

Why the Economy? The Micro-Foundations of the Economic Vote in Comparative Perspective

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An important puzzle in the study of comparative political behavior is the apparent variability, across countries and over time, of the extent and nature of economic influences on political support for parties and politicians. In this proposal, we offer a theoretical solution to this puzzle and outline a plan for testing it empirically. The theoretical solution departs from previous work on comparative economic voting because it draws heavily on relatively recent insights into the nature, sources, and impact of information on public opinion. Such work differs from earlier literature in two ways: (1) it assigns a dominant role to the media in communicating information to citizens and ultimately in influencing their political opinions and behavior; (2) it accounts for individual heterogeneity in political opinion and behavior largely through differences in people's incentive and ability to receive and accept media messages (i.e., their political awareness).

Most of the insights of this literature, however, have not yet penetrated the comparative study of economic voting, which has maintained quite simple conceptions of the cognitive process that leads to the empirical phenomenon of economic voting. This is perhaps the reason that the leading explanation for cross-national difference in economic voting, the clarity-of-responsibility-hypothesis, has had only limited empirical success. In this project, we offer a more nuanced theoretical model of economic voting that builds on the recent literature in American public opinion (which is itself an outgrowth of advances in cognitive psychology).

We begin with the usual economic voting model, but recognize that it is really built from a series of connected *opinions* (i.e., an economic judgment, an attribution of responsibility for the economy, and an expression of political support). Consequently, a fruitful way of building a more fully realized model of economic voting would be to flesh out the explanation of how voters form and change each of these opinions. This theoretical expansion of the economic voting model accommodates a number of the most prominent, but more *ad hoc*, hypotheses about comparative economic voting already in the literature, but it also generates a whole range of new theoretical hypotheses. Indeed, this theory promises to reorient student of comparative economic voting away from an exclusive focus on governmental institutions and party systems as the sources of difference in cross-national economic voting; and toward a focus on international differences in how the media reports on the economy. In addition, the theory produces a number of new sources of individual level heterogeneity in economic voting that (because of difference in the distribution of these characteristics in different populations) could also help explain variation in economic voting cross nationally.

In order to explore whether this kind of theoretical expansion is useful we will need to collect data on what the media in different countries say about the economy over time. To do this, we propose to collect about 30,000 front-pages of selected newspapers from 15 developed democracies from 1980-2001. These papers will be copied and coded for economic (and some political) messages by native language speakers. The project will also require information at the

individual level. Many of the hypotheses specify relationships between variables like political awareness and economic judgments, political support, or responsibility attributions. To test these, we ask a series of survey questions to citizens in 5 different countries.