The probability-choice perspective in voter decision making models*

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Introduction

For many rational choice theorists involved in formal representations of voter decision making, recourse to expected utility models has undoubtedly rested on the desirable modelling properties provided by the probabilities, which constitute the defining characteristics of such models. First, a probabilistic perspective, as opposed to a deterministic one, is meant to capture an individual’s subjective estimation of his or her uncertain or ‘risky’ environment, as it bears on the choice situation at hand. Second, probabilities are instrumental entities providing a nexus between actions and outcomes. In the electoral context probabilities, because they are contingent upon the actual choice made or alternative selected by the citizen, reference the likelihood the individual can affect the election outcome.

No doubt these qualities attracted Riker and Ordeshook (1968) when, building on the work of Anthony Downs (1957: 38-47), they developed a formal representation of the voter decision rule for two candidate contests. Their ‘calculus of voting’ embedded, in part at least, in an expected utility framework, is given as:

$$R = PB - C + D$$

where $R$ is the reward or expected utility associated with voting; $P$, the citizen’s subjective estimate the vote can materially affect the election outcome; $B$, the utility differential between the two candidates; $C$, the cost of voting, and $D$, the reward from voting per se. According to the decision rule, one votes (for the preferred candidate) if and only if $R$ is positive; otherwise, abstention is the rational course of action. It is important to note that $PB$, a weighted utility measure, represents the ‘value’ of the vote as the vote aids in helping the preferred candidate win. It is thus an instrumental entity and the benefit it provides is clearly outcome dependent. On the

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other hand, the $D$ term is a noninstrumental or expressive item, incorporating 'satisfactions' or utility derived from the act of voting independent of the outcome. Among other things, Riker and Ordeshook suggest the $D$ term can comprise 'benefits' derived from 'compliance with the ethic of voting,' i.e., the fulfillment of citizen duty, or from 'affirming a partisan preference' (1968: 28).

Of course, simply specifying this formal decision rule does not have any strict bearing on whether voter choice is reasonably modelled along such lines. Indeed, this calculus is not without its critics (for example, Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974, 1975; Barry, 1970). Several, in fact, point to Riker and Ordeshook's own test results which, based on American presidential elections, show that the $P$ term only weakly explains turnout. Rather, it is the noninstrumental $D$ term, which some appear to regard as a wholly socio-psychological variable, which registers the largest effect. This has provoked at least one writer to wonder about the 'point and value of the whole “economic” approach' (Barry, p. 15).

Not surprisingly, this negative assessment has led, in part, to the generation of alternative models. Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974), for example, have advocated one based on Savages' minimax regret (MMR), which assumes decision making under uncertainty in the strict sense; that is, where state (outcome) probabilities are presumed unknown or unknowable. Furthermore, conducting tests of the two models with American presidential data, they (1975) actually find greater corroboration for MMR. Moreover, in another exercise Fiorina advances, but does not test, another model of voter choice which he suggests 'attempts to mold the issue voter of traditional democratic theory and rational choice models with the “nature of the times” and partisan voters of empirical voting studies (1977: 601). However, as Fiorina himself points out, the rationality aspect of this synthesis is more broadly (and loosely) constructed on the basis of issue voting. The major point is that the model is purely expressive. Conspicuously missing from Fiorina's formulation is an instrumental, i.e., probability-choice, perspective. The same is true for Brody and Page's 'candidate evaluation decision model' (1973). 1

In what follows, an argument will be made that the abandonment and/or eschewing of the probabilities is an unfortunate development. At best, it is premature, at worst, misguided. There are two general reasons for the position taken here. First, the expected utility model allows for a much wider range of application to various choice situations. As will be noted, this is especially important in light of attempts to devise models that are cross-national in scope. Second, current (negative) judgements about the efficacy of the probability terms and hence the model itself, emerging almost exclusively from American presidential election data, are either too tentative (since it is possible the model has not been adequately tested) or are too narrowly based (because of the nearly total preoccupation with this one kind of election).