



Electoral registration and the control of votes: The case of Chile



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ABSTRACT

We investigate how the employment relationship may lead employers to control the voting behavior and to induce the electoral registration of their workers. Forced registration and the control of votes become feasible when voting behavior is observable, as in open ballot elections. Workers whose vote is controlled are more likely to be registered as compared to other eligible voters, increasing their impact on electoral outcomes. Increasing the secrecy of the vote (for instance with the adoption of a secret ballot) significantly reduces the control of votes. Electoral registration, however, remains biased as long as the probability of voting behavior disclosure induces less ideologically motivated voters to comply with the political preference of the employer. We provide empirical support for the predictions of the model examining the effects of the introduction of the secret ballot in Chile in 1958.

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1. Introduction

Independent observers of the recent 2012 presidential election in Russia pointed out how Putin's victory was marred by serious problems at the level of electoral registration. Allegedly, many of the violations involved the so-called *cruise* or *carousel* voting where people, many of which public servants fraudulently registered, are bussed with the ballots to multiple polling stations.²

This salient case shows the crucial role that strategic electoral registration can play in electoral frauds, and underlines the importance of studying the incentives for

electoral registration in settings potentially prone to vote coercion and vote buying.

In this paper we investigate the role played by electoral registration in the nexus between employment and political control. It has been shown that, when employers concede rents to workers, these can be used to control their voting behavior (Baland and Robinson, 2008, 2012). The control of the votes works particularly well in the absence of a secret ballot. When the secrecy of the vote is violated, vote's coercion becomes feasible. Several cases have been reported in the literature of employers controlling the votes of their employees for their own benefit. In agrarian economies landlords influenced or even directly controlled the voting behavior of their workers sometimes crucially determining election outcomes where vote secrecy was not guaranteed.³

In the absence of an effective secret ballot, the ballots have frequently subtle but distinct marks across parties,

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² See for instance the web edition of *Financial Times* on March 4, 2012.

³ See for instance Kitson-Clark (1951) and O'Gorman (1989) for Britain, and Blackburn (1988), and Gibson and Blinkhorn (1991) for Germany.

such as paper thickness, color and size, from which the voter's decision is easily detected. Once this information reaches the local lords punishment can be inflicted upon the deviating voters. Similar tactics have been in use up to the present day in democratic third world countries.⁴

Baland and Robinson (2008) describe the mechanism which allowed Chilean landlords to control the political behavior of their long-term tenants (*inquilinos*). In particular, they show that before the introduction of the secret ballot in 1958, landlords were able to control their workers, thereby influencing election results to the advantage of the Conservative and Liberal parties. After 1958, the secrecy of the vote reduced this control and increased the votes gained by the centrist and the leftist parties.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, we show both theoretically and empirically that open ballot elections may lead to a bias in registration, in which voters whose vote is controlled by their employers have a larger registration rate as compared to other voters. Interestingly, the biased electoral registration reinforces the impact of vote control on electoral results. Focusing on the Chilean case, we argue that the effects documented in Baland and Robinson (2008) result partially from the existence of a bias in electoral registration. Not only tenants' votes were controlled by landlords. Tenants were also more likely to be registered in electoral lists as compared to the rest of the population, increasing the share of total votes influenced by the landlords.

Second, we show that the introduction of an Australian (secret) ballot, while reducing the control of votes, not necessarily cancel the bias in electoral registration. If vote secrecy's violation continues even partially under the secret ballot (or is simply believed to continue by voters), employers may find it profitable to register their employees in the attempt to control some of them.⁵ Studying the introduction of the secret ballot in 1958 in Chile suggests the plausibility of this mechanism.

The impact of secret balloting has been neglected by the literature on political economy (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Cox, 1997; Persson and Tabellini, 2000, 2003). Several studies have investigated the impact of the cost of voting (including cost of registration) on turnout (e.g., Kovenock and Roberson, 2011; Powell, 1986; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980), but to our knowledge only one recent study relates it with the effects of an open ballot (Nichter, 2008). Considering the case of Argentina under secret ballot elections, Nichter (2008) argues that parties were distributing rewards to unmobilized supporters to convince them to vote.

2. Theoretical framework

We set up a model to describe the incentives for electoral registration. The political system is constituted by two

parties: left (L), and right (R). Workers prefer L whereas the rest of the population prefers R .⁶ There is a continuum of individuals in terms of political motivation, denoted by σ . Formally, $\sigma \sim U[0; \sigma^H]$.⁷ Accordingly, the most ideologically motivated worker derives a utility of σ^H from voting for L . Moreover, in order to vote individuals have to register in the electoral lists at a cost c .⁸ Formally the utility for a worker j voting for his preferred party is:

$$U_j = \sigma_j - c \quad (1)$$

The political motivation σ is private information.⁹

Two occupations are available to workers: they can work independently for a wage \underline{w} , or be hired by employer E for a wage $\bar{w} > \underline{w}$. Only a subset of workers are hired by E , who prefers R . The higher wage offered by employer E provides the right incentives for the hired workers to perform properly their task (i.e. efficiency wage).

The timing of the model is the following:

1. Workers are hired.
2. Registration and elections take place.
3. Production occurs.
4. Payoffs \underline{w} and \bar{w} are distributed.

We can now consider the electoral registration of workers under open ballot and secret ballot elections, respectively.

2.1. Open ballot elections

If the electoral system is characterized by an open ballot regime, voting behavior is observable at the individual level. As a consequence, the employer E can change the terms of the contract making the wage payment conditional to electoral registration and voting behavior.

The following proposition addresses the consequences of open ballot elections on electoral registration.

Proposition 1. *If $\bar{w} - \underline{w} \geq c$ there exists a bias in electoral registration, under open ballot elections.*

A formal proof is provided in the Appendix.

If the voting behavior is observable, E can add two conditions in the workers' contract: they must i) register and ii) vote R in order to get paid the wage \bar{w} . If $\bar{w} - \underline{w} \geq c$, the income gap between E 's workers and self-employed workers is large enough to cover the cost of registration.

⁶ Our theoretical framework is not meant to explain electoral outcomes. As a consequence the rest of the population voting R is not explicitly dealt with in the model. We specifically focus on registration incentives among workers.

⁷ We assume that individuals derive utility from expressing their support for their preferred party through their vote (Brennan and Hamlin, 1998).

⁸ The cost of registration can be interpreted as the time and transportation costs involved to reach the electoral offices during working hours.

⁹ Expressive voting is usually modeled as granting a positive utility for voting for one's preferred party and a negative utility of voting for another party. Since this leads to unnecessary complexity in notation, we omit the negative utility of voting for other parties, and set the utility of voting for another party equal to zero.

⁴ Baland and Robinson (2008) report examples particularly focusing on Latin America. For instance, in Colombia, an effective secret ballot (*tarjetón*) was legislated only in 1988 and introduced two years later in the 1990 election.

⁵ For studies on secrecy's violation under secret ballot see Schaffer 2007, Stokes, 2008, Collier and Vicente 2012).

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