

Do Politicians Change Public Attitudes?

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Extended Abstract

A large theoretical and empirical literature explores whether politicians change their policy positions in response to voters' preferences. This paper asks the reverse question: do politicians affect voters' attitudes on important policy issues? The power of political representation to shape public attitudes could arise if being elected provides politicians with a platform to express ideas, increased media attention, or the ability to implement policies. However, the problems of reverse causality and omitted variable bias make this a difficult question to answer empirically.

We study whether politicians affect public attitudes on nuclear energy and immigration in Sweden. We combine panel data for 290 municipal election units with attitudinal surveys measured at the municipality level. To identify causal effects, we take advantage of large non-linearities in the way seats are assigned. Using a modified regression discontinuity approach which allows for multiple running variables and varying cutoffs, we compare otherwise similar elections where one party either barely wins or loses an additional seat. Using this threshold variation from many local random experiments, we estimate whether gaining an additional seat on the city council changes attitudes in subsequent surveys of the local population.

The presence of small, issue-focused parties in Sweden provides an ideal setting for this identification approach, as it is clear which attitudes might be affected. The nascent Green Party focused narrowly on shutting down nuclear power plants in Sweden in the aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl accident. We estimate that a one seat increase for the Green Party reduces support for nuclear energy in that municipality by 17%. This change in public attitudes has a reward at the ballot box, with a one seat increase leading to 18% more votes in the next election.

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Our second example is the Swedish Democrats, a party formed a dozen years ago to reduce the flow of immigrants into Sweden. When these anti-immigration politicians get elected, they cause less negative attitudes towards immigration, which is opposite the party's policy position. When the Swedish Democrats gain one more seat, negative attitudes towards immigration in the municipality decrease by 6%, and the number of votes received by the party in the next election decreases by an insignificant 2%, wiping out any incumbency advantage.

To explore possible mechanisms, we analyze media coverage of the Swedish Democrats and immigration in 143 local and regional newspapers (earlier data for the Green Party and nuclear energy is not available). We find causal evidence that the election of Swedish Democrats increases the debate about immigration policy and the mention of Swedish Democrats in local newspapers. However, most of this post-election coverage is not favorable, with negative phrases such as "racism" and "xenophobia" being mentioned more often in conjunction with the word "Swedish Democrat." We find no evidence that immigration policy changed after the election of Swedish Democrats.

These findings have important implications for both the theory and estimation of how voter preferences enter into political economy models. Our causal estimates indicate that politicians are not merely responding to voters' preferences, but that political representation has the power to mold and alter public attitudes on important policy issues. Forward-looking politicians should take this into account when calculating how to trade off preferred policy platforms and the probability of election. More broadly, our results point to the important influence those in positions of power have to change public opinion.