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The Voter Experience Around the World: Lessons for Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This special issue has introduced the human reflexivity approach as a framework for studying elections. Empirical studies in the volume have then considered how institutional design, cultural practices and strategic actions come together to inform the voter experience – and how this experience, in turn, has broader consequences for the quality of elections and democracy. This concluding piece summarises some of the key empirical findings and draws out lessons for policy makers. Given that citizens who are younger and have fewer formal educational qualifications self-report a poorer voter experience, there is an urgent need for action to equalise democracy. The special issue provides empirical evidence in support of implementing automatic and assisted voter registration, civic education, limiting overly restrictive voter identification requirements, caution with concurrent elections and improved transparency practices. A human reflexivity approach, it is argued, gives policy makers greater theoretical freedom to support better elections and democracy – rather than follow ‘rational’ logics of power maximisation both described and prescribed by traditional rational choice theorists.

KEYWORDS

Electoral integrity; trust; electoral malpractice; electoral backsliding; democracy

Introduction

Elections are one of the most well-developed fields of study in political science. Casting a vote is a crucial moment in which citizens can have their input into the political system and is a moment of self-expression. Yet the experience of voters in this important process has been under-theorised. The common approach since the 1960s has been to understand voting as rational choice, in which the voter experience is reduced to a series of cost–benefit calculations. The introduction to this special issue, however, provided an alternative approach: understanding voting through the lens of human reflexivity. This approach explores the complex relationship between institutional design, the strategic

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choices of actors other than voters (such as party agents, incumbents and election monitors) and cultural norms. It argues that experiences are formed through the interplay of institutional design, cultural norms and strategic action. These experiences in turn shape levels of trust, voter choices, turnout and election outcomes.

The introduction to this special issue presented the following research questions:

- What is the nature of the voter experience? To what extent does this vary worldwide? Are there common trends and experiences?
- What shapes the voter experience? How do voters reflect on their experience and reshape their participation in and perceptions of the electoral process?
- What are the consequences of specific forms of voter experiences? How can research on the voter experience be used to improve it?

Articles in the special issue provided cutting-edge original research through either cross-national or individual country-level studies. These questions are now revisited in light of the research articles presented in the special issue. The practical lessons for policy makers is then considered.

What is the Nature of the Voter Experience?

The introduction to the special issue introduced the human reflexivity approach to provide an alternative theoretical framework for understanding the voter experience (James & Garnett, 2024a). The voter experience is not a process which *happens to* citizens. They are not passive objects in the democratic process – but have agency and the ability to interpret and react to situations. The voter experience involves the ‘gathering and responding to knowledge, perceptions and emotions about the electoral process through observing and (non)participating in electoral activities’ (James & Garnett, 2024a).

What has been the nature of the experience, according to the research articles presented in this special issue? The introduction used data on voter’s experience from the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity Index to provide a global overview of trends in voter experience at a macro level, over a ten-year period (2012–2022). Data were also used from the World Values Survey. The analysis showed that older and more educated voters tend to have a more positive voter experience. This demonstrates on a cross-national basis that the experience of voters differ, according to individual or institutional characteristics.

What Shapes the Voter Experience? How Do Citizens React?

The remaining papers focused on describing the factors known to influence voter experience, from the per-electoral period, through the campaign and election day, to the aftermath and adjudication of the election.

Firstly, Barton (2024) shows there is great variation on the type of identification the voter is required to produce, and whether this needs to have a photo ID, with potential effects on voter turnout. The Comparative Voter Identification Law Dataset (CVIL) presented in his article helps us to better map these variations, with data on 246 individual

electoral jurisdictions, covering billions of voters. Barton finds that the interaction between the voter and the electoral official on election day are the last and decisive step in the exercise of this fundamental right: if voters are already used to photo identification requirements for other purposes, this type of voting card will not pose an additional burden at the polling station, and is not likely to affect turnout. Voter identification laws therefore play a vital role in shaping the voter experience.

Next, articles in this special issue explored the cross-national variation in the processes by which voters register and cast their ballot. James and Garnett (2024b) map out that the process is automated for many citizens, with no active involvement required. Voter registration may therefore be an unconscious part of the voter experience for many. By contrast, the experience can be bureaucratic and burdensome in other jurisdictions as there is an individual requirement for citizens to gather the data needed to register, complete the necessary forms and make sure that they meet the deadlines set by law makers and Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs). They report that, unsurprisingly, automatic voter registration produces more accurate and complete registers - therefore having less potential to disenfranchise eligible voters (James & Garnett, 2024b). However, this seems to also be influenced by more capable electoral management bodies.

The voter experience is also shaped by the number of elections held at the same time. Concurrent elections can significantly change the information environment and the strategic action of voters, parties and electoral administrators. Andersen (2024) argues that concurrent elections can tend to channel attention to the most prominent campaign topics and candidates. Though this can have a positive impact on turnout, it can also overshadow less prominent campaign topics or low-salience candidates. Voters seem likely to respond to concurrent elections with increased participation, but satisfaction with the system, particularly with low-salience candidates, can decrease. Concurrent elections can decrease information levels on low-salience topics and candidates, with the potential to also affect trust.

Work by Stockemer and Amaechi (2024) showed that voters also have different perceptions and understandings of ethics of electoral practices. Vote buying seems acceptable for a large group in this case study, as it represents reciprocity, and voters also feel entitled to receive something on Election Day. This is widespread and not contingent on education level or economic vulnerability. Vote buying seems to shape electoral outcomes and parties actively engage in this practice.

Finally, transparency, crucial to electoral oversight, can inform voters' experience of elections (Power et al., 2023). Transparency should translate into concrete outcomes that voters can easily reach so that they can trust the process. In the United Kingdom, campaign spending system does not seem to allow voters to meaningfully disclose information, namely on the methods used by election contestants to win their vote. This might prevent voters from understanding modern election campaign activity, with potential long-term implications for the voter experience and electoral democracy. Trust might also be impacted by ineffective transparency, and the campaign spending that is not meaningful to voters might create distrust in campaign methods (Power et al., 2023).

In sum, these studies find that voter experiences are connected to their willingness to participate, perceptions of electoral integrity and trust in the electoral system. It is important to note that the voters studied in the articles in this special issue, however, do not always react as expected. For example, automatic voter registration does make registers

more complete but do not have an adverse effect on the accuracy of these registers (James & Garnett, 2024b). Voter identification can pose a challenge to voters not used to presenting this identification, while for voters already commonly using photo identification, it is not a significant barrier (Barton, 2024). Concurrent elections will decrease information salience, but at the same time can increase turnout (Andersen, 2024). Vote buying is seen globally as an indicator of poor electoral integrity, but may not be viewed so negatively by recipients (Stockemer & Amaechi, 2024). These findings highlight that the diversity of experiences with electoral practices, laws, or institutions, can lead to diverse outcomes.

What are the Lessons for Policymakers?

These articles contribute important lessons for researchers, policy makers and those interested in promoting electoral integrity.

Practice

Some studies present concrete suggestions for policy makers. As James and Garnett have shown (2024b), automatic voter registration seems to lead to more accurate and complete electoral registers. Adding to this, a better organisational performance of the electoral management body can also increase the completeness and accuracy of electoral registers (James & Garnett, 2024b). This reinforces the argument that EMB capacity strongly impacts electoral integrity, as previous research has shown, pointing towards the need for greater public investment in the capacity and human resources of electoral management bodies. It also shows how public investment in automatic voter registration systems can improve their completeness and accuracy, as these factors do not seem dependent on levels of democracy and development, but rather on laws and organisational factors. As robust voter registration systems can have an impact on improving electoral integrity, the investment, both on an automatic voter registration system and on human resources of the EMB, seems to be a clear way forward.

Barton shows how important voter identification laws and respective identification requirements, such as voter cards, can be for the voter and therefore for electoral integrity. Policy makers can also make great use of the Civil Identification Laws dataset here presented (Barton, 2024), as it also allows to account for this within the electoral cycle and the potential impact on electoral integrity. Preparation costs are also integrated and an analysis in this regard can be made. This can undoubtedly feed into a more detailed analysis on the impact of voter identification laws on electoral integrity.

Other lessons point to more nuanced responses. Stockemer and Amaechi (2024) have shown that vote buying can be perceived by groups as party members, politically interested people and young citizens to be an acceptable practice. This points to the need for targeted civic and voter education campaigns to improve public understandings of the importance of how elections can empower voters.

Formal financial disclosure rules might not be enough to provide information that is significant to voters. In fact, the level of information provided and transparency can also be enhanced in the case shown (Power et al., 2023). More informative data on campaign

spending can increase electoral transparency, contribute to better informed voters and to create trust. The standardisation of the information can help citizens to better understand its material content.

Holding multiple elections also deserves careful consideration by policy makers. Policy makers may be tempted to hold concurrent elections to save administrative costs, time and resources. The results from the case study (Andersen, 2024) show that while this has the potential to increase turnout, it might have some negative consequences on the election itself.

Finally, given that young people and those with less formal education describe themselves as having a poor voter experience (James & Garnett, 2024a), there is a need for policy makers to engage those who might have already ‘checked out’ of elections. This means reaching out to the next generation of voters to build mutual understandings of how elections can be better designed to deliver electoral integrity, democracy - and broader empowerment.

Theory

There are also some theoretical implications for the praxis of policy making that follow from using a reflexivity approach, rather than the traditional rational choice approach. Under the reflexivity approach, citizens are not driven by rational cost benefit analysis. Structural contexts may shape their understandings and choices, but they have some creative freedom in the choices that they make.

Voters are not the only actors who have reflexivity – all other electoral actors have this too. Policy makers are usually described as being restricted to ‘utility maximising’ behaviour by the traditional rational choice approach. Legislators are assumed to be only interested in maximising seats, votes or popularity when it comes to considering electoral reforms (Boix, 1999; Renwick, 2010). It would be irrational to do anything other than this, rational choice theorists both describe and prescribe. However, human reflexivity emphasises that they have choice and there is contingency, despite any structural incentives to do otherwise.

Policy makers can therefore make choices and decisions based upon compassion, compromise and evidence to improve the voter experience, elections and democracy, in spite of structural forces, such as political pressure from peer decision makers, to do otherwise. In an age of democratic backsliding, it is ever more important than ever that they do so. This special issue has hopefully given both some theoretical legitimisation to do so alongside some empirical evidence for how to do this.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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