

DO INTERNET VOTERS BEHAVE DIFFERENTLY? AN EXPLORATION OF THE 2014 FRENCH CONSULAR ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, French voters living abroad participated for the first time in consular elections and could choose to vote in the consular venues or via the Internet. 43.21% of them decided to use the dedicated online platform to fill in their ballots. With the help of an analysis of the election outcomes for all the lists competing in these elections, this short paper aims at exploring whether ballot box and Internet voters display different voting behavior. It concludes that both types of voters tend to vote for the same lists and candidates, even if right-wing lists receive slightly more votes among Internet voters.

KEYWORDS

Internet Voting, Ballot Box Voting, Voting Behaviour, Consular Elections, France

1. INTRODUCTION

This short paper explores the differences in voting behaviour of ballot box voters and Internet voters during the 2014 French consular elections. More precisely, we test whether ballot box voters and Internet voters vote in the same way and support the same parties or candidates. Previous works on the same elections have focused on differences in turnout – i.e. electoral participation patterns – between ballot box and Internet voters (Dandoy and Kernalegenn, 2021). Rather than judging whether the voting technology influences voting behaviour, we aim at verifying if there is a selection bias when voters opt for a specific voting modality. Given the empirical difficulties to relate the lists participating in the consular elections to existing political parties, we observe the variation of the success of the lists based on their left-right position.

This short paper is structured as follows. A first section discusses the political representation of French citizens living abroad and introduces Internet voting for the 2014 consular elections. A second section presents the data collection process and the main variables while the third section explores the existence of patterns regarding the voting behaviour of Internet voters. We observe that the ballot box and Internet voters display the same voting behaviour and tend to favour the same types of lists, even if right-wing lists receive slightly more votes from Internet voters and left-wing lists are slightly more popular among ballot box voters. A conclusion summarizes the main findings.

2. AN ANALYSIS OF INTERNET AND BALLOT BOX VOTING

2.1 Internet Voting in the French Consular Elections

French citizens living abroad benefit from a substantial political representation as they are represented in both houses of the French Parliament. In addition, they directly elect their 443 consular councillors based on 130 extra-territorial electoral districts since 2014. These consular councillors are the ‘local’ representatives of French citizens abroad. They sit in one of the 130 consular councils, a consultative body created in 2014

aimed at advising the French consul. Their most concrete tasks are the allocation of scholarships to French students in the network of French schools abroad; the social assistance to French people in need; the support for the voluntary sector; and security issues (Lequesne, 2020).

A system of internet voting had been previously used between 2006 and 2010 for the election of the members of the Assembly of French Citizens Abroad and Internet voting was also implemented for the 2012 legislative election in the eleven newly created constituencies for French citizens living abroad, alongside in person, by proxy, and postal voting. For the first consular elections in 2014, three voting methods were possible: in-person voting, proxy voting or internet voting. Ballot box voting (i.e., in-person and proxy voting) took place in the offices opened abroad by French embassies and consulates on the 24 and 25 May 2014, while Internet voting took place from 14 to 20 May 2014. Internet voters were asked to express their vote a few days before election day, in order to identify and list them and to prevent internet voters to emit a second vote physically or by proxy on election day.

At the occasion of the 2014 consular elections, no less than 185,422 French citizens participated in the electoral process, representing a turnout of 16.61%. 3.7% of the votes were declared invalid (i.e. blank or null). 80,115 citizens (43.21%) decided to use Internet to fill their ballots from 14 to 20 May 2014, while the remaining voters voted either by proxy or went physically in the French embassy and consulate buildings and expressed their vote via a paper ballot on election day.

2.2 Exploring the 2014 Consular Election Results

In order to explore the results of the 2014 consular elections, we built a database on voting behaviour collected at the list level. No less than 395 lists participated in the elections in the 130 electoral districts abroad, meaning that – on average – there were a bit more than three lists per electoral district. Our database relies on official elections records from the French ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. We differentiated the electoral performance of each list among ballot box voters and among Internet voters.

One specificity of the French consular elections is the large liberty given to parties and candidates for their list names. We observe a very large variety of list names, from lists that use the name of an existing political party to lists that use the name of the running candidate or lists that merely appeal to French voters from a specific country (for instance the list *‘Français de Colombie’* in the Colombia district). This large variation in the list names complexifies any empirical analysis of voting behaviour as it relies on a preliminary recoding of the lists in order to link them to specific political parties or political ideologies. For instance, only 23.8% of the lists’ names could be related to existing political parties. Other list names refer to political associations of migrants, inform the voter about the list’s policy position, or simply do not provide any explicit political or policy information.

As many lists do not explicitly refer to their political affiliation or position in their name, we relied on other types of sources for identifying their party of policy identification. With the help of our personal network of French emigrants, we gathered a large amount of campaign material, including manifestos, campaign leaflets and online information. We analysed the lists’ manifestos, campaign posters and ballot papers in order to find the presence of a mention to a political party or its logo. We also analysed the lists and the candidates’ webpages or websites or accounts in various social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and we complemented this material with a media research. Despite these intensive data collection efforts, a significant number of lists and candidates competing in the 2014 consular elections could not be linked to existing political parties or political movements. As a result, we grouped them according to their position on the main French political cleavage, i.e., on the traditional left-right axis. Overall, we successfully managed to identify the left-right position of no less than 322 lists, that is 81.52% of the total number of lists.

Table 1 shows that no less than 183 lists (46.33%) can be positioned on the right side of the cleavage while 120 lists (30.38%) belong to the left. Few lists are positioned on the radical-left and radical-right of the axis (3.04% and 1.77% respectively). There were only two lists explicitly attached to the green party EELV (*Europe Écologie Les Verts* - Europe Ecology The Greens) and they have been coded as left-wing. In addition to those two exceptions, EELV was present on or supported 31 ‘plural’ left-wing lists. Similarly, 15 lists could be related to the centre-right of the left-right cleavage, mainly lists related to MoDem (*Mouvement démocrate* - Democratic Movement) and/or UDI (*Union des démocrates et indépendants* - Union of Democrats and Independents). The French party system being very bipolar, these two parties belonged to or supported most of the times plural right-wing lists. We therefore coded them as right-wing lists. A final category gathered 73 lists and included the independent lists as well as the lists that could not be positioned on the left-right axis for the 2014 consular elections.

Table 1. Election results per left-right position

	Number of lists	Votes (total)	Votes (average per list)	Seats
Radical-left	12	4,699 (2.63%)	391.58	5 (1.13%)
Left	120	62,010 (34.76%)	516.75	153 (34.62%)
Right	183	92,746 (51.99%)	508.81	238 (53.84%)
Radical-right	7	1,906 (1.07%)	272.29	3 (0.68%)
Independent / Unknown	73	17,022 (9.54%)	233.18	43 (9.73%)
Total	395	178,383 (100.00%)	451.60	442 (100.00%)

A detailed analysis of the election results delivers interesting findings. The lists and candidates located on the right side of the cleavage are the more successful among French citizens living abroad. Altogether, they gathered no less than 53% of the votes and more than half of the councillor seats. This group of lists is followed by the left-wing lists that obtained a bit more than one third of the votes and of the seats. But the average number of votes per list indicates that left-wing lists are slightly more successful as they attract on average more votes than right-wing lists. The results of the other types of lists seem – in comparison – more anecdotic. The radical-left lists obtained 2.63% of the votes and only five seats of councillors, while the radical-right lists performed even worse (1.07% of the votes) but managed to get three councillors. The absolute number of lists for each political tendency does not explain these variations. When looking at the average number of votes obtained by each list, the left- and right-wing lists obtain more votes than the average, while the radical-right lists appear to be the least successful, which is in line with the traditional electoral trends of French expatriates (Collard 2013).

2.3 A Differentiated Voting Behaviour of Internet Voters?

At the occasion of the 2014 consular elections, 101,210 valid votes have been expressed in person in the buildings of the French consulate or embassy (the so-called ballot box voters) while 77,173 valid votes were registered through the online platform prior to election day (the so-called Internet voters). The Table 2 presents an overview of the elections results based on the left-right position of the lists and the type of voting modality chosen by the French voters (ballot box or Internet voting).

Table 2. Election results per voter types and left-right position of the list

List position	Votes (total)	Ballot box voters	Internet voters	Difference
Radical-left	2.63 %	2.52 %	2.78 %	+ 0.26 %
Left	34.76 %	35.62 %	33.63 %	- 1.99 %
Right	51.99 %	51.07 %	53.21 %	+ 2.14 %
Radical-right	1.07 %	1.11 %	1.01 %	- 0.10 %
Independent / Unknown	9.54%	9.68 %	9.36 %	- 0.31 %
Total	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	

The observed differences between ballot box voters and Internet voters seem minimal. Globally, the ballot box and Internet voters display the same voting behaviour and tend to favour the same types of lists. For instance, radical-left and radical-right lists seem to perform equally among ballot box and Internet voters. The independent and unknown lists are slightly more popular among ballot box voters, but differences are not significant. On the contrary, differences between two types of voters are significant for two categories of parties: two sample t-test indicate that the mean difference is significantly greater than zero for left and right parties. The lists and candidates that are located on the left side of the political cleavage are less successful among Internet voters (-1.99%), while the right-wing lists receive more votes from the voters that filled their ballots online (+2.14%).

While it could be interesting to explore whether the observed differences in voting behaviour are due to the technical specificities of paper and Internet voting (according to Calvo et al. (2008), the implementation of e-voting frequently introduces small adjustments to the ballot structure that may have unintended effects on representation), these findings probably teach us more about the socio-demographic profile of Internet voters. First, voters choosing to vote via Internet - rather than based on paper - could present some specific characteristics: they probably live in rural areas or at least away from the voting centres, are more familiar with ICT and live in an environment where a stable and secure Internet connection can be found. Second,

only a sub-set of the French population living abroad has the opportunity to vote physically in the consulate and embassy venues: those living in safe countries, living in or close by the capital city, living in countries with convenient transportation facilities and/or that are sufficiently wealthy to cover the costs of the transportation (and in some case the accommodation) in order to reach the polling station. In a country like Russia, the polling station may be located hundreds of kilometres away, implying important costs. Altogether, the combination of these two socio-demographic profiles seem to correspond to different types of electorates and may explain the small observed differences in voting behaviour of ballot box and Internet voters.

3. CONCLUSION

This short paper intended to provide a brief empirical look at Internet voting in the 2014 French consular elections. The electoral performance of each of the 395 individual lists competing in these elections has been analysed depending on the type of votes (in the polling station or by Internet), allowing us to distinguish between different categories of voters: the so-called ‘ballot box voters’ vs. the ‘Internet voters’. This collected data enabled us to explore whether voters using Internet adopted a different behaviour than voters voting in the consulates’ buildings.

Based on a large amount of collected information about ballots, campaign material and (social) media information, a majority of the 395 lists competing in these elections has been positioned on the left-right cleavage. Our analyses demonstrate that Internet and ballot box voters display the same voting behaviour and tend to favour the same types of lists. The only significant differences could be found regarding the electoral success of parties based on their left-right position: left-wing parties appear to be slightly less successful among Internet voters while the right-wing lists receive more votes from the voters that filled in their ballots online. These small differences may structurally be explained by the different socio-demographic profile of the Internet voters.

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