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Information, Participation,
and Choice

An Economic Theory of Democracy
in Perspective

Edited by Bernard Grofman

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Introduction

Bernard Grofman

Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, originally published in 1957, is one of the five founding books of the public choice movement, along with Kenneth J. Arrow's *Social Choice and Individual Values* ([1951] 1962), Duncan Black's *The Theory of Committees and Elections* (1958), James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock's *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (1962), and *The Logic of Collective Action* by Mancur Olson, Jr. ([1965] 1971). All were written by economists, and all appeared between the years 1951 and 1965.¹ Each has spawned a vast literature and has had ramifications throughout the social sciences and in allied disciplines such as law and philosophy.² Collectively these works and their successors have defined a research approach and a research agenda that has transformed the way political scientists and economists write about politics—the “rational choice” perspective.³ Of these books, however, it is *An Eco-*

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1. I would be inclined to add William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (1962) to this Pentateuch, even though its influence has been largely confined to political science.

2. The example of these works inspired numerous scholars in succeeding decades to apply tools derived from microeconomics and game theory to a wide range of political phenomena, including interest groups, Congress, and the courts.

3. That perspective's success in producing research that fills the pages of the leading political science journals and its perceived normative and empirical shortcomings and claimed ideological bias have led to a recent counterreaction of “rational choice bashing” (see last essay in this volume). This volume is devoted to a study of Downs's influence on the study of voter choice and party competition, and is anchored in empirical debate about competing explanations of specific phenomena and in the development of new models rooted in ideas derived from Downs. With the notable exception of my own brief essay at the end of the volume, all the authors in this book eschew abstract philosophical debate about the merits of rational choice modeling except as the essays happen to deal with specific topics where empirical research can provide at least an indirect test of competing assumptions. As noted in the acknowledgments, many of the chapters in this volume were papers given at the first day of a two-day conference on “*An Economic Theory of Democracy* in Thirty-Year Perspective” held at the University of California, Irvine, in

nomie Theory of Democracy that had both the earlier⁴ and the greatest impact on the political science discipline.⁵

Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is an important work for a number of reasons. First, by positing the desire of politicians to be elected and the corresponding need to construct candidate and party platforms with voter preferences in mind, it introduced a simple model of voter choice and political party competition that has helped make sense of a number of features of American political life that the earlier sociological and social psychological approaches failed to account for satisfactorily. Downs's contribution to modeling party competition, although inspired by ideas from Joseph A. Schumpeter (1950) and Harold Hotelling (1929),⁶ models party convergence and the special role of the median voter in a way that makes it virtually impossible to think of these concepts without also thinking of Downs.⁷

Second, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* helped inspire reevaluation of the 1950s (and earlier) civics textbook model of democracy. On the one hand, Downs provides a view of governmental action (harkening back to that in the *Federalist Papers*) that recognizes that government is a human agency

1989. Papers given at the second day of that conference dealt with the more philosophical debate about competing theories of politics and human behavior. The latter papers are collected in Monroe 1991, and the reader is referred to that volume and to Mansbridge 1990 for an excellent introduction to the various views in the general debate over the utility of rational choice modeling and about the nature of human nature.

4. Arrow's work began to achieve its present-day prominence after its second edition appeared in 1962, although the ideas of Arrow (and of Duncan Black) were introduced into political science by William H. Riker even earlier (Riker 1958, 1961).

5. As Martin Wattenberg (1991, 17–18) points out, "The six year interval from 1954 to 1960 was a truly formative period in voting behavior research." Three seminal works were published (*Voting* [Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954], *The American Voter* [Campbell et al., 1960], and *An Economic Theory of Democracy* [Downs 1957b]), each of which "reflected a unique disciplinary perspective" (sociology, social psychology, and economics, respectively) and which, collectively, have "set much of the agenda of voting." Wattenberg (1991) shows that *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is now the most widely cited research work in political science by a living scholar. Shortly after publication its citations began to exceed those to *Voting*, and by the late 1970s its citations exceeded those to the *American Voter*, with the gap continuing to widen. It also far outdistances the best-known successor to the *American Voter*, the *Changing American Voter* (Nie and Verba 1976), with seven times as many citations as that work in 1990.

The areas where *An Economic Theory of Democracy* has probably had its greatest impact are in the study of voter choice (see, e.g., Grofman 1987 for a partial review), party competition (see, e.g., Davis, Hinich, and Ordeshook, 1970, for early work in this area; see especially the excellent summaries of work to date in Enelow and Hinich 1984, 1990b), and voter turnout (see chap. 4 for a partial review).

6. Downs was introduced to the ideas of Schumpeter by Julius Margolis, then a professor at Stanford. Margolis suggested to Downs that he explore Schumpeterian ideas for his dissertation, done under the supervision of Kenneth J. Arrow (see chap. 13).

7. Albeit this way of thinking about politics has become so familiar that citations to its source are now often omitted.

whose (elected) officials must be “privately motivated to carry out their social functions” (Downs 1957b, 290). On the other hand, Downs provides a view of voters that recognizes the almost total absence of incentives for them to gather knowledge about politics or to be politically active. The ideas of rational ignorance and the rationality of abstention developed by Downs have become an indispensable component of any discussion of citizenship, even among those who find these ideas abhorrent to a “strong” concept of participatory democracy (cf. Barber 1984).⁸

Third, there are other contributions of Downs that, although not nearly as well-known as his insights into incentives for party convergence, rational ignorance, and the rationality of abstention in a world where voting is not costless, are, I believe, of the same order of importance as these ideas.⁹ These include the notion of ideology as an information heuristic, party labels as signaling devices,¹⁰ and the feasibility of putting together a winning coalition based on single-issue voting blocs.

As a seminal work, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* suffers from the triple dangers of (1) being forever cited but rarely if ever read, with its ideas so simplified as to be almost unrecognizable, (2) being regarded as outmoded or irrelevant, (3) having its central ideas so elaborated by ostensible refinements that what was good and sensible about the original gets lost amidst the subsequent encrustations. Each of these calamities has befallen Downs’s 1957 work. On the one hand, the key ideas in it have degenerated into talismanic phrases that are treated as gospel truths, for example, along the general lines of “since Downs showed that parties must converge to the median, then there can’t be any real differences between Republicans and Democrats,” while, on the other hand, these ideas have been dismissed as irrelevant or nonsensical, for example, along the general lines of “since Downs showed that rational voters don’t vote, then Downs (and rational choice modeling in general) must be full of hot air, because people *do* vote; moreover I vote, and you can’t tell me that *I’m* not rational.” Moreover, Downs’s ideas about party competition have inspired a variety of exercises in mathematical modeling, some of which have contributed significantly to our understanding of candidate and voter behavior, but some of which are almost completely divorced from any touch with the politics whose realities Downs was trying to make sense of.¹¹ As a

8. See, e.g., chapter 1 and the various essays in Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990.

9. My colleague A Wuffie (personal communication, August 1990) has claimed that no book is remembered for more than one or two ideas. It is a mark of the importance of *An Economic Theory of Democracy* that it is remembered for at least three.

10. Built upon by Morris P. Fiorina (1979) in his work on retrospective voting.

11. Some of the social choice literature can best be taken as contributions to pure mathematics and should be judged by those standards. However, most public choice work is intended as a contribution to social science. An unwillingness on the part of some modelers to explain results

consequence of the all too frequent trivializing and/or esotericizing of its message, too few political scientists see *An Economic Theory of Democracy* as the major contribution to political theory that it is, and many of those of who do see Downs as a democratic theorist do so only to reject what he has to say as fundamentally erroneous.¹²

The purpose of this volume is neither to praise Downs nor to bury him. The volume's purpose is threefold. First and quite simply, it is to subject *An Economic Theory of Democracy* to a careful rereading, with the aim of identifying and clarifying its central ideas, including those that have been neglected by succeeding generations of scholars.¹³ Like any true classic, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* continues to repay careful reading. A second purpose is to provide a series of essays by scholars summarizing the research findings of the literature in political science and economics that the book has inspired. These essays—on central topics in Downs's classic such as party competition, voter choice, and political participation—are intended to aid political scientists of a less mathematical bent to make sense of the relevant literature subsequent to Downs's work. Third, it is to suggest the potential of what I refer to as "neo-Downsian" modeling, by including chapters (such as one on the implications of vice-presidential selection) that build on *An Economic Theory of Democracy* to develop what I call a more "institution-rich" theory of political competition.

I wish to be quite open about the idiosyncratic features of this volume that so clearly reflect the editor's own prejudices. First, all but one of the contributors to this volume identify with the public choice tradition in which

in a fashion that can be understood in intuitive terms by less technically trained scholars makes useful communication between formal modelers and other social scientists unnecessarily difficult. Moreover, a few scholars who see themselves as doing applied modeling have written as if nothing of real importance can be said about a topic such as political party competition unless it is in the form of a theorem about strategic voting over n -dimensional issue space, rather than regarding mathematical results as the basis for insights and hypotheses about actual politics.

12. However, even when Downs is wrong he is usually wrong in a useful way, by raising the question of why things are not as the model he proposes suggests they ought to be. For example, confronting the questions "Why don't parties converge?" and "Why do voters vote even in situations where their vote has no discernible likelihood of influencing the outcome?" has forced political scientists to think through important conceptual and empirical issues that had previously either not been thought about or, if thought about, had been given unsatisfactory answers.

13. For example, the only work on threshold models of which I am aware that acknowledges Downs's contributions in this area is chapter 2. In like manner, Downs's discussion of models of political persuasion in a world of uncertainty (Downs 1957b, 83–88), has been almost completely neglected. Chapter 15, however, does develop a notion of persuasion based on appeals to long-run as opposed to short-run interest. Because rational choice modeling is often accused of always taking preferences as fixed, it is particularly unfortunate that few scholars seem aware of Downs's own views of the importance of political persuasion.

An Economic Theory of Democracy is one of the canonical works.¹⁴ Second, my own research contributions to the literature on parties and voter choice and those of my coauthors are very much overrepresented. Third, I have sought to pick chapters for this volume that are true to Downs's view that modeling ought to begin with a desire to understand human behavior and to answer real questions. In the appendix to *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Downs considers the matchup between his models and real world data, and his modeling efforts were guided by knowledge of the basic features of the data, such as the extent of voter ignorance about politics. I believe very strongly that work that builds on Downs's contribution should follow his lead in that regard.¹⁵

Information and Choice

The chapters in part one review some of the most important ideas in Downs's work having to do with incentives for political participation and information search. These include information shortcuts such as cost-saving mechanisms, party targeting strategies, and the concept of voting as an instrumentally rational act.

Information (or lack thereof) and uncertainty play a critical role in the models of *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. According to Downs many voters rely almost entirely on the free information that comes to them as a by-product of other aspects of their lives. When voters do search for information that will allow them to better choose among candidates or parties, they often make use of information that, while far from perfect, is inexpensive to gather. Chapter 1, by Samuel L. Popkin, describes what we know about how voters

14. The exception is Martin Wattenberg, a Michigan-trained scholar whose work has been in the survey research tradition. That he now is a member of the University of California, Irvine, Interdisciplinary Focused Research Program in Public Choice does not affect his fundamental allegiance to his alma mater. Of course, some people might feel after reading my own essays in this volume that cast doubt on some orthodoxies that I am not really a rational choice modeler, despite my being on the editorial board of *Public Choice*. I would not dissent too strongly from this analysis. Like my colleague A Wuffle, I consider myself a "reasonable choice" modeler, and a member in good standing of the California Drive-in Church of the Incurably Eclectic.

15. Of course, some of the classic work in public choice, that of Buchanan and Tullock (1962) or Arrow ([1951] 1962), made its major contribution to the normative theory of democracy, even though it also inspired empirical research on topics such as the prevalence of logrolling or the existence of cycles of preference in legislatures. Indeed, Downs's own work on the role of the median voter, on voter ignorance, and on voter incentives to participate in the political process all have important normative implications for a theory of democracy. I do not in any way wish to slight the importance of the normative aspects of public choice theory. However, I also believe that some theorists have been too quick to assume that the portrait of voters and politicians given in current public choice models of rent seeking, shirking, agenda manipulation, and the like is descriptively accurate (for arguments along similar lines see Farber and Frickey 1991).

make use of information shortcuts such as party labels, ideological positioning, media analysis, and past and present economic conditions as indicators of incumbent and party performance. Popkin sees these shortcuts as providing an electorate able to cast a more-informed vote than might appear from survey data on voter ignorance about candidates and issues. However, he supports Downs's expectations that, as a consequence of voter heterogeneity in interests as well as education, information about any given political issue is likely to be very unevenly distributed. Popkin also devotes considerable attention to a treatment of party identification that is consistent with rational choice modeling.

The second chapter, by Roger G. Noll, takes an idea mentioned in Downs's work, but relatively little developed by that author, the idea of political thresholds, and develops it further in an attempt to account for changes in voter participation. In the process Noll seeks to resolve important ambiguities and inconsistencies in Downs's original formulation of the threshold concept. In Downs's original treatment (1957b, chap. 6) thresholds are used to define the boundaries among five states of support: active support, passive support, neutrality, passive opposition, and active opposition. Information suppliers such as parties and activists will, according to Downs, concentrate their information-dissemination activities on voters who are relatively close to a perception threshold. As the concept is reformulated by Noll, it leads to a theory of electoral and policy inertia that partially resolves the problem of unstable outcomes in majority rule decision making called attention to by authors such as Arrow ([1951] 1962), Richard D. McKelvey (1979) and Linda R. Cohen and Steven A. Mathews (1980).

Noll's observations take him over a wide range of territory, including incentives for new interest groups to form, the role of technological innovations in information delivery, and the uses of negative advertising. An important feature of Noll's chapter is the development of a formal model in the appendix to his chapter that shows when it is sensible for voters to be "rationally" ignorant as a function of factors such as the extent to which parties are similar in their issue positions.

The third chapter is by Julie Withers and myself. This chapter is in many ways a complement to that of Popkin. He deals with empirical evidence on use of information shortcuts by voters. We deal with recent efforts to model the process by which voters can make use of the quite-limited information at their disposal to arrive at choices that are identical to (or at least close to) what they would have achieved had they been perfectly informed. We also review modeling efforts by authors such as McKelvey and Peter C. Ordeshook (1985a, 1985b, 1987) myself and Barbara Norrander (1990), Randall Calvert (1985a), and Nicholas R. Miller (1986), which largely show the positive face of a neo-Downsian analysis of voter ignorance. Instead of the message being that it is rational to be politically ignorant, the central message of these works is

that voters who are relatively poorly informed can nonetheless make reasonable choices by making use of a variety of information heuristics, such as following the polls, or paying attention to endorsements provided by reference groups with known political views. Indeed, one of the models we review, that of Miller (1986), shows that even a little learning goes a long way if we look not to the optimality of the choices made by individual voters but rather to the likelihood that the election outcome would have been different had voters been perfectly informed.

Participation and Choice

The three chapters in part two address what is often taken as one of the embarrassingly misguided aspects of "economic" models of voting, the notion of voting as an instrumentally rational act, an act motivated by a concern to affect the outcome of an election in order to elect a candidate whose policies are closer to those the voter most prefers.

The first chapter in this section is by Carole Jean Uhlaner. As Uhlaner notes: "With regard to . . . turnout, . . . Downs's work sets up a paradox. He concludes that most citizens would find it rational to abstain when voting is not costless. . . . However, empirically we do observe substantial numbers of voters." Her chapter reviews the many attempts by political scientists and economists to reconcile the contradiction between what Downs's model predicts and what we actually observe. She observes that the three standard "fixes" are (1) to permit noninstrumental benefits (such as expressive or consumption benefits from voting) to drive voter choice, (2) to assert that costs are a minor factor in voting decisions since the costs of voting are relatively trivial, (3) to allow for misperception of the likelihood that one's vote will be decisive. After commenting on the utility of these ways out of the paradox, she then discusses her own preferred model (see Uhlaner 1989a, 1989b), which involves embedding the voter in a social structure and considering the roles played by intermediaries (such as group leaders) in motivating turnout. She argues that group leaders provide their members with incentives to vote "in order to capture a collective benefit in the form of a favorable shift in candidate position."

The second chapter in this section is by Amihai Glazer. Like Uhlaner, he is concerned with why people vote as well as for whom they vote. Like her, he focuses on the role of group identification in modifying the standard negative conclusions about turnout in the Downsian model, but he does not deal with the entrepreneurial role of group leaders. Rather, Glazer focuses on what he calls "expressive voting." In order to develop nontautological implications, the Glazer model voter posits that choice between parties is not merely a function of the parties' announced issue positions, it is also a function of which groups can be expected to vote for a party given its announced issue positions.

In this model, "a person gets pleasure in voting for a candidate who identifies with the voter's group, and gets pleasure in voting against a candidate who supports a different group." In the last section of his paper Glazer applies the theory of expressive voting to choices among parties and candidates as a function of the extent of their support from black voters. He finds evidence from presidential primaries with Jesse Jackson as a candidate and from congressional elections in the South that support the predictions derived from an expressive model of voting.¹⁶

The last chapter in this section, of which I am the single author, makes two points: First, it argues that what is often supposed to be the central paradox of rational choice theory, voters choosing to vote even though their vote is unlikely to affect the outcome, is in fact not the problem for rational choice models that it is claimed to be. We need to recognize the use of rational choice models in accounting for *changes* in choices rather than choices *per se*. Rational choice models cannot explain why, *ceteris paribus*, the French drink more wine and the Germans drink more beer, either. They can, however, predict that wine consumption and beer consumption in each country will be affected by changes in the relative prices of the two commodities. Moreover, while rational choice models appear to do poorly in predicting who will vote in a given election, so do all other models other than those that posit that people who aren't registered won't vote (Erikson 1981) and those that recognize that the single best predictor of whether or not someone will vote is whether or not they have voted before (Barbara Norrander, personal communication, 1985).

Second, in reviewing a somewhat different aspect of the problem of turnout, the relationship between turnout and electoral closeness, I argue that the models that fail to find such a link are improperly specified largely because of their failure to take into account a long enough time frame and to recognize that turnout variations will often be more a function of long-run than of short-run election-specific factors. Looking at the evidence about the factors that affect voter participation in the aggregate, contrary to most of what has been written on this topic, I find rational choice prediction to do quite well. For example, as the Democratic primary declines in significance in southern elections, turnout levels in the primary (even among Democratic voters) decline relative to turnout in the general election. Similarly, the enfranchisement of blacks in the South in the 1960s triggered a corresponding countermobilization in the turnout rates of white voters *relative to those of blacks* in the areas where whites both were most directly threatened and had a feasible counter-response (Alt 1994, forthcoming).

16. In related, more technical work, Glazer and his coauthors (Glazer, Grofman, and Owen 1991) show how the assumption of group-oriented choice can resolve the problem that, if voters are choosing whether or not and for whom to vote on the basis of how they expect other voters to vote, there may be no equilibrium.

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Spatial Models of Party and Candidate Competition

The third section contains papers that build on Downsian ideas of spatial political competition to consider topics such as the incentives for candidates and political parties to honor their commitments, the importance of perceived candidate competence evaluations on voter choice, political campaign tactics that emphasize each party's particular strengths, the role of party uncertainty about voter locations, and the role of the vice-president in models of presidential choice.

A key assumption of *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is that candidates and parties are oriented to electoral success as their primary (if not their only) goal. Hence candidates and/or parties are led to propose positions that they think will gain them votes. But why expect politicians once in office to adhere to their campaign promises? The first chapter in this section, by John Ferejohn, explores the question of the extent to which we can expect campaign platforms to have predictive value to the voter, that is, the conditions under which it makes sense for the voter to act as if candidates will keep their campaign promises and adhere to the positions they espouse in their platform. After first reviewing the basic analytical elements of the spatial model in one and more than one dimension, and then looking at Downs's arguments as to why candidates can be expected to try to implement their platforms (the most plausible of which is based on a concern for reputation—politicians who lie will be much less likely to be reelected), Ferejohn turns to a look at the empirical evidence on promise keeping.

He finds that "whether for Downs's reasons or for others, politicians seem to take positions in an ideological space, and these positions seem quite stable over time." Then Ferejohn reviews recent formal modeling work on the behavior of office-seeking candidates in iterated elections where voters can monitor politicians' behavior directly or indirectly, concluding with a discussion of work on the reputation-bearing nature of political parties, that is, a party label as a cultivated "brand name."¹⁷ Here the insights derived by Ferejohn from formal models and those derived by Popkin from a review of the empirical evidence on party images appear mutually reinforcing.

17. My own preferred metaphor is that party label is a franchise. The franchiser seeks to ensure predictability in the product and can screen to a certain extent potential franchisees. Moreover the franchisee has an incentive to conform to expectations and an incentive to tailor the product to the most important audience of local consumers. Thus, just as McDonalds in Tokyo has a product line (including various fishburgers) that is not identical to that in McDonalds in Chicago, so too a Democrat from North Carolina is not the same thing as a Democrat from New York. Nonetheless, in any given state, the Democrat will be to the left (indeed, considerably to the left) of the Republican elected from that same constituency (see, e.g., Grofman, Griffin, and Glazer 1990, which shows consistent 30 to 40-point Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) score differences between U.S. senators of opposite parties from the same state and virtual identity in the ADA scores of senators of the same party elected from the same state).

The second chapter in this section, by James M. Enelow, James W. Endersby, and Michael C. Munger builds on earlier work by Enelow, Melvin J. Hinich, and N. Mendell (1986), Peter J. Coughlin and Schmucl Nitzan (1981), and myself (1987) and looks at the empirical evidence for two competing models of voter choice, one based on the idea that voters choose among candidates on the basis of their announced platforms (issue positions), the other based on the idea that voters attach different credibility weights to each candidate's campaign issue positions based on the candidate's perceived competence to carry out the policies that are being proposed. Under most circumstances the latter model predicts candidates will adopt different positions. An empirical test of the two models based on National Election Survey presidential election data from 1980, 1984, and 1988 does not promote either one, but a hybrid model in which voters discount only challenger issue positions is shown to do the best job of predicting perceived candidate issue positions. This hybrid model helps account for the candidate issue-divergence found in real two-candidate elections.

The third chapter in this section, by Thomas H. Hammond and Brian D. Humes, combines Downsian ideas of multidimensional issue competition with recent work in cognitive psychology on "framing effects," that is, on how the presentation of issues helps shape voter choices. They argue that an important part of political competition is a debate to persuade voters that certain issues (issue dimensions) are important (or more important than others). The outcome of the election will often critically depend upon which issues are salient to the voters (or more generally, how different issue dimensions are weighted).¹⁸ Candidates seek to "activate" those dimensions on which their preferred positions will command majority support.¹⁹ The chapter, although seen by its authors as a preliminary effort, develops a formal spatial model to predict how rational candidates would seek to frame the issues in a political campaign, and is likely to motivate new empirical research on campaign tactics that tests the model's theoretical ideas.

The fourth chapter in this section, by Scott E. Page, Ken Kollman, and John H. Miller, modifies the standard simple Downsian spatial model in a

18. A very similar argument is set forth in Popkin 1991: "Because party images vary so widely from issue to issue, party candidates for office try to increase the salience of issues where their party starts out with the largest advantage. Candidates addressing an issue where their party has a strong image have the wind at their back while candidates addressing an issue where their party has a weak image have the wind in their face. Changing issues changes the campaign, if not the outcome."

19. There is an important parallel between this chapter and chapter 8. Enelow and Endersby modify the standard spatial model by weighting issue *positions* by perceived candidate competence; Hammond and Humes modify the standard spatial model by weighting issue *dimensions* by the salience that candidates succeed in attaching to them.

different way than do the other chapters in this section. While accepting that parties seek a vote-maximizing policy location, Page, Kollman, and Miller replace the assumption that parties know voter issue positions with a concept of parties as only “boundedly rational” because of limited knowledge about what voters prefer and limited ability to make optimal use of the knowledge they do possess. This chapter is unique in drawing on the artificial intelligence literature (and even more specifically the use of “genetic algorithms”) to develop models of “adaptive” parties. These models are used to trace trajectories of winning party positions. The preliminary conclusion is that parties trace out a dance whose image resembles that of a slowly shrinking dumbbell. In this simulation parties eventually converge, but they need not do so either continuously or rapidly.

The next to last chapter in this section, by Martin Wattenberg and myself, provides a rational choice model of voting for presidential and vice-presidential nominees as a package deal. This model allows for the potential importance of voter preferences among vice-presidential candidates when these differ from the directionality of the voter’s preference for the top of the ticket. Wattenberg and I also try to take into account the potential importance of the vice-president in terms of the likelihood that an individual elected to the vice-presidency will become president. The principal purpose of our brief essay is to evaluate how important the choice of vice-president is for a party’s vote share, but this essay also serves as an illustration of the claim that it is important to develop more institutionally detailed models of voter choice and party competition, such as by taking into account the fact that, in the United States, the president and vice-president have (since the ratification of the Twelfth Amendment in 1804) been elected as a team.

The last chapter in this section is another of which I am the sole author. It takes its point of departure from the Wattenberg and Grofman chapter and asserts that we need to modify and enrich Downs’s basic models so as to more realistically take into account the complex institutional structure of American (and other nations’) political competition (e.g., party primaries, campaign-financing rules, competition at different levels of government, multicandidate slates, concurrent and nonconcurrent election cycles, etc.). After reviewing the assumptions of the simplest Downsian model involving voters who choose between political parties based on their announced platforms, and arguing that the usual view of Downs as standing for the proposition that political parties can be expected to converge to Tweedledum, Tweedledee-like identity is false to the remarkably nuanced picture of party competition portrayed in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, I consider the ways in which modifying each of the “standard” simplifying assumptions can lead us to a more empirically accurate picture of party competition in the United States (and elsewhere). In that realistic picture of U.S. politics there is no reason to expect that parties

will converge, since there are centripetal as well as centrifugal incentives to party competition.

Reflections on *An Economic Theory of Democracy*

The lead chapter in this section is a brief autobiographical comment by Anthony Downs. Downs discusses both the personal influences (suggestions by his Stanford professors: Kenneth J. Arrow and Julius Margolis; his experiences as student body president at Carleton College) and the other intellectual influences (especially ideas in Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* to which Margolis had called his attention) that helped shape *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Like many another graduate students Downs changed the topic of his dissertation from what he had originally proposed doing—a study of the effects of the Nimitz Freeway on land values in the San Francisco East Bay area. In the process he lost the dissertation fellowship that he had been awarded by the Social Science Research Council, but made social science history.

The second brief chapter in this section is also in the nature of a personal reminiscence. Gabriel A. Almond, who was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford a year after Robert Dahl was there, was lent a copy of Downs's dissertation by Kenneth J. Arrow a year prior to its publication. Almond concludes his chapter with a discussion of the initial book reviews of *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, some of which prophetically foresaw its subsequent importance and some of which did not, and with the grounds for his belief that Downs's book is a true classic that will continue to be read for many years to come.

The third chapter in this section, by M. Stephen Weatherford, compares a Downsian view of the process of governance with that of the more traditional normative conception of politics as infused with a pursuit of the public good or the national interest. Weatherford summarizes the Downsian model as one in which choice by voters among competing policy platforms allows the policy goals to be specified by election outcomes. In this model, "governments can be judged by efficiency criteria, leaders are largely fungible, and institutions merely mediate the fundamental relationship between the demand for and supply of policies." After reviewing some of the literature dealing with barriers to consistent policy implementation, in the last section of his chapter Weatherford sketches a model in which the appeal by a president to a common commitment to national economic policy goals can attract sufficient support from reelection-oriented legislators to outweigh competing claims based on more narrowly defined notions of interest.

The fourth brief chapter in this section, by Arend Lijphart, considers the contributions of *An Economic Theory of Democracy* to the comparative study

of party systems. Lijphart does not consider formal models of multiparty competition since Downs's but confines himself to an explication in flowchart terms of the model of multiparty competition implicit in Downs's book. Lijphart identifies as one of Downs's greatest insights the early recognition of bidirectional relationships between key variables such as electoral system and the distribution of voter preferences. Lijphart reviews Downs's treatment of the implications of coalition government for a theory of responsible democracy. He argues that two of Downs's assertions about multiparty democracies, the claimed greater difficulty of voters arriving at choices among parties and the claimed difficulty of coalition governments taking effective action to solve basic social problems, are both overstated and do not really follow from the premises stated in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*.

The last chapter in this section, and the concluding one of the volume, is my own. It considers the debate over the utility of rational choice modeling in the context of the topics considered in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. I argue that it is futile to debate *in the abstract* whether or not (or to what extent) people are rational, self-interested, and making conscious choices rather than responding to operant reinforcement or early socialization. After making the point that there is no such thing as *the* rational choice model of a given institution or behavior, only *a* rational choice model, I then argue that you can't beat something with nothing, and so it is not enough to show that some given rational choice model does not fit the data. It is necessary to show that some other perspective leads to a model with better fit and predictive power. Looking at the empirical track record of rational choice models, I suggest that early rational choice models can best be characterized as having been "insightfully and usefully wrong" by raising important questions about phenomena (such as incentives to vote or to organize for collective ends) that had previously been taken for granted. I also argue that, so far, it has been through its questions, rather than its answers, that the rational choice approach has made its major contribution to empirical democratic theory.

However, I also believe that applications of the rational choice approach to the analysis of political behavior is in its infancy, and that as it moves away from models based on atomic individualism to ones that are institution-rich, historically sensitive, and context-specific, its ability to explain real world phenomena will begin to match its formal sophistication. Moreover, I also believe that there are no other approaches that have its potential for deriving testable predictions about so many important aspects of politics.