

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 15: The Rational Voter?

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[Page and Shapiro, “The Rational Public”](#)

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From Institutions to Behavior

From Institutions to Behavior

Cameron's conditions for when rational choice theory is useful:

1. Players understand the “game” they’re playing
2. “Social glue”: shared understanding of the rules of the game (shared history, culture)
3. Significant incentives to act like a decision theorist

In studying political behavior, rational choice recedes and **psychology** comes to the forefront:

1. Information processing, knowledge, memory, beliefs...
2. Group identification, identity, self-interest (individual and collective)
3. Likability, trust, etc.

How do voters decide?

"I'm truly worried about Social Security and Medicare. I have hypertension and diabetes. As an older person, I don't care how many times Trump and Pence come to Pennsylvania — I'm disenchanted with the federal government."
— Robert Ward, 68, property manager



"As a gay man — as someone who fought hard to get married — we're scared. If we get four more years with Trump, who could put another person on the Supreme Court, our marriage could get taken away."
— Alex Reber, 35, C.P.A.

(First vice chair of the Dauphin County Democratic Committee Leadership Team)



How do voters decide?

"I don't want someone in office who is racist, sexist and against human equality in general."
-Devon Ozehovski, 34, beer distributor



"I have never voted before. I'm driven this year. The Trump administration has made it very difficult, especially in the field that I'm in - working with immigrants. The administration has put a lot of fear into their minds. I would like to see a legal pathway for DACA recipients." -Yatciri Cruz, 20, paralegal for immigration services



"I am from Sudan. This is the first presidential election I'm voting in. My life is better now. I'm for Trump. What I like about him is that he wants to control America. I like what Trump says. We don't need any more people destroying America." -Jacob Bilis, 40, forklift operator

"I hated Trump all through his presidency, but I don't like Biden. If I vote this year, it'll be for Trump. He's not afraid to take chances. Trump sneaks back up - everybody thinks he's losing, but then people come out of the woodwork to vote for him." -Tommy O'Neil, 73, retired

Readings

The **folk theory of democracy**: government by the people, for the people

- Depends on informed and engaged citizens
- Has achieved near universal acceptance as a goal and an ideal.

Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. “Democratic Ideals and Realities.” Chapter 1 in *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton University Press, 2017. © Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Two forms of democracy to consider:

1. Populist democracy

- Representative democracy
- Direct democracy

2. Leadership selection

- Retrospective voting

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Achen and Bartels, “Democracy for Realists”

The critical tradition: Lazarsfeld et al. 1954, Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1964

- A portrait of voting behavior as **socially determined**: family, school, church, media bubble...
- Rather than coherent policy views, voters have thin, disorganized, ideologically incoherent “belief systems” formed by their social environments
- Even well-informed citizens turn out to be “*just a rather mechanical reflection of what their favorite group and party leaders have instructed them to think.*”

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*“Our point, instead, is that the public **as a collective body** is capable of holding sensible opinions and processing the information made available to it. The chief cure for the ills of American democracy is to be found not in less but in more democracy; not in thwarting the public’s desires but in providing it with good political information and heeding its wishes.”*

Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Y. Shapiro. “Rational Public Opinion.” Chapter 1 in *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences*. University of Chicago Press, 1992. © University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

The Magic of Aggregation

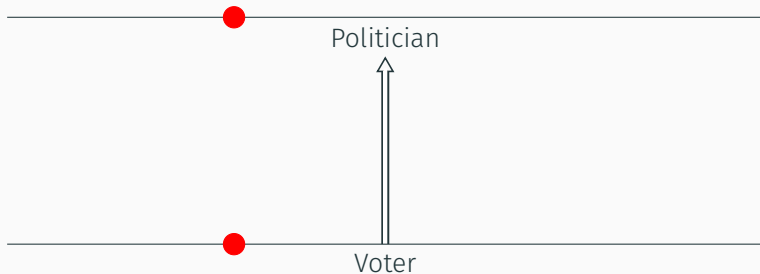
*“Moreover—and this is the key point—at any given moment, the random deviations of individuals from their long-term opinions may well cancel out over a large sample, so that a poll or survey can accurately measure **collective preferences** as defined in terms of the **true or long-term preferences** of many individual citizens.”*

*“That is to say, even if **individual opinions or survey responses are ill-informed, shallow, and fluctuating**, **collective opinion can be real, highly stable, and.. based on all the available information...**”*

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Lenz, “Follow the Leader”

Problem: **observational equivalence**

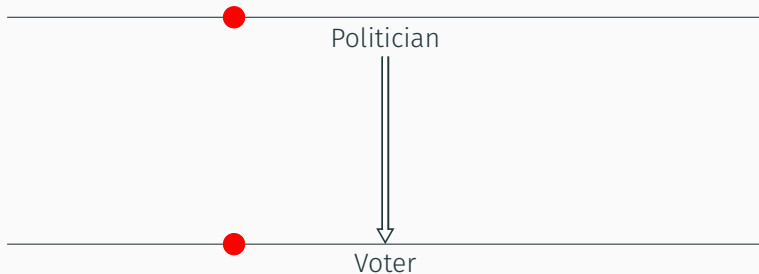


Do politicians follow voters?

Lenz, Gabriel S. “Rum Punch or Issue Voting?” Chapter 1 in *Follow the Leader?: How Voters Respond to Politicians’ Policies and Performance*. University of Chicago Press, 2012. © University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Lenz, “Follow the Leader”

Problem: **observational equivalence**



Or do voters follow politicians?

Lenz, “Follow the Leader”

Solution: we need to observe a change on one side and obtain measurements over time.



Time 1: Baseline

Lenz, “Follow the Leader”

Solution: we need to observe a change on one side and obtain measurements over time.



Time 2: Something affected voters

Lenz, “Follow the Leader”

Solution: we need to observe a change on one side and obtain measurements over time.



Time 3: Politicians had time to adjust their views

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Lenz, “Follow the Leader”

What can change voters’ attitudes?

- Media priming
 - When economy becomes more prominent, does presidential approval fall in line with prior judgments of economic *performance*? **Yes.**
 - On ten additional policy *issues*: **No.**
- Persuasion
 - When a voter changes her mind on *performance*, does she change her mind on a candidate? **Yes.**
 - When a voter changes her mind on *an issue*, does she change her mind on a candidate? **No.**
- Learning
 - When a voter learns new information about *performance or issues*, her vote choice generally does not change.

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