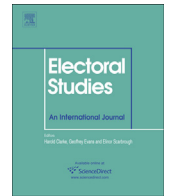




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A communitropic theory of economic voting

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ABSTRACT

Within the social sciences, there is a long and storied history of the effect of economic conditions on vote choice. The traditional arguments are that voters have personal (egotropic) and/or other-regarding (sociotropic) preferences and that they reward and punish politicians electorally based on economic conditions at these levels. However, there is a third option. As industries, employment, and economic conditions are not uniformly distributed across the country, preferences may be locally based. This project combines unique survey data with Metropolitan Statistical Area unemployment numbers and finds evidence of distinct preferences at a third “communitropic” level.

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1. Introduction

In the months approaching an election, candidates and the media devote vast amounts of resources and time to the political and social issues of the day. But no matter the policies being debated or the endless banter of parties and pundits, one issue is always given a position of prominence: the economy. The difficulty however, is not just the determination of which aspects of the economy are most salient, but even how to define and measure ‘the economy.’

The electoral rewarding or punishing of representatives for economic conditions (Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000) has traditionally been examined in two forms: Egotropic (also known as pocketbook) and sociotropic voting (Nannestad and Paldam, 1994). If voters are egotropically motivated, then their votes are most directly affected by changes in personal financial circumstances. The link between a politician's policies and a voter's losses (gains) may be indirect and unintentional, but that would not necessarily absolve her from blame (credit). In contrast, sociotropically motivated voters are primarily influenced by the macro economy. That is, they care more about whether the country is doing well or poorly than they do about their

own present situation. Government has only a limited ability to influence macroeconomic indicators, but representatives would still be held responsible.

Not only are officials not omnipotent, but the constituencies over which they govern are not uniform. Variation in the concentrations of industries and workers, and differences in state and local governments, among other factors, mean that macroeconomic conditions vary across states and regions. These local conditions are much more pertinent to voters than the often reported national figures. For example, it would be an ecological fallacy to use the national unemployment rate as a description of any given state. In December 2012, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a national unemployment rate of 7.8%, but state unemployment ranged from 3.2% (North Dakota) to 10.2% (Nevada and Rhode Island). The reasons for this disparity are not important, but it does suggest that how people experience the macro economy in these states may differ in ways that are meaningful to the study of vote choice.

Egotropic voting is self-interested in nature, as may be sociotropic voting, but the latter includes the possibility of other-regarding preferences. Yet while people may care about the welfare of others, it is well established that pro-social behavior is stronger within groups than between them, even when group bonds are trivial (Tajfel and Billig, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). By this rationale, people may care about the national economy, but it is reasonable

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to assume that they also care separately and more strongly about the condition of their local economy. These preferences are distinct from egotropic motives, in that they are other regarding. However, they are also not purely sociotropic, in that they place stronger weight on subsets of society. Let us define ‘communitropic’ voting to be the electoral rewarding or punishing of incumbents for general economic conditions within a particular community or region. These are collectively motivated preferences, but are geographically constrained to a strict subset of the official’s jurisdiction.

For example, if perceptions national economic conditions affect presidential approval, then these are sociotropic preferences. Similarly, if a city’s economic conditions affect the mayor’s approval rate, then this is also sociotropic. However, if conditions within a city affect presidential approval among those who live in the city, then this would demonstrate communitropic preferences. This project first introduces the theory of communitropic voting and then provides evidence from a nationally representative survey, combined with objective measures of local economic conditions.

2. Communitropic economic voting

Modeling voters as being self-interested is appropriate, but perhaps misleading. To say that a voter is egotropically motivated is not to suggest that she is selfish, rather that she is motivated by recent personal (economic) experiences. As such, if the individual has experienced loss of employment (Grafstein, 2005) or personal financial gain (Fiorina, 1978), she may attribute blame or credit to the incumbent (or party thereof) and update her support/approval of candidates accordingly. State level economic conditions have been found to increase self interest, among survey respondents (Lau and Heldman, 2009). This sort of narrow self-interested depiction of voting is most often associated with rational choice models of political behavior. But while such theories became popular, particularly with the growth of game theory in the fields of both political science and economics, observational and experimental studies of behavior suggest a degree of pro-social behavior (Bolton and Ockenfels, 2000; Andreoni, 1995).

Sociotropic voting, which will here be defined as rewarding or punishing candidates based on economic conditions at the highest appropriate level, has been investigated for many decades.¹ These sociotropic preferences may be pro-social in nature, but they may also reflect a voter’s belief that current macroeconomic conditions are the best predictors of her future personal welfare (Kiner and Kiewiet, 1981). The manner in which such conditions are judged varies widely, from study to study. Economic growth rates (Lewis-Beck and Rice, 1984; Lewis-Beck and Tien, 1996), inflation (Norpoth, 1996), consumer prices (Arcelus and Meltzer, 1975; Lepper, 1974), leading economic indicators (Wlezien and Erikson, 1996), and perceptions of a party’s ability to solve national economic problems

(Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979) have all been used as explanations of sociotropic behavior.

Between the two levels, several types of complications have been posited. Among these, first, it may be that egotropic and sociotropic behavior are associated with different levels of political sophistication (Gomez and Wilson, 2007). Alternatively, beliefs regarding national economic conditions may be inaccurate, biased by media coverage, which Hetherington (1996) argues to have occurred prior to the 1992 presidential election. The accuracy of perceptions may also be affected by the voter’s socioeconomic status (Holbrook and Garand, 1996) or by local economic conditions (Duch et al., 2000). Thus, even those voters who are attempting to behave sociotropically may be doing so more or less than they would otherwise prefer. Voters are only able to reward or punish, if they are able to clearly attribute responsibility to government officials (Powell and Whitten, 1993).

Even though locally-based preferences have not been directly considered in terms of economic voting, there is a related and well populated literature implicitly in support of this theory. If politicians are electorally motivated; engage in advertising, credit claiming, and position taking (Mayhew, 1974); and engage in a degree of distributional politics (Dixit and Londregan, 1996), then logically officials assume that voters are aware of local conditions and behave accordingly. That is, if officials care most about winning elections, then their primary reason for engaging in these activities is that they believe they will translate to votes. Indeed there is some evidence to support the claim that voters hold local officials accountable for performance (Berry and Howell, 2007). This also requires that voters be at least subconsciously aware of what elected officials have done and that voters have working knowledge of how policies relate to outcomes. A communitropic theory of economic voting is not so strict. All it requires is that voters have a sense of community and can perceive whether times are good or poor. In order to study this, it is necessary to assess the effects of both objective local conditions and perceptions thereof.

3. Hypotheses

Drawing on this communitropic theory of economic voting, a series of hypotheses can be tested, the first of which relates to the ability of respondents to distinguish local from national conditions.

Hypothesis 1. *Increases in the local unemployment rate will be negatively associated with perceptions of local conditions, but will not be related to perceptions of personal or national conditions.*

This is crucial to the theory, as for communitropic preferences to be truly distinct, respondents must have a general idea of the state of the local economy, relative to their personal situation and that of the nation. That is, a respondent knows if her community is better or worse off than others and if she has personally fared better or worse than those around her. As unemployment rates tend to change at a relatively slow pace, small changes should not directly affect personal finances. Similarly, any individual

¹ This means presidents, senators, and members of the House of Representatives are judged based on national conditions, while governors and state officials are judged based on state level indicators.

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