Discussion

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This article is an interesting contribution to the literature of theories of voter preferences, with an empirical approach using sample survey data about actual multiparty elections. As explained in Section 3, the models being fit have four features that purport to explain voting behavior: (1) a proximity component, favoring parties that are similar in ideology to the voter; (2) a directional component, favoring extreme parties with ideologies in the same direction as the voter; (3) a factor favoring parties with high vote totals in previous elections, which the author identifies with strategic voting; and (4) a stochastic component allowing for the fact that preferences are influenced by other factors not included in the model. As the author demonstrates with the data from Norway and Sweden, the full model fits quite well and might be useful for predictive purposes. Unfortunately, I think that the political interpretations given for the parameter estimates and tests are incorrect, because of a fundamental indeterminacy related to the so-called "strategic voting" factor.

As noted in the article, feature (3) is necessary for the model to have any hope of fitting reality; it is commonplace for a political system to include parties with nearly identical ideologies but quite different vote shares. Unfortunately, this feature seems hopelessly confounded with the other aspects of the preference model. For example, consider an electoral system in which the Communists have been consistently unpopular because of their extreme positions. The feature (3) of the model will attribute much of the current unpopularity to their poor showing in the past, even if a better explanation would be that their extreme ideology caused the poor votes both in past and present. In general, the adjustment for past votes would cause the unpopularity of extreme positions held by minor parties to be underestimated, which in turn would cause the "directional" component of the model to be overestimated. Thus the model can accurately fit the data without the parameters having their stated meaning.

As noted in Section 2, the proximity model is consistent with the mainstream of research in political science. Given that the directional component estimated by the model could easily arise from an artifact of overcorrection for past vote shares, the burden of proof is with the author to demonstrate that the standard view is wrong. In addition, the amount of the confounding depends on a complicated combination of party strengths and ideologies. As a result, I do not see the estimate of beta = .11 as a true indication that the voters in the Norwegian election of 1989 are "directional" or that they are more directional in 1989 than in 1985. (Of course, the parameter estimates under the model omitting feature (3) cannot be interpreted either, because that model does not fit the data at all.)

In addition, I believe the author is incorrect in attributing all or even most of effect (3) to strategic voting. Preferences that do not depend on ideology alone can be explained by many factors, including positions on other issues, regional and class identification, constituency support, candidate quality, incumbency, and familiarity with a more established party. In addition, an aspect of strategic voting is already captured in feature (2), in which a person will vote for a party with ideology more extreme than his or hers. Although feature (3) is not a measure of strategic voting, it is useful as strategic modeling (by which I mean that it is a critical factor in allowing the model to fit the data). But using the model to answer substantive political questions requires more strategic interpretation than seems possible here.

What then can be learned from these models and data? First, in just an exploratory sense, the directional and proximity models discussed and elaborated on in this article can be useful in understanding the survey responses. Figures 1, 2, and 3 are interesting, and it would also be interesting to see scatterplots of perceived ideology of parties versus stated ideologies of voters. Do voters tend to perceive their preferred parties as having ideology close to theirs? For example, among the voters for the Social Democrats in any given election year, do voters with self-declared ideologies of "highly left-wing" tend to see the party as more left-wing than do voters with self-declared ideologies of "moderately left-wing"? A bias in this direction would imply that some of the perceived proximity is a consequence, not a cause, of preference. Similar studies of directionality could also be revealing, especially for centrist parties that may try to appeal to a varied constituency. In using these data to estimate and test theories of voter preferences, one must deal with the confounding between factor (3) and the proximity and directional models. To avoid this problem, it would be useful to model how the support for a party changes from election to election as a function of changes in the ideologies of the party and its supporters. Such a study, requiring comparisons of preference data between successive elections, could be an important addition to our understanding of voting in multiparty elections.

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