



Are Nonvoters Fence-sitters?



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Abstract

In this paper, we compare 18- and 19-year-olds to 20- and 21-year-olds in twelve U.S. interim election years; the former is ineligible to vote in the presidential election two years before while the latter is eligible. Using the voting eligibility as an instrumental variable, we find that nonvoters are 23.5 percent more likely to affiliate to the same party with president than voters. Three placebo tests show that this finding is not driven by the age difference. Instead, we contend that cognitive dissonance is the main cause. Nonvoters, especially for those who would cast a vote for losers if they were eligible, tend to change their attitude after election to go along with most people.



Identification Strategy

Variable Definition:

- ❑ **Explained variable:** whether the respondent is the same party as president.
- ❑ **Explanatory variable:** whether the respondent voted in the previous election two years ago
 - ✓ The voting behavior is endogenous, affected by demographic characteristics as well as past voting experience (e.g., Meredith 2009; Kadt, 2017)
- ❑ **Instrumented variable:** whether the respondent was eligible to vote (18 years old or older on election day)

Identification strategy:

❑ The first stage:

$$Voted_{i,t-2} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Eligible_{i,t-2} + X_{it}\Gamma + \delta_t + \phi_r + \epsilon_{it}$$

❑ The second stage:

$$Same_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Voted_{i,t-2} + X_{it}\Gamma + \delta_t + \phi_r + \epsilon_{it}$$

- ✓ where X_{it} represents a set of demographic controls including the logarithm of family income and dummies for gender, race, being employed, having graduated from high school, living in an urban area. δ_t and ϕ_r indicates year fixed effect and region fixed effect, respectively.

Mechanism

- ❑ **Cognitive dissonance theory** (Festinger, 1957)
 - ✓ any discrepancy between cognitions may be psychologically disturbing
 - ✓ people have a strong incentive to reduce such dissonance
- ❑ For voters
 - ✓ choice bring loyalty (Dinas, 2013)
 - ✓ voting causes greater polarization in attitudes toward the president (Mullainathan & Washington, 2009)
- ❑ For nonvoters
 - ✓ if their potential choices are inconsistent with the outcome (most people favor), what will happen?
- ❑ Among those who would like to cast a vote for losers, nonvoters are more likely to affiliate to the same party with winners after the election.

Table III. By Potential Voting Choice

	Vote for winners	Vote for losers
Dependent variable:	Same party as president	Same party as president
voted	-0.206 (0.208)	-0.347** (0.148)
Kleibergen-Paap F-statistic:	73.985	90.721
Observations	363	437

Introduction

Motivation:

- ❑ A vast literature studies voters' behaviors and attitudes.
 - ✓ the determinants of voting participation and voting choice (e.g., Zuckerman et al., 2007)
 - ✓ the evolution of party identification throughout life cycle (e.g., Gerber et al., 2003; Coppock & Green, 2015)
 - ✓ the interaction of voting behavior and attitudes (e.g., Mullainathan & Washington, 2009)
- ❑ Less attention paid to nonvoters
 - ✓ potential voters
 - ✓ more weak-willed

Research Questions:

- ❑ Are nonvoters more likely to affiliate to the same party as president than voters after the U.S. presidential election?
- ❑ If so, what theory can explain?

Data

- ❑ This paper mainly uses data from **General Social Survey** in twelve nonpresidential (interim) election years from 1974 to 2018.
- ❑ We also use data from **National Election Study** in twelve presidential elections to provide supplementary evidences.
- ❑ Our sample consists of young people who were eligible to vote in the previous presidential election (**20- and 21-year-olds**) as well as those who were ineligible (**18- and 19-year-olds**).

Empirical Results

- ❑ **Table I** presents the effect of voting on party affiliation.
- ❑ The 2SLS estimate reveals that nonvoters are 23.5 percent more likely to affiliate to the same party with president than voters two years after the presidential election.

Table I. Voting and Party Affiliation

Dependent variable:	(1) OLS	(2) First-stage	(3) 2SLS
	Same party as president	Voted in the previous election	Same party as president
Voted	0.005 (0.040)		-0.235** (0.119)
Eligible		0.321*** (0.024)	
Kleibergen-Paap F-statistic:		175.458	
Demographics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region fixed	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sample size	800	800	800

- ❑ **Table II** presents three placebo tests between two groups differing in age but not in voting eligibility, providing evidences that the previous finding is not driven by the age difference.

Table II. Placebo Tests

Time period relative to presidential election	Two years post presidential election	Two years post Presidential election	Presidential election year (NBS)
Ages compared	22,23vs. 20,21	24,25vs. 22,23	20,21vs.18,19
Eligible	0.047 (0.028)	0.001 (0.025)	0.006 (0.025)
Observations	1,262	1,609	1,356

Heterogeneity Analysis

- ❑ First, When the president is going to leave office due to the term limits, the difference between voters and nonvoters in party affiliation will disappear.
- ❑ Second, when society trusts in government, a larger difference is observed. Whereas, when society distrusts in government, this difference is weakened.
- ❑ Third, only in male group, nonvoters are more likely to affiliate to the same party as president than voters.

Conclusions

- ❑ This paper empirically estimate the impact of voting on party affiliation.
- ❑ We find that nonvoters are 23.5 percent more likely to affiliate to the same party with president than voters after the presidential election.
- ❑ Cognitive dissonance plays a vital role
 - ✓ Voters prefer the party they choose (keep attitude consistent with behavior)
 - ✓ Nonvoters, especially for those who would cast a vote for losers if they were eligible, tend to change their attitude after election to go along with most people.

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