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Full of Regret: Possible Economic and Psychological Predictors of Voter Turnout Rates

by Marc B. Watterson

Abstract

Economic prosperity has been at the forefront of political campaigns for over two centuries in America. The state of the economy and indications of its performance have been used as political fodder to pull citizens to the voting booths. While America has suffered from rather anemic performances at the polls, the perceived state of the economy does make a difference in how, when, and how often people choose to vote. The question is whether poor or prosperous economic indicators spur people to vote en masse and what psychological effect might explain these results.

Do employment conditions in the state affect whether or not people turn out to vote? Voter turnout rates from the last five midterm elections of a president’s first term in office are used to estimate the effect that unemployment rates and the competitiveness of a race have on voter turnout. Both unemployment and the competitiveness of the highest office race (Congressional or Gubernatorial) have positive effects on voter turnout. Individual analysis of states with the highest and lowest unemployment rates complement my findings. When people feel like their previous vote or failure to vote contributed to a perceived decline in the economy, they are more inclined to vote in an attempt to change their circumstances. Conversely, when a person feels like their previous vote or failure to vote contributed to a perceived improvement or sustainment in the economy, they are more likely to not feel the need to vote to change or sustain the circumstances they in which they find themselves. High unemployment rates both increase a person’s desire to seek for change and increase their likelihood to vote. This behavior is consistent with the theory of regret.

1. Voter turnout is often associated with voter efficacy. Low voter turnout is thus associated with citizens having a very negative attitude toward their own ability to effect change in government through their individual actions. Thus, low voter turnout is perceived to be a negative indicator of people’s perceptions of their government.
Introduction

The American electorate uses many gauges and criteria when judging the performance of their elected leaders. While a politician’s attitudes, actions, and overall appearance to voters plays an important role, nowhere are these gauges more apparent than in voters’ perception of the economic well being of the country in relation to how it reflects upon the president of the United States, the United States Congress, and the governors of each state.

Political institutions, parties, and news organizations continuously contract polling agencies to quantify how economic indicators might affect the popularity of elected leaders. But do economic indicators, such as the stock market or unemployment, have an effect in voting booths on Election Day? Put succinctly, does dissatisfaction with the state of the economy—in particular, national and state unemployment rates—lead to higher voter turnout?

Theoretical Background

The research on this subject has been vast and quite thorough in the past, yet academia continues to debate whether strains on the economic system create impassioned desires to go out and vote. Seymour Lipset argues that “groups subject to economic pressures with which individuals cannot cope, such as inflation, depression, monopolistic exploitation, or structural changes in the economy, might also be expected to turn to government action as a solution and to show a high voting average” (1960, p. 192). Political participation and voter efficacy is thus correlated with the economic performance of both nation and state. Voters who witness or perceive negative changes in the economic stability of their nation or state are more likely to feel their civic participation can change the course of the economy (Milbrath and Goel 1977).

Samuel Kernell suggests the American psyche is much more inclined to punish than reward political figures for economic conditions (1977, p. 54). Surveying the results of midterm elections, he claims presidents who fail to convey positive messages of the economy toward an electorate are more likely to see former supporters defect to their political opponents. Such attitudes speak volumes of the fickle nature of the American electorate and their perceived efficacy to enact change en masse when their expectation (realistic or not) are not met. Such attitudes and conclusions give credence to the theory of current American politics acting much like a pendulum, constantly swinging back and forth (Martin 1906; Byander and Hart 2006).

Analogous to this argument is the work of Morris Fiorina, who also argued that voters engage in rational responses to economic and social conditions. In what he termed “retrospective voting,” Fiorina claims the American electorate engage in Simple Retrospective Evaluations (SRE) wherein, through their personal experiences and evaluation of the past and current conditions of the country, voters rationally tie perceived failings in the direction of the country to those whom they have elected. This tendency to engage
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in retrospective voting is such a pivotal force in voting that it leads to some citizens voting for candidates of a political party they have never supported before (Fiorina 1981).

However, the tide of research that claims economic indicators keep people at home rather than project them to the polls on voting day are impossible to ignore. Steven Rosenstone contends that "when a person suffers economic adversity his scarce resources are spent holding body and soul together, not on remote concerns like politics. Economic problems both increase the opportunity costs of political participation and reduce a person's capacity to attend to politics" (1982, p. 25). Such claims assert that individuals are more concerned about trying to survive and function on an individual level.

"Citizens whose chief worry is making ends meet, holding onto their job, or finding one, may well find any interest they might have in the broad affairs of politics deflected to coping with finding a way to deal now, or as soon as possible, with the most immediate and pressing of 'bread-and-butter' problems" (Brody and Sniderman 1977). This train of thought supports the economic theory of opportunity costs. As it relates to my theory, citizens simply do not have the time or energy to engage in the political process. Such causal theory also suggests voter efficacy is negatively affected by the perceived state of the economy, spurring citizens to simply stay home—or continue to go out and look for work—rather than head to the polls. This line of thinking suggests voter attitudes and general distrust of the government and its institutions will increase in negativity as the perceived state of the economy continues to falter or shows anemic signs of growth.

So which is it? Do citizens make it a point to voice their discontent when the economy is flailing, or do they find themselves more concerned with the day-to-day struggle to provide for their wants and needs? Are citizens empowered by their perception of the economy or feel the immensity of the institution is beyond their ability to change on an individual, or group, basis?

While many scholars have studied this topic extensively over the past few decades, the timeliness of this study and its potential predictive power for the upcoming election make it an invaluable intellectual contribution to the state of knowledge. Most of the studies related to this subject were published over twenty years ago as scientists and psychologists studied the possible effect of the Carter economic turmoil and recession that plagued Reagan's first few years in office (Fiorina; Fritz; Kernell; and Rosenstone).

However, the state of the country, the immensity of the economy, and the resources available to each individual in this day and age would astonish and amaze researchers of the past few decades. None of them could have predicted the pervasiveness of technology in our modern era or the overwhelming effect it has had on every facet of society—especially the economy and politics. Quite simply, the technology of today changes the rules and assumptions of the past.

Also, the relative perception of economic indicators changes drastically over time. While voters in 1982 would have been relieved to see unemployment rates in

80
the 8 or 9 percent range, voters of today are outraged and galvanized by these figures. Voters, especially among the Generation X and Millennial generations, have grown up in a world expecting a job for every person, a home for every family, and a system that works to satiate their needs. They do not have the disposition to recognize the ebb and flow of the economy over the years. Economic indicators, especially unemployment rates, could have a much stronger impact on their feelings of political efficacy than their generational forbearers.

The importance of such a modern study could also have a tremendous effect on how candidates attempt to spur voter turnout. If a significant correlation exists between unemployment rates and voter turnout, candidates will be able to fine tune their campaigns to know exactly which issues to “push,” because they are most likely to appeal to the electorate. The ability for candidates to refine messages and recognize the most important issues to voters is the key to encouraging citizens to get to the polls. Recognizing that generational gaps might exist in attitudes toward economic indicators will also be of value to candidates as they attempt to shape political discourse amongst the electorate, and in particular, their supporters. With extremely intense partisanship and dissatisfaction levels of congress at record lows, finding issues that are not just important to voters but are proven to increase voter turnout will be of tremendous importance to political discussions.

Data and Methods

The premise behind my theory is that high unemployment rates in individual states during election years have a positive effect on voter turnout rates. As was stated earlier, my theory is consistent with the theory of regret, because individuals feel both empowered and compelled to enact political change. These individuals express these attitudes of regret by seeking to change the institutions they see as responsible for their current economic conditions (Arceneaux 2006).

The theoretical framework of my research question is intended to simply account for the effect of unemployment rates on voter turnout. My justification for not including other variables is to begin anew the discussion of what possible psychological and political effect a state’s unemployment rate has on the general voting public. While I do not have individual level data to suggest the psychological effect exists, the state level data and subsequent analysis that my research delves into opens the door to suggest more research should be done in this area.

As was discussed earlier, the generational and technological effects on today’s economy are such that they vary drastically from what the country experienced twenty years ago. This is not to say generational effects should discount every political theory regarding voter turnout and economic conditions done in the past. But a practical revisiting of these past theories helps us to understand if those same conclusions hold true today.
The following variables were included in the full unemployment effect model to control for economic, political, and other determinants of U.S. voter turnout. Because all of these variables are contained within panel data, one can safely assume that omitted variables that are not included in the model will be accounted for through the state and time effects inherent in running regression models of panel data.

1. Voter Turnout: From research done by Dr. Michael McDonald of George Mason University, voter turnout for each election year is calculated by taking the "vote for highest office divided by the voting-eligible population." According to McDonald "the voting-eligible population is the best estimate of the number of people eligible to vote." Thus VEPHOTR stands for Voting-Eligible Population Highest Office Turnout Rate (McDonald 2010).

2. Unemployment: A measure of the non-seasonally adjusted, average unemployment rate for each state for the given year (1982, 1990, etc.) as recorded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The figures used reflected the average unemployment rate in the given year.

3. State: A list of the fifty individual states comprising the United States of America

4. Year: For this project, data was collected for the years 1982, 1990, 1994, 2002, and 2010. Each of these years represent the first midterm elections a new U.S. president faced.

5. Competitive: Refers to the competitiveness of the race for the highest office in each state for a given year. In states where both a Senatorial and Gubernatorial election were held, the average for these two were taken. In states where neither a Senatorial or Gubernatorial election were held, the House of Representative elections were examined and the average margin of victory used to calculate its competitiveness. For this variable, 0 = a Noncompetitive Race and 1 = a Competitive Race. The standard of competitiveness was set at 5 percentage points, meaning that races that were decided by 5 percentage points or less were deemed competitive.

Because I am using fixed effects estimates, I do not focus on variables that do not change over time. Also, many individual level variables that may contribute to voter turnout are simply not present in the state level data. Therefore, the analysis I have chosen to engage in is at the state level.²

I chose to test my theory with state data because of its broader implications in national elections. Simply gathering data on a community basis would lack broader

². Because of this, I have chosen to omit some variables that may contribute to voter turnout such as level of partisanship (Fiorina 2002), proximity to voting precincts (Gimpel, Dyck, and Shaw 2004), one’s perceived interest in the election or those running for office (Goldstein and Ridout 2002), presence of a robust social movement and one’s association with the movement (Burden 2000), and voter knowledge of the issues and candidates (Matsusaka 1995). Also, other economic indicators such as stock market performance, interest rates, socioeconomic status, and others are not used here. Future studies would be useful to explore the effect of these variables.
predictive power in that voter turnout rates are rather salient across state levels (Gimpel, Dyck, and Shaw 2004). The same could be said across regions as well (Fullerton and Borch 2008).

Using a total of five election years for fifty states satisfies the law of large numbers needed for these quantitative tests to be statistically valid. Including past data would also help as I analyze what the perceived effect of generational gaps might be. Do people simply become accustomed to economic indicators such as unemployment rates as time goes on? Are spikes in voter turnout likely to happen only when the electorate perceives that the relative rates are concerning?

I chose to use the average unemployment rates for the specific election years because of how widely publicized these figures are throughout the year and how voter’s awareness of them is likely to build as elections draw near. Media outlets and political figures recognize that citizens’ political views and efficacy are affected by economic indicators—though to what extent remains to be seen. Attempting to use the unemployment figures for September or October only might skew the results if they are not reflective of the overall performance of the year, especially since doing so might have negated the possible effect of the unemployment rates improving or diminishing leading up to the election—though further analysis of this subject would be very interesting, especially as to its possible effect on voter turnout.

The decision to not gather data on a county level was constrained not only by time parameters for the project but also by the possible limitations in finding specific data at that level of analysis. More research could be done in this area.

To gain more insight into the effect of unemployment on voter turnout, quantitative data will be used in my analysis. Knowing which people are most likely to vote might help us understand the forces underlying voter turnout. Identifying the people most likely to vote provides empirical generalizations about voting which might then contribute to theoretical explanations of voter turnout.

Because the data I collected is from multiple years, with their associated voter turnout and unemployment rates, I ran a regression test of analysis. These tests were run accounting for both state and time fixed effects. Doing this allows me to control for all of the omitted variables that were not included in my study that might otherwise have an effect on voter turnout. Running this regression across both state and time controls for any broad effects of a certain culture and accounts for any variables that might affect voter turnout in a given year (like a social movement that seeks to spur voter participation). Other statistical tests were run to gauge the relationship between my variables and ensure that my estimators are not biased.4

3. As will be witnessed by the strength of my regression results, the individual coefficients are statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

4. A Breusch-pagan test to determine if my data is heteroskedastic with accompanying robust standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity was also run during my tests to ensure validity.
Results

All data gathered for this project had 250 observations, except for voter turnout, which only had 249. The data for Louisiana in 1982 could not be located.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Number of Obs.</th>
<th>Min and Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter Turnout</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>20.2–64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>2.3–15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitiveness</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>0–1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we look at the data (individual tables and graphs are contained in the Appendix) we begin to see the general layout and typical observations for our figures (see Table 1). Voter turnout has varied greatly over these years, with citizens showing significant levels of efficacy in the frequency of their voting behavior. Unemployment has also seen tremendous highs and lows during these observed years, though the mean rate typifies an “acceptable” amount of unemployment—though the perception of this figure depends on one’s comparison of relative performance across years. We also see that a vast majority of political races are not competitive.

Observing Figure 1, one can see why it was necessary to employ a regression analysis for both time and state effects. By separating the years from one another and clustering states together (measuring their uniqueness in comparison with their neighbors), our data became more clear and conclusive in its findings.

Figure 1: Scatterplot of Voter Turnout and Unemployment by Year and Across All Years

Mississippi, Virginia, Kentucky, and Georgia consistently had both low voter turnout rates and low unemployment rates while Minnesota, Alaska, Maine, Montana, Oregon and the Dakota’s all had consistently high voter turnout rates and moderately high unemployment rates.

Table 2 contains the result from my fixed effects regression. The data revealed what variables affect voter turnout. The variables measuring unemployment and race

5. As the option to cluster either by state or time was available (Stata does not allow both to be run at the same time), the high degree of variance in voter turnout in each state made clustering by state the most logical choice.
competitiveness were held constant throughout this model so my variable on voter turnout would be more accurate. My regression model also contains State clustered standard errors. These were included to account for possible autocorrelation problems that might arise as I ran regressions for state and time fixed effects.

Table 2: Regression Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>(1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>0.661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>2.614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.599)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Effects?</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Effects?</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustered SE?</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F-Stats & p-Values

| Time Effects    | 1.07     |
|                 | (0.381)  |
| State Effects   | 1538.14  |
|                 | (0.000)  |
| Constant        | 37.90    |
|                 | (1.215)  |
| R-squared       | 0.789    |

These regressors were estimated using panel data for 50 U.S. states for midterm elections in years 1982, 1990, 1994, 2002, and 2010 (249 observations total [no data for Louisiana 1982]), described in Appendix. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses under the coefficients, and p-values are given in parentheses under the coefficients. The individual coefficients are statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

Observing Table 2, one can see the coefficients for unemployment and race competitiveness are both statistically significant and reveal a positive effect on voter turnout when time and state effects are taken into account. I can therefore conclude that as the unemployment rates in a given state rise, the voter turnout in those states will rise as well. Thus, from my regression model one could say that a state with an unemployment rate of 9.8 percent (which was the National average for October 2010), would see a 5.98 percent jump in voter turnout rates (9.8 * 0.611 = 5.98). Thus, higher unem-

6. Note: For Table 2, voter turnout is the dependent variable.

7. Though not contained in this model, it is interesting to note that when time and state effects are not accounted for, our regression models including unemployment suggests a statistically significant negative effect on voter turnout rates. Such results reveal the value of controlling for these effects and might suggest the variance in unemployment rates over the years can skew our results (Unemployment rates were much higher in the 1980s than they were in the 1990s and early 2000s).
ployment rates contribute to higher voter turnout rates. With statistically significant coefficients, the data suggests for every one percentage point that unemployment rates go up, voter turnout rates increase by 0.661 percent.

My regression model also suggests the competitiveness of the race for highest office in each state is also statistically significant and reveals that race competitiveness has a positive effect on overall voter turnout, confirming research done by other researchers (Pacheco 2008; Gerber and Green 2005). Again, observing my regression model one can see that voter turnout rates are 99 percent likely to see around a 2.6 jump when statewide races are competitive.

Based on my regression model, I could predict voter turnout with a state that has an unemployment rate of 7 and a competitive race to be:

\[ 7.0 \times 0.661 = 4.6 \rightarrow 4.6 + 2.6 = 7.2 \rightarrow 7.2 + 37.9 = 45.1 \]

As an example, for Washington in 2002, unemployment was 7.3 percent and there was not a competitive race. The regression results suggest with a base constant of 37.9, voter turnout should be:

\[ 7.3 \times 0.661 = 4.8 \rightarrow 4.8 + 37.9 = 42.7 \]

The actual voter turnout rate was slightly below that at 41.8 percent. However, the ability to statistically predict voter turnout in a state, based solely on the unemployment rate, within less than a point supports my article. As another example, Colorado in 2010 had an unemployment rate of 8 percent and a competitive race. Our regression analysis would predict a voter turnout rate of:

\[ 8 \times 0.661 = 5.288 \rightarrow 5.288 + 2.614 = 7.9 \rightarrow 7.9 + 37.9 = 45.8 \]

The actual voter turnout was slightly better than that at 47.6 percent. However, these findings are consistent with my data, because Colorado saw the highest unemployment rates in 2010 out of the five years I was examining and also saw the highest voter turnout rates out of those five years.

Discussion

My findings are in direct correlation with my causal theory, because higher unemployment rates lead to voters turning to the election booth to try and change their economic environment. These results are consistent with the theory of regret. More research is necessary to determine if this is the true casual explanation.

While my regression model is shown to effectively predict voter turnout rates based upon unemployment rates in a given state, the question remains as to why people who are concerned about unemployment turn out to the polls to vote. The contributions from other researchers cited earlier suggest people are so petrified by unemployment they are concerned with little else. As an unemployed forty-one-year-old autoworker explains, “When you have no job, it’s like dying—except you don’t stop breathing. Your whole source of motivation is gone” (Fritz 1980, 68). But what motivation is he talking about? The regression model clearly shows unemployment
rates accurately predict voter turnout rates. Could it be that a large portion of Americans are actually motivated by regret for their, or others, choice in the previous election? This suggests regret is not only present among people who are unemployed but also among those who are employed and recognize the economy in a state they feel needs to be improved. It appears more research is needed to determine which group comes out to vote more.

While my data and research were focused on the effect of unemployment on a state level, I also found there might be other regional factors at work effecting voter turnout. While I will not speculate as to the many independent variables that might suggest differences between people living in different regions in the U.S., my data clearly suggests that Westerners turn out in greater numbers on Election Day than any other region. More research into this field must be done to understand the relationship region has on voter turnout.

Conclusion

My data is consistent with a theory of regret—though it should be noted the data has not produced direct evidence about individual psychology or regret. As a state's unemployment rate rises, so does its voter turnout rates in midterm elections during a president's first term in office. More research that incorporates other years must be conducted in the future to test whether the theory holds true for all election years.

The significance of such findings would be strengthened by further studies attempting to narrow what other, if any, economic indicators might affect voter turnout, including which indicators might vary in importance over time. Further studies into the attitudes and behavior of generation cleavages and age cohorts should also be conducted to explore their effect on voter participation and political efficacy.

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