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Voting as communicating: Mandates, multiple candidates, and the signaling voter's curse

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ABSTRACT

In this spatial model of common-value elections, votes convey citizens' private opinions regarding which policies are socially optimal, and the winning candidate utilizes this information in choosing policy. In equilibrium, large margins of victory convey *mandates* for candidates to make bold policy changes. To communicate extreme policy views, citizens support extreme parties that may be unlikely to win office. To convey moderate views, citizens deliberately abstain from voting, thereby avoiding the *signaling voter's curse* of encouraging overextremism. In large elections, mandates can identify the optimal policy from an entire continuum, thereby greatly strengthening *Condorcet's (1785)* classic "jury" theorem. Behavioral patterns are consistent with otherwise puzzling empirical features of elections, and can also apply to other political activities, such as public protests or writing letters to elected officials.

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1. Introduction

Observers of elections commonly interpret large margins of victory as "mandates" from voters to elected officials—that is, as injunctions to take bold and decisive policy actions. Recent empirical studies document candidate responses that are consistent with this notion. According to [Faravelli et al. \(2015\)](#), for example, U.S. congressional votes shift in proportion to the most recent election's margin of victory; according to [Peterson et al. \(2003\)](#), they also shift after election outcomes that news media label as mandates. [Conley \(2001, Ch. 4\)](#) and [Fowler and Smirnov \(2007, Ch. 3\)](#) document evidence of mandates in U.S. presidential and senate elections. With only a few exceptions (discussed below), however, existing election models say nothing about mandates, focusing instead on the formal impact of a vote, which is to change the identity of the election

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winner. Indeed, restricting attention to such *pivotal* voting scenarios, even if they are rare, is treated in much of existing literature as an important hallmark of voter rationality.

Another theoretical implication of the pivotal voting calculus is [Duverger's \(1954\)](#) law, which predicts that majoritarian electoral systems should foster only two parties or candidates, because votes for third parties are unlikely to be pivotal, and so are wasted. Empirically, majoritarian systems do often tend to be dominated by two major parties, but minor parties also do often receive substantial electoral support. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, for example, minor parties garnered about seven million votes ([Leip, 2016](#)); in 1992, they received over 20 million—a share of about 20% ([Federal Election Commission, 1992](#)). Presidential primaries regularly include a half-dozen candidates or more, each receiving substantial vote shares.

This paper provides a unified framework for understanding electoral mandates and votes for minor parties as two manifestations of a signaling incentive in common-value elections, building on the models of [Lohmann \(1993, 1994\)](#), [Piketty \(2000\)](#), and [Razin \(2003\)](#). Like standard spatial models, the model below assumes that candidates choose policy positions from a continuum of alternatives. As in the classic model of [de Condorcet \(1785\)](#), however, one policy in the continuum is ultimately best for society, and citizens each form an opinion regarding the location of the optimum, modeled as private signals that are each correlated with the truth.² By the logic of [Condorcet's \(1785\)](#) “jury” theorem, the candidate whose policy is truly superior has a high probability of winning the election. By Bayes’ rule, then, a candidate who wins the election infers that truth was on her side.³ If the candidate on the left receives a majority of votes, for example, it is likely that the optimal policy is left of center. If she wins only narrowly, the optimal policy is likely only slightly left of center, but if she wins by a large margin, the optimal policy is likely more extreme. Accordingly, a large margin makes a liberal candidate more confident in implementing liberal policies; symmetrically, a large margin makes a conservative more conservative.

When candidates respond to mandates, a citizen’s task shifts from that of helping one candidate win office to that of shaping the beliefs of whoever wins. In the equilibrium characterized below, this is straightforward: a vote for the candidate on the left pushes the ultimately policy outcome to the left, whether by bolstering the confidence of the liberal candidate or weakening the confidence of the conservative. If a citizen is confident that the optimal policy is far left or right, he can nudge the policy outcome even further to the left or right by voting for an extreme party. That party may not win, but the citizen’s vote can nevertheless influence the policy choice of the candidate who does.

When every vote exerts a marginal influence on the policy outcome, the standard pivotal voting calculus is no longer relevant. This raises new questions, however, because the implications of a pivotal vote have been useful in explaining voter participation patterns. Specifically, [Feddersen and Pesendorfer \(1996\)](#) show that when pivotal considerations contradict a citizen’s initial opinion, it generates a *swing voter’s curse*, leading the citizen to abstain from voting, in deference to those with better information. This can explain why citizens often cast only partial ballots, even after voting costs have been paid, and is consistent with extensive empirical evidence that voter participation increases with information.⁴ It also lends strong support for the common-value paradigm of elections, since a citizen is only willing to defer to his peers if they share his basic objective.

The swing voter’s curse does not arise in the model below, but a new incentive for abstention arises in its place, which exhibits the same patterns. This is because candidates can observe neither the precision nor the magnitude of the private signals underlying citizens’ votes, and so merely respond as if each signal were of average quality and average magnitude. This reaction is appropriate on average, but overreacts to citizens with low expertise or moderate policy opinions. Accordingly, such citizens abstain to avoid the *signaling voter’s curse* of pushing the policy outcome too far in the desired direction. Put differently, such citizens deliberately abstain, to avoid encouraging extremism on either side. As explained below, the signaling voter’s curse can explain behaviors that the swing voter’s curse cannot, such as split-ticket voting and blank or spoiled ballots. Since it doesn’t rely on pivot probabilities, the signaling voter’s curse can also apply to participation in political activities other than voting, such as writing letters, signing petitions, or attending protests, rallies, or marches. This is useful because, as shown below, these activities exhibit the same empirical pattern as voter participation.

The welfare consequence of electoral mandates is a greatly strengthened jury theorem: a large electorate can now identify not only the better of two alternatives, but the unique optimum from an entire continuum. Since abstention withholds private information that is socially valuable, it may seem that decisions would improve even further if voting were compulsory. As explained below, however, this is not the case: abstention improves communication so that the most informative signals receive the greatest weight. Adding candidates is beneficial for similar reasons. That these normative conclusions differ from those of conventional private-value models underscores the importance of considering both types of models before prescribing policy.

The remainder of this paper is as follows. First, [Section 2](#) reviews related literature and [Section 3](#) introduces the formal model. [Section 4.1](#) then provides the basic equilibrium characterization, which formalizes the notion of electoral mandates.

² [McMurray \(2016a, 2016b\)](#) adapts Condorcet’s model to a spatial environment, and explains how a common-value paradigm can arise in spite of fundamental conflicts of interest, as citizens take one another’s private interests into account, and view elections as if through the eyes of social planners (while disagreeing what a planner should prefer). Those papers also highlight several empirical features of elections that are puzzling from the standard private-value perspective, but arise quite naturally in the common-value framework, such as shifts in public opinion; patterns of information, extremism, and participation; lop-sided election outcomes; and the extreme polarization of political candidates.

³ Throughout this paper, feminine pronouns refer to candidates and masculine pronouns refer to voters.

⁴ See [McMurray \(2015\)](#) for a review of the empirical literature.

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