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To swing or not to swing: an assessment of age and political cynicism of swing voting behaviour

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Abstract

The empirical question of voting preferences and how these may change (swing) is yet to be answered, as there is little first-hand microeconomic evidence on swing voting. We focus on the relevance of voters' age and political cynicism as predictors for swing voting. Towards this end, we apply a stated and revealed preference framework to assess swing voting, using data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Survey (DPES) between 1989 to 2010. Our results indicate that swing voting is less likely to occur in older age groups and more likely among individuals with higher levels of political cynicism. The age effects tend to be stronger among those with lower political cynicism values.

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1. Introduction

The body of work concerned with the study of democratic outcomes and voting behavior is considerable. For a political economic approach, see Gerber et al. (2009); for a public choice one, Goodman and Porter (2021); or, for political science one, Powell and Whitten (1993). Unfortunately, even across these disciplines, there are limited empirical applications on swing voting behavior, as research remains predominately theoretical (Krasa and Polborn 2014).

This paper contributes to the economic literature of swing voting by understanding its empirical interrelation with political cynicism and age. Adriaansen et al. (2012, 155) define “political cynicism as a harsh distrust in the reliability and/or competence of politicians”. In this instance, political cynicism is viewed as a threat to democracy (Pattyn et al. 2012), which is explained broadly from its negative effects to policy campaigns, media and political opinions (Fu et al. 2011; Lariscy et al. 2011). Although research has primarily focused on how media relates to defining political cynicism amongst voters (Adriaansen et al. 2010; Adriaansen et al. 2012; de Vreese and Elenbaas 2008; Schuck et al. 2013), some evidence suggests that higher political cynicism associates to lower support for voting for traditionalist parties and greater support for far-right parties (Van Assche et al. 2019).

We would therefore expect people expressing higher levels of political cynicism to have a higher probability of changing voting preferences such that they are more likely to engage in swing voting. However, understanding this relationship is not simple, as research shows that the relationship between voting preferences and political cynicism may vary across age groups (Lariscy et al. 2011; Pattyn et al. 2012). Such findings would suggest that the act of voting is habit-forming (Gerber et al. 2003), due to its recurrent nature (Coppock and Green 2016). In this instance, we would expect that older cohorts have a lower probability of swinging in their voting choices.

We analyse individual swing voting behaviour in the Netherlands using data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) between 1989 and 2010. This provides empirical demographic and preliminary institutional insights that may synthesise and extend future research for microeconomic approaches within swing voting and institutional behaviour research regarding age and political cynicism. Although the analysis does not directly answer why voters change their vote, it does reveal when and how political cynicism may occur for different political ideologies and age groups.

2. Methods

2.1 Data

We pool all six waves of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) dataset from 1989 to 2010 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek et al. 1989; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek et al. 2006; Irwin et al. 2003; Kamp et al. 1998; Stichting Kiezersonderzoek Nederland et al. 2012; Thomassen, 1994). The DPES contains rich information pertaining to voting behaviour, demographics, political and institutional measurements representing the attitudes of the Dutch populace from 1989 to 2010. For each wave, participants undergo a survey shortly before and after each election, creating a cross-sectional representative sample of the Dutch population. The fact that participants are surveyed shortly before and after each election allows us to identify swing-voting behaviour.

We draw from the work of Sen (1971), which applies constructs of revealed preference theory when seeking to understand the differences between a stated and revealed preference in

economic decision-making. Prior to the election, the DPES gauges each participant's intended vote (stated preference). After the election, each participant is surveyed on the actual vote (revealed preference under the assumption of truthful reporting). This allows us to quantify the extent to which voters swing or not, by taking the simple difference between their stated preference vote and the revealed preference vote. This simple approach identifies an individual's vote as either a 'Swing Vote' (coded as 1) or 'No Swing Vote' (coded as 0) through a dummy variable, which forms our dependent variable.

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics summary of our dependent variable within each cross-section of the DPES for which stated vote preferences and revealed vote decisions are available. The percentage of swing voters ranges between 11 and 22% depending on the wave explored.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics – Swing v No Swing Voters

	1989	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010
No Swing Vote	990	779	1,040	991	1,204	969
Swing Vote	106	104	149	177	170	212
Share Swing Vote	0.11	0.13	0.14	0.18	0.14	0.22

Our key independent variable of political cynicism is a pre-defined 4-point ordinal scale ("0=low...3=high"). It is an index variable constructed on a Mokken scale, drawing from a battery of categorical predictors and ranging from opinions about politicians fulfilling promises, whether the agendas of politicians are pro-social or personal, and whether politicians collude to gain access to the political domain rather than gaining entry on the merit of their own abilities. Age is classified into seven different age groups (age group 17-25 years forming the reference category). As controls, we include political interest, degree of urbanisation, sex, education, income, marital status and religious denomination. Variable coding, index construction and robustness testing of the political cynicism index is provided in the supplemental materials.

3. Results

We analyse the dependent variable in a regression control framework. For our analysis, we pool all six waves together and include wave fixed effects. A linear probability model is presented in Table 2. To this effect, we also note that a logit or probit regression specification lead to qualitatively and quantitatively similar results.

For political cynicism we systematically find a statistically significant, robust, and positive relationship in specification (1) at ($p=0.006$); (2) at ($p=0.015$) and (3) at ($p=0.093$), which suggests a higher probability to swing with increased political cynicism. This is consistent with our expectations and the existing literature. Regarding the magnitude of the link, specification (1), for example, indicates that an increase in the political cynicism scale by one unit is associated to an increase in the probability to swing by 1.3 percentage points.

Table 2: Swing Voting, Political Cynicism, and Age – DPES 1989-2010

VARIABLES	(1) Pooled	(2) Left Wing	(3) Right Wing	(4) Low Cynicism	(5) High Cynicism
Age					
26-35	0.0178 (0.0198)	0.0118 (0.0298)	0.00823 (0.0278)	0.0234 (0.0244)	0.00538 (0.0331)
36-45	0.0160 (0.0196)	0.00793 (0.0291)	0.00371 (0.0277)	0.0341 (0.0243)	-0.0119 (0.0322)
46-55	-0.0201 (0.0197)	-0.0345 (0.0296)	-0.0305 (0.0274)	-0.00477 (0.0246)	-0.0405 (0.0323)
56-65	-0.0254 (0.0203)	-0.0335 (0.0306)	-0.0345 (0.0281)	-0.0113 (0.0263)	-0.0449 (0.0323)
66-75	-0.0500** (0.0204)	-0.0657** (0.0320)	-0.0468* (0.0278)	-0.0699*** (0.0249)	-0.0455 (0.0333)
76 or Older	-0.0563** (0.0233)	-0.0926*** (0.0348)	-0.0607* (0.0315)	-0.0602* (0.0311)	-0.0653* (0.0353)
Political Cynicism	0.0135*** (0.00488)	0.0180** (0.00737)	0.0114* (0.00681)		
Political Interest	-0.00585 (0.00410)	-0.0100 (0.00612)	0.00165 (0.00566)	-0.00882 (0.00557)	-0.00413 (0.00593)
Degree of Urbanisation	-0.00609** (0.00307)	-0.00175 (0.00457)	-0.00688 (0.00435)	-0.00416 (0.00422)	-0.00884** (0.00445)
Sex (Male)	-0.0210** (0.00867)	-0.0155 (0.0131)	-0.0175 (0.0121)	-0.0258** (0.0117)	-0.0115 (0.0128)
Education	-0.00854** (0.00407)	-0.00330 (0.00591)	-0.0127** (0.00573)	-0.0112** (0.00564)	-0.00685 (0.00585)
Income	0.000524 (0.00111)	0.000973 (0.00174)	0.000989 (0.00151)	0.00123 (0.00152)	-0.00111 (0.00159)
Marital Status	-0.00614 (0.00407)	-0.00384 (0.00597)	-0.00782 (0.00575)	-0.00601 (0.00552)	-0.00488 (0.00600)
Religious Denomination	-0.00800 (0.00883)	-0.000182 (0.0132)	-0.0142 (0.0134)	-0.00741 (0.0121)	-0.0102 (0.0129)
Constant	0.171*** (0.0265)	0.137*** (0.0395)	0.186*** (0.0383)	0.182*** (0.0341)	0.213*** (0.0379)
Wave Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Observations	6,300	3,000	2,956	3,303	3,060
R-squared	0.017	0.021	0.014	0.023	0.014

Notes: The dependent variable is ‘Swing Vote’. Specification (1) represents a pooled linear probability regression. Specification (2) employs a subsample of voters that identify as left wing party supporters. Specification (3) employs a subsample of voters that identify as right wing party supporters. Specifications (4-5) employ subsamples of voters with a low and a high median split of political cynicism. All estimates are unstandardised coefficients. P-values are denoted by ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1. Robust standard errors specified in parentheses. Robustness analysis of the political cynicism index and sensitivity analysis for the functional form of the interaction effects between age and political cynicism are presented in the supplemental materials.

As for the age groups in specification (1), the pooled specification, we find a lower probability to swing vote from age groups 66-75 (p=0.014) and 76 or older (p=0.016). Those age groups have about a 5 percentage points lower probability to swing than our youngest age cohort group (reference group: age 17-25). In addition, specification (1) suggests that coming from a less urbanized environment is correlated with a lower probability to swing (p=0.047). Males also have a lower probability of swing voting (p=0.016) and a higher level of education is correlated with a lower probability to swing vote (p=0.036).

We also separate the sample into left and right party supports as shown in specifications (2) and (3). Political cynicism matters slightly more for left wing voters ($p=0.015$) in specification (2) rather than right wing voters ($p=0.093$) in specification (3) but both coefficients are statistically significant.

To understand whether there are differences between voters with lower and higher political cynicism, we split the sample based on the median of political cynicism. When comparing the samples of lower and higher cynicism, we find that the overall age matters more for voters with lower cynicism (coefficients are statistically significant in specification (4) for age group 66-75 ($p=0.005$) and 76+ ($p=0.053$)). In comparison, voters with high cynicism are only related to the age group 76+ ($p=0.064$) and the results reported in Table 2 remain robust when adding the control variables sequentially into the specification (see supplemental materials for robustness analysis).

With respect to the different sub factors for political cynicism, we observe two key correlates of the probability to swing in Table 3. In this instance, we see statistical significance in specification (1), regarding promises of politicians ($p=0.073$) and in specification (2) regarding the agendas of politicians ($p=0.000$). By contrast, the sub factor related to the abilities of politicians remains statistically non-significant ($p=0.671$).

Table 3: Robustness Testing - Political Cynicism

VARIABLES	(1) Promises	(2) Agendas	(3) Abilities
Politician Promises	-0.0124* (0.00694)		
Politician Agendas		-0.0245*** (0.00637)	
Politician Abilities			-0.00279 (0.00657)
Constant	0.122*** (0.0165)	0.164*** (0.0196)	0.105*** (0.0196)
Wave Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES
Observations	6,832	6,743	6,488
R-squared	0.006	0.008	0.006

Notes: The dependent variable is ‘Swing Vote’. Models (1-4) represent pooled linear probability regression estimates. All estimates are unstandardized coefficients. P-values are denoted by *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$. Robust standard errors specified in parentheses. Robustness testing of this process is presented in the supplemental materials.

4. Discussion

We introduced an empirical framework to capture swing-voting behaviour, which is modelled by an economic revealed preference theory framework. As such, we can introduce a means of capturing individual-level empirical evidence across a battery of socio-demographic factors that may relate attitudes of political cynicism to swing voting. This is new to the economic literature and pertinent.

The current empirical evidence associating the relationship between age and political cynicism was limited. Our results suggest a lower probability for swing voting amongst two of the older age groups, which may indicate that voting is habit driven, and there is an increased probability to swing vote amongst voters with high levels of political cynicism related to higher

levels of distrust in the reliability and/or competence of politicians. These results provide an empirical basis for future research to explore specific institutional aspects of why individual voters may or may not swing vote.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from [GESIS, Cologne, Germany - Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences]. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from <https://www.gesis.org/en/home> with the permission of [GESIS, Cologne, Germany - Leibniz-Institute for the Social Sciences].

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