

#04

Do Voting Rules Really Matter? Insights from the 2019 Styrian Regional Election

by
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Elections are the foundation of democracy, but the rules for counting votes can dramatically change outcomes. A recent study by Andreas Darmann and Christian Klamler, published in *Public Choice*, explores this question using the 2019 regional election in Styria (Austria) as a case study. The research shows how different voting systems influence outcomes, how consistently voters express preferences—and how strategic voting works.

The Influence of Voting Rules

The study compared nine voting systems, from simple plurality voting (one vote per voter) to more complex methods like evaluative voting (rating parties on a scale from -20 to +20).

The findings were:

- Plurality voting favored the Greens and the ÖVP, while smaller parties like NEOS performed worse.
- Approval Voting (multiple votes allowed) helped parties like NEOS and the KPÖ—suggesting that systems with broader expression options favor moderate candidates.
- Evaluative voting reinforced this effect: polarizing parties like the FPÖ performed poorly due to strong disapproval.

Key Insight: The voting system is not just a technicality—it can favor or disadvantage certain parties, especially niche or moderate ones.

Voter Consistency: Can We Make Up Our Minds?

The study also examined how consistently voters expressed their preferences across systems:

- Over 85% of voters remained consistent with their rankings (e.g., selecting their favorite party).
- With more detailed rating scales, consistency dropped—suggesting voters struggle to express nuance numerically.

Interestingly, voters found it easier than expected to rank parties (75% said it was “easy”). However, with the -20 to +20 scale, many chose round numbers like -5, 0, or +5—indicating a preference for simplicity even when offered complex options.

Strategic Voting: Tactics Over Conviction

The study uncovered strategic voting—when voters don’t choose their favorite party to avoid “wasting” their vote or to influence coalitions:

- Around 14% of voters voted strategically, especially supporters of the Greens and NEOS.
- Green voters often supported the KPÖ to help them enter parliament, while NEOS voters leaned toward safer bets like the ÖVP or Greens.

Some voters made seemingly irrational choices (e.g., for less-preferred parties)—a reminder that human behavior doesn’t always align with theoretical models.

Why This Matters

The study shows: voting rules aren’t neutral. They shape outcomes, influence voter behavior, and can even change political landscapes by favoring certain types of parties. For advocates of reforms like Approval Voting or evaluative rating, the results offer empirical support: these methods give voters more expressive power and may reduce polarization.

But there’s a catch. If voters act inconsistently or strategically, the “perfect” system remains elusive. As the authors note, future research could explore how these rules affect seat allocation—because in politics, it’s not just about who wins, but about the balance of power.

Something to think about: If someone says, “a vote is a vote,” remind them: the rules of the game decide whose votes count—and how.

This blog is based on the following research article:

Darmann, A., Klamler, C. Does the rule matter? A comparison of preference elicitation methods and voting rules based on data from an Austrian regional parliamentary election in 2019. *Public Choice* 197, 63–87 (2023).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-023-01071-y>