Strategic Split-Ticket Voting in Mixed Electoral Systems: The Cases of Germany, Hungary, and Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine strategic split-voting in mixed systems by analyzing the results of elections in three countries using mixed electoral systems—Germany, Hungary, and Lithuania—to further improve researchers’ understanding of the relationship between strategic voting and ticket splitting. This is achieved by exploring new quantitative measures. The three selected countries do not use identical electoral systems, but their common characteristic is that they provide an opportunity for voters to split their ballot between an individual candidate running in a single-member constituency and a party list. This makes it possible to compare the two different types of votes and to search for patterns indicating strategic behavior. In this article, the authors introduce two analytic tools: one for determining the approximate quantity of split ballots and another for measuring strategic voting patterns based on the concentration of split tickets.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

Although researchers have extensively studied patterns of both strategic voting and split-ticket voting have in the past, they remain difficult to observe or measure and can still be considered somewhat elusive subjects in political science. At the same time, with the growing number of mixed member electoral system used around the world, the intersection of tactical and split-ticket voting provides new data for research every election year. This paper aims to examine this subject by analyzing the results of 23 legislative elections in three countries using mixed electoral systems: Germany, Hungary, and Lithuania. The main goal of this research is to further improve researchers’ understanding of the relationship between strategic voting and ticket splitting by exploring new, common quantitative measures. The three selected countries do not use identical electoral systems. Rather, their common characteristic is that they provide an opportunity for the voters to split their ballot between an individual candidate running in a single-member constituency and a party list competing on either a national or a regional level. This makes it possible to compare the two different types of votes and to search for patterns indicating strategic behavior. In this paper, the authors introduce two analytic tools: one
for determining the approximate quantity of split ballots and another one for measuring strategic voting patterns based on the concentration of split tickets. The two measures rely on each other in an indirect manner, and although they analyze two separate, sometimes independent phenomena, they are both calculated based on the difference between party list and candidate vote counts. The rate of split-ticket votes provides the context for the concentration of such ballots and indicates an overlap between split voting and strategic voting.

Theoretical Framework for Strategic Voting

The term “strategic voting”, also called “tactical voting,” refers to a situation when a voter supports a second-preferred party or candidate due to the perception that they have a better chance at winning the election than the first-preferred one (Blais & Nadeau, 1996). This definition, however, may be further expanded by replacing “second-preferred” with “another”, as it is possible that the nth preference of the voter has an even higher chance to win. Researchers often note that such situations are specific to multiparty systems (Downs, 1957, p. 48), in which choosing between second- and third-preferred alternatives makes most sense. Downs explains such voter decisions with rational voter behavior: the voter considers their vote to be a tool in the selection process, not just an expression of preference (Downs, 1957, p. 48). Consequently, these voters attempt to make an optimal decision in the polling booth that promises a successful political outcome - that is, at least some of their political preferences gain representation or as a bare minimum, they may prohibit their least-preferred alternative from winning. As Downs explicitly discusses, this approach to understanding voter behavior is predicated on the theory of rational, strategic voters as opposed to expressive ones. While this study follows the same theoretical framework, it must be noted that the scientific debate on which model describes voter behavior best is ongoing, and empirical research suggests the two explanations overlap in the real world (Spēnkuch, 2018). For the purposes of examining tactical voting from an empirical aspect, this paper will assume that voters by and large make strategic decisions in the polling booth.

The entire theory of voters may choose a more viable alternative against a more-preferred one can be traced back to the works of Maurice Duverger. His prediction that first-past-the-post systems lead to two-party competition established the concept of the Duvergerian equilibrium (Duverger, 1954). According to this theory, in a district of magnitude M, the strongest M + 1 candidates receive all rational votes (Crisp et al., 2012). Thus, a single-member constituency is in equilibrium if the two strongest candidates gain the overwhelming majority of electoral support. Consequently, this theory applies to the constituency level competition – it is entirely possible for the competition to be bipolar on the constituency level but multipolar nationally. The mechanical and psychological effects of the electoral systems, as described by Duverger, both influence this phenomenon. While the former effect influences the transformation of votes into seats, the latter affects voter decisions before the fact. This distinction is important because according to the theoretical framework of tactical voting, the expectations and predictions of the voters can not only influence their main political preferences, but they may also overrule them.

Identifying strategic voting reliably is quite difficult, and determining its precise proportions is impossible since it would require researchers to understand perfectly the individual motivations behind each ballot cast. That is why the extent of tactical voting is often measured with opinion polls (for the evaluation of such approaches, see Blais et al., 2005). However, there are a number of analytical tools developed over the years that could provide information on tactical voting based on the detailed final results of an election.

One of such tools is the so-called SF ratio (Cox, 1997). Researchers derive its name from the formula used for calculating it, as it is the vote count of the second loser in a constituency expressed as a ratio of the first losers’ ballot count. The SF ratio will be 0 when the third runner up receives no support and the votes concentrate on the first runner-up, or in other words, if there is a Duvergerian equilibrium. In such an extreme situation, all supporters of the third contender defected, deserting the candidate to vote for the more likely winner. On the other hand, when the SF ratio takes the value
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