PART I

Theoretical approaches to the study of voter behavior

1
DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR[1]

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Normatively, democracy is a system of institutions, procedures and conventions. In practice, however, democracy is nothing without the citizens who provide it with form and substance. At democracy's core are the beliefs, behavior and actions of citizens who make up the actual or potential democratic polity. As Angus Campbell and his colleagues put it in the seminal *The American Voter* study, "our approach is in the main dependent on the point of view of the actor" (Campbell et al. 1960: 27). Placing the citizen at the core of our understanding of democracy therefore provides a different perspective on how democracy operates, how it is changing, and perhaps most important of all, how it may change in the future. The purpose of this chapter is to outline how recent advances in the study of electoral behavior are altering democratic theory.

The backdrop to understanding the role that electoral behavior plays in shaping democratic theory is the rapid post-war advances in social science methodology. These advances have made it possible to explore, among other things: what citizens understand about democracy and what their expectations of it are; how citizens behave within a democracy and the political consequences of their behaviors; and what political actions citizens might take under certain hypothetical conditions. The rise of public opinion surveys in the 1950s and 1960s provided an early and strong empirical base for analyzing these changes. Based on more than half a century of opinion research, we know an immense amount about how citizens think and behave politically.

In contrast to much recent research, many of the early scholars of political behavior were as interested in the normative implications of their work as they were in its substantive findings. Bernard Berelson's famous 1952 *Public Opinion Quarterly* article first gave voice to this approach by arguing that "opinion research can help a democracy to know itself, evaluate its achievements, and bring its practices more nearly in accord with its own fundamental ideals" (Berelson 1952: 313).[2] Another earlier pioneer of this approach was V. O. Key, who was particularly concerned about the role of public opinion in constraining political elites, and about elite responsiveness to citizen demands (Key 1966).

Despite this early and vigorous attempt to integrate theory with empirical research, it is fair to say that democratic theory, with some notable exceptions, has signally failed to keep pace with advances in electoral behavior.[3] Rather than post-war advances in methodology heralding a new collaboration between theorists and behaviorists, both sides have largely followed independent intellectual paths. The first section of this chapter examines how we define democracy as it relates to electoral behavior, while the second section focuses on the consequences of electoral system design for behavior and theory. The third section examines four fields of electoral behavior which have specific implications for democratic theory, while the conclusion highlights the benefits of a closer relationship between behavioral and normative approaches to democracy.

Defining democracy

Before we can evaluate how advances in electoral behavior affect democratic theory, we need to arrive at an understanding of what is meant by democracy, and what constitutes its main components. Such an exercise has obviously occupied many academic studies and a review of the relevant literature is beyond the scope of this chapter. Briefly, we can identify two general approaches.

The first approach is to see democracy in terms of institutions and procedures. One of the earliest expressions was Schumpeter's (1976 [1942]) definition of democracy as a competitive struggle for the popular vote. This view was further developed by Robert Dahl (1971), who saw democracy as involving contestation or competition on the one hand, and participation or inclusion on the other. Later studies have focused on outcomes, such as freedom and liberty, which can be defined in terms of the legal protections that citizens rely on (for reviews, see Diamond 1999; Ringen 2009).[4] Whatever the focus, electoral behavior has relatively little role to play in this approach since it sees democracy as consisting of a framework of rules, rather than as a pattern of behavior.

A second approach has viewed democracy in terms of the social benefits that it can deliver, such as providing access to welfare and ensuring a basic standard of living. This view that democracy acts as a social safety net has been especially popular in low-income societies; there it is argued that political rights are meaningless in the absence of clearly demarcated social rights (see, for example, Przeworski 1985). Moreover, following Sen's (1999) argument that democracy is more likely to increase living standards compared to other systems – since governments will have an electoral incentive to ensure fewer of its citizens remain in poverty – political and economic freedoms are often bracketed together. In this approach, too, behavior is seen to be of secondary importance to democracy when compared to social and economic performance.

One response to these varying definitions of democracy, and the implication that citizen opinions and behaviors are of secondary importance, has been to ask citizens themselves what they understand by the concept of democracy (Dalton, Shin and Jou 2007). This research has found that the public's understanding of democracy is driven as much by political history as by a society's economic development. Another response has been to use large-scale comparative surveys to measure various aspects of democracy (see Elkins 2000; Munck and Verkuilen 2002). Ferrín and Kriesi (2015), for example, show that Europeans mostly associate democracy with the rule of law and with free and fair elections. However, much of this research has been concerned with methodology rather than conceptualization. This has resulted in a poor fit between the normative and empirical aspects of democracy, and makes it difficult to arrive at agreed measures of democratic performance.

The approach taken by these studies is to define liberal democracy in terms of four key concepts which relate directly to electoral institutions; all four also overlap to a greater or lesser degree. First, *accountability* ensures that citizens can use regular elections to hold governments responsible for their performance while in office. Following O'Donnell (1998), vertical accountability is often distinguished from horizontal accountability. The former refers to the ability to hold elected representatives publicly accountable for their decisions while in office (Schedler 1999; Schmitter and Karl 1991), while the latter refers to the ability of government agencies to sanction one another for breaches of law or procedure. The ability of citizens in this way to steer governments toward policies they prefer has been a preoccupation of a large literature on dynamic representation (sometimes referred to as "thermostatic governance").[5]

The second aspect of democracy is *responsible government*, which means that governments are appointed by a popularly elected legislature, remain answerable to them and can be removed from office by them. This system had its roots in the nineteenth-century Westminster system of government. In the mid-twentieth century, the concept of responsible government was revised to take into account a third aspect of democracy: *political parties*. In this approach, political parties are identified as the central agents of mass mobilization and the mechanism through which the system of responsible government operates (American Political Science Association 1950). In turn, responsible party government exists to ensure that the system performs to the satisfaction of its citizens; thus *system performance* is the fourth aspect of democracy focused on in this chapter. Before turning to how advances in electoral behavior have revised these four key concepts of democracy, the next section examines the key role of the electoral system and its impact on political behavior.

Electoral systems and democracy

What citizens think about democracy is agreed to be a key driver of the health of a democracy. If citizens are generally supportive of democracy, then it should thrive; if citizens are equivocal, then democracy may be under threat, particularly during periods of existential crisis. A large literature has examined public opinion during the transition from authoritarianism to democracy – what is called the process of democratic consolidation (see, for example, Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Diamond 1999). Once citizens come to hold a widespread view that democracy is what Linz and Stepan (1996: 5) characterize as "the only game in town," then it can be properly said to have consolidated. But what constitutes widespread public support for democracy? And what are its mainsprings and how does public support vary according to differing institutional arrangements?

While scholars disagree about many aspects of public support for democracy, there is broad agreement that popular support for democracy is a highly complex phenomenon which is in a constant state of change (Klingemann 1999). This is especially the case in new democracies, which frequently retain elements of authoritarianism and where the norms, values and practices of democracy are often unfamiliar to many citizens. Measuring public support for democracy is therefore complex, and has to take into account different histories, cultures and institutional settings. Much of this complexity can be reduced to the distinction between whether the electoral system is majoritarian or proportional in its design. This is a distinction that was first highlighted by Lijphart (1999), who showed that it had particular consequences for the public's views of democracy.

In the majoritarian model of government, the goal of the political system is to satisfy the demands of the majority of the electorate, and the selection of a government becomes the first priority of the electoral system. The majority controls the government through two mechanisms. The first is by providing the government with a mandate, so that they have the popularly-derived authority to implement the legislative program on which they won the election. The second mechanism is via accountability, so that political elites are held accountable by citizens for their actions while in office. These mechanisms have been criticized by electoral behavior scholars as unrealistic in terms of how party policies guide voters' choices, and because winning parties rarely secure support from a majority of the electorate (see Thomassen 1994, 2014).[6]

In contrast to the majoritarian model, a proportional model of government is based on the assumption that elections produce elected representatives who reflect as closely as possible the characteristics of the electorate. Since it is rare under such a system for one party to achieve a governing majority, it is almost always the case that two or more parties must come together to form a governing coalition. An inevitable consequence of coalition government is that clarity of responsibility becomes blurred since it is never clear which party has been responsible for government policy (Aarts and Thomassen 2008). The ability of citizens to deliver an electoral reward or punishment for government performance is therefore weakened.

How do these two models of government shape the public's view of democracy? This question has generated considerable research. In general, proportional or consensual models of government seem to work more efficiently than majoritarian models, at least from the electorate's perspective. Powell (2000) argues that if elections are seen as a mechanism for linking citizen preferences with government outcomes, then the proportional model is more effective. Lijphart (1999) comes to similar conclusions, and he finds that the public's satisfaction with their democracy is around 17 percentage points higher in proportional systems compared to majoritarian ones (see also Klingemann 1999, but cf. Aarts and Thomassen 2008).

Along with the public's views of democracy, voting rules also have a wide range of consequences for electoral behavior. However, the interactions are complex and often intertwined with a country's history and culture (for reviews, see Klingemann 1999; Norris 2004). In general, majoritarian systems have higher thresholds for election, which encourages political parties to aggregate their support and adopt a "catch-all" strategy in seeking votes. In proportional systems, the threshold for election is usually lower, which produces a larger number of parties that are then encouraged to pursue a narrower base of support around a more particularistic range of issues. This, in turn, has consequences for how parties mobilize opinion, and for partisanship, which is generally weaker in countries with multiple parties. This can lead to higher levels of electoral volatility (see Heath, this volume; Bowler, this volume).

Electoral behavior and democracy

While the framework of democratic theory is ever changing, this chapter argues that our understanding of citizens' behavior and attitudes has advanced at a much greater pace. The period that has elapsed since the start of the quantitative revolution in the study of electoral behavior in the 1950s has resulted in numerous insights, and the last two decades have seen an unprecedented increase in the breadth and depth of such studies. Space prevents a detailed consideration of this research, but four areas are outlined here where developments have already fundamentally revised current theoretical approaches to democracy, or are likely to in the future. For each of these four areas, an outline of the findings of recent studies is provided, together with an evaluation of how and in what ways they influence democratic theory.

Political competency

One of the assumptions of liberal democratic theory is the existence of a competent electorate which is capable of making informed choices. Without a competent electorate, the public's ability to use elections to hold governments accountable for their performance while in office will be limited. This, in turn, will undermine the core assumptions of a liberal democracy. As Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1966: 308) put it half a century ago:

> The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs … to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are.

This optimistic view of the public's political competency has been challenged by the evidence. Ever since opinion surveys began to collect information on political knowledge in the 1940s, a consistent finding has been that most citizens are anything but knowledgeable about politics (for a review, see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Most citizens know little about politics and possess minimal factual information about the operation of the political system. Moreover, these persistently low levels of political knowledge have been impervious to advances in civic education, the huge post-war expansion of tertiary education and an increasingly sophisticated mass media.

One theoretical response to the lack of competency among the mass public is democratic elitism. The most famous advocate of this theory, Joseph Schumpeter (1976 [1942]), argued that democratic electorates were too ill-informed and superficial to identify the common good and that, as a result, citizens should be restricted to a single, periodic choice between competing elites. This view was supported by later empirical research by Herbert McCloskey (1964: 374), who argued that political elites "serve as the major repositories of the public conscience and as carriers of the Creed." In short, the role of citizens should be restricted to voting for members of competing political elites and they should have no role in the complexities of policy making.

In parallel with the research on political knowledge, a large literature has examined the level of political sophistication within the electorate. While much of the literature is discordant and has focused on different ways of measuring the concept of sophistication (see, for example, Luskin 1990), there is a dominant view that, while citizens may possess low levels of political knowledge, they are nevertheless able to reach well-informed judgments about leaders and issue positions based on limited information. Key (1966: 7) put it succinctly when he commented that "voters are not fools." In this view, then, citizens can still make balanced decisions on the basis of minimal information (see Bølstad in this volume; Erikson in this volume).

Serving to increase political competency among the public is the rise of educational attainments across almost all of the advanced democracies (Highton 2009). In addition to better cognitive skills, studies have also shown that election campaigns provide an important source of political information and learning for voters (Arceneaux 2006; Erikson and Wlezien 2012), with campaigns providing particularly useful information on economic matters. Leaders' debates conducted during campaigns are also an important source of information, particularly if the debate is held earlier in the campaign and if one or more of the leaders are unfamiliar to voters (Benoit and Hansen 2006).

The internet

Arguably the internet represents the greatest change to the political systems of the advanced societies since democratization. Traditional accounts of political communication show that the advent of television fundamentally changed the nature of politics in the 1960s and 1970s. It is now becoming clear that the internet will reshape the operation of the modern political system in ways which are at least as profound as television half a century earlier. More importantly, the interactivity of the internet has major consequences for democratic theory and will fundamentally alter how parties and voters view politics (for reviews, see Bimber 2003; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Farrell 2012). Three major political implications of the internet are examined here: democratic competency; e-voting; and e-participation.

In principle, the internet should deliver higher democratic competency by providing greater access to political information; this is reflected in the transition from a low-choice media environment to a high-choice one. For most of the post-war period, there were relatively few choices in whatever media sources citizens preferred, whether it was newspapers, radio or TV. The net effect was that citizens were exposed to low but constant levels of political information, which could not be ignored save for avoiding the media altogether (Prior 2007). The effect of this exposure was a low but consistent level of political involvement, which provided a degree of stability.

The rise of the internet has disrupted this decades-long stable relationship between voters and parties. Citizens now have unprecedented choice in the political information that they choose to access: at one extreme, citizens may choose to access no information; at another extreme, they can access highly detailed information for 24 hours a day. In many cases, the information that they choose to access reinforces rather than challenges their views. The interactivity, which is integral to the internet, means that citizens can increasingly have their views heard, rather than simply being passive recipients of information. Since internet use is disproportionately concentrated among the young, it provides a unique opportunity to convey political information to a group whose knowledge is low. A range of studies have confirmed that the internet is indeed having a significant impact on the levels of political information and democratic competency among the young (Gibson and McAllister 2015a; Gronlund 2007).

E-voting or digital democracy is a second area in which the internet can change democratic politics. With the ability to consult citizens about legislative changes interactively, the internet could in principle undermine the need for representative democracy altogether. The traditional objection to e-voting, the lack of internet security, is rapidly being solved by technological change (Lindner, Aichholzer and Hennen 2016). Studies have, however, focused less on giving citizens a direct say in decision-making through the internet and more on the development of online communications. This often occurs through the creation of virtual public spaces where citizens can exchange ideas and preferences, occasionally with the involvement of elected representatives (Coleman and Shane 2012).

Third, the internet facilitates interactive e-participation, to a degree that is unparalleled in modern times – almost akin to a continuous town hall meeting in the nineteenth century. Political parties have been slow to exploit this new opportunity for mobilization and conversion. Initial studies suggested that the major parties dominated the area, with their ability to design sophisticated multifunctional websites that delivered more information and greater opportunities for participation and financial donations (Schweitzer 2008). More recent research has shown that minor parties, such as those stressing the environment, have become highly effective in promoting e-participation, reflecting the medium's low entry costs (Gibson and McAllister 2015b).

Globalization

Vertical accountability in democracies depends on elections that are free, fair and competitive. Citizens then make judgments about the performance of governments while in office and, on that basis, can choose to either reward or punish them. But what if government performance has been shaped by factors that are outside the government's control? Globalization presents just such a challenge for democracy, since a country's economic performance may have been influenced by international events and policies, perhaps thousands of miles away, which are not under the control of the national government.

In practice, of course, a government can always shape policy outcomes to some degree. For example, even during the 2007–08 global financial crisis a government could be judged on its policy responses to the crisis, even though the crisis itself originated internationally. But when decision-making transcends the nation-state, it raises questions about how and under what circumstances transnational institutions can be held accountable to the people whose lives they affect (Sperling 2009: 8). Should a European government be punished for poor economic performance when the economic crisis that caused it began in the United States? Such questions raise fundamental issues for our ideas of accountability which are at the core of liberal democracy theory.

One case of democratic accountability within a global context is economic voting. A large literature has demonstrated that voters make judgments at elections about the economic performance of incumbent governments (for reviews see Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). Such judgments can be made retrospectively or prospectively, and can be about citizens' own household economies ("egocentric") or about the nation's economy as a whole ("sociotropic"). However, if citizens do not see their national government as instrumental in shaping economic performance ("attribution"), and instead see international and/or market forces as being the important determinants, then accountability through the mechanism of an election cannot take place.

Studies suggest that globalization does indeed influence how voters approach accountability. Hellwig and Samuels (2007: 283; see also Kayser 2007) analyzed elections from 75 countries over 27 years to show that "exposure to the world economy weakens connections between economic performance and support for political incumbents." Other work has indicated that parties may adapt their positions in response to changing economic conditions. In particular, political incumbents are more likely to move toward the positions of their political opponents, thus blurring accountability and avoiding potential blame for a poorly performing economy (Hellwig 2011, 2016). The net effect is that voters have reduced information about who to blame or reward for economic performance.

A second example in which international changes are affecting traditional views of democratic accountability is the growth of governance beyond the nation-state, what is variously termed "transnational" or "supranational" governance. An example of such a change is the European Union, which exercises an increasing amount of power among its members over what were once exclusively domestic issues.[7] Such advances leave a "democratic accountability deficit" which is difficult to fill; remedial measures include greater openness and transparency in decision-making; clearer identification of decision-makers so that they can be held to account; and regular EU elections (Curtin, Mair and Papadopoulos 2010). However, even in the case of elections, they rarely act as sanctions since votes against the incumbent government are often difficult for political leaders to interpret (Hobolt, Spoon and Tilley 2009).

Party decline

Political parties act as a crucial linkage between citizens and policy outputs, through their ability to organize what Neumann (1956: 397) has called "the chaotic public will." In this view, parties are central to the model of responsible party government first articulated by the American Political Science Association's Committee on Political Parties in 1950. The apparent decline of political parties appears to undermine this ability to ensure accountability through elections. Mair (2005: 7) has noted the failure of parties "to engage ordinary citizens" and as evidence to support his case highlights declining electoral turnout, the rise of voter volatility, falling levels of party identification and the dramatic decline in party membership. Indeed, party membership is now so low in many countries that parties "have all but abandoned any pretensions to being mass organizations" (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012: 42).[8]

All of these trends – which are largely uncontested in the literature – would suggest that, at the very least, political parties are experiencing significant change, with major implications for the operation of liberal democracy (for a review, see Webb 2005). One consequence is a weakening link between the citizen and the government, with elections becoming less effective as a mechanism for holding governments to account. If this link were to significantly weaken, it would undermine the whole system of responsible party government.

Various objections have been made against the decline of parties thesis (for a review, see Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011). One objection is that, while the long-term trends show decline, the patterns are more modest than many have suggested. For example, while voter turnout has declined, it is often from a relatively high base, and in some countries has now begun to increase (Franklin 2004). A second objection is that parties have, in fact, been in decline in terms of their membership since the "golden age" of the mass party, which was first popularized by Duverger (1964). Parties may therefore be returning to a "steady state" level of mass membership following an abnormal heyday.

While overstating the trends is one argument against the decline of parties thesis, more important is the view that parties have begun to adapt to these changes (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister 2011: Chapter 9; Mair 2003). In response to an existential electoral threat, many parties have radically altered their policy appeals. This was the route the British Labour Party took in the early 1990s when it was rebranded as "New Labour" under the leadership of Tony Blair. The party ditched its outmoded class appeal and instead stressed equality of opportunity, thus skillfully retaining Labour's traditional working class supporters while recruiting disaffected Conservative voters. There are numerous other examples around the world of this form of party adaptation.

A second form of party adaption has been organizational. One approach has been to democratize the selection of the party leader, as has occurred, for example, in the British Labour Party. Giving the mass membership a greater say in the selection of the leader has been seen as one way of trying to arrest the decline in the mass party membership. However, the risk is that the membership will select a leader who is attractive to their own (more extreme) policy positions, but not to that of the median voter. The British Labour Party membership's two-time election of the left-wing Jeremy Corbyn as its leader is a case in point.

Another party tactic has been to exploit the rise of television through the promotion of leaders with attractive visual images and sophisticated communication skills. While there is a vigorous debate about the veracity of the "personalization of politics" thesis (McAllister 2007; Karvonen 2010), there is little dispute that a popular leader can communicate a party's message more effectively than a policy statement. In turn, voters prefer to hold a personality accountable for performance rather than an abstract entity such as a political party. And not least, a popular leader can appeal to the public over the heads of their political party. Such a tactic can be particularly effective when the leader runs into resistance from their party about strategy and direction.

Finally, parties have sought to redesign political institutions – "the rules of the political game" – with the aim of excluding competitors, such as newly emerging parties which could erode the party's electoral base. This interpretation of party adaptation has been most closely associated with Katz and Mair's (1995) "cartel party" model. In this view, major parties often collude in order to change the rules to best serve their interests and to exclude potential competitors. The best example of cartel behavior by the major political parties is the allocation of state finance for political parties, with the rules typically designed to exclude new entrants.

Conclusion

With some notable exceptions, democratic theory has tended to focus on the role of institutions and procedures, rather than on patterns of political behavior. Yet, it is the attitudes and behavior of citizens that give democracy form and meaning, so understanding how these attitudes and behaviors are shaped should inform our current understanding of theory. To date, this complementarity has not taken place, and research on democratic theory and research on political behavior have largely followed their own, independent paths. This chapter has examined how advances in electoral behavior across four main areas – political competence, the internet, globalization and party decline – present challenges to our current thinking about democratic theory.

A central theme of this chapter has been that democratic theory has been slow to respond to advances in our understanding of electoral behavior. This is understandable; the formulation of a theory requires the accumulation of a robust body of evidence that largely reaches similar conclusions. When this condition is met, theory can be revised. In many areas of electoral behavior, this requirement is as yet unfulfilled; we know, for example, that citizens have low levels of political knowledge, but views are divided on whether this ultimately affects the quality of the choices that citizens make at the ballot box. Similarly, we know that most indicators of the health of political parties are in long-term decline, but we also know that parties are beginning to adapt to these changes. In short, much of the empirical evidence that might result in revisions to democratic theory is, at a minimum, contestable.

Where there is broad agreement in the electoral research, there are clear implications for democratic theory. We know, for example, that citizens are more likely to use elections to reward governments, based on sound performance, rather than to punish them. This has implications for the operation of accountability and responsible party government. We also know that citizens support greater political involvement through the internet and the opportunity to have an enhanced say in government decision-making. This has implications for theories of representation, and for democratic elitism. In these and a host of other areas of electoral research, advances in our understanding of the attitudes and behavior of citizens have major implications for democratic theory.

Above all of these debates is the relentless pace of technological change, which is rapidly changing most of the assumptions on which liberal democratic theory rests. The advent of television in the 1960s was one of the main drivers of the personalization of politics, which has arguably fundamentally changed its nature. The rise of the internet will result in political changes that are expected to be many times more profound than television. The immediacy, interconnectivity and information-sharing that the internet brings to politics have implications for all aspects of democracy, from the accountability of governments to citizen competence and political participation, to responsible party government. How institutions and actors respond to these profound changes will shape twenty-first century democratic theory.

Notes

1 I am indebted to Keith Dowding for insightful comments on an earlier draft of the chapter. Also thanks to Rachel Gibson and the other editors for their valuable comments.

2 The tools of social research have made it possible, for the first time, to determine with reasonable precision and objectivity the extent to which the practice of politics by the citizens of a democratic state conforms to the requirements and the assumptions of the theory of democratic politics (insofar as it refers to decisions by the electorate). (Berelson 1952: 314)

3 There are, of course, exceptions to this. Prominent theorists who have made extensive use of empirical material relating to electoral behavior include Fishkin (1995) and Brennan and Lomasky (1993).

4 There is also a large literature dealing with the fairness and integrity of electoral practices, which is not considered here. (See Norris in this volume for an overview.)

5 For a seminal, wide-ranging and authoritative survey of this literature, see Franklin, Soroka and Wlezien (2014).

6 A further criticism of the clarity of responsibility mechanisms is when a governing party changes its policy position after an election (Quinn 2016).
7 Other examples include the G20 of nations or the United Nations.
8 A contrary argument is that formal membership figures are not a reliable measure of party health, since they largely ignore non-members who are nevertheless supporters. See Fisher, Fieldhouse and Cutts (2014) and Gauja (2015). Declining partisanship and increased volatility are viewed as by-products of other developments by van der Brug and Franklin (in this volume).

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2

THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Vincent L. Hutchings and Hakeem J. Jefferson

Early proposed determinants of the vote choice

Why do citizens vote for one candidate rather than another? Various explanations have been offered over the roughly 70-year history of voting behavior research, but two explanations in particular have garnered the most attention and generated the most debate in the literature on voting behavior. These explanations are known as the Columbia Model and the Michigan Model, and describing these two theories – including their respective strengths and weaknesses – is the subject of this chapter.

Before summarizing these two foundational theories, it is important to first understand the prevailing view about the origins of candidate preference prior to the scientific study of this issue. Before the advent of voting behavior research, many believed that ordinary citizens, much like elites, viewed the parties and candidates in ideological terms and made their political judgments largely on this basis. At the time that research on voting behavior was first developing, and indeed long before this time, this explanation held considerable weight. Even today, variants of this explanation remain in political science and such views are often implicit in standard political reporting, which reflects a powerful, though empirically unsupported, view of the ordinary citizen as ideologically committed and attentive to the particulars of the American political system (Achen and Bartels 2016). Thanks in part to the pioneering scholarship of the authors of the Columbia and Michigan Models and earlier work by journalist Walter Lippman, we now know that voters are not typically motivated by ideology and are often ignorant of the most basic facts of politics (Campbell et al. 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Lippmann 1922). Indeed, even those familiar with public policy debates are often unaware of the position of the candidates and the parties on the issues (Converse 1964).

The Columbia Model – described as such because of the contributions of Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and other scholars at Columbia University – helped to explain how voters make sense of the political world despite their general inattentiveness to politics. This groundbreaking theory was first articulated in *The People's Choice*, the first study to rely on representative sample surveys to explain what factors motivated individual voting decisions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). The Columbia scholars examined survey respondents in Ohio from May to November of the 1940 presidential election. They found that exposure to the election campaign essentially had two effects: it *reinforced* the choices made by early deciders and it *motivated* the latent predispositions of uncommitted voters. These predispositions were associated with three types of social characteristics: (1) a citizen's class status; (2) a citizen's racial or religious identification; and (3) the region of the country a citizen lived in and whether they resided in an urban or rural setting. The social characteristics that were activated by the campaign were described as the *Index of Political Predispositions* (IPP) and this index predicted the 1940 vote quite accurately. For example, the IPP predicted that rural, middle class Protestants would vote for the Republican candidate and in fact this held true for about 74 percent of this group.

The Columbia scholars followed up on *The People's Choice* with the equally impressive book *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). As with *The People's Choice*, *Voting* argues that one's social identification, or political predispositions, largely accounts for how citizens think and act with regard to politics. In *Voting*, Berelson and his co-authors surveyed the citizens of a moderate-sized community, in Elmira, New York in 1948. In this study, Berelson and his colleagues provide much greater evidence, than in the previous study, of the importance of the social characteristics outlined above. Because their study focuses on only one community, however, they could not fully explore the role that place of residence plays in shaping political attitudes.

The Columbia Model was an important first step to answering the question posed at the beginning of this chapter and many of its insights regarding the political significance of social groups remains relevant today. Still, in spite of its strengths, the theory suffered from a very serious weakness. A model of vote choice based on social-demographic categories does not account very well for swings in election results over time. In other words, how could the Index of Political Predispositions explain the vote for Truman in 1948 (a very close Democrat victory) and the subsequent landslide victory of the Republican presidential nominee, Dwight Eisenhower, in 1952? The social characteristics of the voters could not account for these shifting preferences since the demographics changed little from 1948 to 1952. For this reason, an additional explanation was needed to account for over-time change in voting preferences.

Although the Columbia school's perspective on voting behavior proved influential, it was insufficiently dynamic, thus giving rise to an alternative model of voting. This newer model, proposed by scholars at the University of Michigan, offered a somewhat different explanation of voting behavior and it eventually became the dominant model of voting in the scholarly literature. Unlike the Columbia Model, which emphasized the social characteristics of voters, the Michigan Model – as this approach came to be known – focused on the individual attitudes of the voters as well as their identification with one of the major political parties. Briefly, the argument of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) can be summarized into three larger points. First, the Michigan scholars argued that people identify psychologically with political parties just as they do with religious, class, racial, and ethnic groups. Second, identification with a political party should be viewed as a long-term component of the political system and therefore this identification should persist even when people vote for a candidate representing the opposing party. Lastly, party identification is powerful not merely for its direct effects on vote choice, but also for its indirect influence on attitudes associated with the vote. These attitudes include evaluations of the major party candidates, the issues of the day, and the political parties.

The Michigan scholars offered a distinctive definition of party identification. They defined it as a sense of psychological attachment to one of the major parties. Importantly, this did not mean that one officially belonged to the party in the sense that one held formal membership in the party. By attachment they meant a sense of attraction (or repulsion) similar to the sense of attachment one feels to one's class, racial, or religious group. According to Campbell and his co-authors, party identification has two characteristics: direction and strength. By direction, they simply meant whether one is a Democrat, Independent, or Republican. By strength, they meant the intensity of one's attachment to the parties. Thus, in this formulation, one's attachment to the party is either strong, not very strong, or one is an Independent who usually leans toward one of the two parties.

It is important to note that party identification could have been defined as one's prior voting record, and in fact other researchers had previously described it this way. The Michigan scholars rejected this definition because they did not want to confuse one's attachment to the party with how one votes at election time. They are not, strictly speaking, the same thing. Although not common, Republican identifiers can, under some circumstances, vote for a Democrat, and vice versa. If partisan attachment were not defined as something other than the vote this could not be recognized, let alone explained. In other words, the authors were interested in the extent to which the one (attachment) explains the other (voting behavior) and they could not explore this relationship unless the concepts were conceptually distinct.

As we have noted, the Michigan Model offered an explanation of vote choice based on a psychologically oriented perspective. This model was different from previous models because it did not locate explanations in the (relatively) immutable social characteristics of the voter, or in their presumed ideological sophistication, but in a broader set of individual attitudes. It is in this sense that *The American Voter* offers a "psychological" explanation of voting, although it does not strictly rely upon models developed in the field of psychology.

As indicated previously, the authors of *The American Voter* argued that attitudes about the candidates, issues, and parties predicted the subsequent vote choice. More importantly, however, levels of partisan identification predicted these attitudes. In other words, to a large extent, knowing which party a citizen identified with (and how strongly) determined how they would evaluate the candidates, and what position they would take on the issues. Thus, for example, citizens identifying with the Republican Party should also favorably evaluate Republican candidates and generally agree with Republican leaders on the major issues.

An obvious criticism of this formulation is that policy positions and candidate evaluations can also affect party identification, just as party identification can influence them. As plausible as this may sound, the Michigan scholars mostly reject the alternative proposition that issues affect partisanship. They adopt this view in part because of the relatively low levels of political knowledge in the electorate and the general lack of ideological sophistication. In making their argument, they also point out that party identification typically develops in adolescence and tends to be stable over time, while issue preferences and candidate evaluations usually arise much later and are more ephemeral (see Carsey and Layman 2006 for more recent evidence largely consistent with this view).

As evidence for the power of their theory, the authors of *The American Voter* examined nationally representative survey data from the 1952 and 1956 presidential elections. Their results are generally consistent with their expectations. They find that their measure of partisanship is strongly correlated with a variety of political attitudes about the candidates, parties, and current issues. Without exception, the stronger one's attachment to the parties is the more the respondent tends to view the political world in ways consistent with that attachment. For example, "strong Republicans" are much more likely to view Republican presidential nominee – and, later president – Dwight Eisenhower favorably, agree with the Republicans on domestic and foreign policy issues, and regard the Republican Party as a more effective manager of government than Republicans with moderate attachment to their party, Independents, moderately attached Democrats, and especially strong Democrats.

In their second test, Campbell and his co-authors argue that if party identification affects attitudes so deeply, the more partisan members of their sample should have more ideologically consistent issue positions than less partisan respondents. In other words, respondents' attitudes about the candidates, issues, and parties should more consistently favor the Republican/ Democratic Party as the strength of partisan attachment increases. They find that the evidence supports these hypotheses. Finally, they show that their measure of partisanship is strongly related to respondent vote choice in both 1952 and 1956.

According to the authors of *The American Voter*, issue preferences and ideological principles are not the source of party identification. Instead, partisanship is the result of pre-adult socialization. Attachments to political parties, they argue, typically form in mid-to-late childhood largely as a result of parental influence (similar to the acquisition of one's religious affiliation). As evidence for this claim, they use their survey data to show that respondents whose parents belong to the same party were overwhelmingly likely to also identify with that party. If parents disagreed with one another, the pattern was less consistent. An obvious problem with their evidence is that it is based on respondent recall. It is possible that strong partisans recall their parents having a similar party identification even though this is not the case. This is called "projection," and there is certainly evidence in the literature that citizens tend to erroneously assume that others (e.g., candidates, friends, relatives) have political views similar to their own. However, later work by Jennings and Niemi (1968) examined high-school students and their parents' partisanship and found that there was considerable agreement.

Although the authors of *The American Voter* argue that partisanship is mostly stable over time – at the individual level and in the aggregate – they do not argue that it never changes. Sometimes it does and they identify two causes of these changes. The first is what they call personal forces or changes in an individual's social environment. This was the least common explanation for the roughly 20 percent of the respondents in their sample who indicated that they had changed their party identification.

They refer to the more common explanation as emanating from social forces. Unlike personal forces that depend purely on personal circumstances, social forces involve experiences shared across a large number of citizens. There are essentially two ways that social forces can affect partisanship. The first is through life-cycle changes. For example, young people are more likely than older individuals to identify as Independents, whereas older people are more likely to identify as partisans. The second way that social forces can affect partisanship is through massive societal dislocations on the order of the Civil War or the Great Depression. From the vantage point of the Michigan Model, issues can influence partisanship only when they achieve this level of intensity.

In summary, the explanation for voting behavior offered by the Michigan Model can be summarized into three larger points: (1) people identify with political parties just as they do with their religious, class, racial, and ethnic group identity; (2) identification with political parties should be viewed as a long-term component of the political system that persists even when people vote contrary to their identification; and finally (3) partisanship is powerful not merely for its direct effect on vote choice, but also for its indirect influence on attitudes associated with the vote. The Michigan Model also holds that party identification is typically formed before citizens become adults (largely through parental influence) and that typically issues affect partisanship only when they reach catastrophic proportions (e.g., during the Great Depression).

Partisanship and the normal vote

The concept of partisanship was refined somewhat by Phil Converse, one of the co-authors of *The American Voter*, some six years after the publication of this landmark book. In an article entitled "The Concept of a Normal Vote," Converse (1966) pointed out that there were often large fluctuations in presidential election outcomes from one year to the next with no corresponding change in the overall distribution of party identification. Converse interpreted this to mean that the election outcomes could be characterized as fitting into two categories: the normal vote and short-term deviations from the normal vote. By the term "normal vote," Converse meant election results that simply reflected the voter's stable commitment to either of the two parties. In other words, since the majority of voters identified with the Democrats one could expect the Democrats to win every presidential election if the electorate voted only on the basis of their party attachment.

By "short-term deviations" from the normal vote, Converse meant that election outcomes were sometimes influenced by fleeting circumstances, such as scandals or international crises, which did not substantially affect the overall balance of partisan support in the electorate. Sometimes short-term forces worked to the benefit of the Republicans (as in 1952 when General Dwight Eisenhower, a war hero, was the Republican presidential nominee) and sometimes to the benefit of the Democrats (as in 1964 when the Democratic presidential nominee was the former Vice-President of the recently assassinated President Kennedy). When these short-term forces cancel out, or when they are essentially equal for both parties, Democrats were estimated to receive 54 percent of the two-party vote.

Contemporary socio-psychological perspectives on voting

In the aftermath of its publication, *The American Voter* generated considerable controversy and disagreement. In time, however, researchers focused less attention on the dominant role of partisan identification and more attention on the psychological underpinnings of the theory. In particular, a number of scholars relied on social identity theory to help adjudicate long-standing questions about partisanship and to reorient how we think about the concept. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) were at the forefront of this effort, along with Greene (1999), and Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015).

In their 2002 book entitled *Partisan Hearts and Minds*, Green, Palmquist, and Schickler develop an argument they had originally introduced years earlier in several influential articles. In general, they argue that partisanship is a social identity and should be thought of in ways consistent with our understanding of other salient social identities. Building on the arguments put forth by the authors of *The American Voter*, Green and his co-authors also note that individuals consider salient social groups when they think of the political parties and subsequently determine their partisan loyalties by assessing which party most closely reflects their own unique set of identities. Beyond this grounding of party identification as a social identity, the authors present evidence suggesting that partisanship demonstrates levels of stability akin to other social identities. This stability is demonstrated at both the individual and the aggregate levels. On the occasions when we observe shifts in partisan identification, this is usually because individuals perceive changes in the identities of those who belong to the party. For example, we may expect shifts in partisan identification if one of the two major parties were to become newly associated with a different set of racial or ethnic groups. Interestingly, although their focus is clearly on America, the authors demonstrate that partisanship in places like Great Britain and Germany also operates similarly. The battles between Democrats and Republicans, or the more complicated multi-party competition in other democracies around the world, are not merely a fight over ideas; they are also fights between members of distinct social groups engaged in the same kind of conflict we observe between members of other social groups (for an opposing view, see Abramowitz and Saunders 2006).

In a similar vein, Greene (1999) posits that we should consider party identification through the lens of social identity theory. That is, individuals derive a sense of their own self-worth from their self-perceived membership in partisan groups. Consistent with early work on social identity theory, Greene (1999: 394) suggests that partisan identifiers have an incentive to distinguish their in-group from partisan out-groups, and engage in a style of social comparison that "heighten[s] differences between the groups." Using a psychological measure of group identification, Greene gauged the extent to which Democrats, Republicans, and partisan leaners expressed a partisan social identity. Unsurprisingly, Greene finds that partisan social identity is most pronounced for strong partisans relative to weak partisans and leaners. He also finds that higher degrees of social identification with a given party correspond with more negative perceptions of the out-party relative to the in-party. This measure of partisan social identity was also related to an engagement in partisan political behavior and an individual's likelihood of turning out.

Huddy and her colleagues (2015) have also sought to apply social identity theory to the issue of partisan attachments. More specifically, they ask whether partisan identity is instrumental or expressive. An instrumental understanding of partisan identity would suggest that individuals collect some running tally of how well the parties have done and attend to questions of how closely aligned the party's goals and preferences are with one's own. Focusing on the expressive nature of partisan identity, however, builds on the idea that partisan identification, like other social identities, motivates individuals to behave in ways that protect the image of the group and maintains its high regard relative to the out-group. To explore the alternative explanations of partisan identity, the authors use campaign activity as their main outcome variable of interest. Across different studies, respondents noted whether they planned to contribute money to presidential/congressional candidates, and political organizations, and whether they planned to volunteer. Whereas a measure of expressive partisan identity is related to the participatory behaviors across the various studies, they find that an ideological intensity measure (the authors' measure of instrumental partisanship) has a more limited influence.

In the past few years, scholars have reexamined the original perspectives outlined in the Columbia and Michigan Models. In 2008, a new group of scholars – Michael Lewis-Beck, William Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert Weisberg – sought to revisit the groundbreaking arguments of *The American Voter*. Specifically, they sought to subject the theories introduced in this volume to examination with more recent survey data (i.e., the 2000 and 2004 American National Election Studies). This replication was a bold effort. If the groundbreaking results of *The American Voter* are as enduring as the original authors believed, they should hold up even when examined with survey evidence collected almost 50 years after the data used in the original study. This updated test of the Michigan Model was explored in a book called *The American Voter Revisited*.

Lewis-Beck and his co-authors designed their book to mirror the same set-up as the original, with chapters mostly following the same pattern and addressing the same subject matter as the original book. One interesting point highlighted in the replication is that, although the authors of *The American Voter* emphasized individual attitudes, they did not neglect the role of social-demographic groups. Echoing results from *Voting*, as well as the original Michigan Model, the authors of *The American Voter Revisited* find that group members who identify strongly with the group are more likely to vote in accordance with the group. These effects are particularly strong for some voters (e.g., Jewish voters and, to a somewhat lesser extent, union members, Hispanics and women) but much weaker for others (e.g., blacks and Catholics).

Lewis-Beck and his colleagues, again building on the model developed by the Michigan scholars, argued that the influence that is exerted by social groups is done largely through their impact on party identification. In other words, just as the Columbia Model suggested, social group attachments inevitably lead to partisan group attachments. However, once these socio-demographic affiliations lead to the "appropriate" partisan identification, it becomes exceedingly difficult to dislodge this attachment. And, typically partisan group attachments exert more influence on political judgments than the social group memberships that give rise to it. If interest group leaders try to change the party identification of their members, for whatever reasons, they are likely to have a difficult time doing so – especially for older group members.

In 2016, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels also addressed the fundamental question of what motivates voters. In their book, *Democracy for Realists*, they deconstruct what they refer to as the "folk theory of democracy" – the notion that citizens evaluate political leaders on the basis of ideology or issue preferences. The authors review a broad range of scholarship on this question, both within and outside of the US. Consistent with the early Columbia and Michigan Models, Achen and Bartels conclude that voters fail to meet even the more limited expectations of the retrospective model of voting (i.e., rewarding and/or punishing elected officials based on assessments of their performance in office rather than their adherence to abstract ideological principles). Given their condemnation of the "folk theory of democracy," the authors turn to a more realistic basis for political judgment – salient social groups. Again echoing the pioneering work of Lazarsfeld, Campbell, and their respective colleagues, Achen and Bartels conclude that the vast majority of voters develop their attachment to the parties based on social group loyalties (and pre-adult socialization from their parents). Similarly, they argue that the actions of political figures are primarily interpreted through a partisan or social group lens.

Although there is considerable evidence in support of the foundational works in public opinion, most of this evidence is derived from the US (although see Achen and Bartels 2016). Research on both stable and emerging democracies suggest that the concept of partisanship does not always perform as anticipated in other parts of the world. Holmberg (2007) provides an excellent review of this literature. He notes, for example, that the concept of party identification translates better in some parts of Europe than others. More specifically, partisanship is more volatile in the Netherlands than in Britain or Sweden. Moreover, the number of strong partisan identifiers is mostly stable in the US, but has been declining in Sweden. In the case of emerging democracies in Eastern Europe, Holmberg reports that partisan identifiers are also rare and – more troubling for the standard Michigan Model – such attachments that are developing seem mostly based on cognitive rather than affective factors.

Conclusion

Here, we have attempted to provide a broad overview of the early history of scholarship pertaining to candidate choice and some of the more recent examinations of these theories both domestically and internationally. In particular, we focused on two complementary, though distinct, schools of thought that laid the foundation for much of our contemporary understanding of how individuals come to make political decisions.

To recap, the Columbia Model, with its focus on the role of socio-demographic factors, including social class and membership within salient social groups, brings to the fore a consideration of how political decision-making is informed by one's place in the social hierarchy and one's connection to others who share in their social identity. Focusing more directly on the attitudes individuals hold toward political objects (e.g., candidates, parties, and issues), the Michigan Model adopted a more social-psychological understanding of individuals' decision-making calculus. Describing partisan identification as a psychological attachment to one of the political parties, akin to the attachment one might have to one's racial or religious group, the Michigan Model placed at the center of our theorizing a concern with party identification as a key predictor of individual-level behavior. Remarking on its stability, the authors concede that partisan identification is not immune to change, but note that change requires either a shift in an individual's personal situation or the occurrence of a large-scale, salient social or political event. With few exceptions, the claims put forth by the Michigan Model are replicated and extended by the authors of *The American Voter Revisited*, published more than 50 years after the original text.

Finally, as the other chapters of this handbook demonstrate, there is a great deal of new and exciting work being done that both clarifies and complicates our understanding of the nature of individuals' political beliefs and behaviors. And while much of this work warrants careful consideration by readers, we are particularly excited by scholarship that bridges literature in political science and social psychology to interrogate partisan identification as a meaningful social identity that forms the foundation for citizens' interactions in the political world. The chief tenets of social identity theory, which center on the connection between one's sense of self and her membership in a salient social group, not only provide an interesting lens through which to consider this important feature of the American political system. These tenets also allow us to make sense of deep and persistent divides between individuals for whom a partisan identity is about more than electoral choice, but occupies a central role in a broader set of social identities that motivates behaviors across a range of domains. In fact, this way of thinking about partisan identity takes us full circle to the Michigan Model's early sense that there was an important psychological underpinning to this politically meaningful construct.

In focusing on these two schools of thought and some of the subsequent scholarship they have inspired, we hope we have provided the reader with a useful starting place for grappling with the ideas and debates highlighted in other chapters of this handbook. And though many scholars appreciate both the role of social groups and the centrality of partisanship in the American political system, debates will undoubtedly continue in the literature about the relative stability or dynamism of partisanship, the influence of context on political identity, the role of social identities on political choice, and, in the case of new immigrants and emerging democracies, the very roots of partisan attachment. Clearly, the work we have endeavored to describe in the preceding pages represents the very beginning of what continues to be an exciting and growing area of study in our discipline.

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3
RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY AND VOTING

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Political economy

Political economy, in studies of voter and party behavior, usually refers to a specific method: the economic or rational choice method. Sometimes termed "positive political theory," because its aim is to explain political behavior rather than tell us how we should run our political regimes (which is the job of normative political philosophy), it nevertheless has a strongly normative bent. Underlying political economy models are axiomatic principles that enable deductive model building and formally derived hypotheses. These principles – usually called "rationality assumptions" – can be considered normative desiderata for consistent behavior. They actually have very little to do with "rationality" or reasonableness as normally understood. We might be able to predict the behavior of an agent, be it a person or an institution, without considering that behavior to be in the least reasonable, prudent or sensible. Normatively an agent can be consistently irrational or unreasonable, but as long as they are consistent then their behavior can be modeled.

The tenets of "methodological individualism" are also usually associated with rational choice models. Karl Popper (1957: 136) was probably the first to link methodological individualism with economic methods, mis-citing Friedrich Hayek as his source (Hayek was actually saying that economics ought to be methodologically individualist, not that it is). In fact, the modern critics of classical economic methods, behavioral economists, are the true methodological individualists, with the claim that human agents do not behave with the consistency that classical economics assumes. In fact, as we shall see, whilst we can interpret political economy models in behavioral terms, they can more plausibly be seen as providing structural constraints or incentives for agents to behave within certain bounds. They provide structural explanation as much as methodologically individualist explanation.

The axioms of rational choice or revealed preference under certainty include reflexivity, completeness and transitivity (Austen-Smith and Banks 1999). The first ensures that someone is indifferent between two identical items; the second that all items enter into a person's preference function; and the third ensures the consistency that enables prediction. The idea of revealed preference is that we can observe behavior under some conditions in order to predict behavior under other conditions. The final continuity assumption is more technical, but is designed to convert ordinal preferences into cardinal utility functions.

The point of the assumptions of revealed preference is prediction. The idea is that if we can construct a utility function for an agent in one situation, we can then use the utility function to predict how they will behave in a different situation. Utility functions can include any type of argument. So individual utility functions do not need to be composed of material self-interest, but can include the welfare of the family, the group, society at large, refugees or the foreign needy. Adding any sort of social benefit can, within individual applications, provide trivial predictions but the idea of revealed preference theory is to take a utility function constructed in one situation and apply it to other situations to provide predictions there. This can work in practice if the situations are not too dissimilar. In fact, political science models are rarely if ever applied to "an" agent, but rather to sets of agents defined by their type, and so the assumption is that the important elements of the utility function are those that refer to the endogenous interests of that type. The important point is that the rationality assumptions are used for predictive and hence explanatory purposes. What we find – and this is not unimportant in applications to voting and party behavior – is that for collectives sometimes we cannot make a prediction, at least for single events, for it turns out there are no pure equilibrium strategies and/or there are multiple equilibriums.

Applications to voting

The two classic texts of political economy in relation to voters and elections are Kenneth Arrow's (1951) *Social Choice and Individual Values* and Anthony Downs' (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Duncan Black's (1948) median voter theorem (often misattributed to Downs) was also seminal, though his argument for a similar conclusion takes an importantly different form.

Arrow is important normatively. He shows that there is no such thing as a social welfare function. In terms of elections, we can interpret this as saying that the result of any preference-aggregation mechanism (any voting system) depends upon the mechanism itself as well as on the preferences of the voters: same mechanism, different preferences: (potentially) different outcome; same preferences, different mechanism: (potentially) different outcome. Arrow's result can be considered a generalization of the Condorcet cycle with at least three alternatives and three voters – x beats y, y beats z and z beats x in pairwise votes. So every alternative loses to another alternative in a simple majority vote (see also Iain McLean's chapter in this volume).

Another way of thinking about this is that, just given the preferences of the collective alone, we cannot predict the result. Normatively this suggests that there is no perfect electoral system; in practice it entails that one can construct results from any electoral system that somehow seem paradoxical or wrong. More importantly, however, corollaries of Arrow's theorem show that electoral systems are manipulable (Gibbard 1973; Satterthwaite 1975). We sometimes see in legislatures that agenda setters can manipulate the order of votes to affect outcomes and enable heresthetic politicians to break up winning coalitions to form a new voting bloc (Riker 1982, 1986; McLean 2001). Voters can also vote strategically in order to scupper what would otherwise be winning alternatives. Such manipulation is usually considered to be normatively bad, some claiming that it means electoral results are arbitrary (Riker 1982), though others suggest that manipulation is just the game of politics (Dowding and van Hees 2008), not so different from behavior in market and other social situations. These essentially normative results are important in models of voter behavior only because they demonstrate the strategic possibilities and show the basic unpredictability of politics *even when we have full information*.

Black's median voter theorem is from the same academic stable as Arrow. It demonstrates that in one-dimensional ideological space, where voters have single-peaked preferences, the ideal point of the median voter is a Condorcet winner (Black 1948). Since a Condorcet winner is the alternative that beats all other alternatives in pairwise votes, the conditions of the proof discount the Arrow problem. As a Condorcet winner is a simple majority winner against each of the other alternatives, the median voter theorem can be given the normative praise that it truly defines a democratic result. Thus any voting system that picks a Condorcet winner will provide winners that satisfy the median voter.

In fact, few voting systems used in major elections ensure that winners are Condorcet winners, though any direct voting system will do so where there are only two candidates. Nevertheless, the median voter theorem is used in many contexts in political economy. Where issues are democratically decided and can be reasonably represented in one dimension, political economy models often assume that the median voter theorem will hold and that, accordingly, in committees, cabinets, parliaments, courts, and so on, the median voter can force a result that reflects their ideal point. Of course, conditions might not allow this to obtain. Votes are often not taken, for example, in cabinets. In parliaments with strong party systems, agenda setters (the government or prime minister) can ensure that the alternatives do not coincide with the ideal point of the median voter. But we can model the dynamics of what agenda setters can get away with given the ideological makeup of backbenchers of vying parties. So the median voter theorem is used to see how agenda setting and other strategic manipulation are constrained under democratic conditions. It becomes a structural condition or incentive constraining the possible maneuvers of powerful agents.

Spatial models

The Downsian model of voter and party behavior is rather different, and is confused with the median voter theorem simply because it utilizes the result that if there are only two parties then the winning party must secure the vote of the pivotal voter. Assuming a single ideological dimension, that voter will be a median voter. Downs' argument is based on the Hotelling model, which explains why similar businesses, such as shoe shops or electrical goods stores, tend to abide in the same location. The answer lies in competition for the best location – where most people will find it convenient to shop. A business that occupies the second-best location, assuming its products are no better, will always competitively be second. Translated to party competition, the party that will do best is the party that locates in ideological space closest to where most voters are also located – assuming, that is, that voters vote for the party closest to them in ideological space. Parties that locate elsewhere would always do worse.

Downs applied his model with most effect to the then contemporary two-party situation in the USA and the UK. Where there are two parties, each vying to become the majority party that controls the government or legislature, Downs argues that there is a logic for candidates or parties to converge on the center of the ideological spectrum if that center is understood as the median voter (Downs 1957; Hotelling 1929). This entails that if the median voter shifts ideological position over time, the ideological spectrum will also shift over time. But in a multiparty setting, especially when taking into consideration more proportional systems, whilst parties must be aware of the ideological shifts in parties close to them, such dynamic forces can lead to almost any set of shuffling up and down the single dimension. No long-term or point predictions are thus possible.

From that simple informal model, many more formal results have developed. In plurality systems, Palfrey (1984) demonstrates that two-party systems could deter third-party entrants by keeping away from the median voter, thus explaining non-convergence. The possibility of third-party entry can mean neither of the original two parties will locate at the median.

He demonstrates equilibrium where both parties locate away from the median, giving third parties no incentive to enter the contest. In more proportional systems, a third party can be guaranteed representation in parliament and possibly a share of power. Here again divergence is likely. Electoral systems do have determinative effects on party systems (Cox 1997; Grofman 2006), though not straightforwardly. In other words, we do not have to change the structural conditions very much to generate very different predictions. One of the strengths of formal modeling is that we can often see how robust conclusions are to the specific assumptions of the models. And where those assumptions do not hold, we can see why the conclusions of models do not follow. The models here provide a normative or ideal standard by which to judge reality.

Stephen Ansolabehere (2006: 35) suggests that the median voter theorem performs for political scientists the role of the Hardy–Weinberg model for evolutionary biologists. Hardy–Weinberg shows that allele and genotypic frequencies in a population will remain constant over generations in the absence of other evolutionary forces. However, other forces *are* always present, so the model acts as a reference point for measuring their effects. Ansolabehere's point is that the assumptions of the median voter theorem are rarely if ever satisfied, but we can examine what departures from those assumptions mean for voter and party behavior. In that sense, the median voter theorem is a reference point for comparative analysis to explain why it is that the parties are not at the median or the winning party did not capture the median voter.

Almost none of the conditions of the median voter theorem standardly hold. Not every person's preference is single-peaked and, whilst some divergence does not entail that Hotelling/Black forces cannot operate, it can lead to cycling. Increasing the number of dimensions also brings problems of predictability. If preferences over issues cannot be summarized into a single ideological dimension, then voters might choose parties or candidates by the basket of policies each offers. The basket can be thought of as a vector product across n-dimensions. The McKelvey–Schofield theorem demonstrates that, as the number of dimensions increases and with relatively small numbers of voters, any basket of policies can be beaten by at least one other basket (McKelvey 1976; Schofield 1978). Whilst this theorem suggests that politics can be unpredictable, empirical research suggests that most voting decisions seem to be reducible to one or two dimensions and often, whilst the major issues can shift across elections, one or two issues tend to dominate (Poole 2005; Poole and Rosenthal 2007). However, perhaps a bigger problem for the assumptions of spatial models is valence issues (Stokes 1963).

Valence and trust

A valence issue is one where all voters want the same thing – less crime, lower inflation, peace, and so on. So the candidates will not differ much in their promises over valence issues, though they might disagree on how to go about, for example, reducing crime rates. In that case, there will be little ideological divergence over the policies that matter in an election, so voters must select their candidates on other grounds. They are likely to choose on the basis of how much they trust them. Trust can mean several things in this context. It could be an issue of competence or it could be related to how the voter thinks the candidate will respond to unforeseen contingencies.

On the first, voters might choose candidates or parties based on how competent they are on valence issues, and that might depend on how well the candidates have fared in the past. So a lot of voting depends upon rewarding or punishing past behavior, thinking about the future, how much they trust candidates. This can lead to votes of a personal nature for known candidates. Valence issues thus also affect the prediction that candidates or parties will converge on the median voter. If the candidates are close together, then the personal vote should count for more than when candidates are ideologically separated. If one candidate in a two-candidate contest has valence advantage, then his opponent has an incentive to move further away ideologically to reduce that advantage. That still holds, even though the candidate with valence advantage can locate at the median and so win with certainty (Ansolobehere and Snyder 2000; Wittman 2005).

These models all assume that voters know where in ideological or policy space the parties are located, and that the parties know where the electorate is situated. Even with certainty, we do not necessarily get convergence on the median voter; but with uncertainty we can also get divergence. If parties locate too close to each other, voters might not be able to distinguish them; this will reduce turnout and voting can be random (Hinich and Munger 1994). Such uncertainty can, as Downs (1957) first suggested, open up a role for ideology. Rather than striving to get voters to understand in detail their policy positions, the party creates a brand name associated with a particular ideological position, from which voters can estimate its likely policies. Meanwhile the parties target groups of voters whose policy positions they can best estimate, which means that some groups are left out of the competition for votes.

This leads to the second issue of trust. Ideology can serve as a signal as to how a candidate or party is likely to respond to some issue that has not arisen. One feature of the success of Donald Trump's bid for the Republican candidacy that has puzzled many commentators is why his many wild, implausible and false claims do not seem to damage him. Perhaps by making these claims, wild and false as they might be, he is providing a strong signal to a particular constituency that he thinks as they do on these issues, and so as president will behave as they would like to do if they had that role. The signal is one of political or social disposition, rather than of competence or actual policy preference. What he is saying is, "whatever the constraints, I am like you, so I will do the best that you could do if you were president."

Information

Uncertainty over spatial location shows the need for campaigning to provide information and provide such signals. However, given uncertainty about what voters want, candidates have incentives to try to create variance in their rivals' position by mud-slinging and character assassination, trying to make opponents seem more extreme. This predicts that negative campaigning will be more effective than positive (Hinich and Munger 1994: 216–219). On the other hand, the more ideological the groups, the less likely they are to be swayed. This implies that the battle, at least in two-party systems, will revolve around swing voters, those most likely to shift their votes. These will be the most ideologically neutral, so parties will concentrate their attention on those voters, who might not be the median as defined. Such voters might be swayed more by valence issues, particularly economic issues (Persson and Tabellini 2000: 52–58).

Whilst voting is often portrayed as irrational in terms of collective action, since a single vote is unlikely to be pivotal, the broader problem, and the one Downs (1957) first recognized, was rational ignorance. Again, the fact that many voters know little about the specific policy positions of candidates shows that ideology or signals about dispositions can take on great importance. Most of the models assume that politicians enter politics in order to win. Indeed, contestation is the heart of political economy models. Nevertheless, we should expect that candidates, like voters, have policy preferences. The fact that candidates have policy preferences also explains policy divergence (Besley and Coate 1997; Wittman 1983).

Parties should act as gatekeepers for candidates. On the one hand, parties, at least in strong party systems, should ensure that party leaders follow the ideology of the party, whilst keeping in check candidates who are likely to be electorally unsuccessful. To the extent that the procedures for choosing leaders are democratic, we should expect new leaders to win by gaining the votes of the median party voter. May's law of curvilinear disparity suggests the most ideological members of a party are the sub-leaders with ordinary members and those at the top, due to electoral consideration, the most moderate (May 1973). Whilst evidence on the claim is mixed (Kitschelt 1989; Norris 1995), we can know that the median member of left parties will be to the left of the median voter in the electorate, and the median member of a right party to the right of the median in the electorate. Given ideological divergence across parties, we should expect party leaders to take up divergent policy positions. However, once elected, new leaders have incentives to maximize their appeal across the broader electorate. We should expect therefore that new leaders will seem more radical than the outgoing incumbents, since they had to appeal to a more radical electorate, but over time they will soften their stance to appeal to the electorate more broadly. However, where a party has suffered a major electoral setback, the need to appeal more broadly might lead it to choose a leader more in keeping with the electorate's policy preferences.

We should also expect parties whose parliamentarians choose their leader to be more aware of electoral contingencies than those whose leadership electoral base is much broader. A major problem in US presidential elections, for example, is that the choice of candidate is broad-based, and occurs only a few months prior to the presidential campaign itself. Candidates must first appeal to their partisan base, but then do not have enough time to moderate their positions without seeming hypocritical when facing the national electorate.

Constructing utility functions

We saw that the rationality assumptions provide consistency that enables prediction, but utility functions must be constructed from behavior. When the four conditions hold, we can represent agents' preferences by a utility function unique up to a positive monotonic transformation. Roughly speaking, this means that two different mathematical functions can both represent the same choice behavior, as long as one increases whenever the other does. The precise interpretation of those functions might not matter for the behavior under analysis, but might do so under different structural incentives.

"Utility" in this formulation is a completely empty concept. It does not represent anything "experienced," such as "happiness," or "satisfaction," or "desire." It simply represents the behavior of the person. We assume that the behavior is going to be consistent – that is, when a person strictly prefers x to y, they will always choose x from the opportunity set $\{x, y\}$. In other words, "utility" does *not* provide a *reason* for choosing x over y. Someone might vote for a conservative party rather than a radical one for all sorts of reasons – they fear radicalism, they trust the conservative leader, distrust the radical leader, and so on. These are the person's *reasons* for voting for the conservative and not the radical party. But the fact they have those reasons means that when they vote conservative (they choose x over y), they maximize their utility. A person's reasons for choosing x over y are arguments in the person's utility function; the function itself simply represents the conclusion of those arguments.

Prediction is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for explanation; and explanation of behavior requires inputting an interpretation on to that behavior. Such interpretations can go astray. Again, though, this is no greater a problem for formal methods than for non-formal ones that also have to make these interpretative moves. For interpretation, further assumptions about the nature of preferences are required. Standard assumptions include material self- or group-interest and knowledge of the policy positions of the candidates or parties. Political economy models standardly assume that voters vote for parties or candidates whose policy positions are closest to the voter's own position. The models assume thereby that voters vote in their own interests, though those interests can be broadly defined not only in personal but also in family, group or class terms. Material self-interest, even understood broadly, brings the first oft-noted challenge to political-economic models of voter behavior. Of course, such assumptions are not simply those of classic political economy. Many social psychologists also work with such group-oriented self-interest. Weeden and Kurzban (2014) reconstruct party support in the USA across diverse subsets of voters, arguing that interest is what motivates all ideological and partisan support.

Nevertheless, the material self-interest assumption motivates the first important issue for political economy. How do we explain collective action, given underlying material self-interest? The collective action or free-rider problem arises because many actions to attain certain goals that require a large number of people also do not need everyone who would gain from the attainment of those goals to take part. If taking part is costly, then it is in each person's interest to be in the free-riding subgroup that does not actually engage in the collective act. Each person can assume or hope that others, because it is in their interest to secure some outcome, will work to attain it, allowing the individual herself to spend her time on other activities also to her benefit. If all reason in that way, no one will act and the collective interest will not be assured.

Rational turnout

We can easily recast this problem as a strategic game with multiple possible outcomes, some optimal, some sub-optimal. One of the earliest solutions for such collective action problems is the provision of selective benefits giving individuals private as well as collective benefits (Olson 1965, 1971). Such selective incentives need not be positive; much state regulation that, arguably, exists for the collective interest provides punitive incentives. Voting can also be seen as a collective action problem, but one not simply solvable through selective benefits. There are two related questions. First, is relatively high turnout explicable in rational choice terms? Second, are rational choice models consistent with high turnout? The second question enables us to admit that rational choice theory cannot get people to the polls – but once voters are in the polling booth it provides good explanations of their behavior there. Most rational choice scholars want to take on the first question.

So can political-economic models explain why people bother to vote at all? The rational turnout problem has long been associated with rational choice models (Dowding 2005; Fedderson 2004). Given that the chances of being pivotal or decisive in any election are so small and that voting has costs, why would anyone vote (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Tullock 1967)? Olson's solution for general collective action is selective incentives, but there are few selective incentives on offer for voters.

The problem of getting rational actors to the polls has been tackled on many fronts. Some writers address the calculation associated with the problem, arguing that the probabilities of pivotality are higher than generally thought (Gelman et al. 1998) or that the costs of voting are too low for most people to consider at all (Aldrich 1993; Olson 1965, 1971; Palfrey and Rosenthal 1983). Others suggest that there are potential costs of not voting that can lead some to the polls (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974). Rather than relying on the decision-theoretic logic of the simple calculation, game-theoretic models suggest that strategic consideration can lead people to vote. After all, if no one votes, then a single individual's voter would be decisive. Following such logic demonstrates that a mixed strategy for voting or not voting is a Nash equilibrium. However, these models predict levels of turnout far below those than actually witnessed (Ledyard 1984).

One early and standard solution is to return to a selective incentive, but an internal rather than an externally provided one. Riker and Ordeshook (1968), among the first to examine the turnout problem, suggest that people believe in a duty to vote. Empirical evidence supports this; and those who say that there is a duty to vote are both more likely to vote and less likely to be deterred by marginal increases in the costs of voting, such as bad weather (Blais 2000). Some believe that adding duty to a utility function trivializes the answer to the question (Barry 1976); however, to the extent that it captures a real factor in a utility function, there is no reason for not so adding it. Taking non-instrumental factors into account is further extended by those who argue that voting brings participation benefits (Brennan and Lomasky 1993). Such models have some important normative implications that I will explore below, but they are perfectly compatible with the spatial models that form the heart of most political-economic modeling.

The turnout problem is in many respects orthogonal to the ways in which political economy models are used to explain voting patterns and party behavior. The models are used for marginal predictions – differences that are made by changing costs and benefits or through shifting party position in ideological space. The strategic considerations are relevant for those concerned about whom to vote for rather than whether to vote at all. The rationale of voting depends in part upon the voter's party or candidate differential: that is, what it would mean for the voter if one or another side won the election. That party differential need not be simply self-interest narrowly understood, but also what the voter understands more broadly for the country as a whole (Weeden and Kurzban 2014). Certainly there is evidence that the greater the ideological divergence amongst candidates in two-horse races, the higher the turnout. Turnout is also higher in elections which matter more, measured by the power of the relevant government; and increases too with the closeness of the expected result (Blais 2000: 58). Conversely, small increases in the cost of voting reduce turnout, again showing that marginal factors matter. Policy makers have tried to reduce the costs of voting with the strategic placement of polling booths, making postal voting easier and so on. Even in countries where voting is compulsory with fines for not voting, such as Australia, turnout is about 80 percent of the voting age population. These suggest that, for at least part of the population, voting costs are not trivial. These considerations suggest that, even if political-economic models cannot explain why people vote, they are useful for helping to explain the way people vote.

One factor might simply be that people do not much consider the costs if they develop the habit of voting and if they do not really understand the probabilities. It has been shown that, whilst people have a good understanding of high probability estimates, they are very bad at behaviorally distinguishing low probability estimates.[1] Furthermore, parties and candidates do not want to win by a single vote: they want large majorities for both safety and stability and also for legitimacy – and voters might feel the same. The problem with the turnout paradox is that it is set up with the wrong utility function.

Alongside these considerations, for many people voting should be understood less instrumentally than expressively (Brennan and Lomasky 1993; Schuessler 2000). When people vote, they are expressing their views in a public forum. Some take that to mean elections are not necessarily Pareto-efficient signals in the same manner as purchasing in markets (Caplin 2007). This seems to downgrade the legitimacy of democratic decision-making. Whilst republicans, for example, might argue that people have a duty to vote, others suggest that the ignorant have a duty not to vote, since their participation reduces the rationality of the decision (Brennan 2012). However, if some people vote with due consideration and others vote randomly, the random voters will not affect the direction of the decision. Only if the ignorant systematically voted against their own interests could we believe that the quality of voting is reduced by ignorance.

Some simple agent-based models applied initially to turnout decision, but also to informational cascades which lead people to behave simply according to utility post their decision, even if the utility level is not causally determined by their behavior. So one might vote for an incumbent government if one's standard of living has risen during its tenure, but for an opposition party if it has stagnated. Surprisingly, such simple decision models show robust results in terms of more complex decision processes. These models can be considered rival to standard political economy models, as they depart from any assumptions over completeness of preference orderings. However, the utility functions they contain are still well-behaved.

Such considerations do not create problems for spatial modeling, since empirically both voter and candidate locations in policy space are based upon assessments made by voters. The major theoretical results of spatial voting are thus not affected by the nature of voter preferences.

Conclusions

Rational choice or political economy models are often thought to be based upon the idea that voters and politicians act out of material self-interest, and such assumptions do lead to the rational turnout problem. However, most models assume some form of spatial calculation where voters vote for the parties closest to them in ideological space. Where voters located themselves will be based upon considerations of their family interest, but that is not unrelated to the interests of most of the country when it comes to economic interests, and not unrelated to ideology. Indeed ideology is an important fact given the issue of rational ignorance. Voters do not know the detailed policies of candidates or parties and so work out what their views are likely to be over a range of issues based upon signals they receive. Signals over the ideology of the candidates and parties are important for voters. Other signals, for example, over the honesty and consistency of candidates, are important, though if candidates play fast and loose with facts but in a way that mirrors the attitudes of voters, the signal that voters receive is that this candidate thinks like they do. Thus they might be expected to behave in power as the voter would, whatever the facts are. This might explain why personal dishonesty is punished more than dishonesty over general facts about the economy, immigration or other social-economic issues. A bigger problem for the spatial models is valence issues where competence is the key factor in voting decisions rather than spatial position. Where valence issues dominate, spatial position as usually measured will not be predictive of outcomes, and specifically we should not expect candidate or party convergence.

The strength of political-economic models is the clarity of the theory and the prediction that the models produce. Often these models use stylized facts or make assumptions that are much simpler than the complex reality. In doing so, the models are normative comparators providing a standard by which to judge reality, where departures from the model predictions provide the explanations of outcomes as much as the models themselves. Some of the models are normative in a stronger sense revealing problems with basic assumptions in the normative desiderata of democracy and show how strategic manipulation becomes possible. All of these issues suggest that, whilst political economy models are an important explanatory technique in our understanding of electoral and party competition, they constitute a weapon that is best used alongside other methods.

Note

1 The fact that academics cannot agree over the probabilities only serves to reinforce this point (Brennan and Lomasky 1993; Gelman et al. 1998; Mueller 2003; Owen and Grofman 1984; Riker and Ordeshook 1968 – to name but a few).

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4
INSTITUTIONS AND VOTING BEHAVIOR

B. Guy Peters

The study of political institutions and voting behavior are generally kept far apart in contemporary political science theory. This separation is unfortunate, given that the two aspects of political life are, in practice, closely linked and an understanding of one can inform the understanding of the other. Elections are generally about the capacity to control an institution or multiple institutions. And institutions – notably legal institutions – shape the manner in which elections are conducted and can directly influence the outcomes. While some academic division of labor is inevitable, that division should not go so far as to exclude important factors arising in different elements of the discipline, or allied disciplines.

As well as the more empirical justifications for linking institutions and mass political behavior such as voting, there are theoretical reasons as well. Most obviously, these are the two sides of the classic structure versus agency problem in the social sciences (Giddens 1979; Thornton and Ocasio 2003). Do we explain observed outcomes based on the nature of institutions and other formal structures or do we explain those outcomes through the behaviors of individuals? The most satisfying answer to this somewhat false dichotomy is both. But that answer requires elaboration, and the interactions between structure and agency must be developed theoretically as well as empirically.

For the study of voting behavior and other forms of mass politics, the usual assumption about explanation has been agency, with individual voters being the relevant actors. These actors may be embedded in a social and political system but their attitudes, partisan identifications and perceptions of self-interest have dominated the discussion of voting (but see Blais, Singh and Dumitrescu 2014). While accepting that individual choice is central in voting and other forms of mass participation, we should also consider the role that political institutions have in shaping the opportunities for participation, and in providing incentives and disincentives for voting, and even for voting in certain ways.

This chapter will look at the reciprocal influences of structure and agency on political participation. The impact of voting and other aspects of political behavior on institutions is perhaps the more obvious direction of influence, given that voting will determine the occupants of institutional positions, at least in democratic regimes. I will, however, begin by attempting to demonstrate how the nature of institutions influences the behavior of individuals as well as the collective behavior of interest groups and political parties. In this perspective, institutions comprise the locus in which political participants engage in order to shape policy and the performance of the political system. Or, in the terms of Douglass North (1990; see also Khalil

1995), institutions are the rules of the game and political parties and other organizations are the teams playing the game. Also, for elections, individual voters can be conceptualized as participating in the "game" that is structured by the institutions.

The discussion to this point has been primarily in terms of formal institutions and their capacity to shape political behavior. But informal institutions, including norms, values and organizational routines can also be important in shaping the behaviors of individuals.[1] For example, campaigning for office may have relatively few formal rules but the behavior of candidates is constrained by understandings and informal protocols. Likewise, within formal institutions of government there are informal expectations and standards of behavior that also shape how individuals perform their roles.[2]

Institutional effects on individual and group behavior

Individuals are, by definition, the primary actors in mass politics but they are always acting in a context defined by formal and informal political institutions. In addition to the effects of those institutions on individuals, the institutions influence the behavior of organizational actors such as political parties and interest groups. Further, we can also conceptualize the political parties and interest groups themselves as institutions (see Peters 2010) that in turn interact with one another and also shape the behavior of individual citizens.[3]

I will be arguing that institutions have two primary effects on political participation and voting. The first is that institutions are *opportunity structures*, and the more open these structures are to the involvement of citizens then the greater encouragement they will provide for participation. The other effect of institutions on participation will be through *information*. To the extent that institutions can reduce the information costs of potential participants in the political process, the more likely those citizens are to actually participate.

Institutions as opportunity structures

One general way of conceptualizing the impact of institutions on individuals is to think of them as opportunity structures for individuals. That is, the formal institutions in the public sector can provide opportunities for political action, or they may be designed in ways that discourage or actively repress participation and involvement. These opportunities, or lack thereof, can be developed from the level of macro-constitutional structures all the way down to the structures of political parties and interest groups themselves. Further, the institutional features affecting behavior need not be formal organizations, but rather may also be legal prescriptions or proscriptions on behavior that affect the opportunities for involvement.[4]

In his conceptualization of opportunity structures, Kitschelt (1986) focused on the openness of institutions, as well as the effectiveness of institutions in making and implementing policy, to define types of structures. In this model, open systems, and especially those with effective governments, provide the greatest opportunities for participation, and have a style which attempts to assimilate social movement or other attempts to influence policy. On the other hand, more closed and ineffective political systems tend to provide fewer real opportunities and produce more confrontational styles of governing.

The term of opportunity structure has been employed in a variety of ways in the literature on political participation. The dominant use of the idea of opportunity structures has been in relationship to the development and success of social movements (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996). In this perspective, the openness of the state to its citizens and their articulation of interests will influence the capacity, and the necessity, of those social movements to form and to have demonstrable effects on policy. On the other hand, the capacity of the state to employ repression to prevent mobilization of movements will obviously limit the opportunities for those movements to have any success.

I tend to subscribe to Giovanni Sartori's (1970) tenets about the dangers of concept "stretching." There is an inherent danger that by stretching the concept it loses meaning and is applied in circumstances in which it is inappropriate and may, in fact, cloud meaning rather than contribute to understanding. In this case, however, I do think it may be useful to extend the discussion of opportunity structures to encompass the various ways in which political institutions shape the opportunities available to citizens for participation. This stretching does not undermine the basic content of that concept in any significant manner, even though it does apply the concept to a much wider range of phenomena, in terms of both the institutions and the actors, than originally intended.[5] This should also be understood in a context in which some versions of institutionalism may themselves be considered "stretched" when compared to a formal, structural conception of that term.

In the following discussion, I will be examining the influence of institutions on opportunity structures for individuals and groups in society. The same logic that has been applied to social movements can be extended to a range of phenomena. While the study of social movements has tended to focus on the movements themselves, this analysis will focus more on the institutions that present the opportunity structures for participation, and which may even shape the direction of participation for citizens. The primary "dependent variable" for this discussion will be voter turnout, but other patterns of participation will also be considered.

Opportunity structures at the macro-level

As noted above, the concept of opportunity structures can also be applied at the macro-institutional or constitutional level as well as for mass participation. Several of the conventional institutional differences among political systems can be conceptualized as differences in opportunity structures for participation. While institutional differences such as those between presidential and parliamentary systems, and between federal and unitary regimes, are usually discussed in terms of their impacts on governance capacities (Lijphart 2012; Weaver and Rockman 1993), these different institutional structures also can be argued to influence levels and types of political participation of individuals.

If we begin with the classic distinction of presidential and parliamentary systems, we could posit several potentially contradictory hypotheses about the effect of these institutional structures on mass participation. On the one hand, the presence of two independent structures in presidential systems that have influence over policy provides citizens with multiple opportunities for voting, and for voting that actually does influence the policies being adopted by government. Parliamentary regimes, on the other hand, allow only one set of votes that in the end determine the occupants of both executive and legislative offices.

The alternative hypothesis would be that voters want the chance to actually choose policy when they vote, and therefore parliamentary regimes, especially parliamentary regimes with the opportunity to produce a one-party government, or a coalition with a limited number of parties, may provide them greater opportunities to shape policy directly. Voting for the parliament that in turn will determine the nature of the executive does not confront the voter with as great a probability of gridlock and dilatory institutional politics as is possible, or even likely, with presidential governments and their checks and balances.

The opportunities provided voters to make decisions about both executive and legislative officials in presidential governments appear to be taken by voters, and often result in divided government (Mayhew 1991). Divided governments emerge frequently at both the federal and the state government levels in the United States. There is a seemingly disproportionate number of elections that result in divided governments, with voters – whether consciously or subconsciously – choosing the legislature from one party and the executive from the other. If this outcome is intentional on the part of voters, then those choices would appear to contradict the assumption that voters like to choose governments and thereby to select public policy. Rather, these voters appear to be selecting inaction and gridlock.

Divided governments are not, however, solely an American phenomenon (Elgie 2001). In semi-presidential regimes such as France, there have been several periods of *cohabitation* since the formation of the Fifth Republic (Tsai 2008). Likewise, other countries copying the French model, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, have also had periods of divided government, sometimes with negative consequences for governing (Gerghina and Mosciou 2013). Leaving the governance consequences aside for the moment, the capacity to vote separately for the legislature and for the president provides more opportunities for participation and perhaps for differentiated choices by voters.

There are several possible effects on participation of having a presidential form of government. On the one hand, voting for president appears to focus attention on that election and to make voters believe that their participation is particularly important (Blais 2000). With the presidentialization of parliamentary systems (Poguntke and Webb 2007), the connections between voting for candidates and the choice of executive appear to have become clearer in many parliamentary systems, notably those with a limited number of possible post-election coalitions. However, when the coalition possibilities are not known *ex ante* the connections between voting in parliamentary elections and the governmental and policy outcomes of the election may be more difficult for voters to identify.[6]

At an extreme, the numerous elective positions in many American state and local governments can provide both opportunities for participation and a source of potential confusion for voters (see, for example, Green and Gerber 2015). Some American states in the South and Midwest provide for up to a dozen statewide elected officials in the executive branch – not counting legislators or judges. And then there are numerous local government officials to vote for as well, especially when local governments are nested within larger units.[7] These multiple opportunities for participation can at some point impose such great information demands on voters that they may opt out of voting. The multiple elections can also produce voter fatigue, especially with, as in Switzerland, multiple referendums (Rallings, Thrasher and Borisyuk 2003).

Federalism

The division of powers among levels of government, and the degree of autonomy available to sub-national governments, is another standard institutional question in the public sector. This question is usually phrased as federalism but the formal constitutional differences between federal and unitary systems tell only part of the story. For example, there are marked differences in the powers available to the provinces or states within federal regimes (Fenna and Hueglin 2010). Likewise, in some instances, sub-national governments in nominally unitary regimes may have more autonomy to raise taxes and make autonomous policy decisions than do those in federal regimes.[8]

We should therefore tend to think of this question of sub-national government more in terms of the degree of decentralization existing within a regime (Falleti 2005). What powers are decentralized – whether to provincial or local governments – and what powers are retained in the center? And to what extent are political powers decentralized? This division of power among various levels of government presents opportunities and barriers to voters attempting to control public policy. On the one hand, more decentralized forms of governance present more opportunities for citizens to participate. On the other, however, more decentralized regimes may make influencing overall patterns of policy more difficult; a party or an interest group would have to be successful in a number of different venues to shape national policy.

Although decentralization is the more generic concept for addressing the question of the allocation of powers among tiers of government, the formal institutions associated with federalism also have some relevance. In particular, having a sub-national tier of government with some degree of sovereignty and having autonomy over some aspects of governing – especially when that involves own-source revenues – creates arrangements that can influence the utility of voting, as well as the pattern of voting.

To be more precise, federalism creates the possibility of another form of divided government. Voters can, if they wish, create patterns in which the central government is controlled by one party or coalition and the states or *Länder* are controlled by another political group. These voting opportunities have special relevance when, as in the case of Germany and Austria, those *Land* governments send representatives to the second chamber of parliament. These second chambers cannot dismiss a government formed in the lower house, but they can make the life of that government rather difficult, as is true in any form of divided government.

The bureaucracy and participation

Bureaucracy and democracy are usually thought of as antithetical concepts, albeit both having substantial relevance for governing. However, the structure of bureaucracies may have some impact, albeit very indirectly, on the behavior of voters and the politicians whom they elect. The accountability function is central to any democratic regime (Brandsma and Schillemans 2013) and elections are far from irrelevant for promoting that accountability. This is especially true if, as Keane (2009) has argued, democracy is increasingly about monitoring government activities rather than voting to attempt to make grand policy decisions.

In addition to the argument concerning the monitory nature of contemporary democracy, the increased presidentialization of governments (see Poguntke and Webb 2007; Savoie 2008; but see Norton 2013 on the United Kingdom) may also emphasize voting as a mechanism for accountability rather than for policy choice. If in parliamentary regimes power is moving toward the executive and parliamentary democracy has in essence become prime ministerial democracies, then voting may be an even blunter instrument than in the past for controlling policy. That is especially true for multi-party systems in which the coalition that will emerge after an election is not known.[9]

The diminished capacity to control policy through the election appears to be a reality of contemporary democracies, and with it there may be a decrease in the real and/or perceived efficacy of voting for many citizens. That said, the necessity of controlling governments retrospectively will, if anything, have been increased by executive dominance in government. With the powers of the political executive parliaments increasing significantly, voters can react to perceived poor policy choices, or other perceived failures, through replacing that executive through a subsequent election.

At the same time that political executives have been increasing their powers relative to parliaments, there have been significant changes in the nature of public bureaucracy that also have made the voting act seemingly less efficacious in controlling the bureaucracy. As early as the 1980s (Day and Klein 1987), it had become clear that the classic form of parliamentary accountability was becoming less dominant and other forms of accountability depending more on the use of social actors and stakeholders were ascendant.

The shift in accountability is only one manifestation of changes in the public bureaucracy that may have some effect on voting, at least indirectly. Part of the logic of the New Public Management (see Christensen and Laegreid 2011) has been to emphasize the role of public administrators in making policy and denigrating their nominal political masters. As well as a general cultural shift within the public sector, structural changes, such as the use of agencies, tended to reduce the control of political leaders over the bureaucracy (Verhoest 2010).

While this shift in the linkage of voting to accountability over the public bureaucracy may tend to devalue voting, the positive side of the story is that these transformations may open different opportunities for participation. Although reforms of the public sector have tended to emphasize the autonomy of the bureaucracy, that autonomy is also limited by increased powers for clients and participants at the level of the individual facility (Gilley 2009). If voting does not provide the public with the type of influence over the executive that should exist in a democracy, there may still be effective forms of participation available for those citizens.

Information costs and voting

Information costs can be a second major variable affecting voting, and especially voting turnout. High information costs can be considered a major deterrent to potential participants in the political process. If voters have to invest heavily in acquiring information then they will be less likely to participate. Either the costs will be too high and they will not seek out the information, or they will not want to consider themselves ignorant when they go to the polls, so will not go. Institutions in the political system, and especially party systems and the nature of political parties, can raise or lower information costs, and hence affect turnout.

Campaign laws themselves may increase information costs for voting. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom, there are limits to the distribution of campaign information, and an inability to purchase media time. In others, campaigning may end a day or several days before the poll, so that last-minute potential voters have less information. And in the interest of preventing bandwagon effects, opinion poll information can be restricted. While done in the interest of fairness in most cases, these mechanisms do impose greater information costs.

While lowering information costs for voters may in general be a positive value for the political system, like so many aspects of designing institutions there will be trade-offs with other important values (Smith 2009). For example, lowering information costs for voting by reducing the number of parties and making the party system more stable (see below) will tend to reduce the representativeness of the party system and the parliament. Likewise, lowering information costs for voters through reducing the number of elective offices, or by reducing opportunities for referendums and initiatives, will potentially have a negative effect on democratic controls over government.

Credible commitment

The concept of credible commitment has been used to describe the need for public sector institutions, such as central banks and regulatory agencies, to make policy choices that will survive beyond a single term of office (Majone 2002; North 1993). Again, if we stretch the concept of credible commitment further, we can argue that political parties as institutions should make credible commitments to policy positions and ideology to reduce the information costs of voters. And if they can reduce those information costs then citizens will find it easier to make choices and to vote.

To some extent, the choice to maintain consistent policy positions is the decision of the party itself. If it wishes to maintain a stable approach to policy across time, there are few constraints on its doing so, other than perhaps electoral success. That said, the electoral systems and electoral laws may also influence the capacity of the party to maintain a predictable position. If we return to Duverger's (1951) classic distinction between parties of maneuver and parties of position, we could argue that parties of maneuver, usually parties in two-party or limited multi-party systems, will provide more unstable, or perhaps merely ambiguous, policy positions. In contrast, parties in more extreme multi-party systems will maintain more consistent positions and thus lower information costs for voters.

Proportional representation also tends to reduce the need for tactical or "sophisticated" voting. Perhaps only when there are questions of getting an allied party over a threshold is there much reason to vote for the party representing the voters' real preferences. In single-member districts, however, there are often significant incentives to vote for a less preferred alternative in order to prevent the least preferred party from winning (see Kiewiet 2013). The possible advantages of this type of voting in turn require higher levels of information from voters than would be true in other voting systems.

Unfortunately, there appears to be an equally viable alternative hypothesis about the role of multi-party systems. More extreme multi-party systems offer fewer barriers to entry for new parties, whether these be personalistic "flash" parties or attempts to create more stable and enduring parties. When there are a number of new parties entering the electoral market, then voters will have to sort through more options and acquire more information in order to make a rational choice among the options. Or they may simply opt not to participate.

The above discussion assumes that voters are indeed making their voting choices based primarily on their policy preferences. We have assumed the same already in some of the discussion of opportunity structures, with the argument being that when multi-party coalition systems obscure the connection between voting, the coalition that is formed, and policy choices, then potential voters may think that their vote is too blunt an instrument to affect the final choices made by government (see Selb 2009). In this case, the necessity of frequently renewing one's stock of relevant political information to take into account new parties that come, and may soon go, may lead potential voters to spend their time and energy elsewhere.

Electoral laws and voting behavior

I have already discussed some general analytic and theoretical approaches concerning the role of institutions in affecting voting. I will now look more specifically at the most significant institution affecting voting, namely electoral laws. These laws will influence voting behavior through both of the mechanisms mentioned above, and may have some more specific effects on the behavior of individuals as they become involved in the political process, as well as on the role of political parties that have an indirect effect on individual behavior.

Law is a fundamental institution of society, and for the political system. For the purposes of defining the opportunities for participation, and defining the impacts of voting behavior, electoral laws represent a crucial legal framework (Bowler 2006). From at least the time of Maurice Duverger (1951), we have understood clearly that electoral laws affect the party system, with two-party systems being likely to occur only in electoral systems with first-past-the-post systems. More recent scholarship (Taagapera and Shugart 1999) has refined the linkage between electoral laws and the capacity of electoral systems to produce outcomes that represent closely the division of votes among parties, and have discussed the effects of various electoral systems on the outcomes of elections.

We can hypothesize that this basic impact of electoral laws on the number of parties and the diversity of the ideologies (or at least electoral platforms) offered by the parties will affect the behavior of voters, as well as their political activities beyond voting. For example, the general argument – supported by some evidence – is that proportional representation systems are related to higher levels of turnout than are single-member district, first-past-the-post systems (Ladner and Milner 1999). This linkage between electoral law and the representativeness of parliaments is a manifestation of the logic of opportunity structures discussed above. If the electoral laws provide more opportunities for parties to enter politics, and therefore make it easier for voters to select parties whose policies they support, then citizens may be more likely to participate.[10]

The general assumption has been that proportional representation is linked to higher levels of turnout (see Brockington 2004, for a nuanced perspective). The effects of proportional representation on turnout appear to be manifested through several paths. The most obvious is that, with multiple parties running for office, the voter is likely to find a party that is close to his or her political views than in the more constrained selection of parties available under other electoral systems. In addition, the voter may feel more efficacious in a proportional representation system, knowing that their party or candidate has a greater opportunity to gain at least some representation.

There may, however, be some point at which the electoral institutions can permit too many parties to participate, and with that cause confusion and impose significant information costs on voters. Leaving aside small and obviously idiosyncratic parties, the Dutch general election of 2012 had 20 parties participating, while the Peruvian elections of 2016 for president had candidates representing 18 parties.[11] Especially if the party system is not well-institutionalized and there are numerous shifts in party names and composition between elections, this proliferation of parties can impose a major information burden on voters.

As well as the possible negative effects of a large number of parties on turnout, the informational demands imposed by more complex electoral systems, such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV), may also suppress participation. If a voter has to rank all candidates in a multi-party election then all but the best informed and most diligent of voters may feel somewhat reluctant to participate. Thus, those electoral systems that provide voters the greatest power over outcomes may also demand the most from those voters. Thus, in this setting there may be a conflict between the opportunities provided to, and the information required of, the voters.

Even in single-member districts, however, there may be effects of other aspects of electoral law on voter turnout. For example Jackman (1987) found that in the United States elections in competitive districts tend to have higher turnout than in those that are less competitive. The same appears to be true in most British elections (Denver 2015). In the competitive districts there was something to vote for, while in less competitive districts there may be little reason to vote, other than to express systemic support. Thus, in American elections with congressional districts and state legislatures increasingly gerrymandered to ensure one party or the other wins consistently, already low levels of turnout should be expected to worsen (Angstrom 2013). The relative absence of gerrymandered and safe seats in proportional representation systems provides voters with greater incentives to turn out to vote on a more consistent basis.

While these two basic notions of the linkage between electoral institutions and voting are useful, there may be several more detailed points that should also be made. The first is that the relationship between electoral laws and turnout is more suggestive than conclusive, and there are certainly cases in which the effects are the opposite of those argued above. The degree of representativeness produced by electoral laws and the capacity of voting to ensure the formation of government are inversely related. Therefore, voters may be deterred from voting if they think that their vote will not be related to the outcomes of the election. That said, however, majoritarian political systems tend to have lower levels of political participation than do proportional representation, arguing that voters appear to value having their views represented more than they do producing winners.

The presence of threshold values for the representation of a party in the parliament may affect the strategies of voters more than it affects the level of turnout. For example, if a political party A likely requires another particular party B as a coalition partner, then voters who actually prefer A may decide, or even be encouraged, to vote for B in order to ensure that B surpasses the electoral threshold. For example, the rather high threshold of 5 percent in German elections may encourage Christian Democratic Union adherents to vote for the Free Democrats in order to ensure that their usual coalition partner is indeed present in parliament.[12]

The threshold requirement may also affect turnout. If adherents of a particular party do not think their party can surpass the needed proportion of votes, then they may choose not to vote unless one of the other available parties is acceptable to them. While the presence of a threshold was intended to deter, at least in part, the representation of radical and anti-systemic parties in parliament, it may have a more pervasive effect of institutionalizing a particular cartel of parties and in the process discouraging voters who want to move away from the status quo, even if in benign directions.

Finally, other changes in electoral laws may also be able to influence turnout, and in a positive direction. Mechanisms such as postal voting, early voting, extending the time period for voting and Sunday elections all appear to increase turnout (Franklin 2001). These mechanisms appear to be especially important in the United States for increasing the electoral participation of members of minority groups.

Other reasons for voting

The above discussion has been premised on an assumption that voters choose parties, or candidates, for policy reasons. We know, however, that voters in many countries tend to be more interested in the capacity of politicians to provide constituency service, and to "bring home the bacon," than they are in their policy stances. That is, voters want representatives who will serve as intermediaries with the bureaucracy, and who can bring public money (whether as infrastructure or government contracts for local firms) to their area. For politicians, then, taking policy stances runs the risk of alienating voters while successful constituency service only makes friends.[13]

If we leave aside for a moment the more clientelistic forms of relationship between voters and their elected representative (Piattoni 2001), we can still identify the presence of an interaction among electoral laws, the provision of benefits for individuals and districts, and voting. First, for this relationship to function, there needs to be some close connection between the voter and the representative, something that is more likely to exist in first-past-the-post majoritarian systems.[14] The relationship is, however, confounded by the tendency for these voting systems to produce incumbency and safe districts, reducing the incentive for voters to turn out. Voters can therefore be free riders, taking the benefits of constituency service when needed but not having to invest time and effort in voting.

Political parties and participation

Not only do electoral laws affect the participation of individuals in politics, as I have argued above, political parties themselves may, as one type of institution, offer more or fewer opportunities for individuals to participate and to be effective in that participation.[15] At one extreme, one can find the American party system in which the leadership of the party has little control over the party and who can run for office in the name of the party. The primary system allows outsiders who have not worked their way up the hierarchy within the party – namely, Donald Trump and Ben Carson – to parachute into candidacy and, especially in state and local elections, even to win office. While the endorsement of the party may still be necessary for election – if nothing else being assured of places on the ballot – that endorsement is possible for an extremely wide array of individuals.

At the other end of this spectrum of political parties, those that function in closed list electoral systems can control not only who runs in their name but also the order in which they appear on the ballot. These more formalized structures and roles for political parties in the electoral process enable them to control political recruitment, but may also provide fewer opportunities for voters to express their views, especially of individual candidates. The capacity to control recruitment and placement of candidates strengthens parties as institutions, but also provides greater predictability for voters and thus lowers the information costs for those voters.

This powerful role assigned to the leadership of parties will be effective when there are strong party loyalties and commitments, as has been true for traditional parties in Europe and, to some extent, Latin America. But the commitment of voters to parties has been decreasing significantly for the past several decades (van Bizen, Mair and Poguntke 2012) and appears likely to continue. The former cartel parties (Katz and Mair 2009) are facing increased competition from "flash parties" and other less institutionalized parties (Barr 2009).

Summary

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate the connection between the institutional design of political systems and the behavior of voters. Although these institutional effects may appear far removed from more proximate causes of voting, such as attitudes and policy preferences, they are nonetheless important for understanding patterns of behavior at an aggregate level. These connections also point to the interactions between individuals and institutions that are important for institutional theory.

As well as the importance for institutional theory, this discussion is obviously very relevant for understanding how political participation – and most notably, voter turnout – can be shaped. While affecting attitudes toward government and a sense of civic duty toward voting may be difficult, institutions can be manipulated more readily. But, as already noted, attempts to affect levels of public participation may be only one of a number of criteria that institutional designers may consider when shaping institutions. Political institutions are complex structures with a wide range of effects on their members and on politics as a whole, and their role in political participation should not be underestimated.

Notes

1 The sociological approach to institutionalism (March and Olsen 1989) defines institutions in terms of these concepts, and does not differentiate clearly between formal and informal institutions. For the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on formal institutions defined in more legalistic and structural terms.
2 One of the best examples of this influence is Matthews (1960).
3 One of the standard understandings of institutional theory is that the environment of any one institution is composed of other institutions.
4 Elinor Ostrom (1990) defined institutions as structures of rules that permit, prescribe and proscribe behaviors by individuals.

5 In Sartori's terminology, this application of the concept of opportunity structures involves increased extension of the concept, although in this case there is not any significant reduction of the intension of the concept.
6 Richard Rose (1976) developed a model of party government that linked voting choices, the characteristics of the individuals occupying government positions and policy choices. He argued that even in majoritarian political systems such as the United Kingdom the linkage between voting and the choices of governments was tenuous.
7 For example, I vote for officials at the county level as well as for the borough in which I reside. And I also vote for school board members.
8 For example, Swedish local governments have substantially more taxing powers than do sub-national governments in federal regimes such as Germany.
9 Of course in some moderate multi-party systems, to use Sartori's term, there may be only a limited number of possible coalitions so that voters would have a much better chance of assessing *ex ante* likely policy choices.
10 For an analysis of the effects of proportional representation as opposed to the first-past-the-post system, see Dunleavy et al. (1998).
11 Perhaps the tradition of compulsory voting in the Netherlands mitigates some of the effects of so many choices for the voters.
12 In the 2013 election, this strategy failed and the Free Democratic Party did not pass the threshold. The Social Democrats have had a somewhat similar relationship with the Green Party, especially at the Land level.
13 This logic is at least part of the reason for high levels of reelection of sitting members of legislatures. For the classic statement, see Fiorina (1977).
14 That said, the STV voting system in Ireland, with the capacity of voters to rank candidates, may create some of the same patterns. See Collins (1985).
15 On political parties as institutions, see Peters (2010, Chapter 8).

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