

Chapter 9

Preaching to the Choir: Coordinating Strategic Voting on Facebook During the 2018 Hungarian Election Campaign

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ABSTRACT

A main topic of the 2018 election campaign in Hungary was strategic voting, seen as an opportunity for opposition parties to remove the governing coalition from power. Strategic split-ticket voting was incentivized by the political context and the electoral system and was further facilitated by a limited co-operation between opposition political forces. Nonetheless, demand-side coordination was indispensable in this aspect. While social media was an important channel during the campaign, it was not crucial for strategic voting as it was mostly used to reinforce the positions of candidates among their own supporters, “preaching to the choir”. The influence of strategically split ballots can be measured in seat shares by modeling what would have happened if there was no coordination and cooperation at all. Results indicate that strategic votes transferred a total of 15 seats from the governing parties to the opposition political blocs, however this was not enough to prevent the decisive victory of the Fidesz-KDNP and another two-thirds supermajority in the Hungarian National Assembly.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic voting is an elusive concept that is theorized to exist according to models of rational voter behavior but is especially challenging to prove reliably or to measure accurately. To put simply, it occurs when citizens decide to vote against their preferred parties or candidates in hope of influencing the results more effectively. For strategic voting to be effective, voters need to be well-informed and well-coordinated, so that they can properly adjust to a common strategy. The 2018 Hungarian parliamentary elections provide a unique opportunity to explore certain aspects of this phenomenon. Due to the nature

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of the Hungarian mixed member electoral system, strategic voting is possible by casting split-ticket ballots, allowing voters to act tactically and to support their first-preferred political group at the same time. Such behavior was intensively propagated in 2018 and it eventually became one of the main topics of the election campaign with numerous civilian and political actors urging opposition voters to strategically split their ballots with the objective of removing the Fidesz-KDNP coalition from government. The results of the election and the campaign activities of the candidates allow us to look into this attempt at facilitating large-scale voter coordination. The relevance of social media is further emphasized by the media environment in Hungary, where online platforms are the main channel of opposition political communication. This paper first provides a theoretical framework for strategic voting and describes the political and institutional context of the Hungarian elections. Then it analyses the Facebook activity of single-member constituency candidates in relation to strategic voting. Finally, it assesses the effectiveness of strategically split tickets on the election outcome.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper examines an overlap of several closely related but still separate phenomena and consequently it is based on a wide theoretical framework of strategic voting, split-ticket voting, voter coordination and the effects of social media on modern political campaigns. These were all influential factors during the 2018 Hungarian elections and their interplay greatly contributed to the final outcome. The expressions “strategic voting” and “tactical voting” will be used interchangeably in this paper. While the relevant literature mainly applies the term “strategic” to the voter behavior described here, “tactical” was used more often in Hungary recently. The distinction between the two could be made as the act of casting such a ballot is actually the tactic that is necessary to achieve a strategic goal like removing a party from government for example.

Strategic voting is defined as the choice made by a voter to move electoral support from the first-preferred party or candidate to another one because of the perception that the latter has a better chance at winning (Blais and Nadeau 1996). This is often called the “wasted-votes” theory and its central element is that voters want to influence the election outcome. At the same time there is an alternative explanation for switching the vote from the first-preference, according to which the electorate wants to influence the composition of governing coalitions (Gschwend 2007, Plescia 2017) and thus major party voters may support minor parties to achieve to desired configuration of seat shares. Such votes are often called strategic votes, ballots that contain the original first preference are on the other hand referred to as sincere votes. The concept of strategic voting is often traced back to Anthony Downs who described it mainly as a feature of multiparty systems in his seminal work, *An economic theory of democracy* (Downs 1957: 48). Switching one’s vote to a second-preferred candidate (or party) in a purely two-party context probably indicates indifference to the outcome and not strategic behavior. The theoretical basis of such conscious decisions obviously lies in a model that assumes voters are acting rationally and not expressively in the polling booth. This concept was further improved upon by Duverger with his idea that first-past-the-post systems produce two-party competition (Duverger 1954). To both generalize and operationalize this concept, one can describe a Duvergerian equilibrium, where all (rational) voters

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