

Public Abstract

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Graduation Term: FS 2015

Department: Political Science

Degree: PhD

Title: A New Measure of Economic Voting: Priority Heuristic Theory and Combining Sociotropic and Egocentric Evaluations

It is well-known that a voter's retrospective economic evaluations influence vote choice. A classic debate within the literature on retrospective economic voting concerns whether voters are sociotropic or egocentric when evaluating an incumbent's economic performance. Each side assumes a voter independently considers two perceptual dimensions of economic health, the national economy and one's household financial situation. However, the extant studies overlook the fact that two economic perceptions are correlated. Consequently, our current understanding often fails to account for how sociotropic and egocentric economic evaluations interactively affect vote choice. Moreover, theoretically, voters tend to simplify decision-making when confronted with several alternatives. This notion suggests that voters jointly use sociotropic and egocentric evaluations in a scale rather than use them separately to assess incumbents. Like assuming that voters use a unidimensional scale of ideology though there are several different items that reflect an individual's or a political party's ideology, it is plausible that voters use a unidimensional scale of economic evaluation. On the basis of this notion, this dissertation proposes an improved interval measure of economic evaluation to capture a voter's economic assessment in a single dimension and to provide a comparable economic voting measurement across elections.

To construct the new unidimensional measure, this dissertation proposes a lexicographic or priority ordering of economic evaluations on the basis of priority heuristic theory, which provides a convincing prediction of how voters jointly use two different criteria of economic evaluation. PH theory argues that decision makers place alternatives along a single dimension by primarily using the first-priority criterion and then using the next priority to supplement the first. In the case of retrospective economic voting, voters may judge the incumbent mainly according to the economic evaluation they value more and use the other to supplement the decision.

According to this theoretical expectation, this dissertation proposes a new unidimensional scale of a voter's economic evaluation. By treating this ordinal variable as nominal in a logistic regression model to predict the probability of an incumbent vote, this dissertation tests its theoretical expectation that voters use the two economic evaluations in a combined way on the basis of priority heuristics. This theoretical expectation is tested with survey data from the elections of five countries (the United States, Britain, Canada, South Korea, and Taiwan). The empirical findings of this research show that voters order economic perceptions and prioritize in sequence, thus merging sociotropic and egocentric retrospective evaluations. A logistic regression model demonstrates that the order of probabilities in voting for the incumbent corresponds with the ordinal measure. Throughout recent elections in five countries, voters used sociotropic and egocentric economic assessments jointly for making vote decisions. Voters depend primarily on sociotropic evaluations as a component of vote choice. However, they incorporate an egocentric perspective as a complementary criterion. This is a universal voting behavior of economic voters examined in this dissertation. This confirms the theoretical expectation on the basis of priority heuristics. This dissertation proposes an economic voting heuristic, an innovative unidimensional measurement combining sociotropic and egocentric assessments that is theoretically stronger than, and empirically as strong as, traditional retrospective voting models.