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Measuring strategic voting in multiparty plurality elections

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Abstract

We propose a method for measuring strategic voting in multiparty plurality elections, and we apply that method to the 1997 Canadian election. The first stage of the inquiry determines whether voters' expectations about the outcome of the election have an independent effect on vote choice, after controlling their preferences, more specifically their party identification and evaluations of parties and leaders. We show that in the 1997 Canadian election perceptions of the local race in the constituency did affect the vote, but not perceptions of the race for who would form the government and the official opposition. The second stage of the analysis consists in assessing for each respondent whether her vote was sincere or strategic: a respondent is deemed to have cast a strategic vote if whether her expectations about the outcome of the election are considered or not leads to a different prediction about which party she is most likely to support. On that basis, we estimate that about 3% of voters cast a strategic vote in the 1997 election. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Cox (1997, p. 71) provides the standard characterization of a strategic voter in a plurality election: "Some voter, whose favourite candidate has a poor chance of winning, notices that she has a preference between the top two candidates; she then rationally decides to vote for the most preferred of these top two competitors rather than for her overall favourite, because the latter vote has a much smaller chance of actually affecting the outcome than the former".

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From that characterization, we derive the following definition: a strategic vote is *a vote for a party (candidate) that is not the preferred one, motivated by the intention to affect the outcome of the election*. This definition drives home the idea that a strategic vote is based on a combination of preferences and of expectations about the outcome of the election and on the belief that one's vote may be decisive.

Consequently, two conditions must be met for a vote to be construed as strategic. The person must have voted for a party (candidate) that was not the most preferred, and she must have done so because of her expectations about the outcome of the election.

What remains to be specified is which aspect of the election outcome voters are concerned with. The type of strategic voting that has been the most systematically examined occurs in a plurality election: it is "a vote for a second-preferred party (candidate) rather than for the first-preferred one, motivated by the perception that the former has a better chance of winning the election" (Blais and Nadeau, 1996, p. 40; see also Cox, 1997, p. 72).¹ In this case, voters are concerned with the various parties' (candidates') chances of winning in their local constituency.

In other kinds of electoral systems, voters are likely to pay attention to other aspects of the election outcome. Suppose a German voter prefers the CDU but perceives the FDP, the CDU ally, to be in danger of falling below the 5% threshold, in which case the FDP will get no PR seat and the CDU–FDP coalition will fail to win a majority of seats. The voter may well decide to vote strategically for her second choice, the FDP.²

A variety of voting behaviors can qualify as strategic. These variations depend to a great extent on electoral laws. If some German voters strategically desert the CDU to support the FDP, it is because of the presence of the 5% threshold for compensatory PR seats. Different types of electoral systems induce specific types of strategic voting.

In a simple plurality system, the standard assumption has been that some voters may vote for a party that is not their most preferred because that party is perceived to have a better chance of winning in their constituency. Such 'local' strategic voting has been examined in numerous studies (for a review, see Alvarez and Nagler, 2000).

However, there are other possibilities. Voters could be more concerned about which party may win the election in the country as a whole and form the government than with which candidate may win in their constituency. Of course the odds of casting a decisive vote at the national level are extremely small, but in Canada they are only about 300 times smaller than the odds of casting a decisive vote at the local level. In addition, there is some suggestive evidence that perceptions of the national race do affect vote choice (Johnston et al., 1992, p. 229).

Some analysts of the 1997 Canadian election have suggested that some voters may have been concerned first and foremost not with which party would form the

¹ The same logic has been applied to primary elections; see Abramson et al. (1992, p. 55) and Bartels (1988, p. 109).

² This example is provided by Cox (1997, p. 82).

government but rather with which party would form the official opposition. The reasons for this are related to the outcome of the previous election. In the 1993 election, the Bloc Québécois, a party that advocates the breakup of the country, obtained 54 seats in the province of Quebec, enough to become the official opposition. It is not hard to imagine that many Canadians disliked the idea of a separatist party being the official opposition. This raises the possibility that, in 1997, some voters may have voted for the party that seemed most likely to unseat the Bloc as the official opposition.³

We propose below a methodology that permits an examination of all forms of strategic voting. We apply that methodology to one particular case, the 1997 Canadian election. We confirm the presence of “local” strategic voting. We do not see any evidence, however, of strategic support based on perceptions of the race for who would form the government or the official opposition.

1. The study

We use the 1997 Canadian Election Study (CES) data. The telephone survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University. A total of 3949 eligible voters were interviewed during the campaign;⁴ 3170 of these were reinterviewed in the post-election survey.

The measurement of strategic voting requires information about individuals’ vote, preferences, and expectations about the outcome of the election (Blais and Nadeau, 1996; Bartels, 1988; Abramson et al., 1992). The post-election wave of the CES provides measures of voting behavior and preferences. Expectations were tapped in the campaign survey (see Appendix A for question wordings).⁵

Preferences are assumed to be reflected in overall evaluations of the parties and of the leaders, as well as in traditional attachment to the parties. Expectations are measured by a 100-point scale indicating the probability that each party would win in the respondent’s constituency, in the country as a whole, or would form the official opposition. However, it is relative expectations, how a party is perceived to be doing compared to the others, that matter. For that reason we rely on standardized scores.⁶

³ This raises the question of why it should matter which party forms the official opposition. The bottom line is that being the official opposition allows a party to play a prominent role in the question period and to influence the public agenda, as media coverage of Parliament is entirely focused on the question period (Franks, 1987, p. 147). This is consistent with Strom’s (1990, p. 38) general observation that “one need not hold government office in order to gain policy influence”.

⁴ The campaign survey was a rolling cross-section, a miniature sample of around 110 Canadians being interviewed every day of the campaign, which lasted 36 days. The response rate was 59%.

⁵ It does not make sense to measure expectations about the outcome of the election *ex post*, after the outcome is known.

⁶ For each respondent, the score given to a party is divided by the scores given to all the parties.

2. The findings

A necessary condition for a vote to be construed as strategic is that it is affected by expectations about the outcome of the election. The first stage of the inquiry thus consists in establishing whether expectations affect the vote, even after taking into account preferences, that is party identification and evaluations of the parties and of the leaders.

But what kind of expectations should matter? Following on the logic laid out by Alvarez and Nagler,⁷ we assume that the basic motivation for strategic voting is the concern not to waste one's vote on a party (candidate) that has no chance of winning a given race. Consider a person whose first preference is the NDP. The incentive to cast a strategic vote for another party will be greater if the NDP is perceived to be far behind in a given race.⁸

On that basis, we created a No chance variable, which indicates how far behind a party is perceived to be in a given race. No chance equals 0 when the party is perceived to be ahead or tied for first place. If the party is not perceived to be ahead, it equals the distance between its perceived chances (on a 0–1 scale) and the chances of the top contender.⁹ There are three No chance variables, one for the local race in the constituency, one for the race for who would form the government and one for the race for the official opposition.

As there are two quite distinct party systems inside and outside Quebec — the Bloc Québécois did not run any candidate outside Quebec and the Reform party ran only a few token candidates in Quebec — we look separately at the patterns prevailing in and outside Quebec. The dependent variable equals 1 if an individual voted for a given party and 0 otherwise.¹⁰ The main independent variables are the three No chance variables, which have just been described.

The control variables are party and leader ratings and party identification. The first two correspond to the difference in the score (on a 0–1 scale) given to a given party or leader and the higher score given to the other parties or leaders. Party identification equals 1 if an individual identifies very or fairly strongly with a given party, –1 if she identifies with another party, and 0 otherwise.

⁷ Our study relies on direct measures of voters' perceptions of the race, whereas Alvarez and Nagler use the actual outcome as proxy. We look not only at the local race in the constituency, but also at the races for who would form the government and the official opposition.

⁸ As pointed out by Blais and Nadeau (1996) and Alvarez and Nagler (2000), the incentive to cast a strategic vote should also depend on the closeness of the race between the top two contenders (aside the party in question). We constructed a Close contest variable, like W2 in Alvarez and Nagler. That variable proved to be non-significant in all estimations.

⁹ In the latter case, the operationalization is identical to W1 in Alvarez and Nagler (2000), except for the fact that we use direct measures of perceptions. Our measure is different for those cases where the party is perceived to be ahead. In our approach, No chance equals 0 for those cases. It seems to us that there is no reason to cast a strategic vote when one's preferred party is perceived to be ahead.

¹⁰ The five main parties were: the Liberal Party, the Progressive Conservative Party (PC), the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Reform Party, and the Bloc Québécois.

Table 1 shows that each of the three control variables (party and leader ratings and party identification) is significant (and with the right sign) in each of the eight equations, except for leader ratings in the case of the NDP vote in Quebec. The findings confirm that perceptions of the local race did have an independent impact on vote choice: the No chance/LOCAL coefficient has the expected negative sign in all eight equations and is statistically significant in six cases. The results indicate, however, that perceptions of the race for who would form the government or the opposition did not move the vote. The No chance/OPP coefficient is significant in two equations but has the wrong sign in one case. As for the No chance/GOV variable, it is systematically not significant.

Our analyses indicate that the vote is influenced by expectations about the local race in the constituency: voters are less inclined to vote for a party that is perceived to have little chance of winning in the constituency. These perceptions have an independent effect on vote choice, even after taking into account long-term attachment to the parties and evaluations of the various parties and leaders. According to our data, however, only expectations about the local race mattered. There is no support, for instance, for the view that some voters were motivated primarily by the race for who would form the official opposition. These results confirm that expectations matter. But how much? How many people were induced to vote for a party that was not their most preferred because of these expectations? We can estimate, for each respondent, the party she was the most likely to vote for given her party identification, her evaluations of each party and of each leader, and her expectations about the outcome of the election in the local constituency.¹¹ The same equations are also used to estimate for each respondent the party she would have been the most likely to support if her vote had been sincere, that is, if she had voted entirely on the basis of party identification and of party and leader ratings, but *not at all on the basis of expectations* about the outcome of the election in her constituency. We can then determine whether the same prediction holds whether expectations are taken into account or not. If the party that a respondent is predicted to be the most likely to support is the same regardless of whether her expectations are taken into account, the respondent is deemed to have cast a sincere vote. If the inclusion of expectations leads to a different prediction about which party a respondent is most likely to support, then the voter is deemed to have cast a strategic vote.

Table 2 shows the results of the exercise. The entries along the main diagonal represent sincere voters, whose predicted vote is the same whether expectations are taken into account or not. The off-diagonal entries represent strategic voters, whose predicted vote differs when expectations are included in the analysis. This gives us an estimate of 3% of voters having cast a strategic vote both in and outside Quebec.

Which parties benefited or were hurt by strategic voting? As expected, most strategic voters deserted weak parties to the benefit of larger ones. About 8% of those who preferred the NDP and, in Quebec, the Conservatives supported another party.

¹¹ The equations we have used for these estimations did not include expectations about the race for who would form the government and the official opposition, which were not significant.

Table 1
 The determinants of the vote: logistic regressions (* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$)

	Outside Quebec					Quebec				
	Liberal	PC	NDP	Reform	Liberal	PC	NDP	Bloc		
<i>Leader rating</i>	1.93***	2.61***	2.60***	2.63***	4.22***	5.30***	-0.95	4.83***		
<i>Party rating</i>	9.71***	9.51***	11.95***	9.97***	8.51***	7.46***	11.37***	6.87***		
<i>Party identification</i>	0.99***	0.88***	0.92***	0.85***	1.02***	0.93***	0.83*	1.74***		
<i>No chance/LOCAL</i>	-1.14***	-1.13***	-1.63***	-0.99**	-0.18	-0.86*	-1.60	-1.51**		
<i>No chance/GOV</i>	3.13	-0.30	0.70	0.36	1.22	0.16	0.34	1.35		
<i>No chance/OPP</i>	0.63*	1.09**	-0.10	-1.24**	-0.31	-0.37	0.67	-0.54		
Constant	-0.65***	-0.21*	-0.22	0.78***	-0.07	-0.27	-1.52**	0.16		
<i>N</i>	1506	1440	1346	1492	503	497	392	492		
-2 log likelihood	927.86	672.11	384.49	594.64	275.22	268.26	68.04	181.87		

Table 2
Sincere and strategic voting

Strategic predicted vote	Sincere predicted vote				
	Liberal (%)	PC (%)	NDP (%)	Reform (%)	N
<i>(a) Outside Quebec</i>					
Liberal	99.0	1.7	4.2	1.2	703
PC	0.6	97.6	2.1	0.6	293
NDP	0.0	0.0	91.7	0.2	221
Reform	0.4	0.7	2.1	98.0	499
N	689	288	240	499	1716
<i>(b) Quebec</i>					
Liberal	100.0	5.8	7.7	0.5	189
PC	0.0	92.2	0.0	1.6	98
NDP	0.0	0.0	92.3	0.0	12
Bloc	0.0	1.9	0.0	97.9	185
N	181	103	13	187	484

These results are consistent with theoretical expectations and provide some indirect support for our estimation.

There seems to have been much less strategic voting in the 1997 Canadian election than in the 1988 election. In the latter case, Blais and Nadeau (1996) estimated that about 6% of voters cast a strategic vote. The 1988 election had an ingredient that was missing in 1997. In 1988, because of the dominance of the Canada/US free trade issue (Johnston et al., 1992), those who were opposed to free trade had to choose between the two anti free trade parties, the Liberals and the NDP, and many decided to support the one party that had the best chances of defeating the pro free trade party, the Conservatives. There was no overriding issue to divide the parties into two camps in 1997, nor was there any generalized feeling to vote against a specific party. Under such circumstances, we should expect relatively little strategic voting and little we find.

3. Conclusion

We have proposed a method for measuring strategic voting in multiparty plurality elections, and we have applied that method to the 1997 Canadian election. The first stage of the inquiry consists in determining whether voters' expectations about the outcome of the election have an independent effect on vote choice, after controlling their preferences, more specifically their party identification and evaluations of parties and leaders. In the 1997 Canadian election perceptions of the local race in the constituency did affect the vote, but not perceptions of the race for who would form the government and the official opposition.

The second stage of the analysis consists in assessing for each respondent whether her vote was sincere or strategic: a respondent is deemed to have cast a strategic

vote if whether her expectations about the outcome of the election are considered or not leads to a different prediction about which party she is most likely to support. On that basis, we estimate that about 3% of voters cast a strategic vote in the 1997 election.

There appears to have been relatively little strategic voting in the 1997 Canadian election. A comparison with the 1988 election suggests that for an election to elicit substantial strategic voting there must be some generalized feeling that one specific party that is perceived to have a good chance of winning is completely unacceptable. In the absence of such a condition, few voters are induced to strategically desert their preferred party.

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Appendix A. Description of variables¹²

Leader rating. The following questions have been used:

- How do you feel about Jean Charest (pesc1a) / Jean Chrétien (pesc1b) / Alexa McDonough (pesc1c) / Preston Manning (pesc1d) / Gilles Duceppe (pesc1e) on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means you really dislike him/her and 100 means you really like him/her?

The variable is the difference between the score (recoded on a scale from 0 to 1) given to the leader of a given party minus the highest score given to the other leaders.

Party rating. The following questions have been used:

- How do you feel about the Conservative party (pesc2a) / the Liberal party (pesc2b) / the New Democratic party (pesc2c) / the Reform party (pesc2d) / the Bloc Québécois (pesc2e) on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means you really dislike the party and 100 means you really like the party?

The variable is the difference between the score (recoded on a scale from 0 to 1) given to a given party minus the highest score given to the other parties.

¹² The parentheses refer to question numbers in the survey: *cps* refers to the campaign survey and *pes* to the post-election survey.

Party identification. The following questions have been used:

- In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a Liberal, Conservative, N.D.P., Reform, Bloc or none of these (cpsk1)?
- How strongly (name of party) do you feel: very strongly, fairly strongly, or not very strongly (cpsk2)?

The variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent has a strong or a fairly strong party identification for the party, –1 if the respondent has a strong or a fairly strong party identification for another party, and 0 otherwise.

No chance/LOC. The following questions have been used:

- We'll be using a scale from 0 to 100. 0 means a party has no chance at all of winning, 50 means an even chance, and 100 means the party is certain to win. You can use any number from 0 to 100. What are the Conservative party's chances of winning in your riding (cps1a)? The Liberal party's chances (cps1b)? The New Democratic party's chances (cps1c)? The Reform party's chances (cps1d)? The Bloc Québécois's chances (cps1e)?

The variable is the difference between the highest score (standardized and recoded on a scale from 0 to 1) given to the other parties minus the score given to a given party. Negative values have been recoded 0.

No chance/GOV. The following questions have been used:

- On a scale from 0 to 100 where 0 means no chance for the party, 50 means an even chance, and 100 means certain victory in the whole country, what are the Conservative party's chances of winning the election in the whole country (cps2a)? The Liberal party's chances (cps2b)? The New Democratic party's chances (cps2c)? The Reform party's chances (cps2d)?

The variable is the difference between the highest score (standardized and recoded on a scale from 0 to 1) given to the other parties minus the score given to a given party. Negative values have been recoded 0.

No chance/OPP. The following questions have been used:

- The party that comes in second gets to form the official opposition. Using the 0–100 scale where 0 means no chance for the party, 50 means an even chance, and 100 means certain, what are the Liberal party's chances of forming the official opposition (cps3a)? The Conservative party's chances (cps3b)? The New Democratic party's chances (cps3c)? The Reform party's chances (cps3d)? The Bloc Québécois's chances (cps3e)?

The variable is the difference between the highest score (standardized and recoded on a scale from 0 to 1) given to the other parties minus the score given to a given party. Negative values have been recoded 0.

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