

Political Sophistication and Third-Party Voting in Recent Presidential Elections

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Overview

- During the 1990s, minor-party candidates had an important impact on politics at the state and national levels.
- Possibly a reflection of further *dealignment* of the electorate—the breakdown of voters' traditional allegiance to the major parties.
- Raises questions: *who* votes for minor-party candidates, and *where* and *when*?

Sources of a Two-Party System

- Political scientists have long believed that plurality electoral systems, like those of the United States, encourage the development of two major parties (e.g. Henry Droop, Maurice Duverger).
- In the middle of the 20th century, Anthony Downs and William Riker (among others) tied Duverger's Law to rational choice models of politics.
- Rational choice theory: a citizen should cast ballots that *minimize the chances of his or her least preferred viable candidate from winning*—hence, we can view voting primarily as a defensive act.
- Assuming most voters behave this way—voting *strategically*—we expect a two-party system will emerge.

The Strategic Environment

Consider the 2000 presidential election. Assuming that there is a roughly unidimensional policy space, we can arrange the candidates (from ideological left to right) as below:

Nader Gore Bush Buchanan

For the voter who prefers Gore or Bush, the strategic choice is simple, and coincides with their sincere choice: vote for the preferred candidate.

The Minor-Party Supporter's Choice

Nader

Gore

Bush

Buchanan

However, the voter who prefers Nader or Buchanan—or some other minor-party candidate—has a decision to make:

- Vote for her sincere choice, and give up the opportunity to vote for a candidate who will hurt a major-party candidate's chances of winning.
- Vote strategically, and implicitly support a major-party candidate who she finds less appealing than her sincere choice.

When vote sincerely? When vote strategically?

Logically, we would expect voters to be more likely to vote strategically when their votes have a greater chance of affecting the outcome of the election.

But there are complicating factors:

- Does the voter have some overriding commitment to the minor party (or its candidate) that may preclude their casting a strategic vote?
- Does the voter correctly recognize when they may affect the outcome of the election?

The Electoral College and the Strategic Environment

An additional complicating factor in making this decision in American politics is the electoral college. While the chances of an individual vote determining the outcome of an election are usually quite slim, this probability differs by both state and year.

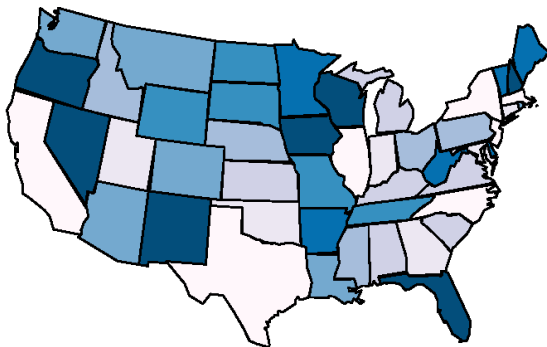
In 2000, the impact of an individual vote differed drastically between the states:

- In Florida, the most competitive state, a vote for Bush or Gore had a 1 in 268.5 chance of affecting the outcome of the election.
- At the other end of the spectrum, in California (the least competitive state, in terms of total votes) the chances were 1 in 646,887.

Another way to put it is that a voter in Florida had 3000 times as much impact on the outcome of the election in her state than a voter in California.

Marginality in the 2000 Election, By State

This map shows the level of competitiveness in each state in 2000, with the darker states having a greater degree of competition:



Who recognizes the strategic environment?

Given these differences in the strategic environment, both across states and across time, voters should be able to sometimes vote sincerely without cost (i.e. without helping a less preferred major-party candidate win), and sometimes vote strategically.

It stands to reason that those voters who are best able to understand, process, and use new political information would be the best equipped to deal with these differences.

Political scientists have referred to this capacity under a variety of labels, such as *political expertise* or *political sophistication*.

Measuring political expertise

It should be noted that while we typically have measured sophistication in terms of assessing individuals' rote knowledge of politics, these are separate and distinct concepts.

A number of viable approaches to measuring sophistication have been employed over the years. In the case of the American National Election Study series, the interviewer's assessment of the respondent's level of political knowledge is used fairly commonly and has been shown to do about as good a job as other measures derived from the NES.

Measuring third-party voting

A second measurement issue worth noting is that obtaining good data on voting for minor-party candidates from national surveys like the NES is something of a challenge, as researchers who have tried to study ethnic minorities using the traditional NES sample have already found.

Hence, we should be cautious in reading too much into these results, particularly in the 2000 election, where an unusually small NES sample corresponded with relatively small (albeit pivotally important) levels of voting for minor-party candidates when compared to the 1992 and 1996 elections.

Aggregate Results

Independent Variable	Coefficients (Standard Error)		
	1992	1996	2000
Marginality of election in state	0.101 (0.062)	0.175*** (0.041)	0.053** (0.018)
Partisanship of state electorate	0.390*** (0.063)	0.203*** (0.049)	0.038 (0.024)
Independence of state electorate	0.399** (0.119)	0.172† (0.101)	0.243*** (0.051)
Intercept	0.070† (0.040)	0.033 (0.033)	-0.046* (0.018)
Adjusted R^2	0.457	0.363	0.361
$F(3, 47)$	15.01***	10.49***	10.43***

- Coefficients are ordinary least squares linear regression estimates. $N = 51$.
- The dependent variable is the proportion of the vote received by third-party and independent candidates in the state or District of Columbia.
- *** indicates $p(t) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; † $p < .10$ (two-tailed test).

Individual-level models

While the aggregate evidence supports the existence of a relationship between electoral marginality and the level of minor-party voting in the states (at least in 1996 and 2000), it cannot illustrate the effect of sophistication on individual choices.

Thus, I estimated individual-level multinomial logistic regression models for each of the 1992, 1996, and 2000 elections from the NES. The respondent's three-way vote choice was used as the dependent variable (including Buchanan in 2000 was not feasible due to his general lack of support).

Variables in the individual-level models

Attitudes toward the most prominent minor-party candidate: feeling thermometer rating of Perot (1992, 1996) or Nader (2000).

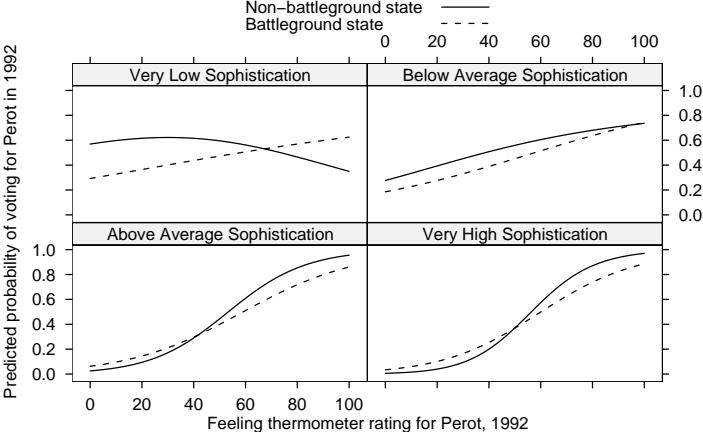
Electoral environment: dummy variable representing battleground states in that election.

Political sophistication: post-interview evaluation by interviewer.

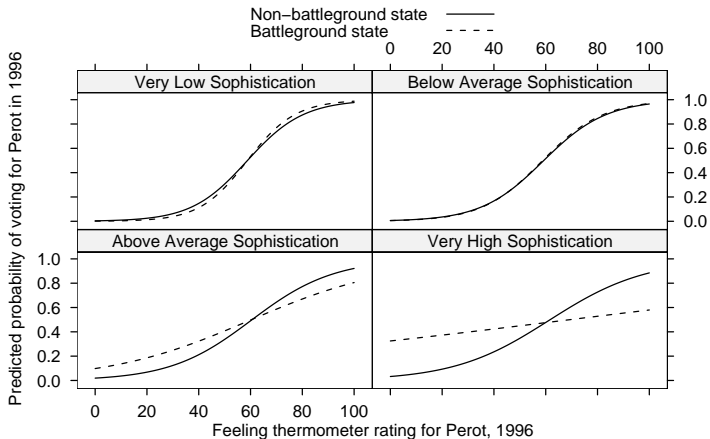
Issue importance scale: deficit (1996), environment (2000); no obvious issue connected to Perot appeared on 1992 NES.

Control variables: indicators of gender, marital status, age, education level, union membership, party identification, religiosity, and white southerner.

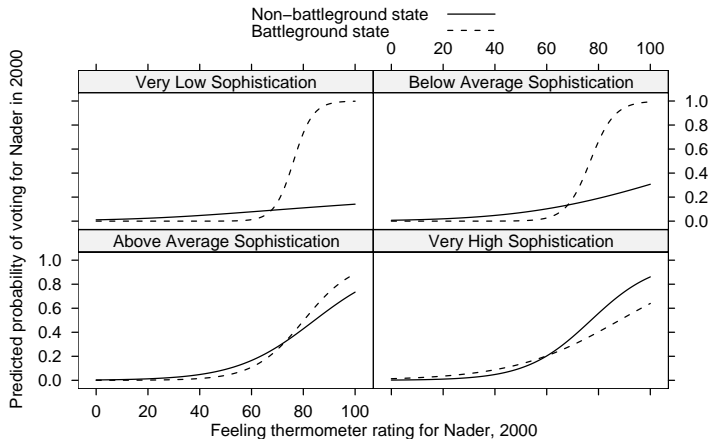
Effects Display: 1992



Effects Display: 1996



Effects Display: 2000



Conclusions

- Results suggest that the conditional strategic behavior theory has some merit.
- Found significant interaction between electoral environment, sophistication, and candidate attitudes in 1992 ($p < .05$, two-tailed), 2000 ($p < .10$, two-tailed).
- 1996 may be unusual: relatively popular incumbent possibly made the election *de facto* not competitive nationwide.

Future Directions

Likely future directions for this research:

- Use of survey-based experiments to determine effects of sophistication on minor-party support more directly.
- Consider the relationship between split-ticket voting and sophistication.
- See if these findings extrapolate to other types of strategic voting: mixed-PR electoral systems (Germany, Scottish/Welsh legislatures), threshold effects for minor parties in PR systems, strategic voting to influence coalition formation under PR.