

Models of voter turnout: a brief idiosyncratic review*

A comment

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There are two rather different traditions that have looked at the question "Why do citizens vote?"

One tradition describes/predicts turnout in terms of demographic and attitudinal characteristics—often by looking for the multivariate regression equation with highest r^2 based on some subset of the variable list in the ICPSR codebook (i.e., every variable known to political science).¹ In one variant of this tradition, voting is treated as just one of a large class of potential forms of political participation (including, e.g., writing a letter to one's Congressman, making a campaign contribution, throwing a pie at the President, etc.).²

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1. See e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980), Cassel and Hill (1981). A variant of this approach, used for analysis of the decline in turnout in U.S. elections over the past two decades, focuses on only those variables which move in the right direction over time, e.g., trust in government (see, e.g., Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1979; Abramson and Aldrich, 1982. For a critique see Cassel, 1982 unpublished).

2. This variant usually generates factor analyses of the extent to which particular forms of participation are linked (see e.g., Uhlaner, 1982). This line of research is also tied to the literature on political socialization (see, e.g., Beck and Jennings, 1982).

A second tradition of turnout research, that in the public choice literature, seeks to model voter turnout in terms of a rational choice calculus in which citizens compare the cost of voting to its probable (or in the Ferejohn, Fiorina (1974, 1975) minimax-regret version, possible) benefits. The classic expected utility-maximizing model is to be found in Downs (1957), though its roots go back at least as far as Joseph Schumpeter. The empirical evidence for the gospel according to Downs is explored in Riker and Ordeshook (1968; cf. Barry 1970). The rational-choice framework has generated a number of models bearing a family resemblance to the classic Downsian view. This work includes the Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974, 1975) minimax-regret model, in which possibilities rather than probabilities are what matter, a view which Grofman (1979) has carried one step further toward *reduction ad absurdum* by introducing mixed strategies: the Tullock self-esteem model, which suggests that it is always rational to vote for yourself, at least if your name is Tullock (or possibly that it is always rational to vote for Gordon Tullock—I am unable to recall the exact details of this model); the Hinich (1981) voting as an act-of-contribution model; the Garvey (1966) abstention-from-alienation model; the Weisberg and Grofman (1981) abstention-from-satisfaction model; and the all too little known minimax-blame model of my UCI colleague Professor Wuffle (1981), which posits abstention from fear (with maybe a little loathing thrown in for good measure). Significant contributions have also been made by Boyd (1981), who pointed out that election turnout in the United States probably has not really declined, it has just been spread across different elections;³ Erickson (1981), who pointed out that people who were not registered were not apt to vote (which pushes the problem one step back); and Sperlich (1971; see also Campbell et al, 1960; Brody and Grofman, 1982) who suggested that voters are less likely to vote if they are confused.⁴ Also, Niemi (1976) has reminded us that voting, like sex, while sometimes a duty, can sometimes also be enjoyable, especially if done in the company of friends. (I am rephrasing here, slightly.)

The two research traditions identified above spring from quite different roots,

3. Professor Boyd's research suggests that the U.S. has the highest ratio of elected officials to citizens of any country in world history. Familiarity with Boyd's work, with work on turnout decline, and with work on the advantages of incumbency in U.S. elections has led Professor Wuffle to assert: "Never have so few elected so many so often."

4. The term "cross-pressured" has also been used rather than "confused," but that term has been given a number of different operationalizations. See references cited above. Relevant here may also be the work of Brunk (1980), who showed that individuals exposed to rational-choice arguments became less likely to vote.

but they have one overwhelming similarity—to date their explanatory power for *individual* decisions to vote or not to vote has been minimal, although each has had some success predicting which categories of voters are more/less likely to vote and in predicting turnout increases/decreases across elections.

Gerald Kramer (personal communication, 1981, only somewhat misquoted) has remarked that rational choice modellers will be able to explain voting and nonvoting as soon as they solve the problem of why people salute the flag even when they know that nobody is looking. The Palfrey/Rosenthal paper offers an elegant mathematical framework for the analysis of dichotomous choices in a multi-actor environment, but as a contribution to empirical social science research on turnout it does not pass the Fannie Grofman test—i.e., it does not help me understand the behavior of my mother (voting behavior, that is).

It is well-known that any single actor's likelihood of being decisive in any given election is miniscule;⁵ yet if everybody decided not to vote, then somebody clearly should—since his/her vote would then determine the election. Resolving what has been called the "paradox of the throwaway vote" (Meehl, 1977) or the "paradox of nonvoting" (Owen and Grofman, 1983 forthcoming) hinges on specifying a model for forming stable expectations. Various authors (e.g., Simon (1957) in his model of bandwagon and underdog effects, Schelling (1971) in his "chain-reaction" model, and Growney (1981)) have looked at related problems. The Palfrey/Rosenthal approach to the paradox of the wasted vote is via game-theoretic equilibrium notions. They look at pure strategy, mixed-pure strategy, and various quasi-symmetric equilibria. While the methods employed are both general and powerful and I have no doubt that the cases they analyze will ultimately prove of considerable interest in a wide variety of applications, only one of the cases they look at strikes me as having much relevance to voter turnout in any realistically featured world — case 8, the pure symmetric case. However, I am biased in that their analysis of this pure symmetric case gives rise to results virtually identical to those in Owen and Grofman (1983 forthcoming), which also uses a game-theoretic derived notion of equilibrium to look at the wasted-voter paradox, with a model similar but not quite identical to that in Palfrey and

5. It is well to recall, however, that Adolph Hitler was first elected head of the Nazi Party by only one vote (One Vote, 1982).

Rosenthal.⁶ In this pure symmetric case, the finding which I regard as most important is the result that, under not unreasonable assumptions, the equilibrium turnout level will actually *increase* with the cost of voting.

6. The Owen/Grofman model (1983 forthcoming) assumes a very large potential electorate and is thus more limited than the models in Palfrey and Rosenthal, which treat the size of the potential electorate as a variable.

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