Vote Choice Formation and Minimal Effects of TV Debates: Evidence from 61 Elections in Nine OECD Countries joint with Caroline Le Pennec

Vincent Pons

Abstract

We use 201,000 observations from repeated survey data in 61 elections in nine OECD countries since 1952 to study the formation of vote choices and policy preferences in the electoral season and assess how TV debates contribute to this process. We find that the share of voters who state a pre-election vote intention corresponding to their final vote choice increases by 15 percentage points in the two months preceding the election. Changes in individual vote choices mostly result from changes in beliefs about competing candidates and in issue salience, and they generate aggregate shifts in predicted vote shares. Policy preferences, on the other hand, remain remarkably stable over time. We use an event study to estimate the impact of TV debates, and we find that they affect significantly neither individual vote choice and policy preference formation nor aggregate vote shares. This suggests that information continuously received by voters exerts more influence on their behavior than TV debates do.