DOWNSIAN MODEL OF ELECTIONS

Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), which was his doctoral dissertation in economics at Stanford University, is one of the seminal works on electoral behavior. Downs offers a model of voter choice and a model of candidate/party competition, and then he integrates these two models into a dynamic story about how candidates and parties devise platforms based on their anticipation of voter responses to the alternatives available to them, including the option of not voting at all. In addition, Downs offers insights into how voters decide when to seek information and into the role that information plays in voter choice.

The Downsian model of outcome-oriented voter choice is one of the three main approaches to understanding voting behavior. Unlike sociological models that see voter choice and the structure of the party system as rooted in underlying socio-demographic cleavages (for example, urban-rural, regional, class-based, ethnic, or religious conflicts), or the socio-psychological model that emphasizes partisan attachments formed at an early age (which, like choice of religion, are strongly conditioned by family and social environment), the Downsian approach emphasizes the volitional and prospective aspects of voter behavior.

Downs's model of party competition stresses the role of office-seeking politicians. Indeed, the Downsian model is almost schizophrenic in distinguishing the motivations of the voters from those of the politicians. The former wish to gain the election of candidates and parties who will implement policies as close as possible to those they prefer. The latter are seen as indifferent to policies except insofar as the policy platform they propose enables them to gain the support of a winning coalition of voters. Here, Downs's logic (inspired by the work of the economist Joseph Schumpeter) is directly analogous to Adam Smith's view of the "invisible hand." Smith's baker produces goods not out of a beneficent concern for the well-being of his customers but in order to sell them; for Downs, the link between voter desires for policy outputs and the candidates' desire for election is forged as candidates adopt policies that they think will "sell" with the voters. In the Hotelling-Smithies spatial model of economic competition, shops seek to locate where they can maximize their flow of customers; in the Downsian adaptation of this model, politicians compete to locate where (in policy terms) they can attract the most votes.

Another important contribution of *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is that it is the first work to recognize the problematicity of the decision to vote. In the basic Downsian calculus, voting is an instrumentally rational act only when the expected benefits of voting exceed the "opportunity costs" of alternative uses of one's time (including the time involved in deciding how best to vote). The outcome of a process of voting can be thought of as a collective good (as economists such as Mancur Olson use that term). Because any single voter's participation has only a minuscule chance of being decisive in changing the outcome of an election, voting raises the problem of "free riding." Even though a voter may very much want a particular candidate (or party) to win, the payoff he or she expects to get from having that candidate elected, rather than one of the opponents, must be discounted by the probability that the vote will be decisive (an "expected" benefit calculation). Thus, it would appear that a voter who can expect her preferred candidate to win is better off not voting, and a voter who can expect her preferred candidate to lose is also better off not voting. When rationality is judged in purely instrumental terms, only in the presence of electoral uncertainty is it possible for voting to be a rational act.

Of course, if we take Downs literally, then we cannot explain why so many people vote except by appealing to non-instrumental reasons such as a sense of citizen duty, but that does not mean that Downs's analysis is irrelevant. The Downsian approach to voter turnout allows us to appreciate turnout as a puzzle that needs to be explained, but it also identifies factors (for example, expected electoral closeness, magnitude of candidate differences, costs of electoral participation) that can help explain comparative variations in turnout across elections of different types or at different points in time. When judged by that test the Downsian approach does quite well.

Downs also makes important contributions to our understanding of the role that information plays in electoral choice. Just as Downs's approach to voter turnout emphasizes the need to take into account whether one's vote can be expected to make a difference in the election outcome, so his approach to political information emphasizes the need to take into account whether new information can be expected to make a difference in the choice voters make about which candidate or party to support or whether to vote at all. Similarly, just as Downs's approach to voter turnout emphasizes

that voting has costs, so too his approach to information requires us to take into account the costs of gaining new information.

First and foremost, Downs offers what might be called a model of "rational ignorance." Only if new information can be expected to improve our decision making, so as to give us a higher expected payoff than before, and only if that expected gain exceeds the costs of pursuing the new information will it be instrumentally rational to seek additional political knowledge.

Second, although Downs would expect most voters to be relatively ignorant about politics, information useful to political choice may be gained at a relatively low cost as a "by-product" of other activities. For example, while voters may not know the values (or recent time path) of aggregate indicators such as GDP, inflation, or unemployment rates, they can use the information that comes to them when they buy things, and from their conversations with friends and neighbors, to assess inflation, unemployment, and the overall state of the economy.

Third, Downs highlights the "signaling" power of various types of informational cues, such as party labels, interest group endorsements, and professed ideology. To the extent that such cues are reliable predictors of the policy positions of the candidates and parties (or at least their positions relative to one another), such cues can dramatically reduce the costs of gathering information and make possible an informed vote, that is, a vote that matches the choice the voter would make if he or she were in possession of complete information about the options available.

While *An Economic Theory of Democracy* discusses political choices in multiparty settings, its principal focus is on two-party competition in a single election. The result most often associated with Downs is the "median voter theorem." This theorem asserts that, in two-party competition along a single ideological or policy dimension, the candidates of each party will converge toward the median voter in the electorate. This theorem leads us to expect tweedledum-tweedledee politics. However, it would be a mistake to identify the median-voter theorem as the Downsian model of two-party competition; and it would be an even greater mistake to think that spatial models of politics of the sort propounded by Downs are of no value just because in the United States (and in other countries using plurality-based elections) we do not observe the full convergence of party positions that the median voter theorem posits.

First, Downs's analysis does not confine itself to a single dimension. For example, he discusses the feasibility of putting together a winning coalition based on single-issue voting blocs. He also considers the role in voter choice of a candidate or party's previous performance, anticipating Morris Fiorina's notion of retrospective voting.

Second, and more important, even if we posit only a single dimension of political competition, that the election chooses a single candidate, and that the election is decided by a plurality vote, the median voter theorem holds only under very restrictive conditions. Eight assumptions of the basic Downsian model must be met for the median voter theorem to hold. The pure convergence result disappears if, contra Downs, we admit the possibility that other elections are taking place simultaneously in which candidates of each party are also running; or admit the possibility that voters or parties (or both) are looking beyond the outcome of this particular election to see its implications for future policies and future election chances; or recognize that candidates and parties care about more than simply winning, but also about what policies will be adopted (just as voters do); or admit the possibility that voters discount candidate platforms by taking into account the likelihood that the espoused positions will actually be implemented, then the pure convergence result disappears. In two-party contests, the Downsian spatial model of candidate and party competition gives us reasons why, in competition over a single issue dimension, there are pressures toward party convergence. But, within the Downsian framework there may also be strong countervailing, centrifugal pressures even when politics is one-dimensional. For example, if there are party primaries or nomination procedures in which party activists play a major role, then we would expect that candidates will locate somewhere between their party median and the overall voter median. In the United States there is strong empirical support for this prediction.

Downsian models of party competition and electoral choice (and so-called rational choice models of politics generally) have recently come under considerable attack because of alleged deficiencies in empirical performance. Most of that attack is misguided because it views Downs as the final word on election models, rather than as an important first start; takes Downs too literally; or takes too seriously the exaggerated claims of some modelers that game-theory and other mathematical tools allow them to "solve" for optimal electoral behavior, and that political actors will make the choices prescribed by their models. There is no such thing as *the* Downsian model of elections. Downs himself offered a richer and much more nuanced view of political competition than any of those who have sought to formalize Downsian insights. In general, the Downsian proximity model helps us understand how politicians develop strategies to attract votes. Only when we add institutional detail can we develop realistic models with predictive power. Moreover, we should see the Downsian approach as complementary to (rather than

antithetical with) other approaches that help us understand the social embedding of political competition.

See also *Campaigning; Competitiveness of Elections; Democracy and Elections; Manifesto, Election; Paradox of Voting; Turnout; Unopposed Returns; Voting Behavior, Influences on; Wasted Votes.*

BERNARD GROFMAN,
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Downs, Anthony. *An Economic Theory of Democracy.* New York: Harper and Row, 1957.

Grofman, Bernard. "The Neglected Role of the Status Quo in Models of Issue Voting." *Journal of Politics* 47 (1985): 231–237.

————. "Political Economy: Downsian Perspectives." In *New Handbook of Political Science,* edited by Robert Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, 691–701. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

————, ed. *Information, Participation and Choice: An "Economic Theory of Democracy" in Perspective.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Shapiro, Catherine R., David W. Brady, Richard A. Brody, and John A. Ferejohn. "Linking Constituency Opinion and Senate Voting Scores: A Hybrid Explanation." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 15 (1990): 599–623.