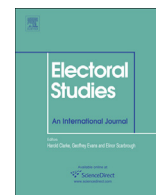




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Two types of economic voting: How economic conditions jointly affect vote choice and turnout



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ABSTRACT

The economic voting literature mostly looks at vote choice, ignoring potential effects on turnout. Studies that do focus on the latter often ignore the former, and come to contradictory conclusions. I develop a model of economic voting that jointly incorporates vote choice and abstention due to alienation or indifference. Analyzing ten elections with validated turnout data and conducting empirically informed simulations, I make two contributions. First, I show that “turnout switching” accounts for up to one third of total economic voting. This second type of economic voting is more common when the number of parties is low and responsibility is dispersed. Second, I show that a bad economy moves some people to abstain while having the opposite effect on others. The aggregate effect is ambiguous and related to macro-conditions in a non-linear way. This explains contradictory findings in the literature.

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1. Introduction

The central message of the voluminous literature on economic voting is simple: If the economy is doing well, citizens tend to vote for the incumbent, and if the economy is doing poorly, they cast their votes for the opposition. This ignores an alternative mechanism through which voters can express their opinion: namely, whether they turn out or abstain. Studies have criticized this omission and contend that the economic voting literature misses important dynamics (Lacy and Burden, 1999; Taylor, 2000; Stevens, 2006; Tillman, 2008). While there exists a separate literature on the connection between economic conditions and the decision to turn out, it tends to ignore vote choice. It also offers inconsistent empirical results at the micro and macro-level, finding in turn positive, negative, and non-existent correlations between economic indicators and turnout (Blais, 2006).

In this paper, I develop a model of economic voting that jointly incorporates vote choice and turnout. To do so, I use insights from the spatial voting literature, in which abstention is conceptualized as a function of two mechanisms: alienation and indifference (Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Hinich and Munger, 1994; Sanders, 1998; Adams et al., 2006). A citizen is alienated if none of the parties provide her with sufficiently high utility. Someone is indifferent if the differences between the utilities for the parties are not large enough. Using these concepts, I argue that citizens' evaluation of the economy interact with their evaluation of other party characteristics, such as policy positions, to jointly determine vote choice and abstention. If the governing party manages the economy badly, voters are more likely to be alienated, which increases their probability to abstain. Economic mismanagement also affects indifference, but in two different ways. On the one hand, citizens who evaluate the governing parties positively might not want to vote for them anymore because of their poor handling of the economy. At the same time, they may not want to cast a ballot for other parties either, e.g. because they oppose their

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policies. These voters are likely to become indifferent and thus abstain. On the other hand, citizens who are indifferent between the parties and abstain under “normal” circumstances will receive important additional information when the governing parties manage the economy badly. They now see that these parties lack competence, which makes opposition parties preferable. This makes them less likely to be indifferent, and more likely to turn out. I use this unified model of economic voting with abstention due to alienation and/or indifference in two ways. First, I estimate the model statistically for ten election studies from four countries with validated turnout data. Second, I conduct a series of exploratory computer simulations that are calibrated using the empirical estimates from the statistical models. In the absence of reliable survey data for a large number of elections, such empirically informed simulations are a second-best option for providing insights into how macro-level conditions affect economic voting.

The paper makes two novel contributions. First, it shows that there are indeed two types of economic voting. In all ten elections that are analyzed, a non-negligible part of the population reacts to worsening economic conditions by changing their probability to abstain. Macro-level conditions systematically influence the prevalence of turnout switching compared to vote switching. If the number of parties is low, a substantial part of economic voting happens through changes in the probability of turning out. In the US elections analyzed, up to one third of total economic voting happens through turnout switching. “Traditional” economic voting through vote switching is more dominant when there are many parties. But even in the elections with four major parties analyzed in this paper (Sweden and New Zealand), more than ten percent of the total impact of changing economic conditions happens through turnout switching. The exploratory computer simulations additionally suggest that “traditional” economic voting is dominant when there is high clarity of responsibility. When responsibility is dispersed, however, voters are more likely to react through their turnout decision. The paper shows that studies that ignore turnout run the risk of significantly and systematically underestimating the effect of the economy on elections.

Second, the paper provides an explanation for the contradictory findings in the literature on the relation between the economy and turnout at the micro and macro-level. The empirical analysis shows that in each given election, some voters are more likely to abstain in reaction to changing economic conditions because they become alienated or indifferent. Others, however, are less likely to be indifferent and therefore more likely to turn out. Existing studies constrain the effect of the economy on the decision to abstain to be equal for all voters. The sign and magnitude of this effect then depends on how prevalent the changes in alienation and indifference are. Indeed, I find that worsening economic conditions can lead to higher or lower aggregate turnout rates. In the sample of ten elections, a worse economy leads to lower turnout in four cases, to higher turnout in three, and has a null effect in another three. The exploratory simulations suggest that when the number of parties is high, a worse

economy leads to lower turnout. When the number of parties is low, the effect is expected to be non-linear, especially if governing responsibility is concentrated. Turnout decreases under moderately bad conditions, and then stays constant or even increases again as conditions get even worse because the positive effect of indifference outweighs the negative impact of alienation and indifference. This provides an explanation for why existing studies, which test for simple linear effects, come to contradictory conclusions.

2. The economy, vote choice, and abstention

The connection between the economy and elections has been one of the most active research agendas in political science over the past three decades. Since the seminal contribution by Fiorina (1981), hundreds of studies have looked at economic voting from the micro and macro-angle; in countries across all regions of the world; and from a variety of perspectives, e.g. political economy, political behavior, or political psychology (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000, 2007; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). Due to the profound impact of the “Great Recession,” economic voting has received increased attention again in the past years (see the contributions summarized in Scotto, 2012). While the research program has been criticized periodically (Paldam, 1991; Cheibub and Przeworski, 1999; Anderson, 2007; van der Brug et al., 2007; Evans and Pickup, 2010), it has taken up the posed challenges and sought to address the problems that were pointed out. An important development has been the increased quantity and quality of studies that look at economic voting in a comparative context. As a consequence, it is fairly well understood under what circumstances economic conditions influence vote choice in what way. Most importantly, the “clarity of responsibility” hypothesis (Powell and Whitten, 1993) has received ample support. It states that when several parties share executive and/or legislative powers, voters have difficulties identifying who is responsible for the (mis-)management, and there is less economic voting (Anderson, 2000; Nadeau et al., 2002; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). Whereas clarity of responsibility focuses on citizens’ ability to identify who to vote *against* in case of economic mismanagement, the “availability of alternatives for dissent” hypothesis stresses that for economic voting to be high, voters also need someone to vote *for* (Lewis-Beck, 1988; Anderson, 2000, 2007; Anderson and Hecht, 2012). It emphasizes that citizens “will desert the governing party only when they have somewhere to go to express their discontent” (Anderson, 2007, p. 285). Other contributions have identified a number of additional factors that influence the strength of economic voting, such as multilevel governance (Anderson, 2006; Queralt, 2012), economic openness (Hellwig and Samuels, 2007; Duch and Stevenson, 2010; Anderson and Hecht, 2012), or the state of the economy in comparable countries (Kayser and Peress, 2012).

Nevertheless, important open questions remain. One is the connection between economic voting and turnout. The dependent variable in economic voting studies is typically

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