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Nationalism and ethnic heterogeneity: The importance of local context for nationalist party vote choice☆

Peter John Loewen*, Maxime Heroux-Legault, Carolina de Miguel

Department of Political Science, University of Toronto, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the individual-level correlates of nationalist party vote choice and the extent to which these correlates are conditioned by an individual's local context. We argue that the influence of individuals' policy positions on nationalism should vary in importance for predicting voting for nationalist parties in localities where voters feel threatened culturally or economically. To test this argument we use the case of support for the Bloc Quebecois in the Canadian province of Quebec and data from the 2011 Canadian Vote Compass. We show that voters' policy positions on nationalism become more important in predicting a vote for the Bloc Quebecois when the percentage of English speakers (our proxy for ethno-cultural threat) increases in their locality. By contrast, we find that the relationship between nationalism and support for the Bloc Quebecois is not conditioned by economic hardship in the place where an individual lives. To test the robustness of our findings, we reestimate our models using a different dataset from multiple elections – the Canadian Election Study as well as an additional modelling approach. Our findings contribute to the broader vote choice literature by examining the role that local context plays in individuals' choice of parties. Furthermore, our findings lend support to arguments made in the literature on the importance of an ethno-cultural calculus among voters voting for nationalist parties.

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1. Introduction

As with many countries in the world, Canada witnessed a rise in support for nationalist parties[1] in the second half of the 20th century, coinciding with the election of an official separatist government in the French-speaking province of Quebec in 1976. The Parti Québécois would go on to hold referenda on secession from Canada in 1980 and again in 1995.[2] In the interim, Canada also saw the rise of a French-Canadian nationalist party within its federal Parliament. In

☆ This work relies heavily on the 2011 federal election edition of Vote Compass Canada, a voting engagement application. The original research team on this project included Peter Loewen, Yannick Dufresne, Gregory Eady, Jennifer Hove, and most especially Clifton van der Linden, who is the Founder and Executive Director of Vox Pop Labs. More details on the project can be found at www.votecompass.ca. Loewen is funded by an Early Researcher Award granted by the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: peter.loewen@utoronto.ca (P.J. Loewen).

[1] We use the term "nationalist parties" to refer to a broad category of parties in which issues of nationalism are an important dimension of political competition. One of the goals of these parties is to defend the interests (cultural, linguistic, economic) of a geographically-defined nation or community. The comparative literature us es a variety of terms for these types of parties such as regional parties, ethno-regional parties, autonomist parties and separatist parties. The findings of this paper could be potentially extended to parties that defend the interests of a community or group that is *not* geographically defined such as the United Kingdom Independence Party.

[2] They were out of office between 1985 and 1994.

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1993, the Bloc Québécois was successful in having MPs elected in two-thirds of Quebec's constituencies. As a result they held the status of the second largest party in Canada's House of Commons.

The rise of the Parti Québécois (PQ) and Bloc Québécois (BQ) has motivated substantial research on the determinants of support for nationalist parties in Canada. This work, together with a broader comparative research agenda on nationalism has provided valuable insights into the individual-level determinants of vote choice for nationalist parties. For example, scholars have found that support for nationalist parties is driven by voters' policy positions on issues of nationalism as well as by voters' positions on socio-economic policy issues linked to the traditional left-right dimension. In addition, support for nationalist parties is often correlated with feelings of attachment to one's nation and various individual-level demographic factors.

Surprisingly few scholars have moved beyond individual-level models to examine whether individual determinants of nationalist vote vary across regions in a given country, or across time within the same locale. This omission of context and the reliance on individualistic models is understandable for both theoretical and practical reasons. Rational choice theory argues that voting is an individual act (Downs, 1957, Enelow and Hinich, 1984) and as such the principal focus ought to be on individual-level variations. Some scholars focus on sociological determinants of voting, but even then such determinants are measured and conceptualized as characteristics of the individual voter (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944, Berelson et al., 1954). There are also practical considerations that justify this focus on individual factors since the modal election study has a limited number of respondents (generally a few thousand) spread over dozens or hundreds of geographic units. Accordingly, estimating contextual effects at a local level is to invite problems of low statistical power. Put differently, it is hard to uncover meaningful local variation in the determinants of voting when only a small number of respondents live in each locale.[3]

In this paper we link the individual to their social and political context. More specifically, we examine the modelling assumption that the determinants of support for nationalist parties have a constant effect across localities, and we explore both the individual-level correlates of nationalist party vote choice and the extent to which these correlates are conditioned by an individual's local context. To do so we focus on the case of support for the Bloc Québécois in the province of Quebec. Our main argument is that policy positions on nationalism should become more important in predicting vote for the Bloc Québécois in localities where voters feel threatened culturally or economically.

To test this argument we use data from the 2011 Canadian Vote Compass, a uniquely large survey of voters.[4] We first estimate an individual-level model of vote choice, testing the comparative effects of nationalist preferences, left-wing policy preferences, and leader evaluations on support for the Bloc Québécois across the province of Quebec. Our findings are largely consistent with findings in the Canadian and broader comparative literatures that two main cleavages (nationalism and ideology) underly support for nationalist parties. We then turn to explore how two local contextual factors (percentage of English speakers and percentage of unemployed) condition the effect of these individual-level determinants of nationalist vote. We estimate these contextual effects at the level of census divisions (roughly corresponding to cities and towns) using a two-step model recommended by Jusko and Shively (2005). In support of our argument, we find that voters' policy positions on nationalism become more important in predicting a vote for the Bloc Québécois when the percentage of English speakers (our proxy for ethno-cultural threat) increases in their locality. By contrast, we find that the relationship between nationalism and support for nationalist parties is not conditioned by economic hardship in the place where an individual lives. To demonstrate the robustness of our findings, we then test our arguments using a different dataset from multiple elections – the Canadian Election Study – as well as an additional modelling approach.

Our findings have implications for how we think about nationalist parties' electoral strategies, especially the trade-off these parties face between catering to identitarian policies or to classical ideological policies. If nationalist parties want to maximize electoral support across geographic constituencies they may have to tailor their message differently in different localities. More specifically, the emphasis they will place on nationalist policy positions should not be the same everywhere. Furthermore, our findings lend support to arguments made in the literature on the importance of an ethno-cultural calculus among voters voting for nationalist parties. Finally, this paper seeks to contribute to the broader vote choice literature by examining the role that local context plays in individuals' choice of parties. We assume that voters employ different calculi depending on the environment in which they are situated, and we try to show this by explicitly modelling how individual-level determinants of vote choice vary by local conditions that should plausibly affect voters' calculus.

In what follows, we review the Canadian and comparative literatures on individual level determinants of vote choice for nationalist parties and apply their insights to our case of the Bloc Québécois (Section 2). In turn, we explore how local context matters to the study of vote choice for nationalist parties and derive some empirical expectations of the ways in which contextual variables exacerbate or attenuate the effects of individual-level predictors of nationalist vote (Section 3). We then review our data and modelling strategy (Section 4), and we follow this with our analyses and discussion of results using two different datasets and methodologies (Section 5). We end with a discussion of the implications of our findings and further avenues of research (Section 6).

[3] We do note, however, that related and very promising work in "small area estimation" (Park et al., 2004; Jiang and Lahiri, 2006; Ghitza and Gelman, 2013) is presenting an easily applied solution to this problem.

[4] Restricting our analysis to the province of Quebec in Canada, we still have more than eighteen-thousand respondents.

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