

Political Economy of Selection and Polarisation: Essays on Electoral Choice, Representation and Voter Participation

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Abstract

A near-consensus view in academic economics suggests that democracy promotes economic performance by creating and maintaining conducive institutions and improving political selection. Yet real-world democratic processes frequently diverge from these expectations, often handing the levers of power to leaders who disregard democratic norms and dismiss established economic expertise on various matters of public policy. This dissertation aims to shed light on this apparent puzzle from multiple angles to understand why democratic processes often diverge from the ideal-typical functioning described in much of the economics and political science literature. It comprises four research articles, focusing on the role of institutions in political selection, voter turnout and electoral polarisation, and finally, the strategic incentives on the supply side of politics that feed political polarisation.

The first article highlights how seemingly minor institutional features—such as the way schoolchildren are sorted into age cohorts in early life—can have long-term consequences for political selection and representation. These findings underscore the often-overlooked role of ostensibly apolitical institutions in shaping who enters politics and, ultimately, whose interests are represented.

In the second and third articles, the dissertation turns to studying voter turnout and electoral polarisation. It shows how socio-economic conditions can amplify polarisation not necessarily through rational economic voting, but by increasing perceptions of insecurity and status threat. Additionally, patterns of voter turnout are shown to significantly distort political outcomes. When turnout is low, elections disproportionately benefit parties at the ideological extremes, thereby intensifying polarisation.

Finally, the fourth article presents a theoretical political economy model to explain how political parties respond to the internal structure of their voter bases. It argues that when voters are internally more polarised on economic issues than on cultural-identity issues, parties are incentivised to focus their campaign efforts on the latter, as high intragroup polarisation reduces the cost-effectiveness of campaigning. Furthermore, exogenous shocks—such as economic crises—can exacerbate this dynamic by further increasing polarisation on economic issues, which tend to be less persistent than cultural-identity issues. Crucially, this mechanism can induce parties to shift their political discourse towards cultural identity, even when voter demand for such discourse remains unchanged.

Together, the findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of how democracies operate under real-world conditions. They show that deviations from idealised democratic functioning are not anomalies, but the product of identifiable institutional, behavioural, and strategic dynamics. This work contributes to broader debates in political economy about the limits of democratic responsiveness, the causes of polarisation, and the conditions under which democracy can deliver representative and stable governance.