

Behavioural Public Economics: Extended Abstract

Title: *Two Field Experiments on Approval Voting in Germany*

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Alós-Ferrer and Granić (2012) present results from two field experiments on electoral reform, which were carried out alongside official state and federal elections in Germany, in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Electors who had voted in the official elections, which used the mixed-member proportional representation (MMPR) system, were given the opportunity to vote in an experimental election using the ‘Approval Voting’ (AV) system. When combined with the standard methods for allocating parliamentary seats, AV produces markedly different outcomes from MMPR. Alós-Ferrer and Granić argue that this difference implies the current MMPR system used in Germany poorly reflects voter preferences.

The first experiment was conducted during state elections in the town of Messel, Hesse, and the second during federal elections in selected districts in the city of Konstanz, Baden-Württemberg. In both cases, after voting in the official election, electors were given the opportunity to vote in an experimental election. The ballots used in experimental election duplicated the official ballots, which include two decisions: a first vote for an individual candidate, and a second vote for a party. The first vote determines the local constituency MP, and the second the allocation of parliamentary seats amongst the parties.

The experimental elections differed from the official elections in only one respect. In the official elections, electors were required to vote for a single candidate (first vote) and party (second vote). In the experimental election, they were allowed to ‘approve’ any number of candidates and parties, hence the name ‘Approval

Voting'. With relatively high participation rates – roughly half of voters in each official election also participated in the respective experimental election, the results provide insight into voter preferences that is not revealed by the official results.

In both of the experimental elections using AV, the two major parties, the CDU (Conservatives) and SPD (Social Democrats), achieved far smaller shares of the parliamentary seats than under the MMPR system used in the respective official elections. The primary beneficiaries were the FDP (Liberals) and the Greens, which tend to be the coalition partners of the CDU and SPD, respectively. Alós-Ferrer and Granić argue that the broader range of possible choices under AV implies that it better reflects voters' preferences than MMPR. They further suggest that the dominance of the mass parties may be an artefact of the MMPR system, rather than a reflection of underlying preferences.

Comments

The idea of conducting a field experiment in conjunction with an actual election is a very interesting one. Although it has been done previously in French presidential elections (see e.g. Laslier and Van der Straeten 2008), Alós-Ferrer and Granić (2012) combine it with parliamentary elections.

Although the experimental idea is a good one, the argument that AV better reflects preferences is questionable. The essential flaw is that it provides no way to distinguish different degrees of preference. It is evident from Tables 9 and 10 that most CDU voters also approved of the FDP, and that most SPD voters also approved of the Greens. However, the CDU and FDP are traditional coalition partners, as are the SPD and Greens, and the AV system provides no way for voters to express a preference for one party over the other within each of these pairs.

It is reasonable to believe that most of those who approved of both the CDU and FDP on one hand, or the SPD and Greens on the other, had a preference for one party in the respective pair over the other. A CDU voter who favoured a CDU-led coalition with the FDP, for example, could have been expected to approve both parties. However, the equal weight assigned to each is simply an artefact of the AV system. If voters are approving coalitions, but are forced to assign equal weight to the parties within them, large shifts from the CDU and SPD to FDP and Greens are not surprising, even if the MMPR system accurately reflects voter preferences.

The most striking result of the AV elections is the strength of the Greens in Konstanz. However, this may, in part, reflect a willingness of voters who prefer the CDU to support a CDU-Green coalition, with equal weight forced by the AV system. Indeed, after the 2006 state elections in Baden-Württemberg, the leader of the Greens in the state suggested the possibility of a coalition with the CDU ("Winfried Kretschmann und die grüne Revolution im Ländle" 2011). The experiment in Konstanz involved federal rather than state elections, but it is nevertheless far from clear that voters who approved both the CDU and Greens would be indifferent between, for example, a Green/SPD coalition and a CDU/FDP coalition.

References

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