

Short-term political attitudes and PTVs

Preliminary evidence from the Italian case (*)

Andrea De Angelis and Diego Garzia
Università degli Studi di Siena

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Abstract. PTV measures are ever more commonly used in electoral research as a measure of electoral utilities. Yet a growing literature employs them as dependent variable in the voting equation in place of the lower information granted by vote recall questions. However, this choice can be seen as problematic because of the very structure of election survey research. To the extent that voters' PTVs are measured in post-election surveys (as it is often the case), these are likely to result endogenously produced by actual voting behavior in the past election – thus partly undermining the validity of the PTV question which, ideally, should not be related to any specific election (van der Eijk *et al.*, 2006: 433). In this paper, we try to disentangle the relationship between short-term political attitudes (e.g., leader evaluations, issue proximity, economic assessments) and voters' changing patterns of propensiti(es) to vote in both an electoral and a non-electoral context. The latter scenario serves as a means to rule out the potentially contaminating effect of voting choices on voters' PTVs. The data comes from two panel surveys of Italian voters conducted by ITANES in occasion of the 2006 general election, and 2011 (that is, in a non-electoral year) respectively.

(*) Paper prepared for delivery at ELECDEM final conference “Advancing Electoral Research”, European University Institute, Florence, 28-30 June

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed the burgeoning of empirical voting research making use of PTV measures (Tillie, 1995; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; van der Eijk *et al.*, 2006; van der Brug and Mughan, 2007; van der Brug *et al.*, 2007; van der Brug *et al.*, 2008; van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009). Voting propensity scores are commonly employed as dependent variable in a two-stage approach (van der Eijk *et al.*, 2006). An interval-level measure of electoral utility overcomes many drawbacks related to the nominal nature of the dependent variable of electoral research in multi-party systems, and allows researchers to model voting choices with a higher degree of methodological accuracy (van der Eijk, 2002).

Notwithstanding, the propensity to vote for a party and the actual choice to vote for that party remain two separate phenomena. A high propensity score for a specific party does not necessarily imply that the voter will choose that party at the ballot. Strategic considerations might be at work (Rosema, 2006). The attractiveness of emerging political leaders can also represent a source of cross-pressure for voters – this being ever more the case in times of personalization of politics (McAllister, 2007; Garzia, 2011). For sure PTVs and the vote are closely connected, but the individual-level dynamics underlying this connection remain unclear. Suffice it to say that, in terms of electoral survey research, the very same question wording may capture different meanings if asked before or after the election. Pre-electoral PTVs can easily be thought as having a causal impact on voting intentions. In the case of post-electoral surveys,

propensities to *ever* vote for a party are likely to be “colored” to at least some extent by respondents’ voting choice in the last election.

The present electoral literature has by and large treated propensity scores and vote choices as interchangeable concepts, and substituted the latter with the former on the basis of methodological considerations (van Der Brug and Mughan, 2007) . In doing so, however, electoral researchers have potentially overlooked analytical perspectives aimed at uncovering individual-level drivers of PTVs. In a wide majority of cases, these are simply *assumed* to coincide with the classic determinants of voting choice such as party identification, short-term assessments of issues and leaders, and so on (van der Brug *et al.*, 2008). Due to severe data limitations, we know even less about the stability of PTVs throughout time, nor we do know about the drivers of change in patterns of PTVs. Another drawback of the present literature lies in an unclear understanding of the interactive relationship of PTVs with past, current and future electoral behavior. Do the act of voting have an effect on individual-level patterns of PTV? And how closely connected are the two?

In order to provide some preliminary answers to these questions and fill this relevant gap in the literature, we make use of national election study data from the Italian case. The two studies that will be employed, from 2006 and 2011 respectively, provide us with the unprecedented chance to look at the meaning of PTVs before *and* after elections, as well as *within* elections. The employment of panel data will also allow to appraise the actual stability of PTVs throughout time as well as the main drivers of change. Our results will be briefly introduced by a

theoretical and a methodological section. The main implications of our findings will be discussed in the concluding section.

Literature Review

Why do people vote for a party? To answer this (not so) simple question electoral scholars have adopted different, and to some extent competing perspectives. In the last sixty years, the literature has moved from a sociological paradigm stressing the importance of the individual's placement in the social structure (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1944; Berelson *et al.*, 1954) to a social-psychological one relying on voters' long-term feelings of identification with political parties (Campbell *et al.*, 1960) and, in later decades, to a rational perspective suggesting that individuals continuously update their evaluations of parties by looking at short-term political factors such as issue preferences, candidate evaluations, and retrospective assessments of the economy (Page and Brody, 1972; Page and Jones, 1979; Fiorina, 1981).

In the last years, a number of scholars have adopted a novel strategy suggesting that, rather than focusing on different perspectives regarding the explanatory factors driving voting choice, we should *rethink our dependent variable* (van der Eijk *et al.*, 2006). The use of propensities to vote (PTVs) items capturing individual orientations towards political parties interprets this alternative approach. Since then, researchers focusing on the determinants of party preferences have extensively employed this new concept in order to extend our understanding of voters' behavior. According to their proponents,

PTV measures are to be understood as a cardinal measure of the perceived utility proceeding from political parties to individual voters (van der Eijk *et al.*, 2006). Electoral utilities allow us to exploit a greater amount of information with respect to the simple probability to vote for a party, as they are not bounded to sum to any fixed amount (e.g., in the case of probabilities to one). This non-ipsative feature of voting propensities (van der Eijk, 2002) is tightly related to the cardinal character of this measure. This fundamental characteristic of PTVs is obtained by introducing a projective item postponing voters' choice in an undefined future within the question wording:

“Would you indicate for each party how probable it is that you will ever vote for that party?” (van der Eijk and Niemoller, 1983)

From a theoretical point of view, PTVs' coordinates are to be found in the random utility theory, which interprets the electoral utilities perceived by voters as a random variable and the following voting choice as a deterministic process (Manski and Lerman, 1977) . Therefore, PTVs have to be understood in terms of a two-stage model: in the first stage, voters assess the electoral utilities coming from each party in the choice set; in the second, voters use this estimated electoral utility to formulate their voting decision (van der Brug *et al.*, 2007; Ch. 2) .

The use of PTVs as dependent variable of voting research has two important advantages. From a methodological point of view, it permits to avoid

the use of discrete choice models (for a better discussion of this point, see: van der Burg and Mughan, 2007). Secondly, moving from a nominal to a cardinal dependent variable also enables quantitative researchers to overcome the fundamental problem inherent to cross-country comparative analyses (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; van der Brug *et al*, 2008) . This last feature is related to the fact that PTVs switch simultaneously the level of analysis as well as the level of conceptualization. In fact, moving from traditional analyses of voting choice to consider propensities to vote as dependent variable, we observe a double shift: the level of analysis shifts downwards from the individual to the intra-individual (individual*party) level. That is, analogously to the estimation strategy of Multinomial Conditional Logit models, PTV measures force us to reinterpret the independent variables in terms of the relationship individual-parties, by creating measures connecting individuals to choices. On the other hand, the adoption of the PTV approach leads us to a broader interpretation of the concept of party choice. With the traditional nominal party-choice variables researchers were driven to investigate the determinants of the probability of voting for one specific party. If the dependent variable is reinterpreted in terms of the dyadic relationship individual-party, then the object of our analysis is no longer a specific party, but a generic one (regardless of the specific characteristics of the party system). Therefore, our initial question is better formulated as “Why do people vote for a generic party?”

A summary reading of the most recent PTV literature finds that the drivers of the vote for a generic party (that is, the statistical predictors of PTVs)

are assumed to coincide with the classic determinants of voting choice (van der Brug *et al.*, 2008) . Not much is known, however, about the stability of PTVs throughout time. By the same token, relatively few is known about the drivers of change in patterns of PTVs as well as the role of actual voting behavior in the process of change. To provide a preliminary answer to this question is devoted the remainder of this paper.

Data and Methods

The data employed in this analysis comes from two mass surveys conducted by the ITANES¹ team in 2006 ($n=1377$) and 2011 ($n=2362$) respectively. The former was conducted in occasion of the 2006 general elections. Respondents were interviewed twice, i.e., before (February/March) and after the election took place (April/June). As to the 2011 study, this is peculiar for it features two panel waves from a non-electoral year (first wave fieldwork: February/May 2011; second wave: October/November 2011). A comparison of 2006 and 2011 is profitable for our purposes for it allows us to rule out the potentially confounding effect of voting behavior on respondents' pattern of propensity to vote. Each wave from both surveys features all the relevant measures of interest

¹ The ITANES (Italian National Election Studies) Association runs a research program on voting behavior in Italy, the origins of which date back to the early 1990s, when the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo Research Foundation conducted two post-election surveys (1990 and 1992) within the context of a project devoted to the study of change in the Italian political system. For the 1994 elections the Cattaneo's research program was joined by various researchers from several different universities, and in December 2007 they founded the ITANES Association. Further information is available at <http://www.itanes.org>. The analyses, interpretations, and conclusions in this paper are solely those of the authors.

for this analysis, as outlined below. Furthermore, it must be noted that question wording has been kept fully comparable throughout surveys.

In line with the existing literature on PTVs, we stack our data in order to obtain a structure defined at the level stemming from the interaction of individuals and parties (Van der Eijk et al, 2006) Therefore, for each respondent is reported a voting propensity for every measured party. Following the logic of the stacked data matrix, the unit of analysis is represented by respondent*party combinations. The dependent variable is a 10-point scale probing voters' propensity to *ever* vote for each of the parties included as stacks.²

All the main attitudinal predictors are already interpretable in terms of respondent*party combination. *Party identification* is measured through the usual combination of survey questions tapping both the directional and the strength component: respondents are thus assigned a value ranging from 0 (not identified with the party in the specific combination) to 3 (strongly identified with that party). Respondents' *evaluation of party leaders* is tapped by the thermometer score probing their personality assessment on a 10-point scale, whereas *issue proximity* is measured as the absolute difference between the respondents' placement of the self and each of the parties on the left-right scale.

Our statistical models also control for the effect exerted by socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (i.e., *age, gender, educational level*),

² Parties included as stacks with respect to each dataset are as follows: (2006) Alleanza Nazionale, Democratici di Sinistra, Forza Italia, Lega Nord, La Margherita, Rifondazione Comunista, Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e di Centro, Verdi; (2011) Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia, Partito Democratico, Popolo della Libertà, Lega Nord, Italia dei Valori, Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà, Unione dei Democratici Cristiani e di Centro.

their placement within the socio-economic structure (i.e., *urbanization, region of residence, religious denomination, and profession*), and their retrospective evaluation of the economy in the last year. Contrary to the aforementioned attitudinal variables, our statistical controls do not have a straightforward counterpart at our level of analysis (respondents*parties). For this reason, we have produced the so-called *y-hats* – that is, predicted values – regressing our dependent variable on synthetic indexes of the variables of interest through OLS, in order to produce a linear projection (at the respondent*party level) of previously individual variables.

Preliminary Results

As a preliminary step, we estimated four OLS models with the aim of uncovering the underlying structure of vote propensities for the main Italian parties. In Table 1 we present ordinary least squares estimates of propensities to vote in 2006, taking into account data from both the pre- and the post-electoral wave separately, and in 2011 (a non-electoral year) focusing cross-sectionally on each wave in turn. Our simple model relies on the standard explanatory variables (as presented above) that have been identified by electoral researchers as the most relevant predictors of voting choice in Western democracies (Thomassen, 2005), as well as in the Italian case (Bellucci and Segatti, 2011). In this exploratory section of the analysis we simply observe the effect exerted by these variables on electoral utilities in the four different surveys.

Table 1. The determinants of PTVs: cross-sectional analysis

	2006		2011	
	<i>pre-election wave</i>	<i>post-election wave</i>	<i>first wave</i>	<i>second wave</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age	.00	.01	.00	.00
Gender	.01	.04**	.00	-.00
Educational level	.01	.02*	.02*	.02*
Urbanization	.03**	.04**	.03**	.01*
Region of residence	.07**	.06**	.06**	.05**
Religious denominat.	.02*	.03**	.03**	.04**
Profession	.07**	.06**	.05**	.04**
PartyID (Pre)	.21**	-	.21**	-
PartyID (Post)	-	.19**	-	.22**
Leader Eval. (Pre)	.42**	-	.48**	-
Leader Eval. (Post)	-	.44**	-	.49**
Issue Proximity (Pre)	-.22**	-	-.14**	-
Issue Proximity (Post)	-	-.29**	-	-.15**
Economic Eval. (Pre)	.06**	-	.06**	-
Economic Eval. (Post)	-	.05**	-	.04**
R ²	.55	.64	.51	.51
<i>F</i>	<i>F</i> (11,1083)= 927	<i>F</i> (11,1180)= 1444	<i>F</i> (11,1182)= 1352	<i>F</i> (11,1912)= 1140
<i>N</i>	8048	9030	12287	12662

Note: Dependent variable: respondents' PTV for main parties on a stacked data matrix. Table entries are standardized OLS regression coefficients. Standard error estimates are clustered robust at the individual level. ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

The picture emerging from the figures reported in Table 1 fits well with the most recent voting literature from the Second Italian Republic, which stresses the strong personalization of the political system and of voting choices in turn (Garzia and Viotti, 2012). In fact, leader evaluations emerge as the strongest predictor of PTVs in each and every model. In terms of explanatory power, party leader assessments are followed by party-voter proximity on issues. Socio-structural and economic controls, on the contrary, do seem to play much of a role – in line, once again, with the available empirical evidence that demonstrates the declining ability of socio-structural factors to influence Italian voters' behavior (Bellucci and Segatti, 2011).

More interestingly to our purposes is the observation of an extremely stable pattern of coefficients throughout the four surveys. Regardless of the political context in which the various surveys have been conducted (i.e., pre-electoral, post-electoral, and non-electoral periods) the structural content of Italian voters' PTVs appears by and large shaped by inherently political factors, and *in primis* by thermometer assessments of the political leaders. Indeed, it should be noted that the role played by leader evaluations becomes even *more* important in 2011 (columns 3 and 4). During the electoral campaign electoral utilities appear relatively more influenced by issue-related considerations, while their salience in a non-electoral context gets downsized by about 50 percent. In the latter circumstance, voters would seem to rely less on substantive issues in the formulation of their electoral utilities, while even greater role is left to the perception of party leaders. This finding can be possibly interpreted as a result

of the enduring visibility of political leaders in the media, regardless of the electoral cycle, as opposed to the lack of attention devoted to concrete issues in non-electoral periods.

Notwithstanding, our results are possibly biased by unobservable omitted variables that, if correlated with PTV values as well as with some explanatory variable in our model, might lead to inconsistency of the estimates. Therefore, we further controlled for the presence of individual fixed unobserved heterogeneity by estimating the 2006 panel data with a fixed-effect design. Fixed-effects estimates further admit the possibility that the source of unobservable heterogeneity is correlated with one or more of the observable regressors. Failure to consider this source of endogeneity (if present) would lead to inconsistent estimates. Hence, we produced OLS estimates on the model transformed deviations from the individual time means (fixed-effects estimates). Results are so similar to previous simple OLS estimates that we decided, for the sake of simplicity, to simply report those ones.

Stability of PTVs and the Drivers of Change

The relative importance of our statistical predictors in shaping electoral utilities seems thus rather stable over the whole time span covered by our data. But what can be said about the individual-level stability of PTVs throughout time? To search for some hints about this aspect, we have simply correlated our PTV measures taken from the first wave of each survey with their counterpart in the second wave. Overall, PTVs would look like a rather stable variable: the

correlation between the two time points is .66 and .67 in 2006 and 2011 respectively. Interestingly, these values show a virtually identical degree of association across waves in both the electoral and the non-electoral contexts. Therefore, perceived electoral utilities are stable, but they are not fixed – even in the relatively short time elapsed between the first and the second wave of the surveys (about six months). On these bases, we are led to hypothesize that changes in vote propensities could be the key aspect to be considered in order to understand the dynamics of change in actual voting patterns. But then, what drives a change in the perceived electoral utilities?

This questions can only be addressed through a proper specification of the empirical model. To this purpose, we have computed a variable that captures the difference between the first- and the second-wave values of the PTVs. For 2006, we obtain a variable fairly distributed around a mean value of .49 with a standard deviation of 2.56 (the range is obviously between -10 and +10; see Figure 1a). As for 2011, the variable produces a mean change of 0 – quite unsurprisingly, given the fact that the absence of a real election slows down substantially the patterns of change – and a standard deviation of 2.63 (see Figure 1b). In both cases, we observe a sufficient amount of variance at the individual level to be investigated.

We restructured our stacked data matrix by using as new dependent variable the difference in PTVs. We have re-estimated the *y-hat* values for the socio-structural variables, which are obviously not expected to change in the

Figure 1a. Distribution of PTV differences across panel waves, 2006

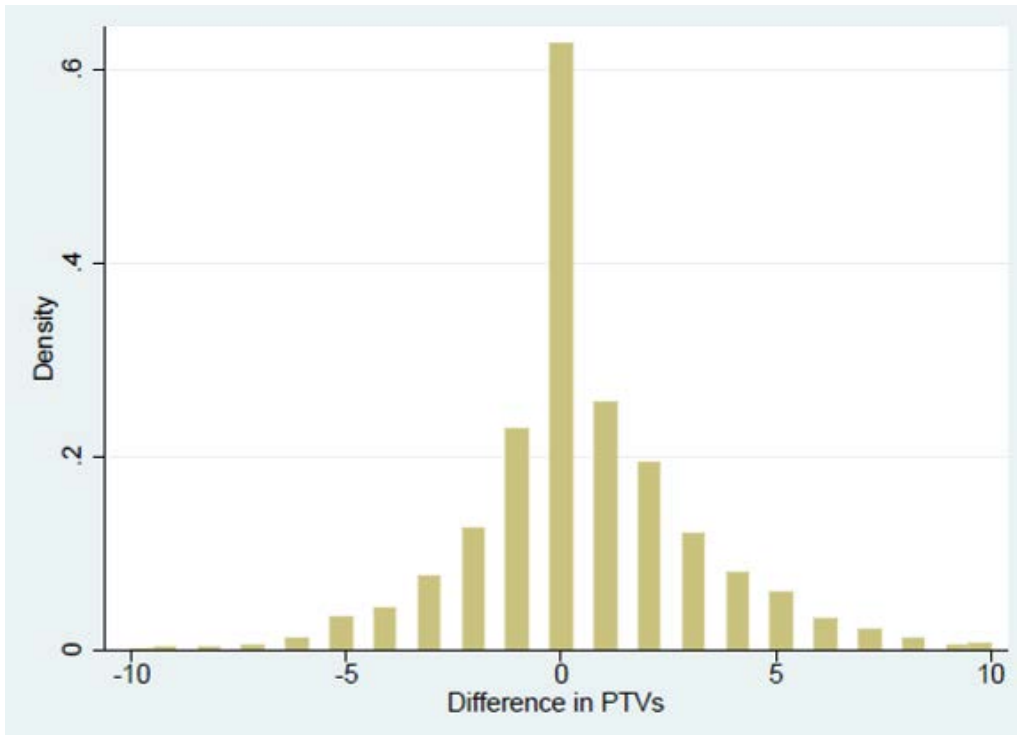
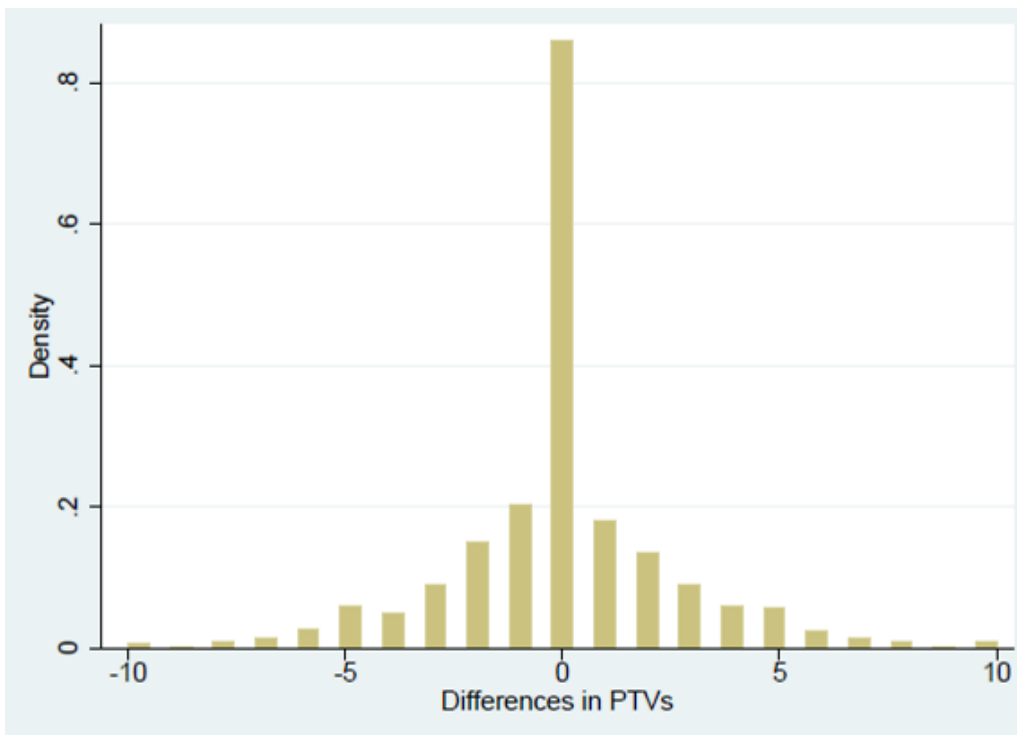


Figure 1b. Distribution of PTV differences across panel waves, 2011



short term. As to the attitudinal measures included in the model, we computed the first differences for the measures of partisanship, party-voter proximity on issues, leader assessments as well as retrospective economic evaluations. Our empirical model of PTV change can be stated as follows:

$$D.Ptv = a + bX + D.Pid + D.Lead + D.Issues + D. Econ + u_i$$

So what drives changes in PTVs? Our first-differences model, as presented in Table 2, shows that changes in the score attributed to party leaders play the greatest role in PTV dynamics. Changes on the relative party-voter distance on issues as well as on the partisanship dimensions play only a secondary role. It would thus appear that patterns of PTV change are most strongly affected by changes in those factors that shapes them more heavily: party leader assessment (a relatively unsurprising conclusion in the light of the pervasive personalization of Italian politics in the last decade).

We also tried to introduce voting choice itself as a predictor of PTV change in the 2006 model (column 2). While recognizing that in the prevailing view voting choice should be deterministically produced as a result of the individual's calculus of voting propensities (and hence a model of PTV that includes vote as predictor should be seen as misspecified), we are interested in understanding whether PTVs are vulnerable to a feedback effect proceeding from voting choice, such as other individual attitudes like party identification (Garzia and De Angelis, 2011). In this alternative framework, PTVs might incorporate an individual bias

related to the rationalization of the act of voting, which may raise the evaluation of the party towards which the ballot has been cast. Evidence shows that voting choice has a significant ($p < .01$) but only modest role in PTV changes ($\beta = .04$), making the feedback hypothesis very difficult to hold.

Table 2. The drivers of PTV change: first-differences models

	2006		2011
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age	.01	.01	-.01
Gender	.04*	.04*	.02
Educational level	.04**	.04**	.01
Urbanization	.06**	.06**	.04**
Region of residence	.10**	.10**	.08**
Religious denominat.	.05**	.05**	.05**
Profession	.12**	.12**	.10**
PartyID (Pre)	.09**	.08**	.07**
Leader Eval. (Pre)	.24**	.24**	.19**
Issue Proximity (Pre)	-.10**	-.10**	-.07**
Economic Eval. (Pre)	.02	.02	.03**
Vote Choice	-	.04**	-
R ²	.13	.13	.08
F	F(11,1016)=57	F(12,1016)=54	F(11,1689)=52
N	7516	7516	10811

Note: Dependent variable: *D.ptv* on a stacked data matrix. Table entries are standardized OLS regression coefficients. Standard error estimates are clustered robust at the individual level.

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

A Few Concluding Remarks

PTV measures are ever more commonly used the dependent variable of electoral research. However, this choice can possibly represent a problem because of the very structure of election survey research. To the extent that voters' PTVs are measured in post-election surveys (as it is often the case), these are likely to result endogenously produced by actual voting behavior in the past election. Our preliminary results, based on Italian election study data, show that this is not the case. Italian voters' pattern of propensity(es) to vote are *not* vulnerable to a feedback effect proceeding from voting choice. What drives PTVs are indeed inherently political factors, such as voters' assessment of party leaders and their proximity to parties on the left-right scale. According to our findings, these factors are also the principal drivers of PTV-change throughout time. In turn, these results provide support for the notion of PTVs as a concept projected in an undefined future (van der Eijk *et al.*, 2006: 433). Italian voters would seem to understand the difference between *actual* vote choices and the likelihood to *ever* vote for a party (with the former bearing only a modest effect on the latter). Needless to say, more research on individual country cases as well as in comparative perspective is in order if we are to understand the extent to which these conclusions hold beyond the borders of Italian (often claimed) uniqueness.

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