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Must Liberals Always Vote for Liberals and Need the More Competent Candidate Always Be Preferred?

AMIHAI GLAZER AND BERNARD GROFMAN

Anthony Downs's¹ model of voter choice is customarily interpreted to mean that each voter chooses the candidate whose positions are closest to the voter's.² Actually, however, this is too simple a picture of Downs's views. Downs anticipated ideas of prospective and performance-based retrospective voting. He recognized that voters evaluate candidates in terms of their past performances and expectations about future performance, and may discount issue proximity to a candidate if the candidate is not expected to be able to live up to his campaign promises on the issue in question.³

The aim of this Note is to demonstrate that a more sophisticated view of the Downsian model leads to some results that at first appear quite counter-intuitive. In particular:

- (1) a liberal voter may prefer the conservative candidate;
- (2) voters may sometimes prefer the candidate who is viewed as less able (or less likely) to carry out his campaign promises.

To understand why liberals need not always vote for liberals and why the more competent candidate need not be preferred, we need to understand how specification of the feasible set of outcomes affects voter choice, and how candidates communicate their views to voters. The set of feasible policy outcomes is known to economists as a possibility frontier. The importance of the possibility frontier for Downsian models has only recently been recognized.⁴ Goodin has done closely related work,⁵ with a probabilistic framework of choice where 'politicians with right-wing preferences can have more possibilities on the left wing than do leftist politicians themselves and vice versa.' Goodin's model, like the one we present, generates the two counter-intuitive results specified above. Our work, however, like that of McCubbins and Schwartz,⁶ uses a deterministic model. Also, our work is readily generalizable to multidimensional-issue space.

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¹ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

² See, e.g., Otto A. Davis, Melvin J. Hinich and Peter C. Ordeshook, 'An Expository Development of a Mathematical Model of Policy Formation in a Democratic Society', *American Political Science Review*, 64 (1970), 426-48.

³ See discussion in Bernard Grofman, 'The Neglected Role of the Status Quo in Models of Issue Voting', *Journal of Politics*, 47 (1985), 231-37 and in Bernard Grofman, 'Models of Voting', in Samuel Long, ed., *Micropolitics Annual* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1987), pp. 31-61, of how Downs's views have been distorted.

⁴ See Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz, 'The Politics of Flatland', *Public Choice*, 46 (1985), 45-60, and William R. Keech, 'Elections and Macroeconomic Policy Optimization', *American Journal of Political Science*, 24 (1980), 345-67.

⁵ Robert E. Goodin, 'Voting through the Looking Glass', *American Political Science Review*, 77 (1983), 420-34, p. 424.

⁶ McCubbins and Schwartz, 'The Politics of Flatland'.

We suppose that each candidate concisely states his preferences by specifying a utility function over possible policy outcomes. As will be seen below, the combination of a utility function and a possibility frontier determines the policies a candidate will favour under different conditions. The simplest assumption about the utility function a candidate presents is that the candidate indicates his most preferred position in some n -dimensional policy space with utility decreasing with distance from that point. (Such a most preferred position is called a 'bliss point'.) The candidate's bliss point identifies the candidate's ideology.

Ideology is merely a shorthand for expressing positions on numerous issues. Ideology need have no psychological meaning, and ideology need not have any substantive consistency under this interpretation. Note further that we need not assume that a candidate simply wishes to maximize his own utility. The position of his bliss point and the set of indifference curves a candidate presents to voters is merely a way of explaining to them the policies the candidate would choose under different conditions. A candidate can, and often will, choose that bliss point (or equivalently that set of indifference curves) that he believes will attract the most votes.

Consider Figure 1, which for simplicity of exposition supposes that the preferences of voters and candidates can be represented by bliss points (indicating the most preferred set of issue positions) and circular indifference curves in a two-dimensional issue space.⁷ The voter must choose between candidates Smith and Jones. The possibility set, i.e., the set of feasible outcomes (as seen by the voters), is bounded by the possibility frontier, line PP. Again for simplicity, we assume that all voters see the same possibility frontier. The voter's own bliss point is at point Voter. The voter will support that candidate who will choose the *feasible* policy that is closest to the voter's bliss point; voters assume that each candidate will support the *feasible* policy closest to the candidate's own bliss point. In Figure 1, candidate Smith, with a bliss point at point Smith, will support policy S. Candidate Jones, with a bliss point at point Jones, will support policy J. Although point Voter is equidistant to points Smith and Jones, point Voter is closer to J than to S, and the voter will prefer Jones over Smith.

Suppose instead that the possibility frontier was line PP'. Candidate Smith would choose policy S' (that is, the point on PP' which lies closest to point Smith), and candidate Jones would choose policy J'. The voter would now prefer Smith over Jones since the distance from point Voter to point S' is less than the distance from point Voter to point J'.

We have now demonstrated how changing the set of outcomes a voter considers to be possible can change which candidate a voter prefers. Indeed, the perceived possibility frontier may lead a voter to prefer a candidate whose ideology is less attractive than his opponent's, but the *effects* of whose preferences will be expected to result in a *feasible* outcome closer to what the voter wants. Such an example is shown in Figure 2. Even though Jones is closer than Smith to the voter, for both PP and PP' the alternatives that Smith would choose are preferred by the voter to those that would be chosen by Jones.

The examples in Figure 1 and Figure 2 can be straightforwardly extended to the general case of convex indifference curves and multiple dimensions.⁸ We can also extend

⁷ Our analysis applies for more general specifications but is most easily illustrated under the specified simplifying assumptions. These assumptions are in the spirit of those made by numerous other authors.

⁸ However, in more than two dimensions there will usually not be an equilibrium outcome of majority-rule voting.

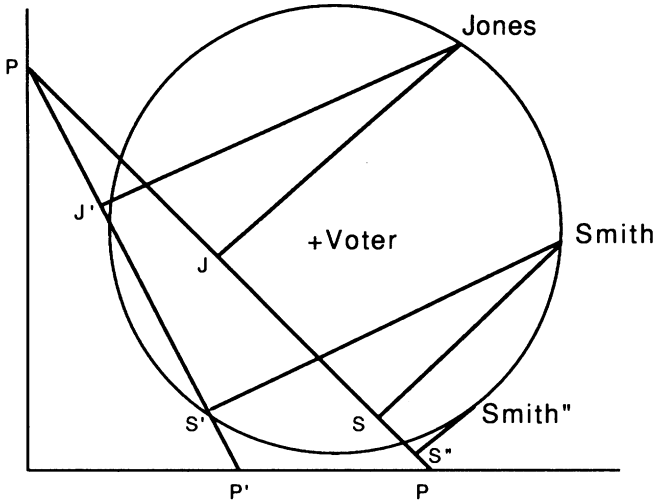


Fig. 1. Voter's choice may depend on possibility frontier

the analysis to apply to 'non-satiated preferences' of the sort commonly studied in micro-economics, i.e., situations where more of a given good is always desired (subject to a budget constraint) and the differences among voters (or candidates) are captured by indifference curves whose slopes reflect trade-off ratios among the different goods. With non-satiated preferences, too, we may readily show that the 'closest' candidate need not always be preferred. The graphical illustrations of this point are similar to those shown in Figures 1 and 2, and we have omitted them to save space.

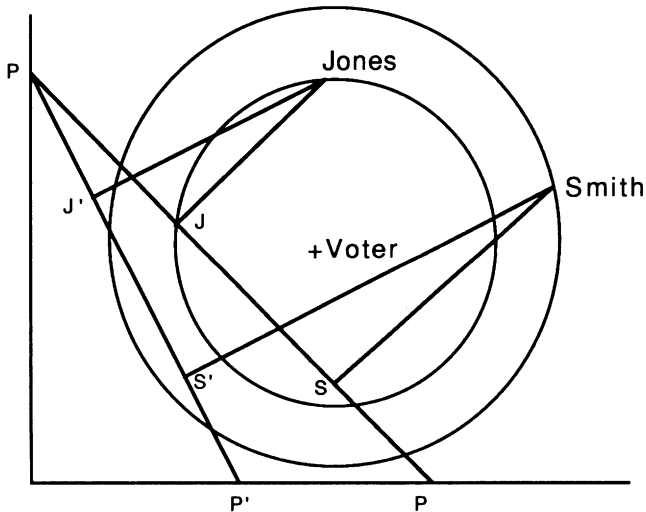


Fig. 2. Voter may not vote for candidate with closest bliss point

EVALUATING THE COMPETENCE OF CANDIDATES

We have so far assumed that the two candidates can attain outcomes that are on the same possibility frontier. Some candidates, however, are able to implement policies that others cannot. This point has been made most forcibly by Goodin.⁹ A number of other authors¹⁰ recognize the importance of candidate performance (or performance potential) and extend the standard spatial model to incorporate the performance component of voter choice. Enelow and Hinich analyse candidate competence in an additive fashion. Grofman follows Downs to argue that a voter will discount certain issue stands made by a candidate if the voter believes that the candidate will not be able to implement the policies he espouses. More specifically, Grofman supposes that a voter assigns each candidate a performance weight on each issue, so that the distance between the voter's ideal point and the candidate's position on each issue is multiplied (that is, discounted) by that factor: voters do not believe all campaign promises – especially when what is promised is a dramatic and immediate change in long-standing policy trends. Thus, Reagan's 1980 claim that he would dismantle the government bureaucracy and reduce federal spending should rightly have been suspect.

While Grofman's model yields some useful insights into the dynamics of two-party politics,¹¹ it is in need of modification. In particular, his model cannot account for the behaviour of voters who view a certain candidate (for example, Jimmy Carter in 1980) as unable to cope with the nation's problems: voters did not discount Carter's positions, they discounted him. Similarly, Goodin's article, while making an intriguing point about the ability of candidates to implement policies at a polar opposite to the preferences of their own supporters (e.g., Nixon's *rapprochement* with China), does not readily generalize to a consideration of alternative possibility frontiers that are not tied to this specific substantive insight.

In terms of our approach, we suppose that, in general, some candidates are able to implement policies others cannot; that is, different candidates choose among policies that lie along different possibility frontiers. For example, Republicans may be able to take certain initiatives in foreign policy (say, an opening to Communist China in the 1970s) that Democrats could not have taken as easily, or one candidate simply may be more competent than another.

Referring back to Figure 1, let Smith be the more competent candidate, i.e., let line PP be a possibility frontier that candidate Smith can reach but that candidate Jones cannot. Assume that Jones can carry out only policies that lie on the inferior possibility frontier PP', so that he would implement policy J'. Let Smith's bliss point be at point Smith"; note that points Jones and Smith" are equidistant from the voter's bliss point. Smith would implement policy S" on line PP, which the voter sees as inferior to the point J' chosen by Jones. Thus, the voter prefers the less competent candidate. Of course, this example depends upon the exact shape of the possibility frontiers and on the locations of Smith and Jones relative to the voter. None the less, it demonstrates that competence is not always a virtue.

⁹ Goodin, 'Voting Through the Looking Glass'.

¹⁰ See Grofman, 'The Neglected Role' and James Enelow and Melvin Hinich, *The Spatial Theory of Voting: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 231–37.

¹¹ For example, Grofman ('The Neglected Role') uses his model to show that if the status quo goes too far to the left, voters with centrist and even left-centrist views who wish to move policy somewhat to the right will vote for right-wing candidates over left-wing candidates to whom they are closer in position. Note that sometimes this will lead to 'overshooting' the medium voter.

DISCUSSION

A further implication of our analysis is that, in contrast to the implications of the standard spatial model, candidates may not find it worthwhile to choose the same ideologies, and a challenger may not wish to choose positions that are very close to those of the incumbent. In particular, suppose candidate Jones is not as competent as candidate Smith, and suppose voters would prefer the more competent of otherwise identical candidates. Then the only chance that Jones has of winning is to present preferences which imply a set of positions that differ from those of Smith.¹²

Figures 1 and 2 also illustrate that a candidate who explains his positions indirectly, by means of a bliss point (or indifference curves), can thereby succinctly inform voters what policies he would choose under a host of different circumstances, or possibility frontiers. If instead a candidate specified his policies directly, he might have to do so for each of hundreds or even thousands of conditions that would arise during his term of office. The candidate would find it costly and difficult to do so, and voters may be reluctant to support a candidate whose positions under different circumstances are unclear.

It might seem that candidates could simply locate themselves at the point on the possibility frontier closest to the median voter. However, real political contests are apt to take place in an environment of imperfect information. In such an environment, voters need not be uniform in their estimate of where the possibility frontier lies, nor, even more importantly, need they see the same possibility frontier for each candidate. Moreover, voter expectations of what is possible may change over the course of a campaign both in response to 'learning' and in response to exogenous events (e.g., a market crash). While some form of probabilistic optimization by candidates is possible,¹³ the basic point of this Note, that voter choice is a function not just of what candidates say they are going to do but also of what voters think it is possible for them to do, remains unaffected. While this point, once clearly stated, may seem trivial, with only a few key exceptions (such as Goodin) it has been almost completely neglected by theorists in the Downsian tradition.

The analysis above also has implications for empirical research. For example, Miller and Shanks¹⁴ attempted to distinguish between policy preference and performance components of voter choice in the 1980 presidential election. They also recognized that preference for issue direction movement from the status quo can be more important in voter evaluations than the usual simple-issue proximity measures. None the less, thorough as their work is, it fails to depict voter choice appropriately. We have shown that whether a voter prefers one candidate's ideology over another's depends on the voter's beliefs about what policies will prove feasible. Similarly we showed that a voter evaluates the com-

¹² This is related to but distinct from the claim that a presidential candidate with foreign-policy experience will make foreign policy a campaign issue, and that one with management experience will emphasize efficiency in government.

¹³ Cf. Peter Coughlin and Shmuel Nitzan, 'Electoral Outcomes with Probabilistic Voting and Nash Social Welfare Minima', *Journal of Public Economics*, 15 (1981), 113-22; A. Glazer, B. Grofman and G. Owen, 'A Model of Candidate Convergence Under Uncertainty About Voter Preferences', *Mathematical Modelling*, forthcoming. In two dimensions for a fixed possibility frontier an 'optimal' location is guaranteed; in multiple dimensions in general there will be no core even when the voting game is restricted to points on the possibility frontier. Even in two dimensions, in general there will be no single candidate location that is optimal for all possibility frontiers.

¹⁴ Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, 'Policy Directions and Presidential Leadership: Alternative Interpretations of the 1980 Presidential Election', *British Journal of Political Science*, 12 (1982), 299-356.

petence of candidates in the light of their ideologies; indeed, the voter may prefer the less able of otherwise similar candidates. It can thus be misleading to ask, as Miller and Shanks (1982, p. 351) did, whether policy preferences or performance evaluation was 'most important in the 1980 election'. The better question is 'How do voters *jointly* consider the policies and abilities of candidates in deciding whom to support?' This is the question that our model seeks to answer.¹⁵

¹⁵ It may also be the case that a candidate's expected performance can be anticipated as a function of the candidate's 'true' policy positions as distinct from those stated in order to maximize the likelihood of election. Some of what a candidate says must be taken as purely for 'public consumption'. But which part?