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*Rationality and Political Participation**

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Aldrich makes a convincing case for casting voter turnout in terms of a rational-actor framework. Two of his arguments are particularly noteworthy. First, the decision to vote is for most people a marginal one with generally low costs and low benefits. He concludes that turnout is not an especially telling example of the collective action problem. Second, Aldrich's emphasis on the ways in which strategic politicians may influence turnout brings politics back to center stage.

These arguments broaden much current work on rational decision making, and, in so doing, return us to the core of Downs's (1957) analysis, with its emphasis on the *context* within which potential voters make decisions. As is well-known, that context includes uncertainty (or incomplete information) for voters *and* candidates alike. This is what makes Downs's analysis decidedly political and is what distinguishes his approach from other analyses of voting behavior (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). Aldrich's stress on strategic politicians and campaigns restores political considerations to the analysis of turnout in much the same way as Fiorina (1981) restored political considerations to the analysis of partisanship.

Despite the plausibility of this perspective, casting political behavior as rational continues to generate considerable resistance (see, e.g., Hindess 1988; and for the Luddite version, Lowi 1992). Since at least Lasswell (1930), many have preferred to see political behavior as motivated by subconscious nonrational drives without purpose. The impact on the field of Lasswell's emphasis on the psychopathology of politics has been monumental in this regard. Indeed, Aldrich concludes that his own major purpose has been to show "that the turnout decision can be fruitfully understood as an exercise in rational decision making," which clearly acknowledges that many think otherwise. While I concur that this is an accurate description, the fact that many continue to regard rational-choice perspectives as contentious is an unfortunate outcome

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that stems from a common misperception of what the assumption of rationality entails.

The following is intended as an addendum to Aldrich's (1993) discussion. I begin with a brief discussion of the assumptions involved in rational-choice models and of the criticisms that are commonly lodged against those models. I then sketch two general arguments. First, while many theoretical and empirical issues remain to be addressed within the rational-choice framework, the commonly proposed alternative frameworks appear inferior. It is, moreover, an approach that subsumes many of those apparent alternatives. Second, if a broad rational-choice perspective remains the optimal manner in which to view voter turnout in particular, it is also the optimal approach to analyze political participation more generally.

The Rationality Assumption

Part of the ongoing debate over the rationality of participation stems from confusion over the meaning of the term. In the case of political participation, this confusion can be traced to classics like Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) and Campbell et al. (1960) which concluded that voters (and nonvoters) are fundamentally irrational because they exhibit very low levels of information about and apparent comprehension of politics. Berelson was especially explicit on this point, suggesting that democratic theory was in need of wholesale revision. Obviously, such conclusions hinge on a substantive view of rationality, in the Weberian sense. And substantive rationality implies judgments about goals selected by the analyst rather than goals selected by the objects of analysis. In the case of turnout, substantive rationality specifies goals and characteristics that the analyst believes potential voters *should* adopt.

In contrast, the models discussed by Downs, Aldrich, and many others depend on a *procedural* view of rationality. Riker (1990, 172) succinctly states the elements of the rational-choice model as follows.

> 1. Actors are able to order their alternative goals, values, tastes, and strategies. This means that the relation of preference and indifference among the alternatives is transitive. . . .
> 2. Actors choose from *available* alternatives so as to maximize their satisfaction (my emphasis).

Note that definition centers only on the alternatives that the actor (as opposed to the analyst [playing God?]) believes to be available or feasible. Observe too that this definition does not preclude miscalculations on the part of actors. Much of social choice theory addresses the ways in which the aggregation of individual preferences, rationally generated, can lead to collectively irrational outcomes (e.g., Arrow 1963). Downs (1957,

chaps. 8, 9) in particular addressed the ways in which rational parties attempt to induce irrationality among individual voters. The emphasis then is on optimizing *expected or anticipated* satisfaction. As Riker points out, "It is quite possible for people to choose alternative actions that frustrate their primary goals. It is also quite possible that, lacking information about others' choices, people choose actions (even ones with undesired consequences) that would be different from those they would choose with full information. In short, this definition requires only that, within the limits of available information about circumstances and consequences, actors choose so as to maximize their satisfaction" (1990, 173). The emphases on uncertainty and incomplete information are characteristics of this framework that have given it a decidedly political bent since at least Downs. Given these emphases, the idea of procedural rationality has proven to be an important premise that has led to the analysis of such obviously political phenomena as agenda setting, ambiguity on the part of political leaders, and the importance of office-seeking considerations.[1]

Despite this, the notion of procedural rationality continues to induce opposition. One common complaint is that the emphasis on utility maximization is inordinately restrictive because it precludes altruism and allows only for selfish behavior (see, e.g., Mansbridge 1990). But as Tsebelis (1990, 21) and others have pointed out, procedural rationality implies no such stipulations because (unlike the substantive view of rationality) it does not address the question of goals. By the same token, rational-choice arguments are not confined to utility defined solely in material economic terms. Arguments couched in terms of procedural rationality can in fact subsume a variety of goals, ranging from egoistic to altruistic, and from materialistic to idealistic.[2]

Others complain that common views of procedural rationality are empirically deficient. The best-known proposal along these lines comes

[1]My distinction between substantive and procedural rationality follows Riker (1990). Others make a slightly different distinction between "procedural" and "instrumental" rationality (e.g., Zagare 1990), where the former refers to utility maximization with full information and complete certainty (following people like Simon) and the latter involves procedural rationality in Riker's terms.

[2]The point is repeatedly misconstrued. For example, Sears and Funk (1990) argue that self-interest has little impact on public opinion and that the rational-choice approach is therefore limited. Instead, "the general public thinks about most political issues, most of the time, in a disinterested frame of mind" (1990, 170). However, this conclusion is predicated on a definition of self-interest that includes only short- to medium-term interests, and material well-being, and refers only to the individual or that individual's immediate family. Excluded from the definition are long-term interests, nonmaterial well-being, and interests that affect the well-being of the individual's group but not necessarily the particular individual. This is inordinately narrow.

from Simon (e.g., 1985, 1986), with his emphasis on bounded rationality. This proposal would carry more weight if it did not inaccurately attribute to procedural rationality assumptions of complete information and certainty. But even a cursory reading of Downs and the literature since reveals the centrality of arguments about imperfect information and uncertainty to rational-choice models (see, e.g., Calvert 1986). Given this, "bounded rationality" is logically indistinguishable from procedural rationality, as commonly used. The point was shown very clearly 20 years ago by Riker and Ordeshook (1973, 20–23). Satisficing, in Simon's word, is thus merely a shorthand label for optimizing under conditions of limited information and uncertainty.[3]

Finally, it is often claimed that the idea of procedural rationality is culturally confined. Some seem to assert that because different political cultures emphasize different values, the possibilities for rational choice are restricted. But this conflates substantive with procedural rationality. As I have already indicated, the latter is moot on the subject of values (i.e., goals). Others imply that the rules of decision making are dominated by unique configurations of enduring values or norms associated with different cultures. Were this the case, however, we would be reduced to idiographic descriptions as opposed to nomothetic attempts at explanation. In other words, we would be reduced to eschewing generalizations.[4] An apparently more subtle claim comes from Eckstein (1992), who declares that in some cultures (say, among the poor) there is more concern with minimizing pain than there is with maximizing pleasure and that the former is qualitatively distinct from the latter. However, the suggestion that there is a disjuncture between these two activities hinges entirely on

[3] A related critique of the procedural position centers on the way decisions are "framed" (Tversky and Kahneman 1986). However, while the ways in which choices are framed may affect the preference functions of actors, this critique is beside the point because the procedural position concerns behavior *given a set of goals*. For example, Downs (1957) is best read as an analysis of how citizens' preferences are framed by the behavior of parties/leaders. Aldrich's emphasis on the impact of strategic politicians also bears directly on questions of framing. And in both instances, the framing is embedded in a wider theory, unlike that offered by Tversky and Kahneman.

[4] For example, it has often been claimed that voter turnout rates are a function of political culture, being higher in participatory cultures than in others (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963). However, as I have attempted to show elsewhere (Jackman 1987), turnout rates in the industrial democracies are a function of institutional arrangements, which suggests that rational potential voters, confronted with the same institutions, will respond in much the same way regardless of the political culture in which they are said to be embedded. In a quite different context, Bueno de Mesquita (1981, 137–40) shows that putative cultural differences have no effect on the use of expected-utility calculations in decisions over whether to go to war.

the restrictive assumptions that utility is equated solely with "pleasure" and that all individuals perceive that they are confronted with the same choices. This, of course, ignores the fact that some individuals are faced with a much more constrained opportunity set than others. For those confronted with a very restricted range of available alternatives extending from horrendous to merely awful, minimizing pain *is* the same as maximizing utility.[5]

In sum, the scope of the procedural rationality premise for political analysis is much broader than its detractors recognize. Further, the major complaints typically lodged against it are misleading because they ignore the centrality of limited information and uncertainty to the rationality assumption. Aldrich's analysis underscores the fruitfulness of this postulate for the analysis of voter turnout.

The Procedural-Rationality Premise Outperforms the Available Alternatives

The commonly asserted deficiencies of rational-choice accounts of participation would seem to imply the existence of superior research options. In this section, however, I use two examples to suggest that the presumed alternatives are often compatible with rational-choice premises, despite common claims to the contrary. I further argue that recasting these alternatives in rational-choice terms offers an improvement because it integrates them into a broader theoretical framework.

Example 1

In a well-known paper, Converse (1969) compares the five countries studied by Almond and Verba (1963) to show that the stability of partisanship is a function of the age of democratic institutions. Arguing that age of institutions (time) serves as a proxy for experience with those institutions, Converse interprets the pattern as consistent with a learning model, according to which party identification is learned by participating in democratic electoral institutions. With increases in the extensiveness of participation come increases in partisan stability. Converse then shows that time also accounts for differences between older and newer voters and between women and men.

As Tsebelis points out, while Converse explains these patterns with a learning model, they can also be framed within a rational-choice ac-

[5] Consider the choices available to a woman who confronts an unwanted pregnancy. Eckstein's (1992) argument implies that rational decision making is impossible here: utility cannot be optimized because none of the alternatives allows for the maximization of pleasure. The implication is odd.

count, using a Bayesian updating process. "Older people have stronger priors because they have formed these priors through long experience (a higher number of relevant events). Therefore, revising their attitudes becomes more difficult for them. Younger people have weaker priors, and each new experience is important in forming their beliefs or attitudes. Women in countries that granted women's suffrage only recently are similar to younger voters on this account" (Tsebelis 1990, 23).

That Converse's empirical results can be shown to be consistent with two different research programs does not in itself imply that one of those programs is superior. But in the present case, a judgment can be made. The political implications of the learning model are narrower, centering as they do on relatively long-term effects of political socialization. In contrast, the rational-choice account suggested by Tsebelis is also a learning model that subsumes these effects within a model that incorporates a host of other political factors. These include the impact of strategic politicians on turnout addressed by Aldrich and of retrospective political evaluations on partisanship discussed by Fiorina (1981). By incorporating the learning model within this wider framework, the rational-choice model offers a richer (and therefore preferred) account of the empirical linkage between the age of democratic institutions and partisan stability.

Example 2

Early in this century, Michels (1927, 1958) conducted an extensive study of the German Social Democratic party. He concluded that while parties may begin with a programmatic (ideological) base, policy considerations are diluted and relegated to a secondary role over time as parties seek, by moderating their image, to maximize their electoral support. As a result, party platforms become increasingly ambiguous and converge close to the center, a process that is completed with electoral success. For organizational reasons, then, the primary goal of political parties becomes the attainment of office.

More recently, Edelman (1964, 1988) has formulated a symbolic interpretation of politics that parallels Michels's argument in several respects. Among other things, he argues that elected officials prefer symbolic responses over tangible ones because the former help to simplify complex policy options and trade-offs whose implications are often not clear to policymakers, let alone potential voters. Indeed, symbols become important to citizens: by simplifying the complexity and conflict inherent in policymaking, they provide reassurance and meaning. They even supply different interpretations of the same events or conditions to different people. Ambiguity on the part of candidates for office as well as officeholders is central to symbolic appeals.

Both Michels's and Edelman's analyses anticipate policy convergence toward the center as candidates seek to maximize their electoral support. With their emphasis on symbolic appeals, both envision that candidates adopt ambiguous policy positions in the process. And both suggest that this is likely to be accepted by potential voters, producing "quiescence," to use Edelman's (1964) term. But neither of these accounts is cast in terms of rational-actor models. Quite the contrary. Michels believed that the process he described did raise questions about rationality, but his discussion is cast in terms of substantive rationality. Edelman goes a little further to suggest that much of political life is fundamentally nonrational or irrational, following the way that term was used by Lasswell (1930) and more recently by French poststructuralists. Again, rationality is cast in Weberian, substantive terms.

Despite this, both arguments are very similar to the median-voter theorem generally associated with Black (1958) and Downs (1957).[6] Downs, of course, argues that parties are fundamentally driven by office-seeking considerations, which leads to a process of policy convergence near the median voter (constrained mildly by the preferences of activists). Employing a rational-choice approach, Downs further stresses the ways in which uncertainty and limited information provide candidates with incentives to adopt ambiguous policy positions, et cetera. Key elements of the arguments advanced by Michels and Edelman are thus rather readily translated into an alternative research program predicated on procedural rationality.

The median-voter argument, in turn, explains Converse's empirical results in his classic study of belief systems. If parties adopt ambiguous positions and thus encourage voter irrationality, we would expect considerable temporal instability in policy preferences, coupled with much more stability in partisan preferences because partisanship in Downs's terms involves a Bayesian running tally of retrospective evaluations (Fiorina 1981). This is precisely the pattern reported by Converse (1964; see also Converse and Markus 1979).

Again, the translation into the rational-choice framework is both feasible *and desirable* because it casts the argument into a more general and richer context. While much remains to be done, the rational-choice premise, broadly conceived, has generated a wide variety of relevant theoretical and empirical studies. These range from the analyses of party behavior (e.g., Schlesinger 1991), to studies of the role of ambiguity in

[6] I provide a more complete discussion of these parallels in Jackman (1986). While the median voter argument is commonly associated with Downs, see Black (1958) and, for the intellectual history, Black (1991).

electoral politics (e.g., Page 1976), to investigations of policy convergence under conditions of uncertainty (e.g., Page and Brody 1972; Calvert 1986). The translation is useful because it incorporates arguments like those of Michels, Edelman, and Converse into a framework that helps account for a variety of other phenomena, including those addressed by Aldrich.

Rationality and Participation

Aldrich's (1993) discussion of procedural rationality focuses directly on the question of whether to vote. Turnout, of course, is a structured form of mass political participation that has received much attention.[7] It is also, as Aldrich points out, a low-cost, low-benefit form of participation for most people. How useful is the procedural-rationality premise for the analysis of participation more generally?

In addition to turnout, participation can take the "conventional" forms addressed by Verba and Nie (1972), among others. Such forms range from involvement in electoral campaigns to contacting elected officials. Given the relatively structured institutional context within which these activities take place, they are readily incorporated within a rational-choice framework.

However, many have argued that rational-choice accounts fail in the analysis of less conventional forms of participation, such as rebellion. These activities are less conventional in the sense that they occur outside routinized political channels, and indeed their occurrence is evidence of the ineffectiveness of those channels. As a result, the rules that govern these forms of participation are vaguer than those that govern, say, voting. Some seem to suggest that this in itself undermines the rational-choice approach. For example, Tsebelis (1990, 32–33) writes, "Rational choice is a better approach to situations in which the actors' identity and goals are established and the rules of the interaction are precise and well-known to the interacting agents. As the actors' goals become fuzzy, or as the rules of the interaction become more fluid and imprecise, rational-choice explanations will become less applicable."

Since the rules that surround activities like rebellions are typically more fluid and less precise, the implication is that rational accounts are less germane to the explanation of such events. But is this conclusion

[7] Along with the extensive literature cited by Aldrich (1993), there are many comparative empirical studies of turnout (e.g., Powell 1986; Jackman 1987). These studies involve aggregate figures and do not therefore directly address the question of procedural rationality. However, they are informed by and bear on rational-choice analyses, as is clear from their concern with the ways in which political institutions constrain voter turnout rates.

reasonable? Fluid rules may make the analysis of such activities less tractable because they increase uncertainty. However, increased uncertainty (and, in the case of rebellion, higher potential costs) does not in itself reduce the utility of the approach.

Perhaps a more common argument is that behaviors like rebellion are a simple function of frustration. The argument goes back at least to Durkheim, who cast much collective political behavior as anomic and essentially purposeless. Most recently, Eckstein (1992) has made a parallel argument, asserting that rational-choice arguments are inappropriate for many political behaviors because those behaviors are not goal oriented. His assertion is based on the distinction between minimizing pain and maximizing utility, noted above. According to Eckstein, because efforts to minimize pain are based on frustration, they cannot be goal oriented. For the reasons I have already given, however, the distinction between minimizing pain and maximizing utility cannot be sustained. Both forms of activity are purposeful.

Tong's (1988) analysis of rebellion and banditry in the Ming Dynasty illustrates the point well. Both these forms of collective violence occurred in subsistence crises, where alternative survival tactics included migration, pawning family members, or becoming monks, eunuchs, or cannibals. All such tactics involve the minimization of pain, to use Eckstein's term, because none of the alternatives is pleasant (although I am prepared to be instructed on this point). Even so, Tong shows that the spatial and temporal distribution of collective violence is best explained as a rational response to subsistence crises: "We have found higher levels of rebellions and banditry in those countries and during those years where there were unmitigated hardship, and when government sanctions were uncertain. Conversely, we found lower levels of collective violence when conditions are reversed, namely, when hardship was ameliorated or tolerable, and when punishment appeared indubitable" (Tong 1988, 128). Far from being anomic and unpredictable outbursts, then, rebellions and banditry in the Ming period were purposeful and occurred where there was a chance of surviving hardship and of surviving as a bandit.

A similar conclusion is implied by Hibbs's (1976) analysis of strike activities in a radically different empirical context, namely, established industrial societies. While strikes are a much less violent (and thus less costly) form of collective action than armed rebellions, they too are a less conventional form of participation that reflects socioeconomic discontent and working-class militancy. Strikes also have been seen as anomic responses, sometimes as outbursts. Against this backdrop, Hibbs showed that there is a strong negative relation between strikes and unemployment, indicating that strikes are generally timed to take advantage of

tight labor markets. Further, they respond to changes in real (rather than money) wages, suggesting that labor is under no money "illusion." Net of these effects, labor and socialist governments do not affect strike activity, despite electoral incentives to do so. In contrast, the relative size of Communist parties influences strike activity, which implies that they serve as important agents for mobilizing and crystallizing labor discontent. All of this is consistent with a rational-choice account. Strikes are more likely where labor thinks it can gain *and* where there have been declines in *real* wages. Note, too, the significance of leadership effects, manifested in the mobilizing role of Communist parties.

Finally, some of the most interesting recent work on collective violence is cast explicitly in rational-choice terms and centers on the same collective action problem that concerns Aldrich (1993). The relative infrequency of rebellion itself speaks directly to the collective action problem. But a number of observers have emphasized that group leaders need to mobilize communities at the *local* level. When issues are localized, free-rider obstacles are minimized because monitoring (and thus participation) problems are minimized. At the same time, localizing issues breaks them down into smaller components and thus helps convince potential participants that their efforts make a perceptible difference (for useful discussions of these issues, see Popkin 1988; Taylor 1988; Moore 1989). Essentially, these are arguments about the ways in which leadership can overcome the collective action problem. And these are therefore arguments that directly parallel Aldrich's discussion of strategic politicians, who "inform voters of the wasted voting argument and convince at least some voters that it is sensible to act as 'strategic voters.'"

Conclusion

Aldrich (1993) makes a compelling case for examining voter turnout from the perspective of the rational-actor model. Given the broader implications of his analysis, along with the impressive and unified body of research already generated by this program, it is puzzling that this model continues to generate so much resistance. I have made three points. First, the common criticisms of procedural rationality distort the way in which the premise is actually used. Second, the premise offers an important way of integrating a wide variety of political patterns in a manner that casts them as more general and more political than the commonly offered alternatives. After all, the fundamental idea that politics involves conflict over the allocation of scarce goods implies purposeful behavior. Third, the procedural-rationality premise offers the best way to analyze mass political participation—both conventional and unconventional—in broader and more unified terms.

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