The Neglected Role of the Status Quo in Models of Issue Voting

Bernard Grofman

The Journal of Politics, Vol. 47, No. 1. (Feb., 1985), pp. 230-237.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-3816%28198502%2947%3A1%3C230%3ATNROTS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4

The Journal of Politics is currently published by Southern Political Science Association.

The Neglected Role of the Status Quo in Models of Issue Voting

Bernard Grofman
University of California, Irvine

We offer a spatial model of voter choice based on the directionality and magnitude of expected shifts from the status quo. In this model citizens do not look merely at the positions (platforms) of the parties/candidates, but also at how successful potential officeholders are likely to be in implementing changes from the present status quo in the direction they intend. We argue that our model is more faithful in spirit to Downs's (1957) work than the standard operationalization and, more importantly, that it enables us to account for long-run dynamics of electoral politics in which, because of shifts in the location of the status quo, voter choices may change even though party locations and voter ideal points remain unchanged. Moreover, it leads to ideas for improving the operationalization of issue-voting models.

Introduction

In this paper, we shall focus on a spatial model of voter choice based on the directionality and magnitude of expected shifts from the status quo. In this model citizens do not look merely at the positions (platforms) of the parties/candidates but also at how successful potential officeholders are likely to be in implementing changes from the present status quo in the direction they intend. This model, although leading to no new theorems, calls attention to the importance of the location of the status quo, on the one hand, and of voter perception of the ability of candidates to implement their platforms, on the other. These matters are neglected in the standard operationalization of Downs (1957), which simply posits that

* A portion of this research was supported by NSF Grant SES 80-07915, Political Science Program. We are indebted to the Word Processing Center of the UCI School of Social Sciences for manuscript typing, to Sue Pursche for bibliographic assistance, and to Carole Uhlaner and two anonymous referees for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

voters will choose the party/candidate whose issue position(s) most closely resembles their own. Moreover, in some cases our model leads to quite different predictions about voter choice than the standard operationalization. We shall argue that our analysis is both closer in spirit to Downs's work (1957) and, far more importantly, can better account for the long-run dynamics of electoral choice than can the usual operationalization.

Anthony Downs (1957, pp. 38–39) has posited that voters will vote (if they vote at all) for that party/candidate they believe will provide them the outcome with the highest utility. As Downs then observes (p. 39),

> rational voting thus appears to be a very simple matter. But its apparent ease is deceiving, for a crucial question remains: how should a rational voter calculate the expected utility incomes from which he derives his expected party differential? It is in answering this question that we encounter difficulties.

With some important exceptions (e.g., Fiorina, 1978, 1981; Cain, 1978a, 1978b; Kramer, 1977; Hinich and Pollard, 1981; Enelow and Hinich, 1981, 1982; Rabinowitz, 1978), the subsequent literature on spatial modeling has sloughed over these difficulties.

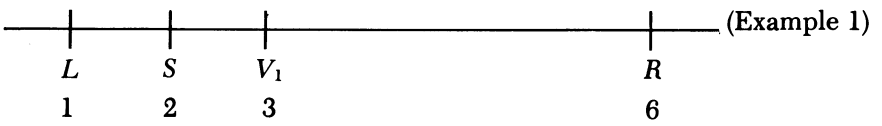
According to Downs (1957, p. 39; emphasis ours),

> a voter makes his decision by comparing future performances he expects from the competing parties. But, if he is rational, *he knows that no party will be able to do everything that it says it will do*. Hence, *he cannot merely compare platforms*; instead he must estimate in his own mind what the parties would actually do were they in power.

Customarily, the party differential in issue-voting models is based on a comparison of party/candidate platforms, with the voter choosing the platform to which he is closest (see, e.g., Davis, Hinich, and Ordeshook, 1970; and most subsequent formal spatial modeling efforts)—but as we have seen from the quotation above, this is an operationalization specifically rejected by Downs's view. Failure to recognize this fact, we believe, has served as an important limitation of most of the actual efforts to test spatial modeling defined in terms of issue voting.

Incremental Change in the Status Quo and the Partisan Differential

Consider the simplest unidimensional spatial voting context involving two-party competition, between party L and party R:



Example 1 shows the platform positions of the two parties, the ideal posi-

tion of a given voter, V_1, and the location of S, the status quo.[1] It might seem obvious that V_1 should vote for L, to which she is far closer than she is to R, and certainly this is the prescription which the Downsian model is customarily interpreted as providing for this situation.[2] However, for Downs it is not the platforms per se but rather the outcome that V_1 thinks each of the parties is actually likely to achieve that matters.[3] If party L is the incumbent party, then the voter may locate the probable outcome of L's continuing in office at S,[4] or may perhaps assume that the outcome of L's being reelected is that the status quo will shift slightly to the left, since that is the direction in which L would be expected to seek to move it. As for party R, the nonincumbent party, clearly it would seek to move the status quo in the rightward direction, *but no "rational" voter would, according to Downs, believe that* R *would succeed in making such a radical shift in one election term*, i.e., R's platform would be "discounted" in part. We shall assume that party R can be characterized as having a performance weight w_R $(0 \leq w_R \leq 1)$ such that, if $\|S,R\|$ is the (unsigned) distance between the status quo and R's preferred outcome (which we shall also denote $d_{S,R}$), R will be predicted to shift the status quo rightward a distance $w_R d_{S,R}$ from S. Let us assume that L also has a performance weight w_L $(0 \leq w_L \leq 1)$.

A party's performance weight can be expected to be a function of past performance relative to the status quo; it might also vary with the magnitude of the gap between R and L, whether the party is or is not the incumbent party, as well as with the nature of the issue dimension being considered and the present location of the status quo.[5] It is important to

[1] For Downs (1957), the status quo has a very special importance in voter judgment of what a party would actually do if reelected because it provides a baseline against which comparisons are made.

[2] According to Downs (1957, p. 42), "the incumbents always regard reelection as a mandate to continue their former policies. Conversely, the opposition party regards its triumph as a command to alter at least some of the incumbent's policies, otherwise, why should people have voted for it?" Downs (1957, pp. 39, 40) asserts that, for a voter, the performance of the incumbent party "gives him the best possible idea of what it will do in the future, assuming its policies have some continuity."

[3] For simplicity we shall, like Downs, avoid the complications posed by introducing party identification as a variable affecting voter choice. For simplicity, we shall assume that voters locate an expected outcome at a point, rather than treating it as a probability distribution over possible points on the line.

[4] Downs (1957) does not distinguish between party and candidate, which leads to ambiguity in interpreting some of his statements; for example, we may have an incumbent party but not an incumbent candidate. However, Downs (1957, chap. 7) argues that the tendency of every rational party is to maintain continuity in its policies.

[5] Downs (1957, pp. 38–46) emphasized the importance of what has subsequently been called retrospective voting. However, he proposed only short-run (one election period) retrospection rather than long-run retrospection.

note that we include in the performance weight not merely the candidate/party's own "competence" but also the situational constraints which can be expected to prevent implementation of its policies, especially of policies far divergent from the present status quo.[6]

In this model, V_1 votes for R iff

$$\|V_1,S - d_{S,L}w_L\| > \|V_1,S + d_{S,R}w_R\|. \tag{1}$$

If $S + d_{S,R}w_R$ is to the left of V_1, for example 1 the above inequality will hold iff

$$V_1 - S + d_{S,L}w_L > V_1 - S - d_{S,R}w_R; \tag{2}$$

i.e., iff

$$d_{S,L}w_L > - d_{S,R}w_R, \tag{3}$$

which is, of course, always true.

If $S + d_{S,R}w_R$ is to the right of V_1, then inequality (1) will hold iff

$$V_1 - S + d_{S,L}w_L > S + d_{S,R}w_R - V_1; \tag{4}$$

i.e., iff

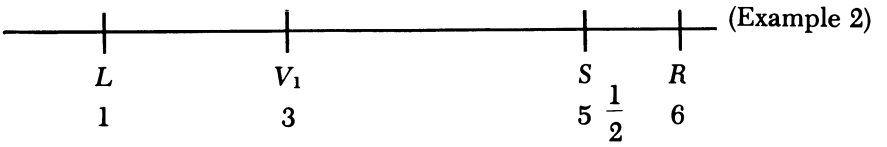
$$V_1 + \frac{d_{S,L}w_L}{2} > S + \frac{d_{S,R}w_R}{2}. \tag{5}$$

In example 1, if $L = 1$, $S = 2$, $V = 3$, $R = 6$, $w_L = \frac{1}{2}$, $w_R = \frac{1}{3}$, then the *expected* L position is at $1\frac{1}{2}$ while the *expected* R position is at $3\frac{1}{3}$. If the above holds except that $w_R = \frac{1}{5}$, then the expected R position is at $2\frac{4}{5}$. In both cases V_1 will vote for R and *not* L, the candidate to whom V_1 is closest.

[6] Downs (1957, pp. 41–45) modifies an earlier emphasis on comparative judgments about actual and hypothetical performance in the immediate past by noting that it would be irrational of citizens to ignore the future when deciding how to vote, since the purpose of voting is to select a future government; he then suggests that voters modify their retrospective comparative judgment by taking into account expected trends – and, when parties do not differ in platforms and it is thus not clear what policies the opposition would change if it got into power, by looking at the performance of the incumbent party relative to an ideal standard.

In example 1, even if $w_R > w_L$ it is possible for V_1's choice of parties to change. For example, if $L = 1$, $S = 2$, $V_1 = 3$, $R = 6$, $w_L = \frac{1}{4}$ and $w_R = \frac{1}{2}$, then R will still be chosen. On the other hand if the above holds except that, say, $w_R = \frac{3}{4}$, then V_1 will choose L. In example 1, because V_1 would like to see change in a rightward direction, she will vote for R as long as R doesn't overshoot, i.e., generate such a radical shift from the status quo as to violate inequality (4).

Another example will prove instructive:



In this example L, V_1, and R are at the same place on the line as in example 1, but S has shifted considerably to the right. As we have drawn it, regardless of w_L and w_R V_1 will always vote for L since, as before, $d_{L,V_1} < d_{V_1,R}$; but now $d_{V_1,S} > d_{V_1,L}$ and hence, even if $w_L = 1$ and $w_R = 0$, V_1 will still prefer L to R.

In comparing example 2 to example 1 we see that V_1's preferences for L relative to R can change even if V_1, L, R, w_L, and w_R remain unchanged, if there has been a sufficient change in S. From the various cases considered in example 1 we saw that, even if V_1, L, R, S, and w_L remain unchanged, V_1's choice of R vs. L can vary with w_R. (Analogously, of course, if V_1, L, R, S, and w_R remain unchanged, the choice of R vs. L can vary with w_L.) Indeed, in general, varying even only one parameter while holding the other five constant may still affect V_1's choice.

If all voters have identical values of w_R and w_L and are identical in where they locate party platforms, then the spatial voting game in the above model is identical to the standard spatial voting game where voters choose the party platform which is closest, with all voters unchanged in position *but* with $L = S - d_{S,L}w_L$ and $R = S + d_{S,R}w_R$. Hence, the usual median voter result remains unchanged.[7] Indeed, it is even the

[7] We could generalize our model to more than one dimension and show that, under the specified assumptions, there exists a straightforward transformation of the L and R positions to generate the usual multidimensional spatial voting game as a choice between competing platforms in which the standard results (see, e.g., Riker and Ordeshook, 1973) about

same median voter as in the voting game before the transformation, since voter positions remain unchanged by the transformation with only the "effective" position of the parties being affected. However, as we saw above (treating V_1 for convenience as the median voter), even though the median voter's ideal *position* is unaffected by the transformation, the voter's *choice* is affected by w_R, w_L, and the location of S.

Discussion

The model above has two interesting implications which are absent from the usual operationalization of the Downsian model but which seem closer to the spirit of Downs's own discussion of the voter's decision calculus. First, in the above model we may have a shift in voter choice even though party platforms have not changed; this is because it is the comparative magnitudes of the expected changes from the status quo which are relevant, and these depend upon S, w_R, and w_L. The status quo changes with changes in policies, the performance weight may change with new information (e.g., that gleaned from a set of observations on what happens when a new party is in power). If, for example, R follows L (e.g., Reagan following Carter), then absent persuasion and conversion effects (i.e., shifts in V_1's own location), we will have a voter "swing" back in the leftward direction to the extent that R actually succeeds in shifting the status quo to the right—thus creating a natural equilibrating force moving politics back toward the median voter (cf. Stokes, 1966). However, like any mechanism with imperfect feedback, there can be oscillation around the median voter position, especially if there are forces (e.g., party activists) which cause the parties to locate away from the societal median in the direction of the median of the internal party electorate (cf. Aldrich, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c).

Second, the expected performance of a party/candidate can affect its election chances, and it is not always advantageous to be thought able actually to implement the policies being proposed. If the point a party proposes as its goal is farther away from what the majority of voters want than is the platform proposed by its opponent, but if the majority of the electorate does want some shift in the status quo in the *direction* being proposed, then a high value of w may cost an election if it causes the party in question to "overshoot" the mark (i.e., to be farther away in expected outcome from the position of the median voter than is the opposition). Thus, Ronald Reagan may have benefited from the fact that some of the voters unhappy with policies seen as "too liberal" still did not believe

equilibria or lack thereof apply. We are dealing here with issue positions rather than valence issues. If all voters want less chance of war, say, then it is always the candidate seen as likely to be more effective in reducing the likelihood of war who will be preferred.

Reagan would actually be able to carry out in full the drastic changes in policy in the conservative direction called for by his platform.[8] This voter skepticism about Reagan's ability to implement his policies could realistically have been based on the now well-known constraints operating on any president—constraints which could only be intensified in the case of a president who would not have a unified Congress backing his policies, and whose policies called for radical restructuring of the federal bureaucracy and reversals of many long-standing trends.[9]

References

Aldrich, John H. (1980a). *Before the Convention: Strategies and Choices in Presidential Nomination Campaigns.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

_____ (1980b). "Rational Choice and Systems Modeling: The Case of Voting and Presidential Primaries." *Public Policy and Political Studies Center,* Political Science Department, Michigan State University. Working paper no. 8.

_____ (1980c). "A Dynamic Model of Presidential Nomination Campaigns." *American Political Science Review* 74: 651–69.

Cain, Bruce E. (1978a). "Strategic Voting in Britain." *American Journal of Political Science* 22: 639–55.

[8] There has been some interesting work on spatial voting which has focused on directionality of change as the key to voter choice (Rabinowitz, 1978; Coughlin and Nitzan, 1981). However, this work does not deal with the expected *magnitude* of shift relative to what is desired. Enelow and Hinich (1981) propose a model which includes candidate competence, as do Hinich and Pollard (1981). In Enelow and Hinich (1981) competence plays an additive rather than a multiplicative role. We see this model as complementary rather than conflicting with our own analysis. Thus, it may well be that, ceteris paribus, voters prefer more competent to less competent candidates. After this paper was completed I read Enelow and Hinich (1984, chap. 4) which contains an argument similar in spirit to that given above, but without the stress on the implications of a changing location for the status quo.

[9] With appropriate survey data it would be possible empirically to compare the predictive power of the model given above with the usual model which predicts that a voter will simply pick the candidate/party with platform closest to his own. In the 1980 SRC-NES issue questions, for each of the issues dealt with, there are questions about candidate and party locations and about the voter's own preferred position. There is also a question on the voter's perception of "the Federal Government's position on [the issue]," which can be taken as the voter's perception of the status quo on that issue. Thus, four of the six elements of our model can be specified with SRC data. Unfortunately, however, we were not able to find a clear analogue to candidate's general competence, although the 1980 battery has a question about leadership and another about ability to solve economic problems. Still, it might be interesting to see to what extent there was a divergence between perceived government position and perceived position of the incumbent party president, since such a divergence would lend support to the claim that voters do distinguish between what a party/candidate wants to do and what they in fact accomplish (e.g., the status quo). This would thus indirectly provide support for the potential utility of the model we have proposed to explain voter choice and the long-run dynamics of party/candidate competition. We leave that topic to another paper.

_____ (1978b). "Dynamic and Static Components of Political Support in Britain." *American Journal of Political Science* 22: 849–66.

Coughlin, Peter, and Shmuel Nitzan (1981). "Directional and Local Electoral Equilibria with Probabilistic Voting." *Journal of Economic Theory* 24: 226–39.

Davis, Otto M., Melvin Hinich, and Peter C. Ordeshook (1970). "An Expository Development of a Mathematical Model of the Electoral Process." *American Political Science Review* 64: 426–48.

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

Enelow, James M., and Melvin J. Hinich (1981). "Nonspatial Candidate Characteristics and Electoral Competition." Unpublished MS.

_____ (1982). "Ideology, Issues, and the Spatial Theory of Elections." *American Political Science Review* 76: 493–501.

_____ (1984). *The Spatial Theory of Voting.* London: Cambridge University Press.

Fiorina, Morris P. (1978). "Economic Retrospective Voting in American National Elections: A Micro-Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 22: 426–43.

_____ (1981). *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hinich, Melvin J., and Walker Pollard (1981). "A New Approach to the Spatial Theory of Party Competition." *American Journal of Political Science* 25: 323–41.

Kramer, Gerald H. (1977). "A Dynamic Model of Political Equilibrium." *Journal of Economic Theory* 16: 310–34.

Rabinowitz, George (1978). "On the Nature of Political Issues: Insights from a Spatial Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 22: 793–817.

Richelson, Jeffrey T. (1982). "Social Choice and the Status Quo." Unpublished MS.

Riker, William, and Peter C. Ordeshook (1973). *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Shepsle, Kenneth A., and Barry R. Weingast (1982). "Institutionalizing Majority Rule: A Social Choice Theory with Policy Implications." *AEA Papers and Proceedings* (May) 1982: 367–71.

Stokes, D. E. (1966). "Some Dynamic Elements of Contests for the Presidency." *American Political Science Review* 60: 19–28.

Zechman, Martin J. (1978). "Dynamic Models of Voting Behavior and Spatial Models of Party Competition." Working Papers in Methodology #10, Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.