

Is what you want what you see? Partisan and ideological bias in perceptions of parties' electoral chances

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how accurately citizens perceive parties' electoral chances. It is often assumed, for example in studies of strategic voting, that citizens' perceptions of parties' electoral chances are correct on average. Previous research has however shown that citizens are affected by wishful thinking. They tend to overestimate the chances of their preferred party. Most of the studies on this topic have focused on majoritarian electoral systems. This paper extends this line of research by considering the accuracy of citizens' perceptions in a proportional electoral system. It also considers two different sources of bias: partisan and ideological preferences. The analysis is based on a pre-electoral internet survey conducted at the occasion of the regional parliamentary election in the canton of Zurich, Switzerland, in April 2011. The results show that both sources of bias influence the quality of citizens' perceptions. Political sophistication increases the accuracy of perceptions, but biases can be observed at all levels of political expertise.

Keywords

Party chances; Voter perceptions; Wishful thinking; Political sophistication; Switzerland

1. Introduction

Are citizens able to estimate which parties will be successful or not in an election? Or are their expectations about parties' electoral success systematically biased by their own partisan leanings? These are the central questions that this paper addresses. How citizens perceive parties' chances of success is an important topic, as these expectations may influence the voting decision process. The decision which party to support depends on both citizens' preferences and the parties' perceived viability. Many studies have shown that citizens can behave in a strategic way (e.g., Alvarez and Nagler 2000; Cox 1997). When their preferred party's chances of success are small, some citizens will prefer casting a vote for a party with better electoral prospects. Such strategic behaviour is demanding. It not only requires that citizens are aware of party positions, but also that they can estimate parties' viability. If voters' expectations about party chances are biased, they will not recognize correctly the incentives for strategic behaviour. In the literature on strategic voting, citizens' perceptions of parties' electoral chances are assumed to be correct on average (Cox 1997). Yet, several studies have shown that this assumption may not be justified. Blais and his co-authors have shown that the accuracy of voters' perceptions is far from being perfect (Blais and Bodet 2006; Blais et al. 2008; Blais and Turgeon 2004). For instance, party identifiers are subject to a "wishful thinking" effect and tend to view more positively the chances of success of their preferred party (Blais and Bodet 2006; Levine 2007; Meffert et al. 2011). Citizens with a low level of political sophistication are also more likely to have inaccurate perceptions (Blais and Turgeon 2004).

These previous studies point to important factors that may influence the accuracy of citizens' perceptions. This paper extends on this research in several ways. While previous research has focused almost exclusively on majoritarian electoral systems, this paper looks at citizens' perceptions in a proportional (PR) electoral system. Considering the case of PR elections is important as several recent publications have highlighted various forms of strategic voting in such electoral systems (Abramson et al. 2010; Kedar 2005). The accuracy with which citizens estimate parties' electoral chances is thus also an issue in PR elections. A few studies have investigated the accuracy of voters' expectations in such contexts (Levine 2007; Meffert et al. 2011). Yet, these studies have considered national level expectations. In contrast, this paper focuses on district level viability, which corresponds more closely to the type of expectations on which theories of strategic voting rest. Furthermore, the case of PR elections raises new questions about the sources of wishful thinking effects. They typically involve a larger

number of competing parties than elections in single-member districts (SMD). Voters are likely to face several parties with a similar ideological profile. Ideological closeness might represent an additional source for a wishful thinking effect, with citizens generally overestimating the electoral chances of parties that are close to their own ideological position. Finally, this paper also clarifies some conceptual issues in the definition of accuracy and bias in voters' expectations. It distinguishes between two ways in which partisan preferences might affect the relation between objective and perceived party chances.

This paper analyses how party preference and ideological orientation bias citizens' perceptions in the case of the April 2011 regional election in the canton of Zurich, Switzerland. Data come from a pre-electoral internet survey conducted in the framework of the project *Making Electoral Democracy Work* (Blais 2010). The analysis focuses on the perceived chances that various parties win at least one seat in a respondent's electoral district. I will consider how these expectations are influenced by parties' objective chances, their past results, as well as by citizens' party identification, ideological orientation, and level of political sophistication. The remaining of this paper is structured as follows: section two discusses in more detail the concept of voters' expectations and their accuracy. Section three presents the voters' and parties' characteristics likely to affect citizens' perceptions and it introduces the hypotheses of this research. The next two sections provide information on the election studied and on the data on which the empirical analysis is based. Section six presents the empirical results. The conclusion discusses the implications of these findings for the analysis of strategic voting behaviour.

2. What are accurate perceptions and why are they important?

The assumption that citizens' perceptions of parties' electoral chances are correct on average is central in theories of strategic voting (Cox 1997). Strategic voting means that citizens do not support the party or candidate they prefer when its chances of being successful are weak. Instead, they support a party they like less, but which is credited with better chances. This behaviour is driven by the aim of avoiding wasting one's vote on a chanceless party. A central condition for this model is that "voter beliefs about which candidates are stronger and weaker will be generally correct" (Cox 1997: 72).

Most studies of strategic voting have focused on majoritarian electoral systems. In single-member plurality elections, it is generally accepted that only two parties or candidates have

real chances of being elected. This corresponds to the “M+1 rule”, which states that a maximum of M+1 candidates can be viable in a district of magnitude M (Cox 1997: 99). In a single-member plurality election, this means that only two candidates have real chances of being elected. Accordingly, the relevant voters’ perceptions are about identifying which candidates are the top two contenders in their electoral district.

Voters in PR systems may also face incentives to depart from their preferred party (Abramson et al. 2010; Lago 2008; Meffert and Gschwend 2011). While the number of viable contenders is likely to be higher, there are also usually more parties in competition. Minimum thresholds of votes required for entering into Parliament and districts of relatively small magnitude imply that many small parties may not be viable – at least not in all districts. Voters in PR elections may thus face the same type of strategic incentives as voters in single-member plurality elections. Hence, the assumption that citizens have correct perceptions of parties’ electoral chances is also important in PR elections. More precisely, citizens should be able to recognize which parties in their electoral district are viable and which ones are not. This study will thus focus on the perceived chances that a party wins *at least one seat* in a voter’s electoral district. This is the minimal criteria for distinguishing successful parties from weaker competitors. It represents only a limited aspect of parties’ chances of success, but it is the crucial one from the point of view of traditional strategic voting.¹

Having identified the relevant type of voters’ expectations, we can now discuss how they can be modelled and how the impact of potential sources of bias can be identified. Two approaches have been used in the literature: *expectations models* and *accuracy models*. They differ in how the dependent variable is constructed. In the first approach, perceived chances for a given party are the dependent variable. These models allow estimating which factors lead citizens to credit a given party with a higher or lower probability of being successful (e.g., Blais and Bodet 2006; Meffert et al. 2011). They have typically been used to estimate the wishful thinking effect associated with partisan preferences. With accuracy models, by contrast, citizens’ perceptions are compared to some objective baseline in order to code them as more or less accurate (e.g., Blais and Turgeon 2004; Levine 2007; Meffert et al. 2011). The

¹ There are other forms of strategic behaviour in PR electoral systems, which also require accurate perceptions of parties’ chances. For instance, citizens may not only care whether a given party is likely to win *at least one seat*, but also how big the chances are that it wins *one seat more or less*. Yet, this paper will concentrate on the type of expectations on which the more “traditional” form of strategic voting is based.

dependent variable is thus not a voter's expectation about the result of a party, but the accuracy of this expectation.

As the central objective of this study is to investigate which characteristics of voters increase or decrease the accuracy of citizens' perceptions, accuracy models seem to be the most intuitive approach. However, determining when voters' perceptions are accurate or not is not always straightforward. Voters' predictions are typically assessed by asking them to rate the electoral chances of various parties. This is the approach used in the survey on which this study relies. It includes a battery of questions asking respondents to evaluate the chances that a number of parties will win "at least one seat" in their electoral district. These perceptions are measured using an eleven-point scale ranging from "no chances at all" to "a certain winner". The relevant outcome, in contrast, is dichotomous: a party either won one or more seats, or it did not. This difference in the type of variables to be compared creates some difficulties for constructing an accuracy variable. Following this approach, Blais and Turgeon (2004) look at the perceived chances of the three main parties in Canadian elections. According to the "M+1 rule" (Cox 1997), two of them can be considered to be viable. They deem voters to be accurate when they rate as lowest the chances of the party that end up third in the race. This means that expectations are dichotomized into accurate and inaccurate perceptions. It is also possible to distinguish between different degrees of accuracy, as in the study of Lago et al. (2015). They construct a scale of accuracy, based on the perceived electoral chances. For parties that ended up winning one or more seat, voters are deemed most accurate if they considered that party to be a certain winner, and they are least accurate if the expected this party to be a certain loser. For losing parties, the scale is reversed. This solution makes more fine-grained distinctions between degrees of accuracy. However, both this approach and that of Blais and Turgeon (2004) make an assumption which may be problematic: Voters are (most) accurate only if they predict the correct outcome. Yet, this outcome may be much easier to predict for some parties than for others. A party may receive only a handful of votes and be very far from the threshold needed to win a seat in a given district. In that case, it seems fair to consider that accurate voters would credit that party with the lowest possible chances. Other parties may win several seats in one district and accurate voters would have considered them to be certain winners. But many parties fall between these two extremes. A party may win a single seat, by a small margin. A measure of accuracy should ideally reflect these differences. The most accurate prediction may be close to 0 or 1 for some parties, but it may correspond to an intermediate value for others. Given the variation in the "true" party

chances, constructing a measure of accuracy implies arbitrary decisions. For instance, for which electoral results should citizens deem a party to be a certain winner? For all parties that have a vote share higher than 1.5 times the required threshold to win one seat, or 2 times higher, or more?

One solution to this problem is to compare voters' expectations about parties' shares of votes (or seats) to the results predicted by campaign polls, rather than to the true electoral outcomes. This is for instance the strategy followed by Levine (2007) and Meffert et al. (2011). While this allows for a more robust measure of accuracy, it is not a perfect solution. It can only be applied in few cases, as voters' expectations about parties' share of votes or seats are rarely available in survey data. Furthermore, polls often present only election-wide results, which are not necessarily relevant to evaluate parties' chances at the district level, which is the type of expectations on which this study focuses. For all of these reasons, this paper's empirical analysis will rely on an expectation model. In that framework, accuracy cannot be modelled directly. Yet, it is possible to relate voters' expectations to objective indicators of party strength. As explained in more detailed below, I include several measures of party strength, based on the vote shares in the current and previous elections, as well as on whether a party already holds one or several seats in a respondent's district. Voters' expectations will be deemed to be more accurate *if they stand in a stronger relation* with these objective measures of party strength.

3. Sensitivity and bias in the perception of parties' electoral chances

To investigate the impact of partisan and ideological preferences on the perceived party chances, I rely on an expectation model, as defined in the previous section. The structure of this model is summarized in Figure 1. Central in this approach is the relation between objective indicators of parties' chances and citizens' perceptions of these chances, which is denoted by E1 (for Effect 1) in the figure. As already mentioned, different indicators of objective party chances will be included. The general claim is that perceptions are more accurate when the effect of objective on perceived chances is stronger.

[Figure 1]

Perceived chances are also likely to be influenced by citizens' personal preferences. Two such effects can be distinguished. First, some voters' characteristics can weaken or strengthen the

relation between objective and perceived chances (E2). In other words, voters' expectations can be *more or less sensitive to a variation in party strength*. Second, voters' characteristics may lead to a *bias* by exerting a direct positive or negative effect on the perceived electoral chances, compared to what would be expected based on the party's strength (E3).

Following the literature on voters' expectations and wishful thinking effects, we can relate these three types of effects to several characteristics of both voters and parties. Regarding first the objective party chances, a central factor is a measure of parties' *effective electoral strength* – that is, how well the party did in the corresponding election. Of course, these results are not known at the moment in which citizens were asked to assess parties' chances. But the effective electoral strength corresponds to what would be perfectly accurate perceptions. It depends on the party's vote share and on the effective threshold (Lijphart 1994) in the corresponding district, and I model this relation as an S-shaped function (see the operationalization section for more details). Several studies have also shown that previous electoral results represent an important source of information for assessing parties' current chances (Blais and Bodet 2006; Lago 2008). Citizens should evaluate more positively the chances of parties that were successful in the previous elections. I include two indicators of parties' past results: the electoral strength in the previous election in a respondent's district, and a dummy for parties that already won at least one seat in the previous election (again, in a respondent's district).

Several scholars have also suggested that poll results represent an important source of information for voters (Blais and Bodet 2006; Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2002; Levine 2007; Meffert and Gschwend 2011; Meffert et al. 2011). In the electoral context on which this study is based, however, polls are not likely to have been of much influence. Polls are rarely conducted at the regional level in Switzerland – and those which are virtually never break down the results at the electoral district level.

At the individual-level, two types of political preferences will be considered: party identification and ideological closeness. Various studies have shown that expectations about election outcomes are biased by voters' partisan preferences (Babad 1997; Babad and Yacobos 1993; Blais and Bodet 2006; Blais and Turgeon 2004; Levine 2007; Meffert and Gschwend 2011; Meffert et al. 2011; Uhlener and Grofman 1986). This wishful thinking effect, which corresponds to the relation E3 in Figure 1, has been demonstrated with a variety

of measures of party preference, such as party identification (Blais and Bodet 2006), ranking of parties in terms of personal preferences (Meffert and Gschwend 2011), or voting intention (Babad and Yacobos 1993). In all of these studies, individual preferences bias the perceived chances of one party (or candidate). The wishful thinking effect corresponds then to a dichotomous distinction between a voter's preferred party and all its opponents. To capture this effect, the empirical models will include a party identification dummy. Another potential source of bias will also be considered: ideological preferences. The underlying rationale is that citizens may not only be biased in favour of a single preferred party, but that they may also display a more general tendency to overestimate the chances of parties that are close to their own ideological views. A citizen with a right-wing ideological position, for instance, may estimate more generously the chances of success of right-wing parties and rate as lower the chances of left-wing parties. To capture such an effect, this study will include the voter-party ideological distance as one additional source of wishful thinking.

In addition to introducing a bias in voters' perceptions, party identification and party closeness could also reduce accuracy. That is, they could weaken the relation between objective and perceived chances (effect E2 in Figure 1), as suggested by Blais and Bodet (2006). Finally, it is also important to account for citizens' level of political expertise. The effects presented in Figure 1 could be further moderated by citizens' degree of political sophistication. It is often expected that political experts perceive parties' chances more accurately than political novices do (Blais and Turgeon 2004). Citizens with a high level of political sophistication should pay more attention to political news during the campaign (Price and Zaller 1993; Zaller 1992). They should have more information about the parties in competition, in terms of both policy positions and electoral chances. For instance, they are more likely to be aware of parties' past electoral results (Blais and Bodet 2006). This means that the relation between objective and perceived chances (E1) should be stronger among citizens with a high degree of political sophistication.

I will also test whether political sophistication moderates the wishful thinking effect, that is, the impact of partisan (or ideological) preferences on perceived chances (E3). Results from previous research are not consistent on that point. Some studies concluded that political experts are less strongly influenced by potential sources of bias (Babad 1997; Levine 2007). Others, like Blais and Turgeon (2004), find that politically sophisticated respondents are more likely to display a wishful thinking effect.

4. Electoral context and data

The following analyses will test these hypotheses by relying on data from a survey conducted at the occasion of a regional election in Switzerland. On 3 April 2011, citizens in the canton of Zurich were called at the polls for the election of the regional parliament and government. At this occasion, a two-wave internet panel survey was conducted as part of the research project Making Electoral Democracy Work (Blais 2010). Respondents were interviewed in the last two weeks before the election and again in the week following the election. The data used in this paper come from the pre-electoral wave only, which was completed by 1191 respondents.² The survey was conducted online by Harris International, relying on a panel of respondents from the Swiss polling firm Link. The sampling was based on a stratified, quota-based approach. Quotas were set by controlling for age, gender and education status. The participation rate in the pre-electoral wave was 36%.

This paper focuses on citizens' perceptions of parties' chances of success in the parliamentary election, at the electoral district level. The election is based on an open-list "bi-proportional" system, with electoral districts of varying magnitudes. The 180 seats of the regional parliament are contested in 18 districts, varying in magnitude from 4 to 17. The party system is relatively fragmented, with 13 parties in competition (10 of which succeeded in entering parliament). Table 1 presents summary information on the parties in competition.

[Table 1]

The "bi-proportional" electoral system used in Zurich was designed by the mathematician Friedrich Pukelsheim and is often referred to as the "double Pukelsheim system" (Pukelsheim and Schuhmacher 2004). While citizens cast their votes in the same way as in open-list PR elections, this electoral system differs in the way in which votes are translated into seats. Although the territory is divided into 18 electoral districts, parties' shares of seats are determined using the overall results at the canton level. That is, parties' seats shares are computed as if citizens had been voting in a single constituency. Then, these seats are distributed across electoral districts proportionally to parties' shares of votes in each district. The system also involves a minimum threshold: A party needs to reach 5% of votes *in at least one constituency* in order to be represented in Parliament. The system is qualified as "bi-

² Respondents who started but did not complete the survey are excluded, as well as respondents who were disqualified on the basis of quality measures, seeking to identify those respondents who appear unengaged, for example by giving illogical responses or by completing the survey too quickly.

proportional” as parties’ shares of seats are first distributed proportionally to their overall share of votes, and as these seats are then distributed proportionally to parties’ strength in the various districts. This system was designed to advantage small parties with votes scattered across many electoral districts. With the old electoral system (a traditional open-list PR system), parties which received only a small percentage of votes in many districts were only able to win seats in large districts – if at all. With the new system, all votes count towards determining their share of seats – even the votes in districts in which they are not strong enough to be viable.

Compared to a traditional PR system, the electoral system used in this election makes it more difficult for voters to estimate parties’ electoral chances. It also implies that explaining the accuracy of citizens’ perceptions might be more challenging. More precisely, it means that it is more difficult to determine which share of votes a party should reach in order to secure a seat in a given district. Yet, there are also reasons to think that the implications of this bi-proportional system for the present study are rather limited. The system is relatively new. The 2011 election was only the second one based on this new system, following its introduction in 2007. In the survey used for this study, only twelve per cent of respondents said they had heard about the introduction of the “double Pukelsheim system”. Less than 10 per cent of respondents had heard about the new system *and knew* it benefited small parties. Thus, many voters seem to be unaware about this new electoral system and might evaluate party chances as in a traditional PR system (which was used before for that election and is still used in federal elections). As a consequence, the threshold needed to win a seat in a given district will be computed as if a standard PR system was used.

5. Model and operationalization

This study’s dependent variable is a measure of parties’ expected chances in a respondent’s electoral district. For each party, respondents were invited to evaluate the chances that it “wins at least one seat” in their district, using an eleven-point scale ranging from 0 (“no chance at all”) to 10 (“certain to win”), recoded here in the 0-1 range. This question was asked for all 13 parties in competition (as listed in Table 1).³ As several measures of estimated chances are available for each respondent, the observations are not individuals, but measures of perceived electoral chances for single parties. The independent variables are measured at different levels. Citizens’ party identification and their ideological distance from a given party

³ Only 12 of these are considered for the analyses. The European Reform Party, which competed in a single district and received only a handful of votes (i.e., less than 0.1 per cent), is excluded.

are characteristics of respondent-by-party combinations. The degree of political sophistication is an individual-level characteristic. Incumbency and (past or current) party strength, in contrast, are characteristics of a party in a given district. Yet, the structure of the data is not strictly hierarchical but corresponds to a cross-classified model (Gelman and Hill 2007). There are multiple observations for each respondents, and each measurement belongs to a given party-district combination. But respondents are not nested within party-districts. The corresponding statistical model can be represented through the following system of equations:

$$chance_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}soph_i + \beta_{2j}pid_{ij} + \beta_{3j}lrd_{ij} + u_i + v_j + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}strength_j + \gamma_{02}strength\ 2007_j + \gamma_{03}incumbent_j + \delta_{0j} \quad (2)$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}strength_j + \gamma_{22}strength\ 2007_j + \gamma_{23}incumbent_j + \delta_{2j} \quad (3)$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \gamma_{30} + \gamma_{31}strength_j + \gamma_{32}strength\ 2007_j + \gamma_{33}incumbent_j + \delta_{3j} \quad (4)$$

$Chance_{ij}$ is the perceived electoral chance of party j in respondent's i electoral district and it can range from 0 to 1.⁴ The subscript j denotes “party–district combinations”, rather than individual parties. Pid_{ij} is a dummy variable that indicates whether a respondent identifies with the corresponding party. Lrd_{ij} is the left-right distance between voter i and party j . Citizens' ideological orientation were measured by inviting them to indicate their position on an eleven-point left-right scale, ranging from “far left” to “far right”. The same question is used to determine the positions of parties, computing it as the average position of the respondents who like this party most. For the purpose of this study, left-right positions were coded in the 0–1 range, and ideological distances can thus also range from 0 to 1. The variable is further centred.

$Soph_i$ indicates voter i 's level of political sophistication. This measure is based on a battery of knowledge questions. Such items have been shown to be the best single indicators of political sophistication (Fiske, Lau, and Smith 1990; Luskin 1987; Price and Zaller 1993).

Respondents were asked to match photographs of candidates in the election of the regional executive with their corresponding party. Respondents were presented with eight photographs and were told that four of them were candidates, one each from the four major Swiss parties (SVP, SPS, FDP, and CVP). They were asked to identify the candidate from each party.

Counting the number of correct answers results in a five-point scale, coded from 0 (no correct answer) to 4 (four correct answers), which is further centred.

⁴ Descriptive statistics for all variables included in the model are presented in the appendix (Table 3).

Several parameters of the individual-level model are expected to be affected by party characteristics: party strength in the previous and current election, as well as incumbency. The latter variable is a dummy identifying the parties which, in 2007, won at least one seat in the respondent's electoral district. A party's strength in the current election is a function of the party's vote share and of the effective electoral threshold:⁵

$$strength = \frac{e^{20(votes-threshold)}}{1 + e^{20(votes-threshold)}}$$

This is an S-shaped function with an inflection point set at the value of the electoral threshold in the corresponding district. Party strength in the previous election (in 2007) is defined in the same way.⁶ Both of these variables are centred at their mean. Party strength and incumbency are expected to influence the constant of the individual-level model (equation 2): Parties which are more successful should be credited with higher chances. In addition these party characteristics can influence the slope of the effects of party identification and left-right distance (equations 3 and 4). In that way, we can test if voters' expectations are more or less sensitive to party strength, depending on their identification with and ideological closeness to the party being evaluated.

Note that the system of equations presented above does not include interaction terms between sophistication and party or voter characteristics. Including these would lead to a complex set of interaction terms, including three-way cross-level interactions. As a simplification, the expected moderating effects of political sophistication will be evaluated by estimating this model separately for citizens with a high and a low level of political sophistication.

6. Results

The estimated parameters of this regression model can be found in Table 2. The presence of several interaction terms calls for some caution in the interpretation. The variables' main effects indicate their impact on the perceived chances of citizens with an average degree of political sophistication, who do not identify with the corresponding party, who share the same position on the left-right scale, and for parties with an average strength (in both the current and previous elections) and which did not win any seat in that district four years before. For that very specific type of voters and parties, all three indicators of parties' objective chances have the expected positive effect: parties with better electoral results in that election or in the

⁵ The effective threshold (Lijphart 1994) is equal to 75 divided by M+1 (where M represents the district magnitude).

⁶ Two parties (the Pirate Party and the Conservative Democratic Party) were competing for the first time in the 2011 election. In that case, the 2007 vote share and the incumbency variable were set to 0.

previous ones, and those which previously did succeed in winning one or more seats are credited with better electoral chances. Yet, the effects of these party characteristics are conditional on voters' party identification and on their degree of ideological closeness to the evaluated party. As a consequence, presenting the results in graphical form will allow for a better understanding of the factors that impact on voters' perceptions.

[Table 2]

Figure 2 shows predicted values of the perceived chances as a function of party strength, for different types of parties and respondents. The two lines on the left-hand side of the graph correspond to non-incumbent parties, while the lines on the right are for parties which already won seats in the previous election. Furthermore, the lower lines (blue and purple) correspond to citizens who do not identify with this party, while the upper lines (red and green) are for citizens who feel close to the corresponding party. For each of these four types of voters-parties, the predicted perceived chances are computed over a range of values of party strength. To that end, I have set the same values for party strength in the current and previous elections. For non-incumbent parties, strength ranges from -1 standard deviation to 0, while it ranges from 0 to +1 standard deviation for incumbent parties.⁷

[Figure 2]

For both non-incumbent and incumbent parties, perceived chances are higher when the respondent identifies with the corresponding party. Furthermore, the relation between party strength and perceived chances is weaker (that is, the line is flatter) for identifiers' preferred party than for other parties. This reveals a double effect of party identification. First, it leads to a wishful thinking effect: the chances of the preferred party are perceived to be higher than what would be expected based on its electoral strength. Second, identifying with a party also means that the preferred party's perceived chances are less sensitive to the party's electoral strength. Figure 2 also allows evaluating the impact of incumbency. For that, we can focus on the perceived chances of parties which take a value of 0 on the electoral strength variable. These are parties with a vote share equal to the effective threshold. At this point, the gap between the red and green lines indicates the incumbency effect among party identifiers. The vertical distance between the blue and purple lines, by contrast, indicates the corresponding

⁷ All of these predicted values were computed for respondents with an average degree of political sophistication, and for an average left-right distance to the corresponding party.

effect for citizens who do not identify with this party. Incumbent parties are perceived to have higher chances than non-incumbents. But this effect is larger for identifiers' preferred party. Party identifiers are generally more confident about the chances of "their" party, and this difference is particularly strong when the party already has one or more representatives in a voter's district. This offers a more nuanced picture of how party identification influences the relation between objective and perceived chances. When evaluating the chances of their preferred party, identifiers attach less importance to (past or expected) vote shares, but they give more weight to incumbency.

Ideological closeness is the second individual-level characteristic which is expected to influence the accuracy of citizens' perceptions. Figure 3 presents the corresponding findings, and it is structured in a similar way to Figure 1. The two sets of predicted values for incumbent and non-incumbent parties are however now defined in terms of ideological distance. The lower lines (blue and purple) correspond to parties which are ideologically distant from the respondent (average left-right distance plus one standard deviation), while the upper lines (red and green) are for parties which are ideologically close (average minus one standard deviation). Like for party identification, ideological closeness leads to a wishful thinking effect, with proximate parties being perceived as having better electoral chances than distant parties. Yet, the magnitude of the effect is substantially weaker than for party identification, and it only reaches statistical significance in the case of incumbent parties. Also, ideological distance does not affect the strength of the relation between objective chances and perceived chances. While there is some evidence that ideological closeness also biases voters' perceptions, the effect is clearly much weaker than that of party identification.

[Figure 3]

The above effects were based on citizens with an average level of political sophistication. But this variable is also likely to moderate the effects of party strength and of citizens' preferences. To that end, the model of Table 2 was estimated again, separately for respondents with a high and a low level of political sophistication.⁸ The corresponding results pertaining to the party identification effect are presented in Figure 4, while those related to ideological distance can be found in Figure 5. The influence of party identification on perceived electoral chances varies strongly between political novices and political experts (Figure 4). Among

⁸ For these separate models, only respondents in lower two and upper two categories of the political sophistication scale were included.

citizens with a high degree of political sophistication, perceived electoral chances stand in a stronger relationship with parties' electoral strength. While party identification weakens this relation among all voters, this moderating effect is attenuated at high levels of sophistication. There is more uncertainty about the estimated results for non-incumbent parties, in particular for citizens with a low level of expertise. This is due to the fact that fewer respondents identify with such parties. But at least for incumbent parties, we can see that the relation between objective and perceived strength is particularly weak among party identifiers with a low level of political knowledge. Furthermore, the wishful thinking effect caused by party identification is also weaker among politically sophisticated respondents. Yet, even among respondents with a very high degree of political expertise, biases linked with party identification can still be observed. In contrast, the effects associated with ideological closeness do not vary very much with citizens' level of political expertise (Figure 5). Yet, we observe that the wishful thinking effect regarding the perceived chances of ideologically close parties becomes stronger as political sophistication increases. However, it is always weaker than the effect of party identification.

[Figures 4 and 5]

7. Conclusion

This paper analyzed the degree of accuracy of voters' perceptions of parties' electoral chances, focusing on the case of the 2011 regional election in the canton of Zurich. It focused on the relation between objective indicators of party strength and perceived chances, and on how these relations vary with party identification, ideological closeness, and political expertise. The results confirm that individual preferences may bias which parties citizens consider to be viable. As suggested by previous studies, citizens are subject to a "wishful thinking effect". This is mainly a consequence of partisan preferences. Voters credit their preferred party with higher chances than other voters do. In addition, the perceptions of party identifiers are more weakly related to objective party chances than is the case for non-identifiers. There is some support for the hypothesis that ideological preferences lead to a similar bias, with citizens viewing more positively the electoral chances of parties that are closer to their own ideological position. However, the magnitude of the latter effect is relatively small compared to that of partisan preferences. Furthermore, the findings of this study show that citizens with a higher degree of political sophistication are less subject to

these wishful thinking effects. But the biases in the perceived chances of parties do not disappear entirely, even at high levels of political expertise.

These results are important for studies of strategic voting. The assumption that citizens' perceptions are correct on average is a central precondition for theories of strategic voting. The wishful thinking effects illustrated by this study's results may help to better understand why strategic voting is not more widespread. Recognizing when one's preferred party is not viable is a necessary condition for voting strategically. Wishful thinking leads citizens to overestimate the chances of success of their preferred party. It reduces the chances that they perceive correctly when their favourite party has only weak electoral chances. This does not necessarily mean that partisans are less strategic given their perceptions of parties' electoral chances. Simply, the wishful thinking effect may prevent them from recognizing when strategic behaviour is needed.

The assumption that voters' perceptions are correct on average is not supported by this study's findings. Partisan preferences, and to a lesser extent ideological preferences, bias how voters evaluate parties' chances of success. This result has implications for studies of strategic voting behaviour. Voters' subjective perceptions of parties' chances may better capture how citizens evaluate the strategic context. Objective measures of electoral chances, in contrast, may rely on too optimistic assumptions about citizens' capacity to correctly recognize strategic incentives.

Appendix

[Table 3]

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Table 1. Parties in competition and electoral results

Party	Votes	Seats	Number of districts where:	
			elected	not elected
Swiss People's Party (SVP)	29.6	54	17	1
Social-Democratic Party (SPS)	19.3	35	18	0
Liberals (FDP)	12.9	23	17	1
Greens (GDP)	10.6	19	17	1
Green Liberal Party (GLP)	10.3	19	17	1
Christian-Democratic Party (CVP)	4.9	9	9	9
Evangelical People's Party (EVP)	3.8	7	7	11
Conservative Democratic Party (BDP)	3.5	6	5	11
Federal Democratic Union (EDU)	2.6	5	5	13
Alternative List (AL)	1.6	3	3	15
Pirate Party (PP)	0.6	0	0	9
Swiss Democrats (SD)	0.4	0	0	10
European Reform Party (ERP)	0.0	0	0	1

Source: Statistical office of the canton of Zurich

Table 2. Determinants of voters' perceptions of parties' electoral chances

	Coef.	Std. err.
<i>Fixed effects</i>		
Intercept	0.47***	0.02
Party strength	0.31***	0.09
Party strength, 2007	0.30**	0.09
Incumbent	0.11***	0.03
Party identification	0.05	0.04
Left-right distance	-0.06	0.03
Political sophistication	0.07***	0.01
Party id. × party strength	0.10	0.12
Party id. × party strength, 2007	-0.36**	0.12
Party id. × incumbent	0.11*	0.05
LR distance × party strength	-0.22	0.18
LR distance × party strength, 2007	0.30	0.19
LR distance × incumbent	-0.10*	0.05
<i>Random effects, party-districts</i>		
Variance, intercept	0.01	0.00
<i>Random effects, respondents</i>		
Variance, intercept	0.02	0.00
Variance, party identification slope	0.00	0.00
Variance, incumbent slope	0.01	0.01
<i>Random effects, observations</i>		
Variance, residuals	0.04	0.00
N (observations)		9206
N (respondents)		1030
N (party/district)		172

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.	N
<i>Respondent × Party level</i>					
Perceived chance	0.54	0.34	0.00	1.00	9206
Party identification	0.05	0.22	0.00	1.00	9206
Left-right distance	0.00	0.16	-0.23	0.57	9206
<i>Respondent level</i>					
Political sophistication	-0.02	0.40	-0.61	0.39	1030
<i>Party × District level</i>					
Party strength	-0.05	0.29	-0.53	0.42	172
Party strength, 2007	-0.05	0.29	-0.53	0.41	172
Incumbent	0.63	0.48	0.00	1.00	172

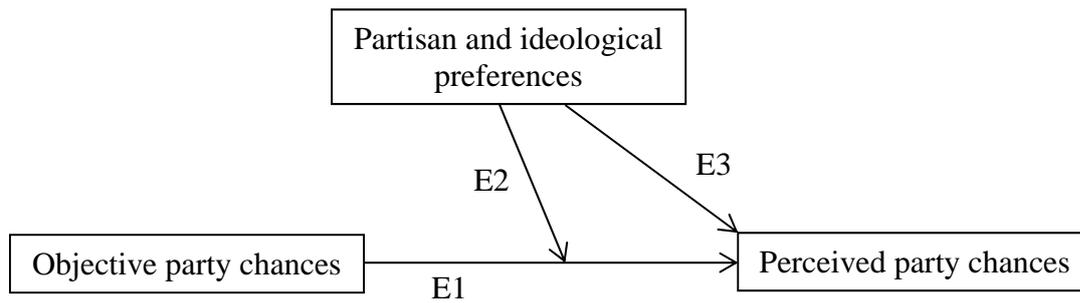


Figure 1: Determinants of perceived party chances

Figure 2. Perceived electoral chances, as a function of electoral strength, incumbency, and party identification. Predicted values based on the results of Table 2.

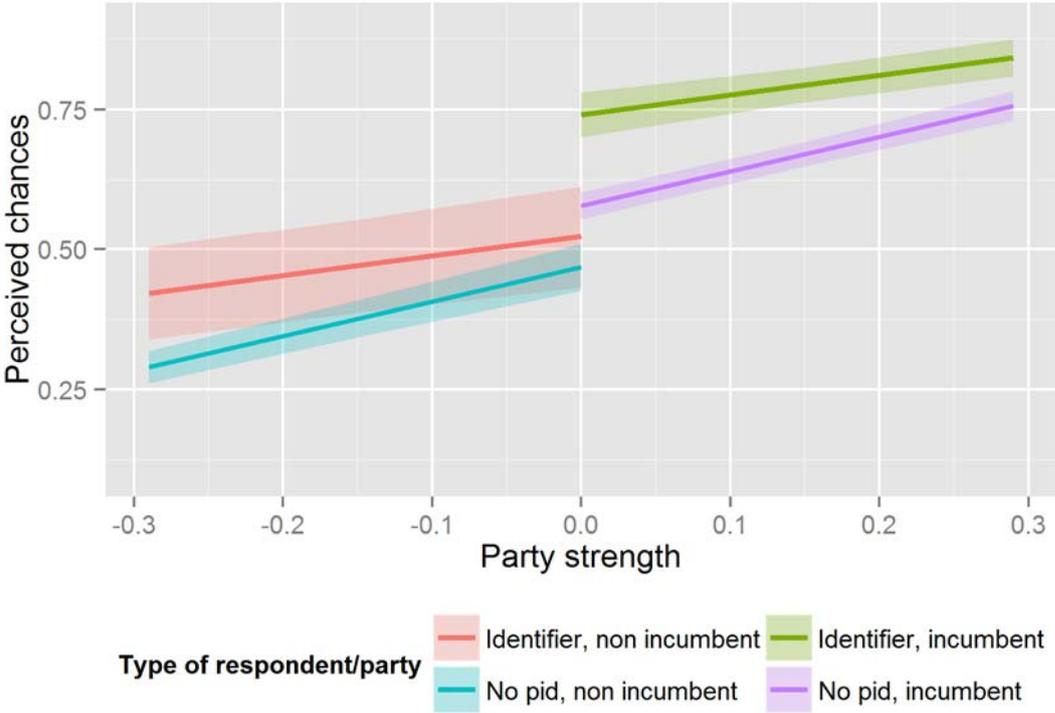


Figure 3. Perceived electoral chances, as a function of electoral strength, incumbency, and ideological distance. Predicted values based on the results of Table 2.

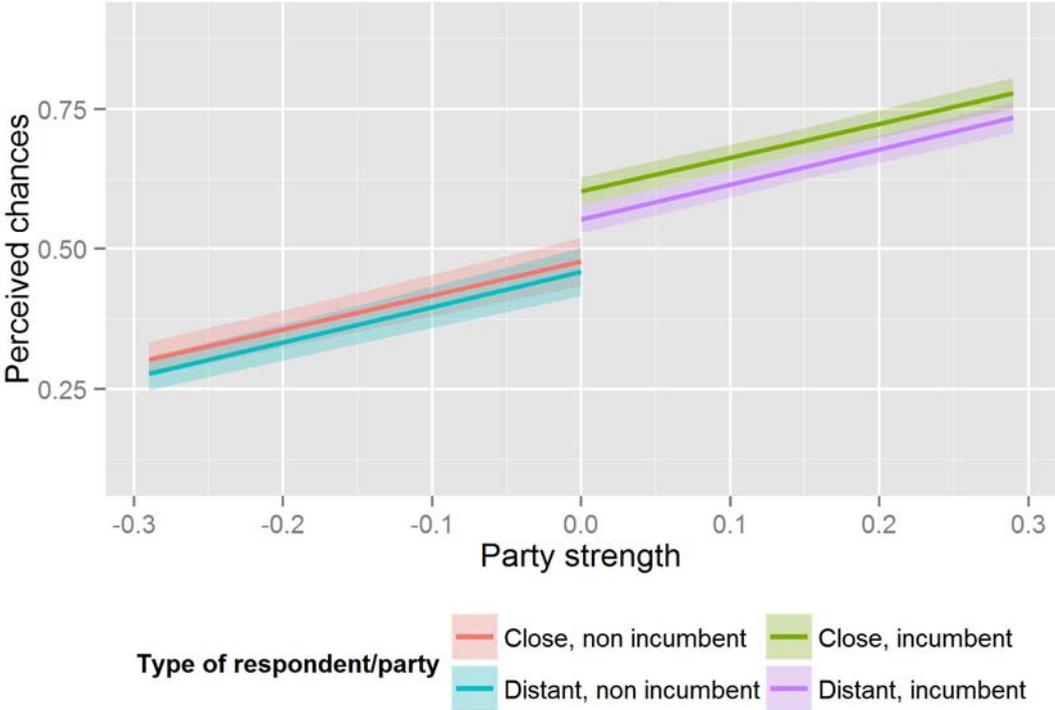


Figure 4. Perceived electoral chances, as a function of electoral strength, incumbency, party identification, and political sophistication. Predicted values based on models estimated separately for citizens with a low and a high level of sophistication.

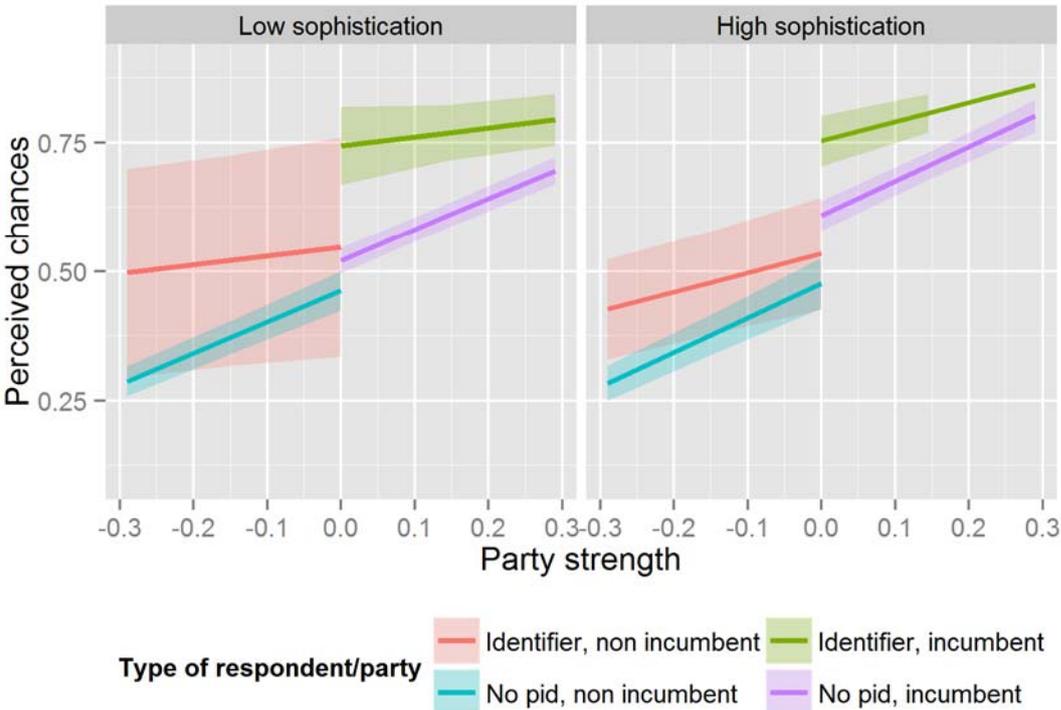


Figure 5. Perceived electoral chances, as a function of electoral strength, incumbency, ideological closeness, and political sophistication. Predicted values based on models estimated separately for citizens with a low and a high level of sophistication.

