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Article in *Political Studies Review* · July 2019

DOI: 10.1177/1478929919862149

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Piecing the Puzzle Together: A Critical Review of Contemporary Research on Protest Voting

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The Final Version of this article has been accepted for publication in **Political Studies Review, published by SAGE, on 12th of March 2019 and is available online: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929919862149>*

Abstract

After several decades of debate on the so-called protest vote, the extant literature in this field is still small and far from consistent in conceptualization and analytical perspectives. Yet, at a time of increasing democratic stress, it becomes crucial for political studies to take stock of current research on this topic and assess its general state of health.

In the light of this, aim of the present contribution is to piece together the puzzle of theoretical and analytical perspectives from which scholars and pundits have approached the matter over the years. First, it will do it at a conceptual level, disentangling different ways of understanding what a protest vote is. Afterwards, it will come to analytical approaches, categorizing them into different clusters according to the type of inferential process on which they rely. It will also deal with current empirical findings on the matter, bringing their historical development of studies on protest voting under two main chronological phases. As a last step, it will summarize the still open issues under different dimensions of analysis, organizing them within a unified platform and identifying possible lines of development for future research.

Keywords

Protest voting; protest parties; political dissatisfaction; political concepts; state-of-the-art review

Introduction

Protest voting is probably one of the most striking paradoxes of our political era. Although very often used in public discourse and in academe this phrase is hardly ever clearly specified, as well as rarely investigated empirically. The limited scientific literature in this field, small and far from consistent in conceptualization and analytical perspectives, is a perfect expression of such state of affairs. In truth, all this should not be surprising at all, as protest voting has always been first and foremost a commonplace of political commentary, before than a substantive research object. In the wake of pundits, indeed, political scientists and analysts have often tried to deduce its existence from peculiar macro-level dynamics, such as ‘shocking’ or at least unexpected electoral results, favoring a party (or a candidate) generally recognized as a vehicle for protest in public debate. Occasionally, an electoral earthquake may indeed take place in a context of protest movements or at least in a political climate characterized by a widely spread sense of frustration and dissatisfaction towards the poor performance of government or even of the representational system. Under such conditions, observers and scholars tend often to conclude that the micro-foundations of the electoral success of a given party are indeed motivations merely inspired by a *voting against logic*. On the other hand, we also know that

protest voting as such is an individual act, and that any reliable strategy to assess it should necessarily focus on the psychological sphere of the voter.

The tension between these two elements, i.e. the psychological dimension of a protest vote and its external manifestation in the form of election outcomes, has never been completely resolved. This is particularly reflected by the fact that many empirical studies, although claiming to analyze individual protest votes, do it by focusing on parties that are already believed to be conveyers of an electoral protest according to media and/or elites' interpretations of election results. Yet, as long as something like protest voting is concerned, elements of public discourse should not influence the focus of the analysis, but rather should be subject to it. More precisely, voters and elites should be considered as part of the same coordination game, in which, as in any coordination problem, the mutual and reflexive expectations between the involved actors assume a central importance.

Clearly, all this suggests that there is a necessity to renew and refine the current analytical framework on protest voting. For this purpose, the present contribution aims to shed some light on the various pieces of the protest voting issue and to systematize them for the purposes of future research in times of democratic stress. At the conceptual level, this will be done by distinguishing two different ways of conceptualizing protest voting: a *party-based* one, deriving the protest nature of specific groups of voters from some

characteristics of the parties they voted for, and a *voter-based* one, focusing more explicitly on the motivations underlying voters' electoral choices. At the empirical level, on the other hand, it will distinguish between measurement strategies based either on the presumed character of a party or on aggregate information relating to it, and inferences at the individual level, alternatively based on voters' self-reported motivations for their vote choice or on multivariate modeling. Finally, existing findings will be traced back to two consecutive phases of research. Hopefully, this effort will provide a useful map, allowing to take stock of such a fragmented and multi-faceted context and successfully guiding them through it.

Conceptualizations of protest voting

Party-based definitions

Although successively labelled as unsatisfactory for an actual understanding of protest voting as an individual act (Bergh, 2004), this type of definitions has actually been the first attempt through which researchers tried to make their mind up with a new era of electoral instability in Western Europe. Faced with an apparent pattern of de-freezing of party systems since the 70s (Mair, 1998), indeed, the idea that the fortunes of newcomers of

political competition could be due to their ability to mobilize a diffused sense of political malaise within the electorate found significant success both in the scientific community and in public debate. On that base, some of these parties were named as protest parties and their voters, as a consequence, as *de facto* protest voters. In the light of an in-depth review of existing research on this point, we could argue that such labelling procedure has generally taken place on the basis of at least two alternative criteria. The first is looking at the ideological appeal of the party voted for, while the second is looking at its distance from government influence, or better, to its *anti-establishment-ness* (Schedler, 1996). A clear exemplification of the first alternative are certainly the works by Hans-Georg Betz. Indeed, within the framework of his *politics of resentment* he argued that the success of new political entrepreneurs between the late 80s and the beginning of the 90s has to be attributed to their ability to mobilize an increasingly widespread climate of cynicism and alienation from politics in the European electorates (Betz, 2002; Betz and Immerfall, 1998). Even more importantly, basing on that interpretation, he concluded that the so-called new-populist parties in Western Europe were essentially protest parties and their voters, accordingly, protest voters.

As anticipated, the second group of *party-based* conceptualizations does not look much at the ideological profile of the parties presumably attracting protest voters, but rather

to its relation with established parties, i.e. its *anti-establishment-ness*. Just as a way of example, Verney and Bosco (2014), in their recent analysis of so-called *protest elections* in Italy and Greece, assimilated protest voting to voting for challenger parties, i.e. parties which have never joined a governing coalition before (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012)¹.

Voter-based definitions

If compared to the first one, this second cluster of conceptualizations of protest voting is relatively more recent. Not by chance, it stems from a series of studies substantially banishing previous party-based definitions as too hasty and trivial depictions of what an electoral protest actually is, especially in public debate. To quote a representative statement on this point, the definition ‘*a protest voter is a voter who votes for a protest party [is] unacceptable, because it begs the question*’ (Van Der Brug et al., 2000: 82). In reply, voter-based definitions firmly share the assumption that protest voting is something pertaining to the internal motivations of the voters and that, for this same reason, any way of defining it should logically avoid any reference to the characteristics of

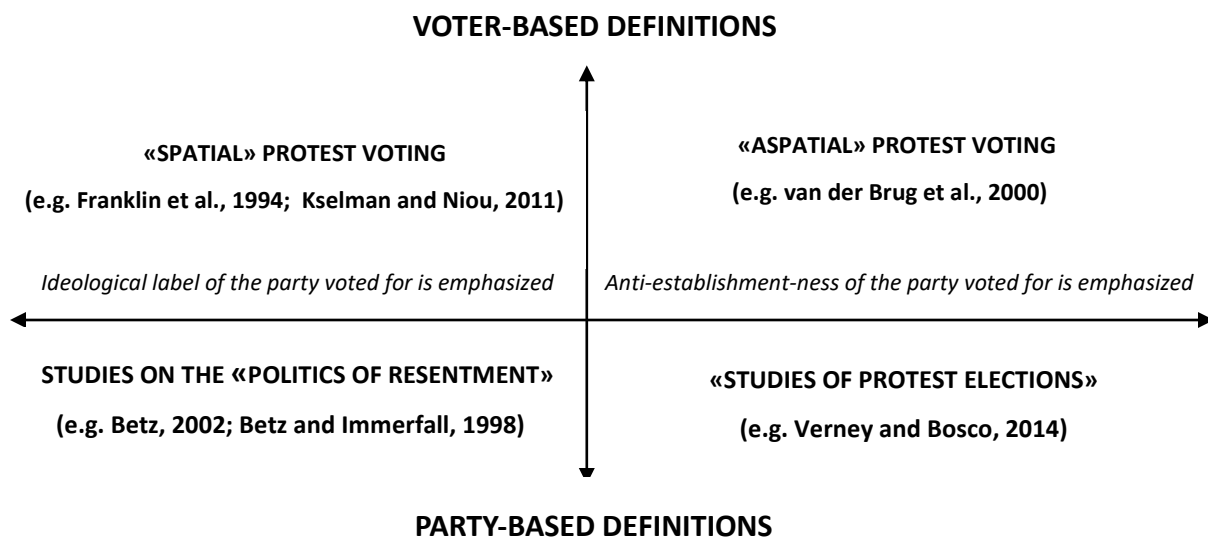
¹ Among other things, challenger parties are in these cases almost all new parties. Nevertheless, *challenger-ness* and *newness* of a party do not necessarily overlap (see e.g. the National Front in France).

the party voted for. Yet, although being only two, they do not share a common perspective on their object of focus. A first voter-based conceptualization defines protest voting as '*choosing a party other than one's most-preferred to send that most preferred party a signal of dissatisfaction*' (Kselman and Niou, 2011). In a way, this makes protest voting definable in terms of a sort of tactical behavior. Alternatively, Franklin et al. (1994) suggest to call it *expressive*. In their view, indeed, the domain of expressivity covers all instances in which individuals might vote not so much to alter the winner in their constituency but rather to send some message or signal, to their own party or to some other. Although a similar behavior could be due to different reasons, the underlying assumption here is that voters choose (or defect) candidates and/or parties spatially, i.e. based on considerations about the proximity/distance of these latter to their own ideological and/or policy preferences (Downs, 1957). To give a practical example, according to this approach supporters of a hypothetical social-democratic party could vote for a smaller – and even more leftist - party to signal a desire that the party changes its current ideological location in that direction.

The second *voter-based* conceptualization of protest voting bases on completely different assumptions. Indeed, it defines the protest voter as a voter whose choice is neither ideologically nor strategically driven (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2000; Van Der Eijk et al.,

1996), as his/her main aim is to express disenchantment with the political system ‘*by voting for a party that is an outcast in the political arena*’ (Van Der Brug et al., 2000: 82). Although both the above definitions could easily fall under the broader category of expressive voting, here it seems much more effective to categorize them according to what really makes them distinguishable, i.e. their amenability to spatial explanations of voting behavior. More precisely, I will refer to them as *spatial* and *aspatial* interpretations of protest voting respectively. For the sake of clarity, the conceptual diagram reported at following Figure 1 offers a synthetic representation of the different conceptualizations described so far.

Fig 1: Definitions of Protest Voting: Summary Scheme



Types of empirical strategies

Inferences from the party level of analysis

Among the existing analytical approaches, this is the one characterizing all the types of *party-based* definitions presented above. Generally, it consists in inferring elements regarding the individual sphere of the voter by looking at the apparent nature of the party (s)he voted for. Hans-Georg Betz' (2002) strategy to derive the presumed protest motives of new-populist party voters from the contents and rhetorical style of these latter's programmatic platforms offers a clear example of it. A similar case is also Pelle Svensson's analysis of Danish politics in the 1970s (1996). Indeed, after identifying those parties that, according to him, were disloyal to that political system, he concluded that their voters had to be called protest voters.

Alongside these, other contributions elaborated party level characteristics by aggregation of individual level data. For example, if specific party voters appear particularly endowed with characteristics such as political cynicism, distrust, inefficacy, alienation, etc., according to some they should be understood as protest voters (Mudde and Holsteyn, 2000).

Strategies based on open-ended questions

Since the approach described above, i.e, drawing inferences about individual-level motivations by means of aggregate-level data, is at least problematic due to serious problems of ecological fallacy (Freedman, 1999), this second group of measurement strategies has been successively presented as a possible improvement. Specifically, it proposes to infer the protest quality of a voter from his self-reported motivation underlying vote choice in an election. The main theoretical standpoint in this case are Campbell *et al.* (1960). Their theory, indeed, was that *'the voter, however badly (s)he might be informed about politics, has a concrete evaluative scheme regarding the various political actors (parties, candidates, media, pressure groups...)'* (Swyngedouw 2001: 221). They called it the *cognitive and affective map of politics* (Campbell *et al.* 1960: 15). With the aim of accessing this map, surveys have been over time increasingly provided with open-ended questions, in the attempt to detect voters' self-reported motives for their voting behavior. As regards protest voting, in particular, answers reported complaints against the elites and/or specific parties have sometimes been used by some as indicators of protest voting (Billiet and De Witte, 1995; Swyngedouw, 2001).

Of course, also this open method of putting questions has its drawbacks. In particular, since respondents in interview situations usually rely on accessible information

(Zaller, 1992), if the media pay a great deal of attention to the claim a party was successful because of protest votes, then the occurrence of standardized responses drawing on that explanation would be likely. To say it with the words of Billiet and De Witte, *'this does not mean that the reported motives are false, but it does mean that real motives which may not be so manifestly present in public discourse may not be reported at all'* (1995: 186).

Inferences based on determinants of party preferences or vote choice

An alternative way to cope with the inferential problems implied by presumed aggregate indicators of protest voting has to do with multivariate modeling. As I will show in the following paragraphs, this strategy, mostly neglected in a first phase of more descriptive research on this topic, has started to be employed quite extensively since the beginning of the 2000s. Nevertheless, there are some exceptions. Billiet and De Witte (1995), for example, provided their analysis about voting for the Vlaams Blok in Belgium also with a multivariate context. Before them, only Bowler and Lanoue (1992) tried a similar solution in this field, by estimating the effect on voting for third minor parties in the Canadian context. Years later, measurement strategies based on determinants of vote choice were also adopted by another group of authors such as Bergh (2004) and Norris (2005), to name but a few. Although falling into the same, broader framework of regression analysis,

studies of protest voting basing on determinants of party preferences actually developed as a sort of autonomous line of research over the past two decades. From a technical standpoint, this is an approach which allows to overcome some limits of traditional analyses based on dichotomous party choice as a dependent variable. As a matter of fact, analytical strategies based on the assessment of party preferences tend to rely on variables indicating the propensity to vote for each of the national parties (PTVs), which provide more insight into the strength of preference for different political actors, both the one voted and those not voted for (van der Eijk, 2017).

Drawing upon such framework, subsequent analyses of protest voting have been aimed to test whether supporting an alleged protest party actually implied a party-specific set of considerations, not comparable with those preceding vote choice for any other parties (Van Der Brug et al., 2000; Van der Brug and Fennema, 2009; Van Der Brug and Fennema, 2003). Substantive details on this point will be provided in the following section.

The evolution of a research field

First phase

Notwithstanding the multiplicity of existing perspectives on protest voting, a summary examination of available studies allows to create an accurate chronology of the

findings relating to it. The general framework is the same described by Betz (2002) and many others before him: increasing representational crisis, low performance of political systems, sudden emergence of new parties and new issues of which to care about. Faced with the dawning of that competitive context, during the late 70s some scholars had already argued that it was not possible for new parties to gain votes if voters were satisfied with how the main parties were performing (Hausss and Rayside 1978)². Clearly, this insight occurred at least one decade ahead the flowering of definitions and conceptualizations reported at the previous paragraphs. Nevertheless, it was still a mere intuition not supported by any systematic empirical evidences. As for more systematic studies, it was not until the beginning of the 90s, when scholars started looking for empirical support to the protest voting hypothesis, i.e. that the electoral success of specific parties was indeed a matter of pure protest against the political system. Some first interesting cases regard voters of several right-wing parties in Germany, France, Netherlands and Belgium. For example, electoral research on the German Die Republikaner at the 1989 European election claimed that support for this party was not exclusively due to a genuine consensus on the party's politics in their main issues. Rather, some of its voters wanted also to show dissatisfaction

² Some of the most visible cases of that time were the Radicals and the NF in the UK, the Radical Party in Italy and the Greens in Germany (Lawson and Merkl, 1988).

with the performance of established parties (Veen et al., 1993). In a similar vein, research on the French National Front at the beginning of the 90s put attention on several indicators possibly signaling that not everything of Le Pen's party support could be explained by programmatic or ideological affinity. Rather, many Lepenist voters appeared to take their voting decision only during the last few weeks in the campaign (Mayer and Perrineau, 1992; Mitra, 1988).

On the other hand, several studies from the Netherlands, Germany and France showed that voters of presumed protest parties did not only feel less efficacious with regard to the political system (Rose, 2000; Voerman and Lucardie, 1992), but were also more congruent with the ideology of their parties (Meloan et al., 1988; Rosseel, 1993). Further acknowledgements on this point came from additional research on the Vlaams Blok in the Flemish part of Belgium (De Witte 1992). This scenario has been subsequently summarized by Eatwell (1998), who concluded that Vlaams Blok's voters, as much as they may have been protesting against the elite, they had also a clear programmatic affinity with that party.

Second phase

If the first period of empirical work on protest voting generally resulted in ambivalent results, sometimes consistent with the so-called protest voting hypothesis and

sometimes not (or only partially), a more intensive use of multivariate analysis tools has successively allowed to achieve clearer outcomes. Nevertheless, even in this case the big picture is not totally unambiguous.

Drawing upon the theoretical insights by van der Eijk et al. (1996), van der Brug et al. (2000) developed the first study of protest voting based on determinants of party preferences, as already mentioned. With a focus on anti-immigrant parties, in particular, they showed that voters of such political actors in the 1994 European Parliament election were not characterized by significantly different motivations than voters of any other party. Rather, they appeared to be not less influenced by ideological location, no less concerned about parties' electoral prospects, and no more hostile to the EU than supporters of conventional mainstream parties. In compliance with these conclusions, also further studies discarded resentment as a causal factor in the rise and the uneven electoral fortunes of anti-immigrant parties, as concerns about policy issues and campaign dynamics were in their view much more impactful (Birch and Dennison, 2017; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Norris, 2005). Other scholars, however, hold a more intermediate position, arguing that issue and protest considerations are not by necessity mutually exclusive in informing the individual calculus of voting for non-established parties (Bergh, 2004; Cutts et al., 2011; Denemark and

Bowler, 2002; Hernández, 2018; Hosch-Dayican 2011; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018; Pop-Eleches, 2010).

Some conclusions: a critical assessment

As explained in the review above, definitions of protest voting are multiple, both in their very contents, as also noticeable from previous Figure 1, and in their relation with different inferential strategies. Such heterogeneity clearly signals how research on this topic is still underdeveloped and in a way under-institutionalized in electoral research (Van der Brug and Fennema 2007). Indeed, protest voting has been usually framed from different perspectives, but scarcely in dialogue with one another and not even agreeing on a common definition of the concept.

In this regard, there are a couple of considerations to be done. The first one regards conceptualizations of protest voting. In the light of the foregoing review, it goes almost without saying that those definitions linking the protest character of a vote back to voter-based dimension (i.e. spatial and aspatial protest voting) are way more appropriate (both conceptually and analytically) than their party-based counterparts. Here too, however, one further clarification is needed. Actually, the argument underlying both spatial and aspatial definitions is that protest voting consists in choosing a party not so much to support its

programmatic and/or ideological platform but rather in order to punish other parties (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2009). And yet, the same idea of a spatial protest vote implies that defecting one's usual preference in favor of a different one is driven by some policy and/or ideological concerns. In this respect, why not just call it a policy and/or ideological vote? If the claim that any self-contained conceptualization of protest voting should be qualitatively different to ideological, strategic or policy votes (Van der Brug and Fennema, 2003), then the aspatial definition by van der Brug et al. (2000) appears to be the best solution so far. This claim, however, more than as a conclusion should sound as a starting point. At present, indeed, any definition of protest voting is still affected by the implicit assumption that a protest vote is, by necessity, a vote for an anti-establishment party. This applies both to party-based conceptualizations, which explicitly tend to project the rhetorical weapons of apparent protest parties on the motivations driving the choice of their voters, and to voter-based definitions, which frame protest voting as an expression of individual dissatisfaction, although exclusively realized through voting for '*an outcast in the political arena*' (Van Der Brug et al., 2000: 82). And yet, nobody can rule out with certainty that mainstream parties will never take advantage of protest votes. This is to say that current definitions of protest voting tend to rely on partial interpretations of the issue, proposed by the elites and/or the media as a way of explaining the electoral success of specific parties, often said

to be protest ones. In future, similar other-directed interpretations should not influence the direction of an objective analysis, but rather should be subject to it. Alongside this, a renewed and systematic empirical commitment with the protest voting issue in general will be needed. Next works on this topic, in particular, will have to overcome the shortcomings of too country-specific approaches, both by embracing a more comparative perspective and by devoting higher attention to the role of macro-political contexts.

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