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Ideology and The Rationality of Non-Voting

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Abstract:

What is the theoretical impact of the erosion of partisan ties on electoral abstention? This question comes from Downs-North's theory of political ideology, which is a tool to reduce the cost of understanding the political debates. Then, when the left-right political divide becomes less visible, the costs of understanding political debates rise and electoral abstention occurs. This interpretation of abstention has two implications: First, it shows that among the multiple reasons responsible for the democratic crisis in France, the weakening of the traditional notion of the left and the right is significant. The "neither left nor right" would not be a solution to democratic crisis but rather its origin. Second, it explains why the relationship between abstention and economic crisis is non-linear.

Keywords: abstention, ideology, rationality and economic crisis

JEL: D72, D83 ; B40 ; Z10

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1. Introduction

It has been recognized that high voter participation gives legitimacy to those in power; it increases the authority of the democratic system as a whole and promotes stability (Franklin, 2004). In contrast, increasing rate of abstention is a sign of apathy toward the democratic system (Dettrey and Schwindt-Bayer, 2009). Such democratic deficit is a widespread phenomenon amongst major liberal democracies (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Magni-Berton, 2012). How can such an abstentionist phenomenon be explained? At first glance, observing large-scale abstention is predictable because no individual is likely to have an influence on the election outcome (Downs, 1957). However, international election results indicate that a considerable number of people do turn out to cast their vote, although they are not obliged to do so.³ This constitutes the paradox of (not) voting. To address this paradox, the literature developed two approaches. The first focuses on the respect of a non consequentialist ethics like “I have the duty to vote” (Blais, 2000). Those with a strong sense of duty almost always vote. Indeed, the number of citizens that decide to vote range from 13% among those with a low sense of duty to 85% of those with a high sense of duty (Campbell et al. 1960: pp. 105–106). The second is modelled through the Downs-Riker-Ordershook’s equation. The decision to vote or to abstain is driven by the comparison of the benefits and costs of voting.

The contribution of this article is to integrate the role played by ideology into the Downs-Riker-Ordeshook’s equation. Indeed, the economic theory of ideology (North 1988, 1992) argues that ideology minimizes the cost of political competency. Thus, ideology determines the cost of voting. When ideological confusion appears, the cost of voting increases together with the abstention rate. Besides, introducing ideology in the study of electoral behaviors helps address expressive acts whereby voters express their political identity when they cast their ballot. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: First, to stress our main contribution, Section 2 shows how ideology affects voter turnout through its effects on the cost of political competency. Section 3 illustrates our theoretical argument through a discussion of the French history of voter turnout at legislative elections. Interestingly, our qualitative analysis of the French case is an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between economic crisis and turnout. To the best of our knowledge, our

³ Two comprehensive web sites reporting global turnout rates are www.electionworld.org and www.idea.int.

analysis is the first that shapes theoretical grounds in support of a non-linear relation. Section 5 provides concluding comments.

2. Ideology and the Costs of Voting

To understand how ideology affects voter turnout through its effects on the costs of political information, it is insightful to rely on the framework of the so-called *paradox of voting*.

2.1 Downs-Riker-Ordeshook's Equation

Within this framework, rationality is instrumental, meaning that an action has value only if it affects outcomes (Downs, 1957). Based on this behavioural assumption, the Expected Utility Model (EUM) of voter turnout (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968) states that a voter, in deciding whether to vote or abstain, calculates the expected utility of both action and votes if benefits exceed costs, or alternatively if:

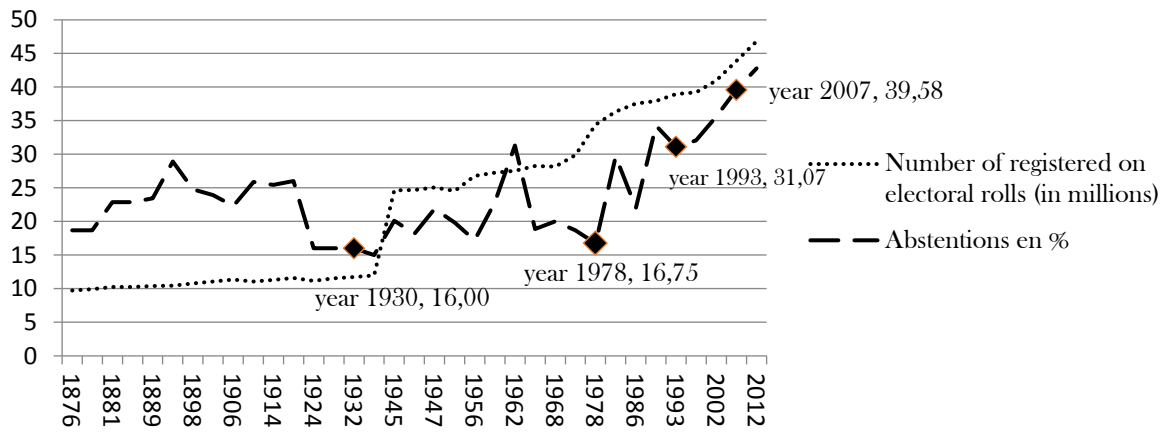
$$R = PB + D - C > 0 \tag{1}$$

In this equation, R represents the net expected utility of voting. The benefits from voting (PB) have two elements. B stands for the benefit a person thinks will accrue from having his or her preferred candidate win. These benefits have to be weighed with the probability (P) that one's vote influences the outcome. Citizens may also vote to see democracy continue, and derive a 'consumption' benefit of voting equal to the value of the increased chance of the survival of democracy. Therefore, D stands for the intrinsic benefit from expressing oneself through the act of voting. Finally, C refers to the costs of voting.

The literature has come up with two strategies to explain voter turnout within the EUM. First, it develops the idea that voters overestimate (P). People vote because the benefits are artificially superior to the costs. The first determinant of (P) is the knowledge by the voters of the paradox of voting. Being aware of the paradox of voting, voters abstain. Blais and Young (1999)'s seminal study confirmed this result. The voting behaviour depends on whether voters know or do not know the paradox of voting. They demonstrated that when voters become

aware of the paradox of voting, they abstain more intensively. This result clearly shows that electoral abstention depends on how voters perceive the probabilistic calculus within a democratic system. The second determinant of (P) is the number of voters. A stylized fact very simple to observe is the correlation between the turnout rate and the number of registered voters; the higher the number of voters, the lower the number of voters who vote. Figure 1 shows this relationship for France.

Fig. 1 Evolution of the Number of Registered Voters and the Rate of Abstention in Parliamentary Elections



Sources: Lancelot (1968), pp.119 and Ministry of Interior.

The third determinant of (P) is related to the subjectivity of voters. The calculus of voters is not based on objective probabilities, but rather on subjective ones. They overestimate the weight of their vote on the final outcome because they act in a context of uncertainty (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974). Others scientists refer to expectations theory. If voters expect that others will not vote, their ballots become decisive (Ledyard, 1981). The fourth explanation is based on regret theory. Voters who would not have cast their ballot could regret their behaviour if the elected government implements policies that reduce their welfare or the welfare of the society as a whole (Tideman, 1985). The second strategy argues that PB is likely to be close to zero since (P) is low to non-existent (Mulligan and Hunter, 2003) and the benefits of political action (B) are collective goods (Aldrich, 1993; Whiteley and Seyd, 1996). The remaining variables that explain voter turnout are D and C and equation (1) can be reduced to:

$$R = D - C \quad (2)$$

In equation (2), parameters D and C deserve a deeper discussion. As mentioned earlier, D stands for the benefit from expressing oneself. It can refer to adherence to social norms. Voting is seen as a citizen's duty (Blais 2000). Alternatively, it refers to expressing a preference amongst the candidates. Individuals vote to 'cheer' ('boo') their favored (unfavored) candidate (Brennan and Buchanan, 1984; Brennan and Hamlin, 1998). Briefly, voters do not vote in order to enhance the success of their political party, but instead to maximize their expressive utility (Glazer, 1987, 2008; Schuessler, 2000; Engelen, 2006; Hillman, 2010). Going to the poll provides an intrinsic satisfaction to the voter, independent from the election results. Building on social theory and anthropology, Shuessler argues that expressive voting is a form of 'being', rather than 'doing'. An expressively motivated individual performs an action X , not to obtain result Y , but to 'be an X -performer' (Schuessler 2000, pp. 90-91).

Parameter C represents the costs of voting. These costs can be divided into two categories: the costs of acquiring political information and the cost of time. The costs of political information are costs that a voter bears before Election Day with respect to gathering information about the candidates and their policy proposals. Converse (1964, 2000) has argued that citizens' limited capabilities to accomplish political tasks may cause these costs to be significant. Uninformed individuals, or those who are less educated, are less likely to form an accurate political judgment. High costs of political information may thus lead them to abstain. This phenomenon is well documented by Braconnier and Dormagen (2012). Similarly, married couples vote at higher rates than singles (Stoker and Jennings, 1995) because they support half of the information costs. The high cost of acquiring political information may also explain the beneficial effects of political campaigns on turnout (Fauvelle-Aymar and François, 2005). By releasing information on political platforms and public policies, political campaigns reduce the cost of acquiring political information. When the latter is low, electoral participation tends to be higher. This is exactly the reasoning that is at stake when one study the effect of media or ideology. Both have an effect on voter turnout by reducing the costs of political information. The costs of time refer to the costs that the voter incurs on Election Day.⁴ These comprise 'shoe leather' costs to get to the polling station and

⁴Moreover, registration procedures, if fulfilled by voters, also involve possibly significant costs (Brians and Carter, 1999; Highton, 2004).

opportunity costs borne from the time spent in casting a vote. Several authors have claimed these costs to be small (Palfrey and Rosenthal, 1985; Aldrich, 1993).

Referring to equation (2), we argue here that, ideology not only plays an important role on the expressive benefits of voting, D (Engelen, 2006), but also on the costs of political information, C . According to Engelen, expressive acts refer to certain commitments in which the voter is engaged. Expressive acts would reflect a political commitment. Commitment can be defined by norms and values such as civic duty. Citizens vote because “they feel they have to, not because they like doing so” (Engelen 2006, p.429). They stick to the duty to vote because they have a political identity. They vote because they know how they vote; for instance, they may vote for a socialist candidate or for a Christian one. Voters’ commitment explains both how they vote and why they vote. For this reason, political identification would come first in the voting behaviour. Nonetheless, political identification is determined by ideology. The expressive benefits of voters come from their political identity, i.e. their ideology. Engelen highlights this point by recognising that “citizens are more likely to vote if they perceive large difference between the candidates...The fact that people without a clear preference of whom to vote for abstain more often shows that the issues of whether and how to vote are strongly related” (Engelen 2006, p.434). This conclusion has at least two analytical consequences. First, a rationality theory of voting requires an explanation of ideological identification. Second, ideology influences the cost of political competence. It is the main result of the economic theory of ideology developed by D.C. North (1988, 1992).

2.2 Ideology and Political Competence

According to Douglas North (1992, p. 485), ideology is a means enabling individuals to explain the world around them whilst modifying it at the lowest cost possible.

“Ideologies contain an essential normative element; that is, they explain both the way the world is and the way it ought to be. While subjective models may be, and usually are, a hodgepodge of beliefs, dogmas, sound theories, and myths, there are usually elements of an organized structure that make them an economizing device for receiving and interpreting information.” (North-1992, p. 485).

It is an incorrect model for interpreting the world, enabling one to fill in the gaps between what the individual has learned through experience, what he has carefully reflected upon, and all the rest, i.e. all that he is unaware of but does not have the time to learn. The individual adheres to the ideological system closest to his own experience, education, and culture. Ideology is therefore a means of economizing on information cost (North, 1992 p.485). In that respect, promoting ideological discourse is rational, since it provides a provisional answer to a group of heterogeneous and complex situations. It also gives a single answer to all the problems that the individual will encounter.⁵ Ideology also plays a key role in political coordination. The candidate who is a political entrepreneur is guided by an electoral gain. He assesses the gap between his political preferences and those of voters by counting the number of ballots to him. The political entrepreneur takes the opportunities to come closer to voters' preferences through political discourse. He seeks to express accurately what voters feel in a confusing way. He proposes different types of political discourse in order to provide an ideological consistency that help in convincing the largest number of voters. By displaying its ideology, the political entrepreneur facilitates the voter political calculus. He reduces voters' costs of political understanding and helps him to form a political opinion at lower cost.⁶ He is at the center of the political dynamic, which consists of expressing voters' political demand.⁷ Ideology helps individuals to distinguish a political discourse close to his own and from one that is more distant. In the same vein, electoral competition is a means to reduce voters' ignorance. Such electoral competition among political entrepreneurs is a discovery process that helps voters know more about candidates' political preferences. Political competition reduces the formation of voters' political opinions precisely because it forces them to display their ideologies.

Thus, ideology creates systemic knowledge enabling voters to identify a political discourse closest to his preferences at lower cost. It is an institutional prerequisite for electoral coordination since it reduces political entrepreneurs' communication costs as well as voters' information costs. Ideological discourse enhances voters' political competence. For this

⁵(North 1988, p. 122) D. North is in accordance with R. Boudon (Boudon 1986, p. 23) who argue that ideologies (namely, beliefs about wrong ideas) emerge "not in spite of the man's rationality but precisely because he is rational."

⁶This is an old argument that has been developed by Downs (1961).

⁷ See also Dougan and Munger (1989) who show that the ideology of an elected official can be used both to restrict voters' information costs, and to force him to serve the interests of the electoral body.

reason, political reform of institutions, whether they were in favor of or against liberalism, had always emerged after ideological revolutions that help reduce voters' understanding costs of the social world (North 1992, p. 486.)

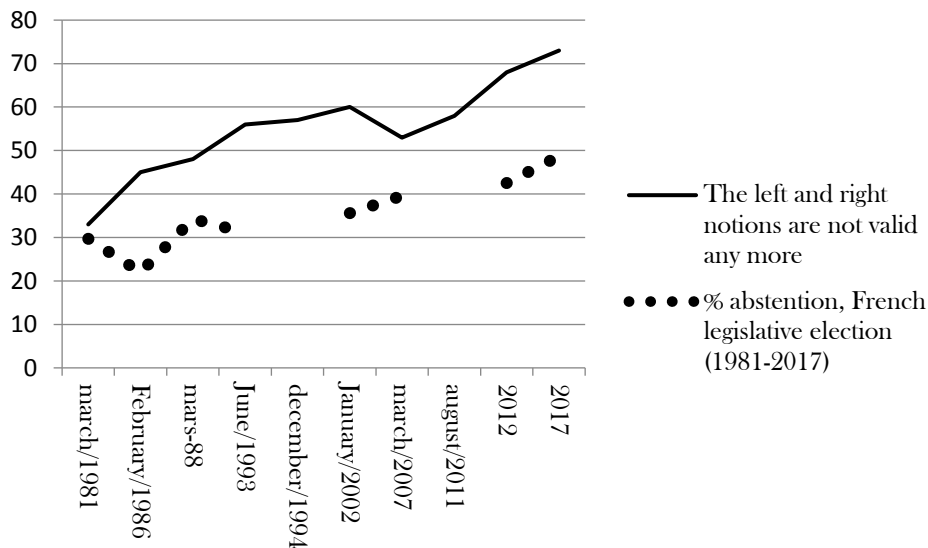
2.3 Erosion of Ideologies and Abstention

Following North (1992) and Downs (1961), ideology plays the role of a signal that is a shortcut to understand political debates and public policy choices. Therefore, ideology reduces parameter C and increases the electoral turn out. The fear of ideologies or its erosion increases the political confusion and the cost of political competence. In a world where traditional left wing and right wing parties are clearly differentiated, specific policies are associated with parties' political programs. Conversely, the absence of ideological divide distorts this signal. This process is, however, less damaging for voters with high human capital than for others. Gradually, the less informed voters are squeezed out of the political debate because they no longer understand it. Hence, they stay away from polls. This is the reason why electoral abstainers are usually individuals with low human capital (Franklin, 2004). Interestingly, this trend towards more ideological vacuity sustains itself as effective voters are those who are the more competent and informed, and therefore the ideological signal becomes useless to them.

3. The French Case: Ideological Decline, Abstention, and Economic Crisis

Applying this simple model of voter turnout to address French electoral abstention not only provides empirical facts to the theory, but also leads to interesting predictions about the future of modern democracies and France in particular. Indeed, over the past few years, all the French opinion polls, Sofres, have shown that, for most of the French people, the Left-Right split is becoming increasingly meaningless. As a result, abstention would rise, i.e. political power would become increasingly illegitimate. A simple correlation between ideological confusion and abstention does not contradict this prediction (Figure 2).

Fig. 2 Correlation Abstention and Ideological Confusion (France, 1981-2017)



Sources: On the ideological confusion, we used the surveys: L'évolution du Clivage Gauche Droite en France (1981/2002) ; Pour L'année 2012 Baromètre Confiance en Politique Vague, 3 octobre 2013 ; CEVIPOF, "Aujourd'hui la Notion de Droite et de Gauche ne Veulent Plus Rien Dire?;" On % abstention, Ministry of Interior.

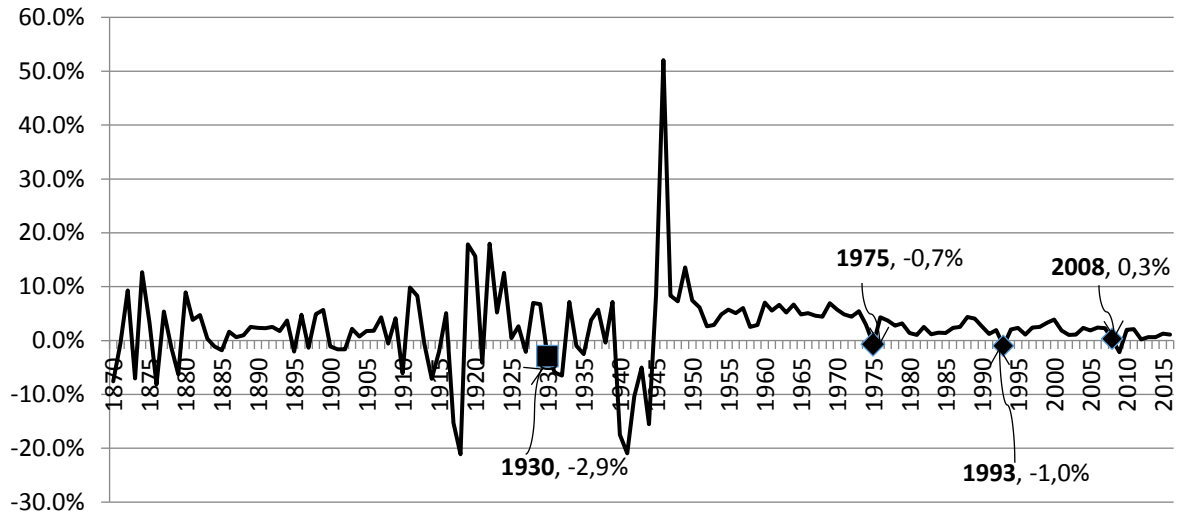
Besides, introducing ideological confusion into the analysis of voting behavior also has the merit of discussing the debate between economic crisis and voter turnout. Thus far, the literature has provided ambiguous results.

In times of crisis, the ineffectiveness of economic policies would generate two contradictory effects. This inefficiency leads to more mobilization if voters believe they can force the elected government to change policy through their vote (Schlozman and Verba, 1979). In this view, people are encouraged to vote, protest, or lobby because they blame the government for their economic hardships and wish to manifest their discontent regarding the government's policies. In that sense, economic crisis generates greater electoral participation. Adverse economic conditions may also have the opposite effect leading citizens to ignore politics, as well as how governments act against economic turmoil. This is the withdrawal effect. The reason for this is that people enduring hard economic conditions face serious problems; they therefore tend to focus their efforts and attention on solving them and, as a result, pay less attention to politics (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Radcliff (1992) introduces the idea that

social security programs matter. In developed countries where social security programs are established, adverse economic conditions depress voter turnout. Conversely, in developing countries, the lack of a social security system exposes voters more robustly to bad economic outcomes, explaining why they tend to participate more strongly in political life. Following Radcliff's analysis, Braconnier (2010) supports the view of a withdrawal effect which points to a linear relationship between the French electoral abstention and economic crisis. In support of this argument, she argues with Dormagen that political under-representation of the blue-collar working class suffering from hard economic conditions significantly contributed to the high level of French abstention during the 2012 Presidential election. (Braconnier and Dormagen, 2012). Martins and Veiga (2013) have gone further and challenged this view by arguing in favour of a non-linear relationship. They assume that in good and bad times the mobilization effect dominates, as voters may wish to express their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with economic performance, while situations in which the economy is neither too hot nor too cold may cause the withdrawal effect to be dominant. These effects are consistent with the theory of expressive voting, according to which voting may be motivated by concerns other than the outcome of the election. Although an individual voter knows that his vote has virtually no chance of being decisive in a mass election, he may wish to vote, however, in order to express his satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the economic performance achieved by the incumbent government. Expressive voting may vary with economic conditions and be more salient in good and bad times (Hillman, 2010). Based on a Portuguese data set related to legislative and municipal elections, it shows that electoral abstention is weaker when economic conditions are very good or very bad, and stronger when economic outcomes are neither good nor bad. In addition, using the Veirmer and Heyndels (2006) electoral model when applied to Flemish municipal elections, they confirm the existence of a non-linear relationship between economic crisis and electoral abstention.

Therefore, the literature is clear in that it has not come up with a straight answer. Studying the French case helps clarify this debate. The effect of the 1929 and 1975 crisis on electoral participation is very different from that of the 1993 and 2008 crisis. Although these crises exhibited negative or zero growth rate (Figure 3), the years 1929 and 1975 recorded the lowest level of abstention throughout the period between 1876-2012.

Fig. 3 French Real GDP Growth Rate (1870–2016)



Sources: Annual Gross Domestic Product in Millions 1990 International Geary-Khamis Dollars, Maddison's website: <http://www.ggdcd.net/MADDISON/oriindex.htm> and INSEE, Time Series (*Série Chronologique*).

On the contrary, the years 1993 and 2008 exhibited the opposite (Figure 1). The answer to this puzzle lies with the degree of ideological divide. It is striking to notice that the political situation during the 1975 economic crisis resembles that of the crisis in early 1930s. The French left is united around a common agenda: a clear and specific ideological alternative is proposed to the electorate, which acts as a cognitive shortcut that reduces voters' costs of political information, enhancing them to fulfil their civic duty. Unsurprisingly, the abstention rate recorded at parliamentary elections in 1975 was among the lowest at roughly 18 percent (Figure 1). Opting for a change in power clearly showed, then, that voters trusted alternate political programs in their ability to solve the problem of unemployment which had become their priority since 1979 (Dupoirier, 1989). Conversely, the 1993 and 2008 economic crises did not occur in the same context. They emerged in a context of the political crisis during the years between 1983-1985, which signalled the point where voters had trouble in differentiating between the left and the right (Figure 2). This crisis has its roots in the failure of the joint program of the left as well as the choice of a restrictive budgetary policy and a monetary policy aiming at strengthening the franc in 1984. In 1981, the left had not ruled for 25 years and voters could clearly distinguish between the right and the left. Since then, however, this

distinction became less evident along with the fact that successive left wing and right-wing governments were unable to tackle the unemployment problem. Hence, less educated voters no longer understood political debates and faced the prohibitive costs of acquiring political information. As a result, the abstention rate during the 1993 and 2008 parliamentary elections increased to 31% and 38% respectively (Figure 1). Hence, the French case shows that the effect of economic crisis on electoral abstention is conditioned by the degree of ideological divide that exists among leading parties. The latter significantly affects the costs of voting. When such a divide is strong, high turnout occurs. When it is weak, it leads to abstention. This is in line with the argument of a non-linear relationship, as suggested elsewhere.⁸

4. Concluding Remarks

Although the paradox of voting has been used by some sociologists to show the limits of instrumental rationality (Boudon, 1997), this article has shown that the economic theory of ideology provides a new perspective to address this paradox within the traditional EUM. On the one hand, our approach helps to refine the determinants of the costs of voting, and on the other hand, to highlight the link between the rise of abstention and the ideological confusion of the political supply. When the ideological discourse of dominant political parties weakens, the costs of acquiring political information become prohibitive and the cost of voting increases. Converse's (1964, 2000) seminal work provided a major contribution by emphasising the role played by political information costs. However, it has ignored the effect of ideology on these costs. When the ideological differentiation between parties is not clearly identified, voters' costs of political competency increase. As a result, abstention tends to increase.

In addition to its theoretical scope, such an explanation sheds a new light on the rise of populism. Populism has a simplistic political platform. In Italy, the Five Star Movement (FSM) is anti-establishment, alter-globalist, eurosceptic, and anti-immigration. U.S. President Donald Trump developed a very simple political slogan: America First. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has a nationalist and anti-immigration political discourse. Hence, not only does ideological undifferentiation lead to abstention, but it also brings electoral success to anti-

⁸Studying the Portuguese case, Martins and Veiga (2013) have supported the case for a non-linear empirical relationship.

establishment rhetorics and anti-elite based politics. The populist rhetoric, which provides caricatured versions of many political issues, may be analysed with a similar cognitive logic. Voting for extremists would be a substitute for understanding confusing political discourses where the words of the left wing party are used by the right wing, and conversely. Populism, ideological confusion, and abstention would go hand in hand. In the same vein, the “*neither from the right nor from the left*” political slogan would not be a solution for the political crisis in a country like France, but rather, one of its main causes. The ideological confusion, almost mechanically, drives out from politics every voter who does not have the necessary resources to develop political competency about technical issues such as monetary policy, public debt, climate change, and/or the balance of social accounts. In that perspective, both voters and political parties have an interest to stick to simplified versions of political debates and to challenge political discourse from technocrats. Voters with low human capital or low political competency would be crowded out from political life. Studying the interplay between populism, ideological confusion, and abstention would be an interesting avenue for further research to address current political development in Western democracies.

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