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OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

OPTIMISTS & SKEPTICS

WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE IN THE VALUE OF THEIR SINGLE VOTE?

KEYWORDS

Voting; Canada; political efficacy, political information, competitive elections

WHAT'S THE STORY?

What are the odds of holding *the* decisive ballot in an election? Imagine a Canadian federal election hangs in the balance. Your vote will not only break a statistical tie between candidates in your riding but could also swing the balance at the federal level: effectively deciding what party will form government in Ottawa and who will assume the position of Canadian Prime Minister.

It could happen. But what are the chances, really? This article begins by pointing out that, statistically speaking, the odds of holding that decisive ballot are virtually zero. Yet, in spite of this fairly obvious fact large numbers of voters routinely participate in democratic election. The question, then, is what drives voters to the polls when the odds that their vote will matter are unlikely in the extreme?

The authors propose two answers for this puzzle. First, it may be a psychological trait – the sense of political efficacy – that separates **optimists** (those who believe their vote matters) from the **skeptics** (those who realize

they will not be the pivotal voter). Political efficacy is simply how a person views the relationship between citizens and the government. If a person feels that government generally listens to citizens (and that their voice matters) then logic suggests she will also cling to the idea that her personal vote could be decisive. The authors also consider the possibility that closeness of the race affects how people value their vote. In theory, the

That Decisive Ballot

About 45% of Canadian voters believe their vote could be decisive in elections. Roughly 45% think their personal vote will not affect outcomes. About 10% have no idea.

Governments Do Listen

The main reason why people feel their vote will make a difference is a psychological sense that the government is responsive to citizens and that their voice matters.

Too Close To Call

Closeness of the race also affects the value people place in their personal ballot, but only for people who are relatively aware of politics in the first place.

closer it is the more likely people are to believe that they will be the pivotal voter.

Based on a large survey of Canadian voters, the study finds evidence for both explanations. The most important factor, though, is that sense of political efficacy. When people feel that the democratic system is generally responsive to citizens they are also likely to believe that their vote could be consequential. Closeness of the race also has an effect, but it matters only for people who are paying attention in the first place. In other words, if someone is actively following politics a close race will induce the feeling that one's vote could be decisive.

HOW WE DID IT?

Results are based on a representative online survey of 3,707 Canadians administered one week before the 2008 Canadian federal election to voters residing in two Canadian provinces: Quebec and British Columbia.

Participants were asked a series of questions about the election including whether or not they agreed that their vote could decide who wins the election in their local riding. Participants also responded to questions tapping political efficacy and a series of questions aimed at measuring awareness of politics. Closeness of the race was measured after the election based on official election results. Analyses are based on multinomial probit regression.

FOR PUBLIC DEBATE

One of the most intriguing results of this study is the sharp divide between Canadians on this question about the impact of their personal vote. About 45 percent of Canadians are in fact optimists who cling to the belief that they could hold the pivotal ballot. But, on the other hand, about 45 percent of voters are skeptics – agreeing that their vote will not matter at the end of the day. This suggests that for any given election roughly half of voters go to the polls in spite of feeling that their individual ballot is ultimately meaningless.

“... about half of them feel they have the power to influence electoral contests; but as interestingly ... about half of them are ready to concede that the act of voting is in fact inconsequential”

TO LEARN MORE:

André Blais and Ludovic Rheault. 2011. “Optimists and Skeptics: Why do People Believe in the Value of their Single Vote?” *Electoral Studies* 30(1): 77-82.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2010.09.008>

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