

WESTERN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES:  
RATIONAL VOTING

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INTRODUCTION

Some political scientists view voting in Western democracies as a rational choice of a party or candidate that best represents the voter's preferences. Others insist that voters know too little to make rational choices and are influenced primarily by non-rational motives.

This essay first explains what rational voting is and then establishes to what extent voters select rationally among issues and alternatives and if this can be assessed at all.

SCIENTIFIC VIEW OF RATIONAL VOTING

The foundation of theories on rational voting was, in effect, laid by Hotelling's Main Street idea, which was originally developed to explain why two competing stores would often be found closely together on Main Street. He then built on this and exchanged customers by voters, stores by parties, and physical by ideological distance (Stokes 1963, pp. 368).

Anthony Downs then adopted this theory and extended it, putting much emphasis on multiparty systems and coalition governments. In order to study voting patterns and rationality scientifically, he made several assumptions that made it easier to create models of legislature and electorate; he, for example, assumed votes for parties, not for individuals, in a very simplistic proportional representation system. He also considered only voters that look upon elections as a means of selecting government, not merely as preference polls, and are not future oriented. He was sure to note that rarely a mass democracy meets these criteria but felt he had to make those limitations to simplify the theory (Downs 1957, pp. 143).

Downs realized that while the Main Street model worked very well in two-party systems like Britain and the United States, for which it was originally developed, several amendments had to be made for multiparty and coalition systems. In a coalition system, he noted, voters know that their favorite parties have little chances to actually govern alone and put their policies into practice without having to compromise. It is therefore of crucial importance to know what coalitions a party is willing to form and which ones it prefers; in the end, a vote for a party is supporting a certain probability distributions of compromises a party is willing to make, and not a vote for policies directly. If, on the other hand, a voter does not know what coalitions a party could form, he might not be able to figure out the party he favors (Downs, pp. 146).

Due to the probability distribution nature of voting, a voter wanting to vote rationally also has to consider the decisions to be made by other voters since those are going to influence the coalitions as well. This leads to a feedback effect that changes

voting dramatically. Because of time constraints, voters will have to end this process of conjecture and counterconjecture, and this point is not predictable; therefore, to a certain degree all voters are thus only quasi-informed and unable to make purely rational decisions, at least from a strictly theoretical point of view (Downs, pp. 150).

Parties also tend to be intentionally ambiguous about their programs and, under coalition governments, about the compromises they are willing to make; this way, they try to appeal to a broader section of the population, but they also make it harder for voters to act rationally. As a conclusion, one can say that voters are under constant pressure to act irrationally, and parties often reinforce this. Every voter is, in a pure sense, irrational to a certain degree.

#### EVIDENCE FOR RATIONAL VOTING

In their studies, some political scientists have found what they consider signs that point toward rational voting behavior. One of them is Russel J. Dalton, who explains the findings in his book “Citizen Politics in Western Democracies.”

According to him and other scientists, long-term party affiliation has dropped considerably over the last decades, and issue voting, conceived to be the opposite of party voting, has increased. The latter, and more specifically voting based on position issues, is seen as the ideal form of selecting government, because “the policy is the end, and the party is the means”, as Converse states (Converse in Niemi and Weisberg 1976, p. 87).

Under issue voting, sophisticated and well-educated voters judge the policies that have been or can be expected to be made by the different parties, determine their favorite parties, and vote accordingly. To do so, voters have to be interested in the issues at stake, should hold an opinion on them, and know the parties' and the candidates' positions. Unfortunately, as Dalton acknowledges, this does not happen very often in today's mass democracies. But even though only a minority qualifies for position issue voting, this does not mean that the majority is unable to make rational choices (Dalton 1996, pp. 220).

Instead, the majority of voters takes a mixed approach and combines voting based on the before mentioned position issues; performance issues; and candidate images and attributes. Dalton sees this as perfectly rational and points out that, for a rational choice of government, not all voters have to be interested in all policy decisions. They are rather grouped into overlapping issue publics that differ in size and address different issues: While a larger one, for example, deals with general economic issues like taxation and benefits, many smaller ones care about agricultural and environmental issues, nuclear energy, and foreign aid. It has been shown that most voters belong to at least one of these groups and thus contribute to an overall rational choice of government (Dalton, pp. 221).

Even though performance issues do not deal directly with policy decisions, their consideration still lead to rationally selected governments. Voting based on them weighs past accomplishments and failures of politicians and tries to anticipate how they would perform in office. Voters either reward politicians for successful policies or punish them for unsuccessful ones. Punishment may often be overly stringent, but this only leads to

politicians who strive even more toward successful policies, ultimately making them more responsive to the electorate's need. As a result, successful and popular policies are continued, while failing policies are abandoned; performance voting thus seems rational (Dalton, pp. 231).

Even voting based on candidate images and their attributes may be considered rational to a certain degree. Individuals seem to be able to place a candidate's attributes into some broad categories and use those to estimate how he or she would perform if elected. Candidate images thus provide a viable shortcut when information on issues and performances is missing. Some of the most important attributes are integrity, reliability, and competence, and no one can doubt that these characteristics should be part of a rationally chosen candidate. This kind of voting is also used most by highly educated people, so it seems to work well and is not purely created by the necessity to arrive at an answer without having the proper means (Dalton, pp. 233).

Dalton clearly views voters as being rational in selecting their leaders, and even notices a trend that further reinforces this. He sees the decline of party affiliation and the increase in issue voting as a self-reinforcing process, and even thinks that a classic democracy based almost entirely on issue voting might be possible today.

## EVIDENCE AGAINST RATIONAL VOTING

Despite Dalton's findings, evidence that points against rational voting also has been found. Philip Converse made pointed this out in his 1964 article "The Stability of Belief Elements over Time."

He found that party identification was very stable over time, not only for the elites closely associated with parties but also for the general mass. In fact, party identification was more stable than all of the issues that were polled in the same longitudinal study. This, of course, seems illogical and irrational, since the party should only be the means to the policy (Converse, pp. 86). Inglehart and Klingman find similar evidence when they point out that the European public can readily place themselves on a one-dimensional left-to-right spectrum, even though parties often stand for different issues that cannot all be placed on the same dimension (Inglehart and Klingman in Budge 1976, 284).

The information Converse gathered from polls does not point toward a generally rational public, but rather to a model that splits it in two. He theorized the electorate is made up of a hard core of voters with a well-established opinion that is perfectly stable over time; and of the remainder of the electorate whose opinion over time is statistically random. This, again, means that a large portion of the population does not make rational decisions when voting, because rational voting would require that the outcome in the same situation is always the same, and not influenced by random noise (Converse, pp. 89).

Converse concludes by saying that instability is associated with the public's lack of information or interest, and that it therefore does not have the basis for rational judgments (Converse, p. 93).

### PROBLEMS ASSESSING RATIONALITY

Beyond the discussion whether voting behavior is rational or not, political scientists are still debating how one may establish what rational voting is, and no conclusion has been reached so far. In his 1963 article in the "American Political Science Review", Donald E. Stokes has criticized several aspects of Down's model that is often used as a basis.

Stokes points out that Down has made several assumptions that do not hold true in reality. He points out that, especially in a multiparty system, parties often cannot be placed on just a single dimension. Parties thus rather have to be placed in a multidimensional space, where the different dimensions represent issues like economic policies, ethnic conflicts, or religious attitudes. To demonstrate the failure of the assumption that party space is one-dimensional, Stokes makes references to confessional parties like Weimar Germany's Zentrum party that never would have been created under Down's original theory. In the rise of this party, clearly other dimensions than just the liberal-conservative axis played a role, and Stokes is quick to point out that the importance and even the number of the different dimension may change over time. This completely changes the structure of the space parties compete in (Stokes, pp. 369).

In addition to that, voters cannot be studied and reduced to prototypes very easily. Often, they seem to be unable to place themselves on the axes established by political scientists, and some of the criteria used for a decision are not position issues at all: They do not range from one extreme to the other, but are rather just values attached to one party or another at a certain time. Finally, Stokes reminds his readers and colleagues that the party space is merely formed by the perceptions of the voters, and naturally, those perceptions may vary from person to person; not all voters have to have a common reference. This makes it hard to discuss rational voting at all (Stokes, pp. 372).

## CONCLUSION

Considering Stokes arguments, I believe it is very hard to conclusively determine if voters are rational or irrational when choosing their leaders. After all, individuals are different and have different ideals and perceptions. I still believe that a voter, as seen from within his paradigm, will always try to improve his situation. The decision reached should therefore rarely be purely irrational and rational more often than not. The process used to make this decision does not have to be the same for all voters, and from an objective point of view, it might not even make sense. Still, given the information and time an individual has, the decision was made in a rational but maybe sub-optimal fashion.

There are, of course, certain situations that make objectively rational choices more likely. In two-party systems, for example, the parties seem to exert less pressure on

the electorate to make irrational choices, and the feedback effect never occurs. Voting therefore is more straightforward, and it even is easier to place parties on just a single dimension, using issues as modifiers that nudge parties toward one or the other extreme, at least in a nearly homogeneous society, which happens to be another factor that improves rational voting.

In inhomogeneous multiparty systems, rational voting gets easier for one voter if a large portion of other voters behave irrationally because the feedback effect gets limited. Most likely, some kind of equilibrium condition will develop that permits as large a number of citizens to vote rationally without demanding too much of their time.

But even irrational behavior, as seen from a scientific point of view, might not be illogical at all: Given the time constraints and available information, it might actually be the logical action to treat elections as preference polls and not as a means to government selection and to ultimately delegate the latter task to the legislature.

It is an extremely hard task to argue for or against rational voting, but I am sure scientifically pure rationality will never be reached in elections. This should not be of importance, though; it should be important that constituents are able to select functional and representative governments, in one way or another, and at least nowadays, this seems to work reasonably well.

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