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EXPRESSIVE VOTING AND ITS COSTS

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Voters who support a candidate with little or no chance of winning face a choice : whether to *express* their true preference, vote for their preferred candidate, and risk wasting their vote; or vote *strategically* for a second-best candidate who is more likely to be in a position to win. To explore this tradeoff, this study focuses on French parliamentary and local elections, in which the top two candidates always qualify for the second round, and others also qualify if they get a number of voters higher than 12.5 percent of registered citizens. Results show that third candidates who qualify for the second round tend to prefer staying in the race rather than dropping out. Many of the third candidates' supporters then act expressively and vote for them instead of their second-best candidate among the top two. The study finds this disproportionally harms the candidate ideologically closest to the third and often causes their defeat. This behavior by voters and candidates likely affects the results of many elections beyond those in the study, including European elections and other proportional elections, where voters face similar trade-offs. The results call for ideologically similar parties to reach agreements limiting the number of candidates or lists that are competing, and for the adoption of voting systems in which electoral outcomes are less distorted by voters' and candidates' failure to act strategically.

- The presence of a third candidate in the second round of French parliamentary and local elections increases the share of people casting a ballot for any of the candidates by 7.8 percentage points and decreases the vote share of the top two candidates by 6.9 percentage points.
- It disproportionately harms the top-two candidate ideologically closest to the third, and causes their defeat in 19.2 percent of the races.
- While voting expressively has the starkest costs in plurality elections, it also has costs in proportional ones such as regional or European elections.
- The study calls for ideologically similar parties to reach agreements limiting the number of candidates that are competing to avoid dividing their votes, and calls into question the widespread use of the plurality rule as an effective method to aggregate votes to reflect citizen preferences.

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Citizens of democracies often operate on a belief that elections directly represent their preferences, with the most popular candidate winning. In reality, the outcomes of elections also depend on additional factors, such as the rules that govern how votes are translated into election outcomes, the alliances that political parties forge, and how strategically voters behave.

Existing studies estimating the extent to which voters act strategically usually compare people's preferences and vote choices and count the number of voters who cast their ballot for a front-runner instead of their favorite. But voters' true preferences are difficult to observe, so these studies depend on survey responses with questionable reliability. By contrast, this study only relies on official electoral results. We compare results in constituencies in which the third candidate obtained a vote share just above the eligibility cutoff, and is thus qualified, against ones where the third candidate obtained just below it, and only two candidates can run in the second round. This exercise reveals that voters often choose to use their vote to express their preference in a way that disregards the potential outcome of the election, and that this practice disproportionately harms the front-runner ideologically closest to their preferred candidate.

Beyond the vote : factors that influence election outcomes

Rules of aggregation and election outcomes

The rules of vote aggregation can often lead to election outcomes that do not reflect the popular vote. A clear example of this is the United States, where the Electoral College system calls for states to have a number of electors based on their population, all of which go to the candidate who wins a majority in the state. This has led candidates winning the most electors, and hence the presidency, despite losing the popular vote. The elections of George W. Bush in 2000 and of Donald Trump in 2016 are salient examples.

Countries such as France have a variety of rules of aggregation governing different types of elections. Different rules can lead to the same party having very different outcomes in different elections. For example, the *Front National* or *Europe Ecologie les Verts* hold very few seats in French Parliament, in part because parliamentary elections use the plurality rule : in each constituency, the candidate with the largest number of votes wins the seat and the others get nothing. Because it is difficult for small and fringe parties to ever get a majority of votes, they end up with a number of seats much lower than their vote share. These parties have far larger seat shares in the regional and European elections, which use the proportional rule : voters cast their ballot for a party list, and the seats are allocated to the different lists proportionally to their vote share.

Party alliances and election outcomes

Election outcomes are also influenced by the extent to which parties strike alliances before the election. When these alliances fail, the number of candidates increases, which creates the risk of dividing the voters on the same side. For instance, the first round of the 2002 French presidential election included no fewer than 16 candidates. While it was widely expected that the *Parti Socialiste* candidate Lionel Jospin would go up against the incumbent Jacques Chirac in the second round, the presence of many other left-wing candidates allowed the *Front National* candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen to make a surprise entrance into the second round, with only 16.9 percent of the votes in the first round. In the second round, Chirac won by the biggest landslide in the history of French presidential elections. The 2002 election serves an example of where political parties' failure to coordinate led to a suboptimal outcome for the average voter. Le Pen was not the second most popular candidate. Had the left-wing parties coordinated better, voters would have been offered a more meaningful choice in the second round.

The 2017 presidential election offers another, albeit less dramatic, example : Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, who qualified for the second round, both had fewer votes than the total obtained by left-wing candidates Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Benoît Hamon or right-wing candidates François Fillon and Nicolas Dupont-Aignan. Differently from these candidates, Macron and Le Pen did not face any competitor from the same side, on the center or on the far-right.

Expressive vs. strategic voting

When more than two candidates are running in an election leading to a single winner, citizens who support lower-ranked candidates face a difficult tradeoff : voting for their favorite, or for another candidate with higher chances of winning. In expressing their true preference, voters may split their support over multiple candidates and nominate less-preferred leaders. Hence, the result of the election depends on the extent to which voters are "expressive" – voting based on their preference among candidates only – or "strategic" – voting based on likely outcomes of the election. This tradeoff is more or less consequential, depending on rules that govern the election.

Expressive and strategic voting in plurality rule elections

In elections following plurality rule, each voter casts a vote for an individual candidate, and the candidate with the most votes wins. Some systems call for two rounds of voting where the frontrunners qualify for the second round. The candidate with the highest vote share in round two wins the election. This is the system used in French presidential elections as well as in the parliamentary and local elections that are the focus of this study.

The tradeoff between expressive and strategic voting is stark in plurality elections because the winner takes all. There is a strong chance that a voter who supports a minor candidate will "lose" their vote. Furthermore, the tradeoff may exist in both the first and second rounds. In the first, a voter who supports a minor candidate must choose between voting for their first choice and voting for someone who can qualify for the second round. Then, if three or more candidates qualify for the second round, supporters of lower-ranked candidates must choose between voting for their favorite and a candidate with higher chances of winning. Even a voter who chooses to be expressive in the first round may well choose to be strategic in the second.

Expressive and strategic voting in proportional elections

Regional and European elections use a different, proportional, rule. The tradeoff between expressive and strategic voting also exists in such elections, even though the risk of a "lost" vote is slighter because all parties receive a number of seats proportional to their vote share. Still, the list or coalition of lists which receives the largest number of seats assumes legislative power. Voters who have a preference for a small list thus need to decide whether to vote expressively for that list or strategically for a list with higher chances to form or participate in a coalition with a majority of seats.

The European elections scheduled for 26 May 2019 provide a clear example of a proportional election where expressive versus strategic voting matters. Unlike previous elections, all French regions are part of a unique constituency. The 79 French seats at the European Parliament will be divided between competing lists proportionally to the vote shares they receive.

Voters face three choices on how to use their vote on 26 May : they can vote expressively or according to either of two types of strategic considerations. With an eye on the overall results across countries, voters may decide to vote for parties which belong to European party groups that are the most likely to lead a winning coalition at the European Parliament : the left-wing Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (to which the *Parti Socialiste* is affiliated), or the right-wing European People's Party group (to which *Les Républicains* is affiliated). In contrast, lists by *En Marche* and the *Front National* are leading the French polls even though neither is part of these two groups.

The second strategic consideration for voters is domestic : the election outcome – in terms of the list that places first in France – will inevitably be interpreted as a judgment on Macron's policies and an indication of Le Pen's chances to win the next presidential elections. This may lead voters to vote for *En Marche* or *Front National*.

For example, a voter who supports the left-wing *La France Insoumise*, can vote expressively in the hope that this party obtains a larger voice in European Parliament. However, if the voter chooses to act strategically, their choice will depend on whether their aim is to affect outcomes in Europe or France. Since it is not clear that delegates from *La France Insoumise* would join a Socialist coalition in the European Parliament, the voter might choose *Parti Socialiste*. They would only choose *En Marche* to make a symbolic strike against the *Front National* since Macron's party is not part of any important European coalition.

Empirical challenge

Returning to the choice between expressive and strategic voting more broadly, the fact that voters face different options is clear, yet measuring the extent to which they use them is more complicated. Previous studies have asked voters which candidate they voted for and which they preferred in order to count the number of voters who cast their ballot for a front-runner instead of their favorite. But the results may suffer from bias : people may not recall or they might overreport that their preference and vote were identical. To this point, research had not given solid results on the extent to which voters acted expressively or strategically.

In our paper titled "Expressive Voting and its Cost : Evidence from Runoffs with Two or Three Candidates", we take a new approach by comparing electoral outcomes in French parliamentary and local elections when two or three candidates are present. Constituencies with two or three qualified candidates differ in many respects, so simply comparing results between those constituencies might lead to wrong conclusions ; to isolate the causal impact of the presence of the third candidate, more developed statistical methods are required. We exploit the discontinuity generated by the qualification rule for the second round : candidates ranked first and second in the first round automatically qualify for the second round, while a third candidate qualifies only when selected by more than 12.5 percent of registered citizens. We compare results in constituencies in which the third candidate obtained

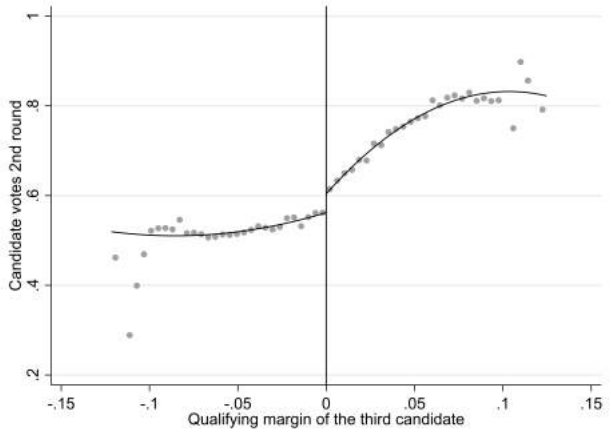
a vote share just above that threshold, and qualified for the second round, against ones where the third candidate obtained just below the threshold, and lost. As obtaining 12.4 instead of 12.6 percent is quasi-random, the only difference between these districts is the qualification of the third candidate for the second round. By comparing their results, we can thus measure the causal impact of this candidate's presence in the second round.

Specifically, the study examines how voters adjust to the presence of a third candidate : do they behave strategically and vote for the top-two candidates, or do voters with a preference for the third switch to voting for that one ?

Results

The study finds that the presence of a third candidate in the second round of French parliamentary and local elections has a number of effects.

Figure 1 – Impact on candidate votes



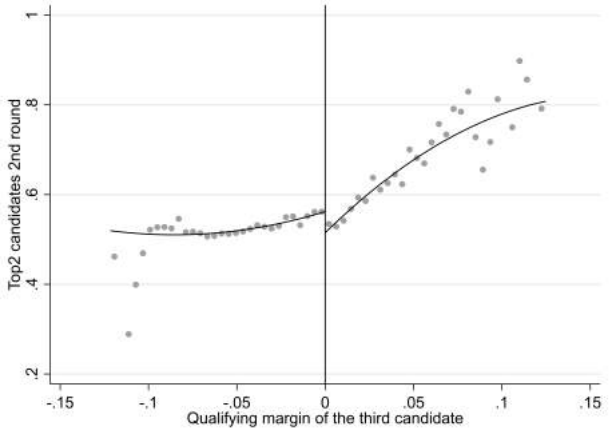
Notes : Dots represent the local averages of the outcome variable (y-axis). Averages are calculated within 0.4 percentage-point-wide bins of the variable on the x-axis : the qualifying margin of the third candidate, defined as the difference between this candidate's vote share (expressed as a fraction of the number of registered citizens) and the 12.5 percent threshold. The threshold at which the third candidate qualifies for the second round is represented at the zero mark on the horizontal axis. Continuous lines are a quadratic fit.

First, it increases voter turnout by 4.0 percentage points and reduces the share of blank and null votes by 3.7 percentage points. On whole, it increases the share of people casting a ballot for any of the candidates by 7.8 percentage points : the third candidate attracts many voters who would otherwise not have voted for the top two. Figure 1 represents this result visually. The horizontal axis shows the qualifying margin of the third candidate – in other words, the difference between that candidate's vote share (expressed as a fraction of the number of registered citizens) and the 12.5 percent threshold at which she qualifies for the second round, represented at the zero mark on the horizontal axis. Elections in which the third candidate failed to qualify are on the left of the threshold. The farther to the left a point is, the farther the third candidate was from receiving votes equivalent to 12.5 percent of registered voters. Elections in which the third candidate did qualify are on the right of the threshold. The vertical axis shows the share of people casting a ballot for any of the candidates. There is a sharp rise with the presence of the third candidate.

Second, the presence of a third candidate in the second round decreases the vote share of the top two candidates.

In figure 2 the vertical axis shows the proportion of the vote gained by the top two candidates combined as a fraction of registered citizens. That proportion drops visibly with the presence of a third – specifically, by an average of 6.9 percentage points. This reflects the fact that the third candidate also gets votes from voters who would otherwise have voted for the top two.

Figure 2 – Impact on votes going to the top two candidates



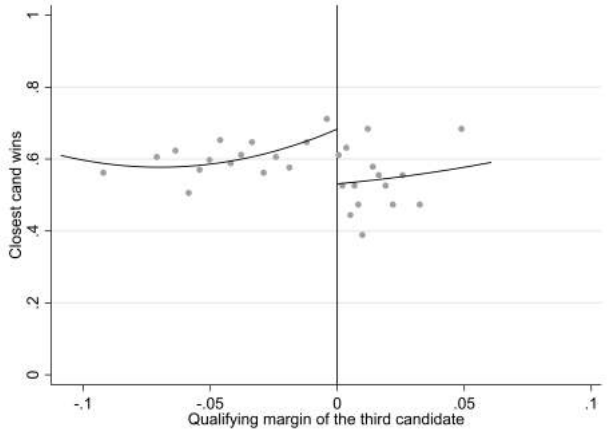
Notes : Same notes as in Figure 1.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the presence of the third candidate disproportionately takes votes away from the candidate ideologically closest to that candidate, and causes their defeat in 19.2 percent of the races. In figure 3, the vertical axis shows the likelihood of victory of the top-two candidate who is ideologically closest to the third-place contender. One can see that when the third candidate enters the race (at the zero mark on the horizontal axis) the likelihood of victory of the closest top two drops off sharply.

To put this in real-world terms, when the top two candidates are on the political left and right, a third candidate on the far-right mostly "steals" votes away from the right-wing contender. Similarly, when the top two candidates are on the right and far-right, a third candidate on the left mostly steals votes away from the right-wing contender. Supporters of the third candidate who vote expressively for her thus contribute to the victory of the candidate

they like the least and to the defeat of their second-best which a majority of voters would have preferred.

Figure 3 – Impact on the probability that the top-two candidate closest to the third wins



Notes : Dots represent the local averages of the probability that the candidate ideologically closest to the third wins in the second round. Averages are calculated within quantile-spaced bins of the running variable (x-axis). The running variable (the qualifying margin of the third-highest-ranking candidate in the first round) is measured as percentage points. Continuous lines are a quadratic fit.

Third-place candidates could prevent this undesirable outcome by dropping out of the race between the first and the second rounds. In cases where third candidates have the same political orientation as one of the top two candidates (for instance, when they are both on the left), the parties usually strike agreements and the third candidate drops out. On the other hand, in cases where third candidates have a different orientation than both top two candidates, as in the examples given above, they tend to take the decision on their own, independently from any party's instructions, and only drop out in rare circumstances. This indicates that, absent party-level agreements leading to their dropping out, third candidates often value the benefits associated with competing in the second round more than influencing its outcome.

Conclusion

Voters for third candidates may be supporters who abstain or vote blank or null when the third candidate is absent, or ones who vote for one of the top two candidates in that case. Either way, their behavior is difficult to rationalize within usual voting models that assume that voters are motivated solely by having a hand in who wins the election. The results of this study suggest that to fully explain voters' choice of candidate, as well as their decision whether to vote or abstain, one must take into account the expressive benefits of a vote, independent of the election outcome. For many voters, the expressive utility of voting for their favorite candidate outweighs the cost of helping their *least* favorite candidate win.

Anticipating voter behavior, third candidates could drop out of the race between the first and the second rounds to prevent the defeat of the ideologically closest top-two candidate. However, third candidates often value the benefits associated with competing in the second round more than influencing its outcome.

Regardless, the overall results of this study suggest that plurality rule often leads to suboptimal outcomes, and call into question its widespread use as a method to aggregate votes and reflect voter preferences.

What do the results mean for France's political parties? Since many voters fail to behave strategically, it is important for parties to coordinate and limit the number of candidates. This is in their interest and increases the likelihood of electing winners who truly represent the preferences of the population. Historically, parties of sister organizations on the left or on the right have often reached successful dropout agreements requiring the third candidate to drop out when she qualified for the second round. These agreements are much rarer when three candidates of different sides qualify.

Lately, there has been a diversification of the electoral offer, with the emergence of strong parties on the far-right and, more recently, in the center. This calls for an extension of party agreements beyond the traditional left-wing and right-wing alliances, between the first and second rounds of local and parliamentary elections. And it also calls for forces in each side (left, center, right, and far-right) to reach within-side agreements even before the first round to increase their chances to progress to the second round. Without such planning, mainstream parties on the left and right can no longer assume that one of their candidates will be present in the second round.

In the upcoming European elections, the proliferation of lists on the left and right means that none can credibly compete to obtain the largest vote share. This risks repeating the scenario of the 2017 presidential election where a failure to coordinate condemned these traditional parties

to play second role behind *En Marche* and *Front National*. The traditional right and left must work better at coordination if they are to stay relevant.

Reference study

This Note is based on the article : "Expressive Voting and its Cost : Evidence from Runoffs With Two or Three Candidates", by the authors Vincent Ponsand Clémence Tricaud, available at : https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/ecta15373_d5c01aaa-c934-4e1a-8a9a-517972fa4b15.pdf

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