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978-0-521-86374-2 - The Economy and the Vote: Economic Conditions and Elections in Fifteen Countries

Wouter van der Brug, Cees van der Eijk and Mark Franklin

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## The Economy and the Vote

### *Economic Conditions and Elections in Fifteen Countries*

Economic conditions are said to affect election outcomes, but past research has produced unstable and even contradictory findings in this respect. This book argues that these problems are caused by the failure to take account of electoral competition between parties. A research strategy to correct this problem is designed and applied to investigate effects of economic conditions on (individual) voter choices and (aggregate) election outcomes in forty-two electoral contexts.

It shows that economic conditions exert small effects on individual party preferences, which can nevertheless have large consequences for election outcomes when competition between parties is strong. In countries where responsibility for economic policy is clear, voters vote retrospectively and reward or punish incumbent parties – although in coalition systems the large government party usually gains at the expense of its junior partners when the economy is doing well. Where clarity of responsibility for economic policy is less clear, voters vote more prospectively on the basis of expected party policies.

Wouter van der Brug is professor of politics in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands. His work has been published in various international peer-reviewed journals, including *Comparative Political Studies*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, the *European Journal of Political Research*, *Electoral Studies*, *Political Behavior*, *Party Politics*, the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, *West European Politics*, and *Acta Politica*. He recently coauthored *European Elections and Domestic Politics* (with Cees van der Eijk, 2007).

Cees van der Eijk is professor of social science research methods at the University of Nottingham, England. He taught at the University of Amsterdam from 1971 to 2004, was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1976–7, and was a Visiting Scholar at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in 1988–9. He is the author or coauthor of fifteen books, including *European Elections and Domestic Politics* (with Wouter van der Brug, 2007), *Citizen Participation in European Politics* (with Hans Agné and others, 2000), *In Search of Structure* (with Meindert Fennema and Huib Schijf, 1998), and *Choosing Europe?* (with Mark Franklin and others, 1996), and of many articles and chapters in refereed journals and books.

Mark Franklin is the Stein Rokkan Professor of Comparative Politics at the European University Institute in Florence while on leave from Trinity College, Connecticut, where he has been teaching since 1998. He has also taught at the universities of Chicago, Iowa, and Houston in the United States and at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland. He has published eleven books, including *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945* (Cambridge, 2004), *Choosing Europe?* (with Cees van der Eijk and others, 1996), and *Electoral Change* (with Tom Mackie, Henry Valen, and others, Cambridge, 1992). He founded the Public Opinion and Participation Section of the European Union Studies Association, has been a director of the European Election Studies project since 1987, and has served on the editorial boards of six journals.

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## *Economic Conditions and Elections in Fifteen Countries*

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521863742](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521863742)

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First published 2007

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Brug, Wouter van der.

The economy and the vote : economic conditions and elections in fifteen countries /

Wouter van der Brug, Cees van der Eijk, Mark Franklin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-86374-2 (hardback)

ISBN-10: 0-521-86374-0 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-68233-6 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-521-68233-9 (pbk.)

I. Voting – Economic aspects. 2. Elections – Economic aspects.

I. Eijk, C. van der. II. Franklin, Mark N. III. Title.

JF1001.B745 2007

324.9-dc22 2006030222

ISBN 978-0-521-86374-2 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-68233-6 paperback

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## Preface

Science is the product not only of reason, but also of sentiments and passions. This particular book is the offspring of two opposite sentiments: disenchantment and enthusiasm. Disenchanted though we were with much of the literature in the field of economic voting, our enthusiasm derived from newly emerging possibilities for systematic comparative studies of electoral processes.

Many of the publications in the field of economic voting are highly sophisticated in their modeling and analyses of empirical data, yet – in our view – often highly implausible when approached from first principles in the light of straightforward observations of the political world, and in the light of what we believed we had learned from our own earlier comparative analyses of voters and elections. As a case in point, analysts commonly group parties in two categories, those in government and those in opposition. This crude dichotomy obviously does not reflect the kind of choice that voters are faced with in multiparty systems. Moreover, when analyzing the effects of “the” economy on voters, categorizing the world in this way has the effect of discarding and disregarding all sorts of other characteristics of parties that are likely to contribute to party choice. Moreover, election results show that, more often than not, the electoral fortunes of coalition partners diverge considerably, thus calling into doubt the simple logic that government parties are rewarded or punished for the way the economy

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performed under their stewardship. In Chapters 1 and 2, we set out the common approaches to the study of economic voting and why we find them in many ways unconvincing.

The other sentiment that can claim parentage to this book is our enthusiasm for and fascination with the possibilities for systematic comparative electoral studies that have been generated by the European Election Studies project (see also Chapter 3 and Appendix A). The electorates of the member states of the European Union (EU) have now been surveyed a number of times in the immediate aftermath of European elections. These surveys are of importance not only for studying European integration and the peculiarities of second-order national elections, but also for comparative electoral research in general. Their high degree of comparability – far surpassing that of national election studies that differ widely in contents and operationalization, even in a single country over time – allows us to make optimal use of the natural “laboratory” that the EU and its member states provide for research. Each country offers a different context, characterized by its own parties, its own electoral system, its own government composition, and, in spite of increasing convergence, its unique economic conditions. In important respects, this comparability of information encompasses not only different countries, but also different election years, thus providing unique opportunities for simultaneous comparison over time and space.

The course of our disenchantment and enthusiasm found its confluence in the possibilities offered by the European Election Studies project for assessing whether our misgivings about existing approaches to economic voting were justified and for testing a different approach. Both required a wider variety of contexts and a more extensive measurement of voters’ party preferences and choices than are common in many studies. And both were provided by the European Election Studies project. Indeed, at the end of the day, we feel that we can now do more than just formulate misgivings about conventional approaches. We can specify where, when, and why they will provide inconsistent, unstable, or outright misleading results. At the same time, we can demonstrate with our own approach that the economy indeed affects the behavior of voters, but in more subtle and variegated ways than have been proposed thus far, and with more sensitivity to

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political and contextual circumstances than citizens are usually given credit for.

This book could not have been written without the extraordinarily rich data that have been generated by the European Election Studies workgroup. We are grateful to our colleagues in that endeavor for their friendship and academic stimulus, but also for indulging our claims on scarce questionnaire space for the extensive measurement of voters' preferences and choice. Some of the analyses in this book were presented at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association in Washington, DC, in 2000 and at three workshops of the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR): Canterbury (2001), Turin (2002), and Edinburgh (2003). We are grateful to virtually all the panelists and workshop members for comments and suggestions that have been immensely helpful in sharpening our thinking. At other occasions too, many colleagues have provided us with valuable feedback; we would like to express our gratitude to Paolo Bellucci, André Blais, Ray Duch, Orit Kedar, Martin Kroh, Bob Luskin, Tony Mughan, Philip van Praag, Hermann Schmitt, Randy Stevenson, Jacques Thomassen, Bernard Wessels, and Paul Whiteley. Special mention has to be made of our gratitude to Michael Marsh and Eric Browne, whose incisive comments were of strategic importance, and to Guy Whitten, who provided the data on clarity of responsibility. While finalizing this book, Wouter van der Brug spent one year as a Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). He benefited enormously from its facilities and from the support of its staff. We must also thank two anonymous referees who provided invaluable comments on an earlier draft of the book, as well as Wenonah Barton for her assistance in preparing the manuscript in its final form.

We want, finally, to acknowledge the importance to this book of a scholar who is probably unaware of his contribution but who nevertheless crucially influenced our own thinking in this and earlier work. Anthony Downs demonstrated as long ago as 1957 that modeling voter choice and election results requires the distinction between voters' propensity to support parties ("utility," in his terminology), on the one hand, and their choices on the other. Although citations of his work have become ubiquitous, this distinction has been largely ignored,

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forgotten, or plainly not understood by students of voters and elections.  
His distinction lies at the heart of the approach that we advocate in  
this book, and we gladly acknowledge our indebtedness.

July 2006

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