

Is there an economic vote in referendums? Citizens' usage of heuristics in referendum voting

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Summary

Case:

- ▶ Italian constitutional referendum, 4 December 2016
- ▶ a complex constitutional reform and strongly polarized campaign

Data: ITANES pre- and post-referendum cross-section (N = 3050)

Findings:

- ▶ strong correlation between subjective evaluations of economy and vote choice
- ▶ stronger 'economic vote' for more knowledgeable respondents

Implication:

- ▶ Italian citizens used referendum as possibility to hold Renzi to account
- ▶ Where in a business cycle a referendum is held may determine outcomes

Motivation

What influences how voters vote in a referendum?

- ▶ A constitutional referendum triggered by the government as a typical case of a national level referendum
- ▶ A complex reform proposal
 - ▶ reform of the Senate,
- ▶ A polarized campaign
 - ▶ 'Si': Partito Democratico, Nuovo Centrodestra, . . . , Coldiretti, CISL
 - ▶ 'No': MoVimento 5 Stelle, Lega Nord, Forza Italia, . . . , National Association of Italian Partisans, CGIL
- ▶ A personalized campaign
 - ▶ Renzi promised to resign if the reform were rejected

Can voters make informed decisions in a referendum?

- ▶ Uninformed cued voters vote similarly to informed voters (Lupia 1994; Christin, Hug, and Sciarini 2002)
- ▶ More knowledgeable voters more likely to vote their opinion in Swiss referendums (Lanz and Nai 2014) but also more likely to be ambivalent (Nai 2014)
- ▶ Voters use simple heuristics to decide, e.g. status quo bias (Bowler and Donovan 1998; LeDuc 2003; Clarke, Elliott, and Stewart 2017)
- ▶ Economic evaluations: 'Can we afford change?' (Bowler and Donovan 1998) or 'Do we need change?' (Jensen 1998)

Economic voting in referendums

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 - ▶ voters punish a government for a bad economy
 - ▶ and reward it for a good economy
 - ▶ best available evidence for electoral accountability (Kayser 2014)
 - ▶ mixed evidence base on aggregate data
 - ▶ more consistent evidence based on survey data
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 2. Given the prominence of the government's position in a referendum and the state of the economy the economic vote is an easily accessible heuristic for referendum voting
 3. Voters who possess less factual knowledge to base their decision on should be particularly prone to resort to simple heuristics

Hypotheses

Did perceptions of the economic situation in Italy influence how citizens voted in the 2016 Constitutional referendum?

H1 The more negative a respondent's evaluation of the economic situation of the country the more likely it is that she voted 'no' in the referendum.

H2 The less knowledge a respondent possesses about the referendum the stronger will be the correlation of economic evaluations and vote choice in the referendum.

Research Design

Data

- ▶ ITANES pre- and post-referendum cross-section
- ▶ $N = 3050$
- ▶ items on vote choice, economic evaluations and government approval

Method

- ▶ Logistic regression: binary vote choice on economic evaluations and other covariates

Results

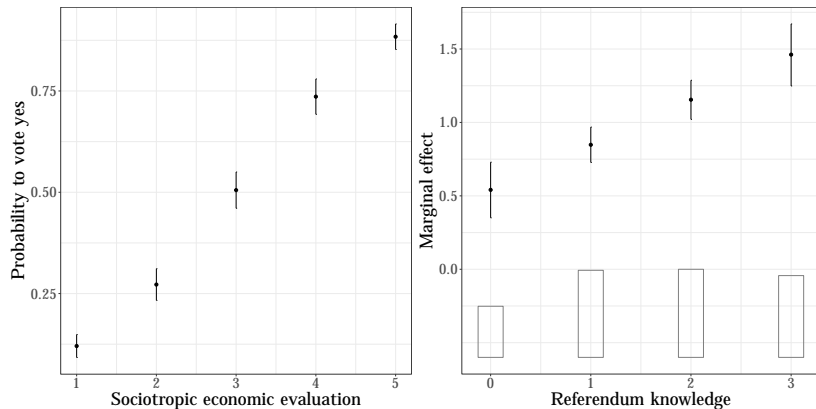
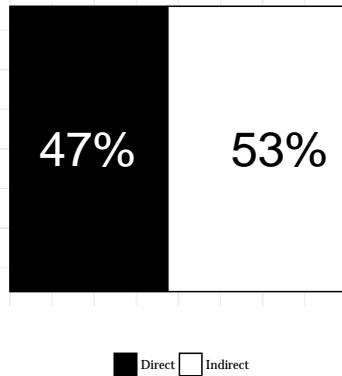
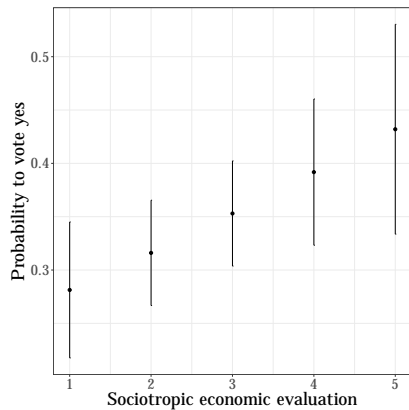


Figure 1: The economic vote

Results



Discussion

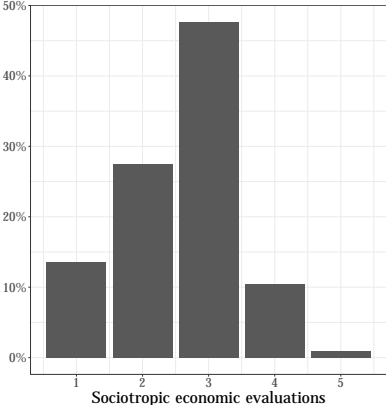


Figure 2: Respondents' economic evaluations

Discussion

- ▶ Stronger correlation for more informed voters
 1. Conforming with more recent evidence (Clarke, Elliott, and Stewart 2017)
 2. Factual knowledge induces ambivalence
 3. ~~Better informed voters have more accurate assessment of Italy's economic woes~~
- ▶ Risk aversion?
 - ▶ 4/5 of Italians open to constitutional reform
 - ▶ What is the status quo? Keeping constitution or Renzi in place?
- ▶ A 'most-likely case' for an economic vote
 - ▶ Rejection of H1 would have been strong evidence against economic vote
 - ▶ Next: 'least-likely cases' and comparative studies

Conclusion

- ▶ A strongly politicized referendum vote could be explained through an electoral heuristic
- ▶ Clashes with normative ideals: referendums are prospective while the economic vote is retrospective
- ▶ Strong economic vote which is stronger among more knowledgeable respondents (cf. Clarke, Elliott, and Stewart 2017)
- ▶ Where in a business cycle a referendum is held is important

Grazie mille!



Figure 3: Renzi before the referendum

Appendix

Tables

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| | Vote choice (Yes) | | Government approval | Vote choice (Yes) |
| | <i>logistic</i> | | <i>OLS</i> | <i>logistic</i> |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Sociotropic economy | 1.00*** (.06) | .54*** (.10) | 1.80*** (.05) | .17** (.07) |
| Referendum knowledge | .07* (.04) | -.76*** (.16) | -.05 (.04) | .15*** (.05) |
| Sociotropic economy × Referendum Knowledge | | .31*** (.05) | | |
| Government approval | | | | .57*** (.03) |
| Female | -.01 (.09) | .01 (.09) | .03 (.09) | -.05 (.10) |
| Age | .02*** (.003) | .02*** (.003) | .01*** (.003) | .01*** (.003) |
| University education | .20** (.09) | .20** (.09) | .32*** (.09) | .07 (.10) |
| Constant | -4.07*** (.23) | -2.83*** (.30) | -1.36*** (.19) | -4.19*** (.26) |
| Observations | 2,682 | 2,682 | 2,943 | 2,656 |
| R ² | | | .34 | |
| Log Likelihood | -1,573.14 | -1,557.12 | | -1,227.44 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure 4:

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