IS HAPPINESS A PREDICTOR OF ELECTION RESULTS? New cross-national evidence suggests voters hold incumbent governments to account for national levels of wellbeing.

The electoral success of the sitting government is related to national happiness. That is the central finding of a new study from the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Using data from a panel of European countries between 1973 and 2012, economist George Ward finds evidence that the electorate punishes incumbent governments at the ballot box during spells of low national wellbeing and rewards them during happier periods. These results suggest it is in politicians’ electoral interest to measure national happiness and to use these data to guide policy-making designed to maximise wellbeing.

The research analyses survey data on life satisfaction together with general election results. It takes account of macroeconomic factors such as GDP growth, unemployment and inflation, as well as personal determinants of wellbeing like age, gender, education and marital status. The data show a correlation between national levels of happiness over time and the electoral fate of governing parties.

In a speech in 2010, David Cameron said: ‘We’ll start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life.’ This new research suggests voters themselves judge government performance at the ballot box at least partly on the basis of their wellbeing.

Governments around the world are increasingly using happiness as a measure of national success and progress. Since 2011, the UK’s Office for National Statistics (ONS) has added ‘subjective wellbeing’ questions to a number of its household surveys and committed to developing broad measures of national wellbeing to supplement its GDP figures, with the intention of tailoring policy towards what matters to people’s lives.

The analysis is different to vote-intention polling in the run-up to an election. Looking at how measures of government performance such as happiness or GDP relate to government vote share is not a rival to electoral forecasting using vote intentions, but is rather an attempt to uncover what is behind people’s voting intentions and behaviour. Looking at current polls of vote intentions is likely to give a more accurate forecast of the UK upcoming election, but the advantage of this type of analysis is that it sheds light on what governments ought to be doing in order to win people’s votes.

The findings are important in terms of the incentives faced by politicians. The data suggest there may be an electoral dividend to focusing policy on a number of things that are known from a growing body of research on the science of happiness to be strongly related to people’s wellbeing – such as mental and physical health, noise and air pollution, violent crime rates, corruption and social cohesion, as well as income and employment.
George Ward, the author of the study, says:

‘One of the most well-known findings in economics, particularly by people themselves working in and around politics, is that the electoral success of the government is tied to the state of the economy. The key implication of this ‘economic voting’ is that the government has a strong incentive to work hard to ensure a buoyant economy in order to win votes. What the data suggest is that it’s not just the economy that matters – governments appear to have a broader incentive to ensure the wider wellbeing of voters.’

‘The economy is important to people’s wellbeing, of course, but it's not the only factor. The analysis points towards an electoral payoff for politicians if they focus their attention on a broad range of factors influencing people’s wellbeing, rather than concentrating solely on ensuring a buoyant election-year economy.’

‘Wellbeing in the UK has, perhaps surprisingly, been rising very steadily over the last parliament despite reasonably poor economic performance. Although this research is cross-national rather than a specific analysis of the UK over time, and is very different to election forecasting using current vote-intention polling, the findings could well be read as quite good news for the UK coalition parties going into the election. But there are of course many different factors that go into determining an election outcome.’

ENDS

Notes for Editors:

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