



Economic globalisation, the perceived room to manoeuvre of national governments, and electoral participation: Evidence from the 2001 British General Election



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ABSTRACT

Recent macro-level research argues that economic globalisation negatively affects electoral turnout by constraining the leeway of national governments and thereby rendering elections less meaningful to voters. This article analyses the link between perceptions of the national government's room to manoeuvre and turnout on the individual level. Drawing on the 2001 British General Election, it is shown that citizens who believe that economic globalisation leaves the national government with less influence on the economy are less likely to report to have voted. Further findings also support the proposed theoretical model according to which room to manoeuvre perceptions affect turnout via views on the importance of elections and matter specifically for citizens that tend towards the left side of the left-right scale.

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1. Introduction

Many observers believe that economic globalisation diminishes the room to manoeuvre of national governments as integration into the international economy puts pressures on national governments to preserve the competitiveness of their economies. Evidence consistent with this claim is, for example, obtained from studies on tax competition showing that tax policies seem increasingly shaped by efficiency considerations in an effort to prevent the flight of mobile tax sources and to remain economically competitive in international markets (e.g. Ganghof, 2006; Genschel and Schwarz, 2013; Plümper et al., 2009). Other scholars, however, have questioned whether economic globalisation poses a fundamental threat to the welfare states of developed democracies pointing to their general resilience in an era of economic globalisation (e.g. Garrett, 1998). While the precise extent to which economic globalisation constrains national policy autonomy remains an open question to be investigated in future research, the available evidence, nonetheless, seems to support the view that it puts at least some real pressures on the policies national governments can efficiently

pursue in certain respects and areas.

More recently, researchers have turned to investigate the repercussions economic globalisation's real or perceived consequences for national policy-making might have on mass publics and especially voting behaviour (e.g. Duch and Stevenson, 2006; Hellwig and Samuels, 2007; Hellwig, 2014, 2015). Building on the notion that economic globalisation has diminished the leeway national governments enjoy with regard to choosing economic policies, recent research within this literature develops the argument that economic globalisation has negative consequences for electoral turnout (Franklin, 2004: 179; Hellwig and Samuels, 2007: 299; Marshall and Fisher, 2015; Norris, 2002: 217; Steiner, 2010). As citizens are exposed to the idea that competitive pressures significantly constrain what governments are able to achieve in terms of economic policy outcomes these individuals care about, they might reason that it makes less of a difference who gets elected. Viewing elections as less meaningful in this sense, citizens might actually participate less in elections. Previous research has tested the resulting hypothesis that turnout is lower in more globalised settings with aggregate level data on national elections in established democracies: Employing different estimation techniques, Marshall and Fisher (2015) and Steiner (2010) converge on the finding that economic globalisation, indeed, diminishes

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turnout.

These studies, however, only test for the association of the two ends of what is arguably a long causal chain. Moreover, as aggregate level studies with time-series cross-sectional datasets they are specifically open to the problem of specification uncertainty (see King and Zeng, 2006; Plümper et al., 2005; Wilson and Butler, 2007). It thus seems essential to supplement the existing evidence with an investigation into the mechanisms on the individual level. No previous research, however, examines whether citizen's individual beliefs concerning the constraints emanating from economic integration actually matter for their turnout decisions. As any association between globalisation and turnout must necessarily be established through the thoughts and actions of individual citizens, the literature on economic globalisation and voter turnout is missing a crucial link.

Addressing this research gap, this article considers the effect of perceptions of the national government's room to manoeuvre under conditions of global economic integration on voter turnout. It explores the effect of room to manoeuvre perceptions on electoral turnout on the individual level: Do individual perceptions that national governments enjoy less leeway under economic globalisation lead to a lower inclination to vote? While researchers have studied whether room to manoeuvre perceptions affect economic voting (e.g. Duch and Stevenson, 2006; Hellwig and Samuels, 2007), so far a micro-level analysis with electoral turnout as a dependent variable is missing. As questions on perceptions of national sovereignty under economic globalisation have been asked in election surveys only sporadically, a cross-national election survey properly suited for the present purpose is unavailable. As an alternative, this study draws on the case of the British General Election in 2001 and the British Election Panel Study 1997–2001 (Heath et al., 2002) which is one of the very rare election surveys in which respondents were asked about their perception of their government's room to manoeuvre in a globalised world. As the incumbent Labour Party extensively referred to economic globalisation as an exogenous constraint, the idea of international market integration constraining the room to manoeuvre of national governments was particularly prominent in this context rendering this a suitable case for a first test of this contribution's main hypothesis.

The empirical findings establish that citizens who believe in less room to manoeuvre are less likely to report to have voted. Further results also support additional observable implications of the theoretical model according to which room to manoeuvre perceptions matter for the perceived importance of elections which in turn matter for turnout. Supplementary evidence suggests that these effects of perceived globalisation constraints are concentrated among citizens of the left and centre-left. Overall, the present article adds micro-level support to the argument that economic globalisation has negative consequences for electoral turnout and adds to the emerging literature on globalisation's electoral consequences.

The next section situates the present study in a broader theoretical discussion and literature review on the general mechanism that might link economic globalisation and electoral turnout. Drawing on established theoretical models of electoral turnout, the third section develops the main hypotheses in more detail. The fourth section gives a brief contextual overview on the 2001 British General Election. The fifth section introduces the data source and discusses the modelling strategy. The sixth section presents the empirical findings. A final section concludes.

2. Causal paths from economic globalisation to electoral turnout: an overall model and previous findings

In this section, I develop a general model of the potential

different causal pathways through which economic globalisation might affect electoral turnout and situate the present study within this broader framework. Fig. 1 illustrates how economic globalisation might be thought to influence electoral turnout and differentiates analytically between two different causal pathways. The starting point of both pathways forms the macro-level phenomenon of economic globalisation, by which I mean the (process of increasing) integration of national economies into international markets, and the consequences for national steering capacity purportedly resulting from it. In the end, both paths converge on the idea that, on the micro-level of individual citizens, economic globalisation influences beliefs about the meaningfulness of elections in terms of whether elections are thought to potentially produce significant differences in outcomes. These attitudes on the relevance of elections in turn are assumed to affect electoral turnout on the individual level and then, by simple logic of aggregation, on the macro-level. The paths diverge with regard to *how* room to manoeuvre constraints from economic globalisation are thought to affect beliefs about the meaningfulness of elections. While the path on the left-bottom is concerned with individual beliefs about decreases in the room to manoeuvre of national governments (solid arrows); the path above and to the right of it assumes that economic globalisation affects turnout through the positioning of political parties and individual's reactions to these (dashed arrows). And while the latter 'party position-path' has already been examined in previous research; the main links of the alternative 'room to manoeuvre perception-path' are unexamined so far and form the subject of the present contribution.

The path of room to manoeuvre perceptions (solid arrows) depicts the argument already stated in the introduction and conforms to the theoretical model in Steiner (2010). The idea is that citizens' beliefs about the constraints for national economic policy brought about by economic globalisation mediate between economic globalisation and the perceived meaningfulness of elections and electoral turnout: As voters are exposed to the idea that competition in an economically integrated world significantly constrains what governments are able to achieve in terms of economic policy outcomes these voters care about, they might reason that it makes less of a difference who gets elected. If voters are of the opinion that elections carry less meaning, they should be less likely to participate in elections. This argument linking, first, perceptions of the influence of the national government on the economy in a globalised world and views on the meaningfulness of elections and, second, perceptions of the meaningfulness of elections and turnout is the simple and intuitive main argument tested for the first time in this article.¹ It might further be the case that individual beliefs on the government's room to manoeuvre matter not equally to different individuals. Fig. 1 incorporates this idea of a heterogeneous effect: It depicts the effect of room to manoeuvre perceptions as being itself affected by the 'salience' of room to manoeuvre perceptions to individuals. Section 3 will develop a specific version of this general argument by hypothesizing that room to manoeuvre perceptions matter specifically for those on the left and centre-left.

A second path (dashed arrows) might operate through the

¹ The article is not primarily concerned with the origins of beliefs about the government's influence on the economy in an economically integrated world and rather treats these as given beliefs that affect the inclination to vote. For work investigating into the macro-level determinants of room to manoeuvre perceptions, in particular objective levels of economic globalisation, see Duch and Stevenson (2006), Hellwig (2015) and Vowles (2008; 2016); on the individual level determinants, see Hellwig et al. (2008). I discuss the link between objective levels of economic globalisation and room to manoeuvre perceptions in the conclusion.

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