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Publication Date

1992

5/28/93

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Working Paper 92-13

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Anthony Downs wrote in An Economic Theory of Democracy that "every rational man decides whether to vote just as he makes all other decisions: if the returns outweigh the costs, he votes; if not, he abstains" (Downs, 1957, p. 260). In the ensuing 35 years innumerable scholars have attempted to confirm, refute, or modify this formulation. Their efforts occupy such a conspicuous place in political science that one recent president of the American Political Science Association was led to label public choice a "hegemonic subdiscipline" (Lowi, 1992). The growing popularity of Downs's book is attested by Wattenberg's finding (1991, pp. 18-19) that "In the late 1960s it was cited . . .half as often as The American Voter; now it is cited . . . more than twice as often . . . ."

Rational choice theories of voting, often described as addressing a behavioral paradox--why do so many people vote when the theory says they should not--in fact illustrate a more

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obvious scholarly paradox, hinted at in this observation by a sympathetic surveyor of the field:

> In rational choice theory, turnout holds a special place, as the most commonly used example of a major theoretical puzzle. So important is this puzzle that some see turnout as the major example of the failure of rational choice theory (Aldrich, 1992).

This paper is intended to demonstrate not only the gaps between the rational choice view of turnout and the real world of American elections, but the broader point that the genre is inherently unsuited to illuminating voter turnout. Although I do make several suggestions about how rational choice theorists could do a better job, my intention is not to improve such studies of turnout, but discourage them. As I will show, real-life American elections pose insuperable problems for rational choice explanations of turnout, including multiple contests on the ballot, the difficulty of compensating for extensive but far from universal ignorance, and, most telling of all, the importance of registering to vote. My discussion of these topics is prefaced by consideration of another gap between the real world and rational choice theory: its practioners' failure to recognize some important cases where the costs and benefits of voting are tangible and evident. First, however, a more detailed look at rational choice theories of turnout.

I. Defining the Rational Voter

Downs's rational voter "compares the utility incomes he believes he would receive were each party in office" (Downs, 1957, p. 39). He votes for the party that he expects to provide more utility; if the parties seem tied, he abstains.[1] But the rational person also recognizes that the benefits he anticipates from the victory of his preferred party or candidate do not depend on his behavior; they will come whether he votes or stays home on election day. Only if his vote can make a difference will his behavior affect his chances of getting the desired benefits. "But in fact his vote is not decisive; it is lost in a sea of other votes" (Downs, 1957, p. 246).

So far the benefits of voting depend on a preferred electoral outcome. There are, however, other rewards from voting:

> The advantage of voting per se is that it makes democracy possible. If no one votes, then the system collapses because no government is chosen. We assume that the citizens of a democracy subscribe to its principles and therefore derive benefits from its continuance; hence they do not want it to collapse. For this reason they attach value to the act of voting per se and receive a return from it (Downs, 1957, pp.

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[1] Some public choice theorists (e.g. Mueller, 1989) use the female pronoun for the hypothetical citizen. In recognition of Downs's seminal role, I will follow his practice in this respect.

261-62).

This "long-run participation value" (Downs, 1957, p. 270) also is subject to the free-rider problem; the citizen receives the reward irrespective of his own behavior (Feeley, 1974, p. 237).

In summarizing his argument, Downs seemed to shrink away from accepting its stark implication that voting is irrational for any citizen because the rewards from his vote will never match the costs of casting it:

> The total return each citizen receives from voting depends on (1) the benefits he gets from democracy, (2) how much he wants a particular party to win, (3) how close he thinks the election will be, and (4) how many other citizens he thinks will vote. These variables insure a relatively wide range of possible returns similar to the range of voting costs (p. 274).

William H. Riker and Peter Ordeshook (1968), the authors of the other landmark in the field, recognized that Downs's argument leads

> . . .to the conclusion that voting, the fundamental political act, is typically irrational. The function of theory is to explain behavior and it is certainly no explanation to assign a sizeable part of politics to the mysterious and inexplicable world of the

irrational. . . .We describe a calculus of voting from which one infers that it is reasonable for those who vote to do so and . . . we present empirical evidence that citizens actually behave as if they employed this calculus (p.25).

Riker and Ordeshook's empirical analysis used the 1952, 1956, and 1960 National Election Studies samples. Each respondent's anticipated reward from the success of his favored candidate was measured with a question asking if he personally cared which party won the presidential election. Estimates of the probability that one's vote would be decisive were measured with a question about how close the respondent expected the election would be. In 1960, the closest presidential election in this century, there were still 119,000 votes between the winner and loser. It strains credulity to assume that many citizens expecting a similarly close outcome in an imminent election would believe that their own votes would make a difference. (The Electoral College will be discussed in due course.) In any event, henceforth rational choice theorists usually estimated the citizen's expectation of being decisive by the closeness of the election, either anticipated by survey respondents or measured in the outcome.

Perhaps their most noteworthy innovation was an attempt to measure the benefits of performing the voting act, irrespective of any outcome. Unlike Downs's notion of the benefits of "voting per se," which concern the survival of democracy and therefore

depend on the behavior of other citizens, Riker and Ordeshook's formulation truly did address what might be called the intrinsic benefits of voting. These were emotional satisfactions, including those derived from "compliance with the ethic of voting; . . . . affirming allegiance to the political system. . . . affirming a partisan preference" (p. 28).

This collection of subjective states, called, elegantly if obscurely, "the D term," was measured by four NES questions on "citizen duty" that solicited agreement or disagreement with normative statements about one's duty to vote in various contexts, none of which they quoted. The citizen duty scale is remarkably ill-suited to its place in Riker and Ordeshook's model. For one thing, none of the four items concerns expressive gratification. In the second place, one statement dismisses many local elections as not "important enough to bother with," which seems beside the point for voting in a presidential election. Worst of all, two other items in the scale raise that sticky issue about whether one vote can make a difference: "It isn't so important to vote when you know your party doesn't have any chance to win" and "So many other people vote in the national elections that it doesn't matter much to me whether I vote or not." Both statements raise the classic rational choice question: Why vote if your vote won't make any difference? Thus they seem to be better indicators of calculations about casting the decisive vote than the item Riker and Ordeshook used for this purpose, the respondent's estimate of the closeness of the outcome.

Riker and Ordeshook handled the question of costs by saying that "the citizen who believes it is terribly important to vote is likely to minimize costs of voting while the citizen who thinks voting is unimportant is likely to maximize costs of voting" (p. 37). Hence they omitted any direct measure of cost.

Their data analysis, a series of crosstabulations with the independent variables all dichotomized, indicated generally positive relationships between turnout and both anticipated rewards and expectations that one's vote would be important to the outcome. As a number of later scholars noted, however, "most of the action is in the D term" (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974, p. 525; see also Mueller, 1989, p. 355).

II. Electoral Records Are Public

In the rational choice school, intrinsic rewards, those that come from performing the act of voting and do not depend on any electoral outcome, are either indivisible and remote, in the case of the Downsian goal of saving democracy; or intangible and expressive, as in the case of various explanations emphasizing remorse, catharsis, group solidarity, or other subjective states.[2] It must be a bittersweet experience to salvage formal choice theories of turnout with such squishy variables.

All the more amazing, then, that no toiler in this vineyard

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[2]Gary Jacobson wittily summarized the latter school: "It's the California model; people vote because it makes them feel good."

seems to have considered any of the more concrete rewards and penalties that are an intrinsic result of electoral participation or nonparticipation. These depend, one way or another, on the simple truth that while how one votes is secret, the fact of having voted is, with rare exceptions, a matter of public record. By the same token, registration records are available for inspection.[3] The implications should be obvious: people who hope to get or keep something of value by virtue of their political fidelity cannot afford to abstain in an election that is important to those who have the power to dispose of those valued goods and services. In plain English, this means, for example, that in places where patronage and favoritism influence governmental decisions, only the most foolhardy public jobholders would stay home on election day.

This proposition was handsomely affirmed in the only empirical study of this topic that I am familiar with. Using various methods of identifying such jobholders and holding constant other demographic and legal variables, Steven Rosenstone and I found that their turnout was up to 13 percentage points higher than that of public employees where patronage was unimportant, and as much as 18 points higher than that of private workers (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, pp. 97-101). Of course, patronage employees are expected to contribute more to the cause that merely their own votes, but those are not scorned.

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[3]The near-universal availability of information on registration and electoral participation is the basis of the National Election Studies' Vote Validation studies: interviewers verify each respondent's claims about registration and voting by inspecting the relevant records at the county courthouse.

At the lowest level of machine politics one finds the exchange of votes for favors: fixed tickets, fixed building inspectors, better apartments in housing projects, and so on. One leader in New Haven described his _modus_ _operandi_ this way: "I do a lot of things for people. I keep working at it . . . . .I just keep piling up good will. . . .People never forget" (quoted in Wolfinger, 1974, p. 84). What people should never forget to do is vote, a point made clear in this description of a local boss in Boston:

> When people wanted help from the organization, they would come right up here to the office. . . . .If a man came in to ask Matt [the boss] for a job, Matt would listen to him and then tell him he'd see what he could do; he should come back in a couple of days. That would give Matt time to get in touch with the precinct captain and find out all about the man. If he didn't vote in the last election, he was out. Matt wouldn't do anything for him--that is, unless he could show that he was so sick he couldn't get to the polls (quoted in Whyte, 1955, p. 194).

Now it is easy to believe that expectations of votes for favors are widespread in those places where machine politics flourishes. Indeed, if this expectation were not pervasive, the machine's retail representatives would be remiss. What we have here, then, is another example of very tangible rewards for

instrinsic voting. How many people are we talking about? In absolute numbers, I do not know. Relatively, I am persuaded that patronage employees and denizens of machine politics communities far outnumber citizens who think that their vote might decide a presidential election.

Registration records are not only public, they are made available to organizations and individuals for a variety of political, commercial, and judicial purposes. Almost everywhere they are a principal source of jury lists; in some places, the only source. Many people know this and many are averse to serving on juries. There is a wealth of anecdotes about citizens declining to register or asking that their names be deleted from the rolls in order to avoid literally costly absences from work. My impression that a great many election officials believe that fear of jury duty depresses turnout is supported by a survey making the same point conducted in the 1970s by the General Accounting Office (U.S. Senate, 1975). One would think that such a clear example of a cost of voting would have engaged the attention of rational choice theorists; but one would be wrong.

The first systematic empirical study of this hypothesized relationship was Stephen Knack's analysis of 1988 National Election Studies data supplemented by state- and county-level data on the sources of jury lists (Knack, 1992b). On the basis of this analysis Knack reported a depressive effect on turnout of seven to nine percentage points. Knack's work helped induce the NES to include questions about the sources of jury lists and

willingness to serve on juries in its 1991 Pilot Study. [4]
Initial analyses of the 1991 Pilot Study data provided one
estimate that fear of jury duty has a very modest deterrent
effect on registration (Oliver and Wolfinger, 1992) and another
that the effect was somewhat more pronounced (Knack, 1992a). In
either case, one might consider these findings a modicum of
support for rational choice theories of turnout.

III. Many Contests Are on Each Ballot

In the formal theorist's world, a citizen looking toward
election day contemplates his alternatives in a single contest:
vote for A, vote for B, or stay home. But of course American
voters typically make at least several choices in each
election.[5] This abundance probably reaches a peak in California,
which averaged 13 statewide propositions on the ballot from 1974
through 1988 (Bowler, Donovan, and Happ, 1992, p. 559). Local
propositions, designated by a letter to differentiate them from
the numbered statewide measures, provide further opportunities
for public choice. They range from highly tangible refinements
of rent control ordinances to expressions of discontent with U.S.
foreign policy. In Alameda County, beyond all the candidates and

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[4]Items about jury duty were deleted in the last stage of
preparing the 1984 NES questionnaire. This might not have happened
if their advocate had thought to play the rational choice card,
thus providing unimpeachable theoretical relevance.

[5]Aldrich (1992) acknowledged this fact. So did Riker and
Ordeshook (1968, p. 36), but they ignored it in their data
analysis.

29 statewide propositions, there were more local measures on the ballot in November 1988 than letters in the alphabet to designate each proposition. Fear of polling-place gridlock led to suggestions of an express lane for citizens who had filled in their sample ballots at home. One county's proposed 10-minute limit in the voting booth was enjoined by a federal judge's ruling that it would violate the 14th Amendment, which evidently guarantees equal protection of the laws to slow voters.

We can assume that the presidential race is supreme to most potential voters, if only because turnout for presidential elections almost always is higher than for elections held at other times. Nevertheless, every four years two to three million Americans go to the polls with so little regard for the top contest that they fail to vote for any presidential candidate (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, p. 116). A fair number of Californians seem to care more about county supervisor than president: "in a typical supervisorial district with a November supervisorial contest in 1980 and 1984, the number of people voting for board candidates actually exceeded the number casting ballots for U.S. presidential candidates" (Lascher, 1991, pp. 666-67). The importance of nonpresidential elections is also attested by the consequences of television networks' early projections of the presidential election winner and, in 1980, President Jimmy Carter's concession of defeat three hours before the polls closed on the West Coast. For present purposes, the interesting finding is not the apparent effect of these events, but its modest dimensions, generally found to be a turnout

reduction of less than five percent (Wolfinger and Linquiti, 1981; Tannenbaum and Kostrich, 1983).

Even if a ballot presented just one choice between two alternatives, people might differ in the rewards they expect should their preferred alternative win: enactment of a desired policy, recognition of their ethnic group, pleasure at a friend's success, influence at city hall, adjustment of a formula for assessing residential real property, purely symbolic expressions of approbation or disapprobation, and so on. Readers who wonder what common currency could be used to measure such disparate choices will have a difficult time finding answers in the rational choice literature. A typical discussion: ". . . the differential benefit, in utiles, that an individual voter receives from the success of his more preferred candidate over his less preferred one" (Riker and Ordewhook, 1968, p. 25). The multiplicity of choices on real world ballots poses a challenge of model specification that would frustrate even the most ingenious formal theorist. Nevertheless, I suggest that rational choice theory leads ineluctably to one proposition: the more choices on the ballot, the higher the turnout.

There are half a million elected officials in the United States, many chosen concurrently with national officials. Just the parents, spouses, significant others, siblings, and adult children of the candidates add up to a sizable number of voters. Even for nonrelatives, the benefit--psychic or otherwise--of being an infinitesimal part of the winning coalition of a presidential candidate may pale beside the rewards from making a

larger contribution to the success of a minor but not wholly trivial candidate or cause.[6] The more contests, the greater the chances of finding a candidate the voter knows, or an issue he cares about. With more contests, the chances increase that one will be close. And as the relevant political unit becomes smaller, the likelihood of being decisive increases.[7]

Calculations on the cost side also suggest that turnout will be related to the number of contests. To be sure, information costs will reflect the number of choices, but the more direct way to avoid paying the cost is not to vote on that contest, a common response in California (Bowler, Donovan, and Happ, 1992). On the other hand, major cost factors include registration, locating the polling place, and taking the time to go there. These are the same regardless of the length of the ballot. Assuming that the probability of rewards increases with ballot length, the fixed costs of voting will be offset by a greater reward factor (more contests = more rewards) and a higher probability of being

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[6]Triviality is in the eyes of the beholder. In November 1988, a hot issue in my home town was whether Berkeley would add a Palestinian refugee camp to its list of impeccably politically correct sister cities. Expenditures on this issue were believed to exceed the budget for any other proposition or candidate, including contenders for President. A get-out-the vote drive was organized by the successful opponents of the measure. Four years earlier Berkeleyans mobilized to support or oppose a measure that would require the mayor to convey to President Reagan the city's endorsement of a formula for restricting American aid to Israel (Polsby, 1986). Luckily for American foreign policy, this proposal was also defeated.

[7]The generally lower turnout in nonconcurrent local elections, where the chances of casting a deciding vote are so much greater, requires modification of propositions linking closeness and turnout.

decisive. This looks like an open-and-shut case for the proposition that longer ballots produce higher turnout.

IV. Citizen Misinformation is Widespread and Indeterminate

In presidential elections, of course, the popular vote does not determine the winner. Some attempts to test rational choice theory with survey data ignore the electoral college (e.g. Riker and Ordeshook, 1968), or specify the model incorrectly:

> In this context, the rational voter hypothesis
> implicitly assumes that, because of the electoral
> college system and its winner-take-all or unit rule, it
> is appropriate to measure the expected closeness of the
> state, rather than national, election outcome (Carroll,
> 1984, p. 682n).

Actually, the objective importance of a presidential vote depends not only on the closeness of the race in the state, but also the contribution of that state to a candidate's electoral vote total and the national balance of electoral votes. A well-informed rational citizen would take all three variables into account when deciding whether to vote.

It seems safe to assume that a great many Americans are not very clear about the electoral college and that even some who do understand this procedure would be taxed to make the three-variable analysis described in the previous paragraph. At the same time, some citizens doubtless do grasp what must be

ascertained to make a fully informed decision. How might a
public choice theorist incorporate such widespread but not
universal ignorance into a model? The proposition to be tested
is not that turnout will be higher in close elections, but that
people who think an election will be close will be more likely to
vote. Data from recent National Election Studies will illustrate
some of the complexities behind this apparently straightforward
assertion.

The important outcomes in presidential elections are the
state-by-state totals. One might think that it would be easier
for most people to pick the winner in their own state than in the
country as a whole. This seems not to be the case, however. In
1984, for example, seven percent of NES respondents declined to
express an opinion about who would be elected president, compared
to 12 percent who refused to predict the winner in their state.
Of those who did venture a prediction, only 13 percent thought
that Walter Mondale would be elected, but fully 32 percent said
that he would carry their state. Just 54 of the 2257 NES
respondents were Minnesotans.

This raises the question of how individuals form their
impressions of likely electoral winners and hence how observers
of this process--rational choice theorists or not--might
attribute predictions to the citizens whose behavior they try to
explain. Pre-election polls are an obvious source of information
(Riker and Ordeshook, 1968, p. 33n). Perhaps the lower accuracy
of citizens' state-level predictions reflects the relative
obscurity of statewide polls in the mass media. What is more,

public statewide surveys are not available in some states. Thus the public's greater capacity to project the national popular-vote winner may reflect the innumerable nationwide polls that have come to occupy such a prominent place in presidential campaign reportage.

The limits of this line of argument demonstrate the difficulty of ascertaining the effect of pre-election polls on public expectations of the outcome. In 1980, 85 percent of the NES sample were willing to pick a winner; 55 percent of them said it would be Jimmy Carter. About two-thirds of the sample reported that they had paid some attention to the polls. Of these, 56 percent said that Ronald Reagan was ahead in the polls. In fact, most polls reported a dead heat. The more interesting point is that 39 percent of those who said that Reagan was leading in the polls thought that Carter would win the election.[8]

The key point, of course, is not who picks the winner, but expectations about the likely margin of victory, which help the citizen estimate whether his vote will be necessary to help bring about the desired outcome. The empirical studies of this point (a number are summarized by Mueller, 1989, pp. 354-61) reach disparate conclusions; sometimes a belief in a close margin is

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[8]Willingness to disregard the polls in not limited to the mass public. In 1980, the last pre-election poll by the National Broadcasting Company/Associated Press partnership showed Ronald Reagan pulling five points ahead of Jimmy Carter. Just after these results were in, on the Saturday night before the election, a group from the NBC Election Unit, the Associated Press's election reporters, and four political science consultants made their predictions of the outcome. All but one of us thought that Carter would win. The exception was the Radcliffe intern at NBC.

associated with higher turnout and sometimes it is not.

Although researchers who study this topic differ in their conclusions, they seem united in the assumption that respondents' beliefs about closeness can be put into an equation without regard to their relationship to reality. This is not to say that public opinion about the likely margin is wholly unrelated to reality. My point is that people who think that an election will be close when all signs point to a landslide are likely to differ from those who expect a narrow margin when all signs indicate a horserace. This can be demonstrated easily enough by comparing respondents who thought the 1980 presidential election would be close with those who had the same impression in 1984. Although Reagan actually led Carter by nearly 10 percentage points in the popular vote, virtually all pre-election polls showed the two men in a dead heat until the last few days before the election. Small wonder, then, that 84 percent of the NES pre-election sample with an opinion on the point expected a close election.' Four years later, on the other hand, informed opinion, buttressed by all the public and private polls, expected that Reagan would easily defeat Walter Mondale. The only suspense was whether Reagan would carry every state (he missed one) and set a modern record for the winning share of the popular vote (he missed by 2.3 percentage points). The people were more out of step with the cognoscenti in 1984; just over half the NES sample with an opinion thought the election would be close.

'Nine percent of the 1980 sample and seven percent of those in 1984 did not know or failed to answer this question.

People who think an impending landslide will be close differ
from those who have this opinion of an election that is neck and
neck until the last minute. Moreover, they differ in ways that
are related to turnout. The 1980 election was expected to be
close by 76 percent of respondents who had not graduated from
high school, 87 percent of those who had, and 86 percent of
people with at least some exposure to college. The corresponding
figures for 1984 are 59 percent, 53 percent, and 44 percent. In
other words, education was positively related to expectations of
closeness in 1980 and negatively related in 1984. This would
lead one to think that plausible estimates of the likely margin
might have a different relationship to turnout than would
implausible estimates, if only because of the different
educational attainments of the two groups. And indeed they do.
In 1980, 62 percent of those expecting a close race voted,
compared to 54 percent who disagreed. The relationship in 1984
went the other way: 61 percent of people expecting a close race
voted, compared to 65 percent of those with a more realistic view
of the campaign.

Variations in education are not the complete explanation, as
can be seen from Table 1, which compares the turnout in 1980 and
1984 of respondents who did and did not expect a close election,
at three different levels of education. In 1980, with education
thus controlled, people who anticipated a close election were
still more likely to vote, except for those who had not graduated
from high school. In 1984, on the other hand, among respondents
with at least some college education, those who expected a close

Table 1

Education, Beliefs about Closeness, and Turnout, 1980 & 1984

Percent Voting: a/

	1980 Believe Election Will Be		1984 Believe Election Will Be	
Education	Not Close (%)	Close (%)	Not Close (%)	Close (%)
under 12 years	47	48	48	51
12 years	49	60	58	59
over 12 years	67	73	76	69

a. Validated turnout

Source: National Election Studies.

outcome were less likely to vote; there were no significant
differences among these with less education.

(Table 1 about here)

My guess is that beliefs about the likely margin reflect
more general information and political sophistication. An
equation properly estimating these attributes probably would wash
out any relationship to turnout, irrespective of the plausibility
of the respondent's expectations.

V.   Registration Is a Prerequisite to Voting

Public choice theorists analyze the rewards from voting and
probabilities of affecting the attainment of those rewards
because they posit that voting--like any act--has costs, which
may offset the rewards.   Yet none of them has much to say about
costs.   Almost all assume, and some say explicitly, that costs
concern the act of voting.[10]   Most seem oblivious to

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[10]Although Downs alludes in passing to registration as a cost
(pp. 265, 266), his references to ways to reduce costs (p. 266) are
mostly concerned with the act of voting itself. His major emphasis
is on the costs of acquiring useful information about the
alternatives facing the citizen. Riker and Ordeshook (1968, p. 26)
are more categorical: "[cost] is the collection of time spent on
the voting decision, the act of voting itself, etc."   With the
exception of Ferejohn and Fiorina (1975), other scholars in the
genre followed these early precedents.   In his recent survey of the
literature, Aldrich (1992), when talking about the costs of voting,
referred exclusively to the costs of registering.   He did not,
however, draw any of the conclusions advanced in this paper.
    Another problematic aspect of rational choice theorists'
attempts to allocate costs to predict variations in turnout is the
apparently eclectic character of the enterprise. For example, does
more education lead to higher or lower turnout?   We know from
observation that the answer is "higher," but most applications of

registration and all of them contemplate rewards and
probabilities that may become evident only in the latter stages
of the campaign, if not on election day itself.[11]

This lack of attention to costs is in striking contrast to
non-rational-choice empirical research, which has been more
successful in identifying variations on the cost rather than the
benefit side.[12] Analysis of the demographic correlates of
American turnout "emphasizes the costs of performing the minor
bureaucratic tasks required to cast a ballot and asserts that
ability to surmount these hurdles is aided by skills learned in
school" (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, p. 62). Variations in

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cost-benefit analysis point the other way. Because better-educated
people usually enjoy higher pay, their time is more valuable and
hence the opportunity cost of voting is greater. Such people also
have less free time and, probably, more attractive uses of that
time other than voting. They are more able to make these
calculations and also to realize the improbability of actually
affecting the outcome of an election. Being better informed, they
are more likely to recognize the complexity of most public policy
issues, and thus be unable to make a decision. Compared to all
these reasons for expecting educated people not to vote, the
countervailing speculations are unimpressive: they can more easily
arrange to take time out to vote and their greater information
makes them more confident about their vote choices and more aware
of the personal impact of public policy.

[11]One last-minute rational choice scenario (Glazer, 1988, p.
17) has Jones driving by his polling place at 7:10 a.m. and seeing
a line made longer by the presence of his neighbor Smith, which
causes him to decide not to invest the extra time to vote. With a
little more imagination one might attribute other thoughts to
Jones, e.g., can he find a place to park; will he be late to work;
can he stand being in Smith's company so early in the morning.

[12]Unlike rational choice theorists, researchers in this genre
do not say that costs generally are consciously calculated, that
costs are compared to the rewards that would result from the
success of favored candidates, or that many "people are brought to
the polls by the belief that their vote will make the difference
between any candidate's victory and defeat" (Wolfinger and
Rosenstone, 1980, p. 7).

the relationship to turnout of other demographic variables are most plausibly explained by differences in individuals' ability to bear the costs of voting. Analysis of the relationship of state registration laws to turnout shows that raising the cost of voting lowers the likelihood of doing it (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, chap. 4). The same point emerges from comparisons with Europeans, who seem a good deal less motivated to vote, but on the other hand are much more likely to do so (Glass, Squire, and Wolfinger, 1984; Powell, 1986; Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire, 1990). The difference between the United States and Europe in this respect comes down to a much higher threshold that Americans must cross compared to Europeans, who for the most part are automatically registered to vote.

Registration is arguably more difficult than voting. It often requires more obscure information and a longer journey at a less convenient time. [13] Registration deadlines pass quietly and the experience of registering usually is a solitary one. On the other hand, it is difficult to ignore election day and the expressive gratifications of participating doubtless are more evident than those of signing up to vote. Notwithstanding all

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[13]Registration may also reflect nothing more than being home when a canvasser calls; sharing shelter from the rain with a registration table; or applying for a driver's license in Oregon, Washington, or Montana, where this action is also an application to register to vote. Also excepted from these remarks about the difficulties of registration are citizens of North Dakota, where registration is not required, and of Maine, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, where one may register on election day. By the same token, the growing liberalization of procedures for obtaining and using absentee ballots is also lowering the cost of voting, at least for the bureaucratically adept. Absentee ballots accounted for fully 14 percent of all votes cast in the 1988 presidential election in California.

the rational choice talk about the information costs of voting,
these seem less consequential than the costs of registering.
Indeed, much of the mental furniture that guides many electoral
choices can scarcely be called either information or costly:
ethnic resentment, dissatisfaction with economic conditions,
religious commitment, historic memory. Registration, on the
other hand, often requires a level of accuracy about where and
when to go that cannot be satisfied by gossip, communal
loyalties, and casual exposure to the media. As for ballot
decisions, the continued strong link between party identification
and vote choice (Keith et al., Chap. 10) suggests one economizing
device that can save a good deal of time on information
gathering.

Once Americans are registered, they are very likely indeed
to vote in presidential elections. About 85 percent of NES
respondents whose registration was verified actually voted in
each of the three presidential elections of the 1980s.[14]
Moreover, some variables that are strongly related to turnout,
e.g. age, are wholly unrelated to the turnout of the registered;
other variables, e.g. political interest and education, have only
a weak relationship (Squire, Glass, and Wolfinger, 1987).
Researchers and interest groups interested in increasing turnout
largely are in agreement that this can most easily be
accomplished by lowering the costs of registration (Piven and
Cloward, 1987; Gans, 1991; Wolfinger, 1991).

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[14]I say "about 85 percent" because the exact number depends on
decisions about classifying those few respondents where the records
are ambiguous.

For all intents and purposes, registration is permanent for those who do not move.[15] Even readers who reject my assertion that registration is more difficult than voting should agree that in any national election the majority of voters will be registered in advance of the campaign, indeed, in advance of the presidential nominating conventions. Therefore costs and rewards occur in quite different time periods. The rewards, whether from the act of voting itself or consequent to the outcome, are received no earlier than election day. A major part of the cost, on the other hand, was paid years or decades earlier, when the citizen registered. The incentives to that earlier registration may have nothing to do with the contemporary election. Perhaps they were Harold Washington's 1983 Chicago mayoralty campaign, or an antinuclear referendum in 1978, or some other long-forgotten issue or hero that moved the citizen to pay the cost of registration. Thus a consequential part of the cost of participating in the current election, having already been paid, need not be set against any benefits likely to ensue from that election.

If only for this reason, the rational choice apparatus is better suited to analyzing the turnout of the registered. The only wielders of rational choice theory I came across in my limited reading who seemed to recognize this point were Ferejohn

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[15]To be sure, most states purge registrants who have not voted for various lengths of time. The grace periods involved, together with Americans' high level of residential mobility (Squire, Wolfinger, and Glass, 1987) doubtless are responsible for the finding that variations in purge laws have no discernible effect on turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980, p. 76).

and Fiorina (1975), whose dependent variable was the nonvalidated turnout of the registered in several NES samples. This measure had the great advantage of being relevant to judgments about closeness of the outcome and the great disadvantage of being a variable with little variation.[16]

Many of the calculations attributed to the rational citizen concern matters that change over the course of the campaign, including the likely closeness of the outcome and the comparative advantage to the citizen of the alternatives. For example, the reportedly fateful debate between Carter and Reagan occurred just a week before the election in 1980 (Lanoue, 1992). Thus the information the rational citizen needs to make a decision about voting or abstaining may not be apparent until the last few weeks or days of the campaign. By this time, it is too late to register. Unlike citizens of most other democracies, where registration is automatic, voting is not a matter of acting on impulse for most Americans, who must register well in advance of election day if they wish to vote. In 1984, for example, 62 percent of voting-age citizens lived in states with a registration deadline at least four weeks before the election.

Because of registration deadlines and the very high turnout of the registered, all the intricate and imaginative formulations about casting a decisive vote, comparing the benefits of A's

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[16]At least one public choice critic of Ferejohn and Fiorina seems not to have taken proper notice that their dependent variable was the turnout of the registered: "In their sample, about 90 percent of the respondents claimed to have voted. This is a much higher percentage than is typical of the United States and suggests a nonrandom sample or misrepresentation of voter behavior" (Mueller, 1989, p. 354).

victory to a triumph for B, and so on, can help predict the
turnout of only that small minority of registrants whose
participation is in doubt. Most non-voters are beyond the reach
of such calculations. They cannot vote because they are not
registered.

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