

Strategic voting in new democracies

Abstract

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Do voters make active attempts to change election results by placing strategic votes? Since the 1990s, the empirical work supporting strategic voting has made this concept one of the focal points of election studies. Works by Abramson et al. or Alvarez and Nagler have shown that in certain types of elections, British voters do not simply choose their most preferred party. However, there is still little empirical evidence of strategic voter behaviour from outside the UK, especially from countries where the party system is less clear cut.

A unique arrangement of electoral rules in the Czech Republic has allowed us to create a quasi-experimental design with a robust test for strategic behaviour. On three occasions since 2000, there have been two sets of elections held at the same time, one for the Czech Senate employing a plurality system, one for regional representative bodies employing PR. By using Bayesian modelling of vote combinations within electoral precincts, we are able to estimate the behaviour of individual voters in both elections at the same time.

We posit that voters' sincere preferences, best represented by a vote in PR based elections, do not apply in a plurality system when the preferred candidate has a low chance of winning and that, in such a case the weak candidate's supporters will vote for the ideologically closest person with a decent chance of winning. By providing a robust test for this type of electoral behaviour we are thus able to evaluate one of the fundamental propositions of strategic voting literature and do so for an area which has so far been out of bounds as regards related empirical studies.

Our findings suggest that there is not an observable level of behaviour that fits expectations based on strategic incentive. Voting for the same party in both types of elections is substantially unchanged in situations where the preferred candidate has, based on his final results, a distinct advantage.