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# INTRODUCTION: Voting Behavior and Elections in Context

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The study of voting compels scholars to unpack the context in which voters make decisions about candidates and parties. Elections take place amid economic cycles, demographic transitions, and social conflicts that shape the meaning and stakes of the contest at hand. For instance, when economic or military crises unfold, political incumbents are seen differently than under other conditions. If religious cleavages or cultural conflict over sexuality are extensive, that tends to shape the terrain on which candidates and parties compete. Past political competition can itself be an ingredient in voter decision making, as when a party gains credit for presiding over the construction of a successful welfare state or instead loses standing by failing to resolve a foreign policy dispute.

In principle, there is a large and imposing array of contexts underlying electoral competition and voter decision making. By the same token, however, institutional or psychological processes may insulate voters and political parties from many sources of environmental influence. This is an important scenario, dating back to the classics of mid-century scholarship.

*The American Voter* (Campbell et al. [1960] 1980) was a landmark in this scholarly tradition, analyzing data from the early American National Election Studies (ANES). Not only did the ANES almost immediately set the standard for survey research on voting behavior, Campbell and colleagues' work challenged both folk and academic assumptions about the seamless operation of electoral politics in the United States. *The American Voter*'s interpretation of findings was polite in tone and restrained in rhetoric. But the results were bombshells. American voters were found to have abysmally low levels of information and sophistication, and they appeared largely uninterested in, and inattentive to, campaigns. Looking further (Converse 1964), the electorate was said to lack anything resembling attitudes toward many of the key domestic and foreign policy conflicts of the day. Together, these results raised serious questions about favorable (much less triumphalist) views of the behavioral foundations of U.S. politics in the postwar era.

The tradition of research established by *The American Voter* proved to be enormously fertile. From the start, scholars began to debate how issues of measurement, statistical estimation, and theoretical conceptualization might figure into this "minimalist" portrait of U.S. voters and mass opinion (Kinder 1983; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). A key challenge was to figure out how voters made decisions out of limited information and meager convictions. Building from *The American Voter*'s

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findings about the reliability and stability of party identification, analysts soon placed partisanship front and center as a trigger in voter decision making. While the causal status of party identification would be hotly debated with the rise of rational choice theorizing, this would only serve to underscore its central place in theory and research on U.S. voter choice (Converse 1966; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). Later work probed the operation of partisanship with respect to its operation as a cognitive moderator of environmental stimuli (Bartels 2002; Gaines et al. 2007), as a polarizing force in governance and legislative behavior (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), and as a multilevel facilitator of elite influence over identifiers (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009).

To be sure, partisanship was not the only factor whose influence was entirely compatible with the findings and analytic influence of the minimalist tradition. Race relations and racial attitudes have also been seen as powerful forces in their own right, and the civil rights movement was a critical intellectual watershed (Hutchings and Valentino 2004). Scholars unpacked such key political changes as the breakup of the solidly Democratic South as both reflecting and facilitating the ongoing political importance of race (Black and Black 1992; Mayhew 2002; Chen 2009). Partisan legacies of racial conflict were found to be enduring among both elected officials and ordinary voters (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Gilens 1999). Ongoing theoretical debates concerning the changing structure and implications of traditional versus modern sources of racial animus have been both extensive and productive (Sears, Sidanius, and Bobo 2000; Kinder and Kam 2009).

Moving forward in time since the 1960 publication of *The American Voter*, a pair of notable developments began to expand the array of contexts and considerations analysts studied with respect to voter choice. The first was the novel set of tools provided by psychological scholarship on heuristic decision making (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982). Here, cognitive shortcuts and prior beliefs are seen as readily activated by specific environmental settings, providing in principle a wide array of motivating stimuli to voters and citizens. From the start, one rich vein of behavioral scholarship began to unpack priming effects (Kinder and Iyengar 1987), where media coverage or experts'/elites' communication prompt voters to sample out of memory considerations that dispose them to view targets in a new light (Zaller 1992). Connecting levels of analysis in this way was powerful, and scholars were soon investigating the interaction between voter shortcuts and environmental stimuli (Sniderman et al. 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998) across a number of established as well as new policy issues.

While one possibility emerging from this work was that shortcuts were taking the place of information, it become clear that heuristic decision making is far from tantamount to an efficient summary of information; both biases and information matter but in distinct ways (Kuklinski 2001; Bartels 2005). The evolution of psychological work on specific biases such as the endowment effect (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1991) in turn exerted analytic pressures toward seeing voters' attitude formation as richly involving a broader array of ingredients than just information: emotions, group identities, and values could now be seen as triggering influences on the political

behavior of individuals (Marcus 2000; Feldman and Steenbergen 2001; Masuoka and Junn 2013).

A second major development was reconsideration and reanalysis of *The American Voters*' original hypotheses and findings. Campbell and colleagues' results concerning the scarcity of information among U.S. voters have easily survived the test of time. A systematic investigation by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) found no evidence that historical, technological, and political changes between the 1950s and the 1990s had produced a factually enlightened public. But a second thesis of *The American Voter*, that policy attitudes were so low in reliability as to indicate the absence of attitudes, fared less well. Krosnick and Berent (1993) found evidence for much higher levels of attitude holding (or reasoning) than envisioned; the branching-format instrumentation of party identification questions led to partisanship being much better measured using the traditional ANES policy items. Not only was there room to improve attitude measurement, but there was also a good deal more to investigate among the American public than just partisanship (or race). This result resonated with parallel work in political economy, where aggregate opinion trends appeared to suggest a degree of coherence and even responsiveness to shifts in the larger historical and political environment (Page and Shapiro 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002).

Another key step in refining the minimalist portrait involved a thorough reanalysis of the ANES data from the 1950s and 1970s on which *The American Voter* was based (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008). Ansolabehere and colleagues argue that the ANES policy items should be scaled to reduce measurement error, going beyond the single-item analysis of earlier research. They find that a scale of domestic policy issues shows much higher degree of stability and strong predictive validity with respect to voter choice in elections.

That U.S. parties and American voters are organized by reference not just to forces of partisan and racial conflict reopens for voter choice scholarship a wider array of contexts and factors. Complementing the thematic findings of Ansolabehere and colleagues, there is parallel evidence that social group and institutional patterns of inequality have contributed in important ways to voter choice and election outcomes. Both racial *and* gender segregation shape the behavior of voters, with high levels of segregation leading to greater support for the Republican presidential candidate in the 2004 elections (McVeigh and Sobolewski 2007).

Manza and Uggen (2006) shed light on prisons and criminal justice policy as a setting that is largely invisible to many citizens and policymakers. They present evidence that legal prohibitions of ex-felons' voting rights has had significant partisan consequences, contributing to Republican victories in a number of senate and presidential elections between 1972 and 2000. These results loom large in an era of mass incarceration in the United States (Western 2006; Pettit 2012), and the massive overrepresentation of black men in prison and ex-felon populations reveals a powerful linkage between racial inequalities and political-legal inequality.

Another novel recent focus is on the relevance of personality traits to the formation of political attitudes. Looking at the big five traits from the field of personality

psychology, such traits as openness to change show powerful associations with party identification, ideology, and policy attitudes toward abortion and same-sex marriage (Gerber et al. 2010, 2011). Insofar as personality traits have been found to have considerable stability over time, their exogenous status raises anew questions about socialization and life course effects in the study of political behavior.

A final example concerns foreign policy conflicts and issues. Once viewed as of relevance primarily to policy experts and political elites, foreign policy also appears to routinely influence voter attitudes toward candidates and parties (Aldrich et al. 2006). In the United States, voter attitudes toward counterterrorism, national security, and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were important forces shaping national elections in the new millennium (Campbell 2005; Mueller 2005; Brooks, Dodson, and Hotchkiss 2010). Beyond the U.S. context, the electoral effects of terrorist attacks have been readily discernable in Spain in 2004 (Chari 2004), and Israel during the period between 1990 and 2003 (Berrebi and Klor 2006).

## SYMPOSIUM OVERVIEW

Recent scholarship has tended to broaden in fruitful ways the type of contexts and considerations underlying voter choice and electoral competition. Articles in this symposium follow this analytic pattern with a focus on understudied aspects of voter choice in recent elections. The first article, "The Structure of Issue Voting in Postindustrial Democracies," sets the stage by tackling questions of broad, comparative scope. How do issues affect voting across developed democracies? Does variation in these relationships, especially as involving such new issue-based conflicts as globalization, go beyond the traditional, left/right cleavage?

Armed with a pair of new data sets for voters and political elites in 10 polities, Tim Hellwig (2014) analyzes how (and why) conflicts over established versus emerging issues matter to voters. Across countries such as Australia, France, and the United States, Hellwig finds evidence that the left/right cleavage still matters to voters and parties. Voter attitudes toward issues concerning taxes, spending, and ideological identification cluster together and yield a meaningful, underlying dimension of political conflict in all countries under consideration. Simultaneously, however, Hellwig finds evidence that more recent conflicts over trade and globalization (and to a lesser extent, immigration) suggest the existence of a second, latent dimension along which voter attitudes can be arrayed. The resultant picture is of a two-dimensional structure for the 10 democratic policies under investigation.

Analysis of voter choice and party characteristics rounds out Hellwig's study. Voter attitudes toward trade and globalization have comparable effects on vote intention with the notable exception of the United States, the least globalized nation in the analysis. Similarly, voter attitudes toward taxes and spending appear to shape voter choice in seven countries, but not Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands. Clearly, the country context can matter in affecting the salience of specific issues for national electorates. Furthermore, Hellwig's analysis suggests that the salience of issues is associated with

political party-level factors. For instance, the size of a party is correlated with salience across five of six issues, suggesting the importance of the positions and communication of established parties as key features in the context behind voter decision making.

A focal point of debate in both comparative and American politics concerns the significance of conservative political mobilization from below, particularly as involving issues of immigration and national identity. In "Political and Cultural Dimensions of Tea Party Support, 2009–2012," Andrew Perrin et al. (2014) present a systematic analysis of the Tea Party Movement in the contemporary United States. They start with the rise of the Tea Party in the wake of the 2008 presidential election, following the movement through its 2010 apogee as a public agenda setter and on to its diminished status as a wing of the Republican Party by 2012. What accounts for the Tea Party's dramatic rise-and-fall trajectory, and what can be learned about cultural versus partisan sources of support in recent elections?

Perrin and colleagues identify four cultural themes as central to Tea Party discourse and voter support: ontological insecurity, nativism, libertarianism, and authoritarianism. These themes are measured using items from three new telephone surveys they fielded in North Carolina and Tennessee in 2010 and 2011, and then again in 2012 (North Carolina only). Guided by theory and past scholarship, Perrin and colleagues take into account controls for partisanship and ideology in their analyses of Tea Party support. In 2010, three of the four coefficients for cultural sources of Tea Party support are statistically significant. In 2011, two of the four cultural coefficients are significant, and in 2012 there is no evidence that any of the cultural factors predict Tea Party support. These results suggest that the Tea Party transitioned from operating as a cultural movement with an independent foundation of support into a more partisan and narrowly defined political organization. Perrin and colleagues' regression results provide additional evidence in that ideology and partisanship are significantly associated with Tea Party support across all three surveys/time periods.

By unpacking the historical setting behind this cultural and political transformation, Perrin and colleagues seek to reorient theory and research on the Tea Party movement. In contrast to the theoretical interpretations pointing to the Tea Party as originating in partisan backlash during the 2008 election, Perrin and colleagues argue that the movement emerged amidst diverse sources of cultural support that went beyond partisanship. Subsequently, however, the 2010 elections and expanding opportunities for policy and electoral influence had the effect of damping down the sources (and magnitude) of Tea Party support. Here, Perrin and colleagues' analyses of themes in Associated Press reports during this time period provide a complement to their survey results. Whereas press articles from 2009 made frequent mention of Tea Party movement activism and tactics, media coverage from 2010 onward suggest a turn toward themes of electoral politics and the Republican Party. Perrin and colleagues suggest that the concept of "thin cultural coherence" captures the initial stages of Tea Party mobilization, while a more traditional notion of partisanship captures its assimilation into the Republican Party.

The relevance of race has been a key concern of scholarship in U.S. politics for over half a century. In "Barack Obama, the New Politics of Race, and Classed Constructions of Racial Blackness," Enid Logan (2014) extends this focus to the past two presidential contests and to debates over race, class, and identity. How are such factors implicated in the election (and reelection) of America's first black president? Does the Obama presidency signal a shift in the meaning of race in the contemporary United States?

Logan begins by identifying a new discourse that couples a declaration of the end of racial exclusion with expectations of how blacks should behave when seeking access to jobs and privileges monopolized by whites. Barack Obama's rapid ascendency from community organizer to first-term senator and then U.S. president provides raw data of relevance. In particular, Logan argues that Obama's trajectory signals a new racial order offering greater opportunity to black professionals, provided that they abide by an emerging set of racial norms. The historical context is critical. Just as the Jim Crow racism of the precivil rights era gave way to more subtle forms of racial attitudes and relations, the contemporary era shows a further turn in the evolution of modern racism. In this new era, black and blackness are viewed more positively, but claims about the persistence of racism still generate a negative reception. Analyzing print and online media articles spanning the period from 2007 to 2014, Logan investigates a cluster of class-related norms concerning desirable behavior among African Americans that facilitate upward trajectories. These include the expectation that blacks should be accommodating and articulate in manner, mainstream in orientation, and upbeat in relation to majority group members, while suppressing racial grievances. Logan identifies a dilemma faced by black politicians and black professionals: adopt the emerging view of racial identity with the constraints it imposes versus challenge this view and face political exclusion or sharply diminished access to influence.

Logan unpacks how trends in both media coverage and the campaign/communication strategies pursued by President Obama exemplify the new politics of race. Seeking to avoid triggering racial stereotypes in his first presidential run, Obama communicated a largely unthreatening identity without seeking to invoke ideas of racism or radicalism (and severing his association with controversy-inducing figures such as Jeremiah Wright). Probing media coverage further, Logan finds that deviations from mainstream images led to criticisms that often prompted Obama to moderate his message or otherwise avoid divisive public debate. Logan argues that while the media has tended to quickly sanction Obama for any signs of racial radicalism, commentators have simultaneously praised the president for at times embracing themes of personal responsibility with respect to black families and communities. How these discursive themes operate arenas outside the electoral round, and how they may also apply to such other groups as Latinos, is important. In conclusion, Logan outlines a research agenda to extend theory and debate over the new politics of race in the contemporary United States.

The final paper by Emily Wurgler and Clem Brooks (2014), "Out of Step? Voters and Social Issues in U.S. Presidential Elections," directs attention to linkages between

recent elections and voters' changing attitudes toward social issues. Have issues concerning family, morality, rights and liberties, and sexuality figured into the decision making of voters in the United States? If so, has the pattern of influence on voter choice and election outcomes grown over time? Wurgler and Brooks unpack these questions using data from six American National Studies Surveys for the period from 1992 through 2012. The focus is on voter choice in presidential elections, and in addition to social issues Wurgler and Brooks incorporate controls for such better-established factors as attitudes toward government, national defense, the economy, and partisanship.

Starting with the behavior of individual voters, Wurgler and Brooks find a strong relationship between a scale of social issue attitudes and presidential voter choice. Their analyses suggest that social issues compare favorably in magnitude with more traditional sources of influence over the evaluation and choice of presidential candidates. Testing for change in the social issues/voter choice relationship over time, Wurgler and Brooks report evidence for a highly stable pattern of influence, suggesting that U.S. voters have consistently distinguished between Democratic versus Republican presidential candidates for two decades.

But turning to the aggregate level of election outcomes reveals a key dynamic of political change. In particular, while the behavioral influence of social issues on voter choice appears stable between 1992 and 2012, the level of aggregate opinion has trended sharply during this same time period. Additional analysis by Wurgler and Brooks finds this trend to have mattered (and mattered increasingly) to the outcome of presidential elections. According to their regression simulations, had social issue opinions themselves been stable over time, Democratic candidates would have been in jeopardy of losing elections they in fact won (while losing by a larger margin contests such as 2000 and 2004). These electoral consequences have grown over time and appear particularly critical to understanding the 2008 election and 2012 reelection of Barack Obama to the presidency. Wurgler and Brooks interpret these results as indicating the partisan importance of social issues in the United States. They conclude that American political behavior scholars should incorporate more fully this cleavage into theory and research.

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