



Limited information and coordinated voting in multi-party elections under plurality rule: The role of campaigns



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ABSTRACT

This essay bridges the logic of electoral coordination with the observation that many voters cannot recognize *ex post* viable candidates. When strategic voting is limited, behavioral factors of sincere voting play a large part in coordinating uninformed voters and inform the expectations of potentially strategic voters about the patterns of voting. Using the 2011 Canadian Election Survey, I found strong effects of the density of campaign contacts and the asymmetries in the campaigns spending and party identification on the predictability of the patterns of intra-district competition. A comparison of the effects of behavioral factors on the uninformed and informed voters confirms that the effect of centrifugal spending and party identification is conditional on the ability of voters to recognize the leaders of district competition.

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1. Introduction

The notion that elections in single-member districts tend to produce two-candidate or almost two-candidate competition is one of the most well-established effects of electoral systems (Duverger, 1954; Cox, 1997; Reed, 2001; Myatt, 2007; Taagepera, 2007; Grofman et al., 2009; Singer, 2013). Major studies of this phenomenon often focus on the strategic abandonment of nonviable candidates, also known as strategic voting, and examine individual voters in isolation from other voters: individual voters' willingness to cast a strategic vote and their individual skills at analyzing strategic situations are typically viewed as the major determinants of the impact of electoral rules on electoral outcomes (e.g., Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Bowler and Lanoue, 1992; Duch and Palmer, 2002; Blais and Turgeon, 2004; Peterson and Wrighton, 1998; Merolla and Stephenson, 2007).

Yet, the motivation to cast a strategic vote and political sophistication are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for a vote to be cast for one of the leading candidates. Instrumental rationality is not sufficient for strategic voting because instrumentally rational voters cannot anticipate and adjust their votes to the future vote distribution unless the context of decision-making contains information about the distribution of the future vote.

Instrumental rationality is not necessary for a voter to cast a vote

for one of the leading candidates, either. Blais and Turgeon (2004), after comparing the respondents' expectations about the likely winners in their districts in the 1988 federal election in Canada against the actual results, found that 53 per cent of voters could not identify the two top competitors in their respective districts (also see Table A.3 in the Appendix). Despite this fact, as many as 80.4 per cent of voters ended up voting for either of the two leading candidates in their respective districts. A part of this result can be explained by the idea that a mechanical application of the plurality rule will leave a plurality of voters on the winning side, even if these voters are not intentionally strategic.

These two observations suggest that the constituency context plays a large role in determining which voters appear to and/or choose to be instrumental in their vote choice and which voters waste their votes. The objective of this paper is to investigate the role of the non-institutional context of individual decision-making, specifically constituency campaigns, in the process that leads voters to cast a vote for one of the top candidates. I look into the ways the context of constituency campaigns conditions the mechanical effect of electoral rules on the wasted vote and the strategic adjustment of informed voters. As campaigns guide voters, they may lead them to contribute to the concentration of competition around viable candidates even if these voters are unaware of it. The information contained in such activities facilitates strategic voting, thereby further increasing the vote concentration around leading candidates.

Using the 2011 Canadian Election Study (Fournier et al., 2011), I

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estimate the effect of the aggregate campaign efforts and the asymmetries in campaign efforts between top competitors and other candidates on the probability that a respondent can correctly guess two top competitors in the district. I find a significant effect of the density of campaign contacts, the asymmetries in campaign spending, activist support, and the distribution of strong partisan affinities on this variable.

My second proposition suggests that uninformed voters would concentrate their vote around the leading candidates when campaigning is centered around those leading candidates and would disperse their vote when the patterns of campaigning prompt them to do so. To evaluate this effect empirically, I estimate a model with an interaction term between voters' ability to identify the leading candidates and the asymmetry in campaign efforts. I expect that the impact of the asymmetry in campaign efforts is conditional on the information available to voters (information serves as a mediating variable): if informed voters are not willing to cast a vote for a lagging candidate, they can always adjust their vote choice; thus, better informed voters are less sensitive to the asymmetries in campaigning than less informed voters. An analysis of the conditional effect of the asymmetry in campaign spending supports this conclusion.

Although the primary motivation for this paper comes from the literature on the effects of electoral institutions, this essay also speaks to the literature on the role of the constituency context in voting behavior. This literature shows that the role of the local context of political decision-making is discernible from the role of individual-level factors and the national-level politics in at least four distinct ways. First, continuous interactions among neighbors and friends can induce similarities in their attitudes and perceptions (Claggett et al., 1984; MacKuen and Brown, 1987; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Stein et al., 2000). Second, such similarities can be induced by the distribution of local interests (Cutler, 2007). Third, one would expect some degree of the spatial clustering of the vote if constituency campaigns and the qualities of candidates running in specific districts matter for voting decisions (Cunningham, 1971; Carty, 1991; Carty and Eagles, 1999, 2005; Denver and Hands, 1997; Whiteley and Seyd, 1994; Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2009). Finally, Fieldhouse et al. (2007) show that strategic voting reinforces such spatial clustering. This paper contributes evidence to the third and the fourth mechanisms: it shows a way whereby constituency campaigns matter for electoral outcomes and a way whereby strategic voting reinforces their effect.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 talks about the role of information in electoral coordination and emphasizes the importance of the patterns of sincere voting. Section 3 discusses how campaigns affect the sincere vote and what these influences mean for coordinated voting. Section 4 details the research design. Section 5 discusses the estimated effects of campaigns. Section 6 concludes.

2. Information in strategic voting

Electoral outcomes are oftentimes studied as the outcomes of strategic interactions among instrumentally rational well-informed voters. Although this framework has produced solid results about voters' incentives to concentrate their vote around select parties, it has not given a solid explanation of how voters form their expectations about the strategies of other voters. A number of theoretical works (Cox, 1987, 1994; Palfrey, 1989; Myerson and Weber, 1993) build voting games that endogenize these expectations and establish the existence of Duvergerian equilibria. Yet, as Myerson and Weber (1993) and Fey (1997) show, Duvergerian equilibria are rarely unique; hence, their existence does not explain how voters form their beliefs about the strategies of other voters.

Related experimental studies address this problem by looking into the properties of polls (or quasi-polls such as the levels of financial contributions) as reference points for simultaneously voting voters (Forsythe et al., 1993; Rietz et al., 1998; Andonie and Kuzmics, 2012). These devices work as trial elections that enable voters to figure out which of them will have to adjust their choice once it is time to cast a "real" vote. Similar to Schelling's (1960) focal point, this reference distribution guides voters' collective actions in tacit coordination.

Notice that although polls contain some information about voters' policy preferences and other determinants of the patterns of sincere voting, the precision of this information is irrelevant for the resulting vote distribution as long as all voters react to this focal point in a consistent way (Andonie and Kuzmics, 2012). If the poll results were common knowledge and all voters were certain to choose the most reasonable response, then the resulting proximity of voting outcomes to the coordinated equilibria would not depend on the underlying patterns of potential voting within the major ideological blocks as any deviations from the coordinated vote distribution would be cleared by strategic voting. As much as the focal point mechanism does not rely on the precision of the information contained in polls, it relies on voters' ability to read coordinating signals and the predictability of their reactions.

In this paper, I offer an alternative account of the formation of voters' expectations about the future vote distribution, which relies on less restrictive assumptions about the ability of voters to process coordinating information.

I make two groups of behavioral assumptions. First, voters vary in their ability to draw conclusions about the strategic situation from the publicly available information. A significant portion of voters would not recognize the patterns of competition. This is consistent with the above-cited evidence from Blais and Turgeon (2004) and with the general conclusion of the individual-level studies of strategic voting that voters' capacity for strategic voting varies with their political sophistication and political knowledge (Bowler and Lanoue, 1992; Blais and Turgeon, 2004; Peterson and Wrighton, 1998; Merolla and Stephenson, 2007).

Second, constituency campaigning affects voters' predispositions to vote for specific political parties. The literature on campaign effects shows that campaigning influences voting decisions in at least three ways. Campaigns inform voters about issues, policy alternatives and candidates' policy positions (Gelman and King, 1993; Brians and Wattenberg, 1996; Alvarez, 1997; Brady and Johnston, 2006; Stevenson and Vavreck, 2000; Arceneaux, 2006; Barabas and Jerit, 2009). Longer and more intense campaigning has been found to increase the level of voters' knowledge about parties, candidates and policies. The second effect is priming (Johnston et al., 1992; Bartels, 1993; Zaller, 1996; Norris et al., 1999; Brady and Johnston, 2006). Through their campaigns, parties and candidates convince voters in the salience of the issues that are favorable to them. Third, candidates and parties, to a limited extent, use campaigns to persuade voters in the merits of their policies (Popkin, 1991; Brady and Johnston, 2006). While the enlightening effect of campaigns is *a priori* neutral, priming and persuasion induce voters to vote for specific candidates.

Since strategic voters can reconsider their voting predispositions depending on their beliefs about the strategic situation, their behavior is less predictable than the behavior of voters who cannot act strategically. Less strategically informed voters are likely to follow the voting predispositions formed during the campaign period. Since these voters constitute a large part of the electorate, any patterns induced among them by campaign activities are likely to translate into the patterns in the resulting vote distribution.

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