

Extreme appeal: voters trust extreme positions more than moderate ones, study finds

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Trying to appear moderate is not always the best strategy for capturing votes during an election, reveals a new study. Extreme positions can build trust among an electorate, who value ideological commitment in times of uncertainty.

"The current political advantage of the Republican Party stems from the ability of its candidates to develop 'signature ideas.' This strategy is rewarded even when the electorate has ideological reservations," says University of Southern California economist Juan Carrillo, adding that this poses a challenge for the Democrats.

In the current issue of *The Economic Journal*, Carrillo and Micael Castanheira of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium), show that voters who are unsure about the quality of a policy can be swayed by indications of trustworthiness.

As Carrillo explains, many tend to believe that a candidate's platforms should be tailored to appeal to voters, particularly swing voters. Instead, this research shows that instead of swinging voters, candidates should try to swing ideas by offering higher-quality positions that may be less popular.

In the United States, holding strong positions has already been shown to work on a few issues that have an ideological component, such as abortion and the death penalty, Carrillo notes.

"A rational electorate is reluctant to support someone who does not exhibit commitment to some ideology," Carrillo says. "Voters rightly perceive that someone without ideological commitment cannot have developed a valuable political program. They reason that, 'If you tell me what I want to hear, it probably means that you don't have any ideas of your own to share.'"

Carrillo and Castanheira's paper is an important challenge to the widely accepted median voter theorem. In the median voter theorem, voters who are fully informed will use their understanding when casting a ballot, choosing the platform that is closest to their own beliefs. Thus, it stands to reason that to attract the majority of votes, parties should try to appeal to the majority of voters.

But, as the researchers point out, it is rare for a voter to be fully informed in real life. More likely, voters will have incomplete and sometimes inaccurate information about how left-leaning or right-leaning stances actually translate into high quality proposals for, say, withdrawing troops safely or reforms.

This information comes from the press and other sources, such as campaign advertisements.

"To attract a majority of votes, parties cannot simply try to appear 'median.' Quite the contrary," Carrillo says. "Winning an election is generally about crafting a convincing philosophy that the electorate will view as superior to that of the opponents."

The researchers point to several real-life examples, including the 1995 Belgian election. According to the authors, the VLD – a traditionally right-wing party – sought the opinion of voters on a number of key issues and pledged to follow popular will if elected. The experiment failed. Four years later, the VLD returned to a rightist platform, and their candidate was elected prime minister.

Source: University of Southern California

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