

Comparing Political Systems

VOTERS

Sebastian Koehler

Department of Political Economy
King's College London

Our journey so far

So far, we have discussed

- determinants of political participation and electoral turnout
- institutional aspects of electoral systems and how they create incentives for voters and parties
- the origins and effects of party systems

Today, we close the circle by looking at determinants of individual vote choices.

Plan of the lecture

In this lecture, I will touch on different aspects of voting behaviour

1. Firstly, I discuss different explanations of voting behaviour
2. Secondly, I introduce the idea of economic voting and how it helps to understand voter behaviour
3. Thirdly, I show different approaches which are used to study economic voting
4. Lastly, I highlight on some problems with economic voting arguments

What makes voters tick?

Several approaches exist to explain voter behaviour

1. Sociological
2. Psychosocial ("Michigan School")
3. Rational Choice

Sociological approaches

- Dating back to the work of Lazarsfeld and his collaborators in the 1940s
- Studying vote choice, they found a strong association between individuals and group membership
- They argued that to predict a person's vote, three pieces of information were sufficient:
 - Socio-economic status
 - Religion
 - Area of residence
- The three factors were combined into an index of political predisposition and widely used in research
- Race was another important factor identified in later research
- Later work focused on cleavages as structural determinants of vote choice

Psychological approaches: The Michigan School

- Closely linked to research at the University of Michigan
- Focus is on political attitudes as drivers of vote choice
- Political attitudes are the opinions and values regarding political parties, candidates or issues
- Partisanship (party identification) is the most important attitude
- Other important attitudes refer to candidate evaluation and issue positions

Partisanship

Partisanship is characterized by strong support for a political party, and it

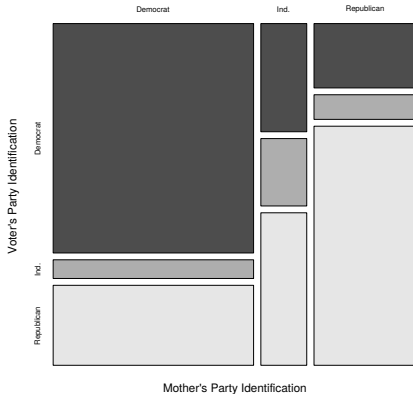
- is the result of (early childhood) socialization
- tends to increase with age
- is stable over a person's lifetime
- is the best predictor of a person's vote choice
- influences attitudes over issues

Measuring Partisanship

Survey question: US example

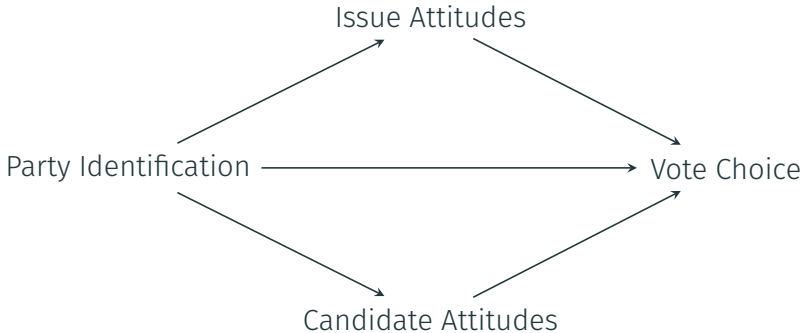
- In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat or an independent?
- Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican/Democrat)?

Partisanship of respondent and respondent's mother



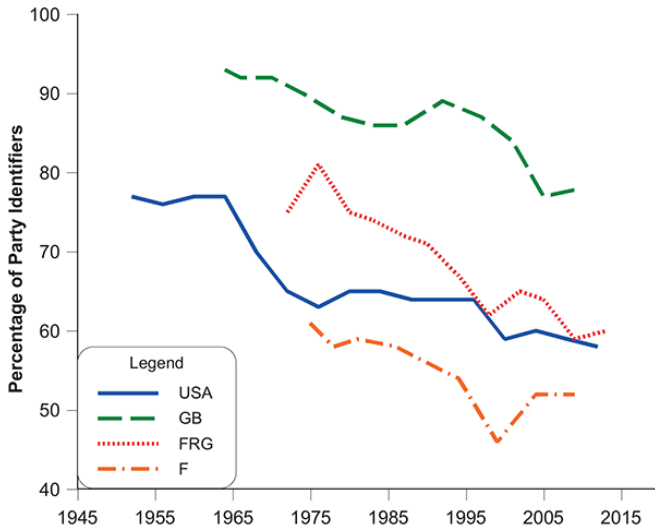
Data source: American National Election Study (1988).

Partisanship and vote choice



Adopted from Asher (1983)

Party identification over time



Rational choice approaches

- Downs (1957) was one of the pioneers of this approach
- Based on the assumption of instrumental rationality
- Voters are perceived as utility maximizers
- Vote choice depends on evaluation of policies or candidates, voters vote for the alternative that yields the highest utility
- It is possible to integrate party affiliations into the model
- the biggest challenge for rational choice models is to explain why people vote at all (see first lecture)

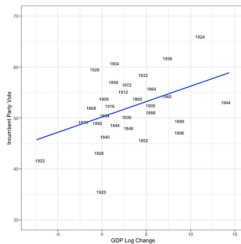
Elections and Accountability

We have already discussed many aspects of elections.
Remember some of their core functions:

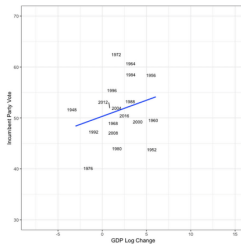
1. Aggregation of information about the preferences of voters
2. Selection of political leaders
3. Holding office holders accountable for their performance

The idea of accountability gives rise to an influential model of vote choice: **Economic voting**.

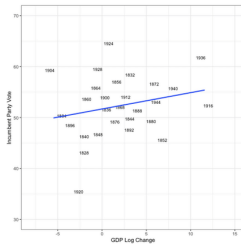
GDP Growth and the vote share of US Presidents



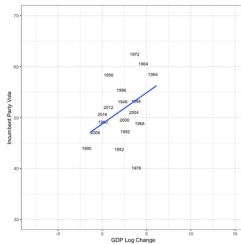
(a) Year 3 1792-1944



(b) Year 3 1948-2016



(c) Year 4 1792-1944



(d) Year 4 1948-2016

Source: Guntermann, Lenz, and Myers (2021)

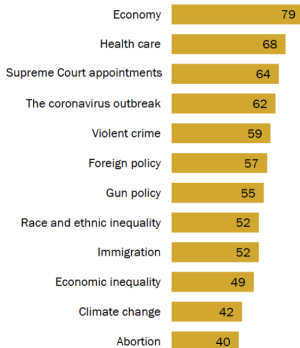
It's the economy, stupid! Or is it?

The powerful relationship between the economy and the electorate in democracies [...] comes from the economic responsiveness of the electors, the individual voters. Among the issues on the typical voter's agenda, none are more consistently present, nor generally has a stronger impact, than the economy. Citizen dissatisfaction with economic performance substantially increases the probability of a vote against the incumbent. (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000, 211)

Voter priorities

Economy is top issue for voters in the 2020 election

% of registered voters saying each is 'very important' to their vote in the 2020 presidential election



Note: Based on registered voters.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 27-Aug. 2, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: PEW Research Center (<https://pewresearch.org>)

Economic voting

- The vote choice (of at least some) voters is based on the evaluation of current economic conditions and recent developments
 - If the economy is good, voters vote for incumbent
 - If the economy is bad, voters vote against incumbent
 - Collective evaluations are more important than pocketbook assessments

Which factors are important for the economic vote?

When assessing the extent of economic voting empirically, researchers usually use three variables to objectively assess the state of the economy around the election:

- unemployment rate
- inflation rate
- economic growth (GDP)

Clarity of responsibility

- In their influential comparative study, Powell and Whitten compare more than 100 elections in 19 democracies from 1969-1988.
- They look at gains and losses of *incumbent parties* based on economic factors.
- They argue that many earlier studies were inconclusive because they missed an important aspect: The clarity of responsibility.

Clarity of responsibility

- The *clarity of responsibility* is the crucial link in the argument on economic voting.
- Voters need to be able to assign responsibility for economic outcomes to the government party or coalition.
- If the clarity of responsibility is high, voters tend to punish or reward incumbents dependent on the state of the economy.
- If the clarity of responsibility is low, voters tend to react less strongly to the actual state of the economy.

Clarity of Responsibility

The clarity of responsibility is diffused by the following features of political systems:

- Low voting cohesion of the major governing parties in Parliament
- Participatory and inclusive committee system in parliament
- Bicameral opposition
- Minority governments
- Coalition governments

Political Ideology (Whitten and Palmer 1999)

- There exists a trade-off between low inflation and low unemployment.
- This generates a goal conflict, where left-wing governments tend to focus on reducing unemployment, while right-wing governments care more about stable inflation rates.
- Due to ideological differences, coalition governments tend to focus more on growth
- Voter seem to take this into account:
 - Right-wing governments are punished for high levels of inflation.
 - Left-wing governments are punished for high levels of unemployment.
 - Coalition governments are punished for low levels of economic growth.

Economic voting theory revisited

- So far, we have treated economic voters as voters who retrospectively evaluate the state of economic affairs and punish or reward incumbents (\Rightarrow accountability).
- However, economic voting could also be seen as a prospective activity, where voters try to predict future performance in office based on past performance (\Rightarrow *selection*).
- Studies of individual behaviour take this additional distinction into account.

Alternative ways of testing economic voting arguments

- One drawback of studies such as Powell and Whitten (1993) or Whitten and Palmer (1999) is the focus on correlations between aggregate votes and economic variables.
- While the results clearly support the arguments regarding economic voting, they do not allow disentangling, whether voters are acting retrospectively or prospectively.
- They do also not allow identifying whether voters care about the economy as a whole or their own economic well-being.
- Other researchers therefore investigate voters more directly, using surveys.

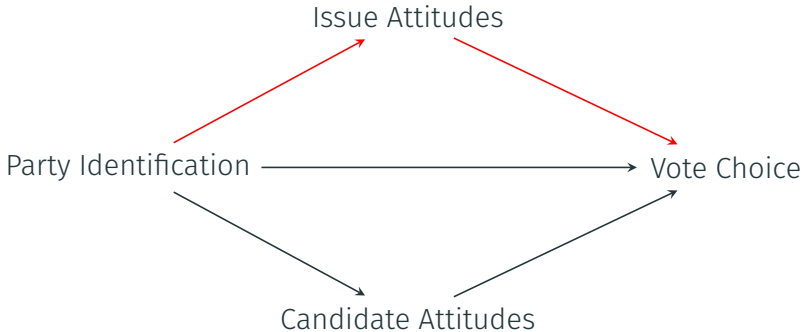
Survey evidence

- Lewis-Beck (1986) compared voters in the UK, France, Germany and Italy
- He correlated relevant data from the Eurobarometer survey and (stated) vote choice
 - Retrospective self-assessment of own financial situation (How are you doing compared to a year ago?).
 - Retrospective assessment of government policies (Have government policies had a good or bad effect on the economy?).
 - Retrospective collective assessments (How is the economy doing compared to a year ago?).
 - Prospective assessments (In a year from now, will government policies have improved the economy?).
- He finds evidence, that retrospective collective and prospective assessments affect the support for incumbent parties.

Challenges of the economic voting model

- The economic voting model asserts that the objective state of the economy matters for the voter
- However, the question is, how voters evaluate the state of the economy. Is it in an objective assessment, or do partisan biases influence the perceptions?
- Ideological biases and party identification may influence the way in which different voters perceive the state of the economy \Rightarrow endogeneity of perceptions

Endogeneity of perceptions



Endogeneity of perceptions

- Many studies show that perceptions of the economy are (partly) endogenous. Some even suggest that this partisan or ideological bias can be large, questioning the validity of economic voting arguments (Evans and Andersen 2006).
- Pickup and Evans (2013) on the other hand show that even when taking the endogeneity of perceptions into account, there is a measurable effect of perceptions on voting decisions.
- Such measurable effects are more likely to materialize for well-informed sophisticated voters, but not for uninformed and less well-educated voters. This suggests that endogeneity concerns are overstated (Lacy and Christenson 2017).

Summary

- Many voters take the state of the economy into account when deciding how to vote.
- At the aggregate level, this leads to gains or losses of vote shares for the incumbent (party or president), dependent on the state of the economy.
- This effect holds, even when accounting for partisanship and ideology.
- Survey-based studies show that both retrospective and prospective evaluations matter for vote choice.
- While partisan voters show biased perceptions of the economy, there are moderating factors such as education.
- Despite the endogeneity of perceptions, there is empirical evidence for economic voting.

Next week

- We will compare different aspects of politics and institutions across political systems
- Majoritarian vs consociational approaches to democratic governance