Electoral Campaigns in the Shadow of Pandering

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Extended Abstract

Why do politicians sometimes espouse views during electoral campaigns that are non-congruent with those of their electorate? Can non-congruent statements credibly convey information to voters about what a politician will do if elected, and if so, why would voters elect a politician who makes such statements? This paper develops a theory of informative cheap-talk electoral campaigns in which politicians hold heterogeneous policy preferences but are also office motivated.

We consider a model in which a representative voter is unsure of candidates’ policy preferences: candidates may either have preferences that are congruent or non-congruent with those of the voter. Once elected into office, reputational pressures imply that a politician of either type will typically engage in strategic policy pandering to signal congruence. We show that when reputational concerns are sufficiently strong, pandering leads to non-monotonic voter welfare in her belief about the politician’s congruence. Specifically, while the voter always prefers a politician who is known to be congruent to one who is known to be non-congruent, she may strictly prefer a politician who she knows is non-congruent to one whose preferences she is uncertain about.

This non-monotonicity allows for (partially-)informative non-binding communication during an election, even when all candidates are primarily office-motivated. A non-congruent candidate can credibly reveal his policy preferences through cheap talk, and has the incentive to do so, because this endogenously serves as a credible commitment to not pander if elected. We find that an equilibrium with informative communication exists for a larger set of prior beliefs about candidates’ congruence when the post-election reputational pressures are stronger. Moreover, an equilibrium with informative communication can either increase or decrease voter welfare relative to equilibria with uninformative communication.

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