

From Booths to Beliefs:

A Cognitive Dissonance Approach to Elections in Europe

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In a nutshell

- ▶ Elections are the primary mechanism for civil society to participate in the democratic process, deliberate about its future.
- ▶ Electoral participation can also intensify disagreement, and influence citizens' attitudes (Mullainathan and Washington 2009).
- ▶ How?
 - ▶ **Cognitive Dissonance:** Electoral participation is equivalent to behaviourally committing to a political team. This commitment has the power to enhance attachment towards the chosen political team and animus towards political opponents (Dinas 2014; Sorace and Hobolt 2021).

Where are we going?

1. Context
2. The Puzzle
3. Research Design
4. Preliminary Findings
5. Discussion

Motivation: When "I" becomes "We"



A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger 1957)

- ▶ Individuals experience mental discomfort when their behaviours are inconsistent with their beliefs.
- ▶ To alleviate this discomfort, they may adjust their preferences to better align with their actions.
- ▶ When individuals make a choice among a **limited set of alternatives** they tend to develop a more favourable perception of their initially preferred option.
- ▶ How does this apply to elections?

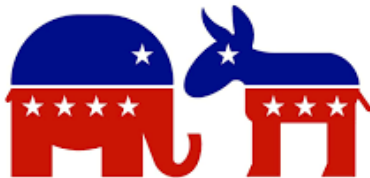
Can Elections Change Your Mind?

- ▶ Under a group theory perspective, voting is a declaration of allegiance to a political group which shapes how citizens view themselves and their opponents.
- ▶ **Evidence:**
 - ▶ After voting for a party, voters tend to view that party more positively than before the election.
 - ▶ Citizens' levels of Partisan Identity (PID) becomes stronger among those who vote in alignment with a prior partisan leaning (Dinas 2014).

The Puzzle: Us vs. Them

US vs THEM?

- The United States: partisan divisions between **Republicans** and **Democrats** (Mason, 2018).



The Puzzle: Us vs. them, them, them and them

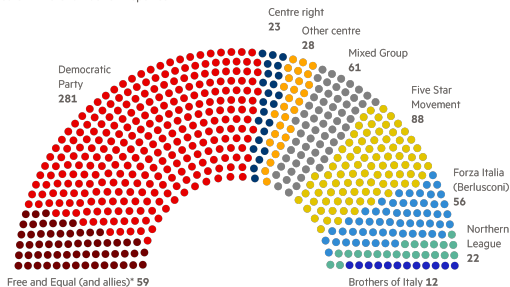
US vs THEM?

- In multiparty systems, citizens might feel positively, or negatively, towards multiple parties at once (Reiljan 2020; Westwood et al. 2018; Wagner 2021).

But, what is the relationship between voting and attitudes when there are more than two actors at play?

The outgoing Italian parliament

Seats in the Chamber of Deputies



*Includes Articolo 1 - Movimento Democratico e Progressista, Sinistra Italiana - Sinistra Ecologia Libertà - Possibile

Source: Open Parlamento

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Research Design

Objective: Investigate how electoral participation influences political attitudes in multi-party systems

Data: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) – Wave 5

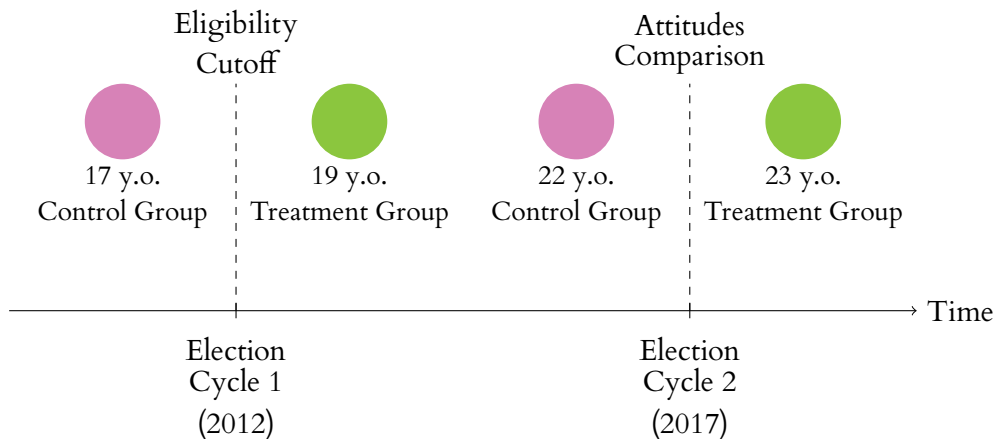
Method: Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD)

Instrument: Voting age eligibility (18 years old)

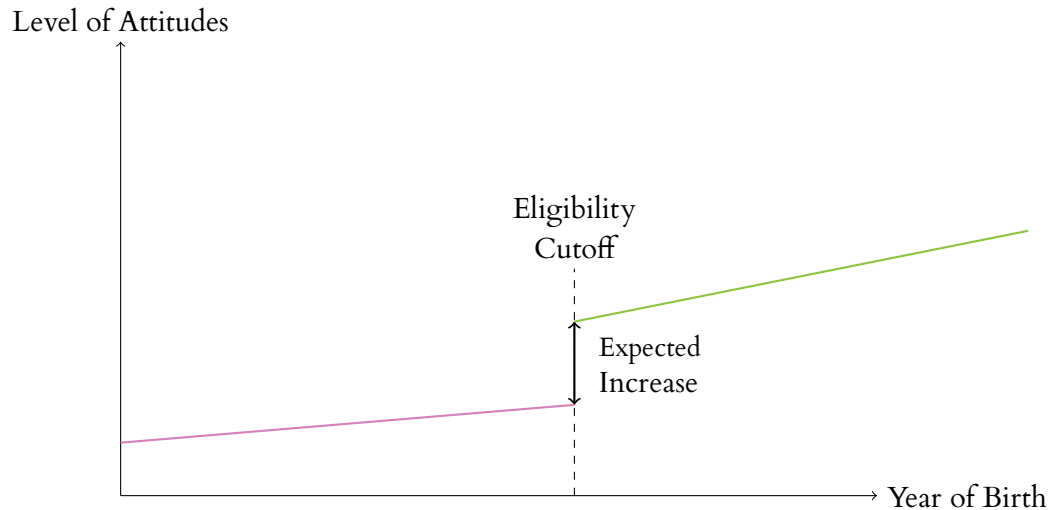
Variables:

- ▶ **Running Variable:** Year of birth
- ▶ **Treatment:** Voting in a Salient Election
- ▶ **Outcome Variables:** Partisanship, Affective Polarisation, (Negative) Attitude Towards Minorities, (Negative) Attitude Towards Political Leaders

In practice:

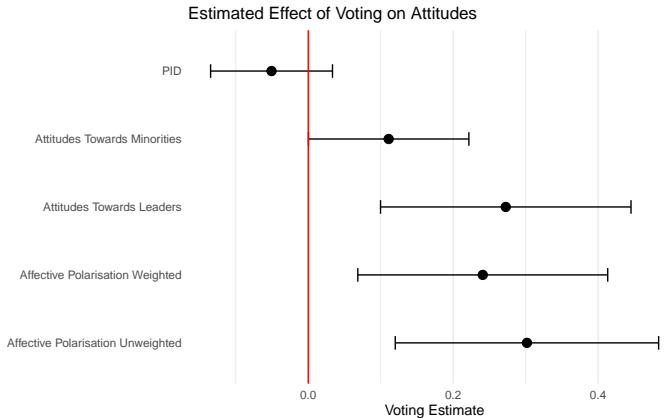


Expectations



Preliminary Findings 1/2

- ▶ Voting in salient elections increases both unweighted and weighted affective polarisation.
- ▶ No significant effect on partisan identification.
- ▶ Positive effect on negative attitudes towards political leaders and minorities.



Preliminary Findings 2/2

	Model 1	Model 2
salient_voting	0.17 (0.10)	0.49*** (0.12)
gendermale	-0.08** (0.03)	-0.13** (0.04)
education	0.07*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
pol_interest	0.16*** (0.02)	0.18*** (0.03)
media	0.01 (0.02)	0.19*** (0.03)
salient_voting:gendermale		0.08 (0.05)
salient_voting:education		0.11*** (0.02)
salient_voting:pol_interest		-0.04 (0.04)
salient_voting:media		-0.28*** (0.04)
R ²	0.11	0.13
Adj. R ²	0.11	0.12
Num. obs.	9195	9195
RMSE	1.24	1.23
*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$		

Table: Effect of Salient Voting on Affective Polarisation + Controls

Discussion

► Preliminary Takeaways:

- Behavioural commitment to a party might have the power to shape attitudes towards political opponents, but it does not necessarily make people feel closer to the chosen party.
- Only respondents near the cutoff \rightsquigarrow it is possible that developing partisanship is a gradual, habitual process. In contrast, it requires less behavioural commitment to identify political opponents and foster negative feelings towards them.

► Limitations:

- Respondents' evaluations of parties as a measure of affective polarisation.
- Is this really about cognitive dissonance?

Going Forward

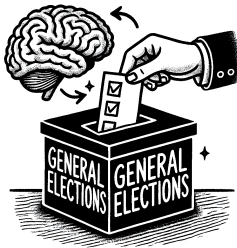
- ▶ **Cross-Comparative Analysis:**


- ▶ Analyse variations over time.
- ▶ Examine across countries, electoral, and institutional systems.


- ▶ **Robustness Checks:**


- ▶ Implement placebo tests with different cutoffs to validate the chosen cutoff.
- ▶ Analyse effects in countries with different voting age rules and electoral systems (e.g. Austria, Brazil).
- ▶ Compare effects in compulsory vs. voluntary voting contexts to identify differences (e.g. Belgium).


Any questions?



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