



What drives rental votes? How coalitions signals facilitate strategic coalition voting



Thomas Gschwend^a, Lukas Stoetzer^{b, *}, Steffen Zittlau^a

^a University of Mannheim, School of Social Science, Germany

^b Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Political Science, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 February 2015

Received in revised form

15 April 2016

Accepted 4 June 2016

Available online 20 August 2016

Keywords:

Strategic voting

Rental votes

Coalitions

Coalition signals

ABSTRACT

Rental voting is a coalition voting strategy, by which supporters of a senior coalition partner cast their vote for the prospective junior coalition partner to secure its representation in parliament and, hence, the formation of this coalition. We make transparent that previous research has only studied rental-voting in contexts, in which coalition signals were consistent with the rental-vote logic. Employing a qualitative identification strategy, we find evidence for rental voting only in the context with consistent coalition signals. Moreover, respondents exposed to consistent coalition signals behave similarly to voters who most likely did not receive the inconsistent coalition signals they had been exposed to.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

The greatest surprise of the German federal election of September 2013 was that the FDP, the junior coalition partner of the CDU within the incumbent government, fell short of the nationwide electoral threshold and, consequently, no longer holds any seats in the national parliament for the first time in post-war history. This came as a big surprise to many political analysts, including the authors of this paper, because they had anticipated that rental votes would bolster-up the FDP's vote share. *Rental votes* (Meffert and Gschwend, 2010, 2011) are a specific form of strategic coalition voting, where supporters of the senior coalition partner cast their vote in favor of a junior coalition partner, who is in danger of falling below the electoral threshold. Thereby, they secure the latter's representation in parliament, and in turn that the preferred coalition can form. Political analysts based their expectation on prior experience with rental votes. In particular, analysts observed an impressive case of vote-coordination at the State elections of Lower Saxony in January 2013, only shortly before the Federal election. Here, the FDP was polling at around 4–6 percent, but received an impressive 9.9 percent of the votes on election day. Most of the difference between projected and

actual results was attributed to rental votes from CDU supporters. For the 2013 federal election it would have been equally important for the CDU to have the FDP enter parliament, because together they could have easily formed a majority coalition. So why did voters refrain from casting rental votes in the federal election while they had done so only a few months before? We will solve this concrete puzzle by making a more general point that coalition signals sent out by the vote-trading parties during the electoral campaign can help voters to coordinate as long as they are consistent with the rental-vote logic. This general point has new important implications for research on voting behavior in multi-party systems.

In multi-party systems voters cast their vote for a party although this does not necessarily increase the likelihood that this party gets into government (Bowler et al., 2010; Debus and Müller, 2014; Kedar, 2011; Norpoth, 1980). As single-party governments hardly exist, coalition governments are rather the norm in those systems. When votes have been turned into seats, parties in parliament try to form a new coalition government. Voters might anticipate those negotiations and cast a strategic coalition vote for a less preferred party in order to make their most preferred coalition more viable. Casting a rental vote is one conceivable strategy to accomplish this that is well documented in various other German, Austrian and Swedish elections (Cox,

* Corresponding author;

E-mail address: lstoetze@mit.edu (L. Stoetzer).

1997; Fredén, 2014; Gschwend, 2007; Meffert and Gschwend, 2010, 2011; Roberts, 1988; Shikano et al., 2009). Strategic voting theory supposes that such behavior is due to the voters' rational calculus, stressing "individualistic" factors such as coalition preferences and expectations about the next coalition government. Strategic voting theory is less concerned with explaining the total amount of rental votes in an election, but rather seeks to explain which characteristics drive individual-level rental voting. From this perspective, the amount of rental votes in an election is merely a function of the distribution of voter preferences and expectations in the electorate. Contextual factors, such as party campaign strategy and communication, are not a part of the explanation. Here the academic state of the art is strangely at odds with how rental voting is discussed in the public sphere. Political commentators and journalists traditionally tend to stress the importance of party- and campaign-level factors for explaining rental voting, such as the signals parties send out to their supporters. Strategic voting research has generally cast out this interpretation: Surely parties can't tell their voters to act strategically. Or can they?

In this paper we uncover why these contextual factors have for so long remained a blind spot of empirical research on strategic voting. We argue that strategic voting research has been subject to a serious case selection problem: So far, rental voting has only been studied (or at least been published) in electoral environments that were conducive for strategic voting. The key contribution of our paper is to show that strategic voting can be highly contextual. Parties need to create an informational environment that facilitates voter coordination. They can do so by modulating the coalition signals they send out in their campaign communication. We differentiate between three aspects of coalition signals: First, parties can engage in public commitments to govern together (Gschwend, 2004; Golder, 2005, 2006). Second, parties can vary the salience of coalition aspects in their campaign. By talking a lot about the coalition, or making common appearances during the campaign, they can prime coalition aspects in the voters mind. Thirdly, and most concretely, they can give out sublime or explicit ballot instructions to their supporters (Gschwend, 2004; Golder, 2005; Meffert and Gschwend, 2010, 2011; Roberts, 1988). We entertain that is not only the existence and amplitude of such signals that shape strategic vote coordination, but the interplay between the coalition signals of the involved parties. The signal sent out by the rental vote-seeking party (the junior partner) and the rental vote-giving party (mostly the senior coalition partner) have to be consistent in order to facilitate strategic voter coordination. This means that even if the junior partner is courting senior coalition partner supporters to rent out their vote, the senior partner can block these attempts by signaling its supporters that they should cast a sincere vote, or by downplaying coalition aspects in its campaign.

At this stage, it is extremely difficult to study the effect of party campaign strategy in a large-N comparative framework due to the absence of suitable databases. Instead, we propose a more exploratory, qualitative research design that relies on the careful selection of comparable cases. We combine this with a statistical analysis of individual-level rental voting behavior. Following the idea of the most-similar-system design, we compare individual vote choices of the same electorate for the same incumbent coalition partners, CDU and FDP, in two different elections that took place only a few months apart, using original survey data from the *Making Electoral Democracy Work* (MEDW) project (Blais, 2010). The key difference between these elections lies in the nature of the coalition signals sent out by the parties. These were consistent with the rental-vote

logic in one election and not consistent in the other. This design allows us to probe the question to what degree the consistent party signals are needed in order for voters to cast rental votes. We find that our statistical rental voting model only identifies rental voting behavior in the first election, where party signals were consistent with the rental voting logic. This indicates that rental voting depends on the electoral context, and that senior coalition partners have considerable leverage to discourage their supporters from casting rental votes.

1. Coalition preferences and expectations

Most democracies around the world have parliaments in which many parties gain representation, but no single party has a majority of seats to form a single-party government. Consequently coalition governments have to be formed. Voters in most systems cannot cast their vote for government coalitions directly, only for a party or a single candidate. They know that coalitions have to be formed after the election and systematically respond to that. Recent literature on voting behavior in multi-party systems consistently finds that voters not only consider party preferences but also coalition preferences and expectations about government formation into their decision-making calculus (Aldrich et al., 2004; Bargsted and Kedar, 2009; Blais et al., 2006; Bowler et al., 2010; Debus and Müller, 2014, 2013; Gschwend, 2007, 2004; Kedar, 2011; Meffert and Gschwend, 2010, 2011; Shikano et al., 2009).

Many coalition governments consist of a large party – the senior coalition partner – and a small party – the junior coalition partner. If the junior coalition partner does not overcome a vote threshold to gain representation in parliament such a coalition could not form. All the votes for the junior coalition partner would be wasted. This would also be an outcome that the senior coalition partner seeks to avoid because no party is likely to gain a majority of seats alone in a multi-party system. A senior coalition partner might very well be willing to trade some of their votes in order to make sure that the junior coalition partner overcomes the threshold which makes a majority of seats for this coalition more likely. Rental votes have been documented as a reasonable strategy in situations where coalitions might not be otherwise viable to govern together (Cox, 1997; Fredén, 2014; Gschwend, 2007; Laux, 1973; Meffert and Gschwend, 2010, 2011; Roberts, 1988; Shikano et al., 2009).

Two types of explanations for rental voting dominate the literature. On the one hand, political commentators as well as some scholars tend to stress an elite-driven process (Laux, 1973; Roberts, 1988). In short, voters may cast rental votes when coalition parties signaling their supporters to do so. Thus, respective party campaign strategies embedded in a particular campaign context facilitate this type of strategic voting.

On the other hand, there are scholars that subscribe to a more individualistic perspective in order to explain rental voting. They identify characteristics that increase an individual's proclivity to cast a rental vote. If voters prefer a coalition, indicated by a strong coalition preference (Meffert and Gschwend, 2010) or a small difference of the respective party preferences (Gschwend, 2007), and are at the same time uncertain that the junior coalition partner gets over the threshold, casting a rental vote is more likely. Voters who are either certain that the junior coalition partner will be represented, or voters who are certain that the small party will not get into parliament anyway, should not be motivated to cast a rental vote, even if they prefer the coalition. Thus, the impact of coalition preferences on voting behavior in

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7463387>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7463387>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)