



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

European Economic Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/euroecorev

Identifying voter preferences: The trade-off between honesty and competence

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 November 2016

Accepted 8 March 2018

Available online 22 March 2018

JEL classification:

C72

C91

D72

Keywords:

Voting preferences

Competence

Honesty

Election

ABSTRACT

We set up two experiments to measure how voters trade off the competence and honesty of candidates in elections. We measure the competence and honesty of candidates by asking them to work on a real effort task and decide whether to report truthfully or not the value of their work. In the first stage, the earnings are the result of the competence and honesty of one randomly selected participant. In the second stage, subjects can select who will determine their earnings based on the first stage's competence and honesty of the alternative candidates. We find that most voters tend to have a bias towards caring about honesty even when this results in lower payoffs.

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1. Introduction

We present an experimental study on the preferences of voters over candidates in public elections. We are interested in two key characteristics that define the quality of a candidate: competence and honesty. Competence refers to the ability of a potential public official to properly perform his/her job, identifying and employing the appropriate policies that enable her to get the job done. Honesty refers to the general attitude of the potential public official to fulfil the trust that the voters have placed on him or her; it usually implies a general aversion towards dishonest practices such as bribery, kickbacks, and public embezzlement which would benefit the public official to the detriment of the public; it can be understood within a fiduciary model of duty in politics according to which the public official behaves honestly in order to fulfil the trust of those who voted for him or her (Besley, 2005).¹

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¹ There are indubitably other aspects that may affect the quality of a public official, although, as Besley (2005, p. 47) pointed out, “their merits are more difficult to assess”. Some of the possible extensions will be noted in Section 10. In a previous study by Caselli and Morelli (2004), the authors used the same two characteristics to define the quality of a public official. Besley (2005) also used the term honesty to identify, along with competence, the principal dimensions of the quality of politician, and he interpreted it as “a duty of rulers to uphold the public trust” (Besley, 2005: pp. 48–49). From a more general perspective, competence and honesty can also be associated to the two universal dimensions of human social cognition: competence or efficiency, on the one side, and perceived warmth or trustworthiness, on the other side (in social psychology, see, e.g., Fiske et al., 2007; Fiske et al., 2002; in economics, see Butler and Miller, 2014).

One can find many real-world examples which could be used to support either the primacy of honesty or that of competence for voting behavior. One example is the success of the anti-establishment movement of the comedian Beppe Grillo at the general and local elections in Italy over the last years. Many voters might have voted for Grillo's party because of its choice to propose ordinary voters as candidates, with no experience on politics and public offices, but, as Grillo emphasized during his 2013 political campaign, much more honest than conventional politicians (Bartlett, 2013). Another comedian with limited political experience, Jimmy Morales, won the 2015 presidential elections in Guatemala under the slogan "neither corrupt nor a thief". A pure dislike of voters for dishonest candidates (rather than a simple evaluation of the monetary costs and benefits associated to the selection of a dishonest public official) may also explain why, in certain cases, candidates affected by corruption scandals fail to be elected or experience a significant drop in voters' support. For instance, in the elections of the US House of Representatives Peters and Welch (1980) and Welch and Hibbing (1997) found that incumbent candidates touched by corruption allegations lost more often their seats and received about 10% less than incumbent candidates with no corruption accusations. The results of the 2016 presidential elections in US are consistent with the claim that perceived honesty is important for voters. Donald Trump won the electoral college against most predictions. Looking at the voters' pre-election evaluations of the candidates on key characteristics, we discover that most voters generally perceived Trump as more honest and trustworthy but less competent than Clinton. The difference in perceived honesty between the two candidates was particularly remarkable in those states considered, before the elections, most likely to be contested and which Trump managed to flip to the Republican side.² We should stress that, even if Clinton lost the overall elections, she won the nationwide popular vote. This suggests that, if indeed people cared more about honesty than competence, their preference was however not lexicographic.

Other real world examples can be found however in support of the opposite conjecture that voters are motivated by their final expected payoffs or care more about the competence of candidates rather than the honesty. For instance, many of the parliamentarians who were involved in the 2009 UK parliamentary expenses scandal held their seats in the 2010 general elections and experienced only a marginal drop in voters' support (about 1.5% on average; Eggers and Fischer, 2011). In Brazil, the former Brazilian President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva won the 2006 general elections regardless of the corruption scandals that plagued his previous administration and after a mandate characterized by steady economic growth and decrease in poverty for Brazil (Winters and Weitz-Shapiro, 2013).

While all these examples are suggestive, they do not tell much about the real underlying preferences of voters over honesty and competence. Many other factors may have played a role in those voting decisions. In addition, it is not possible to discern how much of the voters' behavior was indeed motivated by intrinsic rather than simple cost-benefit considerations. Research is thus needed to uncover the voters' preferences over honesty and competence, and isolate them from other influences.

The question that we ask in this paper is whether people have an intrinsic preference over one of these two characteristics that define the quality of a public official. From a traditional economic point of view, this should not be the case. A rational and purely self-interested voter should always prefer the candidate that ensures the highest expected return for the elector irrespectively of whether this is because the selected candidate is more honest or more competent. The underlying idea – well captured by Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign strategist James Carville in his slogan "[it's] the economy, stupid" – is that people care only about their own financial position and want candidates who are able to improve it, irrespectively of everything else. The results of this study will tell us whether this is true or not based on the preferences of the voters over the characteristics of the candidates. They will also inform us whether people's voting preferences can be responsible of why democracies may at times suffer from endemic dishonesty at the public level. Indeed, if voters display a rational and profit-maximizing voting behavior or a preference for competence over honesty, they may directly select dishonest officials into public office. On the contrary, if voters have an intrinsic preference for honest candidates, the existence of dishonesty at the public level can be better explained by other things such as country-level institutional and economic factors or a lack of information about the candidates.

Why may people have an intrinsic preference for honest candidates? Voters may be reluctant to support a dishonest candidate if, for instance, they display what has been referred as "betrayal aversion", that is a general dislike to "being betrayed beyond the mere payoff consequences" (Bohnet et al., 2008, p. 295), or if they care more about the process by which the payoffs are generated rather than the final payoffs (see, e.g., Rabin, 1993). Similarly, voters may be sensitive to a social norm that prescribes to punish a candidate who proves to be dishonest. As a result, voters may select a candidate who is more reliable but overall less worthwhile than the contender in terms of what they can get in return in terms of monetary payoffs.

The opposite, also plausible, possibility is that voters may support the more competent candidate, quite independently of the honesty of the alternative candidates and the expected returns associated to each of them. This may be the case if, for instance, voters think that the misuse of public power for personal benefit at the public level is a fact of life and, hence,

² In particular, Trump was seen as less qualified, with a worse temperament to serve as president, less able to understand people's needs and problems, and less able to unite the country than Clinton. See, e.g., the polls from Economist/YouGov (2016, November 4–6), Fox News (2016, November 3–6); ABC News/Washington post (2016, November 7); CBS News/NY Times (2016, October 28 – November 1); McClatchy/Marist (2016, November 1–3); CNN (2016, October 20–23). We looked at the most recent polls released in the battleground states where the information about perceived honesty/trustworthiness was available. To identify the battleground states, we used the list provided by Politico at <http://www.politico.com/2016-election/swing-states> (accessed 15 November 2016).

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