

Ben Halle & Layla Wofsy

November 22, 2020

POLS 208-1

Dr. Davis

Impact of Electorate Polarization on Split-Ticket Voting

I. Introduction

Split-ticket voting is the act in which an individual casts votes for candidates of multiple parties on the same ballot. In comparison, straight-ticket voting, or the action of voting for one party “up and down the ballot” is when an individual votes for candidates of a single party in every race on a ballot. We are looking to find out what impacts voters to decide to split their vote between two parties on the same ballot. More specifically, we are wondering if polarization affects an individual’s likelihood to split their ticket between a Presidential candidate and a Congressional candidate of opposing parties. To find an answer to this question, we will create an observational research design that utilizes data provided by the American National Election Studies (ANES).

The answer to our research question will provide valuable information for voters, political candidates and strategists, as well as political scientists who may use our conclusions as the basis for their studies. This is because, with this information, voters will be able to better understand their personal voting behavior as well as common voting trends in the United States. Additionally, this information will be valuable for candidates and consultants who are looking to gain additional support and votes from those who are less tied to one party. We also feel that our study will add necessary information to the existing literature on polarization and ticket-splitting that future researchers will find valuable.

In this paper, we have adopted a dominant theoretical perspective on split-ticket voting. The perspective that we have developed views split-ticket voting within the context of an observed increasing level of polarization in the United States electorate.

II. Literature Review

Voting behavior has been studied extensively, including split ticket and straight-ticket voting. Many researchers have conducted studies in an attempt to find out the causes of split-ticket voting. One way to analyze split-ticket voting is through various electoral contexts. Kuriwaki (2020) attempts to answer the question: is ticket-splitting more prevalent in state and local elections rather than in presidential elections? Kuriwaki theorizes that voters are more reliant on party labels and more often would cast a straight party vote in less important races such as state legislature, county executive, and county council races (Kuriwaki, 2020). Ultimately, he concludes that voters stray from their national party allegiance in state and county offices at similar or higher rates than they do in congressional races (Kuriwaki, 2020). Edelson (2014) attempted to discover if, contrary to popular belief, there were certain situations in which increased polarization could increase ticket-splitting. Interestingly, Edelson finds evidence that “when the same party enjoys valence advantages in concurrently held races... some partisans [become] more likely to split their tickets than are independents” (Edelson, 2014). In their study, Brunell and Grofman (2009) analyze the motivations for ticket-splitting in a more common electoral environment. The researchers hypothesize that voters split tickets between the House and President for “sincere” reasons - they vote for the candidate they prefer - more often than “strategic” reasons, meaning that voters would vote for a combination of candidates that will result in policies that more closely align with their beliefs. With pre-existing databases of

elections between 1900 and 2004, the researchers use a variety of independent variables, including the margin of presidential victory, incumbency advantage, and magnitudes of ideological differences, to test the validity of the two aforementioned explanations of ticket-splitting. Ultimately, the researchers conclude that the “sincere” model “explains more about voter behavior” (Brunell and Grofman, 2009). Mattei and Howes (2000) look to answer the question: is there a relationship between party polarization and ticket-splitting? They hypothesize that when a moderate voter is closer to the party that is expected to lose the presidential election, they are more likely to cast a straight ballot for that party. With the use of ANES data from 1980-1996, they conclude that the level of ticket-splitting declines as voters move toward the endpoints of the liberal and conservative scale (Mattei and Howes, 2000).

Multiple researchers also looked at the motivations for ticket-splitting on an individual-level. Beck, Baum, Clausen and Smith (1992) looked at a similar concept. The researchers asked the general question “why do people split their ticket?” and to answer this, they theorized that party identification leads voters to vote in a partisan manner. To test their theory they compared party identification with whether or not voters split their ticket. They did a statewide panel study of Ohio voting-age adults conducted by telephone by professional interviewers in the Polimetrics Laboratory at Ohio State University. They were looking at voter behavior across the five-office partisan ballot in the 1990 election. The study focused on the 567 voters (out of 1,033 respondents) who completed pre- and post-election interviews. From this data, they determined that party identification is strongly related to a partisan pattern of voting. They wrote, “Strong Democrats and strong Republicans least frequently split their votes in the 1990 Ohio contests. A majority of them supported only the candidates of their party. Those who did divide their votes between the parties did so only minimally. Nonetheless, a substantial

minority of strong partisans defected at least once, which suggests that strong partisanship alone is not sufficient to produce a straight party vote” (Beck, Baum, Clausen and Smith, 1992). Karp and Garland (2007) attempt to see if voters’ knowledge about candidates’ positions will affect split-ticket voting. Ultimately, they find that the less voters know about candidates, the more likely they are to split their ticket (Karp and Garland, 2007). In another attempt to identify voters’ motivations for ticket-splitting, Roscoe (2003) asks if voters are splitting tickets because of their personal beliefs or because of candidate quality instead. Roscoe’s hypothesis that characteristics of both voters and candidates are important, but candidate-level variables as a whole provide a better account of ticket-splitting than individual-level variables was eventually confirmed. He explains that, while there are a myriad of factors and characteristics that can influence a voter’s likelihood to split their ticket, a candidate’s individual characteristics lead to ticket-splitting behaviors more often than their positions (Roscoe, 2003). Campbell and Miller (1957) investigate why voters may decide to split their ticket between candidates of opposing parties. One theory that they described is that a straight-ticket vote is the product of “indifference and lack of concern with political affairs” (Campbell and Miller, 1957). Contrastingly, they argue that someone that splits their vote is a “motivated voter, ... with sufficient interest to distinguish among the candidates and take the trouble to choose among them” (Campbell and Miller, 1957). This idea is valid; however, compared to the other studies that we have analyzed, this theory is an outlier. This same study presents a contrasting explanation of the straight-ticket vote and says “the straight ticket is the expression of high political motivation. The motivated voter is more likely to organize his ballot in a highly structured pattern” (Campbell and Miller, 1957). Again, this theory does not align with many of the other pieces of literature that we have gone through. Lastly, this study does propose another explanation that goes along with the theories of many

other researchers. They argue that “the straight ticket is the mark of the party-oriented voter. Whether his general interest in politics is high or low, his party attachment governs his voting behavior” (Campbell and Miller, 1957). This theory is consistent with the theories found in additional pieces of literature. Mulligan (2011) concludes that ticket-splitting is motivated by ambivalence over the two major political parties. In his observational study, Mulligan hypothesizes that partisan ambivalence increases the chance that an individual will split their vote. He tested this idea with ANES data from 1952-2004. He compared partisan ambivalence, which was based on responses to questions that asked respondents how well four traits describe each political party and whether the parties have made the respondent feel four emotions, with the likelihood of a voter to split their ticket. Ultimately, he found that partisan ambivalence impacts ticket-splitting at both the national and state levels however there also were other explanations for the outcome. The results of his study suggest that divided government occurs, in part because the voting population is divided.

Green (2020) further explores how certain positions can change the decisions of voters. Green explains that there are so many factors in modern American politics that could affect someone’s vote other than specific policy stances. Given this, he wanted to understand how often “floating policy voters,” or voters who hold views that correlate with both major parties, switched the party of their vote for President from 2012 to 2016. Green ultimately concluded that, while cross-pressured voters are somewhat rare, those who were cross-pressured in 2016 were significantly more likely to change their vote from 2012. While his study did not exactly relate to ticket-splitting, Green’s work provides a necessary understanding of the factors that could change how someone votes (Green, 2020).

In a further attempt to understand voter behavior in various governmental levels, Trounstine (2018) explored why one in three counties in twelve different states, which were thought to be representative of the nation as a whole, elect county officials of different parties than the county's vote for President. Trounstine concludes that voters are often able to subconsciously separate local candidates from the national political party they may be associated with for a variety of reasons, including the drastic difference in many of the issues local and national candidates focus on (Trounstine, 2018). Lachat (2008) posed the question "What is the relationship between party system polarization and ideological voting?". They hypothesized that polarization influences voters to depend on ideological criteria when voting, likely due to party ties. To test this they used data from the 1999 European Election Study and from an expert survey on party positions to compare spatial utilities, which expresses the relationship between the ideological positions of voters and parties, with polarization. Their research concluded that polarization reinforces the impact of ideology on the vote. Additionally, they determined that the reinforcement of party polarization does not impact all citizens to the same extent, rather the effect is determined by party identification and by political sophistication. Two additional studies examined the prevalence of split-ticket voting today due to increased polarization. Kilgore (2018) concluded that because of the increased ideological separation of the two major parties, ticket-splitting has declined over time (Kilgore, 2018). Additionally, Stein (2016) determined that ticket-splitting is no longer very common due to polarization. In agreement with the previous studies and articles, Kimball (2002) wrote that "The continuing party polarization in American politics means that ticket splitting should continue to decline" (Kimball, 2002). These studies convey the idea that polarization has led to a decrease in split-ticket voting, this is something that we look to investigate in our research.

It is also important to look at what has been studied in terms of polarization trends in the electorate. Doherty (2014) explained that “Republicans and Democrats are further apart ideologically than at any point in recent history. Growing numbers of Republicans and Democrats express highly negative views of the opposing party. And to a considerable degree, polarization is reflected in the personal lives and lifestyles of those on both the right and left” (Doherty, 2014). This displays that polarization has increased over time and the electorate has been growing further apart.

Overall, there have been a lot of studies done to compare the characteristics and behaviors of those who split their ticket to those who do not. These studies have allowed us to think deeper in terms of our own observational research design and our hypotheses about split-ticket voting.

III. Theoretical Argument & Hypotheses

We have theorized that the likelihood of a voter splitting their ticket between a Presidential candidate and Congressional candidate of different parties is positively correlated with a voter’s commitment to one political party. More simply, when more voters are committed to a political party, there will be fewer individuals who split their tickets. This is because we have predicted that party loyalty and voting history plays a major role in an individual’s decision to vote for one party down-the-ballot. There are a variety of reasons why polarization can affect an individual’s likelihood to split their ticket.

We see our independent variable, a voter’s level of polarization, impacting our dependent variable, the likelihood of an individual to split their ticket between Presidential and Congressional candidates of different parties, in a negative correlation due to multiple factors.

First, if a voter gets in the habit of voting for one party, they may just become committed to that party, this is a very common trend in American politics. Voters easily become deeply committed to political parties and often remain active within the party for much of their lives. One may hear an individual explain that they've voted for a certain party their whole lives and they will continue to do so. Second, voters who choose not to educate themselves about new candidates, or are unmotivated to do so, may just vote for the candidates of their registered party, despite their knowledge about any of the candidates, because they do not know much about candidates of either party. It is important to note that not every voter registers with a party, based on varied state laws, so polarization will look different depending on if the voter has identified with a party. Lastly, nowadays the parties each have very different and well-defined agendas, making it easier for a voter to connect to a singular party, rather than individual candidates. This factor can cause a voter to feel strongly connected to one party and strongly disconnected from the other, causing them to only vote for candidates of the one party that they agree with most because the values of the parties are extremely opposite to each other. Given this, we hypothesize that when a voter is more polarized, or more aligned with a single party, they are less likely to split their vote between candidates of two parties.

According to Pew Research, “the share of Americans who express consistently conservative or consistently liberal opinions has doubled over the past two decades, from 10% to 21%” (Doherty, 2014). It is unclear whether this significant shift has caused or is the result of increased polarization, but this does not change our study. With the growth of individuals with consistent conservative and liberal opinions, the instances of split ticket voting should have decreased over the period specified by Doherty. We are able to see the positive relationship between time and polarization, likely due to the increasing divide between the values of each

party. Clearly, the trend that overall our nation has become more polarized, and more people strongly identify with one party, is legitimate. We have developed the hypothesis that individuals are currently more likely than they have been in the past few decades to cast a straight-ticket vote for one party rather than split their vote between candidates of different parties.

We have theorized that the percentage of people who split their vote between a Presidential and Congressional candidate of opposing parties is impacted by an individual's polarization and attitude towards the two main parties. We have determined that polarization is influenced by an individual's feelings about certain social issues, such as abortion. We test the following hypotheses: (1) When an individual identifies closely with one of the two major parties, they are less likely to split their vote between candidates of different parties. (2) Due to the general increase in polarization over time, the percentage of people splitting their vote has decreased over time. (3) Polarization has increased on the individual level because the parties have grown further apart on social issues such as abortion.

IV. Research design

All of the data and measurement for our variables comes from the American National Election Studies (ANES). The ANES collects and provides voting data to inform researchers of explanations of election outcomes. The studies ask the same questions repeatedly over time to a different sample of respondents each election year. The main focus of ANES efforts has been on Time Series studies conducted before and after presidential elections since 1948. Most of their surveys have been conducted using face-to-face interviews in respondents' homes. The sampling frame is drawn from a list of residential addresses to which the United States Postal Service delivered mail in the 50 states and District of Columbia. An interesting feature of the ANES data

is that data from 1948 to 2016 is available. This information can be helpful when used in relation to the other variables that are being looked at in our research design. This will allow us to see the trends over time and add to the relationship that we ultimately will find.

Our dependent variable of our large N study design is the percentage of individuals that split their ticket between a Presidential candidate and a House of Representatives candidate of opposing parties. For this concept and all of our others, we will be looking at data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). This variable has respondents select one of four options. The options were if the voter voted for a Democrat Presidential candidate and a Democrat Congressional (House) candidate, Democrat Presidential candidate and a Republican Congressional (House) candidate, Republican Presidential candidate and a Democrat Congressional (House) candidate, Republican Presidential candidate and a Republican Congressional (House) candidate. The sample size for this survey was 59,944.

Our second dependent variable looks at the percentage of individuals that split their ticket between a Presidential candidate and a Senate candidate of opposing parties. The ANES variable for this concept had participants select one of four options. The options were if the voter voted for a Democrat Presidential candidate and a Democrat Senate candidate, Democrat Presidential candidate and a Republican Senate candidate, Republican Presidential candidate and a Democrat Senate candidate, Republican Presidential candidate and a Republican Senate candidate. The sample size for this survey was 59,944 people.

Another variable that we have, looks at individual polarization. This variable will be used as an independent variable to compare with likelihood of voters to split their ticket. This will also be used as a dependent variable when compared with the independent variable that looks at feelings about abortions. To measure polarization, we use an ANES variable that looks

at a Major-Party Thermometer Index. This has respondents score their feelings about the major parties. A “2” is a score for “Most Republican,” a “50” is a score for someone who feels “Neutral,” and a “99” is a score for someone who is “Most Democratic.” The party thermometer will provide us with information about the party identification of individual voters.

An additional independent variable in our theory is individual feelings about the issue of abortion. We will look to see if individuals’ opinions on abortion have become more polarized over time and if this polarization over time occurs in line with increased polarization. We will use ANES data which asked respondents “By law, when should abortion be allowed”. The respondents were given five possible responses: “1) By law, abortion should never be permitted,” “2) The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger,” “3) The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established,” “4) By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice,” or “5) Don’t Know; other.” The sample size for this variable is 59,944.

To observe if there are relationships between our variables, we would run a regression analysis between the likelihood of splitting a ticket between a Presidential and House candidate of different parties and polarization, likelihood of splitting a ticket between a Presidential and Senate candidate of different parties and polarization as well as individual polarization compared to time. We would also run a regression analysis with the variable about abortion feelings and major-party thermometer index to see if the parties have gotten further apart ideologically.

The control variables in our design that are important to account for, include voter demographics such as age, race, gender, education, and state of residency. These factors have the

potential to influence a voter's likelihood to vote split ticket so they must be controlled when observing the data. These factors can be controlled within the ANES data.

V. Reflections and Conclusions

We are confident in our study's research design. There are very few conceivable threats to the internal validity of our research design. We believe all of our variables are measured in the correct way using accurate samples. We also are certain that there is a clearly demonstrated positive causal relationship between polarization and split-ticket voting. The use of ANES, a recognized, reliable data source, absolves any worries about our observational study's sampling error. We also believe our study has strong external validity and it can be applied to other relevant contexts, specifically future elections in the United States.

Our study, which theorized that a positive relationship exists between a voter's commitment to their political party and their likelihood to split their ticket, can be used as a jumping-off point from which future studies can build upon our research in a variety of directions. First, one aspect of this observational study that future studies may want to change is the use of public opinion on abortion to track increases in polarization. Future studies could consider using other social issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, affirmative action, second amendment rights, or many others. Future studies could also replace public opinion on abortion with economic issues including the minimum wage and taxing the rich.

This research would add significant information to the existing literature on both polarization as well as split-ticket voting. Throughout our process of reviewing the research of other political scientists on polarization and split-ticket voting, we did not find any studies that compare voters' propensities to split their tickets between President and House with the

probability that they split their votes between President and the Senate. Our study is the only recent study to do so. It is essential that the literature on ticket-splitting includes information on the potential variation, or lack thereof, between these two circumstances.

In an attempt to further add to the aforementioned widened electoral scenarios being considered by those studying ticket-splitting, we also recommend that future studies consider additional electoral scenarios, namely statewide races and local races. We recommend that researchers look into the possibility that the number of offices involved in the election may have an effect on the number of split tickets. When looking into these various electoral scenarios, future research should also attempt to identify if voters tend to stray from the rest of their ballot on certain offices or if other offices are often correlated in their votes. There are a myriad of potential combinations that future research should look into.