

Self-Interest, Voter Behavior and Political Attitudes: Evidence from a Swiss Pension Reform^{*†}

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Andrea Ghisletta[‡]

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Abstract

Voting is a fundamental activity in democracy. Still, there is little quasi-experimental evidence on the importance of personal and general motives when voting. I exploit a cohort discontinuity in the cost assignment of a pension reform in Switzerland to isolate the impact of personal loss on voter behavior. Using rich administrative data and post-vote survey data, I find an advertised personal loss of CHF 26,000 to increase voter participation by 5.5 percentage points and reform rejection by 22.9 percentage points. Individuals thus balance between personal and general arguments when called to vote. I rationalize this revealed behavior in a model in which voters profit from expressive utility in the act of voting for their preferred option, which in turn depends on the consideration of both self- and general interests. I further find the governmental timing plans and the proposed compensation measures to be irrelevant to voters' response, suggesting the primacy of political advertisement over concrete reform plans. Finally, I do not find the personal loss to consistently shift attitudes towards the parties supporting the referendum, the government, the workers' unions or the economic associations. I conjecture that direct democracy can help to shift the burden of responsibility from the involved political actors to the citizenship itself.

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[‡]University of Basel, Peter Merian-Weg 6, CH-4002 Basel. Email: andrea.ghisletta@unibas.ch.