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The Selfless Voter: Altruism and Irrationality in Economic Voting

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THE SELFLESS VOTER

Altruism and Irrationality in Economic Voting

Abstract

An assumption of classical political economics is that voters vote in their own self-interest. However, in every election, we can observe individuals supporting policies and candidates that would raise the individuals' taxes or provide fewer government benefits. Why is this? Under what conditions does irrational voting occur? First, I investigate the irrational voter with a theoretical investigation of motives and causes for irrationality. Then, using data from the National Election Survey, I create various regression models to observe the propensity of different voting populations to support financially irrational policy platforms. Finally, I explore how an understanding of irrational voting might have broader implications on our conceptualization of voter motivation and what this might mean for the political climate.

Byrne, John

Why people vote has been extensively written about and has been answered with a plethora of hypotheses. According to traditional thought and good evidence, the state of the economy is prioritized over other political considerations. This follows the popular definition of politics, a discussion of “who gets what, when, and how”. As Downs (1957) pointed out, economics and politics are largely thought of as separate realms in classical liberalism, and any influence of one on the models of another is considered interference and strictly exogenous. He says that just as government economic regulation is a central component of a healthy economy, rather than an authoritarian interference, so too does the state of the economy play a primary role in deciding elections. Seeking to build upon the foundation that Downs lay, Kramer (1971) was the first to provide empirical evidence of economic variables as a primary cause for variation among American congressional and presidential elections. Given that economic voting exists and is significant in determining elections, many questions arise. Do people vote for policies that benefit themselves or the economy? Do voters make their decisions based on the incumbent’s past performance or do they vote for the candidate whom they think is the best fit for the future economy. And finally, when voters do not vote according to economic reason, is their irrationality explained by altruism? In this paper, I seek to understand the truth about political altruism’s existence, whether it is a hopeful pipedream or a quality of human nature that is cause for optimism.

Literature Review

When writing of the interplay between economics and politics, Downs summoned the classical economic assumption of human nature: “Because the citizens of our model democracy are rational, each of them views elections strictly as means of selecting the government most beneficial to him. Each citizen estimates the utility income from government action he expects each party would provide him if it were in power in the forthcoming election period” (138). This is called pocketbook voting: voting in the strict interest of one’s own financial interests. This is a smooth translation of classical economic theory from the minds of Adam Smith and John Maynard Keynes into a political model. Do the fundamental assumptions of Smith’s Invisible Hand adequately explain economic voting? The literature finds that, yes, voters are significantly interested in the improvement of their own welfare though their behavior is not always as direct as Downs would suggest.

Franko, Tolbert, and Witko (2013) investigate the support among the poor for redistributive taxes. Obviously, under the assumption of rational, pocketbook economic voting, low-income voters should support redistributive taxes because they would be directly benefitted. The authors indeed find that when redistributive policies are communicated clearly to the public, low-income voters will overwhelmingly support such programs, specifically during periods of especially high wealth inequality; this final condition implies that a sizable portion of this income group will not support redistributive policies when wealth inequality is more tame

despite the policy benefitting them just the same. Healy et al. (2017) found similar results in an individual-level study of financial and political data, concluding that economic voters are as likely to vote in their own interest as they are in the national economy's interest.

Sociotropic voting is a form of economic voting in which the voter uses national and aggregate economic factors and reasoning to make voting decisions. This can manifest as an individual's voting according to the incumbent's economic performance in the past term, the unemployment rate, wage stagnation, or other aggregate measures that do not necessarily directly impact the voter. Some assume this to be altruistic voting because the target of improvement is the greater economy instead of the individual. However, voting in the interest of the economy does not necessarily imply any sort of selflessness or patriotism. Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck (2011) argue that socioeconomic voting cannot be ruled as altruistic because the voter is a member of the economy and will therefore realize potential rewards from an improved economy even if the socioeconomic vote did not affect them directly. It is possible that voters utilize sociotropic voting as a proxy for pocketbook voting when they have difficulty differentiating economic and political influences from other individualized factors in their recent financial performance. One author notes that a voter would likely not credit the occupant of the White House with the large inheritance they received after their grandparent's passing and, therefore, cannot easily assume that their individual financial performance is representative of the incumbent government's performance. Assuming that these authors are correct, then neither pocketbook nor sociotropic voting is inherently financially irrational.

What is altruistic voting exactly? Because sociotropic voting might be beneficial to the voter, as they are an economic actor, this leaves open the question of what vote, then, can be cast that can be described as altruistic and not eventually self-interested? If there are policies that would directly and negatively influence the voter but benefit some other group, would such a vote even be considered? Some authors (Kau and Rubin 1979; Peltzman 1984; Holmes 1990) posit that altruistic voting is synonymous with ideological voting, though this complicates things further. The effects of partisanship on an individual's vote are two-fold.

Firstly, party identification can shape the ideals and values the voter holds. This alone would not affect the voter's rationality. For example, if the individual is more ideologically libertarian, they may support more subsidized privatization of sectors typically state-run because they favor a variety of suppliers to choose from, such as those who support school choice. A progressive voter might reach the opposite conclusion, thinking that a cohesive national education system would eliminate some educational discrepancies across states. Both conclusions are rational conclusions given their different ideological values.

Secondly, partisanship also has a heavy hand in influencing voters' perception of policy and national status that may obscure, for example, responsibility for recent economic performance. If a voter believes the opposing governmental party or policy is responsible for a recent recession, for example, or if the voter has an objectively false view of the recession, then

the voter may make an irrational choice. Returning to my previous education example, a progressive voter might be irrationally opposed to an increase in the Department of Education's budget if it is proposed by a Republican president despite such a policy being aligned with the voter's base values.

Some evidence suggests that some amount of economic voting irrationality is caused not by altruism but by partisanship. This is an important factor to consider in any analysis because voters are not purely rational agents voting for marginal financial gains like an accountant. Voters may be heavily biased one way or another and this bias may even convince the voter that a policy is against their own interest when the opposite is true. As they did in studying the prevalence of pocketbook versus sociotropic voting, Healy et al. (2017) find that there is some truth to both sides. The authors find that there is statistically significant partisan bias in a voter's support and their evaluation of the economy in addition to significant economic rationality and reason.

Theory

Common current scholarship concludes that altruism and politics rarely go together outside of manifestos and campaign ads. This, however, is likely not true. Despite the traditional and logical, if pessimistic, perception that voters are strictly self-interested, researchers have already observed some societal concern and sympathy for other groups that is exhibited by voters. This simple fact, that voters are sometimes concerned with societal issues that do not affect them personally, implies that there is some level of altruism in elections and not strictly direct or indirect pocketbook voting.

Voters have an ideal in their minds of what their country should be and how it should look beyond short-term economic considerations. While it is true that many may vote for which candidate's tax platform may be most beneficial for their tax bracket, people also vote for what they think is just for others. Imagine an auditorium of a thousand wealthy individuals that make about \$400,000 per year, all working in industries that use little to no minimum-wage work. A marginal change in their local minimum wage would likely not affect them at all as they will make no extra money, nor do they have any employees whom they would need to pay more. In other words, their pocketbooks have no skin in the game. Now, is it safe to assume that not one of these individuals has an opinion of the optimal minimum wage just because they have no wealth to be gained or lost? Of course not. They consider what policy would move the nation closer to their ideal.

This is not necessarily altruism, of course, because choosing what one believes is morally right over what is viewed as morally wrong is easy when neither option affects a voter personally. This also could be an example of the pocketbook voting-by-proxy that was discussed previously. What is not expected, and what I hope to observe, is the prioritization of this societal

ideal over the interests of the pocketbook. Assuming that the voters are accurately informed of the nature of their options and given that morality and justice are truly factors in a voter's calculus, I expect to observe cases in which certain individuals will place their ethical values over their own financial wellbeing. In these cases, the voters will be from a subset of the population that is negatively affected by a given policy platform and yet vote for it anyway. This would not be self-interested sociotropic voting because the individual would be negatively affected to an extent that indirect benefit from wider economic improvement could not correct.

Research Design

I will conduct three experiments; each will measure support for a certain policy platform. Each of these policy platforms is inherently against the interests of a specific demographic in the United States, so the purpose of the model is to measure the support for each policy platform among the negatively affected demographic. Deviation from voting against the platform is assumed to be altruistic voting because of the negative repercussions to the respondent.

I will be using data from the National Election Survey (NES) from 2012, a dataset that collects information on demographics, opinions, ideological identification, and more. To test the data, I will be running different linear regression models to observe the support from the significant population on the chosen policy platform. I will also be including various demographic variables such as race, gender, party identification, and age into the regression to control for any confounding factors that might inhibit the accuracy of the regression. I will also use a variety of interaction terms to control for possible collinearity, such as between party identification and income; voters are typically more conservative as their income increases, for example.

If not already a variable in the model, the following are the demographic variables that will be included in each model. These variables account for race (white: Not white = 0, white = 1), gender (my male Dummy: Not male = 0, male = 1), a proxy for party affiliation (ft_rep, a feeling thermometer for the Republican party: a higher number means stronger approval for the party), education (my_educGroup: 0 = N/A, 1 = < High School diploma, 2 = HS diploma, 3 = post-HS degree, 4 = bachelor's degree, 5 = graduate's degree), age (dem_age6: 1 = 17-29, 2 = 30-39, 3 = 40-49, 4 = 50-59, 5 = 60-69, 6 = 70 and older), and income quintile (income5). As previously stated, there are interaction terms to account for related variables. These interaction terms are for party identification and income (partyID_Income) and party identification and education (partyID_educ3).

The first model observes the support for increasing the federal government's education budget. Theoretically, any voter that does not have children would see no personal benefit to this increase and any material societal improvement that the voter might benefit from would take

years to come to fruition. This would also most likely mean higher taxes, a direct negative affect on the voter. Therefore, we can assume that any voter without children that supports increasing the federal education budget is doing so altruistically. I expect that having children is statistically significant in increasing the likelihood that a respondent wishes to increase the federal education budget, but it will not be a perfect predictor because of nonparents who value quality education more than the additional taxes they will accrue.

For model 1, the dependent variable is whether the respondent wishes to increase, decrease, or maintain the federal budget for education (*my_schoolSpend*: 1 = decrease, 2 = maintain, 3 = increase). The key independent variable is a dummy variable for whether the respondent has children (*my_childDummy*: 0 = No, 1 = Yes). NEED TO EXPLAIN THAT YOU ANALYZED BY AGE BECAUSE OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHO EXPECT TO HAVE CHILDREN.

$$my_schoolSpend = \beta_0 + \beta_1 my_childDummy...$$

The second model, model 2, tests if a respondent's income is an accurate predictor of their opinion on redistributive programs. If all respondents involved are perfectly rational pocketbook voters, their income and desire for wealth distribution should be perfectly inversely related. It would only be the lower income voters who altruistically desire a decentralized, liberal economy that would oppose redistributive efforts and high-income voters that altruistically desire better conditions for the less fortunate who would support it.

The variable used to represent support for redistributive economic policies is a recode of *cses_govtact* (*my_govtAct*: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = slightly disagree, 3 = indifferent, 4 = slightly agree, 5 = strongly agree). This was gathered by asking respondents to rate, on a scale from 1 to 5, how strongly they agree with the government taking action to diminish income inequality. The key dependent variable, *income5*, is a 1 to 5 scale representing which quintile of the income distribution the respondent reports to be in.

$$my_govtAct = \beta_0 + \beta_1 income5...$$

The third and final model, model 3, tests the effect age has on a respondent's support for governmental protection of the environment. Assuming self-interest, rational voting behavior, I should observe limited support for environmental protection among the elderly because the chance that they will experience the extreme consequences of climate change decreases as they get older. In addition to not experiencing any benefit themselves, the elderly would likely be voting to increase their own taxes. Much like model 1, there would be no immediate benefit to the voter demographic in question if this policy were to be implemented because any possible pocketbook benefit is too long-term to seriously consider, and the policy heavily implies short-term tax increases. Importantly, I will also include an interaction effect between the respondent's age and whether they have children. This is because an elderly voter may care very deeply about climate change because of their children or grandchildren. Although some may claim that this is

an act of altruism, here I am going to define this as self-interested because it concerns the voter individually (roughly) and not the nation¹.

Model 3's dependent variable to represent support for governmental environment protection policies is *fedspend_enviroR* (0 = Decrease, 1 = Maintain, 2 = Increase). The independent variables are *dem_age6* (*dem_age6*: 1 = 17-29, 2 = 30-39, 3 = 40-49, 4 = 50-59, 5 = 60-69, 6 = 70 and older) and the previously detailed *my_childDummy*. Finally, the interaction term is *my_ageXchildren*.

$$fedspend_enviroR = \beta_0 + \beta_1 dem_age6 + \beta_2 my_ageXchildren \dots$$

Data

Model 1

$$my_schoolSpend = \beta_0 + \beta_1 my_childDummy + \beta_2 white + \beta_3 my_maleDummy + \beta_4 ft_rep + \beta_5 my_educGroup + \beta_6 dem_age6 + \beta_7 income5 + \varepsilon$$

		Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	2.821	.064		44.399	.000	2.696	2.946
	Six Age Groups	-.040	.008	-.104	-5.102	.000	-.055	-.024
	Does R have children?	.062	.026	.048	2.355	.019	.010	.114
	Is R white?	-.093	.027	-.068	-3.486	.000	-.146	-.041
	PRE: Feeling Thermometer: Republican Party	.001	.001	.035	.697	.486	-.001	.003
	partyID_Income	-.001	.000	-.099	-1.788	.074	-.001	.000
	partyID_educ3	-.002	.001	-.163	-2.919	.004	-.003	-.001
	Education	.027	.028	.036	.975	.329	-.028	.083
	Income quintile	.019	.016	.042	1.147	.252	-.013	.051

a. Dependent Variable: Does R wish to increase, decrease, or maintain the federal level of school spending?

Model 2

¹ I should reiterate that I do not mean to say, at any point in this paper, that self-interest is morally wrong and altruism the sole good. Self-interest is not synonymous with selfishness: if you did not sometimes eat food out of self-interest you would starve to death, which is not good.

$$my_govtAct = \beta_0 + \beta_1 income5 + \beta_2 white + \beta_3 my_maleDummy + \beta_4 ft_rep + \beta_5 my_educGroup + \beta_6 dem_age6 + \beta_7 income5 + \varepsilon$$

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4.103	.176		23.374	.000	3.759	4.447
	Six Age Groups	-.114	.021	-.126	-5.465	.000	-.155	-.073
	Does R have children?	.064	.070	.021	.910	.363	-.074	.202
	Is R white?	-.533	.073	-.162	-7.333	.000	-.675	-.390
	PRE: Feeling Thermometer: Republican Party	.000	.003	.003	.043	.966	-.006	.006
	partyID_Income	-.003	.001	-.250	-3.869	.000	-.005	-.002
	partyID_educ3	-.003	.001	-.144	-2.204	.028	-.006	.000
	Education	-.083	.076	-.046	-1.091	.275	-.232	.066
	Income quintile	.027	.044	.025	.614	.540	-.059	.113

a. Dependent Variable: Does R approve of government regulating income inequality?

Model 3

$$fedspend_enviroR = \beta_0 + \beta_1 dem_age6 + \beta_2 white + \beta_3 my_maleDummy + \beta_4 ft_rep + \beta_5 my_educGroup + \beta_6 dem_age6 + \beta_7 income5 + \beta_8 my_ageXchildren + \varepsilon$$

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.496	.071		21.031	.000	1.357	1.636
	Six Age Groups	-.028	.010	-.066	-2.903	.004	-.047	-.009
	Does R have children?	.038	.061	.026	.628	.530	-.081	.158
	Is R white?	-.138	.029	-.090	-4.767	.000	-.195	-.081
	PRE: Feeling Thermometer: Republican Party	8.111E-5	.001	.003	.067	.947	-.002	.002
	partyID_Income	-.002	.000	-.296	-5.506	.000	-.002	-.001
	partyID_educ3	-.001	.001	-.069	-1.266	.206	-.002	.000
	Education	.030	.030	.035	.988	.323	-.030	.090
	Income quintile	.061	.018	.124	3.492	.000	.027	.096
	my_ageXchildren	.008	.020	.016	.408	.683	-.031	.047

a. Dependent Variable: Fed\$:Enviro

Data Analysis

The models return varying results regarding altruistic support of each of the three policies. Model 1 shows that, at the 95% confidence level, there is a statistically significant positive correlation between the respondent having a child and desiring to increase the federal

budget for education. Race and age are also statistically significant: as the respondent gets older, it is more likely that they will oppose increasing the budget for education. This may be because their children are grown and no longer in school. Race is significant in that there is a correlation between being white and preferring to decrease the education budget. It seems likely that this is because white people are predominately wealthier than people of color and therefore less reliant on the public school system, though income was notably not statistically significant in this regression, perhaps because it is measured by quintile and not as a continuous variable, making it a very blunt and sloppy instrument.

As predicted, parents are more likely to vote for better public education than nonparents. Also fitting my hypothesis, these variables are not perfectly or near-perfectly correlated either, meaning that there are significant exceptions to the pocketbook voting theory. This persistent, unexplained deviation implies financial irrationality, possibly altruism, is still a significant factor. This should perhaps be investigated more closely, more on this in the conclusion.

Model 2 shows an extraordinary deviation from traditional thought. Approval of government-led wealth redistribution is not correlated with the income of the respondent at all according to this model. The same is true for the ideological identity of the voter, this regression showing no correlation between approval of redistribution and conservatism. As with the first model, income being measured by quintile may be throwing off the regression and decreasing the accuracy of the model but the proxy conservatism variable having no correlation to opinions on progressive policy remains baffling.

Finally, model 3 meets predictions by showing a negative correlation between age and approval of the government combatting climate change. The elderly have a difficult time justifying paying higher taxes for a benefit that they may never see, understandably so, but even still, the coefficient for age in this regression is not even the most drastic of the significant variables. There remains unexplored motives that self-interest cannot contain. The lack of statistical significance for the parenthood dummy variable contradicts the hypothesis that the elderly would more strongly support environmental protection if it meant a better future for their children. Perhaps a more accurate variable would have been a test of the respondent's grandparenthood but if the respondent has a grandchild, they surely have a child as well.

One thing that is consistent amongst these models is that the individual financial effect of a policy on a voter is not the be-all-end-all that classical politics and economics believe it to be. Even in cases in which the pocketbook voter theory may have correctly predicted the outcome, the key independent variable was never close to perfect predication nor accurate enough to generalize. Because this deviation remains unexplored and fails to be explained fully by self-interested thinking, a similar method to the one use in this paper with further refinement could produce more illuminating material on this topic in the future.

In looking at more practical applications of this knowledge, using altruism to mobilize politics, if people, could create more passion and excitement for politics while decreasing the

toxic and tribalist nature between so many groups. If anything, understanding that altruistic voting is not irregular can assist in creating a healthier political community simply because everyone can acknowledge respectable intentions from others.

Conclusion

There is still much to learn about the motives of voters and what influences their decision-making progress but there is one thing that we might all be able to safely conclude: the assumption that voters are only self-interested is incorrect. Through testing support for policies among specific demographics, it was found that an observer can find support for a given platform among any group. This means that there is, consistently, altruism in the political system. To what degree altruism is prevalent in the voting process and how it might be harnessed or encouraged is still yet to be discovered, though a highly suggest topic of further research, but might encourage some sort of optimism in the future political system that might be a reversion of the toxic political landscape America is currently experiencing which has alienated so many.

Further research of political altruism is recommended. Firstly, identifying more cases in which voters cast their ballots “irrationally” according to traditional pocketbook though will help illuminate the commonalities between cases of altruism and, possibly, causation. Additionally, the strength of altruistic tendencies when faced with various incentives would be groundbreaking if there was a consistent way of not only observing political altruism but quantifying it. This new hopeful field in political science paves new roads ahead for our understanding of politics and, hopefully, will assist us in living together more harmoniously.

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