

Context and Congressional Elections: Assessing the Impact of Local Influences on Third Party Voting in U.S. House Elections

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Abstract

The attributes of districts that make voters within them more likely to select non-major party Congressional candidates were examined. The two primary explanations tested were those based on district-level support for non-major party candidates more broadly and those based on strategic voting. These attributes and their impact on voting behavior were examined using a model specification (multilevel logit) that can take into account variables measured at the district level (ie. the percentage difference between major party vote shares) and the individual level (ie. respondents' ratings of major party candidates) and evaluate their influence on individual vote choice. Districts with higher current or most recent third party/independent presidential vote shares made voters in those districts more likely to select non-major party House candidates. Larger percentage differences between the two party vote shares of the major party House candidates had a similar impact on voters.

Keywords: independent, voting, parties, multi-level, Congress, logit

1. Introduction

Due to the presidential candidacies of Ralph Nader and Ross Perot, the rationale behind voting for third party¹ candidates in U.S. elections became a topic of interest for both pundits and scholars in the 1990s and 2000s. Further, Walter Hickel (AK), Lowell Weicker (CT), Jesse Ventura (MN), and Angus King (ME) all won governorships as third party or independent candidates in the 1990s (for an in-depth discussion of these elections see Gold 2005). Angus King's (I-ME) election to a U.S. Senate seat in 2012 is a contemporary example of the importance of a non-major party candidate in a high-profile election. Third party candidate success is unusual in elections for the House or Senate as well as many other offices in the United States, however, it does happen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) has represented the state of Vermont for many years and while none of them came close to winning the election, multiple third party presidential candidates attracted the attention of the American public at the end of the twentieth century. John Anderson, Ross Perot, and Ralph Nader did not become president but were able to attract attention to their campaigns to a degree that other non-major party candidates would certainly envy. Presidential coattails (Campbell, 1986) have been examined with regard to Congressional elections as well. However, this analysis will be concerned with third party candidates broadly, not any particular third party. A particular third party's presidential candidate having an impact on his/her party's candidates in House elections will not be of direct relevance to this analysis, but the overall impact of third party presidential candidates on House elections will be explored. Elections for lower offices are similar in many ways to that of the presidency but also contain important distinctions. Anderson, Perot, and Nader were running in national elections where major parties historically have held a strong advantage. Democrats and Republicans dominate lower-level elections as well, but Congressional elections do not involve the same candidates campaigning across multiple states to appeal to voters across those states.

¹ In this analysis, the use of the term "third party" to describe a candidate indicates that the individual running to which it refers could be an independent or a member of a minor party.

Voter incentives in Congressional elections, particularly House elections, are much more localized than Presidential elections and voters will understand them in House elections clearly for this reason. The Electoral College is irrelevant to these contests and the impact of a voter's choice on the outcome is not contingent on the choice of voters in other states. How voters perceive this choice among Democrats, Republicans and other candidates is central to the following analysis. On first blush, one might expect third party candidates, like major party candidates, to be able to attract voters whose preferences are closer to their than those of any other candidate. However, a different logic, or perhaps more accurately a conditional logic, likely applies to third party voting. Despite the utility of using spatial models (Downs, 1957) or directional models (Rabinowitz & MacDonald, 1989) to explain major party voting behavior in a winner-take-all plurality system, these models cannot easily explain the concerns that are specific to voting for a third party candidate.

As the presidential election of 2000 drew closer, respondents who had expressed support for Ralph Nader were found to be less likely to maintain that support in more competitive states (Hillygus, 2007). Similar discrepancies were found between vote totals and poll numbers in U.S. states during the 2000 election, with fewer voters in competitive states selecting Nader than the polls suggested (Burden, 2005). I expect similar dynamics to occur in lower-level elections involving single-member districts. U.S. Representatives are elected from single-member districts, so I expect the same logic to apply to these elections as applies to states in presidential elections. In districts that are not clearly conducive to either a Republican or a Democratic victory, voters should be more prone to select major party candidates. When voters are offered three choices, if they are aware that choosing their most favored candidate, as opposed to voting for their second choice, could facilitate the election of their least-favored candidate, they have strong incentives not to vote for their favorite candidate (Blais & Nadeau, 1996). This is the rationale behind what Blais and Nadeau labeled "a strategic vote" (1996, 40), and the following analysis will look for evidence of this type of voting in U.S. House elections. Burden (2007) found that more voters chose third party/independent candidates in less competitive gubernatorial and Senate contests in 2006, and I expect the same dynamics to apply across the wider temporal domain, and different type of election, that will be examined in this analysis.

Factors other than candidates' electoral prospects play into a voter's decision as well, and have been found to be important in previous research. There is evidence that third party presidential support, in certain notable elections, indicated dissatisfaction with the Democratic and Republican candidates (Abramson, Aldrich, Paolino & Rohde, 2000). While weaker partisans, among those who identify with a party, are more likely to vote for third party candidates, the impact of candidate selection on vote choice makes the major party candidates in any election an important consideration when determining whether voters will support a third party candidate. If voters are dissatisfied with the major party candidates, then they become more likely to vote for a third party candidate. Voters' assessments of candidates are predicted to be important in a country with elections as candidate-centric as those in the United States. Furthermore, the calculus of voters is complicated by the fact that choosing a third party candidate not only rejects the major party candidates, it dismisses the two party system that Americans have been socialized to accept (Gillespie, 1993; Rosenstone, Behr & Lazarus, 1996), so attachment to the party system itself may be an important component in voters' electoral decisions. Voters may be *exiting* the party system if they vote for a third party candidate (Hirschmann, 1970). If a voter makes such a choice, the voter is expressing dissatisfaction with the two party systems and is engaging in either exit or voice, as articulated by Hirschmann in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970).² The voter is engaging in voice when he/she is expressing dissatisfaction with the system but has not left it entirely; the voter has exited the two party system when he/she no longer identifies with the two party system and votes for a third party candidate for that reason. Also, the way voters perceive choices depends on how the media present those choices (Zaller, 1992); if someone votes for a third party candidate, he or she is rejecting much of the narrative that the media use to explain politics. In the two-party horse race that is often reported, the third party voter does not pick a known horse. Americans also identify with a party because of the perception that it is the appropriate party for people like themselves-- i.e., those who demographically resemble themselves (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). Voters, then, not only reject the major parties when they vote for a third party candidate; in accordance with Green et al. (2002), they may be rejecting a part of their own identity.

² Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus (1996), an examination of third party presidential voting discussed often in this analysis, also used Hirschmann's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970) for theoretical guidance.

Social identities have also been shown to impact strongly the behavior of individuals when they interact with others, who are outside of that identity, individuals against whom they tend to discriminate (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner 2004).³ Thus, for those with a strong partisan identity, voting for a third party candidate could mean rejecting their political identity in favor of something they had previously viewed in a negative light. Creating individual incentives and disincentives to vote for third party candidates, the context surrounding individual voters is likely to impact their choice. In a context that is conducive to third party voting, *ceteris paribus*, a voter is more likely to select a third party candidate. U.S. electoral rules and political socialization generally disincentivize third party voting, but some districts exhibit characteristics that counteract this socialization, such as a (relatively) large vote percentage for recent third party presidential candidates. Exposed to such factors, a voter should be more likely to vote for a third party candidate.

2. Theoretical Motivation/Hypotheses

An indicator of third party success and an indicator of major party competition will proxy the electoral context in which voters cast their votes. Higher third party presidential vote totals (%IND PRES VOTE) are expected to positively impact voters' propensity to choose a third party candidate. I specify the district third party presidential vote percentage in the current or most recent presidential election.⁴ The most recent percentage will be used in midterm election years. Greater previous third party success is hypothesized to impact positively third party vote choice because, barring other factors, voters in a district that had a large percentage of third party votes in the past will be less strongly oriented toward a two party system (Rosenstone, Behr & Lazarus, 1996; Gillespie, 1993) than other voters. The previous third party vote captures other unidentified district-level factors that contribute to third party voting as well, such as a district electorate's openness to new ideas and willingness to make unorthodox choices.

H1: Voters who live in districts that had higher recent combined totals for third party presidential candidates will be more likely to vote for third party House candidates.

The percentage difference between the two major party candidates' shares of the two-party vote (%MAJOR PARTY DIFF) is hypothesized to increase the respondent's probability of voting for a third party candidate.⁵ A higher percentage difference between these two candidates removes the incentive for strategic voting. Whenever a voter essentially knows who is going to win the election ahead of time and perceives a third party candidate to be a better option, he/she has no incentive to choose a preferred major party candidate. Thus, in accordance with Burden (2007), the percentage difference between the vote totals for the two major party candidates will influence a voter's probability of casting a third party vote.

H2: Voters who live in districts with a larger percentage point difference between the two-party vote shares of the major party candidates in the current election will be more likely to vote for a third party candidate in the current election.⁶

³ Tajfel and Turner (2004) is a piece from an edited volume that draws heavily from Tajfel and Turner's own work.

⁴ The district level third party presidential vote was coded from Congressional Quarterly's *Politics in America 1992: The 102nd Congress* (Duncan eds., 1991), and *CQ's Politics in America 2002: The 107th Congress* (Nutting and Stern eds., 2001). In 1992, the district-level third party presidential vote only included votes for Perot (Nutting and Stern eds., 2001, pp. xiii); data for other years do not have similar limitations.

⁵ The percentage difference in two-party vote shares between major candidates for years up to 1990 have been obtained from ICPSR's "Candidate Name and Constituency Totals, 1788-1990" (ICPSR, 1995) unless otherwise specified. The same variable for later years was coded by the author based on the election results posted at the website of the Clerk of the U.S. House http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html (Office of the Clerk: U.S. House of Representatives, n.d.) unless otherwise specified. Whether a third party candidate was running in the current cycle was coded from the same Clerk of the House documents and those documents were used to refine measures of the non-major party vote in the ICPSR data. Elections without third party candidates were dropped from the analysis because the dependent variable can only be zero in those elections.

⁶ Elections that took place in New York and Louisiana will not be included in these analyses because of the unusual electoral rules in those states. New York permits fusion endorsements and Louisiana allows multiple candidates from both major parties on general election ballots. Elections with only one major party candidate remained in the data, but that district would have a (%MAJOR PARTY DIFF) value of one hundred because no other candidate would have any percentage of the two-party vote.

The ideas tested in this analysis pertain to the incentives facing individual voters and the context around them. Although these macro-level variables should influence voting behavior, a respondent's partisanship and ratings of major party candidates should also influence third party voting. The models examine how both electoral incentives and voters' own beliefs influence their decisions. In addition to the macro factors, these models examine what aspects of individual voters caused them to choose a third party candidate rather than a major party candidate. Third party voting has not been studied as much in congressional elections as in presidential elections, and this research will shed light on whether similar forces operate in these lower-level elections. The following analyses will examine whether this framework helps to explain vote choice in U.S. Congressional elections (1980-2000) using the American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative file.⁷ The cumulative file covers many more years than are used in this analysis, but the years prior to 1978 do not contain all of the needed variables that pertain to Congressional races. Specifically, the feeling thermometer measures that pertain to Congressional candidates are not available for years prior to 1978. Also, 1980 was an optimal starting point for this analysis because of the focus on the influence of presidential candidates on House voting. There was not a candidate comparable to John Anderson, Ross Perot, or Ralph Nader in 1976. There also has not been a similarly noteworthy third party presidential candidate since Ralph Nader in 2000, so the analysis ends in that election cycle. Also, the models will only examine districts in which a third party candidate is running so the findings will not be distorted by the absence of a third party option in some contests.⁸ The data, therefore, do not lend themselves to explaining third party voting in any one district but are conducive to examining the determinants of third party voting across those districts in which a third party option is available.

In Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus's (1996) analysis of presidential elections, each respondent's assessment of major party candidates is the difference between the quantities of positive and negative comments about his/her favored major party candidate, based on interviewers asking respondents what they thought was favorable and unfavorable about each major party candidate. They recorded their variable to give it a range of zero to one, with zero representing the most negative assessment and one representing the most positive assessment. My analyses, however, will use a different approach to determine how respondents feel about the major party U.S. House candidates because comparable variables are not available for them. Due to respondents' relative lack of information about Congressional candidates, as compared to presidential candidates, a measure that does not involve open-ended comments will have to be used. The variable used in this analysis is the greater of the two feeling thermometer ratings for the two major party candidates. Feeling thermometer ratings range from zero to one hundred; higher scores indicate a greater fondness for a candidate. The greater of the two will be used because it should indicate how likely someone is to vote for his/her preferred major party candidate. A voter with a rating of 50 for his/her preferred major party candidate obviously is less enthusiastic than a voter whose corresponding rating is 100.⁹ While distinct from the variable used by Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus (1996), the feeling thermometer measure gauges a respondent's opinion about his/her preferred major party candidate, as Rosenstone, Behr, and Lazarus (1996) did with their variable. This variable should have a significant and negative impact on the dependent variable because of the candidate-centric nature of modern campaigns. Abramson et al. (2000) found that support for non-major party presidential candidates was greater among those who were not pleased with the Republican and Democratic nominees. A similar relationship is expected here with regard to vote choice and U.S. House races. Voters who do not like either major party candidate in a U.S. Congressional race will be more likely to vote for a third party candidate in that election.

H3: Voters with a lower feeling thermometer rating for their respective preferred major party candidate will be more likely to select a third party candidate than voters who gave their preferred major party candidate a more favorable rating.

⁷ All individual level variables in the analyses of Congressional elections were taken from The AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES TIME SERIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE (1948-2012) [dataset] (ANES, 2014). [Online] Available: http://electionstudies.org/studypages/download/datacenter_all_NoData.php.

⁸ These models will only examine voters from these districts because I am directly interested in the decisions of voters, not the decisions of candidates.

⁹ If a respondent had the same rating for both major party candidates, that number will be used. If a respondent only rated one of them, the rating the respondent gave will be used. Voters are assumed to be unenthusiastic about candidates they choose not to rate.

Strength of partisan identification (PARTY ID STRENGTH) will be specified to assess the influence of partisanship on a respondent's propensity to vote for a third party candidate. Rosentone, Behr, and Lazarus's (1996) models, which explained the same choice in presidential elections, did not control for strength of partisanship, although its importance was discussed in their theory. Because more information typically is easily available about presidential candidates than about congressional candidates, assessments of (major party) presidential candidates likely are more important direct determinants of respondent vote choice than partisanship. Partisanship will be important here, however, because information about U.S. House candidates is more costly than that about presidential candidates; partisanship can easily be used as a shortcut in lower-level elections where information is more costly (see Downs, 1957). While partisanship clearly influences respondents' opinions of the major party candidates, it also may exert a direct influence on a respondent's vote choice, especially in a Congressional election, where the voter may have little information about the candidates. Partisanship will be taken into account using a four point scale that ranges from independent through leaning independent and weak partisan to strong partisan. Less partisan respondents, as determined by this scale, are hypothesized to be more likely to vote for a third party candidate.

H4: Weaker partisans, as measured by level of attachment to either of the two major parties, will be more likely than stronger partisans to vote for third party candidates.

3. Model Specification

A standard logit, probit, or regression model assumes that all of the variables are measured at the same level, whether individual or aggregate. An example of a strictly individual-level relationship is that between a respondent's major party candidate rating and her vote choice. Multilevel models, in contrast, allow macro level (i.e., level-2) factors to cause different systemic levels of third party voting behavior among the people in each jurisdiction (see Steenbergen & Jones, 2002; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). Multilevel modeling enables the nesting of respondents within districts, and examination of which district level measures cause differences in the behavior or outcome of interest. In the present analysis, a multi-level model is more appropriate than a standard logit or probit model because some of the variables are measured at the aggregate level, while others are measured at the individual level. These models will be estimated using a multilevel logit specification because the dependent variable in the individual-level (level-1) models, vote choice, is dichotomous. Intercepts-as-outcomes models will be specified to examine whether macro level variables that are hypothesized to make voters more likely to select third party candidates have district-specific direct effects on vote choice. These models allow intercepts to vary for each second level category (district) and for each district-level variable to have a unique impact on whether a voter (at level-1) selects a third party legislative candidate. Similar models have been used to examine the effect of context on the relationship between economic inequality and voter turnout across U.S. states (Galbraith & Hale, 2008) and to examine economic voting across country-years (Duch & Stevenson, 2005). Placing individuals within their electoral context to examine third party voting behavior, the models examined in the following sections were adapted from examples presented by Raudenbush and Bryk (2002) and Bryk and Raudenbush (1992).¹⁰

4. Logit Model

A multilevel specification has been used to nest voters in years at level three and states at level two in presidential elections to examine correct voting (Lau, Andersen & Redlawsk 2008). A similar specification is appropriate here because of the structure of the data and the nature of voting in U.S. House elections. In this analysis, the models have a random intercept calculated at level-3 corresponding to each state-year to accommodate for temporal and state-specific impacts on voting behavior. These state-year-specific intercepts address the problem of needing to include temporal variation in a time series cross sectional model; they are used instead of fixed effects dummies representing states and election years. Each state-year (level-3), which is a U.S. state in a particular election year, has its own unique intercept in the congressional district (level-2) models. The district-level models, in turn, predict the intercept in the individual vote choice models (level-1).

¹⁰ See Eulau (1996) for a more theoretical discussion of the importance of different levels of measurement.

House Intercepts-As-Outcomes Logit Model

Individual Vote Choice Model (Level-1)

$$\text{THIRD PARTY VOTE}_{i,j,k} = \beta_{0jk} + \beta_1 \text{MAJOR PARTY CAND RATING}_{i,j,k} + \beta_2 \text{PARTY ID STRENGTH}_{i,j,k} + \epsilon_{i,j,k}$$

Predictors of Congressional District-Specific Intercept (Level-2)

$$\beta_{0jk} = \gamma_{00k} + \gamma_{01} \% \text{IND PRES VOTE} + \gamma_{02} \% \text{MAJOR PARTY DIFF} + r_{0jk}$$

State-Year Specific Intercept Equation (Level-3)

$$\gamma_{00k} = \gamma_{000} + u_{00k}$$

In the 3-level intercepts as outcomes logit model i voters (level-1 units) are nested in j congressional districts at level-2 and in k state-years at level-3; the districts are also nested within the state-years. At level three, γ_{000} is the grand mean intercept and u_{00k} is the random error associated with predicting γ_{00k} , which is the state-year specific intercept in the level-2 equation. The grand mean intercept is the baseline intercept for the entire model. State-year-specific intercepts are treated as the sum of the grand mean and a random error component specific to each state-year. The level-2 model is used to predict the congressional district-specific intercept β_{0jk} . This intercept will proxy congressional district-specific effects on individual vote choice at level-1. The congressional district-specific intercept, β_{0jk} , is predicted at the second level by %MAJOR PARTY DIFF and %IND PRES VOTE. The level-2 error term, the congressional district-specific error impacting the level-1 intercept, is r_{0jk} . The individual-level vote choice model is straightforward and explains the effects of individual-level factors on vote choice. The multilevel specification can measure the impact of macro factors on individual vote choice in addition to the influence of individual level variables. For example, the term $\beta_1 \text{MAJOR PARTY CAND RATING}_{i,j,k}$ in the individual level component of the House models represents the impact of major party candidate ratings on the probability of voter i in district j and state-year k selecting a third party candidate, with all other variables held constant. Also, the intercept in the individual level model has been influenced by error specific to the state-year (level-3) and district (level-2) in which a voter (level-1) makes a decision.¹¹

Table 1: Intercepts-As-Outcomes Logit Model Multi-level Indicators of U.S. House Voting (1980-2000)

Variance Components (Levels 1 and 2)						
Random Effect	Std. Dev.	Var. Comp.	d.f.	χ^2	p-value	
Intercept1,r0	0.04296	0.00185	684	264.01695	>.500	
Variance Components (Level 3)						
Random Effect	Std. Dev.	Var. Comp.	d.f.	χ^2	p-value	
Intercept1/Intercept2,u00	0.90351	0.81633	238	227.35042	>.500	
n (Level-3) 239						
n (Level-2)=925						
n (Level-1) 2,745						

Level-3	Level-2	Level-1	Coefficient	Robust SE	T-ratio	P-value
INTERCEPT			-1.201	0.484	-8.685	<0.001
	%IND PRES VOTE		0.065	0.019	3.374	<0.001
	%MAJOR PARTY DIFF		0.021	0.006	3.459	<0.001
		PARTY ID STRENGTH	0.098	0.108	0.906	0.365
		MAJOR PARTY CAND RATING	-0.030	0.005	-5.903	<0.001

¹¹ HLM 7 (Raudenbush, Bryk & Congdon, 2011) was used to estimate the multilevel models used in this analysis. The manual corresponding to this program (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, & du Toit, 2011) was extremely helpful and was consulted for assistance with model estimation and the interpretation of the results of the models. Xpost (Cheng & Long 2014) was used to calculate predicted probabilities and can be downloaded at http://www.indiana.edu/~jslsoc/web_spost9/sp_xpost.htm. For a thorough explanation of the uses of XPost see Cheng and Long (2000), available at http://www.indiana.edu/~jslsoc/files_research/xpost/xpost.pdf. Other metrics included in the analysis (ie. means and other descriptive statistics) were obtained using Stata12 (StataCorp., 2011). The graphs that accompany the analysis were also made using Stata 12 (StataCorp., 2011).

5. Findings

5.1. Level-2 Findings

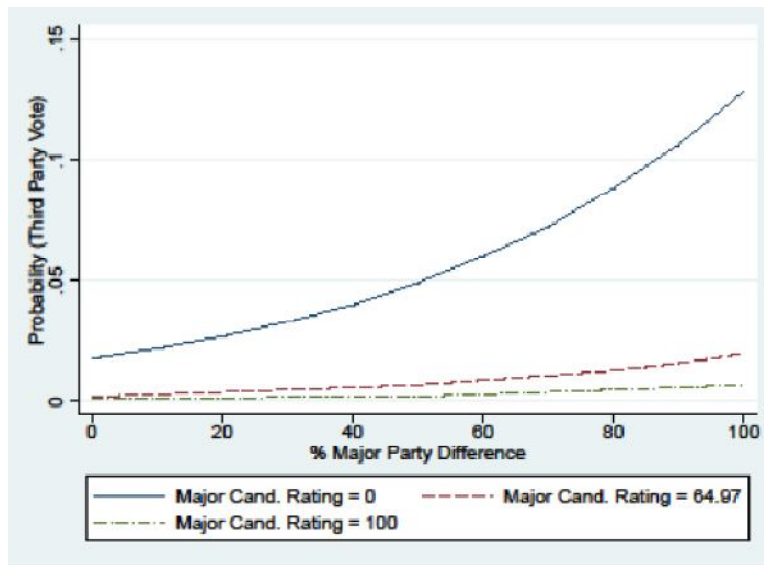
The analysis confirmed hypothesis one. Greater levels of third party presidential voting in current and recent elections made voters more likely to select third party candidates. If third party presidential candidates have recently received large shares of the vote in a district, third party House candidates benefit from that success. Voters in the district become more likely to vote for third party candidates. Openness to third party presidential candidates is indicative of openness to non major party candidates in a more general sense. If voters will vote for a third party presidential candidate in large numbers in a district, that is a signal to an individual voter that selecting a candidate who is not a Democrat or a Republican is an acceptable choice in American elections. This signal makes that voter more open to select a third party candidate. This relationship remained intact, even controlling for the influence of the percentage difference between the two party vote shares of the major party candidates in the current election. Presidential elections are high profile affairs and are likely to influence the way voters think about elections in a manner distinct from that of Congressional elections. The presidential election receives much more news coverage than House elections and therefore is likely to be seen as more important in the eyes of the voter. If he/she has been participating in American politics in an environment where one or more third party presidential candidates has had recent, relative success a voter is much more likely to think of third party candidates favorably than voters in other contexts. If many of a voter's neighbors selected a third party candidate for president, that voter has received a signal that a third party candidate is definitely an acceptable choice for the U.S. House.

Higher percentage differences between the two-party vote shares of the major candidates in the current House contest made voters more likely to select third party House candidates. Hypothesis three was confirmed because this variable was statistically significant. Controlling for other factors included in the model, the degree of two-party competition in House contests in their districts influenced voters' decision processes. Burden (2007) found the degree of competition between major party candidates for governorships or U.S. Senate seats was the primary factor determining vote shares for non-major party candidates in those elections. This analysis has generated similar findings at the level of the individual voter in House elections. Due to the significance of both level-2 independent variables, the level-1 intercepts are influenced by their values. In the level-1 logit models, this will impact the predicted probabilities corresponding to the significant level-1 indicators. The initial discussion of the level-1 findings in these models will not directly address the significant level-2 indicators so it will not mention differences in the level-1 intercepts. Further discussion will elaborate on how the predicted probabilities vary across districts.

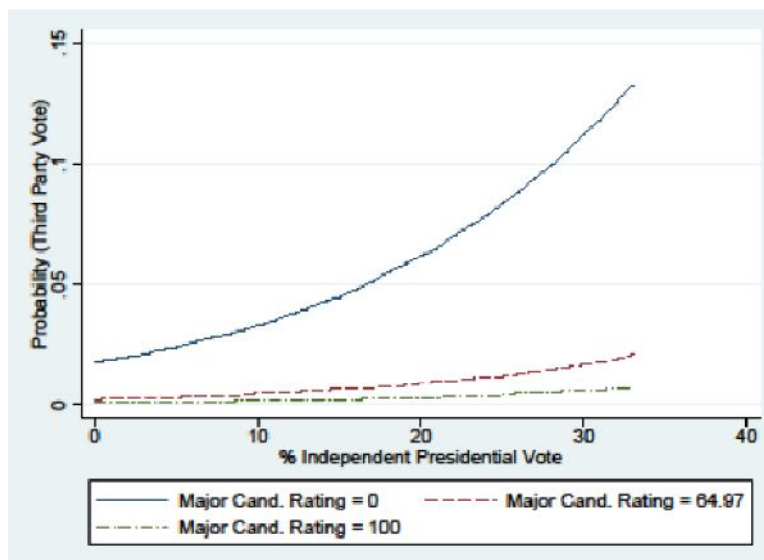
5.2. Level-1 Finding

Respondents' ratings of major party candidates negatively influenced the dependent variable at level-1. Those who were less enthusiastic about the major party candidates were more likely to support third party House candidates, controlling for the other variables. This is not surprising because voters are unlikely to select candidates they do not support. The finding is also consistent with Abramson et al.'s (2000) findings, though this analysis examines a different type of election and analyzes vote choice as opposed to candidate support. Controlling for their ratings of major party candidates more partisan respondents were not less likely to vote for third party candidates. The partisanship measure is an index of attachment to one of the major parties so this finding is somewhat surprising at first glance. Most observers would argue anyone who fervently supports Democrats or Republicans is unlikely to vote for Greens, Libertarians, or other similar House candidates. However, major party candidate evaluations also measured that support. Controlling for candidate ratings caused partisanship to have an insignificant impact on vote choice.

Graph 1: Predicted Probability of a Third Party House Vote at Different Values of %Major Party Difference



Graph 2: Predicted Probability of a Third Party House Vote at Different Values of %Independent Presidential Vote



5.3. Predicted Probabilities

Third party voting is an uncommon occurrence in U.S. elections, but the level-2 variables clearly caused voters to be more likely to make this decision. Both aspects of the voter’s electoral context measured here had a positive, significant impact on the intercepts at level-1, and through this impact, increased the probability of a third party House vote. The graphs that accompany this analysis illustrate a similar trend across the ranges of the level-2 variables. When a voter has an extremely negative assessment of the major party House candidates (gives neither of them a rating above zero), either contextual variable has a strong impact. When a voter reports this assessment of the candidates and either level-2 variable is at its maximum, holding the other constant at zero, the probability of a voter selecting a third party candidate is at least .128. Third party votes are rare in U.S. elections, as is success for third party candidates in the U.S. House, so a probability of .128 indicates a relatively high likelihood of a voter engaging in very rare electoral behavior. When the voter has an average (64.97) assessment of the major party candidates, or assesses them with the most positive value (100), the graphs illustrate that voter is very unlikely to select a third party House candidate. Voters with the most positive assessments of the major party candidates are incredibly unlikely to vote for third party House candidates regardless of context.

The probability of such a vote when the major party candidate rating is held constant at its maximum (100) never exceeds .007 regardless of the value of either of the two district-level measures. The independent presidential vote and the percentage difference in the two-party vote shares of the major party candidates both changed the calculations of voters. Voters were more likely to select third party House candidates when these variables were at higher values, but the impact was most noticeable among voters with low assessments of the major party candidates.

6. Conclusion

Major party candidate ratings impacted whether a respondent would select a third party candidate, independent of partisanship. The significance and negative influence of major party candidate ratings highlights the importance of candidate selection. When offered choices of major party candidates whom they find desirable, voters will select from among those candidates. A voter who dislikes the major party candidates is noticeably more likely to vote for third party candidates than a voter who likes the major party candidates. Abramson et al. (2000) found those who were dissatisfied with Republican and Democratic presidential candidates were more supportive of the less conventional candidates they were offered in notable late twentieth century elections. Similar reasoning applies in these analyses of House elections. Presidential vote shares matter at the district level as well. If the combined total for non major party presidential candidates in the current or most recent election for that office is high, that shows a district has partially overcome cultural biases toward choosing candidates from the two major parties (see Gillespie, 1993; Rosenstone, Behr & Lazarus, 1996). Voters in these districts have received the message that selecting third party candidates for national office is acceptable and they are more likely to make that choice than other voters. Consistent with Burden's (2007) aggregate-level analysis of senatorial and gubernatorial contests, the competitive context in which voters found themselves was relevant to their decisions as well. In districts with closer two-party vote percentages for the House seat, voters were less likely to select third party House candidates.

Third party voting is unusual in the United States. Most voters in most partisan elections choose either a Republican or a Democrat. If major party candidates are seen as undesirable choices, some voters will overcome the bias toward selecting major candidates. Living in areas where third party presidential candidates had recent success, or where one major party candidate is clearly ahead of the other in the House contest, makes voters more likely to select third party candidates. Major party candidates have an advantage because voters are taught to see voting as a choice between their two labels, but when both are perceived to be unfavorable, voters are open to other options. Third party voting is unusual, but in the right circumstances, can influence election outcomes when voters disapprove of the mainstream choices they are offered.

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