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Voter preferences and party loyalty under cumulative voting: Political behaviour after electoral reform in Bremen and Hamburg

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ABSTRACT

Many electoral systems constrain voters to one or two votes at election time. Reformers often see this as a failing because voters' preferences are both broader and more varied than the number of choices allowed. New electoral systems therefore often permit more preferences to be expressed. In this paper we examine what happens when cumulative voting is introduced in two German states. Even when we allow for tactical considerations, we find that the principle of unconstrained choice is not widely embraced by voters, although in practice, too, many seem to have preferences for more than just one party. This finding has implications for arguments relating to electoral reform as well as how to conceive of party affiliations in multi-party systems.

1. Introduction

What happens when voters are given the opportunity to express numerous preferences? Many electoral systems allow voters only a limited amount of choice. In First Past the Post (FPTP) systems and some list Proportional Representation (PR), for example, voters can choose just one candidate from one party. Other electoral systems allow for a little more choice: Mixed-member Proportional Representation (MMP) enables voters to make two choices – one according to FPTP rules and a second according to list PR rules. The Single Transferable Vote (STV) and cumulative voting (CV) permit voters to express a choice for multiple candidates and multiple parties. Voter choice is relatively less constrained by these systems. Unsurprisingly, election reformers argue that providing opportunities for voters to express more than one choice has a positive value for the quality of representation and democracy itself. For example, the reform group Fairvote promotes the use of ranked choice voting arguing “Democracy is strongest when more voices are heard. Too often ... efforts are taken to limit the number of candidates who compete. This limits voters' choices.”¹ Britain's Electoral Reform Society similarly sees more choice as a positive feature of electoral systems asserting “Open lists offer voters more

choice and control over who is elected”.² Reformers even argue that giving voters more choice will increase voter engagement and turnout.³ Hence the question with which we began: when voters are permitted to make lots of choices, what kinds of choice behaviour do we see? Do voters take advantage of that opportunity? And if so, how varied are their choices and how are they structured?

Electoral reform in the German states of Bremen and Hamburg allow us to address this question since both have adopted cumulative voting for state elections. While 14 of the 16 German Bundesländer use some form of PR system in their Land elections, only Bremen and Hamburg recently opted for this alternative preferential system.⁴ The last two elections in these states were conducted under cumulative voting. The electoral reforms in both states were promoted by the non-profit, non-partisan organisation ‘Mehr Demokratie e.V.’. In Hamburg the electoral system was introduced after a referendum. Cumulative voting was advanced as a means of reversing the decline in voter turnout in Land elections; voters, it was argued, would be more motivated to cast their ballots if they had more options to express their preferences.

Cumulative voting is, undeniably, one of the lesser known of the preferential systems. In brief, if X seats in a political system are to be

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¹ <http://www.fairvote.org/rcv#rcvbenefits> (accessed August 12, 2017).

² <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/party-list> (accessed August 12, 2017).

³ It is probably fair to say, however, that the argument that links more choice to more turnout is one that is more often made by proponents of a given reform than demonstrated in practice.

⁴ While most systems are similar to the national mixed-member PR system, in Baden-Württemberg there are no party lists and every voter has only one vote. In contrast to the other states, Bavaria uses an open-list PR system with only one vote for the party list. For more information on the various electoral systems in the 16 German states see <http://www.wahlrecht.de/landtage/> (accessed August 12, 2017).

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elected, voters are given Y votes (with $Y > 1$) and may distribute them as they see fit: giving all Y votes to one candidate/party or one vote to each of X candidates or combinations in between. We will discuss the specific details of the electoral reform in Bremen and Hamburg below. For the moment we will simply note that this is a system very similar to STV in allowing voters a wide range of choices and that these systems allow us to look at voter choice behaviour when it is relatively unconstrained. This brings us back to our initial question: when voter choices are unconstrained, then, how would we expect their choices to look?

We first develop a set of expectations relating to the factors that will drive choice behaviour. We next identify a series of factors that should foster ticket splitting as well as a variety of factors that are likely to produce more structuring of choice behaviour. We finally test these expectations using opinion data from elections in both Bremen and Hamburg. Even in a situation which allows for a great deal of choice – including tactical choices – the majority of respondents still tend to vote for a single party. In contrast to theories which suggest voters are interested in policy balance we find that voters who split their ticket between several parties choose combinations that mirror coalitions on the federal level and are, more broadly, constrained to be within the same “party family”.

2. Cumulative voting and split ticket voting

Cumulative voting has been used in municipal elections in Germany for several decades, especially in the South. In addition to the recent introduction in Bremen and Hamburg, it is a system that has been used in both the US and UK across an eclectic range of settings including corporate elections (Glazer et al., 1983; Blair, 1958), elections to the state legislature of Illinois (Blair, 1958; Sawyer and MacRae, 1962), school board elections in Victorian England (Bowler et al., 1999) and as a means of redressing minority under-representation within some US communities (see e.g. Cole et al., 1990; Engstrom and Barrilleaux, 1991; Guinier, 1992, 1994; Still and Karlan, 1995; Brischetto and Engstrom, 1997; Brockington et al., 1998).

The essence of preferential electoral systems, such as cumulative voting, is that they provide the opportunity for voters to deviate from an expression of a single party and/or candidate preference. One of the most studied preferential electoral systems is the Single Transferable Vote, as operated in the Republic of Ireland, where it is found that most voters do indeed have a preference for more than one party and a significant number of voters cast their ballots on the basis of candidate characteristics rather than party loyalties (Marsh et al., 2008: 157). Based on the existing literature, as well as the claims of reformers, we would expect to see a great variety in voter choice. Motivations for candidate centred voting, considerations of strategic voting, and underlying preferences (e.g. for policy balancing) should all promote and shape ticket-splitting under CV in Bremen and Hamburg.

2.1. Candidate centred voting

First, a straightforward expectation is that we will observe candidate centred voting, as voters seek out high quality (or at least well-known) local notables. Under the national MMP, that operates at the federal level in Germany, voters have some leeway to express two party preferences, as such the concept of ticket splitting is not entirely new to German voters. The national data show the existence of candidate effects and ticket splitting under MMP (Pappi and Thurner, 2002; Gschwend et al., 2003; Gschwend, 2007; Gschwend and Zittel, 2015). There is some reason to think, then, that a system that allows more choice will permit an even wider range of voting behaviour. The most recent elections in Hamburg provide strong evidence of candidate effects in at least one of those state elections. Jankowski (2016) shows that in the 2015 parliamentary election in Hamburg candidates running for the same party picked up a significant ‘friends and neighbours’

bonus from their home district. Given our data (see below) we are, unfortunately, not able to geocode respondents and candidates, nevertheless, if candidate centred motivations do drive choice then we should see this in broad patterns. Votes, for example, will not show much sign of being structured by ideology but instead show patterns of choices across party lines and should be distributed more or less evenly (i.e. randomly) across parties.

2.2. Strategic voting

A second family of expectations are grounded in different varieties of strategic voting. Studies of elections at the federal level in Germany demonstrate that strategic voting does indeed take place (Bawn, 1999; Gschwend, 2007) though how widespread a phenomenon this is has been questioned (Herrmann and Pappi, 2007). Strategic voting can take several forms. One broad form of strategic voting is motivated by a desire for policy balancing. This version can take a number of configurations depending on the institutional setting. In federal systems the hypothesis of policy balancing proposes that voters will cast ballots for ideologically different parties in order to ensure that different branches of government will be controlled by different parties (see e.g. Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2004; Kedar, 2006; Bafumi et al., 2010). Alternatively, within coalition governments, voters may cast their ballot in such a way as to affect policy outcomes. For instance, the inclusion of a small leftist extremist party in a coalition will influence government legislation in a leftwards direction (Duch et al., 2010; Indridason, 2011). While there are some differences in meaning about the nature of policy balancing in a multi-party system, as opposed to a two party system, we note that voters do not have to sacrifice their only vote for a non-preferred candidate to ensure policy balancing, they can mix and match. Under this set of arguments we should see a wide range of choices being made as voters seek to balance off various ideological and policy positions by splitting their ticket among several parties.

A second form of strategic voting is grounded in expectations about coalition politics. Under threshold insurance strategic motivations, supporters of large parties will vote for a less preferred party, but a preferred coalition partner, to ensure the smaller party gets above the threshold for representation in parliament. Empirically this logic does not apply for the viable small coalition partners in each of the four races under consideration in this paper. Studies have found that polling information influences voters decision to cast an insurance vote (Meffert and Gschwend, 2011; Huber and Faas, 2014; Fredén, 2017) and opinion polls in the run up to each race demonstrate that the smaller likely coalition party (in all cases the Greens) was well above the 5 per cent threshold.⁵ Furthermore, the extent of threshold insurance voting, even at the national level, is contested. Gschwend (2007) and Fredén (2014) empirically demonstrate its existence only amongst a small subset of sophisticated voters. Still, we allow that it is possible that voters may wish to help smaller parties become coalition members.

Before becoming too deeply involved in discussions of strategic voting it is worth reiterating that the informational requirements for strategic voting escalate with electoral system complexity. As Bartholdi and Orlin (1991) have demonstrated, STV is particularly resistant to manipulation, given the computational complexity involved. Much the same logic applies to cumulative voting. Outcomes under CV depend not simply on voter opinions but also the nomination strategies of

⁵ In both Bremen and Hamburg in 2011 and 2015 the only viable small party coalition partner was the Greens. In 2015 in Hamburg they were running at 11–13 per cent in pre-election opinion polls and 14–15 per cent in 2011 (indeed in 2011 the SPD won an absolute majority of seats). In Bremen in 2015 the Greens were running at 12–17 per cent and in 2011 at 22–24 per cent (largely due to the nuclear disaster in Fukushima that happened two months before the election). The FPD was hovering at the 5 per cent threshold but was not considered a viable coalition partner for any, also because a CDU-FDP coalition was impossible in all four elections due to the weakness of the CDU (share of votes ranged only between 16 [Hamburg 2011] and 22 per cent [Bremen 2015]).

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