



What motivates bandwagon voting behavior: Altruism or a desire to win?



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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the literature on psychological and strategic mental processes of bandwagon behavior, discusses the literature of bandwagon behavior in the context of the two different types, bandwagon vote choices and bandwagon abstention effects, and examines the rationality of other-regarding bandwagon vote choices. Key experimental results are reported to investigate the extent that bandwagon behavior can be explained by other-regarding preferences in contrast to a psychological desire to simply support a winner. We find support for purely psychological non-other-regarding bandwagon behavior but primarily when subjects have information about the distribution of voter choices in previous elections but individual choices are private. Interestingly, when voting is public this type of bandwagon behavior disappears and bandwagon behavior that could be other-regarding is much higher. Given that observability increases other-regarding behavior in other contexts, our results suggest that some of the observed bandwagon behavior may be explained by other-regarding preferences as well.

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1. Introduction

George Wallace, who was the master of Alabama politics, understood the bandwagon effect. He knew that people like to vote for the winner. He would often tell me that he would rather have someone say that he was going to win rather than say that they were going to vote for him. ... "If they hear someone say they're going to vote for me, they figure they might have a selfish motive, but say he's going to win invites everyone to get on the train to victory and vote for the winner." Some country people would describe it as saying, "I don't want to lose my vote voting for so-and-so, he can't win." Wallace used a unique political practice to exploit this bandwagon effect. He would employ what I call runners. These well trained runners would only number a handful of men because they had to be perfect for the job. They had to be believable, genuine and look the part. These men would circulate throughout the state-during an election year. They would pose as traveling salesmen. The state was full of country stores in those days. These country stores were where politics was talked. They were at the country branch heads. They were the grapevine for the rural community. ... Wallace's man would stop at a country store in North Alabama several times, first to talk about the weather and the crops. On his next stop he would talk about football. Finally, after he had won the confidence of the locals in the country store, he would go into politics. These folks would ask their well-traveled friend how did the governor's race look throughout the state. He would look them in the eye and say, "It ain't no race, George Wallace is going to clean up. He's going to get all the votes in South Alabama." The North Alabamians

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would want to get on the bandwagon. The Wallace runner or traveling salesman would do the same thing in South Alabama.—Steve Flowers, Tuskegee News, August 16, 2012.

Voters ... gravitate towards those seen as winners. Ajay Kishore (28) from Bhuntar in Himachal says, 'My vote's for the winning candidate.' The expression 'bandwagon effect' alludes to group-think, simply following others. First-time voter Pulkit Sareen (22) from Patiala says a combination of Modi's charisma and the bandwagon effect works for him.—Times of India March 18, 2014 report on voter intentions in the 2014 Indian parliamentary election.

The two quotes above illustrate the extent that both voters and candidates generally perceive that there can be bandwagon behavior in elections—that is, voters have a tendency to vote for the winner or want to be on the side of the winner. Numerous empirical studies have found some evidence supportive of bandwagon behavior. For example, in 2005 France changed its voting calendar such that voters in some western overseas territories voted before mainland France when they previously voted after the mainland. Morton et al. (2014) find evidence to support bandwagon behavior prior to the change when comparing voting behavior before and after the change in the calendar.¹

Why does bandwagon behavior exist? A number of explanations have been put forward from the psychological (voters prefer to be on the winning side) to the rational/informational (bandwagon behavior due to strategic voting or voters using support for candidates as signals about unknown aspects of candidates' qualities or policies). One possible explanation has received little attention in the academic literature—*other-regarding voting behavior*. Specifically, other-regarding voting means voters vote against their material self-interest and instead vote for a morally or socially appealing alternative. It is worth noting that bandwagon behavior may stem from a willingness of voters to vote with the majority even when their private preferences are with the minority (or to abstain and let the majority win). Minority voters may wish to support the majority either through directly voting for the majority or by abstaining because they wish to make the choice that benefits the most voters in society, even when they themselves may pay a cost to do so. Such an explanation makes intuitive sense. That is, in almost all naturally occurring elections and in experimental work a particular choice is more likely to win when it is supported by the majority, thus there is almost perfect correlation between providing support for choices that benefit the majority of voters (which would be other-regarding behavior by the minority) and bandwagon behavior. But the correlation leads to a problem. That is, it is almost impossible to distinguish between what has been considered psychologically motivated bandwagon behavior (which is not other-regarding) and other-regarding voting in naturally occurring elections or in prior experimental work.

What motivates bandwagon behavior has consequences for the impact of such behavior in elections. That is, if bandwagon behavior is purely a psychological desire to be on the winning side, then it can possibly lead to outcomes in elections that are contrary to voters' true preferences over policies. But if bandwagon behavior is rational and/or other-regarding, then it can be much less problematic for elections.

In this paper we present an experiment designed to evaluate the extent that other-regarding preferences might explain bandwagon behavior. In our experiments we abstract away most information and strategic explanations of bandwagon behavior so that we can focus on distinguishing between the two remaining explanations—a simple psychological preference for being supportive of the winner (or deserting a loser) versus an other-regarding motive of supporting the choice favored by the majority. That is, we consider voting behavior in a two-choice voting game in which one group of supporters has a clear majority and thus is more likely to win as a consequence and in a two-choice game in which supporters of both the choices are equal sized, but the voting rule advantages one of the choices. If bandwagon behavior is motivated by other-regarding preferences, then we should observe bandwagon behavior in the first case, but less so in the second.

We find that both psychological and other-regarding preferences motivate bandwagon behavior, but that each depends crucially on the privacy of vote choices and the information that voters have about others' vote choices. We find support for purely psychological, non-other-regarding bandwagon behavior but primarily when subjects have information about the distribution of voter choices in previous elections, so are aware of which outcome has won in the past, but individual choices are private. Voters then do appear to have a psychological benefit from supporting the winner, even when such a choice is not other-regarding. Interestingly, when voting is public this type of bandwagon behavior disappears. However, when voting is public bandwagon behavior that could be other-regarding is much higher. Given that observability increases other-regarding behavior in other contexts, our results suggests that some of the observed bandwagon behavior in general may be explained by other-regarding preferences as well.

In the next section we review the previous literature on bandwagon and other-regarding voting. In Section 3, we present our experimental design. Section 4 discusses our experimental results, and Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature review

The first time that bandwagon behavior was observed as a phenomenon can be dated back to 1848. Originally, "bandwagon" was a horse-drawn wagon bearing a brass band, and it was used in a circus parade. A showman used his bandwagon and its music to gain attention for his campaign appearances. Because the showman's campaign became more successful, other politicians strove for a seat on the bandwagon, hoping to be associated with the showman's success. After that, bandwagons as a device have been widely used for local and national election campaigns.

In the past decades, bandwagon behavior has been one of the more popular topics in political behavior and has attracted attention from both political scientists and economists. In this section, we scratch the surface of the large literature on bandwagon behavior,

¹ See also Nadeau et al. (1993) and McAllister and Studlar (1991).

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