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Does being elected increase subjective entitlements? Evidence from the laboratory

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Abstract

In Geng, Weiss, and Wolff (2011), we pointed to the possibility that a voting mechanism may create or strengthen an entitlement effect in political-power holders relative to a random-appointment mechanism. This comment documents that such an effect, if it exists, is not robust.

We thank the lively TWI research group for fruitful discussions.

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1 Introduction

In Geng, Weiss, and Wolff (2011, p. 711f.), we concluded that abstracting from additional factors such as electoral promises “it seems as if being elected on the basis of one’s personality induces a stronger sense of entitlement [compared to being randomly chosen], leading to less welfare-oriented behaviour.” This note reports on additional sessions we ran in early 2012 with a very similar design intended to examine this conjecture. We do not find any evidence for the conjectured effect and conclude that, if there is any such effect at all, it is not a robust phenomenon.

We based our above conjecture on a simple experimental treatment comparison: two “candidates” had to select an ordered list of three out of eight positively connoted adjectives. In a second stage, the three lists were displayed to three “citizens” who in the VOTE-D treatment had to appoint their “president” by majority vote, while in the RAND-D treatment, the “president” was chosen by chance. In the third stage, the successful candidate had to indicate how much of an endowment of 100 points she would transfer to the voters, where each voter would obtain the amount of points given up by the “president”. In the German sessions, the successful candidates’ transfers were 38.30 in VOTE-D and 49.70 in RAND-D, the citizens’ expectations being 35.03 and 40.53, respectively. While the difference in transfers was clearly insignificant ($p = 0.424$), citizens’ expectations seemed to suggest there was some substance to this difference ($p = 0.069$). Our treatments reported here shed some light on this discrepancy.

2 Differences in experimental setups

The experimental protocol of the new sessions was the same as in the original experiment except for the following changes. Most importantly, the adjectives “optimistic,” “erudite,” “creative,” “musical,” “sportive,” “lively,” “diligent,” and “fond of traveling” were exchanged for eight adjectives taken from real election-campaign posters: “competent,” “consistent,” “courageous,” “far-sighted,” “really strong,” “hands-on,” “steadfast,” and “determined.”¹ Not only were these new adjectives closer to real election campaigns, they were also all related to the way in which power would be exerted. A second change was a change of subject pool: this time, the experiments were conducted in Cologne rather than in Erfurt. Furthermore, the unsuccessful candidate’s payoff was 0 rather than a random number with an expected value of 50. Finally, we used the strategy method straight away given we did not find any indication for a difference in the original data. For a full description of the original experiment, cf. Geng, Weiss, and Wolff (2011).

3 Results

Having gathered 12 independent observations in each treatment, we find no treatment effect: average transfers are 28.9 in the voting treatment and 29.6 in the random-appointment treatment (the rank sums are 151 and 149, respectively, so that $p = 0.965$).²

¹Adjectives 1, 2, 4, and 5 were used as statements in electoral campaigns in Switzerland, the remaining adjectives were extracted from longer statements in German election-campaign posters that were old enough so that our German student participants would not be able to remember them.

²Treatment comparisons are done by Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests.

At the same time, we replicate the reported effect on citizens' expectations: in the voting treatment, citizens on average expect a transfer of 22.8, whereas in the random-appointment treatment, their average expectation is 30.3. This difference is substantial but not significant ($p = 0.310$). There is a very plausible explanation for both the size and the non-significance of this effect: the average citizen voting in favour of the winning candidate expects a transfer of 26.5 while the average citizen voting for the loser expects only 11.3 (in 4 out of 4 groups in which there is a citizen voting for the losing candidate, the latter's expectation is below that of the majority, which in the absence of any systematic difference—i.e., under a binomial distribution—has a probability of occurrence of 0.063). In other words, voters of successful candidates do not expect the latter to be nicer or nastier than citizens under randomly appointed presidents ($p = 0.589$), but supporters of losing candidates tend to be clearly more pessimistic ($p = 0.1095$, comparison to the random-appointment treatment).

4 Conclusion

Based on the conjunction of the experiments reported in Geng, Weiss, and Wolff (2011) and the new treatments reported here, we conclude that the mere presence of a voting mechanism does not lead to a robust entitlement effect in elected candidates. This is reflected in the expectations of voters supporting the winning candidate who have the same expectations as “citizens” under a random-appointment mechanism; only supporters of the unsuccessful candidate differ in that they are more pessimistic.

References

- [1] Geng, H., A. R. Weiss, and I. Wolff (2011). “The limited power of voting to limit power.” *Journal of Public Economic Theory* 13(5): 695–719.