

Abstract on “A ‘Reasonable Choice’ Approach to Turnout”

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The Central puzzle we seek to address is “Why does what is arguably the most plausible account of the decision to vote or not to vote, namely the rational choice model proposed by Anthony Downs (1957), apparently go so badly awry in predicting voter’s turnout decisions?”. First, rational choice models of voter turnout seemingly lead to empirically falsified expectations, such as most (or even all) voters being predicted not to vote. Second, if we think that only those voters for whom $PB-C+D > 0$ should vote then, given how low is the likelihood that any single voter could by her vote change the election outcome (P), it would seem that the only ways to make sense of anyone voting is to assume that B (the benefits of seeing your candidate win) is absurdly high or that the D term (benefits to voting that are not tied to one’s expected impact on the outcome) exceed the C term, the costs of voting. But this suggests either that voters are being irrational in terms of beliefs – which is not good news for a rational choice approach to turnout, or that, pretty much, the only thing that matters for turnout is citizen duty, which is how the D term is most commonly operationalized. A third empirically grounded attack on the Downsian rational choice model of turnout is based on the observation that there is no good empirical evidence for a multiplicative interaction between P and B, thus casting doubt on the “expected utility” foundations of the Downsian model (Blais, 2000).

We offer an alternative “reasonable choice” approach (Grofman, 1999) with three key features. First, we replace the usual Downsian model with a two-parameter approach to the calculus of turnout: one a motivational factor, M, that is independent of election contest specific factors or expected current election contest outcomes, and the second, E, involving factors tied to the current election, such as the nature of the campaigning, election day weather, and anticipated current election outcomes. We operationalize this two parameter approach in terms of a threshold-based model of voter participation choices based on ideas in Briens and Grofman (1999) and Arcenau and Nickerson (2009). Second, while the two parameter approach will incorporate the same factors used in rational choice models of turnout -- P, B, C, and D, and emphasizes the usefulness of utility/incentive based approaches to understanding the turnout decision, our approach uses the same factors in a rather different way, in terms a *comparative statics* approach, i.e., how changes in each of these factors can be expected to affect changes in turnout levels and changes in who votes, rather than examining turnout decisions in a one-shot and individual-choice focused fashion using cross-sectional data. Third, we acknowledge the explanatory limitations of models that are built on a narrow concept of motivation based solely on instrumental considerations at the individual level tied to expected changes in outcome. Our approach is also flexible enough to incorporate many other factors not normally part of the Downsian framework, including non-policy related candidate characteristics, the nature of campaigning and get out the vote activities, expressive voting incentives, *habit*, and *shared fate*, but addresses these in a unified fashion in terms of the information and incentive mechanisms that might account for their impact on turnout. In sum, we are to provide a common sense account for a number of stylized facts about voting, such as the sorting of voters into frequent and infrequent voters, the fact that turnout (and ballot roll-on) is higher

in more important elections, and the difficulty reformers have in triggering substantial changes in voter turnout by making institutional reforms designed to reduce the costs of voting.