

Stick that in Your Pipe: An Analysis of Rural Voting Responses to Federal Agricultural Policy

By

Katharine McCoy

Department of Political Science

McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract

This thesis examines the voting behaviour of farmers in response to unpopular agricultural policy. Using the Tobacco Transition Program (TTP) quota buyout from 2008 as a natural experiment, this project uses mixed methods to understand if there was any electoral backlash to the federal program in the election that October. Differences-in-differences analysis of electoral outcomes, media analysis, and semi-structured interviews were used to determine the results. Using differences-in-differences analysis to examine electoral outcomes, I found that there was little effect of the TTP on the voting behaviour of tobacco producers. Interviews uncovered that responsibility allocation was difficult for voters, which is likely why there was so little effect in the models.

Cette dissertation examine le comportement électoral des fermiers en réponse aux politiques agricoles impopulaires. En utilisant le rachat de contingents du Programme de Transition pour les producteurs de Tabac (PTT) de 2008 en tant qu'expérience naturelle, ce projet utilise des méthodes mixtes pour comprendre s'il y a eu une répercussion électorale au programme fédéral pendant les élections d'octobre 2008. Ce projet se sert de plusieurs types d'analyse : la méthode des doubles différences sur les résultats électoraux, analyse des médias, et d'entrevues semi-structurées. En employant une analyse des doubles différences pour examiner les résultats électoraux, je conclus que le PTT a eu peu d'effet sur le comportement électoral des producteurs de tabac. Les entrevues ont révélé que l'attribution de responsabilité était difficile pour les électeurs, ce qui est probablement la raison pour laquelle les modèles ont montré peu d'effets.

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Introduction

Do regional policies with concentrated costs and diffuse benefits generate a local electoral backlash? Voters use a number of cues to evaluate government performance in the run-up to an election, and so voters in the affected region may exact a punishment by voting against the incumbent candidate. If the unpopular regional policy emerges as one of those cues, the candidate of the incumbent party is likely to receive fewer votes. A potential example of one such policy is Canada's Tobacco Transition Program.

Introduced in the summer of 2008, ostensibly as a way to reduce the amount of tobacco grown in Canada and help farmers get out of a dying industry, the \$286 million dollar Tobacco Transition Program (TTP) was unpopular with tobacco farmers. Having been in decline for several decades, the tobacco industry was approaching a crisis and the governmental quota had been rumoured to be removed for years. The aim of the program was to help farmers transition out of producing tobacco into either retirement or into another crop, but, backed by the National Farmers Union, tobacco farmers argued that the TTP underpaid them for their product and was not a suitable replacement for the previously used quota system (National Farmers Union, 2008). They had petitioned the federal government for a \$3 per pound per quota buy-out, but the TTP settled on only a \$1.05 per pound per quota buy out.¹

¹ The total cost of the program was over 300 million dollars, with the bulk going to producers themselves and 15 million going to the communities generally. The TTP was also controversial after it emerged that farmers had used a loophole to accept the buyout and then transfer the farm to family members and continue to farm tobacco after applying for a new license (Fletcher, 2011). On the other side, anti-smoking lobbyists argued that it did too little to actually change tobacco growing and smoking levels in Canada (Physicians for a Smoke Free Canada, 2010). Still, the number of flue-cured tobacco farms in the country has decreased from over 1,000 in 2001 to 127 in 2022 (Census of Agriculture) and only 12% of Canadians aged 15 years and older reported using at least one tobacco product in the past 30 days in 2020, compared to 22% in 2001 (Canadian Tobacco and Nicotine Survey).

As over 90% of the tobacco in Canada is grown in the region of Southwestern Ontario referred to as the Tobacco Belt, it is a prime example of a natural experiment, enabling me to explore how policies with concentrated costs can result in local electoral backlash. Additionally, as the rural parts of Canada have been more in favour of the Conservative Party since 1993 (Armstrong, Lucas and Taylor, 2021), it will allow me to see how voters who favour a particular party respond to unpopular legislation that the preferred party implemented. Because funding for agricultural policy in Ontario is split between the federal and provincial governments,² the TTP also presents an opportunity to examine how accurate voters are at attributing responsibility for multi-level government policies. Finally, this particular case offers an opportunity to contribute to the emerging literature on rural political behaviour.

I use a mixed methods approach. Using a difference-in-differences (DID) design to compare the electoral results in the Tobacco Belt in the 2008 federal election with those of other Conservative agricultural areas, I determine if the TTP resulted in a local electoral backlash. Additionally, I draw on interviews to examine the attitudes of tobacco farmers in the region as well as interviews with farmers, community members, a reporter, an MP, and prominent agricultural group members to gain an understanding of the political salience of this particular issue in the 2008 federal election. This mixed methods approach enables me both to examine whether the TTP had a causal effect and to identify how voters were mobilized.

The rest of the thesis proceeds as follows. It begins with a literature review where I analyze two bodies of literature that contribute to the project. I describe the retrospective voting literature and electoral backlash literature, which provide the theoretical foundations for the

² Traditionally, 60% of the funding comes from the federal government, while 40% comes from the Ontario government.

thesis. I present my hypothesis and discuss how the literature on rural backlash might undermine my argument. Next, I provide an explanation and justification for the methods used. I then frame the issue of the TPP with a description of the news coverage from the year it was introduced. Finally, I discuss the results of the media analysis, quantitative analysis, and interviews, to try and evaluate the impact of the policy on the area's electoral politics.

Relevant Literature

I draw on two bodies of literature. First, the retrospective voting literature focuses on the cues that voters use as information shortcuts when deciding how to vote. These cues revolve around the personal – and often economic – situation of voters. Retrospective voting models allow me to develop an argument which explains how an electoral backlash might arise if the policy of interest becomes one of those cues. Second, the literature on electoral backlash shows that geographic proximity to areas that are most affected by an unpopular policy can impact voters' responses to that policy. I build on this to discuss if geographic proximity can determine the saliency of that policy as a cue in subsequent elections. Finally, I use literature on rural consciousness to discuss a potential alternative hypothesis after presenting my own hypotheses.

Retrospective Voting

Retrospective voting models describe the way that voters use cues as shortcuts in their voting decisions (Healy and Malhotra 2013). If an unpopular policy ends up as a cue, it may result in an electoral backlash. It is unclear prior to an election which issues will become cues that are important to voters, and how much control politicians actually have over them. What makes a cue salient will depend on a number of factors. Lupia and McCubbins (1998) argue “that there are regular, cognitively driven, institutionally influenced reasons that any cue,

including those based on party, ideology, gender, or race, is effective” (pg. 208). For example, Druckman and Lupia (2016) found that individuals use their personal lives, rather than community- or national-level information, as a frame of reference in their evaluation of politicians’ performance. Ashworth et al. (2017) argue that some exogenous shocks may actually tell voters about the capabilities of a politician vis-à-vis policies like emergency preparedness plans. However, Healy et al. (2010) even found that voters will punish politicians for events outside of their control, such as college football standings.

Healy and Malhotra (2013) discuss three main models of retrospective voting. The first is the sanctioning model, which argues that voters use their vote to punish or reward incumbent politicians for their performance in office. According to this traditional carrot and stick model, voters’ willingness to abandon a party is what creates accountability for politicians (Key, 1966). Politicians do not want to lose the voters’ support, and so they are motivated to maintain some reasonable level of accountability. The second model is the rational-choice model, where voters reference the past performance of an incumbent to elect the party or the individual whom they believe will be most competent in office. The final model considers the emotional and cognitive biases present in the voting process. It argues that voters’ emotions or partisan allegiances are instrumental in selecting cues from the massive quantity of information they are exposed to in the lead-up to an election. Healy et al. (2014) found that there is a partisan bias in how voters respond to negative information and events and Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2014) found it can also affect their ability to evaluate cues. Voters may selectively absorb or ignore information depending on whether the information is “congruent with their partisan leanings” or not (pg. 145). These models (as illustrated by Cutler, 2002) provide a framework for evaluating

voting outcomes in elections where voters attempt to hold the incumbent government accountable for policy decisions.

For elections to be an effective mechanism for democracy, voters have to be able to engage with their local, regional, and national politics with a certain level of competency. This is because they need to be able to accurately assign credit or blame to the right level of government in order to use the incumbent's performance as an effective cue (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Studies focused on economic voting cues have found that egocentric (personal finances) cueing was more effective in areas with low clarity of responsibility attribution, whereas sociotropic (macro-economic) cueing was more effective in areas with high clarity (Anderson, 2000). Yet, the literature remains unclear on how accurate voters are in assigning credit or blame to the correct actors based on these performance cues. The realities of linear time may make it difficult for voters to accord all policies that affect them the same level of importance. Recent events typically have particularly large effects, with Bartels (2008) illustrating that people put more weight on the previous year's economy compared to the last several years. Additionally, voters may have increased difficulty attributing responsibility to the correct actor as they try to remember both the timeline of events and the distribution of responsibility.

Initially argued by Powell and Whitton (1993), then expanded by Whitton and Palmer (1999), the literature on responsibility attribution argues that retrospective and particularly economic voting is hindered by a lack of clarity about where voters should assign blame. While initially discussed as "clear" or "unclear," the literature has expanded to differentiate types of clarity, distinguishing between governmental (horizontal) clarity and institutional (vertical) clarity. Governmental clarity refers to how clear it is within the government which political

actors are responsible for specific actions (Hobolt, Tilley, Banducci, 2013, Cutler, 2017). Minority and coalition governments, for example, obfuscate responsibility by introducing more political parties. Institutional clarity refers to the way that the organization of institutions themselves clarify or complicate responsibility allocation (Ibid.). For example, a unicameral system is clearer than a bicameral system. Federations – and particularly decentralized ones such as Canada – are less clear than other systems, as different levels of governance with additional leaders and parties create more information for voters to process. Federalism and multilevel governance may make it more difficult for voters in the Canadian context to accurately assign blame. This may be why within the context of Canada studies have found that regional economic conditions have little to no impact on federal elections (Anderson 2005; Belanger and Gelineau 2004).

Determining if voters are able to accurately attribute blame for unpopular policies is important to better predict voting behaviour and determine if voter opinion is accurately translated into vote choice. In the Canadian context, with traditionally higher levels of political apathy compared to countries in western Europe, it seems likely that responsibility for unpopular policies will be misattributed to the wrong level of government (Milner, 2002; Howe 2006; see also Blais et al. 2004). This may be especially true for areas where multiple levels of government have legislative authority, like agriculture. Cutler (2017) found that the interconnected responsibility of provincial and federal governments made attribution a tall order for Canadian voters. Such misattribution could lead voters to punish the wrong actors. This behaviour would mean voters are holding actors responsible for policies out of their control, which in turn makes elections a questionable source of accountability. In Canada, healthcare is a particularly interesting area to focus on as a voting cue, because it is an area where both federal and

provincial governments have an important role and voters view it as such (Cutler, 2004). Studies have found that confusion around responsibility is greater in healthcare compared to the economy (Hobolt, Tilley, Banducci, 2013, and Cutler, 2008) and that many Canadians cannot accurately assign blame for poor performance (Cutler, 2008).

Stokes (2016) indicates that rural Ontarians are able to differentiate the responsible actors when an unpopular policy is implemented with clear principal actors. I argue that the TTP functions as a both a singular unpopular policy and an economic cue for affected voters, who feel the impact in the economic performance of the affected region and in personal economic situation. While agricultural policy functions as an economic policy in areas with a strong agricultural industry, agriculture is one of the few policy areas in Canadian federalism where both the federal and provincial governments are involved. Agricultural policy is thus comparable to healthcare, with both levels of government having responsibility.³ Additionally, the federal Conservative government of 2008 was a minority government, meaning the influence of other parties may have made Conservative responsibility for the TTP less clear to voters than if it was a majority government. These two factors may have made it particularly difficult for voters to “negotiate this intergovernmental jungle” (Cutler, 2004). Thus, the nature of agricultural policy and Canadian federalism could have made it much more difficult for tobacco producers to attribute responsibility to the Conservative government, even if it was a federal policy that negatively affected them.

³ Note that within Canadian federalism economic transfers allow for a federal influence on healthcare, a policy area under provincial jurisdiction. This differs from agriculture, which is formally an area where both levels of government have jurisdiction.

Electoral Backlash

When voters are able to attribute responsibility correctly, very unpopular policies can potentially lead to an electoral backlash. Leah Stokes' (2016) study of the rural backlash against windmills in Ontario focuses on the geographic disparities in voters' responses to the installation of windmills. She uses a quantitative approach to determine the existence of an electoral backlash, something new in the literature on rural political identity.

Stokes (2016) uses the case as a potential example of accountability failure, where concentrated backlash causes adjustment to a policy that the majority favours. She argues that the "losers" of a policy are more likely to be vocal, and when there is notable backlash, policies will be adjusted because politicians perceive the policy to be unpopular with the electorate. She notes that when the provincial Liberal government removed the ability of a community to select into or out of windmill projects in 2009, the government lost its electoral majority by one seat in the following 2011 election. The media attributed this to rural voters' discontent with windmills, and the government responded by placing a de facto moratorium on new windmill projects, even though the policy had over 90% approval province wide.

The electoral backlash occurred in areas geographically closer to the windmill sites. Stokes found that the framing of windmills as an issue of community power and sovereignty by opposition partisan actors and vocal anti-windmill groups led to polarization on the topic, and a loss of vote share for the Liberal party. This is different to Nova Scotia, where a similar policy with bi-partisan support faced little resistance from the electorate (Walker, Stephenson, and Baxter 2018), which implies that this policy became partisan in Ontario because of the behaviour of parties and partisan cueing.

Stokes' study underlines two key points. First, discourse, particularly of political actors, can be a critical factor in mobilizing a regional-based identity in response to unpopular policies. Second, rural Ontarians are generally able to differentiate between the responsibilities of different levels of government and accurately assign blame for unpopular policies. Both points are relevant for understanding responses to the Tobacco Transition Program. On the one hand, the discourse around the program may have shaped whether and how it was understood as a political cue. On the other hand, rural Ontarians would likely have been able to differentiate which level of government was responsible for the program.

Hypothesis

The literature shows that there might be a backlash if an issue becomes a salient cue for voters (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). Regions where there are high proportions of agricultural workers are more dependent on agriculture for their economic well-being. Large changes like a quota buyout mean that agricultural policy is likely to be a voting cue. Accordingly, I hypothesize that there will be an electoral backlash against the TTP in the regions that were directly affected by the program.

H1: An unpopular agricultural policy will diminish support for the incumbent party in rural areas adversely affected by the policy, even if those areas had been consistently supportive of the party that implemented the policy in the past.

There are potentially two ways that voter backlash can manifest. The first is that defections will diminish the vote share for the party that implemented the policy. Retrospective voting models indicate that voters can vote for other parties as a way to punish incumbents (Key, 1966). If so, the vote share for the Conservative party would diminish in the election after the

policy was implemented. The second way that voter backlash can manifest is that voters abstain from voting to avoid supporting the party or candidate, but without supporting other parties. For example, strong partisans are often more likely to abstain than vote for another party (Blais et al, 2001). In the second case, there will be a dip in voter turnout in the 2008 election.

H1a: The negative impact of the policy will be visible in a decrease in support for the incumbent party through voting for another party. Areas negatively affected by a policy will see a larger increase in support for opposition parties than unaffected regions.

H1b: The negative impact of the policy will be visible in a decrease in support for the incumbent party through a refusal to vote. Areas negatively affected by a policy will see a larger decline in turnout than unaffected areas

The literature on retrospective voting and electoral backlash provides a framework for my hypothesis. Put simply, if the TTP became a salient cue for voters in the 2008 election, then there should have been an electoral consequence for the party that implemented the policy, with voters either voting against the incumbent or refusing to vote altogether. Since flue-cured tobacco, the kind used in the majority of cigarettes, is grown almost entirely in one region of the country, erstwhile Conservative voters in regions affected by the policy should either have changed their vote or, if they were unwilling to vote for another party, abstained or spoiled their ballot. Moreover, the electoral backlash is likely to have been larger in the region with more tobacco farms (Norfolk county) than the region with fewer farms (Elgin and Oxford counties). It also means that regions outside of the treatment area are unlikely to have been so against the TTP that it would have become a salient issue.

It is possible, however, that any decline in Conservative vote shares or turnout reflected a broader rural backlash, rather than a single unpopular policy. There is evidence from ethnographic studies on rural political culture that rural Canadians, like their American counterparts, feel as though they are treated unfairly compared to urban residents (Banack 2021). This literature indicates that there may be a general backlash against governments that are perceived as acting against the interest of rural communities, rather than a specific kind of policy.

The ethnographic study by Cramer-Walsh (2016) is the seminal piece of literature on rural politics in the United States. Over a several year period she used listening as an ethnographic method to determine the values and political motivations of rural Wisconsinites compared to those of urban residents. She noted the importance of the paradigm that she termed *rural consciousness* – that rural people work harder than people in urban areas but see fewer resources from the state in return. She argues that this paradigm of perceived unfair resource allocation and cultural difference fuels the resentment found in rural Wisconsin. This resentment toward urban centres came as a shock to urban Wisconsinites after the election of Scott Walker as governor.

Banack (2021) replicated Cramer-Walsh’s study in parts of rural Alberta and found the same anger and alienation from the federal and provincial political processes. He similarly used “listening as method” to create a conversation with rural residents in informal social gatherings. The alienation in this case had three distinct sources. The first was the Western alienation that is prominent in the prairie provinces. The second source of this alienation was the feeling that politicians do not listen to “ordinary people” and the final source was related to their rural

identity. Banack stops short of examining how rural consciousness might affect political outcomes but does establish that it is important to opinion formation. This study illustrates that rural consciousness is not only an American political and cultural phenomenon.

Where this alienated rural identity emerged from is less clear. There are a few theories, such as those that link the alienation directly to a sense of difference to those in urban areas. For example, Cramer-Walsh (2016) attributes some of the resentment to the perceived underfunding of rural public goods since the 1970s and 1980s. This is also when devolution picked up and meant that local governments were increasingly responsible for providing services, while being more dependent on state aid. These local governments are at a disadvantage in that they have smaller tax bases to dip into, and because of scaling, programs are more expensive to run. Rural voters, she concludes, are more likely to feel as though they receive an unfair distribution of public goods. Hochschild (2016) traces the same kind of resentment in Tea Party supporters in rural Louisiana to the changing demographics in America. They are resentful of ethnic minorities taking spaces “in line” to which they believed themselves entitled. Carr and Kefalas (2009), meanwhile, argue that the resentment of urban areas in Iowa is the result of a competition for high skilled workers in relation to the rural brain drain.

The Canadian context is even less clear than the American. Rayside (2013) argues that the alienation is a result of social changes in other parts of the country. He argues that the mobilization of parties and voters in rural Ontario is the result in some cases of moral conservatism. However, Banack (2021) argues that political idea formation comes directly from this rural identity rather than the identity being the result of political action. Overall, there is agreement that rural folks feel alienated and ignored compared to those in cities (even when data

shows they get more resources than cities per capita (Cramer, 2016)) but a consensus as to *why* they feel this is the case is lacking. The mechanism that turns rural consciousness from part of voters' identity into a politically salient and *mobilized* paradigm is also unclear. Regardless, the larger point remains that there may have been a general backlash against an incumbent government that was seen as not supporting the needs of rural voters rather than a negative reaction to the TTP *per se*.

Data and Methods

This study uses a mixed-method approach to address the central question of whether or not there was a localized backlash against the TTP. Lieberman (2005) shows how mixed method approaches create the space for a “nested” study where a small selection of cases from a larger study is examined qualitatively in order to augment and improve the quantitative parts of the study. Using both small N cases qualitatively and large N cases quantitatively gives me an opportunity to identify any causal effect as well as the causal mechanism. The large N analysis is accomplished through difference-in-differences analysis of electoral results at a poll level, while focus groups with farmers, and interviews with community leaders, members of agricultural groups, and reporters focus on the mechanisms. Previous studies of rural politics have used ethnographic studies, which are very useful for gaining insight into the workings of individual cases but may not be generalizable to rural political culture and behaviour as a whole. Therefore, expanding the method to include a quantitative analysis of a natural experiment adds to the external validity of the study.

Difference-in-differences

This study uses a difference-in-differences (DID) framework to compare the outcomes of regions affected by the program to similar regions that were not impacted. For this framework, there is a treatment group, in this case, the ridings of the Tobacco Belt, who had farmers impacted by the TTP. There is also a control group, which is made up of similar agricultural and Conservative ridings in Ontario that do not grow tobacco and whose farmers therefore were not directly impacted by the TTP. While there is some variation in the amount of production, the groups are classified at a constituency level rather than at the poll level in order to capture some variation (for example, people living off the property of the farms where they work). It also helps to cover voters working in some of the auxiliary industries that may be impacted by the TTP. The control group is found by comparing other regions on key indicators. Census data from 2006 show the similarity between Southwestern and Eastern Ontario in terms of the number of agricultural workers as a percentage of the population, racial makeup, population size and employment levels (see Table 1). The vote share and turnout data come from Elections Canada and are available at an individual poll level from 2004 on.

| Riding | Percentage Agricultural Workers | Percentage White | Population | Unemployment Rate | Treatment Group |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Elgin | 4.0 | 96.4 | 85,351 | 5.5 | Treatment |
| Haldimand-Norfolk | 6.2 | 97.4 | 107,812 | 6.0 | Treatment |
| Oxford | 4.3 | 96.3 | 102,756 | 4.8 | Treatment |
| Chatham-Kent | 4.7 | 94.5 | 108,589 | 7.2 | Control |
| Leeds | 3.7 | 98.3 | 99,210 | 5.7 | Control |
| Lanark | 4.5 | 98.6 | 117,390 | 5.7 | Control |
| Lethbridge | 10.6 | 94.6 | 113,540 | 4.0 | Control |
| Northumberland – Quinte West | 5.5 | 97.8 | 123,705 | 5.8 | Control |

Table 1: Demographic similarities in treatment and control regions in the 2006 census

DID is a useful framework for looking at differences in small geographic regions, and for looking at micro level politics. DID also works for looking at the effect of public policy, as it requires observations from before the treatment period and after. As the TTP was implemented the summer before the 2008 election, the pre-treatment period ($t = 0$) is the 2004 and 2006 elections. The post-treatment period ($t = 1$) is the 2008 election. To test my hypotheses, I have specified four models that predict the Conservative vote share (as both a share of valid votes and based on all eligible voters), vote share for other parties (based on all eligible voters), and turnout. By examining both the Conservative share of the vote and the Conservative vote as a percentage of the total electorate, I am able to assess the extent to which the Conservative vote goes down as a result of defections to other parties versus abstentions.

The ATT on the Conservative vote share identified as:

$$\text{Convotespst} = \hat{\alpha} + \hat{\gamma}TB_s + \hat{\delta}Post_t + \hat{\tau}(TB \times Post_t) + \hat{\epsilon}_{pst}$$

The ATT on the Conservative vote as a percentage of the eligible electorate is identified as:

$$\text{ConvoteE} = \hat{\alpha} + \hat{\gamma}TB_s + \hat{\delta}Post_t + \hat{\delta}TB \times Post_t + \hat{\epsilon}_{pst}$$

The ATT on the opposition vote as a percentage of the eligible electorate is identified as:

$$\text{OppvoteE} = \hat{\eta} + \hat{\gamma}TB_s + \hat{\delta}Post_t + \hat{\tau}TB \times Post_t + \hat{\epsilon}_{pst}$$

The ATT on voter turnout is identified as:

$$\text{TurnoutPST} = \hat{\kappa} + \hat{\gamma}TB_s + \hat{\delta}Post_t + \hat{\tau}TB \times Post_t + \hat{\epsilon}_{pst}$$

where TB is a dummy variable equal to 1 if a poll is in the Tobacco Belt. $Post$ is a dummy variable equal to 1 if a poll is in the post-treatment period. The difference-in-differences is τ . The initial Conservative vote for Southeastern Ontario is captured in α . The initial opposition vote is captured in η . The initial turnout is captured in κ . The pre-existing differences between Southeastern Ontario and the Tobacco Belt are given in γ and the change in time is in δ . The subset p is the unit indicator for the poll.

The main identification assumption for differences-in-differences is parallel trends; in the absence of treatment, the post-treatment trends in the treated group would have been the same as the post-treatment trends in the control group. While this assumption is untestable, we can be more confident if the control and treatment groups have similar trends before the treatment. In the present case, this is established by comparing the voter turnout and Conservative vote share in the elections before the treatment (see the results section below). Both the control and treatment groups must have similar dependent variable values in the elections leading up to the treatment in order for the control to function as a counterfactual for the treatment group.

Additionally, the Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA) must be met to allow for a causal interpretation of the models. In this case, the treatment effect cannot be caused by the treatment being given to another region. This is plausible since the treatment was a federal program that applied to only one region because of soil type,⁴ and because the ability of an area to grow tobacco does not depend on the ability of a nearby region. Additionally, SUTVA means there cannot be any impact from the treatment on another region. In the case of industries with strong networks, such as those found within agriculture and farming, this is more difficult to substantiate, and one could argue there are potential spillover effects from one region to another.

⁴ In this case, the preferred soil type is sandy, loam rich, and well-draining, which is the result of the Wisconsin Glaciation, rather than any policy decision, or the soil of a nearby region.

In order to assess the potential for spillover effects in the control regions, I undertook a media analysis. The TTP was announced August 1, 2008, after a series of protests and meetings about the flagging tobacco industry. Press coverage of tobacco policy in each of the regions was examined from January 1, 2007 to October 14, 2008⁵ to assess the amount, type, and tone in order to compare the coverage in the Tobacco Belt with the control regions. I also analyzed national coverage. The newspapers examined from the treatment group were The Norfolk and Tillsonburg News, The Simcoe Reformer, The Woodstock Sentinel-Review, The St-Thomas Times Journal, The Aylmer Express, The Hamilton Spectator, and The Haldimand Press. The newspapers examined from the control groups were: News Now Network, Quinte News, County Live, The Picton Gazette, Perth Courier, Smiths Falls Record News, Carleton Place/Almonte Canadian-Gazette, Frontenac News, Sydenham Current, Napanee Today, The Napanee Beaver, The Chatham News and Record, and The Tilbury Times Reporter. If the newspapers in the control regions devote little or no attention to the TTP, this would suggest that it was not an important local issue. In other words, regardless of any communication that may occur between different agricultural producers, it was likely not salient enough to make an impact on the voters.

In order to address an unbalanced control and treatment group, one set of models uses Mahalanobis distance matching on census measures between the treatment and the control group as a robustness check.⁶ This pre-treatment selection on observables makes sure that the control and treatment group are more balanced, addressing one of the weaknesses of a natural

⁵ The election was held on October 14, 2008.

⁶ Synthetic controls would be useful here, but the restructuring of constituencies in 2000 means that there is not enough pre-treatment data organized at the constituency level. Without such data, “‘incidental parameters’ can lead to biased estimates of the treatment effects” (Xu, 2017).

experiment. These controls are sourced mostly from Eastern Ontario, a similarly agricultural and Conservative area, but one that grows other crops than tobacco.⁷

The entire counties are being included in order to make the models robust to some of the spillover from other industries that were impacted by the TTP, such as cigarette manufacturers and equipment producers. Since the resulting models are less sensitive, the potential impact of the TTP on the voting behaviour of tobacco producers may be under-estimated, making for a more conservative test.

There is also some potential for treatment variation, as the amount of tobacco production varied within the constituencies that make up the Tobacco Belt. For example, the riding of Haldimand-Norfolk has a higher number of tobacco farms than Elgin or Oxford. Additionally, Haldimand-Norfolk has farms throughout the constituency rather than only in part of the riding (such as the southern part of Oxford county). As such, one might expect there to be a larger treatment in Norfolk and therefore a stronger ATT in that region.

Accordingly, there will be a number of models examining a variety of outcomes. Of central interest are the models that compare the Tobacco Belt to other ridings in Ontario, and the models comparing Haldimand-Norfolk to the Ontario controls. The appendix also contains the full models matched on propensity scores, and the full results of the model with country-wide controls.⁸

⁷ Sourcing controls from outside of Ontario is complicated. Prairie provinces, while similarly Conservative and anglophone, have a much larger percentage of primary industry workers. Moreover, the Census does not distinguish between agricultural workers and other primary industry workers. Comparing agricultural workers to workers in the logging or oil industries undermines their validity as controls. Additionally, Western alienation means the political culture is different than in Ontario and makes the western provinces questionable counterfactuals for ridings in Ontario. However, a country-wide model was run and can be found in the appendix.

⁸ The results from the country-wide models show a 13.8 percentage point lower Conservative vote share, a 0.4 percentage point lower turnout, and a 7.4 percentage point higher opposition share of the electorate, and a 7.9 percentage point lower Conservative share of the electorate. The results for turnout are not statistically significant. The results for the propensity score models are null, indicating the TTP had no effect on Conservative vote share, turnout, opposition electorate share, or Conservative electorate share.

The dataset has 814 polls from 2004 to 2011. 400 of these polls are from the treatment group, while 414 are from the control group. For each dependent variable, I ran three different models. The first model was an ordinary least squares (OLS) model, without any additional covariates, to measure the ATT. The second model included demographic covariates that were indicated through a balance table as potentially having an impact. The demographic covariates included are the percentage of the population that works in agriculture, the population, and the unemployment rate. The third model used Mahalanobis distance to match individual polls in the treatment group with individual polls in the control group.

*Interviews*⁹

While the quantitative analyses allow me to determine the impact of the program on the vote-share for the Conservative Party and voter turnout, they do not provide any insight into individual voters' motivations. The quantitative analysis determines *what* happened, but the interviews help determine *why* it happened. Moreover, because the quantitative analyses are based on aggregate data, there is the risk of faulty inferences about individual behaviour. The interviews enable me to guard against the ecological fallacy and to understand how voters thought about and interacted with the program.¹⁰

⁹ I had planned to conduct focus groups as well since focus groups can be particularly effective for determining the attitudes, perceptions, and responses to an event (Litosseliti, 2003). The focus groups were intended to determine how farmers were influenced politically by the TTP, and to investigate their attitudes toward the policy. Focus group participants were selected through snowball sampling, initiated through community contacts, and the focus groups were arranged to be held on August 1st and 2nd 2022, with four participants each. Given that 14 years have passed since the 2008 election, the original design for this project included more focus groups with more participants, as focus groups are useful for facilitating memory. However, unexpectedly, community members still found the topic quite sensitive, and a number of them indicated that they preferred interviews one on one as opposed to group discussions with other farmers or people involved, making it difficult to recruit more participants. This reluctance to discuss the topic with others may explain why, on August 1st, only one person attended, with the other three doing interviews at later dates, and no-one attended on August 2nd. That the TPP is still such a sensitive issue 14 years later confirms that it was likely a highly salient issue at the time of the 2008 election.

¹⁰ Ethics approval for both the focus groups and the interviews was received on July 14th 2022

Testimony to the salience of the program, the TTP remained a surprisingly sensitive topic, even 14 years later, making it difficult to recruit interviewees. There were a number of people who would speak freely to me about the lead up to the TTP and the quota buyout but declined to participate in semi-structured interviews. As a result, I only five interviews in which participants consented to being recorded and quoted, three in the treatment group, two in the control group, with another 6 interviews strictly off the record (a list of the questions can be found in the appendix). While I reached out to some individuals, others were also contacted through snowball sampling. The interviews with tobacco farmers, agricultural workers, community leaders, a reporter, a member of parliament (MP), and members of the Tobacco Marketing Board occurred in the summer of 2022. They were conducted largely over Microsoft Teams, with some auxiliary communication over email, text, and phone calls. I had intended to interview campaign staff and candidates, but although I reached out to every MP office and MPP office in the treatment region, only one agreed to speak with me about the TTP. Interviewees shared their perspectives on the salience of the TTP, the decline of the tobacco industry, the roles of the different levels of government, and the program's impacted on their political behaviour.

Mosely (2013) argues that interviews are able to reveal complex causal mechanisms that are often unobservable in other forms of data, and for that reason pair well with quantitative methods. My goal with the interviews was to gain an insight into the political reasoning of the time, and if the TTP was as much of a priority for the community leaders as it may have been for the farmers themselves.

Results

Results: Media Analysis

The analysis of local news suggests that any spillover effects are likely to have been limited, which helps to substantiate the SUTVA assumption. One potential way to violate SUTVA is through a spillover effect, which occurs when the treatment being given to one area causes individuals in another area to react, creating a treatment effect on the control regions. When this occurs, the controls no longer function as reasonable counterfactuals for the treatment group. In order to test for spillover, I analyzed newspapers to try and establish the saliency of the TTP in different regions. If the issue was salient in the control regions as well as the treatment regions, it should have been covered in local newspapers in the control region. Accordingly, I examined local news coverage in the treatment and control groups for the year of 2008, paying specific attention to the period between the announcement of the TTP on August 1st and the election on October 14th. In addition to local news, I examined national news, and the most popular provincial agriculture newspaper, Ontario Farmer.

The analysis of local news suggests that any spillover effects are likely to have been limited. Local newspapers in the treatment region contained only six articles over the course of the year about the TTP, the campaigning by producers for a government buyout, and the response by the government and politicians. Local newspapers in the control region contained zero articles about the program, or the tobacco industry. This indicates that the issues surrounding the industry and were not salient in the control regions.

National newspapers ran 17 articles on the TTP. Additionally, Ontario Farmer, the biggest agricultural newspaper in the province, had articles that mentioned the buyout and related campaigning 13 times over the year. If media coverage were to reflect or increase the saliency of

the issue in the control regions, it would be through this national and provincial coverage. However, this coverage was also limited. Most of the national articles came from The Canadian Press.

It is important to note that the industry-specific news from Ontario Farmer contained a number of editorials and comparisons to other industries. It particularly noted the concurrent campaigning by the pig producers fighting for funding from the same source as the TTP, and that one of the published editorials argued that tobacco farmers should receive *less* money. This indicates that even if the TTP was more salient in these regions because of this media coverage, it does not necessarily mean that there was a spillover effect such that other producers were going to react similarly to tobacco producers when it came time to vote.

The other interesting aspect of the press coverage was the focus on the Haldimand-Norfolk riding. Diane Finley, the MP for Haldimand-Norfolk, got much more coverage than the other Conservative MPs in the Tobacco Belt. There could be a couple reasons for this focus: there are more tobacco farmers in Norfolk county than in either Oxford or Elgin, and Diane Finley was a member of the cabinet as the Minister of Immigration at the time. The focus on Norfolk led me to look specifically at Norfolk in my models to see if there was an increased effect size, on the assumption that the TTP may have been a more salient issue in some areas of the Tobacco Belt than in others.

The press analysis illustrates that tobacco farming, the quota buyout, and the TTP were national issues, although not as much as other tobacco issues like regulation and illegal production. Local news coverage was limited to areas in and around the Tobacco Belt and was not found in the control regions. None of the local newspapers in the control groups mentioned

the TTP, indicating to me that control groups were unlikely to view the issue as salient as it was in the Tobacco Belt, and thus indicating that any spillover effects are likely to be limited.

Results: Differences in Differences

The control groups function well as a counterfactual for the treatment group because they are also agricultural ridings but rely on different outputs. However, while the media analysis helps to substantiate the SUTVA assumption, it is still necessary to assess the plausibility of the parallel trends assumption. The parallel trends assumption is more plausible if the treatment and control groups have similar trends before the treatment is applied to the treatment group. As Figure 1 shows, the parallel trends assumption holds for the Conservative share of votes cast. The trends run parallel in the 2004 and 2006 elections, but while the Conservative vote continued to rise in the control group, it plateaued in the treatment group, indicating a treatment effect. The parallel trends assumption also appears to hold for voter turnout (see Figure 2), but the fact that the trends continue to overlap after the implementation of the TTP indicates no treatment effect. It holds, albeit less strongly, for the Conservative share of the electorate (See Figure 3). However, the vote shares are not significantly different in 2008, indicating no effect. The opposition shares of the electorate (See Figure 4) in the treatment and control groups run parallel pre-treatment but clearly diverge in 2008, indicating an effect.

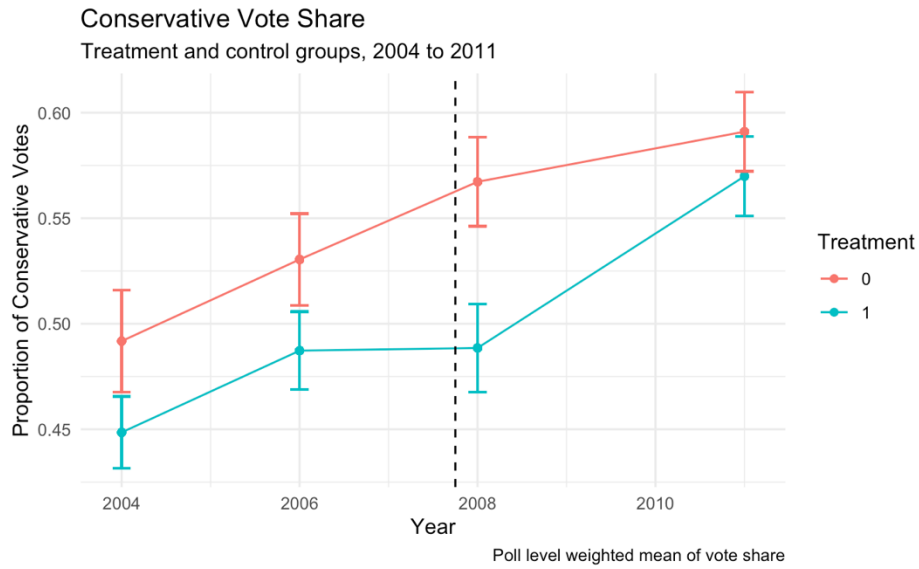


Figure 1. Conservative vote share of all votes, treatment and control groups from 2004 to 2011. 95% confidence intervals are indicated. Data is from Elections Canada, with 814 polls. 400 are from the treatment group and 414 are from the control group

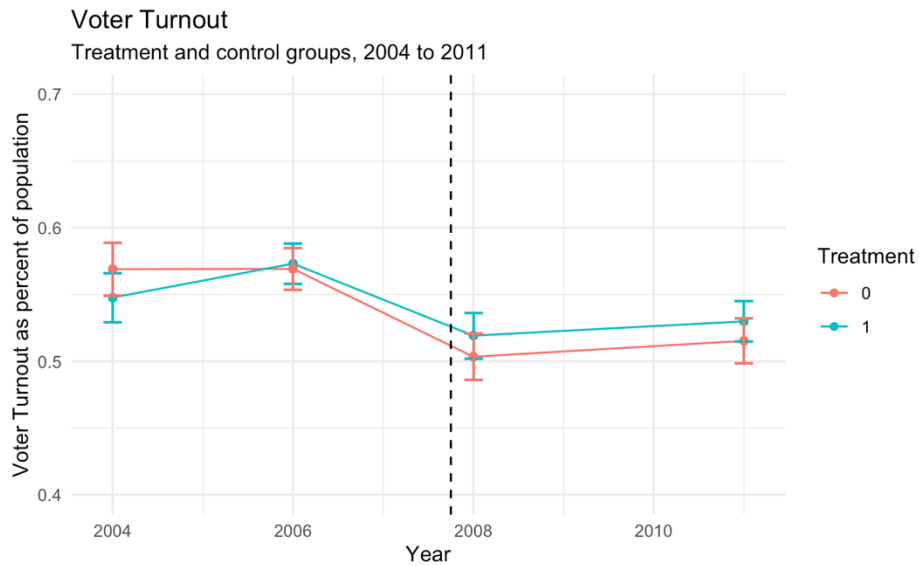


Figure 2. Voter Turnout for the treatment and control groups, from 2004 to 2011. 95% confidence intervals are indicated. Data is from Elections Canada, with 814 polls. 400 are from the treatment group and 414 are from the control group.

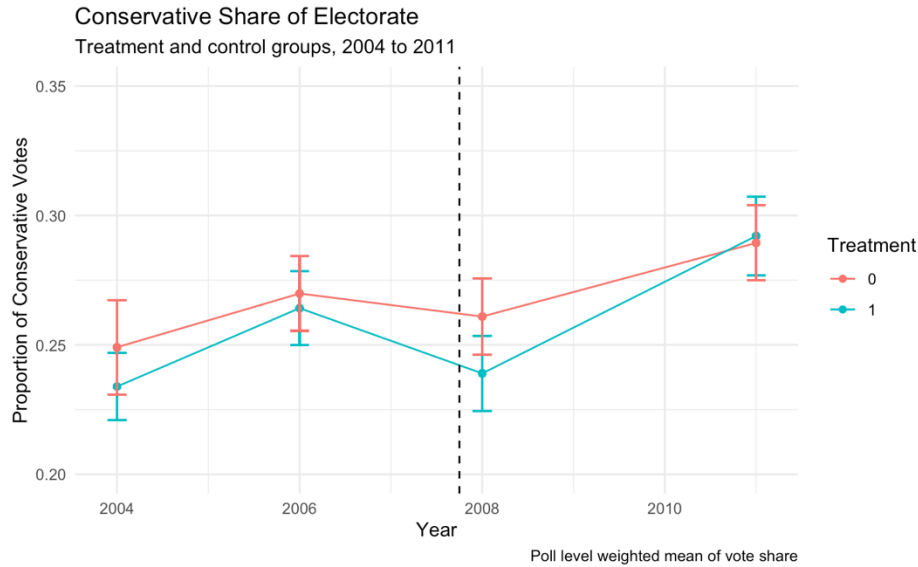


Figure 3. Conservative Vote Share of the Electorate, treatment and control groups from 2004 to 2011. 95% confidence intervals are indicated. Data is from Elections Canada, with 814 polls, 400 are from the treatment group, and 414 are from the control group

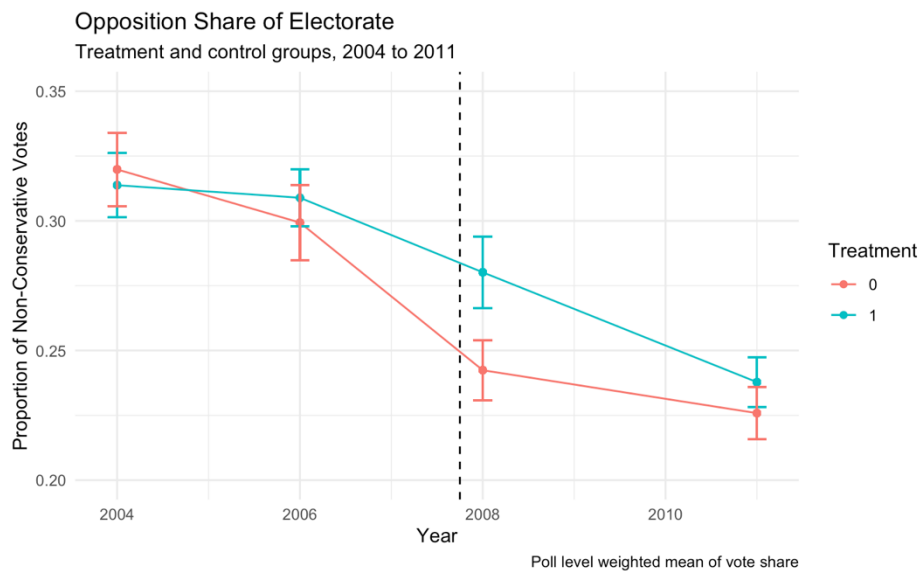


Figure 4. Opposition Vote Share of the electorate, Treatment and Control Groups, 2004 to 2011. 95% confidence intervals are indicated. Data is from Elections Canada, with 814 polls. 400 are from the treatment group and 414 are from the control group

OLS provides an indication of the effect that the treatment, or implementation of the TTP, had on voters in the areas with tobacco farms. However, other issues like unemployment rates might have led to an electoral backlash instead. As such, as a robustness check, the second model controls for multiple covariates that impact economic voting, namely, the unemployment

rate, the percentage of agriculture workers, and the population. The third model takes matches based on those covariates using Mahalanobis distance, for an even more robust model.

| Table 2. Effect of TTP on Conservative Vote Share in the Tobacco Belt | | |
|---|--------|----------------|
| Model | ATT | Standard Error |
| OLS | -0.052 | 0.012 |
| OLS + Controls | -0.047 | 0.017 |
| Matching | -0.021 | 0.008 |

Note: The standard errors for the matching model are clustered at a poll level. There are 810 observations for each model with 742 observations used for the matching model.

The models return the Average Treatment effect on the Treated (ATT). The ATT measures the impact on the treated group in comparison to the control group. The OLS model for the proportion of Conservative votes indicates that the program resulted in a 5.2 percentage point lower vote share for the Conservative Party in the 2008 election, compared with the control group. This confirms the hypothesis that the TTP had a negative effect on the Conservative Party’s vote share in the affected regions. The second OLS model controls for unemployment, percentage agricultural workers, and population. The model with the controls shows a 4.7 percentage point lower Conservative vote share for the treatment group after the implementation of the TTP. The third model that matches on the covariates indicates that the TTP caused a 2.1 percentage point decrease in vote share, compared with the control group. Overall, this indicates that the TTP may have had an impact on voter behaviour, but it was very small. As the races in the 2008 election were not particularly close, this would not have changed the outcomes in any of the ridings in the treatment group.

| Table 3. Effect of TTP on Voter Turnout in the Tobacco Belt | | |
|---|--------|----------------|
| Model | ATT | Standard Error |
| OLS | +0.016 | 0.015 |
| OLS + Covariates | +0.016 | 0.014 |
| Matching | -0.010 | 0.007 |

Note: The standard errors for the matching model are clustered at a poll level. There are 810 observations for each model with 742 observations used for the matching model.

As strong partisans are often more likely to abstain than vote for another party (Blais et al., 2001), It is possible that some Conservative partisans simply did not vote rather than vote for another party. Therefore, I also estimate a model of the effect of the TTP on turnout. However, the models for voter turnout find no effect of the TTP on voter turnout. The wide standard errors indicate null results for all three models.

Table 4. Effect of TTP on the Conservative share of the Electorate

| Model | ATT | Standard Error |
|------------------|--------|----------------|
| OLS | -0.016 | 0.013 |
| OLS + Covariates | -0.010 | 0.007 |
| Matching | -0.015 | 0.006 |

Note: The standard errors for the matching model are clustered at a poll level. There are 810 observations for each model with 742 observations used for the matching model.

In order to discern the extent to which the Conservative vote goes down as a result of defections to other parties versus abstentions, I also modelled the Conservative share of the electorate and the opposition parties' share of the electorate. The first two models indicate that the TTP did not have a significant effect on the Conservative share of the electorate, given the wide standard errors. However, once matching is used to correct for imbalances between the treatment and control groups, the results show that the Conservative share of the electorate was 1.5 points lower in the treatment group.

Table 5. Effect of TTP on the Opposition share of the Electorate

| Model | ATT | Standard Error |
|-------|-------|----------------|
| OLS | 0.032 | 0.012 |

| | | |
|-------------------------|-------|-------|
| OLS + Covariates | 0.032 | 0.011 |
| Matching | 0.006 | 0.005 |

Note: The standard errors for the matching model are clustered at a poll level. There are 810 observations for each model with 742 observations used for the matching model.

The first OLS model indicates that the opposition share of the electorate was 3.2 percentage point higher in the treatment group than the control group. The OLS model with the controls continues to indicate that the opposition share of the electorate was 3.2 points higher. Finally, the estimate of the ATT based on the model using matching is 0.6 percentage points. However, given the large standard errors, we have to infer no treatment effect. These results indicate that the opposition lost fewer votes than the Conservatives in the treatment group when turnout went down in 2008, which is attributable to the TTP. However, this is not necessarily a robust result, as matching to correct imbalances weakens the effect.

Given the number of tobacco farms in Haldimand-Norfolk and the media focus on this constituency, I expected a larger effect size than found for the treatment group as a whole. Accordingly, I also ran models with that sole constituency as the treatment group and the same Ontario controls.

| Table 6. Effect of TTP on Haldimand-Norfolk, Matching Models | | |
|---|------------|-----------------------|
| Dependent Variable | ATT | Standard Error |
| Conservative Vote Share | -0.048 | 0.009 |
| Turnout | -0.016 | 0.008 |
| Opposition Electorate Share | +0.017 | 0.006 |
| Conservative Electorate Share | -0.033 | 0.007 |

Note: The matching is done by Mahalanobis distance on the unemployment level, percentage of agricultural workers, population, and percentage of the riding that is white. There are 708 observations for each model, with 342 matched.

The models estimate a 4.8 percentage point lower Conservative vote share, no effect on turnout, a 1.7 percentage point higher opposition share of the electorate, and 3.3 percentage point lower Conservative share of the electorate. As expected, the Haldimand-Norfolk riding has a

larger effect size compared to the entire tobacco belt. This means that areas where the costs were more acutely felt had a larger electoral backlash.

Overall, the results indicate that the TTP had an impact on the Conservative vote share in the Tobacco Belt, costing the Conservatives roughly 2 percentage points of their vote, and 4.8 percentage points in Norfolk County. This is a small effect, which indicates that even if the TTP was a politically salient event, it resulted in only a very small change in the voting behaviour of the treatment groups. This may be the result of the conservative model used that is likely to underestimate the true treatment effect. However, the potential substantive reasons for this are explored below.

Semi-structured Interviews

The small estimated effect indicates that the TTP had a small impact on voting. Semi-structured interviews can uncover causal mechanisms that may help explain the reasons for such a small effect. Interviews with tobacco producers, community leaders and other local experts indicated that there were several reasons why blame attribution was difficult and varied for the quota buyout.

One of the ideas that was shared by a variety of tobacco producers in the interviews was that there was a complicated interplay between different types of actors in the quota buyout. Specifically, the Tobacco Marketing Board, the federal government, the provincial government (the Health Ministry specifically), cigarette companies, Indigenous tobacco producers, and anti-smoking lobbyists were all key players in the lead up to the TTP. The Tobacco Marketing board lobbied the federal and provincial governments in order to get a buyout. The federal government implemented the buyout, but this was only *after* tobacco producers had petitioned the provincial

government for it with no results. Health ministers were also identified with anti-smoking groups in that they worked to reduce the production of tobacco in order to lower the levels of cigarette production. This complicated system of many actors may have made it more difficult for producers to attribute responsibility for the buyout to the federal government. This may explain the small electoral effects detected in the analysis of voting at the federal level.

The Tobacco Marketing Board in particular is an interesting actor because they were in direct communication and negotiation with the federal and provincial governments over a number of years. This kind of ongoing relationship goes directly against one of the central assumptions of rural consciousness, that rural communities are ignored in favour of cities. However, it does not necessarily counter the idea that rural communities are not heard or understood. A number of people said that regardless of what happened to farmers, there is no political will to make change unless there is a threat to diminishing government tax revenue, even when they go through the “proper” channels such as the marketing board. This means that regardless of the existence of channels that cater to rural interests, if they are unsuccessful in negotiations, this dynamic may contribute to the idea that politicians do not listen to “ordinary people” as discussed by Banack (2021). As it stands, the understanding of tobacco producers was that they were not prioritized by the government. The marketing board was able to campaign and act on behalf of their community but did not necessarily end up with a result that would decrease the resentment felt by the growers. One tobacco producer and community leader said that, “Everybody always seems to be short of what they should do. But that’s the way it is, nobody is going to want to walk out being a multi-millionaire.” This illustrates, that even if rural communities are organised so they are heard by “people who matter,” it does not mean that there is any understanding of the needs of these communities, let alone a response that voters deem

appropriate. Additionally, this dynamic between local groups and governments appears to result in blame being directed at individual members of the community because of their positions in these groups. Some interviewees indicated that the marketing board and its members (comprised entirely of locals) had become complacent and were at fault for the failure of the buyout. So regardless of the actual communication or contact with rural communities, perceptions of failure may still exacerbate rural consciousness and alienation from the bigger governmental bodies that matter, and therefore feed into those feelings of resentment.

There seemed to be more widespread disappointment with the provincial government than the federal government. Even where they had different perspectives on the buyout, the farmers seemed more disappointed in the provincial Liberal government of the time than the federal Conservative government. One farmer simply put it as, “the Liberals cost me a lot of money.” They argued that, because the provincial government failed to step up for them for financial or personal reasons, the federal government had to pick up the slack. Specifically, the rumours were that the Liberal premier of Ontario at the time, Dalton McGuinty, had personal reasons to be anti-tobacco. Others stated that it was all about the money gained from cigarettes and the cigarette companies. As one interviewee phrased it, “the [...] provincial government was going to end up putting more money into it than what they were getting [from tobacco]. So, the provincial government to see if they could get money [from the federal government], refused to put any money in the program.” Farmers seemed to agree that the lack of motivation on the part of the province was related both to money and the political culture of the provincial Liberal Party. Of course, agriculture is one area that is a matter of both federal and provincial jurisdiction, and so the allocation of blame is split. This impedes the attribution of responsibility to the federal government and might explain why the TTP had such little effect on voting

behaviour. The Tobacco Belt is also an area that leans Conservative, so it may be that voter bias allows farmers to place blame on the provincial party they hold less loyalty to than the federal one they traditionally support.

The Tobacco Transition Program was one of two quota buyouts available to growers in Ontario. The first one, several years earlier, had been a joint effort by both provincial and federal governments. This meant there may have been some expectation from tobacco producers for the provincial government to contribute to the policy. In fact, one producer confused the two buyouts in the interview (I later received two separate phone calls, one from the interviewee and one from another community member to clarify he had been speaking about the wrong buyout). This lack of clarity, in addition to the fact that the Conservative government in 2008 was a minority government, may have contributed to the difficulty in accurately attributing responsibility for the TTP. This lack of blame may explain why there is so little effects in the DID analysis.

In regard to federal politics, one farmer said that, “there was not the appetite [for a buyout] in the House prior to 2008.” In general, there was a consensus that there was a lack of political will in parliament to use taxpayer money to fund a buyout, even though the industry was suffering. However, after the federal government received money from cigarette companies in a lawsuit, they were able to use the money to help close down the flagging industry. The Conservatives formed the federal government during this time and their role was mentioned in the interviews as frequently as the provincial government’s. However, even when federal parties, were mentioned, accounts differed. An agricultural reporter and journalist mentioned that, “[Conservative] MP Diane Finley worked hard to get the money for the federal government, she was key in that.” However, a newspaper at the time said that, “Bales of Ontario tobacco, several of [Conservative] MP Joe Preston's campaign signs, and a handful of Conservative party

membership cards went up in smoke” in protest (Tobacco Farmers Deserve Justice, Ontario Farmer, May 6, 2008). An interviewee put it simply as “Look, I vote Conservative. I’d like to hear what the other parties have to say, and if they were going to do things for the community, but-.” However, another farmer said that, “The only ones that really supported us at first was the NDP.”

The interviewees also highlighted that the buyout is still a sensitive topic. A number of community members had anxieties over who would read the interviews, and if identifying information would be attached to what was said, even when it was explained while establishing contact and on mandatory consent forms that anonymity would be guaranteed in any papers. Different tobacco farmers had different opinions on the buyout, and those who were willing to take it held different views from those who wanted to continue growing. Those who agreed that it was good seemed to view it as a good way to help a dying industry. Those who were against it figured it was a bad policy because it was not as much money as it should have been. This means that it is possible for the TTP to be a different cue, either positive or negative, for different farmers. Farmers said that the quota buyout was unique in that it was one of multiple buyouts, but this one was strictly from the federal government, rather than from both the provincial and federal governments. Earlier buyouts had involved both levels of government. As such, some farmers blamed the *provincial* government for not getting involved more than they blamed the federal government for the low buying price. In addition, there were disagreements about a good price to settle on between producers, and some of the relationships turned bitter. They also indicated that these differences helped explain why there was not a better bailout. It was made clear to me how upset some people still were. Multiple interviewees indicated that it disrupted a number of livelihoods, created wounds, ruined relationships, and led to misconceptions of the

industry. Members of the Tobacco Marketing Board said that splits within the board had affected their ability to negotiate effectively. A previous member told me that nine of eleven members were for the buyout, while two thought the industry could and should continue. This difference may have led to the removal of one of the two dissenters. One farmer said that those who wanted to grow “no matter what” were the reason for such a low price, while another farmer claimed some tobacco producers gave up too easily. This mix of perspectives may be another reason why there were such small effects on voting behaviour: even if the TTP was a salient cue for voters, whether it was a positive or negative cue varied from producer to producer.

The interviews highlighted two key points about responsibility allocation. The first is that there were more important figures than simply the Conservative government and the tobacco producers. Responsibility was blurred between the provincial and federal governments, the Tobacco Marketing Board, and other actors. This fits with the retrospective voting literature, which argues that unclear responsibility makes voting a less reliable measure of backlash. This seems to apply to agricultural policy in Canada. Secondly, there were many disagreements between farmers on the manner of the buyout and the result. As one farmer put it “you know, see five farmers get ten different opinions.” Disagreements between farmers may help explain why there is little effect in the DID models. Yet, a decade and a half later, it is still an important topic, and one that is salient in the political decisions that tobacco producers are making, even if it did not have the same impact on all farmers.

Additionally, the interviews indicated that there were other political responses to the TTP beyond voting. For example, while the local settler tobacco market languished in the 1990s and early 2000s, the perception was that the Indigenous tobacco market did well. Selling untaxed cigarettes meant they cost less for consumers and were more affordable on a foreign market than

cigarettes bought through the government quota. While Indigenous tobacco production was simply viewed as a fact by farmers rather than negatively or positively, there was some discussion about how the continued non-taxation of their cigarettes was a failure of government action, and that lack of regulation was regularly brought up. A tobacco farmer said, “So that was another thorn that was there to be looked after, but the government, in their laziness and very little wisdom, would not look after trying to control [the Indigenous cigarette industry].” Some tobacco producers were said to be selling under the table to Indigenous distributors and giving tobacco to Indigenous producers was a part of the protest methods used by the tobacco farmers in campaigning for the buyout, in addition to other protests. Tobacco farmers gave “thousands of bales” to Six Nations in protest, “amounting to millions of dollars in lost tax revenue for the government” (Tobacco Farmers Ramp Up Drive, The Canadian Press, 2008). Some producers hinted that the reason the buyout was so poorly done was because other producers had already transitioned to selling under the table to Indigenous cigarette companies rather than through the Marketing Board, which was the only legal method of selling. This trend has appeared to continue. One interviewee explained, “I think that what's happened, though since the buyout - research it because a lot of stuff's gone underground. Like, there's more illegal stuff and there's, you know, a big tobacco industry and a big tobacco company, you know, on Six Nations and so I'll let you put the pieces together.”

There were other options for farmers as well. Accepting the buyout meant that farmers were not supposed to grow tobacco again because the money was meant to help farmers transition into other crops. Not only did some producers sell under the table, but there was also a loophole that allowed others to continue selling. The land was still good for tobacco, and it was possible to arrange for *someone else* use the land and equipment to continue to grow. This

continuation of selling was reported on in the media after the fact (*Federal Tobacco Transition Program lacked safeguards to prevent abuse: Auditor General*, National Post, 2011), but it was explained to me as a part of the response to getting only 60% of the expected quota price. An interviewee said that “And so you had people who had [taken the buyout] saying we're gonna wait for the provincial government [to add funds to the buyout] and I do not feel comfortable [continuing producing] because I took that 60%, I will not. I will not do tobacco again. And then we saw others that said hey, Ontario didn't come to the table, we're going to continue [growing].”

The tobacco farmers also protested during the lead up to the TTP, via means such as demonstrations and destroying crops. It was reported in newspapers that community organisers “asked [farmers] to toss a bale of tobacco in the garbage each day after Jan. 31 unless they get the funding they seek” (Tobacco Farmers Ramp Up Drive, *The Canadian Press*, 2008). Several protests at and in Diane Finley's office were also reported in the news (Tobacco farmers barge into office of Tory MP in Simcoe, Ont., *The Canadian Press*, 2008). In short, there were responses other than voting from farmers, particularly from those who looked to other avenues when the tobacco industry started to flag before the buyout in the early 2000s. These other avenues may explain why there was not a stronger voter response to the TTP, as there were other ways to protest.

Finally, the Conservative Party did not use the TTP much in their campaigning. MP Karen Vecchio¹¹ said that “there was a lot of other things that were happening at the same time, [the] tobacco buyout, I would say wasn't in the top ten at all.” She further clarified that despite

¹¹ Karen Vecchio is MP for Elgin-Middlesex-London from 2015 to the time of writing. She also worked on the 2008 Campaign of Joe Preston (MP for Elgin-Middlesex-London from 2004 to 2015), as well as an assistant in the Conservative Government in 2008.

farmers being a “huge” part of the constituency, other agrobusiness issues were more important during the 2008 election, such as the “ethanol content. That was a huge part of the 2008 campaign, was the ethanol content.” This supports the finding in Stokes (2016) and Walker, Stephenson, and Baxter (2018), who noted that without party campaigning on issues, they can fail to become salient or partisan cues for voters. The TTP had little effect on voting, and the interviews show that not only was this because of the difficulty of attributing responsibility for the buyout, but also because it was not picked up in campaigns, and farmers had other ways to protest.

Interviews with farmers from the control regions were conducted virtually in August 2022. These were interviews with dairy and crop farmers from Eastern Ontario. These farmers generally did not know much about the TTP but were able to speak to the relationship between different kinds of producers, and how a quota buyout would impact their voting. These interviews established several main points, the most important being that the TTP was not a salient issue in the control regions, therefore validating the SUTVA assumption.

The interviewees explained that there is some but not much community overlap between the different kinds of producers. They were less sure of the details of the TTP than those in the treatment regions. Even though they seemed to have positive associations with the tobacco industry, it was not something they were familiar with. “I’ll be honest with you, I don’t really know anything about that,” said one of the farmers in Northumberland when I mentioned that I was looking into the tobacco quota buyout from 2008. Another farmer said, “Anything I heard would have been in - probably what I read, and it would have been in the agricultural media, the newspapers... I didn’t pay a lot of attention.” While the relationship between industries may be amicable, farmers do not necessarily organize around each other. It was explained to me that, “I

think you know everybody kind of wishes their brothers in the industry the best of luck and just go for it.” Another farmer explained it as “I don't expect the beef producers are lobbying on behalf of, you know, the dairy and the feather business.¹²” The discussions confirmed that while the news media may have increased the visibility of issue in the control regions, it did not make it a politically salient issue or voting cue.

Finally, they agreed that poorly received agricultural policy, specifically quota buyouts, would impact the way that they voted. Even if the TTP or tobacco industry was not a politically salient issue, other farmers agreed that there would be a political response to a flagging industry. Quota buyouts represent a particularly huge change for an agricultural industry. The farmers who used quotas said that they functioned as a sort of “retirement plan” for producers. They plan to sell off the quota in order to move from farming. Quotas also mitigate the risk in farming compared to contracts, as they assure that a crop yield of a certain amount will be sold in any given year. For these two reasons, they explained, it would be a hard hit to remove a quota, even if the industry was flagging. An interviewee explained that it would cause a lot of grief, “You know, in that five to ten years away from retirement or something they’re thinking, oh my God, there goes all my equity. And it's gone.” This matches with the treatment group interviews, where interviewees explained that the buyout impacted them to the point it was something they considered while voting, though not necessarily something that would change how they voted.

Speaking with producers who did not work in tobacco illuminated several main points, the most important being that being that the TTP was not a salient issue in the control regions. They also helped clarify the kind of relationships existing between different types of farmers.

¹² “Feather business” refers to poultry and egg farmers as a collective.

They confirmed the assumption that the control regions in eastern Ontario were not impacted by any substantial spillover effects.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, a limited electoral backlash was observed in response to the Tobacco Transition Program. Fewer tobacco farmers and producers appear to have voted for the Conservative Party after the implementation of the TTP, but defections were limited. A combination of factors may explain why the electoral backlash was not bigger: the lack of clear responsibility for the buyout, other political responses beyond voting, and a Conservative bias may all have served to limit Conservative losses.

The literature on the attribution of responsibility has examined the quagmire of healthcare provision in Canada, but agriculture also provides an opportunity to look at how voters respond to policies that involve multiple levels of government. It seems that when responsibility is unclear, it is harder for voters to hold actors accountable for unpopular policies. The interviews helped to illuminate the weak effects observed in the quantitative analyses by revealing why unhappiness with the TTP was not registered in the ballot box. Rather, more complicated dynamics between individuals and different levels of government were highlighted. In the case of the TTP it seems that the misattribution of responsibility was the key factor limiting the potential electoral backlash. A large number of actors contributed to a lack of clarity and voters blamed different levels of government and organizations as a result. This study found that agriculture, being an area of shared governmental jurisdiction, was confusing to voters even when it affected economic situations which traditionally elicit electoral punishment. This study thus supports previous studies that have shown voters having trouble attributing blame between different levels of government (Hobolt, Tilley, Banducci, 2013; Cutler, 2008; Cutler, 2004).

However, the case of the TTP adds to this literature by highlighting the role of *local* actors in federal policy who compounded the lack of clarity. It also supports previous studies indicating that campaign strategy can help keep issues from becoming partisan (Stokes, 2016; Walker, Stephenson, Baxter, 2018).

Natural experiments, of course, have limits. These include the fact that the treatment is not randomly assigned as in a laboratory setting. The researcher has no control over who gets treated. Treatment therefore has to be convincingly “as if” randomly assigned. This means I am assuming farmers in the treatment regions are not inherently different from other farmers, and that there are no spillover effects. Therefore, there is potential for unobserved confounders to affect my results. Although the treatment and control groups had to be balanced post-treatment using matching, it is possible that I did not balance on all potential confounders. While robustness checks have indicated that these limitations are unlikely to have impacted the results, they cannot be ruled out. Finally, experiments have less external validity, leading to limited generalizability. In this case, external validity is not threatened by artificiality, but by the possibility that this particular natural experiment may not be representative of other situations of rural backlash. However, natural experiments also have strengths. By mimicking an experiment, they should enhance causal identification. They are also useful in identifying mechanisms, since real life events provide opportunities for qualitative research, as this study has shown. Because it allowed me to dig into this particular case in great detail, I was able to detect the confusion regarding responsibility for the TTP, as well as the importance of local actors. Finally, because it is a “real” situation, it is stronger than traditional experiments where artificiality limits the generalizability.

There are a number of ways to extend this research. It would be beneficial to analyze electoral responses to an unpopular provincial program. In the case of the tobacco industry, for example, the response of Quebec tobacco regions to the province's buyout program could be compared to their Ontario counterparts' response to the federal buyout. Or, as Canada has both quota farmers and non-quota farmers, it could be interesting to examine responses to other buyouts to get a better sense of whether different kinds of agriculture differ in their salience to voters based on how impactful quotas are. Additionally, this case may be studied from the lens of different additional literatures. First, through the lens of issue voting, to see how different kinds of agricultural policies function as issues for individual voters. Secondly, it will be interesting to see how this electoral behaviour relates to the literature on farmer protest movements in Canada. Further, future research should have a greater focus on interactions between politicians and farmers. Specifically, the research should focus on the campaign priorities of politicians in rural areas, as these priorities illustrate which cues politicians think motivate farmers. Understanding this dynamic would allow for a clearer delineation between prospective and retrospective voting behaviour, as it would be possible to analyse if voters are looking forward by responding to party platforms or looking backward by responding to past policy.

Potentially most importantly, studies of rural politics, like studies of responsibility attribution, would do well to focus on the interplay between local, provincial, and federal politics. Regional policies have not been found to have an impact on federal voting behaviour (Anderson 2005; Bélanger and Gélinau 2005). Accordingly, it may be important for both fields to study how national policies impact local and regional political behaviour in cases where responsibility is blurred. Additionally, the ways in which nongovernmental community groups (such as the tobacco marketing board) interact and negotiate with larger government structures

may be a key mechanism through which rural consciousness forms and is expressed within a broader regional or federal context. Local players who work with larger governmental structures may be key to mobilizing rural consciousness into political action beyond electoral behaviour, which could be another interesting area for future research. While the large number of actors and complicated relationships make observing the role of rural consciousness in electoral behaviour difficult, exploring a variety of political responses may be fruitful.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview Prompts

Questions asked to farmers

- What was the lead up to the announcement of the TTP like? Was there lobbying or political organization around the TTP? I know that before its announcement the farmers union went to the federal government to ask for a specific change in the quota, do you know anything about this?
- What were the responses that you had to the announcement of the TTP? Do you remember if your organization had an official response? Do you remember what the general response was to the TTP? Were there any specific responses from individuals that you remember? Was there an emotional response? Was there a part of the program that got the most attention from farmers?
- Was there a political response to the TTP? Do you remember if people were mobilizing, or talking about how they were going to respond to the program politically? For example, through something like voting or petitions?
- Was there an impact on farmers' finances and livelihoods? Do you think that was something considered by farmers while they were voting during the election? Do you know if there was any organizing to encourage members of unions and other groups to vote a specific way?
- Is there anything I've missed touching on that you think is important to this discussion?

Questions asked to reporters, politicians, and community leaders

- How important are farmers in this constituency? Were they a priority when you were campaigning?
- What do you remember about the response to the program from people in this area? What kind of responses did you see from tobacco farmers? Was the response about a specific part of the program?
- Do you think the program had an impact on the way that people were voting?
- Did it impact the way you campaigned? Was it something you considered while planning your campaign? For example: Did it impact the finances of your constituents, and was that something you were considering while campaigning?
- Do you think the TTP impacted the election that year? Did the program help or hurt your chances? What about the chances of other candidates?

Appendix 2. Federal Controls

I ran models with a control group sourced from the entire country rather than Ontario only. While other control regions in other provinces are even less susceptible to spillover effects, with other things like western alienation, they are more susceptible to confounders. As such, the main results presented in the thesis were focused on controls limited to the province of Ontario, where the Tobacco Belt is.

The models presented use Mahalanobis distance to match on agricultural workers, unemployment, and population. There are N=2587 matched observations in each model.

Table 7. Effect of TTP, Matching Models, country-wide controls

| Dependent Variable | ATT | Standard Error |
|-------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Conservative Vote Share | -0.138 | 0.003 |
| Turnout | -0.004 | 0.002 |
| Opposition Electorate Share | 0.074 | 0.002 |
| Conservative Electorate Share | -0.079 | 0.002 |

The results show Conservative vote share was 13.8 percentage points lower, turnout was 0.4 percentage points lower, an increase for the opposition share of the electorate by 7.4 percentage points, and lower Conservative share of the electorate by 7.9 percentage points. The results for turnout are not statistically significant.

Appendix 3. Propensity Score Models

This model uses propensity scores to match treatment to controls, rather than Mahalanobis distance. It also matches on percentage of population in agriculture work, unemployment, and population. It uses the Ontario controls and there are 371 observations in each model.

Table 8. Effect of TTP, Propensity Score Models

| Dependent Variable | ATT | Standard Error |
|-------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Conservative Vote Share | -0.012 | 0.008 |
| Turnout | 0.000 | 0.007 |
| Opposition Electorate Share | 0.005 | 0.006 |
| Conservative Electorate Share | -0.005 | 0.006 |

The results for each model are null, indicating the TTP had no effect on Conservative vote share, turnout, opposition electorate share, or Conservative electorate share.

Appendix 4. Haldimand Norfolk Complete Models

The focus on Norfolk led me to specifically look at Haldimand Norfolk in my models to see if there was an increased effect size, trying to measure if it was a more salient issue in some areas of the Tobacco Belt than other areas. OLS provides an indication of the effect that the treatment, or implementation of the TTP had on voters in the areas with tobacco farms. However, other issues like unemployment rates might lead to a similar electoral backlash. As such, for a robustness check, the second model controls for multiple covariates that impact economic voting, such as unemployment rate, the percentage of agriculture workers, and population. The third model takes matches based on those covariates using Mahalanobis distance, for an even more robust model.

| Table 9. Effect of TTP on Conservative Vote Share in Haldimand Norfolk | | |
|---|------------|-----------------------|
| Model | ATT | Standard Error |
| OLS | -0.080 | 0.022 |
| OLS + Controls | -0.078 | 0.020 |
| Matching | -0.048 | 0.009 |

Note: The matching is done by Mahalanobis distance on the unemployment level, percentage of agricultural workers, population, and percentage of the riding that is white. There are 708 observations for each model, with 342 matched.

The models return the Average Treatment effect on the Treated (ATT). The ATT measures the impact on the treated group in comparison to the control group. The OLS model for the proportion of Conservative votes indicates that the program resulted in a -4.8 percentage point lowering in the vote share for the Conservative Party in the 2008 election. This confirms the hypothesis that the TTP had a negative effect on the Conservative Party’s vote share in Haldimand-Norfolk. The second OLS model controls for unemployment, percentage agricultural workers, and population. The model with the covariates notes was -7.8 percentage points lower in Conservative vote share for the treatment group after the implementation of the TTP. The third

model indicates that the TTP caused a -8 percentage point lowering in vote share. Overall, this indicates that the TTP did cause a decrease in vote share for the Conservative Party in the 2008 election.

Table 10. Effect of TTP on Voter Turnout in the Tobacco Belt

| Model | ATT | Standard Error |
|------------------|--------|----------------|
| OLS | 0.005 | 0.020 |
| OLS + Covariates | 0.006 | 0.019 |
| Matching | -0.015 | 0.008 |

Note: The matching is done by Mahalanobis distance on the unemployment level, percentage of agricultural workers, population, and percentage of the riding that is white. There are 708 observations for each model, with 342 matched.

The models for the voter turnout indicate that there may be a small effect of the TTP on voter turnout. However, the wide standard errors on the models indicate null results.

Table 11. Effect of TTP on the Opposition share of the Electorate

| Model | ATT | Standard Error |
|------------------|-------|----------------|
| OLS | 0.044 | 0.016 |
| OLS + Covariates | 0.043 | 0.015 |
| Matching | 0.017 | 0.006 |

Note: The matching is done by Mahalanobis distance on the unemployment level, percentage of agricultural workers, population, and percentage of the riding that is white. There are 708 observations for each model, with 342 matched.

The models for the electorate indicate a slight increase in vote share for the opposition share of the electorate. The OLS model indicates that opposition support within the electorate was 4.4 percentage points higher. Similarly, the OLS model that controls for unemployment, population, and percentage agricultural workers also indicates higher support of the electorate for parties other than the Conservatives by 4.3 percentage points. The matching model indicates 1.7 percentage points higher support in the electorate for other parties. There may be an increase for opposition parties caused by the implementation of the TTP.

Table 12. Effect of TTP on the Conservative share of the Electorate

| Model | ATT | Standard Error |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| OLS | -0.039 | 0.016 |
| OLS + Covariates | -0.038 | 0.016 |
| Matching | -0.033 | 0.007 |

Note: The matching is done by Mahalanobis distance on the unemployment level, percentage of agricultural workers, population, and percentage of the riding that is white. There are 708 observations for each model, with 342 matched.

The OLS model indicates that there was -3.9 percentage point lower opposition support within the electorate. Similarly, the OLS model that controls for unemployment, population, and percentage agricultural workers also indicates the electorate's support for the Conservative Party was lower by -3.8 percentage points. Finally, the matching model results indicate electorate support for the Conservatives was -3.3 percentage points lower. What is interesting is that the ATT on the Conservative share is almost double that on the opposition share, which means that, when we select on pre-treatment covariates, voters responded both by voting for other parties, and by not voting in the election.