Paradox of voting and diffusion of democratic ideology: the case of France

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Abstract: This paper argues that the abstention phenomenon could be explained by the widespread generalization of the belief “voting is useless” in the electorate body. It relies on cascades theory to understand how and why voting as a duty becomes less popular and how the belief “voting is useless” develops in the society. In this respect, it merges in an original way the rational theory of voting and the theory of the ideological voting, as cascades theory is based on the rational choice model. It focuses on the history of abstention in France in recent years to illustrate this challenging explanation.

JEL codes: DO3; D83; D72

Key words: rational ignorance, beliefs, voter turnout, information cascades, political failures

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Introduction

The paradox of voting is based on a calculus of probability (Mueller (2003), Chapter 14, Geys (2006)). The probability for a voter’s ballot to affect the final outcome of the election is infinitesimal (Riker and Ordeshook (1968)). If a single voter’s ballot does not affect the elections’ result, nobody should vote. The voter should not expect any kind of benefits from his vote and should refuse to support the costs of voting, namely, being register to vote, spending time to go to the polls or spending time to acquire political information in order to form his political opinion etc. (Teixeira (1992)). However, abstention behaviors in big democracies are not widely widespread. This means that some
voters vote and others do not. Yet, economic theory has not sought to explain both voting and abstention behaviors. It has mainly focused on how to deal with the paradox of voting within its framework of instrumental rationality. Several explanations have been proposed.

First, some scholars assume that the voter overestimates the ability of his vote to be decisive. His calculus is not based on objective probabilities, but rather on subjective one. He overestimates the weight of his vote on the final outcome because he acts in a context of uncertainty (Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974)). Nevertheless, taking into account that the probability for a single ballot to be decisive in presidential elections is lower than the one that refers to regional elections, this solution is not totally relevant. Indeed, it does not explain for instance why French voters vote massively for presidential elections on the one hand, and abstain a lot for regional elections on the other hand. Second, some scholars refer to expectations theory. If the voter expects that others will not vote, his ballot becomes decisive (Ledyard 1981). The third explanation is based on regret theory. A voter who would not have cast his ballot could regret his behavior if the elected government implements policies that reduce his welfare or the welfare of the society as a whole. The fourth explanation conceptualizes the vote as an act of consumption. The voter does not vote in order to enhance the success of its political party, but instead to maximize his expressive utility (Brennan and Buchanan (1984), Brennan and Hamlin (1998), Glazer (1987), (2008), Hillman (2010)). Following Riker and Ordeshook (1968), expressive voting formalizes the voter’s benefit associated with the consumption of political goods. Going to the poll provides satisfaction to the voter, independently from the elections result. The expressive voting theory determines the nature of such satisfaction. The voter votes for the same reasons that he supports a football team. None of the voters (supporters) seeks to change the result of the election (competition), but each voter (supporter) gets satisfaction by expressing his choice. This expressive voting reflects his identity (Glazer, 2008). Voters have incentives to follow moral rules and to be constraint by psychological costs (soft incentives), that influence their turn out at elections. Expressive voting supports the argument that voters know the cost of following a moral rule during election is lowest than on the cost they would support on the marketplace. This is the reason why they can vote without being worried about their
material well-being. As their voting behavior is independent from elections results, they gain an expressive utility. They can vote according to their ideology as voting is not decisive. If they want to defend their own interest, they will develop other political strategies.

In this paper, we adopt a different stance. The latter is inspired by the work done by Blais and Young (1999) that showed that voting behaviors depend on voter’s knowledge or ignorance of the paradox of voting. Their study demonstrated that when voters become aware of the paradox of voting, they abstain more intensively. This result shows that abstention depends on voters’ representation of the functioning of democracy. It is in line with the theory of voting as a duty (Mueller 2003, p.322). Voters consider voting as a duty if they believe that elected politicians represent them in the political sphere (Boudon 1997). As soon as they doubt that politicians represent their values and expectations, they tend to abstain voting. Voting reveals the value voters attribute to democracy. Abstention can therefore be interpreted as a distrust toward democracy. For instance, voters abstain as they do not believe anymore their own vote could be decisive and that the majority rule govern. In this respect, they share the views of supporters of democracy’s failures (Caplan (2007) versus Wittman (1995)). Abstention is explained by voters’ representation of the functioning of democracy. This argument allows us to integrate the voting paradox within the explanation itself. The diffusion of arguments against voting such as “voting is irrational ” favors a voters walkout from the political life. Conversely, the diffusion of arguments in favor of democracy such as “it is the least faulty form of government” supports democracy. Thus, abstention depends not only on how citizens judge the policies implemented by successive governments but also on how they view democracy as a political regime.

The objective of this paper is to explain the reasons for such democratic ideology crisis and therefore provide a deeper explanation for the low level of turnout in the French old democracy. Our reasoning is the following. Electoral participation shows that voters defend democracy as a political regime. They commit themselves to vote as they believe democracy must be defended for mainly two reasons. First, it is a policy-making method, and second, it is an institutional arrangement that protect the values of political liberalism. Voting is thus based on a positive representation of democracy and its virtues.
Conversely, people start to abstain when they develop a more negative vision of democracy (section 2). The third section relies on cascades theory to explain the process by which such negative vision emerges and spreads out in the society. It presents the theory and apply it to the decision of abstaining to vote. On the one hand, reputation cascades highlight the possibility of stigmatization processes used by the electorate body to affect the self-esteem the and the reputation of people who abstain from voting. On the other hand, information cascades explain how and why voters tend to modify their beliefs over the virtues of democracy (section 3). After having reviewed the facts and figures about the French abstention phenomenon as well as the main explanations provided by the literature, the fourth section explains the increasing abstention in France in recent years (1981-2012) by voters’ deception about the virtues of democracy. More precisely, we show that the participation crisis is not necessarily the result of bad economic situations such as economic crisis. Rather, we argue that voters doubt about the virtues of the voting process because they do not believe anymore that right-wing and left-wing parties could de differentiated and therefore represent their values and expectations. In fact, such belief is disconnected from the objective reality and we show to what extent cascades theory is appropriate to explain this misconception of voters’ representation (section 4). Section 5 concludes.

2. Electoral obligation and perception of democracy

Within a political system where voting is mandatory, an individual that refuse to vote would be sanctioned by the society. In that case voting is a legal obligation. On the contrary, in a political system where voting is a right that an individual can fulfill, the obligation to vote is a moral one. If voting is a moral obligation, it is because the individual consciously estimates that not to vote is an immoral choice. Abstaining to vote would endanger democracy and could lead to dictatorship. Therefore, the individual imposes himself the duty to vote and in doing so, he expresses the value he attributes to the democracy. The majority of French voters believe that voting is a duty that must be fulfilled.

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1 The majority of French voters believe that voting is a duty that must be fulfilled. (see table 1 and 2)
2.1 Voting: a moral obligation to defend democracy

Defining democracy is not an easy task. Two conceptions of democracy can be distinguished. On the one hand, it is a policy-making method, and on the other hand it is an institutional arrangement based on the principle of moral autonomy (Schumpeter (1972), p.250\(^2\)). As a policy-making method, democracy is able to distribute and manage the political power. It is essentially an instrument to implement decisions, a way of organizing government so that citizens can choose their rules and hold the political power responsible for their enforcement. Another instrumental way of defining democracy is to conceive it as a process of revealed individual's values and beliefs on what characterizes a good life. Everyone is supposed to be able to define his own vision of general interest and impose it to his peers through the majority rule. These instrumental theories of democracy contrast with the idea that democracy is desired for itself. In this respect, democracy is not conceived as a tool to define and protect private interest, but rather it is an end in itself. The citizen advocates democracy because it allows him to pursue his personal goals and to protect his interest, or because he believes that freedom of expression is a value that must be defended. In this case, the individual truly believes that intolerance or censure are bad in themselves no matter what the consequences could be on the evolution of incomes, inflation, poverty etc.. This conviction toward freedom of expression is based on the idea that humans being have freedom of consciousness and that nobody should be able to constraint their moral autonomy. In that perspective, democracy would be the expression of political liberalism, and would be good in itself (Rawls (1993)). Promoting democracy for itself is similar to defend a cultural system where the protection of individual rights is made sacred.

2.2. Voting, abstention and political representation

If democracy does not seem to be a good instrument of decision making anymore (crisis of the majority rule), if elected politicians do not represent voters’ values and expectations (crisis of representation), voters do not fill obliged to vote anymore. Participation crisis can occur as a consequence of a crisis of representation. In that sense,

\(^2\)Schumpeter (1976) “Democracy is an institutional arrangement that aims at achieving the common good “.
abstention cannot be seen as rejection of politics nor a crisis of civism, but rather as a
deception toward democracy and what might expect from politicians’ decisions. As soon
as voters believe that governments can change the course of history, they vote and
commit themselves to politics. On the contrary, if they estimate that voting does not serve
any purpose because their representation is lacking, they tend to move away from the
obligation of voting.

3. Perception of democracy and cascades theory

Before illustrating these theoretical insights by the history of abstention in France, it is
useful to rigorously understand the effect of spreading of information on individuals’
beliefs formation process. Any information should be known and interpreted in order to
modify individuals behavior. For instance, the effect of economic crisis on people’s
obligation to vote depends on contextual information that individuals use to interpret the
crisis. Cascades theory is appropriate to take into account of such effect. It enables to
understand how a collective belief emerge and spread out in the society, and specifically
within the electorate body.

3.1 Cascades theory and collective beliefs formation

Health experts generally accept that smoking increases the risk of lung cancer, but survey
research indicates that smokers and non-smokers overestimate those risks. Harvard
University professor Kip Viscusi has calculated that, if the public better appreciated the
risk of lung cancer from tobacco use, smoking rates would actually increase between 6.5
and 7.5 per cent (Lemieux (2003). This following of the herd is troubling especially when
the trend is contrary to established evidence. Cascades theory (Bikchandani et al. (1998),
Kuran and Sunstein (1999), Bonardi & Keim (2005)) tries to explain such social
phenomenon and focus on how individual beliefs about sensitive and controversial
political issues are constructed and disseminated throughout the society. It seeks to
explain how the information created by the social process might generate erroneous
collective beliefs and in the end, affects social and economic phenomenon. This process
originates from the behaviour of activists that might also be named political
entrepreneurs, who launch the formation of such beliefs. The latter develop throughout
two mechanisms that are in interaction. First, they may develop through an informational cascades mechanism. Second, they form throughout a reputational cascades mechanism.

3.1.1. Information cascades

Theoreticians of information cascades such as Bikchandani et al. (1992) or Hirshleifer (1995) developed the argument that an informational cascade emerges when it is optimal for an individual to rely on the observation of the behaviour of others and neglect his private information when he has to decide an action, or formulate a judgement on a societal or political issue. The singularity of this theory is that these imitation phenomenon are based on the rational behaviour of individuals in a context of incomplete information.

In the basic model of Hirshleifer (1995), a sequence of individuals have to decide between smoking or not smoking. Each individual observes the actions of his predecessors and not their private information related to the risk of tobacco. The gains associated with each alternative are identical for each individual. If smoking does not lead to health side effects, the gain is 1, otherwise, the gain is -1. Each individual has private information which can be favourable H, or not favourable L. If one supposes smoking is the correct action, the probability to observe an H signal is 75%, the one to observe an L signal is 25%. Each individual decides his action by relying on his private information and the behaviour of his predecessors. The first individual chooses smoking if his private signal is H. The second deduces from the choice of the first he has observed an H signal. If his private signal is H, he chooses smoking. If his private signal is L, he flips a coin to decide. The reasoning is similar if the first individual observes an L signal. When the third individual decides his action, the cascade can start. If the first and the second have adopted smoking, the third individual adopts the same choice. Indeed, the third knows the first has observed an H signal and deduces from the behaviour of the second that he has observed an H signal. He will choose smoking even if his private information is L. Since he does not take into account his private information, his action does not provide information to his successor about the risk of tobacco. This reasoning spreads to all the individuals of the sequence. An up cascade is launched. By analogy, if
the two first individuals choose not smoking, the third will conform even if he observed an L signal. In this case we observe a down cascade.

Consequently, the development of cascades is related to the ranking of individuals with high information precision in the sequence. A cascade will take long time to develop if individuals with high information precision act later in the sequence. Also, the main problem with such informational cascades is that they may be erroneous. Indeed, even if the information precision of the first individual is high, it is not obviously better than the combination of different private information of later individuals. Nevertheless, an evident characteristic of cascades (correct or not), is that they may be easily reversed. An individual with high information precision who acts later in the sequence could reverse the tendency. That situation is highly probable if he is perceived as credible by other individuals (if he is an expert for example). Thus, information cascade theory emphasizes that mass behaviour develops rapidly and is fragile. In the sequence, the credibility of the first and second individual is crucial to affect the choice of the third one. Indeed, social psychologists have reported that people imitate the actions of those who seem to have expertise in a field. According to Bikchandani et al. (1998), this explains the success of product endorsements in which athletes are seen to use a particular brand of athletic shoes. To start a cascade, the first individual must be an expert or a « fashion leader », and he generally ac as a “political entrepreneur”. Nevertheless, cascades are fragile and several shock could reverse a cascade such as the release of new public information, or the arrival of a better informed individual like an expert. Most importantly, the main side effect of information cascades is that they may be erroneous. Indeed, even if the information precision of the first individual is high, it is not obviously better than the combination of different private information of later individuals. In this respect, information cascades lead to a loss of potential accurate and useful knowledge.

3.1.2. Reputation cascades

Several theories have been suggested to explain uniformity in social behavior. For instance, Akerlof (1980) and Kuran (1989) showed that reputational effects and social sanctions may generate uniform behavior among the public. Such theories explain how
constraints and circumstances affect the development of social norms in the absence of legal sanctions. Revealed preference theory suggests that preferences of individuals may be deduced from the observation of their action. Nevertheless, Kuran’s preference falsification theory emphasizes that an individual who joins a riot against a government does not necessarily support a change in the political regime (Kuran (1990)). It might be costly for him if he does not participate. There are some contexts where individuals can be punished or rewarded depending on the preferences they express through their actions. In public choice analysis, this theory may lead to misinterpretations. He develops a framework which seeks to study individual choices that include a wide range of motivations. More precisely, individual utility has three dimensions: the social choice, social sanctions associated with individual choice, and the autonomy of individual decision. These three conflicting factors of utility generate, for each individual, a private preference and a public preference, the latter being the one he reveals to others through his actions. The divergence between these two types of preferences is at the heart of his preference falsification theory. His theory is more powerful than traditional theory because an individual derives satisfaction from different conflicting sources. In the process of collective belief formation, when the latter reaches a critical size, it affects the reputation benefits and costs of individuals who have not yet adopted the belief, and gives them incentive to falsify their preferences. The collective belief may therefore expand through a reputation cascade mechanism. This phenomenon leads to a falsification of knowledge, which, combined with the loss of knowledge generated by the information cascade, reinforces the probability of expansion of an erroneous collective belief.

Several authors have relied on cascades theory to explain a wide range of social and economic phenomena. For instance, analysing the origin of collective beliefs about risk issues, Kuran and Sunstein (1999) showed how political entrepreneurs can influence

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3 This argument has been developed by Kuran (1991) to explain the emergence of revolutions and it focuses particularly on the impact of internal and external costs associated with the opposition to the incumbent regime.

4 Hung and Plott (2001) have demonstrated the existence of reputation cascades through laboratory experiments.

5 Such an idea seems validated by Morris (2001) who has shown that reputation effects lead to a loss of information for which the social value is high.
public policies by initiating information and reputation cascades. Bonardi and Keim (2005) improves notably the relationships between political entrepreneurs, experts and the media that enhance the emergence and the strength of collective beliefs. They focus in particular on the impact of collective beliefs on firm’s reaction. They suggests that firms may themselves adopt these strategies of political entrepreneurship to fight against collective beliefs when theses latter endanger their profits or market shares. More recently, Jaeck (2011) applies Kuran and Sunstein’s framework to explain the differences of climate change regulations between the US and the EU. Jaeck et al. (2013) shed new lights on green consumerism phenomenon by arguing that the dynamic of green markets may depend on a random selection process within which political entrepreneurs may use strategically collective beliefs about product characteristics. In our view, cascades theory may also be applied the issue of voter's abstention. The underlying argument is that the collective beliefs about the drawbacks of democracy materializes itself through variation in voter's abstention.

3.2. Cascades theory and abstention

One might refer reputation cascades to explain how the electorate body stigmatize individuals who abstain. At first glance, reputation cascades do not seem to be applicable as voting is a secret ballot. Stigmatization mechanism do not seem to be able to affect people’s behavior. However, there are some context where reputation effects might occur. In places where the number of voters as well as voting office is low, it is easy to know whether an individual has voted or not. In that case, it has been shown that the growth of cities is a favorable context from abstention (Dormagen 2007). In that case stigmatization can occur. The bigger the cities, the more difficult for individual to hide their abstention. Then, within families, it is easier to know whether an individual has voted or not and stigmatizing behavior could occur. This would explain why a husband abstain from voting only if his wife does. More generally, this would explain why the sociology of abstention has shown a geography of abstention (Lancelot 1967, p.94).

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6 Dormagen (2007). This author has suggested this argumentation but it has not linked to the existence of reputation cascades.
7 This could also suggest that the emergence of single families in developed countries could explain abstention.
the existence of groups more willing to abstain than others. Living in place where abstention is not stigmatized leads to move away from voting. Also, living in a religious, ethnic or social group where voting is not associated with positive values generates the same effect. Hence, a voter imposes to himself the duty to vote because he fears to be stigmatize and wants to preserve the quality of his social relationship. This type of reputation cascade presupposes the existence of a social norm, namely the association between electoral participation and civism. It does not explain, however, why abstaining from voting generates stigmatization, and why abstention could socially accepted. Relying on the information cascade mechanism is thus useful to explain both the formation of the social norm and its evolution. They are based on an imitative behavior in a context of incomplete information. Hirschleifer (1995) has used such mechanism to explain how beliefs over the risk of smoking spread out in the society. His model could also be applied to highlight the generalization of abstention behaviors which can be interpreted as deviating behaviors compare to voting as the social norm.

Similar to Hirshleifer’s analysis, the beliefs « voting is useless » and abstaining is « not using his right to influence political decisions », could be generalized among the electorate because, a context of incomplete information, voters base their judgments by observing the behavior of two fashion leaders. Indeed, such a model is applicable here, as the process of acquiring the relevant information of the true causes of economic and social problems is costly. This argument seems relevant for mainly two reasons. First, the assumption of citizens’ rational ignorance about political issues seems empirically grounded. Indeed, Converse (1964), Page and Shapiro (1992) and Deli et al. (1996) have shown that most US citizens are ignorant of basic principles concerning, for instance, fiscal and monetary policy. In the same way, Hardin (2006) has shown that voters are ignorant of the main debates on economic issues. Second, the existence of controversies among economists through public political debates may give voters incentives to distrust politicians and social sciences experts. Consequently, when voters asses the competence of politicians, they might logically rely on the availability heuristic and respond to the immediate information made available by political entrepreneurs that challenge the skills and capacities of incumbent governments to improve citizens well-being. Such political entrepreneurs or “fashion leaders” are generally represented by
extremist political parties that denounce the failures of moderate parties in power. Voters are thus inclined of believing that their right to vote is not enough in order for their aspirations and values to be represented and implemented by politicians. The collective belief “voting is useless” spread out through information cascades, leading to massive abstentions.

4. Cascades theory: a challenging explanation of the French abstention phenomenon

Cascades theory may be used to understand and explain the increasing level of abstention in France. A first step gives an overview of the trends of the French abstention. A second step shows first of all that the increasing level of abstention is associated with a crisis of representation, and second, it argues that the crisis of representation explains abstention only because voters have deeply modified their representation of political power.

4.1. The French abstention: the facts

In France, the abstention rate is computed by making the ratio between the number of citizens who abstain from voting at an election and the number of citizens subscribed on the electoral lists at the day of the election. According to Abrial et al. (2003), individuals who abstain are rather old or young, have a low level of education, do not own their housing and do not work in the public sector. All these characteristics determine the profile of the individual who abstain but they do not explain why, for instance, the level of turnout strongly fluctuate from one type of election to another. Indeed, voters participate more at presidential elections compare to local, legislatives or European elections (Figure 1).

However, the level of abstention increases among all types of elections (Figure 2). Such trend is widespread in big liberal democracies (Magni-Berton, 2012, p.173, Blais et Dobrzynska 1998). Even for presidential election, this trend is significant. Over the very long run, legislatives elections also exhibit the similar trend (Figure 3).
Figure 1
Turn out rate for different elections in France (1958/2012)


Figure 2
Difference in Turn Out between the first and last election (1958/2012)

Source: ibid Figure 1
From 1876 to 1981, voters’ abstention vary between 15% and 30%. From 1981 to 2012 abstention increases from 29% to 42%. It has reached a maximum in 2012 (43%) and a minimum in 1928\(^8\) (16,21%). During the period 1924-1936, four elections occurred showing an historical abstention rate (between 15% and 16%). Until 1986, the average is around 25% of the subscribed electorate.

### 4.2 The abstention in France: traditional explanations

The voluntary abstention is the focus of an immense theoretical and empirical literature. Here, we briefly summarize the main important contributions that analyze the French case. Lancelot’s contribution represents the main body of analysis that was extended by further scholars (Lancelot 1967, 1968). First, people would be more inclined to abstain in elections where the size of the electorate is high. Within a framework of objective calculus of probability, one could have expected that local elections exhibit higher level of turnout on average compare to presidential elections because the probability for one

\(^8\) Morazé, Charles 1956.
vote to be decisive is objectively higher at local elections. However, figures 1 and 4 does not confirm this assertion.

**Figure 4**
Evolution of the number of registered on electoral rolls and Turn Out in % (1876-2012)

Second, an excess of electoral consultation occurring in a short period of time, has a negative effect on the level of turnout (Lancelot 1967, p.128). Legislative elections that immediately follow presidential elections do not generally exhibit important stakes, as they mainly confirm the results of presidential elections. In that specific context, a high level of abstention is observable (Figure 5).

Third, the scope of election seems also to be an important factor. Indeed, under the third republic, the key election was the legislative election characterizing the republic of congressmen. With the emergence of the fifth republic, the French political system move towards the republic of Presidents. Presidential election becomes the major election. Logically, the abstention rate has shown a lower rate (Figure 1). Nevertheless, this result should be moderated as the fifth republic keeps a parliamentary regime where the president has not any major political role. Under the fifth republic, highest rate of abstention were still observed compare to those recorded at the end of the third republic. Two reasons were suggested to explain this result. On the one hand, the introduction of a proportional ballot would favor abstention (Girod 1953, pp.349-376, Lancelot 1967, p.171). Such effect is confirmed when we analyze European and regional elections.
However, it fails to explain the continuous increase of abstention during the fifth republic (Table 2).

**Figure 5**
Average Rate of Turn Out when the Legislative election is before and after the Presidential Election (1958/2012)

**Tableau 2**
Turn Out and political regime : proportional versus majoritary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Présidentielle</th>
<th>Municipales</th>
<th>Législatives</th>
<th>Cantonales</th>
<th>Régionales</th>
<th>Européennes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scrutin</td>
<td>Majoritaire uninominal</td>
<td>Proportionnelle Avec prime majoritaire</td>
<td>Majoritaire Uninominal</td>
<td>Uninominal majoritaire à deux tours</td>
<td>Proportionnel</td>
<td>Proportionnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstention</td>
<td>19.73</td>
<td>25.57</td>
<td>28.66</td>
<td>39.43</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, history has shown that women abstain more than men (Lancelot 1967, p.171). As the abstention rate depends on the number of individuals subscribed on the electoral lists, the generalization of women voting has mechanically decrease the participation rate. This explanation has been abandoned as today, women vote as much as men (Sineau 2000).

More recently, scholars have highlighted important factors such as the number of candidates (Fauvelle-Aymar et François 2005), the uncertainty associated with the results (Fauvelle-Aymar et François 2005, 2006), the amount of electoral campaign spending (Fauvelle-Aymar et François 2005, 2006), the personality of candidates and the variety of solutions they offer to tackle social problems (Anderson et Glomm 1992), the
corruption of politicians (Stockzemer, LaMontagne et Scruggs 2013), the timing of elections such as whether they are held in vacation time or not (Dubois et Ben Lakhdar 2007) and the political ideology (Fauvelle-Aymar, Lafay et Servais 2000).

4.3. No mechanical relationship between economic crisis and abstention

If we focus on the abstention phenomenon in France during the period 1978-2012, there are good reasons to argue that such phenomenon is due to an increasing distrust of voters towards their representatives. Indeed, opinion polls have shown that 79% of the French distrust politicians in 1989 and 84% in 1997 (17/18 October 1997, Le Figaro Magazine TNS SOFRES, the state of public opinion 1999⁹, p.269, Figure 6).

Figure 6


Also a representation crisis has emerged in the French society. An increasing number of French believe that politicians do not take into account of their aspirations and expectations (Figure 7).

This evolution follows the same trend that abstention at legislative elections (Figure 8). Empirically, we thus observe a clear correlation between the increasing level of abstention in France and the political crisis.

**Figure 8**

Representation Crisis and Turn Out in French Legislative Election (1978-2012)

At first glance, it is tempting to explain this political crisis as a result of the bad economic situation. The economic crisis would explain the political crisis and in the end, the abstention. Many scholars have mechanically linked abstention and economic crisis (Rosenstone 1980; Lafay 1991; Radcliff 1992; Guérin 1995; Hetherington 1998). Also,
abstention would be mechanically correlated with economic cycle (Radcliff 1992). The abstention is the result of the lack of confident towards politicians, and the latter comes from the inability of successive governments to find solutions to social and economic problems in time of economic crisis. In this respect, the decreasing level of turnout in France might be explained be economic crisis (Bracconier 2010). Although this line of reasoning is appealing and has some explanatory power, it seems incomplete in many respect. Indeed, a mechanical relationship between economic crisis, political crisis and abstention does not take into account of the complexity of reality and therefore of the difficulty to make a good assessment of this reality. For instance, let’s compare the evolution of the abstention rate and the one of the growth rate over the long run (Figures 3 and 9). 

**Figure 9**

Evolution of Economic Growth Rate (1875/mi 2013)

![Figure 9](image-url)  


We can see that the 1929 and 1975 crisis characterized by negative growth rate, are associated with a high level of turnout (Figure 3 and 9). In that cases, the economic crisis makes individuals move away from abstention. Conversely, the 1993 and the 2008 crisis have generated the opposite effect, and we observe a high level of abstention. These facts show that voters’ interpretation of economic crisis is different in the 30s and in the 90s. Also, the crisis assessments done by politicians and the level of voters’ confidence towards politics are different.

In 1975, the crisis assessments were the following. First, the crisis was the result of a turbulence occurring within a prosperous economy. Second, the crisis is the one of

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the French growth model. Third, it was a crisis of economic growth in itself (Dupoirier 1989). In 1978, legislative elections showed a high level of turnout as a result of the 1975 crisis and the left-wing party (the opposition) won the election. The left-wing party was unified toward a common political program, it showed a clearly identified ideological solution to the crisis, and therefore voters supported this political alternative. Voters exhibited trust toward political programs from opposing parties to solve priority problems such as unemployment (TNS SOFRES 1979, Dupoirier 1989).

On the contrary, the crisis of 1993 and 2008 has emerged in a different context. They occur as the result of the political crisis in 1983/1985 characterized by the inability of voters to differentiate between right wing and left wing parties and where the latter are perceived obsolete to understand politics (Figure 10). Consequently, depending on the political context, the way voters perceive their representatives, the economic crisis can generate a high or a low level of turnout. It is thus difficult to mechanically associate economic crisis and abstention, or economic cycles and abstention.

**Figure 10**
Inability of voters to differentiate between right wing and left wing parties

![Graph showing inability of voters to differentiate between right wing and left wing parties](image)


The economic crisis would favor abstention only when voters exhibit distrust towards politicians and the solutions proposed to solve the crisis. Abstention phenomenon would be the result of an evolution of voter’s belief on the efficiency of
democracy and the ability of politicians to solve economic and social problems. More precisely, reputation and information cascade mechanism would affect the voters’ perception of the right-wing/left-wing differentiation, and in the end their electoral behavior.

4.4. Representation crisis, left-wing and right-wing undifferentiated and abstention

The belief that politicians are powerless is an option that has been studied by French scholars (Olivennes et Baverez 1994). Also Wagner (1977) has supported this assumption to show that governments could not be held responsible for macroeconomic results. Such belief is based on a triple negative perception of government intervention. First, it is incapable to solve economic and social problems of citizens. Second, politicians are perceived corrupted. Third, parties political programs cannot be easily identified and distinguished by voters (Figure 10). The key question is to understand whether this perception is objectively grounded, or based on prior beliefs. To understand this question, we confront statistics data with voters’ beliefs given by opinion polls. Polls measure the subjective perception, and statistics show the objective reality.

Figure 10
Indifférenciation entre la gauche et la droite

Let’s start with voters’ perception about politicians corruption and the indicator of corruption given *Transparency international*. The lack of interest for electoral participation is highly related with the widespread belief that politicians are corrupted. However, it seems that the French opinion about the corruption of politicians and the transparency international indicator do not evolve in the same direction. Globally, the indicator is stable during the period 1995-2012, and it is relatively low compared to other countries (rank 20). Surprisingly, people’s belief is such that corruption increases continuously during this period showing a peak in 2012-2013 due to the Cahuzac case (figure 11). In addition, while in 2011 72% of respondents believed that politicians were corrupted, they were 77% in 2012. These results support the idea that public opinion may be manipulated by information cascades processes through the media, leading to a gap between subjective perception and objective reality.

**Figure 11** Perception of corruption by the voters and Measure of the corruption by *Transparency International*

![Graph](http://www.transparency.org/)


If we go on by analyzing the evolution of public spending under left-wing and right-wing governments, we reach striking results about voters’ perception of the left/right cleavage. Indeed, over the period 1980-2011, the French believe that left-wing and right-wing parties could not be differentiated anymore (Figure 10). And yet, such perception of undifferentiated right and left emerged in a context where left-wing
governments implemented policies based on public spending (Rocard, Cresson, Bérégovoy), and where right-wing governments spent less Chirac (1986-1988) et Ballardur (1993-1995), (Figure 12). In addition, long-run data show that, over the period 1871-2011, the proportion of domestic public spending in the GDP is 0.4 point higher when the government is entirely composed of left-wing politicians than it would be if composed by right-wing politicians. (Facchini and Melki 2013).

These evidences support the arguments developed by cascades theory, namely that political leaders, and particularly leaders of extremists parties could rely on cascades mechanism to bias voters’ perception of the left/right cleavage. Their ultimate purpose is to attract this share of the electorate who abstain. Since 2011, the diffusion of the slogan of the extremist right-wing party “neither from the left nor from the right” illustrates this tendency of extremists to affect people representation of the political spectrum. The result of such political activism is that the belief “voting is useless” spread out in society through information cascade mechanism. Its diffusion is enhanced by reputation cascade mechanism, leading to abstention.

**Figure 12**
Budgetary Policy and Political Ideology of Government (1976/2012)

Source : Baromètre politique - mars 2003, Source : Baromètre politique décembre 2004
http://www.tns-sofres.com/etudes-et-points-de-vue/barometre-politique
5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed a challenging explanation of the so called “paradox of voting” and what we could qualify the “rational abstention”. Indeed, the literature has shown that when voters become aware of the paradox of voting, they abstain from voting. This result shows that voting and abstaining depend on voters’ representation of the functioning of democracy. Voters consider voting as a duty if they believe that elected politicians represent them in the political sphere. However, when they start doubting that politicians represent their values and expectations, they tend to abstain from voting. In that case, voting reveals the value voters attribute to democracy and abstention can be interpreted as a distrust toward democracy. The objective of this paper has been to explain the increasing abstention in France in recent years (1981-2012) by voters’ deception about the virtues of democracy. As the academic literature on the determinants of abstention in old democracies is immense and has already analysed the most important factors, our methodology has been qualitative and challenging. We have shown that the participation crisis is not necessarily the result of bad economic situations such as economic crisis. Rather, we have argued that voters doubt about the virtues of the voting process because they do not believe anymore that right-wing and left-wing parties could be differentiated and therefore represent their values and expectations. Our contribution has been to show that such belief is disconnected from the objective reality as new forms of collective actions (activism of political entrepreneurs) aimed at affecting voter’s political beliefs can occur in society. Relying on cascades theory, we have shown that democracies are fragile as they can be challenged by political entrepreneurs that use strategically big events such as highly publicized politicians ‘corruption or economic crisis in order to manipulate public opinion, political equilibrium and in the end public policies.
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