

The Secret Ballot and Ethical Voting

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Summary

- Does the secret ballot make voting more “ethical”?
 - This paper offers the first scholarly evidence—experimental or otherwise—that the answer is no
 - In fact, the secret ballot appears to make voters vote in a *more selfish* way
- A laboratory experiment is an ideal method to test this question
 - a wealth of experimental data suggests that the degree of observability of one's choices affects social preferences/selfishness
- Morton and Ou show that voters are most likely to vote selfishly when they are in the majority and voting is secret, and least likely when they are in the minority and voting is public
- Most importantly, they show that there is a tradeoff to be made when choosing private or public voting

Study has a very nice design:

- “Random Dictator” rule is clever, and well justified (e.g. allows for identification of unique symmetric eq'a)
 - Is behavior robust w.r.t changes in this procedure?
- Manipulate payoffs in such a way to vary both aggregate welfare and the inequity (relative payoffs of the two groups) of the distribution
 - allows them to operationalize “ethicality” in several ways
 - any post-treatment questionnaires to see how salient such concerns were for the subjects?

Observability and Turnout

- Result 6: Overall, observability of voting behavior results in higher participation of voters
- Result 7: Observability of voting behavior has a greater effect on the turnout of voters whose selfish preference is the ethical choice
- It appears then, that voting—even in the lab—is affected by social desirability and/or social preferences
- Cost of voting is relatively high: lower costs should lead to less abstention
 - perhaps varying the cost of voting could tell us something about how much subjects care about being seen as a “good” citizens

Social Preferences/Behavioral Responses

- This study raises some issues about laboratory studies of voting more generally
 - Does the mere fact of being “observed” in the lab—even if choices are truly anonymous—affect voting behavior in voting experiments?
- Discussion yesterday raised the issue of modelling other-regarding preferences
 - is it irrational to care about others?
 - is it just as simple as adding a term to the utility function?
 - we need to know more about how subjects view inequality/inequity (F&S vs. B&O)
 - results highlight the situation-dependence of social preferences
- Would differences in behavior wrt to anonymity be attenuated if we first allowed subjects to “earn” their initial payoffs and/or their group membership?