The backbone of democracy: electoral availability and European elections

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What

- Electoral competition is a multidimensional concept.
- It can be studied with respect to the `supply side`...
    - E.g. what strategies do parties or candidates adopt to compete for the votes?
- ...or to the `demand side`.
    - E.g. how do the citizens respond to such strategies?
    - What kind of incentives citizens offer to (future) party competition?
- Here we focus on the latter.

- Citizens' support is the ultimate incentive for parties to be responsive and responsible.
- By potentially withdrawing their support, citizens can direct legislation and governmental action towards the public will.
- However, there are several degrees of "potentially".
  - Citizens can be "stubborn", and keep on supporting the same party no matter what.
  - Citizens can just give up on politics, leaving the command to the most motivated (often stubborn) supporters.
- If citizens do not play their role of directors and watchdogs of policy making, the assumptions on which democracies are built are not met.

Competitiveness

How does a competitive electoral environment look like?

1. Citizens are `engaged`:
   - They are willing to participate in politics, to go and vote.

2. Citizens are `available`:
   - They are open to switch their allegiances between different parties.

- When `condition 1` is not met, governmental action can only reflect personal interests or the will of a few "hardliners".

- When `condition 2` is not met, parties have no incentives to deliver because nobody will hold them accountable for their actions.

How

- How do we assess competitiveness at the level of the electorate?
- We use "propensity to vote" (PTV) scores.
- A battery of N questions, each asked for a different party.
- Example wording from EES2014:

```
We have a number of political parties in [COUNTRY] each of
which would like to get your vote.  How probable is it
that you will ever vote for the following parties?  Please
answer on a scale where '0' means ''not at all probable''
and '10' means ''very probable''.

If you think of [Party X], what mark out of ten best
describes how probable it is that you will ever vote for
this party?
```

How, exactly?

- A high PTV score means a high propensity to vote for a party.
- A person who gives low PTV scores to <u>all</u> the parties, is probably not engaged.
- A person who gives a high PTV score to <u>one</u> party and a low PTV score to all the others, is probably not available.

Therefore:

1. The value of the highest PTV given by a respondent reflects her/his degree of engagement.
2. The value of the second highest PTV given by a respondent (holding the first constant) reflects her/his degree of availability.

PTVs and competition

To represent the idea of engagement/availability, we can use a graph with gradients (like temperature, hot where there is a lot of competition, cold where there is no race).
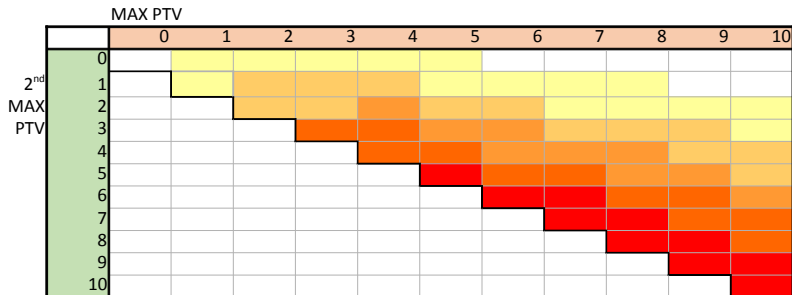
Example: cyclicality of EP elections

- European elections are regarded as "second order": voters voice their dissatisfaction with national parties or governments, rather than voting on European issues.
- This should be reflected by:
    - Lower engagement: lower interest in participating to the election.
    - Lower availability: missing the importance of short-term issues, party loyalties should have the strongest impact.
- However, this effect should vary across the `electoral cycle`, i.e. the distance from the "first order" (national) elections.

Electoral Cycle

- We want to see how engagement and availability change across the electoral cycle, controlling for other individual predictors.
- We also want to compare 2009 with 2014. Was the 2014 election *less* second-order than the 2009?
- Operationalization of the electoral cycle:
    - Time distance from the previous national election, divided by the total length of legislative period in a given country.
    - Ranges between 0 (same time as the previous national election) and 1 (right before the next national election).

Electoral Cycle in 2009 and 2014
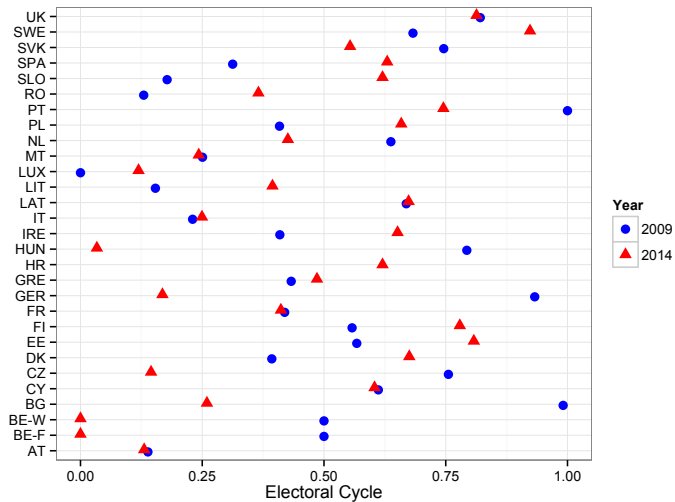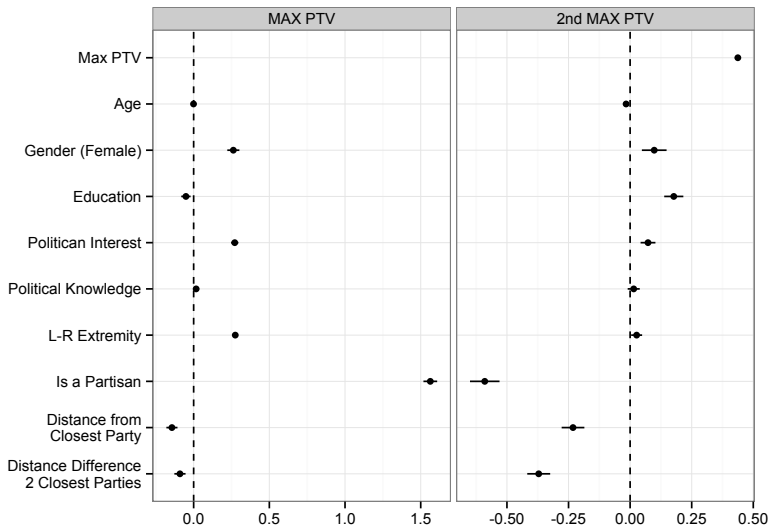
A model for engagement and availability

Engagement:

$$\begin{cases} MaxPTV_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{INDIVIDUAL}X_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \\ \\ \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{CONTEXTUAL}Z_j + \upsilon_{0j} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$
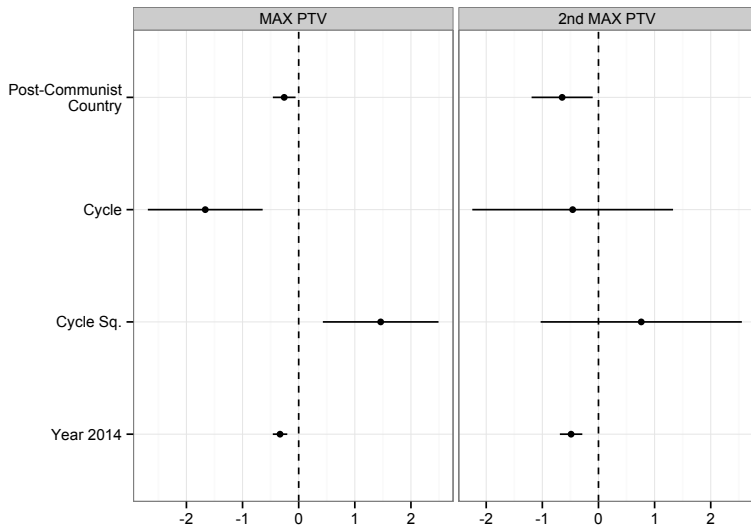
Availability:

$$\begin{cases} 2_{nd}MaxPTV_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + MaxPTV_{ij} + \beta_{INDIVIDUAL}X_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \\ \\ \beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{CONTEXTUAL}Z_j + \upsilon_{0j} \end{cases} \quad (2)$$
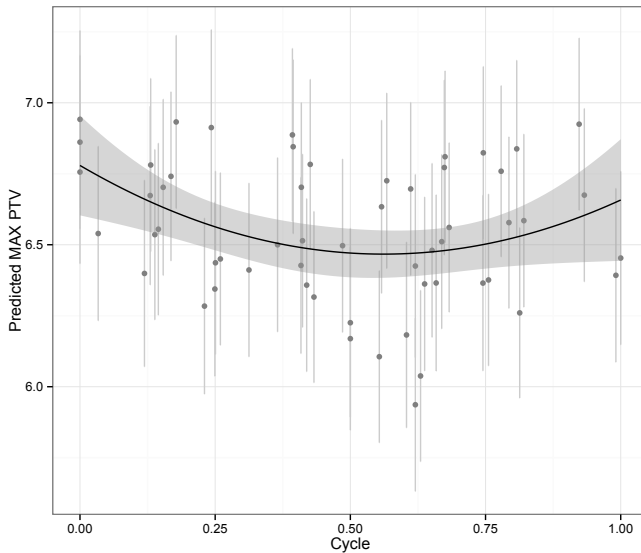
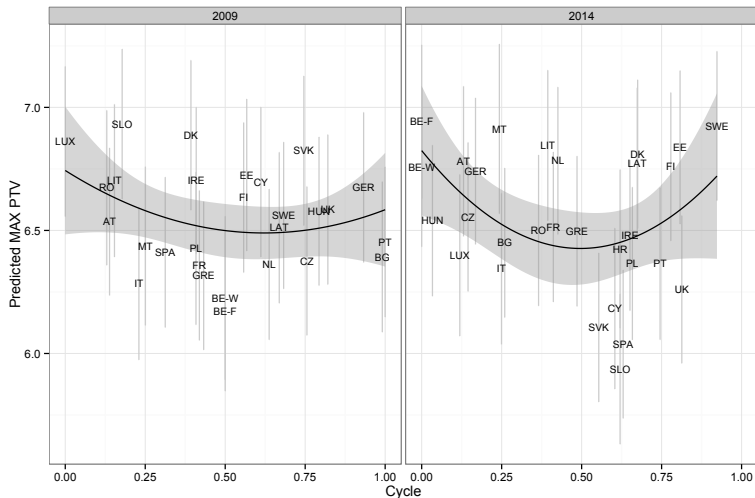# Individual level predictors of engagement and availability

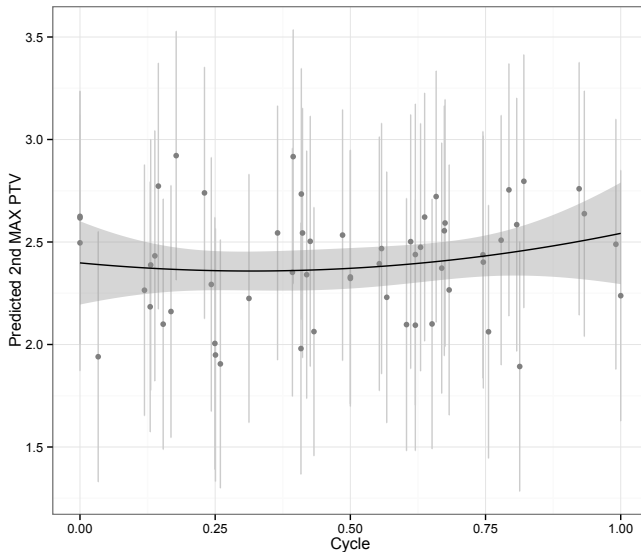# Contextual level predictors of engagement and availability
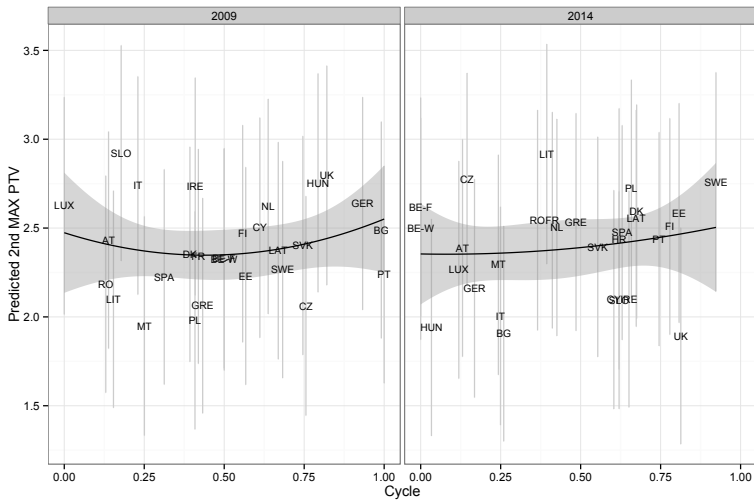
Electoral Cycle and MAX PTV

Electoral Cycle and MAX PTV (2009 and 2014)

Results

- Electoral cycle seems to have a significant effect on engagement.
- No evident effect on availability (however, sensitive to model specification).
- Apparent difference between 2009 and 2014 regarding the effect of cycle, but not significant.
- 2014 has a negative effect on both "MAX PTV" and "2nd MAX PTV" (but, sensitive to model specification).
- Fun fact: if we model the difference between "MAX PTV" and "2nd MAX PTV" (that we can call "PTV certainty"), and we include "MAX PTV" among the predictors, we get exactly the same coefficients as the model for "2nd MAX PTV", just with opposite sign.

Modeling & Conceptual Issues

- Ideally, we would include both "MAX PTV" and "2nd MAX PTV" in a single path model.
- In the model for "2nd MAX PTV", should we exclude the intercept?
- Results are very sensitive to model specification. Considering the "peculiar" nature of the model, this deserves some more thought.
- We would expect different effects for supporters of a party in government vs. supporters of other parties.
- Electoral cycle could be more qualified.

Thank you!