

# POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON VOTING BEHAVIOR

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## Introduction

In contemporary democratic societies, elections have been generally defined as “the embodiment of the popular will, the expression of the sovereign power of the people.” It is a principal means through which citizens can influence their leaders representing their respective groups. And these represent the democratic nature of the government wherein the people exercise their right of suffrage by choosing and electing their candidates for a given period of time and the retention and removal of which depends on the people themselves. Therefore, democracy can be interpreted as a rule by the people, consistent as to what Article II section 1 of the constitution states “Sovereignty resides in the people and all government authority emanates from them.”

If the person is the central theme of a democratic government then the question of who participates in political decision is also central to the nature of democracy in society. As a whole, political participation pertains to those activities by private citizens more or less directly aimed at influencing, the selection of government personnel and on the actions they take. Political participation primarily involves voting, campaign activity, cooperative activity, citizen initiated contacts and voting per se. The legitimacy of the government can be measured on how active the political participation of the people is.

It is been said that suffrage exercised through secret ballot is a precondition of a genuine democracy. Because like other political activities, voting provide no immediate or tangible benefit to the elector, compared with participating in campaign, communication with an official or elected representative or working for an organizational political groups though it is noted that we do not have real political parties, what we have are just mere electoral groups which only exist during elections and self-destruct after it. Consequently, behavioural research has shown that most people know little about their elected incumbent officials, less about their opponents and virtually zero about

public issues. While information levels of voters is said to be wanting and knowledge about public issues are lacking, citizens still employ sensible decision rules, or heuristics in acquiring and storing information about politics.

But the voter's low level of information can be attributed to Benjamin Page's "candidate ambiguity" and with the high costs of obtaining information, not with the imperfection of voters. Barriers to sound choices, relies not on the voters themselves but on electoral environments such as the church, the school, the military, the mass media and other dimensions of voter's political environment. Thus, it is also worthy to mention these different institutions role in shaping the voter's behavior and attitude. These institutions or dimensions in one way or another exert tremendous influence in voter's choices, decisions and consciousness. Political information in addition is very crucial because it aids voters to make the best possible decisions and that which separates a well-informed voter from a poorly informed voter. A well-informed voter is one who chooses among candidates on the bases of understanding of public issues and of the candidates' platforms.

In spite of the fact that voters possess a highly imperfect information about candidates and public issues, a poorly-informed, ill-informed or even uninformed electorate on the other hand decides to vote just by relying completely on irrelevant cues, such as partisan identification, group endorsement and the opinions of friends, as well as the personality, appearance and style of the candidates. The voting behaviour of college students in particular can be explained based on his own perceptions and behaviour and how he acquires and responds to the information provided by his electoral environment. Behavioral findings could suggest that young adults are still generally idealistic. It is easy for them to estimate, predict, judge, choose and decide with little or no foundation at all. They have their own ideas, standards, expectations and qualities of a good leader that is why if these expectations are not met, the tendency is to rely on the information set by their social, political and cultural environment. Furthermore, they would eventually share the sentiments, opinions and attitudes of what their friends, parents, and showbiz idols say or do. In addition, any conflict that would arise between their own perception and their environment's idea of leader, it is more likely that

the latter would prevail. They would somehow surrender a part of their voting behavior in favor of environmental influence.

## Voting Behavior and Political Information

The voting behavior can be understood by considering the psychological variables, which intervene between the external events of the voter's world and his ultimate behavior. The citizen acquires processes and applies political information to choose political candidates. Acquisition of political information is influenced by the electoral environment, which belongs to the external structure of the individual voting behavior. The content of information furnished by the electoral environment provides one reason, which individuals know as much as they do. This is complemented by the extent of cognitive interaction with the environment.

Social structure also influences the cognitive structure of the voter's world. Although voters react in systematically different ways to the same stimulus, some reactions are inevitable. Thus, the social structure is important, because it shapes the social experiences and political information that are brought by the voter to the voting booth. Votes share their preferences with other voters during social exchanges and preferences change as the result of these exchanges.

It follows that to analyse the activity of the voter's mind; the internal structure is the citizen's cognitive domain, specifically what she or he knows about politics. The citizens' cognitive structure is the result of all the information he or she has absorbed and organized. And the link between campaign and citizen response is also information. The citizen response is similarly based on knowledge. There are several elements to cognitive structure, the most basic of which is information level. Information is organized into attitudes, valence cognitions about political objects, which are formed by making more than two beliefs or opinions functionally related to one another in various ways.

There are three important political objects, which motivate voter's behaviour, which may be relevant to the individual's choice of candidate- parties, issues, and candidates. Voters should be cognizant of these when choosing candidates, since these are component of

voter's attitudinal objects. Voter's attitude maybe labelled party identification, issue orientation and candidate orientation.

Party identification is regarded as "the sense of personal attachment which the individual feels toward a party." With regard to vote choice, individual's partisanship can be construed as long predisposition to vote towards one party or another, other things being equal." On the other hand, the perception of the issue stands of candidates and parties is a basis for making vote choices. Finally, candidate orientation is defined as "the structuring of political events in terms of personal attractions to the major personalities involved."

### **Some Thoughts On Voting Behavior**

Voting behavior generally refers to the overt manifestation exhibited by an individual, pro-arriving at decision to vote for a political candidate. Voting behaviour heavily depends on the availability of information most people possess about politics. It is therefore a correct ideal that information is one of the essential factors affecting the voting decision. Empirical research would reveal that electorate varies considerably in its level of concern over political events and in the contents and sources of political information. Electoral decision is not with specific content.

Almond and Verba stated that a large portion of the electorate does not know basic facts of political discourse such as the names of the national political leaders or governmental institutions. Furthermore, the electorate is unable to use such a limited knowledge with intelligence.

Repass stated that "by and large the voting public has at least a few substantive issues in mind at the time of an election, and the voters seems to be acting more responsibly by then had previously been thought."

Page indicated "under certain presumably common circumstances, the self-interest of politicians dictates they avoid specific stances and limit themselves to vague actions and utterances. But it is possible to the electorate to prevent this situation either by persuading the public to react more negatively to ambiguity or by structural changes such as legal requirements or legislative question periods, face to debate or written answer to specific questions."

Key described that “in elections the voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamour for attention and vie for popular support, the people’s verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlook presented to them. The electorate behaves rationally and responsibly, as we should expect, given the clarity at alternatives and presented to it and the character of information available to it.

Kramer argued that” uninformed voter apparently base their voting decisions on historical and retrospective considerations in a space information environment. By so doing, election outcomes can be responsive to objective changes occurring under the incumbent party.”

Popkin asserted that “as an inventor, the voter is concerned with outputs, and because the outputs are collective goods, there is incentive to be free-rider and pass the responsibility to others to inform themselves. Combined with the costliness of the information, this leads to the use of informational cost-saving devices like party, ideology or demographic characteristics and an expectation that voter will be most informed when information is free or when it is obtained not to prepare for voting but to last for use in daily life.”

Mckelvey and Ordeshook stressed that “the voters are able to make relatively informed choices on the basis of contemporaneous endorsements together with either historical data on part of politics of incumbents or contemporaneous poll data.”

And finally Jung concluded that “among the variables related to voter’s cognition, education was the most strongly related to the information level, followed by the interest in the campaign and other political affairs.”

## Conclusion

Voting behavior findings is not only recording of electoral returns, computations of voters or tabulating electoral shift, it is more than that. Students of politics have now the proper recognition of the role of behavioral and psychological processes in shaping political actions.

It is interesting to note that students nowadays have shown great interest and enthusiasm in voting behavior studies not only on the information it gives but even more so because these studies provide them frameworks and guidelines that will help them vote wisely mainly because of the awareness of their internal and external cognitive structure. Aside from the fact there is a strong relationship between voting behavior and the study of political system, an individual is a repository of authority and sovereignty and their electoral decision and political action affects other decision processes in society. The study of voting is mainly concerned with the basic processes of political decision.

Furthermore, it is said that the kind of the people we have is the kind of government we have. We need voters to attain a certain degree of maturity in their choice of leaders to make them and their government politically mature. Also in general, political information plays a vital role in the process of electoral decision. In addition, voters tend to vote for a candidate for public office on the basis of information acquired from his electoral environment. In a nutshell, we need literate, educated and well-informed voters for us to have the ability and capacity to transform society's political system and improve our way of life in the process.

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