

Rational Actors and Voting

Bradley Miller
miller@iastate.edu

Anthony Downs' model of applying the economic concepts of a rational actor to political decision making is carefully constrained to a manner that holds true across almost all situations. Of course it is a great over simplification, but rational decision making as Downs defines it comprises a major part of political behavior. Thus if a single explanation had to be applied, use of the basic assumption of economics is a good place to start.

First it is important to understand what a rational choice would be in this model. The important part is that Downs' definition makes no analysis of the value of the ends. The final goal of the actor is left beyond the scope of this model. The analysis is only on the choices made to obtain that final goal. If a theorist knows the ends of some decision maker, he can predict what actions will be taken to achieve them as follows: (1) he calculates the most reasonable way for the decision maker to reach his goals, and (2) he assumes this way will actually be chosen because the decision maker is rational. (Downs,) The economic analysis is then left with the task of determining what the decision makers ends are, and what choices would get him there.

To assume that all people are rational decision makers does seem absurd. Every day we see people doing things that seem very irrational. However, it is the choice of ends that really is the irrational part. Even people considered to be insane, demonstrate rational means, while the intended ends are often irrational. An example given by Downs helps to clarify this distinction. Take a monk that has consciously selected as his goal the achievement of a state of mystical contemplation of God. In order to attain his goal, he must purge his mind of all logical thoughts and conscious goal-seeking. Economically speaking, this purge is quite rational, even though it would be irrational, by any non-economic definitions of rationality. The economic model holds valid even for people generally considered to be irrational.

The two papers *Economic Conditions and the Congressional Vote: A Review of the Macrolevel Evidence* and *Does the Economy Matter in Midterm Elections?* by Robert S. Erickson and Gary C. Jacobson respectively discuss bearing that the economy has on voter actions in midterm elections. By both of their analysis, the manner in which to study this is to look at the difference the economy is making in the voters life. Erikson puts it like this, "The most obvious way for economic conditions to influence congressional election outcomes would be for individuals to vote their pocketbook: for the 'in' party when their own family income increases but for the 'outs' when their family income suffers." Although there is some doubt to this completely explaining voter behavior. Erikson's study is trying to better understand the voters' motivation. An alternative is that citizen's vote for Congress according to how well they perceive the national economy is doing rather than their family pocketbook. Jacobsen objects to how Erikson designs his study in attempt to observe this. Their debate is over which ends is

being perceived by the voter as the most important. Neither of them stray from trying to figure out which ends the voter is basing his/her decision. Both of the arguments stand on the assumption that the voter is making a rational decision for whatever ends they are desiring. The underlying assumption that holds useful in any analysis is that the voter is making decisions that are rational means for accomplishing their desired ends.

Hannah Arendt has described a model of the impact that education has on a citizen's voting perspective. One who does not have education can be compared to a child. A child has selfish desires and is most concerned with their own security. The child is very focused on its private interests. In Arendt's model, the addition of education for that person introduces much more mature concerns. That person now has a more worldly sophistication and concern for what happens outside of their private world. They are more aware of links, limits, and the need for compromises. This change in perspective certainly has an effect the behavior of a voter. The reason it has such a strong effect is that changes the ends. The citizen's ends go from short sighted, selfish goals to long-view, holistic goals.

Emphasis on the difference the change in ends has, supports the consistency of the model of assumed rational means. If actors were not making rational decisions for the means, then the choice of ends would be insignificant. It is almost like the old truism, 'if you aim for nothing, you'll probably hit it'.

In a complex system of competing factors and desires it is difficult to simplify an explanation of why people do what they do. For all of these complications, Downs' use of the basic economic assumption is admittedly limited. However, in its constrained application it holds true an overwhelming part of the time. The number of people that would choose to walk one mile west when what they want to go one mile east, is a very small percentage of the population.

Bibliography

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