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Affect versus cognition: Wishful thinking on election day

An analysis using exit poll data from Belgium

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ABSTRACT

Citizens tend to overestimate the electoral success of their preferred party. We investigate the extent to which Belgian voters overestimate the result of the party that they vote for and the factors that explain which voters do so more than others. Our focus is on the impact of educational attainment and partisan attachment on the overestimation of one's party's result. Previous research in this field has relied on data gathered in the months before the elections, which introduces a substantial amount of uncertainty and variation over time into the measurements of citizens' vote share estimations. As an alternative, we investigate voters' estimations of their party's electoral success by means of data gathered in an exit poll survey. Our results show partisan attachments to have a strong impact on overestimations, which suggests that a wishful thinking mechanism is in play. Furthermore, we find that the extent to which partisan attachments increase citizens' overestimations depends on a voter's level of education.

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1. Introduction

When asked to predict the outcome of an event, people tend to overestimate the probability that their preferred outcome will occur (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and it has been suggested that this is a consequence of wishful thinking. This phenomenon has been observed in various contexts, including elections. In elections, 'wishful thinking' essentially implies that voters overestimate the result of their preferred party (Babad, 1997; Babad & Yacobos, 1993; Gimpel & Harvey, 1997; Jottier, Ashworth, & Heyndels, 2012).

This paper investigates whether Flemish voters overestimate the electoral result of the party they voted for, and to what extent. In addition, we also investigate the factors that explain why voters overestimate electoral results,

and why some do so more than others. More specifically, we investigate the impact of educational levels and partisan attachments on citizens' predictions of the electoral success of the party that they vote for. First, we expect voters who are more educated to overestimate the vote share of their party less than those who are less educated. Second, citizens who feel more attached to their party would be expected to feel more strongly about their party winning the election, and therefore they are expected to overestimate the performance of their party more. If we find that stronger preferences are associated with a greater tendency to overestimate, this would suggest that a wishful thinking mechanism explains the overestimation of a party's result. Third, we would expect the overall rationalising influence of educational attainments to weaken the extent to which partisan attachments cause citizens to overestimate their party's result. Greater cognitive skills might counterbalance the impact of biased perceptions of the electoral race, thus reducing the extent to which perceptions are guided by partisan attachments (Anduiza, Gallego, & Muñoz, 2013).

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To date, citizens' electoral predictions and wishful thinking in elections have mostly been investigated in two-party contexts such as the United States (Gimpel & Harvey, 1997; Granberg & Brent, 1983; Uhlaner & Grofman, 1986), while research in multi-party systems has been more scarce, though not completely absent (see for example Faas, MacKenrodt, & Schmitt-Beck, 2008; Levine, 2007; Meffert, Huber, Gschwend, & Pappi, 2011). This paper contributes to the literature by investigating the extent to which citizens overestimate the electoral result of their party and the determinants that influence this phenomenon in the Belgian multi-party context. Our analyses differ from previous work in multi-party contexts in two important respects. First, previous research in countries such as Austria or Germany has relied on categorical predictions of election outcomes that can only be coded as right or wrong (e.g., whether a given party would pass the electoral threshold, or which parties would form the governing coalition; see Faas et al., 2008; Meffert et al., 2011). Our study instead opts for a more fine-grained measure of the accuracy of voters' prediction and uses respondents' point estimates of their party's vote share. This allows us to investigate not only what determines whether a voter overestimates her party's result, but also what explains the extent to which the respondents' predictions overestimate. Second, our data come from an exit poll survey, which we argue is more appropriate than the election campaign surveys that previous work has relied on. The exit poll format allows for an exact and straightforward way of calculating the error in citizens' perceptions, as all of the information was gathered on a single day. Our data were collected in the context of the Belgian 2014 general elections, and it should be noted that the Belgian electoral rules render the exit poll format a particularly useful and valid tool for studying citizens' political attitudes and behaviour. More specifically, given that voting is compulsory in Belgium (for the election under study, the turnout was 92.5%) and there is no advance voting, nearly the entire voting-age population can be reached when sampling at the polling station.

We investigate voters' perceptions about the electoral success of the party they voted for and the extent to which these are accurate. Such perceptions are important in electoral democracies because voters' perceptions have an impact on both their attitudes and their voting behaviour (Hollander, 2014; Meffert et al., 2011). In addition, we also investigate the factors that lead voters to overestimate their party's result. More specifically, we examine whether greater educational attainments allow voters to evaluate politics cognitively instead of relying on their feelings of closeness to a party. In doing so, we seek to find evidence for "Jefferson's notion that a better-educated citizenry makes for a better democracy" (Lewis-Beck & Skalaban, 1989, p. 150).

2. Citizens' predictions of electoral results

Citizens have expectations about parties' results in an election and about who is likely to win. A number of studies have argued that these citizen forecasts serve as a good indicator of who will eventually win the election (Babad

& Yacobos, 1993; Lewis-Beck & Skalaban, 1989; Sjöberg, 2009). Citizens' estimates of who will win the election are also important substantively, as citizens tend to rely on these expectations when deciding whom to vote for (Murr, 2016). However, previous research has shown that, even though citizens' predictions are surprisingly accurate in the aggregate (Murr, 2011), the predictions obtained when people are asked to predict the electoral result of their own party are systematically biased upward – which suggests that these predictions are driven by 'wishful thinking' (Babad, 1997; Jottier et al., 2012).

Even the earliest students of electoral behaviour called attention to the occurrence of wishful thinking in elections (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). The context in which wishful thinking in elections has been investigated most widely is that of US presidential elections. Since 1952, all American National Election Studies surveys have included a question asking who the respondents think will become the next president. As Lewis-Beck and Skalaban (1989) show, taken together, the survey respondents are able to predict correctly who will be the next president.¹ However, the individual voters' predictions are not perfect, and are biased in the direction of their own preference. In fact, Granberg and Brent (1983, p. 477) find that 80% of respondents expect their preferred candidate to win.

While the literature on voters' electoral predictions and the mechanism of wishful thinking has focused mainly on the context of the United States, wishful thinking has also been investigated in multi-party systems (Lachat, 2015). In Israel, Babad (1995) and Babad and Yacobos (1993) found that strongly supporting a party considerably biased both citizens' predictions of future results and their interpretation of current events. Furthermore, Babad (1997, p. 122) found that wishful thinking decreased when respondents were promised a reward for accurate predictions. However, even though the predictions improved when respondents received such incentives, the effect of preferring a particular outcome remained substantial. Levine (2007) investigated wishful thinking in the Netherlands, and found a twofold effect of partisan preferences on wishful thinking: on the one hand, preferences affect voters' predictions directly; on the other hand, they bias respondents' recall of the latest poll results, which indirectly biases the prediction of the future electoral result further. Finally, research in the German and Austrian contexts has also shown voters to engage in wishful thinking, overestimating both the electoral chances of their preferred parties and the chance of their preferred coalition taking office (Faas et al., 2008; Ganser & Riordan, 2015; Meffert et al., 2011).

¹ It is not our ambition in this paper to pursue the forecasting of elections in the Belgian multi-party context. Importantly, our data would not allow us to do so anyway. Citizen forecasting models are among the most accurate approaches to forecasting elections (Graefe, 2014; Murr, 2011), but such models require a richer dataset than that at hand. More precisely, given that we only have information on how voters predicted that their own party would perform, the systematic partisan bias in voters' predictions cannot be balanced out by aggregating. In addition, the timing of the data collection (i.e., on Election Day) means that any attempt to use these data to forecast the election has essentially no lead time, which is a crucial criterion for forecasting models (Lewis-Beck, 2005).

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