Electoral participation and communicative voting in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an empirical investigation of electoral participation and communicative voting in 14 European countries. We estimate a multi-level voting process where individuals face a participation decision (whether to vote or abstain) and a voting decision (whether to vote strategically for a likely winner party or as communicating for a sure loser party). Our main findings can be summarized as follows. First, individuals who are either independent or uninformed are less likely to turnout. However, being both independent and uninformed does not have any statistically significant effect on electoral participation. Thus, our results question the empirical relevance of the swing voter's curse theory in large elections. Second, the probability of voting as communicating is positively related with the level of education and the degree of dissatisfaction with the political system. Finally, political preferences and institutional features characterizing the functioning of the political system and of the media market have a significant effect both on electoral participation and on the voting decision.

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1. Introduction

Elections are generally viewed as choice mechanisms in which voters are involved in a decision process structured into two stages: they firstly decide whether to participate in the election (participation decision) and, secondly, they choose whom to cast their vote for (voting decision). In line with other studies (Deacon and Shapiro, 1975; Kahn and Matsusaka, 1997; Degan and Merlo, 2007), we construct a unified empirical framework in which both the participation decision and the voting decision are taken into account. We then employ this framework to empirically investigate the recent theoretical literature concerning the role of information on voter turnout (Matsusaka, 1995; Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996, 1999) and the trade-off between strategic and communicative motives for voting (Piketty, 2000; Castanheira, 2003a; Razin, 2003).

To clarify our terminology, while most of the voting literature uses the term "strategic voting" to indicate the vote for a party different from the one most preferred by the voter (e.g., McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1972), in the present paper we will use the terms "strategic voting" and "communicative voting" *a la Piketty*:

> "Voters trade-off two different motives when deciding how to vote: they care about current decision-making (they are "strategic"), but they also care about communicating their views about their most-preferred candidate so as to influence future elections, by influencing other voters' opinion and/or party positioning" (Piketty, 2000, pg. 169).

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We will thus refer to "strategic voting" as the vote for a likely winner party (indicating that a voter cares more about current-decision making) and will instead refer to "communicative voting" as the vote for a sure loser party (indicating that a voter cares more about future elections).

We model elections as a multi-level choice mechanism in which voters decide both whether to vote and whom to vote for. We collect data from 14 European countries and then employ several econometric techniques to test the validity of the empirical structure underlying the electoral decision process that we propose. Specifically, we estimate multinomial logit, sequential logit and nested logit models and compare the relative appropriateness of each of them to deal with the research questions of this study.

We evaluate how individual characteristics, the level of information, and expressive motivations influence electoral participation. Further, given that people trade-off strategic and communicative motivations in the voting decision, we analyze the individual characteristics that make a voter more likely to care greatly about the strategic part of this trade-off or, alternatively, about the communicative role of voting. At the same time, we explore how institutional features, such as those defining the working of the political system and the characteristics of the media market, influence the participation and the voting decision.

The evidence emerging from individual-level data regarding the role that information plays on electoral participation calls into question the empirical relevance of the *swing voter's curse theory* of abstentionism in large elections (Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996, 1999). Individuals who are either independent *or* uninformed are less likely to turn out. However, being independent *and* uninformed at the same time does not seem to have any statistically significant effect on the turnout decision.

The evidence emerging from cross-country data on electoral participation and communicative voting shows that a lower level of media freedom, a higher threshold for political representation, and a lower number of representatives for a given size of the electoral district are all features leading to a lower turnout probability. On the other hand, lower media freedom and a lower concentration of opposition parties is associated with a higher probability of individuals voting *as communicating.*

Individual preferences affect both electoral participation and voting decisions. Individuals whose ideologically-closer party is a likely winner, as well as those who consider politics important and those who have a good opinion of the political system of their country, are more likely to turn out and are also more likely to vote for a likely winner party.

On the other hand, left-wing extremists are more likely to vote for their most preferred party regardless of whether this party is a sure loser. In contrast, right-wing extremists are very strategic (even more strategic than moderate voters). Moreover, our results also show that better-educated people are more likely to vote *as communicating*, rather than strategically. This evidence seems to suggest that communicative voting indeed reflects forward-looking behavior.

Finally, individual preferences play a role in how institutional characteristics affect electoral participation and communicative voting. The features of the electoral system and the structure of the media market of a country have different effects on the behavior of different individuals. When focusing on the subsample of individuals whose ideologically-closer party is a likely winner, we observe that a higher level of media concentration leads to a higher level of electoral participation and a lower probability of voting *as communicating.* On the other hand, when we analyze the subsample of individuals whose ideologically-closer party is a sure loser, we observe that a lower level of media freedom and a lower level of concentration of opposition parties decrease the probability of electoral participation and increases the probability of communicative voting.

1.1. Related literature

Our study is related to two different strands of literature. The first is the theoretical and empirical literature on voter turnout and, more specifically, on the effect of information on electoral participation. Participation in mass elections is a typical collective action problem: in large elections, the probability that a voter will cast a decisive ballot is not significantly different from zero. A vast literature has emerged trying to explain why people still decide to turn out.[1] The most recent theories on the determinants of electoral participation have focused on the role of information, both in a decision-theoretic (Matsusaka, 1995) and in a game-theoretic framework (Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996, 1999). The decision-theoretic approach predicts that, since the more confident a voter is about voting for the best candidate, the higher is her expected benefit from voting, more informed voters are more likely to turn out (Matsusaka, 1995). On the other hand, by endogenizing the individual probability of being pivotal, Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996) show that politically independent and uninformed voters suffer from the *swing voter's curse*, i.e., they are better off by abstaining than by voting for any of the competing candidates even when the cost of voting is zero. Specifically, in the presence of costless voting, both independent informed and partisan voters have a dominant strategy of turning out to the polls. In contrast, uninformed independent voters "vote to compensate for the [presence of] partisans and having achieved that compensation they abstain" (Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1996, pg. 414). The *swing voter's curse* theory implies that, *ceteris paribus*, uninformed independent voters are less likely to turn out than informed independent and partisan voters.[2]

Recent empirical studies on electoral participation have focused on the relationships between information and turnout. Lassen (2005) uses data from a natural experiment where a random fraction of the electorate is exogenously informed and finds that better-informed voters are more inclined to vote in a referendum setting. Degan and Merlo (2007) show that, since uninformed voters are more uncertain about the optimal candidate, their expected regret from voting is higher and therefore they are less

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[1] See, among the others, Palfrey and Rosenthal (1983,1985) and, more recently, Castanheira (2003b), Coate and Conlin (2004) and Feddersen and Sandroni (2006). Dhillon and Peralta (2002) and Feddersen (2004) provide extensive surveys on the theoretical literature on voters' turnout.
[2] Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1999) generalize this model to allow for a continuum of voters' preferences and a "fine" state space. They show that in such case the level of abstention should be closer to zero. Nevertheless, in presence of a more realistic "coarse" state space "the more general model can produce the same comparative statics as in the 1996 paper" (Feddersen, 2004, pg 105).