

Padua 2017 Abstract Submission

I want to submit an abstract for:

Conference Presentation

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Keywords

Curiosity, diversity, consumption, voting pattern

Research Question

Is there any links between the demand for variety in food and alcohol products and their voting patterns?

Methods

The Nielsen Homescan dataset describes food and beverage purchasing patterns for approximately 70,000 US households in 2007 and 2011. The dependent variable in our model is the votes ratio.

Results

We find evidence that greater diversity of purchases within the cheese or the fruit and vegetable categories are linked to a higher share of votes for the democrat candidate.

Abstract

Background.

Every four years in the United States there is a presidential election, and during each cycle we observe researchers across a range of disciplines attempting to predict the outcome based on different characteristics among the vote-eligible population. Previous research has shown that personality traits have an effect on political orientation (Caprara et al., 1999 ; Mondak and Halperin, 2008 ; Caprara et al., 2009 ; Gerber et al., 2010) and voting patterns. As summarized by Carney et al. (2008, p. 834), "liberals did appear to be more open, tolerant, creative, curious, expressive, enthusiastic, and drawn to novelty and diversity, in comparison with conservatives, who appeared to be more conventional, orderly, organized, neat, clean, withdrawn, reserved, and rigid." We are interested in the role that "curiosity" might have on voting outcomes, and we attempt to examine the level of curiosity in household demand (or the demand for variety) for food and alcohol products. The objective of this research is to better understand if there exist any links between the demand for variety in food and alcohol products and their voting patterns.

The relationship between political opinion and alcohol consumption has been examined by others, but not at the household level. Previous empirical research has investigated the link between the level of liberal ideology (Berry index) and state-level alcohol data, especially alcohol shipments (Yakovlev and Guessford, 2013). Research in psychology has highlighted a positive effect of alcohol consumption on political conservatism (Eidelman et al., 2012).

But what does it mean to be curious and what is the link with diversity? "Curiosity can be defined as a desire to know, to see, or to experience that motivates exploratory behaviour directed towards the acquisition of new information" (Litman, 2005, p. 793). Curiosity can be seen as one determinant of knowledge and might be an

indicator of the trajectory of consumption patterns for an individual. One can know about wine by reading books, visiting wineries, tasting new wines and discussing it with other persons who know about wine. In the case of cultural goods, Adler (1985, p. 210) has shown that, when consumption requires knowledge, “the more time one devotes to art, the larger would be his or her set of stars”. As such, curiosity, through knowledge, would imply a greater degree of diversity in an individual’s consumption basket.

Data and Methodology.

Here we are interested in examining how the purchase diversity of selected food and alcohol products affects county-level voting outcomes for presidential candidates in the United States in 2008 and 2012. We expect that the diversity patterns will differ across food and alcoholic beverage categories for households, and that the diversity of different alcoholic products will be related to voting patterns. To test our hypothesis, we use the Nielsen Homescan dataset that describes food and beverage purchasing patterns for approximately 70,000 households in 2007 (for the 2008 voting outcome) and in 2011 (for the 2012 voting outcome). These purchase diversity data include detailed purchasing information that describes the brand, package size, price, and the product category for each product (UPC-level data). Furthermore, the Homescan data include a plethora of socio-economic information about the households in the panel, and about the locations where the products were purchased. We aggregate household-specific data in the empirical estimation work to the county level and use it to identify links between the demand for variety and voting behavior at the county level. The dependent variable in our model is the votes ratio (Democratic to Republican) at the county-level. The key explanatory variable, the purchase diversity of selected food and beverage products purchased by a household in a given year, is measured using the Entropy Index. The Entropy Index is a measure that increases as the consumption shares of all possible products are equally distributed. A well-designed index for diversification should a) vary directly with the number of different products, b) vary inversely with the increasing unequal distribution of products, c) vary directly with the dissimilarity or heterogeneity of products, and d) if possible, be bounded between zero and unity.

Results.

Summary statistics show that there is substantial range in the diversity scores among households in the panel for the food and alcoholic beverage categories. Preliminary results for our model that regresses the diversity scores on county-level voting outcomes show some interesting results. In particular, we find evidence that greater diversity of purchases within the cheese or the fruit and vegetable categories are linked to a higher share of votes for the democrat candidate in the 2008 election. In addition, the results are not consistent across the different alcoholic beverage categories in 2008. Specifically, we find that more diversity in the purchase patterns for wine are associated with counties that exhibit a greater share of votes for the democrat candidate. The results for the other two alcoholic beverages (beer and spirits) are mixed in 2008 and 2012. Overall, our results show that, relative to the other beverage categories, the demand for variety in food and wine markets may be a good indicator of voter preferences for the democratic candidate in recent elections.

Potential Limitations of the Analysis.

The dependent variable in our model is the voting outcome at the county level and we use household level data for selected households that reside in the same county. This could be problematic if the selected counties do not have consumption patterns that are representative of the county, and therefore we also conduct our analysis only for those countries where we have observations for at least 50 households and find that it does not change the general thrust of our results. A second potential concern is related to the fact that many households in the panel that do not purchase any alcohol or only purchase one type of alcoholic beverage. One solution to this issue is to expand our model to expand the beverage category to also include non-alcoholic beverages as a way to capture household demand for variety of food and beverage products more generally.