Candidates’ Policy Platforms and Election Outcomes:
The Three Faces of Policy Representation

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Abstract

Recent empirical studies by Alvarez and Nagler, Erikson and Romero, and others conclude that candidates’ and parties’ policy platforms only modestly affect their electoral support. This suggests that candidates/parties can win elections even when their policies differ sharply from the policy beliefs of the constituencies that elect them. This raises the question: how can voters exercise control over government policies via elections? We report applications to American and French presidential election data that suggest three, paradoxical, conclusions. On the one hand, we find that presidential candidates can moderate their policies with at most a modest change in vote share, but if they move by the same amount to a more extreme position they face severe vote losses that could cripple their election prospects. Alternatively, movement by both candidates in the same direction or a policy shift by the voters may have a major effect on the outcome.
1. Introduction

The linkage between the policy beliefs of the mass public and the policy behavior of elected officials is a central issue for political representation. While scholars have identified numerous paths through which the public may influence government policy, contested elections hold a privileged position in many normative theories of representative democracy. The central idea is that candidates take positions on issues, the public elects the candidate who best reflects its policy beliefs, and the winning candidate acts on these beliefs once in office.

Over the past 40 years, behavioral researchers have reported results that call into question the extent to which contested elections promote faithful policy representation. The initial impetus was provided by studies which found that in comparison with policies, citizens’ voting decisions might be more easily swayed by factors not tied directly to the candidates’ and parties’ policy proposals in the current campaign, such as national economic conditions, party leaders’ and candidates’ images, group loyalties, and retrospective evaluations of incumbent performance (Campbell et al., 1960; Norpoth et al., 1991; Hibbs, 1987). In a recent series of papers Alvarez, Nagler, and their co-authors have moved a step further by computing the relative influences of policy voting and economic conditions upon the outcomes of historical elections. In analyses of survey data ranging over national elections in the U.S., Britain, and Canada, Alvarez and Nagler (AN) conclude that in several historical elections the identity of the winning candidate or party could have been altered by realistic shifts in national economic conditions, but in no case did the winner depend on the candidates’ policies. Indeed, AN’s computations suggest that for the most part, realistic changes in the candidates’/parties’ positions would have had surprisingly small effects upon the aggregate vote (Alvarez and Nagler, 1995, 1998; Alvarez, Nagler, and Willette, 2000; Alvarez, Nagler, and Bowler, 2000).

The AN studies, in combination with additional works cited below, raise serious questions about the extent to which contested elections promote faithful policy representation. If such factors as the economy overshadow the electoral impact of policy debates, there is no reason to expect the most representative candidates or parties to win elections, nor should we expect that shifts in public opinion between elections will be reflected in
changes in election outcomes. Furthermore, if the competing candidates/parties recognize this fact they will have minimal incentives to propose platforms that reflect the electorate’s policy beliefs, or to shift their policies in response to changes in public opinion.

In this paper we extend the scope of the investigation begun by Alvarez and Nagler, obtaining findings that have different conclusions from theirs concerning representative democracy. Looking at the 1988 French and American presidential elections, we ask a series of questions relating to the electoral impact of policy debates: Were the outcomes of these elections strongly affected by the candidates’ policy positions? How might the election results have changed had the candidates proposed different policy positions from the ones they actually presented, and would it have been possible for a truly “unrepresentative” candidate to win these elections? Would the election outcomes have been responsive to shifts in the voters’ policy preferences?

To get a handle on these questions, consider a stylized representation of a two-party election -- such as an American presidential election or the second round of a French presidential election. Suppose that on the conventional 1-7 Left-Right or liberal-conservative policy scale, one candidate, called $L$, is at the leftist location 3 while the other, called $R$, is at the rightist location 5 (locations which we shall see resemble those of the major presidential candidates in France and the U.S.). Now suppose that candidate $L$ considers moving either to the right or to the left. The plot in Figure 1 is intended to represent plausibly the vote share of this candidate as a function of her policy position, while candidate $R$ remains fixed at location 5. As can be seen from the shape of the curve, candidate $L$ will gain few votes (and may in fact lose votes) by moving toward the center. On the other hand, if candidate $L$ shifts significantly farther away from the center, she will pay a substantial penalty because the curve drops off rapidly to her left; in fact the drop off in support increases disproportionately as her movement in the extreme direction increases. Later, we will provide evidence that the features depicted in this plot -- namely that support curves tend to be concave and peak near the center or between likely candidate locations and the center -- are typical of two-party elections.

\[\text{1} \text{ Intuitively, a curve is concave if it decreases faster and faster as we recede from the peak. More formally, a function is concave if its derivative is always decreasing, or equivalently, if its second derivative is always}\]
Our analyses of the linkages between candidates’ policies, voters’ policy beliefs, and election outcomes suggest conclusions which appear paradoxical, and which imply that there are three “faces” of policy representation. On the one hand, we confirm Alvarez and Nagler’s finding that presidential candidates pay quite modest electoral penalties when -- rather than assume a centrist position -- they advocate the moderately noncentrist policies that are typically associated with the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States, and with the Socialist and Gaullist parties in France. This implies that noncentrist candidates can be electorally competitive, and that therefore such candidates – given non-policy-related advantages – frequently defeat more centrist opponents.

At the same time, we reach two additional conclusions that have far more positive implications for political representation. First -- because of concavity of the vote-share function -- the presidential candidates in our study would have lost many more votes had they shifted further away from the center than they would have gained from similar degrees of policy moderation. This implies that candidates have strong incentives to avoid presenting extreme policies, since an extremist image may entail crippling electoral penalties that render them unelectable. Finally, we note that election outcomes are highly sensitive to simultaneous shifts by both candidates in the same direction or to shifts in the electorate’s policy beliefs.

2. Policy Competition and Election Outcomes: Prior Behavioral Research

Over the past 10 years, behaviorally-oriented studies by Erikson and Romero (1990), Adams and Merrill (1999, 2000), and Alvarez, Nagler, and their co-authors have explored the effects of candidates’ and parties’ policy positions on the outcomes of historical elections. Although these authors differ somewhat in their methods, the basic ap-

A theoretical justification for concavity of support functions under plausible conditions is available on the website http://course.wilkes.edu/Merrill/.

Comparable analyses on British elections – which feature two major parties, Labour and the Conservatives – support identical conclusions to the ones we report here for France and the United States. Hence we believe that our empirical results generalize to other Western democracies.
approach each set of authors uses to analyze policy voting involves three steps. First, they employ survey data from the historical election under review to estimate the positions of voters and candidates/parties in a multidimensional policy space. Second, the authors use the policy positions so estimated, combined with other variables of interest such as the respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics, party affiliations, and perceptions of the economy, to estimate the parameters of a multivariate voting model. These models represent voters’ decisions as probabilistic functions of the policy distances between their own positions and those of the competing candidates or parties.

By summing the survey respondents’ vote probabilities, one can calculate a candidate’s expected vote over all respondents. Furthermore, because these vote probabilities depend on the policy distances between candidates and respondents it is possible to move to step three, which involves calculating the expected electoral effects of changes in the candidates’ policy positions. Thus one can explore counterfactual scenarios and compute, for instance, how the 2000 U.S. presidential election would have turned out had Vice President Gore moderated his liberal policies, how the vote would have changed had Governor Bush taken more conservative positions, and so on. While there are limitations to these types of exercises (as the authors of these studies recognize), they allow one to roughly estimate the electoral impact of candidates’ and parties’ policy platforms.

The results the authors report suggest that changes in the parties’ and candidates’ platforms had only modest potential for improving their vote shares. For instance Erikson and Romero (1990, pages 1114-1115), in their analysis of 1988 American National Election Study (ANES) data, conclude that although the losing candidate Dukakis was perceived as taking distinctly liberal positions (relative to the electorate) on the policy dimensions included in the survey, Dukakis could only have increased his expected vote by about 4% had he presented centrist positions on all policy dimensions simultaneously. Since Dukakis actually lost the election by a 54%-46% popular vote margin, this suggests that Dukakis was at a sufficient non-policy disadvantage that even had he presented a policy

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3 All of the empirical studies that we summarize here explore the electoral effects of voters’ perceptions of the candidates’/parties’ positions (defined as survey respondents’ mean candidate placements along the policy scales included in the survey). While for simplicity we refer to these mean placements as the candidates’ actual positions, the reader should bear this distinction in mind.
platform that exactly mirrored the electorate’s policy preferences – which would have made his own platform far more representative of the public’s beliefs than Bush’s conservative platform -- and if Bush had not altered his policy position in response, Dukakis could at best have transformed the election into a statistical dead heat.

Adams and Merrill’s simulations on survey data from the 1989 Norwegian Storting election and the first round of the 1988 French presidential election imply even smaller potential improvements from policy changes. The authors’ conclude that none of the competing parties or candidates would have increased their votes by as much as 3%, had they shifted unilaterally from their perceived ideological positions to their vote-maximizing ideologies (see Figure 1 in Adams and Merrill, 2000; Figure 3 in Adams and Merrill, 1999).

Finally, recent studies by Alvarez and Nagler (AN) on American, British, and Canadian elections suggest that in three out of the five elections studied economic conditions played larger roles than did the competing candidates’ and parties’ platforms. With respect to the economy, the authors’ analysis of 1992 ANES data suggests that Bush, who finished 5% behind Clinton in the popular vote, would have narrowly won the election had voters’ evaluations of the economy been as positive in 1992 as they had been in 1988 (and had all other factors been held constant; see Alvarez and Nagler, 1995, Table 5B). And for the 1996 presidential election, the authors compute that improvements in voters’ evaluations of economic conditions between 1992 and 1996 boosted Clinton’s popular vote margin over Dole by about 17% – which implies that without the economy at his back, Clinton’s decisive victory might have become a decisive defeat (see Alvarez and Nagler, 1998, Table 9).

In contrast to the crucial electoral impact of the economy, AN conclude that the losing candidates in 1992 and 1996 could not have increased their vote shares by changing their policies by more than 1 to 2.5 percent. Significantly, AN compute that although Clinton was perceived as being substantially to the left of the electorate on most of the policy dimensions included in the ANES, Clinton would have won both the 1992 and 1996 elections regardless of the positions his opponents Bush and Dole took on these dimensions.
AN’s results for British and Canadian national election data are mixed but also support the conclusion that non-policy conditions can overshadow policy voting. In the 1987 British General Election and the 1993 Canadian elections, the authors conclude that the effect of issues was larger than the effect of the economy although they conclude the reverse for the 1988 Canadian election (see Alvarez, Nagler, and Willette, 2000). In each case, however, the authors conclude that due to nonpolicy-related considerations including the economy, the second place parties could not have defeated the first-place parties no matter what policies the runner-ups had proposed (see Alvarez, Nagler, and Willette, 2000; Alvarez, Nagler, and Bowler, 2000).

The studies summarized above have disturbing implications for representative democracy. Most disturbing is AN’s conclusion that due to the electoral impact of the economy, the winning candidates and parties in several of these elections – who presented distinctly noncentrist (though not extreme) policies – would have been victorious no matter what policies their opponents had proposed. If noncentrist candidates/parties may be virtually guaranteed victory given sufficiently favorable economic conditions, then in what sense can voters exercise policy control over political elites via elections?

Although the above question appears rhetorical, we show below that there are answers that shed a positive light on policy representation. The key is to appreciate precisely what the above studies do and do not conclude about the electoral impact of policies. These studies do conclude that distinctly noncentrist (but not extreme) candidates and parties pay quite modest electoral penalties by forgoing the political center. The studies do not systematically explore what would happen if noncentrist candidates/parties shifted even further away from the center, so as to advocate truly extreme policies. We will show that consideration of these issues motivates more optimistic conclusions about the linkage between policy voting and election outcomes.

3. Voters’ Policy Preferences and Individual-Level Voting Models in Presidential Elections

We examine two presidential elections – the 1988 U.S. presidential election and the 1988 French presidential election – that shed light on the link between policy voting and political representation. Presidential elections are particularly appropriate for our study
because unlike multiparty elections in many multiparty parliamentary democracies, in which the composition of the governing coalition may depend on postelection negotiations, presidential elections permit voters to directly elect a single winner whose policies can then be compared to the beliefs of the national electorate. The 1988 French and American presidential elections provide an apt cross-national comparison of the electoral impact of policy voting, because Pierce’s 1988 French Presidential Election Study (FPES) was specifically designed with such a comparison in mind (see Pierce, 1995).

The contexts of the 1988 American and French Presidential Elections

The 1988 U.S. and French presidential elections featured several parallels that appear relevant to policy voting. Both races pitted a candidate from a traditionally right-wing party against an opponent from a traditionally left-wing party: in the U.S., the contest was between the Republican George Bush – the incumbent vice-president serving under the conservative President Reagan – and the Democrat Michael Dukakis, the Governor of the traditionally liberal state of Massachusetts. The decisive ballot in the 1988 French presidential election pitted the Socialist Francois Mitterrand, the incumbent president, against Jacques Chirac, the incumbent Prime Minister and the leader of the right-wing, Gaullist party. Contemporary journalistic accounts of both elections emphasized the importance of policy debates, as a central theme of Bush’s campaign was that Dukakis was far more liberal than the American electorate (see Germond, 1989), while the French election campaign was dominated by debates over immigration and economic policies. In the event, both elections ended in victory for the incumbent party’s nominee, with vice-president Bush defeating Dukakis by a 54%-46% popular vote margin, and President Mitterrand winning re-election over Chirac by the same 54%-46% margin.

The 1988 ANES and the 1988 FPES provide data about the extent to which American and French voters perceived clear differences between the candidates’ policies, and how these policies compared with the voters’ beliefs. In both surveys the respondents were asked to place themselves and the candidates along a variety of seven-point policy

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4 French presidential elections involve two rounds of voting, with the two top finishers at round one advancing to the decisive ballot. For analyses of policy voting in the first round of the 1988 French presidential election, see Pierce (1995) and Adams and Merrill (2000).
scales, with the ANES scales including ideology, domestic spending, national health insurance, defense spending, and government aid to minorities, and the FPES scales including ideology and government intervention in the economy.\footnote{The FPES contained questions relating to two additional policy scales, concerning immigration policy and government subsidies for religious schools. For simplicity we omit these dimensions because our analysis suggests that these dimensions did not significantly influence French voters’ decisions at the decisive ballot.}

Table 1 shows the respondents’ mean positions, along with their mean candidate placements, for the subsamples of 935 ANES respondents and 744 FPES respondents who reported voting for one of the major candidates and who could self-place on the ideological scales.\footnote{For France, the 744 FPES respondents represent a subsample of the 862 respondents who reported voting in round 2 and who could self-place on the ideology dimension, randomly selected so that their reported votes reproduce Mitterrand’s 54%-46% vote margin over Chirac at round 2. We focus on this subsample because in the overall FPES sample the respondents reported voting for Mitterrand over Chirac in much greater proportions than did the actual French electorate, which could lead to incorrect inferences about the French electorate’s political beliefs in 1988.}

The American and French publics appear centrist (on average), with ANES respondents averaging a self-placement of 4.13 across the 1-7 policy scales, and the FPES respondents reporting a mean self-placement of 3.94 across the 1-7 policy scales. Furthermore, respondents perceived clear policy differences between the candidates, in that the Democrat Dukakis and the Socialist Mitterrand were perceived as left-of-center on each issue, and the Republican Bush and the Gaullist Chirac were viewed as right-of-center.

Figures 2A-2B provide a more detailed look at the distribution of the survey respondents’ self-placements, along with their mean candidate placements, along the ideology scale.\footnote{Throughout this paper we use the respondents’ mean placement of the candidates as our best estimates of candidates’ actual positions or platforms. The respondents’ mean candidate placements closely resemble experts’ placements of the candidates’ parties, as reported in Huber and Inglehart (1995).}

These suggest that while the candidates were perceived as distinctly noncentrist relative to the voter distributions, they were not perceived as extreme. Ordering the ideological dimension from left to right, Mitterrand’s mean placement falls at the 30\textsuperscript{th} percentile of the FPES voter distribution while Chirac is placed at the 86\textsuperscript{th} percentile (Figure 2A); for the U.S., Dukakis’s mean perceived position is located at the 17\textsuperscript{th} percentile of the
ANES distribution while Bush is placed at the 68\textsuperscript{th} percentile (Figure 2B).\footnote{For these computations we assumed that the respondents who self-placed at, say, 3 on the 1-7 ideological scale represented a uniform distribution over the interval [2.5, 3.5].} Analyses of the respondent and candidate placements along the remaining policy scales reveal similar patterns.

[TABLE 1 AND FIGURES 2A-2B ABOUT HERE]

Multivariate models of the vote for the 1988 U.S. and French presidential elections

To estimate empirical voting models for the 1988 U.S. and French presidential elections, we specify random utility frameworks in which voters’ candidate utilities are a function of policy distances, economic perceptions, sociodemographic characteristics, party identification, and a random component. The policy variables are quadratic loss functions of the distances between the respondents’ self-placements and the mean candidate placements along the policy scales listed in Table 1; the economic variables are measures of respondents’ retrospective evaluations of their own finances and of national economic conditions; the sociodemographic variables include race, income, and class in the U.S., and income, religion and class in France.\footnote{The selection of these sociodemographic variables was based upon Pierce’s empirical research on the 1988 French and U.S. presidential elections, which suggested that these group bases of choice were particularly salient in these elections (see chapter eight in Pierce, 1995).} The party identification variables are dummy variables for Democratic and for Republican Party identification in the U.S., and for identification with a left-wing party (Socialist or Communist) versus a right-wing party (UDF or RPR) in France.\footnote{Our decision to specify the French party identification variable in terms of leftist party identification versus right-wing party identification is motivated by the fact that French politics is largely structured around competition between a left-wing Communist-Socialist coalition versus a right-wing UDF-Gaullist coalition (see Pierce, 1995).} The random utility approach we employ is Conditional Logit, in which voters’ candidate utilities are perturbed by random components generated independently from a type I extreme value distribution.

Table 2A presents the parameter estimates for the 1988 American presidential election and the 1988 French presidential election. These show that in both elections the
policy parameters are positive and significant, indicating that the smaller the policy distance between the voter and the candidate, the more likely the voter is to support the candidate. The parameter estimates also show that voters who held favorable evaluations of national economic conditions were significantly more likely to support Bush, the incumbent vice-president, and Chirac, the incumbent Prime Minister. As expected, voters’ sociodemographic characteristics and their party identifications also significantly influenced the vote. Table 2B shows that the projected aggregate vote for each model roughly matches the sample vote.

[TABLES 2A-2B ABOUT HERE]

4. Policy Voting and Election Outcomes: Three Faces of Representation

Outcomes when candidates moderate their policies: The first face of representation

Initially, we calculated the electoral effects of unilateral changes in a candidate’s policy positions with the rival candidate fixed at his actual perceived position. Here we assumed that relocation was costless and that a candidate's policy shifts would not alter the voters’ decision rules. (Below we discuss the effects of relaxing these strong assumptions.)

Figures 3A-3B show the predicted vote for the losing candidates Chirac and Dukakis (the vertical axes) as a function of their ideologies. Also marked are the candidates’

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11 The reason that French respondents held Chirac rather than Mitterrand responsible for the French economy is that during the period of “cohabitation” between 1986-88 the right-wing RPR-UDF coalition held a majority of seats in the National Assembly, so that the Socialist President Mitterrand largely ceded economic policy-making decisions to the conservative Prime Minister Chirac.

12 The candidates’ expected votes are calculated by summing the respondents’ vote probabilities, so that the expected vote $EV(K)$ for candidate $K$ is given by $EV(K) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} P_i(K)$, where $P_i(K)$ is the probability of the $i$th individual voting for $K$, and $n$ is the number of respondents included in the analysis. For conditional logit, $P_i(K) = e^{V_i(K)} / \left( \sum_{J} e^{V_i(J)} \right)$ is the probability that voter $i$ votes for candidate $K$, where $V_i(K)$ represents the measured component of the voter’s utility for $K$ and $J$ represents the set of candidates competing in the election (see Train, 1986).
computed vote-maximizing locations, along with their actual (perceived) positions. As expected, these calculations suggest that both Chirac and Dukakis would have increased their support had they presented more centrist ideologies than the ones they were perceived to hold. However, our computations suggest that these candidates’ expected gains from ideological moderation would have been quite small. As shown on the vertical axis of Figure 3A, Chirac could have gained only about two percent of the national vote by shifting from his perceived position at 5.55 to his computed vote-maximizing position (4.02) along the 1-7 Left-Right scale (see Figure 3A); furthermore, as shown in Figure 3B, we compute that Dukakis would have increased his expected vote by about 1.5%, had he shifted from his perceived liberal-conservative position (3.10) to his computed vote-maximizing position at 4.42 (see Figure 3B).

[FIGURES 3A-3B ABOUT HERE]

Of course, ideology was only one of the dimensions that influenced the French and American electorates in 1988, and one might suspect that the losing candidates could have substantially increased their support by moderating all of their policies simultaneously. To explore this hypothesis, we computed the vote-maximizing positions for Chirac and Dukakis along each of the policy dimensions that were included in our voting analyses. Tables 3A-3B report the candidates’ computed policy optima, which are centrist on each dimension, and also show the candidates’ expected votes for scenarios in which they shift to their optimal positions one dimension at a time, as well as along all dimensions simultaneously. Our calculations suggest that neither Chirac nor Dukakis would have won an electoral majority, even given the strong assumption that these candidates could have unilaterally moderated all of their policies. Thus we conclude that in the 1988 French and American presidential elections, Bush and Mitterrand would probably have won the popular vote, no matter what policies their opponents had proposed.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Our results support the findings of Alvarez, Nagler, and others, that noncentrist candidates such as Bush and Mitterrand can be successful provided they enjoy electoral
advantages stemming from the economy, incumbency, or their personal charisma. However one might suspect that compared to the candidates in other historical elections, Mitterrand and Bush enjoyed unusual amounts of policy leeway in 1988, perhaps because they benefited from especially large nonpolicy-related advantages. To explore this hypothesis we estimated the candidates’ vote shares for the counterfactual scenario in which voters attached no importance to the candidates’ policy positions.\footnote{For these computations we set the policy salience parameters to zero, and recomputed the candidates’ expected votes on this basis, using the nonpolicy parameters reported in Table 2A.} We computed that under such “policy-free” election scenarios, Bush would have won about 54% of the vote and Mitterrand about 52%. This suggests that the non-policy-related advantages that Bush and Mitterrand enjoyed were worth only two to four percentage points in the popular vote – estimates that are actually smaller than the advantages that Alvarez, Nagler, and Willette (2000) estimate accrued to the winning parties and candidates in recent American, British, Canadian, and Dutch national elections, due to the effects of economic voting. We conclude that Bush and Mitterrand did not benefit from unusually large nonpolicy-related advantages in the 1988 elections, and that therefore the “policy leeway” that these candidates enjoyed are no more than what we might expect in many other historical elections.

\textit{Election outcomes when candidates shift away from the center: The second face of policy representation}

Given that the winning candidates Bush and Mitterrand enjoyed non-policy-related advantages, we computed the electoral effects of movement by Mitterrand or Bush toward more extreme policies, with their opponents held fixed at their perceived positions. As was the case for Chirac and Dukakis, the support curves for Mitterrand and Bush are concave, i.e. the candidates’ expected votes drop off more and more rapidly as their policies (as perceived by the survey respondents) diverge from their vote-maximizing positions. As the projected support curves in Figure 4 show, we compute that had Mitterrand shifted a significant policy distance to the left of his actual positions, or had Bush shifted significantly further to the right, these candidates would have paid heavy electoral penalties that could have endangered their candidacies. Figure 4A shows that if Bush moves to his optimal positions on all five dimensions at once, his expected vote falls to 50% if he shifts
just .78 units to the right on all issues. Our calculations on Mitterrand’s positioning (illustrated in Figure 4B) yield similar results.\textsuperscript{14}

[FIGURES 4A-4B ABOUT HERE]

We note that our conclusion, that Bush and Mitterrand would have suffered more severe vote losses by presenting extreme policies than they might have gained by shifting toward the center, stems directly from the observation (see Figures 4A and 4B) that these candidates’ support curves are concave and that the curve for the leftist candidate peaks to the right of his actual position and the curve for the rightist candidate peaks to the left of his actual position. It is for this reason that these candidates would be heavily penalized for shifting further away from the center, towards the end points of the policy scales, but that they would achieve modest electoral gains by moderating their policy images.

\textit{The third face of policy representation: Electoral effects of changes in voters’ positions}

In an award-winning article, Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson argue for a representational model in which the public uses elections to influence the direction of public policy because “rightward shifts in public opinion will replace Democrats with Republicans, leftward shifts Republicans with Democrats” (1995, page 544). This perspective on policy representation shifts our focus away from the electoral effects of changes in candidates’ platforms, to the effects of changes in voters’ policy preferences. Such a voter shift, however, has the same effect as shifting both candidates in the same direction. We address the question: How might the 1988 French and American presidential elections have changed in response to shifts in the electorates’ policy preferences?

To explore this question, we simulated the effects of unilaterally shifting the self-placements of all the ANES and FPES respondents along the policy dimension in equal

\textsuperscript{14} We note that in these simulations, the scenarios in which we shift the winning candidates to the extreme ends of the policy scales may be unrealistic, since this represents more extreme positioning than either candidate could plausibly have presented. However from our perspective the important point is that even modest shifts away from the center would have endangered these candidates’ election. In addition we note that the extreme positioning scenario is arguably realistic for the 1988 French presidential election, since two major candidates who contested the first round of voting, the Communist Lajoinie and the National Front’s Le Pen, were perceived as extreme by the French electorate (see Pierce, 1995).
increments, or equivalently, shifting both candidates in the same direction. As expected, election outcomes are strongly responsive to shifts in the voter distribution. If French voters shift one unit to the right along all policy dimensions simultaneously, Mitterrand’s vote share drops by about six percent (see Figure 5A). Shifts in the U.S. electorate have even larger effects (see Figure 5B). The intuitive logic that underlies this conclusion is that when every member of the electorate shifts, say, one policy unit to the right, the effect on the vote is the same as if both competing candidates shift one policy unit to the left. Thus had the French public shifted one ideological unit to the right in 1988, the electoral effects would have been equal to the combined effects of Chirac shifting one unit towards the center (which we have seen would slightly increase Chirac’s expected support) and of Mitterrand simultaneously shifting one unit away from the center (which we have seen would significantly reduce Mitterrand’s support). This combined effect exceeds the effect of a unilateral policy shift by a single candidate.

Beyond ceterus paribus: The effects of relaxing strong simulation assumptions about voters and candidates

As we emphasized above, our substantive conclusions rest on election simulations that feature the strong assumptions that candidates and voters shift their positions unilaterally, and that candidates pay no electoral penalty for changing their policy positions. Although these assumptions are standard in studies that explore the electoral effects of candidate positioning (see Alvarez and Nagler, 1995, 1998; Adams and Merrill, 1999, 2000), the question arises: Do our substantive conclusions likely generalize to more realistic election settings, in which these strong assumptions do not obtain?

We believe the answer to this question is yes. If, for example, we relax the assumption of costless candidate mobility, we would actually strengthen our conclusions. For since we conclude that candidates cannot gain many votes by moving to the center even under the assumption of costless policy mobility, this result certainly extends to sce-

15 These exercises involved shifting some respondents past the endpoints of the policy scales, so that for instance if we shifted all respondents one unit to the right on the Left-Right scale those respondents who actually self-placed at 7 would be shifted to 8.
narios in which voters penalize candidates for moderating their policy platforms. Likewise, given that we find that the electoral cost of candidates’ shifting to more extreme positions is high even given costless spatial mobility, this conclusion clearly extends to situations in which candidates incur additional penalties for shifting to extreme policies.

Finally, if Chirac (for instance) had shifted towards the center, it seems likely that Mitterrand would have responded by shifting towards the center as well. Thus we allowed candidates to respond to their rivals’ policy by successively updating their policy positions in response to their rivals’ policy shifts, until neither candidate could increase his expected vote, i.e., until a Nash equilibrium was achieved. For the 1988 French presidential election the unique equilibrium configuration that we located found the candidates converging to identical positions of 4.01 along the Left-Right scale and 3.93 on the Public Sector scale. Chirac’s expected vote at equilibrium, 47.9%, represents a gain of 1.9% over his expected vote with the candidates at their actual locations (see Table 3). Our computed equilibrium configuration for the U.S locates the two candidates at identical positions16, with Dukakis receiving an expected vote of 47.8% at equilibrium – a vote share 1.2% above his expected vote when the candidates locate at their actual positions. Hence our equilibrium analysis, which assumes that each candidate undertakes his best response to his opponent’s policy shifts, supports the same substantive conclusion we reached based on our analysis of unilateral policy shifts: namely, that the losing candidates Chirac and Dukakis could have only modestly increased their expected vote shares by changing their policy positions.

Summary

Although candidate movement near the center of the voter distribution has only modest effects on election outcomes, we conclude that policy voting does strongly affect election outcomes in two other ways. First, we conclude that the aggregate vote responds sharply when center-left or center-right candidates shift further away from the center, towards the extreme ends of the policy scales. This implies that candidates have strong electoral motivations to avoid presenting such extremist images, and that politicians who

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16 The computed equilibrium configuration locates both candidates at 4.52 on the ideology scale, 4.11 on domestic spending, 3.97 on defense spending, 4.12 on health insurance, and 4.51 on government aid to minorities.
violate this strategic imperative will rarely win election. Second, we conclude that election outcomes are highly sensitive to voters’ policy beliefs, so that candidates have strong incentives to respond to shifts in public opinion, and that unresponsive politicians face sharp electoral penalties. These two results reveal far more benign faces of policy representation, ones that imply that voters exercise meaningful control over government policies via elections.

Conclusion

Our simulations on data from the 1988 French and American presidential elections support the results of Alvarez, Nagler, and others, that major parties and candidates pay quite modest electoral penalties for noncentrist positioning, and that these penalties may be overcome by nonpolicy-related advantages arising from economic voting. Indeed, we conclude that although Francois Mitterrand and George Bush were perceived as presenting distinctly noncentrist policy images in 1988, they would probably have been elected even had their opponents unilaterally shifted to centrist, vote-maximizing policies. These results reveal a troubling face of policy representation, one that suggests that election outcomes may not reflect the electorate’s policy beliefs.

Nevertheless, our arguments and our empirical results suggest reasons for optimism with respect to policy representation. We have shown that the troubled face of policy representation – that noncentrist opponents may easily defeat more centrist rivals – must be balanced against two benign faces of representation: namely, that extreme candidates may suffer crippling electoral penalties and that election outcomes respond sharply to shifts in voters’ policy beliefs. Thus our focus on “the three faces of policy representation” illuminates important linkages between voters’ policy beliefs, candidates’ policy proposals, and election outcomes.
References


Presented at the Annual Meeting if the Western Political Science Association, March 24-26, San Jose, CA.


Table 1. Respondents’ Self-Placements and Their Placements of the Major Candidates in the 1988 French and American Presidential Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Dukakis</th>
<th>Bush</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1988 American National Election Study (N=935)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Spending</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense Spending</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>5.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Insurance</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>5.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to Minorities</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean policy position</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>4.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Mitterrand</th>
<th>Chirac</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1988 French Presidential Election Study (N=744)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>5.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Sector</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>5.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean policy position</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>5.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The column labeled “respondents” reports the mean self-placements of the ANES and the FPES respondents along the various policy scales included in the study. The remaining columns report the respondents’ mean candidate placements. All of the ideology and policy scales used for this analysis run from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating an extreme left-wing placement on the dimension and 7 indicating an extreme right-wing position.
Table 2A. Conditional Logit Equations for Voting in the 1988 U.S. Presidential Election and the 1988 French Presidential Election

1988 U.S. Presidential Election (N=935)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.35*</td>
<td>(.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>2.08*</td>
<td>(.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>1.14*</td>
<td>(.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological utility</td>
<td>.07*</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic spending utility</td>
<td>.05*</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense spending utility</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health insurance utility</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Govt. aid to minorities utility</td>
<td>.08*</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrospective national economy</td>
<td>.39*</td>
<td>(.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrospective family finances</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>-1.94*</td>
<td>(.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td>-312.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1988 French Presidential Election, 2nd Round (N=744)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>(.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leftist party Identification</td>
<td>2.78*</td>
<td>(.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-wing party identification</td>
<td>2.78*</td>
<td>(.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological utility</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector utility</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrospective national economy</td>
<td>.44*</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retrospective family finances</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>(.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>.54*</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-132.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The parameters for the 1988 U.S. election refer to the effect of each independent variable on the respondent’s utility for Bush relative to her utility for Dukakis. The parameters for the 1988 French election refer to the effect of each independent variable on the respondent’s utility for Chirac relative to Mitterrand. Standard errors in parentheses.
Table 2B. Projected Votes for the 1988 U.S. Presidential Election and the 1988 French Presidential Election

### 1988 U.S. Presidential Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bush Vote</th>
<th>Dukakis Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANES distribution</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projected vote</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 1988 French Presidential Election (2nd round)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mitterrand Vote</th>
<th>Chirac Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FPES distribution</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projected vote</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The projected votes are computed by averaging the projected voting probabilities across all respondents, using the probability functions given in note 12. For each election, these projected probabilities are computed using the parameters reported in Table 2A.

**Dukakis’s computed policy optima**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dukakis actual (1)</th>
<th>Dukakis optimal (2)</th>
<th>Exp. vote at actual (3)</th>
<th>Exp. vote at optimal (4)</th>
<th>Expected gain (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Spending</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense Spending</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Insurance</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aid to Minorities</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All dimensions simultaneously</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>45.1%</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chirac’s computed policy optima**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chirac actual (1)</th>
<th>Chirac optimal (2)</th>
<th>Exp. vote at actual (3)</th>
<th>Exp. vote at optimal (4)</th>
<th>Expected gain (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>48.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Sector</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both dimensions simultaneously</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Column 1 presents the candidate’s actual positions, as perceived by the survey respondents; Column 2 presents the candidate’s computed vote-maximizing positions along the policy dimension; Column 3 gives the candidate’s expected vote when he locates at his actual position; Column 4 gives the candidate’s expected vote when he unilaterally relocates to his computed vote-maximizing position along the policy dimension (with his positions fixed at his actual locations along the remaining dimensions); Column 5 represents the difference between the percentages reported in Columns 3 and 4.
Figure 1. Candidate $L$'s share of the vote as a function of candidate $L$'s Left-Right location, with candidate $R$'s location fixed.
Figure 2. Distributions of Respondents’ Ideological Self-Placements and Candidate Placements, 1988 French and American Presidential Elections

2A. 1988 French Presidential Election Study

[Graph showing distributions of respondents' positions and mean candidate placements for the 1988 French Presidential Election Study.]

2B. 1988 U.S. National Election Study

[Graph showing distributions of respondents' positions and mean candidate placements for the 1988 U.S. National Election Study.]
Figure 3. The Losing Candidates’ Expected Votes as a Function of their Ideological Positions, 1988 French and U.S. Presidential Elections

3A. Chirac

3B. Dukakis

Notes: In Figure 3A, “C” represents Chirac’s actual position, and “V*” represents Chirac’s computed vote-maximizing position (with Mitterrand at his actual position).
Figure 4. The Winning Candidates’ Expected Vote Shares as They Move Off Their Actual Positions along All Dimensions Simultaneously

4A. Bush

4B. Mitterrand

Notes: In Figure 4A, “B” refers to Bush’s actual positions along all policy dimensions included in the empirical voting specification, “B-1” refers to the set of positions located one policy unit to the right of Bush’s actual positions, and so on.
Figure 5. Mitterrand’s and Bush’s Expected Votes as the Electorate’s Position Shifts along all Policy Dimensions Simultaneously

5A. Mitterrand

Notes: The value on the vertical axis at “R” shows the candidate’s expected vote with all respondents located at their actual positions along all dimensions; the value at “R+1” gives the expected vote when all respondents are shifted one unit to the right, and so on.

5B. Bush