

The nature of issues in mass elections

I remember standing at the polls one day, when the anger of the political contest gave a certain grimness to the faces of the independent electors, and a good man at my side looking on the people, remarked, “I am satisfied that the largest part of these men on either side mean to vote right.” I suppose considerate observers, looking at the masses of men in their blameless, and in their equivocal actions, will assent that in spite of selfishness and frivolity the general purpose in the great number of persons is fidelity. The reason why any one refuses his assent to your opinion, or his aid to your benevolent design, is in you; he refuses to accept you as a bringer of truth, because, though you think you have it, he feels that you have it not. You have not given him the authentic sign.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, “New England Reformers:
A Lecture Read before the Society in Armory Hall,”
Sunday, March 3, 1844)

This book is about analytical politics. As we noted in Chapter 1, this phrase implies “breaking down” political phenomena into their components and considering theoretical propositions that unify or differentiate these phenomena. However, with only a few exceptions, such as the analysis of turnout in Chapter 7, what we have “analyzed” is voting in committees. In this final chapter, we discuss some recent advances in the ongoing attempt to apply analytical political theory to mass elections.

In discussing the classical spatial model, we have referred to Anthony Downs’s 1957 book, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, and Duncan Black’s 1958 work, *The Theory of Committees and Elections*. It is tempting to categorize these two works as the origins of the “mass elections” model and the “committee voting” model, respectively. Crediting Black with the committee voting model is perfectly accurate. But the orthodox “Downsian” model of elections is different from what Downs intended.

Downs was trying to create a real theory of mass elections. The main goal of Downs's theory was accounting for the uncertainty and lack of information voters face in making political choices. Downs advances the rudiments of a spatial model in his chapters 1–4, and it is on this foundation that much of modern spatial theory, including the MVT, is built. The extensions of the spatial model were accomplished mechanically, taking issues as the dimension(s) of the relevant space.

What Downs was really arguing was that voters have too little information about parties or candidates to solve such a complex problem. Step outside the elaborate logical structure we have built around “issues” for a moment and think about what it all means. Just what is an issue? How many issues are there, really, in a mass election? To put it more formally, how many dimensions are there in the space where mass political competition takes place? How much information do voters have about those issues, and how do voters conceive of their choices in that space?¹

An important early criticism of the spatial model of voting was offered by Stokes (1963). Among other things, Stokes objected to the Downsian model's assumption of “ordered alternatives” as a depiction of the space of political competition in mass elections. Stokes claimed that voters perceive issues diffusely, perhaps even as “either–or” choices or symbols, even if the underlying issues (tax rates, speed limits, spending on the military) may be continuous and measurable.

This criticism is fundamental, though it is better applied to the classical model than to Downs's own discussion.² The “what is an issue?” problem is very difficult for the classical model, because almost anything could be an issue.³ Still, to be fair, the definition of an issue is very difficult for everyone. Scholars and pundits lament that campaigns aren't even “about” issues. In this context, an issue is some policy question that the scholar or pundit cares about. They think everyone else should care, too. It may be useful to restrict the definition of issues to policy questions that do manage to attract widespread attention in the political process.

Consider an example, prison overcrowding, used by Baumgartner and Jones (1993, chapter 7), Jones (1994, chapter 5), and Hinich and Munger (1994, chapter 6). All three of these works point out that there are many social problems, but that few become issues: No one pays attention. If the problem becomes an issue, the political system moves

to a contest over whose language to use to describe the problem. Success in using the “right” language often guarantees the “right” solution, from the perspective of the disputants.

The problem with prison overcrowding is this: There are many more prisoners than beds in correctional facilities. This may be a real *problem*, but it is not necessarily an *issue* if neither politicians nor the media talk about it much. An event to focus attention, such as a court order dictating the release of felons for whom there is no room, can change the problem into an issue reported by the press or talked about by candidates.

Still, what is *the* issue? There are at least two possibilities: First, prisons are overcrowded, because (a) prisons are too small and (b) law enforcement is too lax, so that too many people commit crimes. The solution is to double spending on prisons and police enforcement. Second, prisons are overcrowded, because (a) too much money is being spent on punishment, rather than rehabilitation, and (b) there is too much spent on law enforcement, rather than poverty programs. The solution is to cut spending on prisons and enforcement, and then raise spending on job-training and welfare programs.

The problem this example creates in identifying the issue is obvious. Is the issue here prison overcrowding, the breakdown of law and order, or poverty? The answer may depend on how the issue is “framed” by the media and perceived by voters. In that case, there are no objective issues at all. How are we to portray issues in the political system *before* framing takes place? How can we model the way that mass publics perceive the choices presented to them? The classical spatial model does not address these problems very effectively, because it takes the issue space as given.

There is a further difficulty with the classical model. Mass democracy is rarely *direct*, because citizens only occasionally choose budgets and policies through referenda. Most mass democratic choice is *representative*: Voters choose representatives, who in turn decide policy questions. One might argue that we have reasonable models for how representatives choose. After all, the committee model, with its assumption of high interest, high information, and widespread proposal power, fits legislatures quite well.

But then we still need some model of how voters choose representatives. The answer given by the Downsian model, that voters choose the

candidate closest to them in terms of distance (accounting for salience and nonseparability) in an n -dimensional issue space, seems much less realistic for mass elections than for committee voting. In this chapter, we consider two important alternatives to the classical model, *directional theory* and *ideology*. The reason these approaches are presented here as alternatives is that each questions the nature of issues, and choices presented to voters, in the classical model:

- *Directional theory* models voter responses to policy proposals as having two components: a direction (does the voter feel favorable or unfavorable to the policy?) and an intensity (how strongly does the person feel about the policy?). A voter evaluates a candidate using the sum of his or her responses to the stands of the candidate on each issue.
- Spatial theory based on *ideology* argues that the classical model imposes too many informational requirements on voters, and imposes too many requirements for commitment on parties. The space in which political competition takes place, therefore, is ideology, not policy. The “dimensions” of the ideological space are few, are latent, and are determined by the way that issues tend to cluster in voters’ minds.

Directional theory

“Downsian” theory requires that voters perceive, and candidates occupy, positions in an n -dimensional policy space. Preferences are defined by the (weighted) proximity of a voter’s ideal point to the alternative proposed. Many have claimed that the classical model of spatial preference representation makes inaccurate and misleading assumptions about voters and alternatives. Directional theory preserves some of the intuition of spatial theory, but requires far less information or cognitive exertion by voters.

There is no one directional theory, so it is useful to outline some key assumptions and illustrate their implications for political choice. Perhaps the first formal “directional” alternative to proximity models was suggested by Weisberg (1974), who noted that the idea of ordered, linear dimensions conflicted with voting behavior observed in legislatures.⁴ Weisberg claimed the policy space is not a line, but a circle. If we visualize a circle with the status quo (or the voter) at the center,

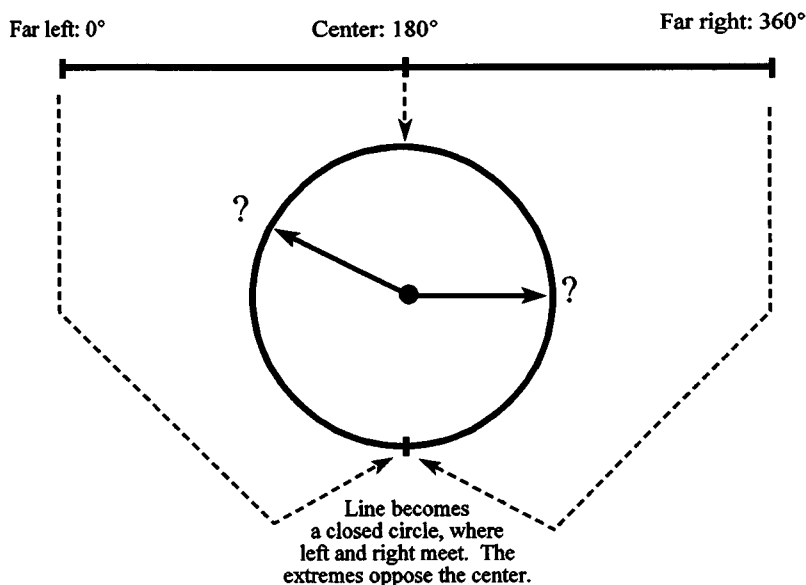


Figure 9.1. The left–right dimension transformed to a circle, where left meets right.

the choice of a direction (ranging from 0° to 360°) implies how policy will change.

Weisberg’s “directional theory” assumed one dimension, a left–right scale that curves back on itself so that the extremes of left and right converge, as shown in Figure 9.1. The basic approach, however, can be extended to multiple dimensions simply by changing the conception from a circle to a *hypersphere*, or circle in n -dimensional space, as Matthews (1979) points out. Matthews analyzes the equilibrium properties of voting under this generalized representation of directional preferences.

A very different directional model is based on the theory and empirical findings developed in Rabinowitz (1978) and developed more fully in Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) and Macdonald, Listhaug, and Rabinowitz (1991, 1995). Rabinowitz (1978) used a nonmetric multidimensional scaling algorithm to place the implied voter ideal points and candidate issue positions in political issue spaces with two dimensions. What he found appeared to contradict the classical model’s conver-

gence prediction: Candidates took positions not in the middle but at the *periphery* of the distribution of voter ideal points.⁵ What is the theoretical perspective of the Rabinowitz–Macdonald variant of directional theory?

Weisberg (1974) and Matthews (1979) assumed circular preferences, but modeled issues in the classical decision-theoretic fashion. For Rabinowitz and Macdonald, issues are in voters' minds no longer identical to the space of ordered alternatives. Instead, issues evoke a "symbol," and these symbols trigger a set of associations in the voter's mind. Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) claim that this "symbolic politics" model can be usefully applied even to everyday political issue voting:

Symbolic politics is by its nature associated with diffuse and emotionally laden reactions to issues. To the extent that issues are symbolic, the impact of issues should be modeled in terms of direction and intensity. But even if we assume a great deal of issue processing is not symbolic in nature, there are reasons to favor a directional (direction–intensity) paradigm for understanding mass cognition of issues. What is critical to the directional perspective is that the basic issue is conceptualized in diffuse fashion rather in terms of specific policy alternatives. . . . Based on [the empirical] findings accumulated over the last three decades, it is virtually inconceivable that the preferences for policy among the mass public go beyond a diffuse sense of direction. (pp. 94–5)

Discussion of an issue evokes two responses by voters in the directional model:

Direction: Is the reaction of the voters to the symbol positive, negative, or zero? For example, if the issue is a national health care system, voters might favor a system more like socialized medicine, or might oppose such a system.

Intensity: How strongly do voters feel about the issue? That is, if they favor a national health care system, what is the intensity of their preferences? Conversely, if they oppose such a move toward socialized medicine, what is the level of their emotional response?

This direction–intensity calculus can be applied to the candidate evaluation decision. Let us consider a representative voter i , who must decide which candidate to support. First, i judges whether each candidate stands on the same "side" (direction) of each issue as the voter herself. For some issues, the candidate and i may agree; on other issues, they take opposing positions. Second, i must make a judgment about (a) the intensity of her feelings about the issue and (b) the intensity of the

candidate's professed commitment. Let us define SQ_j as the "neutral point" (in most cases, the status quo) for policy j . Then i 's evaluation of a candidate A's stand on any given single issue j is:

$$(x_{A_j} - SQ_j) \times (x_{ij} - SQ_j) \quad (9.1)$$

If the voter and the candidate are both on the same "side" of the issue (both positive or both negative), the evaluation will be positive. The sign of the product in Equation 9.1 is the *direction* of the evaluation. Voters also evaluate the candidate based on the *magnitude* of the product (intensity). If the difference between either the candidate's location or the voter's location and the neutral point is small, the evaluation will be low in its intensity. To put it another way, directional theory requires intensity from both the candidate and the voter to generate a large effect.

There are two aspects of this model that differ fundamentally from the classical model, as an example will show. Suppose that there are three candidates (A, B, and C), each of whom takes a position for or against a national health care plan. (Since this is the only issue we will consider in the example, we will drop the j subscript.) Imagine that "positions" on the issue are identified by reactions to the extent of government involvement in delivery of, and financial support for, health care. The support scale has eleven points, centered on a neutral point of zero. Imagine that the four positions (x_A , x_B , x_C , and x_i) can be depicted as in Figure 9.2.

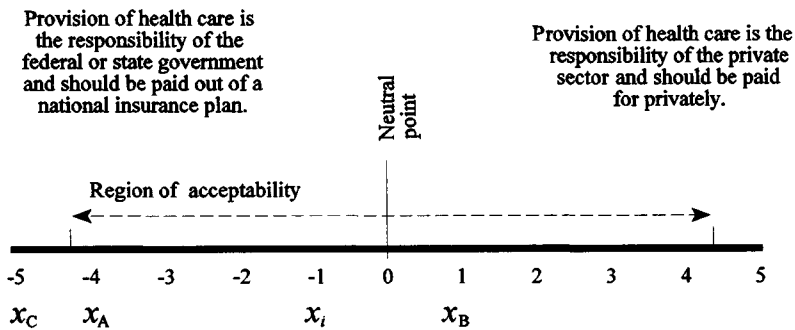
The proximity model would predict that the voter most prefers candidate B (a distance of two units from x_i), with candidate A (three units away) and candidate C (four units away) being ranked lower by the voter. Surprisingly, directional theory makes precisely the *opposite* set of predictions, with i most preferring candidate C, candidate A in the middle, and candidate B the worst. Using Equation 9.1, the evaluations of the candidates are as follows:

Candidate A: $(-4) \times (-1) = 4$

Candidate B: $(1) \times (-1) = -1$

Candidate C: $(-5) \times (-1) = 5$

The reason i would prefer A to B, though B is "closer," is intuitively plausible. Since the evaluation is directional, the apparent proximity is illusory: Voter i and candidate B are on opposite "sides" of the issue.



Directional model: Voter i likes C best and likes A better than B.

Ranking of candidates = C, A, B

Directional model with "region of acceptability": Voter i likes A best, doesn't like B, and thinks that C is "too extreme."

Ranking of candidates = A, B, C

Proximity model: Voter i likes B best and likes A better than C.

Ranking of candidates = B, A, C

Figure 9.2. The implications of the directional model contrasted with the classical proximity model on national health care.

The voter likes any candidate who is on her side of the issue more than any candidate on the other side.

Less easy to accept is the prediction of the directional model that C, the extremist, is preferred to A. After all, A and C are on the same "side" of the issue as i , but A is closer. Why would the voter prefer the more extreme candidate, when the voter herself appears quite moderate in her policy preferences?

The answer has two parts, and it is important to understand each. First, remember that the scale in Figure 9.2 is not an issue dimension! The eleven-point thermometer scale measures the *direction* and *intensity* of both the voter's self-described preferences and the voter's perceptions of the candidates' preferences or intentions. Consequently, candidate C is rewarded by the voter (according to directional theory) for taking a clear and deeply committed stand to an issue the voter slightly favors. The voter would like candidate C still more if the voter herself felt more strongly about the issue, of course. But for any voter who favors the left end of the health care policy scale, C is preferable to B.

Second, directional theorists have recognized that the prediction that extremism is always an advantage is unrealistic. What candidates should strive for is to take more intense stands than the other candidates, but avoid taking stands so extreme that voters reject them as irresponsible. As Rabinowitz and Macdonald point out:

The driving force behind the directional model is the idea that people react to issues in a diffuse way rather than with a concern for the specifics of policy and the exact position the candidate advocates. A candidate, however, must convince voters of his or her reasonableness. Voters are wary of candidates who seem radical and project harshness or stridency. The label “extremist” can attach to such candidates and severely hamper the enthusiasm of potential supporters. This idea is incorporated in directional theory by introducing the concept of the *region of acceptability*. (1989, p. 108; emphasis in original)

The invocation of a *region of acceptability* to rescue the directional model from the patently false prediction “more extreme is better” seems ad hoc. Still, we have seen that a similar assumption has been used by classical spatial modelers to explain turnout: Voters were called “alienated” if all the candidates or alternatives were “too far” (more than an arbitrary constant δ) from the voters’ ideal points.

In any case, for the purposes of our example, if C is perceived as “too extreme,” or outside the region of acceptability, the prediction of the directional model would change: Candidate A would be preferred to C, because A receives the highest evaluation among those candidates whose perceived positions fall within the region of acceptability.

Electoral competition in the directional model

Throughout this book, we have emphasized that formal models give researchers a chance to analyze actual elections. Directional theory has some very interesting implications for the outcomes of elections. Perhaps the most important difference between the classical model and directional theory is the role of the center: The directional model implies that the center rarely commands much power in mass politics! Instead, a relatively noncentrist position, articulated by a strongly committed leader, will win elections and run the government.

If there are many issues, then the evaluation must account for trade-offs among the issues. Though it is possible to use a (diagonal) salience matrix \mathbf{A} , we will assume that $\mathbf{A} = \mathbf{I}$ for simplicity of the exposition.⁶

The reaction of a voter to a candidate is the sum of single issue evaluations across all of the m issues:

$$\sum_{j=1}^J (x_{Aj} - SQ_j) \times (x_{ij} - SQ_j) \quad (9.2)$$

What would spatial competition look like in a multidimensional space with a region of acceptability if voters behave in the way posited by directional theory?

Rabinowitz and Macdonald give two formal results that summarize the predictions of directional theory and highlight the differences between directional theory and classical proximity theory. Because the results are quite technical, but can be summarized intuitively, we will simply restate the results here:

Result 1. If the electorate is symmetrically distributed about the origin (neutral point) of the space, any candidate within the region of acceptability may win. That is, any “not too extreme” candidate is competitive with all other candidates similarly perceived as not too extreme. If more than one candidate is located within the region of acceptability, the election will turn on candidate- or election-specific factors. Stands on issues will not be the primary determinants of who wins.

This result is analogous to portions of the MVT proved earlier for the classical spatial model: If political competition drives candidates to the middle, it will appear that issues don’t matter since all candidates look the same. Elections will be decided on other factors, according to the MVT. There is an important difference in the directional theory version, however: A symmetric distribution of voters renders the center not dominant, but irrelevant. Because voters are distributed symmetrically about the neutral point, their issue preferences as such all cancel out. The winning candidate is then the one who can persuade voters that she is more trustworthy, consistent, and committed.

Result 2. If the electorate is symmetrically distributed about a point (occupied by at least one voter) other than the origin of the space, a dominant political position exists. Define the direction toward the dominant point as established by the line segment between the current neutral point and the point around which voters are symmetrically distributed. Then the dominant position is the intersection of a line drawn in that direction and the region of acceptability. More simply, the most

extreme position in the electorate's preferred direction of change will beat any other position in a pairwise majority rule contest.

The intuition behind this result is again reminiscent of the MVT, but again there are important differences. The MVT claimed that any status quo away from the center of the distribution of voters is unsupportable if there is free proposal power, because any such alternative will lose to a proposal closer to the median (if voter preferences are symmetric). To put it another way, the MVT says that if the polity finds itself pursuing policies different from what the "center" wants, policies are pushed toward the center.

Directional theory predicts that if the electorate has a clear directional preference (the center of the distribution of voters is different from the current neutral point), the best strategy for a candidate is to take as extreme a position as possible in the implied direction. Notice that the "direction" is complex because it is multidimensional. Further, the fact that the candidate takes this position and wins doesn't mean that that position becomes the new neutral point. It is quite possible that a candidate can win, but that a disparity remains in voters' minds between their perception of what government is doing and what they want.

This difference between movement to equilibrium, in the classical model, and movement toward equilibrium, in directional theory, is the defining distinction of the two models. Though differences in assumptions, as well as implications for measurement, make comparison of the two models difficult, a significant body of empirical work supports the view of political competition found in directional theory.

There have been some attempts to test "mixed" models, with elements of both directional and proximity motivations for voters (Merrill, 1993; Dow, 1995).⁷ It is not yet clear whether a pure version of directional theory or one of the mixed variants is the best approach. One thing is clear, however: Directional theory is an important alternative conception of mass political behavior. It has implications for the nature of political choice and competition that differ broadly from the predictions of the classical model.

Ideology

One of the curious things about political opinions is how often the same people line up on opposite sides of different issues. The issues themselves may have no

intrinsic connection with each other . . . yet the same familiar faces can be found glaring at each other from opposite sides of the political fence, again and again. It happens too often to be a coincidence, and it is too uncontrolled to be a plot. (Sowell, 1987, p. 6)

In real politics, choices cluster: “Liberals” favor welfare programs, support abortion rights, and advocate stricter environmental regulations; “conservatives” take opposite stands on *each* of these apparently separate issues. Consequently, one might argue that there are not really three issues (welfare, abortion, environment) at all. There is only one: liberal-conservative ideology.

The theory of mass politics based on ideology makes two claims that conflict with the classical model. First, the actual space in which choices are made is of much lower dimensionality than the complex space of “issues” in committee voting. Second, the dimensions of the space are not fixed, but are “latent,” which means that the dimensions are determined by the way issues cluster in voters’ beliefs or politicians’ rhetoric. Ideologies serve as organizing principles, or guides to choice, in reducing the complex issue space to the much simpler space of mass-level political conflict.

Though there are many definitions of ideology, the one most useful for our purposes is that of Hinich and Munger (1994, p. 11): An ideology is “an internally consistent set of propositions that makes both proscriptive and prescriptive demands on human behavior. All ideologies have implications for (a) what is ethically good, and bad; (b) how society’s resources should be distributed; and (c) where power appropriately resides.”

Political choice based on ideology is not divorced from issues, because ideologies provide a set of “linkages” with the n -dimensional space of policies. These linkages are highly uncertain, however, and may differ across voters and over time. In a moment, we will see an example of how a spatial theory of ideology works. But first, it is important to establish the intellectual origins of the theory. Surprisingly, the originator of the critique of the classical, or “Downsian,” model was Downs himself.

Downs was not a “Downsian”

I personally believe that the way information costs are treated [in *An Economic Theory of Democracy*] is perhaps the most important contribution. . . . It is

more important than the spatial analysis of parties, although the latter has become much more famous. (Downs, 1993, p. 199)

Downs (1957, p. 96) defines ideology as “a verbal image of the good society and the chief means of constructing such a society.” Note that this definition has two parts: *the ends* society should want, and the *means* for achieving these ends. For Downs, the reason that ideologies serve a vital purpose is that political decisions are made in an environment of pervasive uncertainty. The causal link between means and ends is clouded, and in any case the policies to be chosen by candidates after the election can only be guessed at by voters:

[A] voter finds party ideologies useful because they remove the necessity of his relating every issue to his own philosophy. Ideologies help him focus attention on the differences between parties; therefore, they can be used as samples of all the differentiating stands. With this shortcut a voter can save himself the cost of being informed upon a wider range of issues. (Downs, 1957, p. 98)

We can paraphrase the insight in this passage in the language of the spatial theory we have developed in earlier chapters. The cleavages between parties separate along simpler, more predictable lines than an n -dimensional policy space would imply, even if what voters care about is the n -dimensional space. If issues cluster by party ideology in just a few dimensions, then a reduced-dimensional policy space is no less accurate a representation of party conflict than the n -dimensional space. Conceiving of conflict in the simpler space is much easier for voters, however, and parties able to project their message in this fashion have a key competitive advantage. The bad news is that ideologies constrain the set of political choices available to voters, whether or not the voter herself is “ideological.”

Another important function of an ideology is the ability to guide future action and predict positions on new issues. Cleavages among liberals and conservatives are predictable from the intellectual content (Downs’s “verbal image of the good society”) of the ideologies. More simply, an ideology doesn’t just *list* the dimensions of conflict. It logically *implies* differences and cleavages.

Downs constructed a formal model of spatial competition among parties so he could make statements about the choices presented to voters. In other words, the model was designed to illuminate equilibrium. But the decision process Downs spells out for choices by voters rests squarely on the claim that mass behavior can be explained only

using ideology. Yet Downs presented no real “model” of ideology, focusing instead on a model of spatial party competition. Most later scholars have understandably taken Downs’s spatial model as the main contribution of his work.

A variety of scholars have recognized the potential importance of Downs’s theory of ideology in its own right, however. Some, including North (1981, 1990), Kau and Rubin (1981, 1984), Higgs (1987), Hinich and Munger (1992, 1994), and Popkin (1994), have tried to capture the implications of ideology for policy making and the performance of societies over time. The goal in this chapter is much more modest: We will show how a spatial theory of ideology represents a fundamental departure from the classical model of mass political choice, particularly in the way it handles uncertainty and costly information.

Why are there linkages across issues?

There are at least three distinct theoretical justifications for ideologies, or links across issues: *communication*, *commitment*, and *budgets*. These theories are not mutually exclusive, so that more than one may apply to any given political context. Importantly, all three theoretical perspectives offer a justification for linkages across issues. Linkages across issues imply that there are relatively few independent dimensions in the space of political debate. The three justifications for linkage are:

- **Communication:** To provide voters with a message they can understand and use to make choices, parties must simplify their messages. Because only broad statements of principles can be used in advertising and position taking, the latitude for more subtle distinctions and differences is highly circumscribed. Ideologies are a means of solving problems of uncertainty and lack of information.
- **Commitment:** To be able to persuade voters that they can trust the party to do as promised after the election, parties must give reasons and explanations rather than just take positions. But explanations require some sort of overarching system of justification, as well as the advancement of values that can be applied to a variety of issues. Parties trade on reputations, but reputations are meaningful only if they provide a valuable signal. If parties act on their ideologies when such actions do not appear self-interested, reputations gain value.⁸
- **Budgets:** Increasing spending in one area of the budget forces either

decreases elsewhere or increased taxes or deficits. Thus, any change from the status quo forces a linkage to other issues, if only in terms of taxes or opportunity cost.

Ideology and the competition among parties

Parties mediate choices in representative democracy, but we haven't said much about them in this book.⁹ Consider the following definition of a "party" from Hinich and Munger (1994, p. 85), itself adapted from several earlier definitions:

Party. A group of citizens who (a) hold in common substantial elements of a political doctrine identified, both by party members and outsiders, with the name of the party; (b) choose candidates, either from within the group or by selecting outsiders, for political office with the object of carrying out this doctrine; and (c) organize the members of their delegation to the assembly of the political unit where the party is active.

Downs (1957) assumed either that there were precisely two parties or that the number was unimportant. A variety of scholars (see, just for the barest introduction, Lijphart, 1984; Grofman and Lijphart, 1986; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989; Sartori, 1994) have investigated the relation between the number of "effective" parties, the system by which representatives are elected, and the consequent performance of the electoral system. For our purposes, the number of parties can simply be taken as a result of the electoral institutions. From the perspective of voters, these voting rules (e.g., simple majority rule, Borda count) are fixed and exogenous. Parties are then collections of representatives who share all or parts of some political doctrine and seek to implement the policies implied by that doctrine (this simple definition is very close to that of Duverger, 1951). Parties are also citizens who identify with some or all of the political doctrine they associate with the party in the legislature.

Recall the earlier example of prison overcrowding. Suppose there are two parties, Right and Left. Some precipitating event has transformed prison overcrowding into an issue seized on by candidates from the party out of power. The party in power, which would have preferred

that the problem not become an issue, must now try to characterize the problem in terms they prefer.

The Right's ideology might be simple: "Government should maintain law and order." The issues for the right then become lax law enforcement and the expansion of prison capacity. The Left's ideology, by contrast, might be "Government should help people who cannot help themselves." The issue for the left will be that there are too few economic opportunities and too little training in job skills for people already in prison.

The parties also have positions on many other issues. These positions are associated with the doctrines of the party, or its ideology. In a world where ideology presents the menu of choice, the issues are decided by the ideologies of the competing factions. The choices of voters are highly constrained, because representative democracy requires that they choose candidates from parties whose issue stands derive from ideology. What is the effective space in which mass-level political choice takes place, if ideologies determine the way issues cluster?

Consider Figure 9.3. If there are two parties, the effective space in which political choice takes place has only one dimension. The actual policies observed in the society along this dimension will reflect the proportion of seats of the two parties in the legislature. If there are three parties, the effective space is a two-dimensional plane, enough for complicated problems of social choice but far simpler than a space of issues.

Note that it doesn't matter how many issues there are: If there are just a few (cohesive) parties, there are just a few feasible dimensions of conflict. On the other hand, these dimensions of conflict are latent and depend on the way issues happen to cluster in that society. As Hinich and Munger (1994) point out, there are many different potential ways for issues to be linked, but only one of these linkages can be observed in a political system at a time.

Figure 9.3 is a gross simplification, of course, since real parties have internal factions that disagree, and governments may have different "branches," as in the United States federal government, where both the Congress and the president face popular elections of very different forms. Multiple institutions of government with overlapping or conflicting jurisdictions or powers offer a variety of choices for voters (see, e.g., Alesina and Rosenthal, 1995). Poole and Rosenthal (1996) docu-

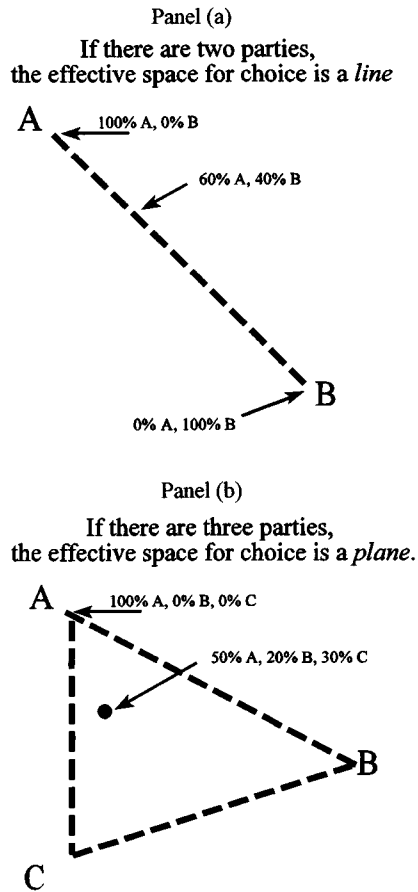


Figure 9.3. The effective space for “choice,” given two or three parties.

ment the internal divisions, and empirical dimensions, that organize issue positions in the U.S. Congress and find that even with two parties there are occasionally two effective dimensions of choice. In terms of measurement of ideology, Poole and Rosenthal’s work is fundamental. They show that if voters are presented with choices over parties, rather than direct choices over issues, the dimensionality of the effective choices presented voters in the United States is small, and almost never more than two.

Poole and Rosenthal (1991, 1996) analyze changes in the number of dimensions and the ability of one or two dimensions to explain variation in positions by members of the U.S. Congress since 1790. Changes in the prevailing ideological cleavage must take place both in individual beliefs and in the shared beliefs (ideologies) that link members into groups. Consider Table 9.1, excerpted from Poole and Rosenthal (1991), listing their measure of ideology (D-NOMINATE) from 1827 to 1860. The “% Correct” columns in the table describe the proportion of votes correctly predicted using a “cut point” based on the Poole–Rosenthal ideology measure.

To understand the table, it is important to consider context for a moment. Histories of this period reveal a fascinating preoccupation of members of Congress with the issue of slavery in the broader context of states’ rights. Genovese (1961, 1972), for example, details the growing differences between the sets of ideas that northerners, westerners, and southerners had about the United States.

As Table 9.1 shows, the ability of any one or even two dimensions to classify votes declines dramatically in the early 1850s. The ideological divide that had organized U.S. politics since Andrew Jackson was breaking down. In fact, for the 32nd Congress (1851–2), even a large number of dimensions (ten, or more) does not classify members’ votes very accurately.¹⁰ Such complexity and idiosyncrasy in voting patterns is most unusual. As Poole and Rosenthal (1996) show, with the exception of the 32nd Congress, two dimensions are always capable of explaining 80% or more of the variation in the votes of elected officials on most issues. In the next section, we will discuss a theoretical model consistent with this clustering phenomenon.

The relation between ideology and issues

There must be some correspondence in people’s minds between ideological statements and predictions about the policies these statements imply.¹¹ This correspondence need in no way be *causal*, in the sense that everyone starts with issues and then infers ideology, or starts with ideology and then guesses at issues. The correspondence may be no more than a subconscious set of associations or stereotypes, based on the experience or socialization of the voter.¹² There is a key difference

Table 9.1. *Performance of Poole–Rosenthal ideology model in classifying slavery votes, 1827–1860*

Congress ^a	Years	1 Dimension:	2 Dimensions:	Description of events
		% Correct ^b	% Correct	
20th	1827–28	81	82	Andrew Jackson elected president; Tariff of Abominations; birth of Democrats; “nullification” doctrine raised
23th	1833–34	76	79	Bank of U.S. dissolved; rise of the Whigs
24th	1835–36	81	86	Currency crisis causes regional tensions; different Whig factions nominate three separate candidates for president
25th	1837–38	84	91	Financial panic; “gag rule” prohibits abolitionist petitions in the House
26th	1839–40	80	88	Continuing currency problems; Whigs gain majority of seats in both chambers of Congress
27th	1841–42	84	90	Democrats regain control of the House in election of 1842
28th	1843–44	80	88	American Republican Party, forerunner of Know-Nothings; Texas annexed; Democrats regain control of Senate in 1844
29th	1845–46	73	89	Wilmot Proviso, outlawing slavery in territories obtained from Mexico; Mexican–American War (1846–8)
30th	1847–48	71	78	Free Soil Party presages new Republican coalition
31st	1849–50	75	82	Compromise of 1850: Texas and New Mexico admitted as slave states, Fugitive Slave Law extended under all parts of federal jurisdiction
32nd	1851–52	70	76	Whigs begin to disintegrate; Free Soil Party fails
33rd	1853–54	92	94	Kansas–Nebraska Act repeals Missouri Compromise (1820); Republican and “Know-Nothing” parties well-established; Republicans win control of House in elections of 1854
34th	1855–56	95	95	End of Whigs as party, in elections and in Congress; violent anarchy in “Bleeding Kansas”; Democrats retake House in 1856 elections
35th	1857–58	92	92	Dred Scott decision; financial “Panic”; Lecompton Constitution in Kansas; Lincoln–Douglas debates in Illinois; Republicans gain control of House in election of 1858
36th	1859–60	88	90	Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry; Democrats split into regional factions; Lincoln elected president; South Carolina votes to secede; Republicans win control of Senate in 1860 election

^a Poole and Rosenthal (1991) include only those congresses that saw at least one recorded roll call vote on slavery.

^b The “percent correct” refers to the proportion of votes by individual members correctly classified by the latent dimension(s) recovered by Poole and Rosenthal’s MDS procedure (D–Nominate).

between belief systems of individuals and ideologies, however: Ideologies are *shared* belief systems.

If, as Downs claimed, an ideology were a weighted average of policy positions (where the weights differ across voters), there would be no coherence in ideological messages. Consequently, my “ideology” might be a shorthand rule or heuristic to help me choose among complicated alternatives, but it could not be a means of communicating in groups or organizing parties. If ideologies are shared belief systems, however, communication is possible and choice is more coherent.

Imagine that voters are aware of the abstract meanings of the words “liberal” and “conservative” and that it is possible to be more or less of either. That is, the statements “Party A is more liberal than party B” or “Candidate A is from the far left, while candidate B is much nearer the center” mean something to voters. What being liberal or conservative means depends, of course, on the historical and cultural context. In eighteenth-century England, the “liberals” favored a *laissez-faire* (hands off) economic policy. In the United States in the late twentieth century, many people associate liberals with increased government regulation of economic processes. In Russia in 1990, the “liberals” were those who favored market-oriented production and consumption patterns, while the “conservatives” advocated the old status quo Communist policies of state control over the means of production.

We are not assuming, then, that “liberal” and “conservative” mean the same things for all people at all times. All that is required is that *many voters, in one nation at one time*, have a *similar understanding* of what ideology means. However, what ideology “means” depends only partly on the aphorical statements used to justify the ideology and communicate it to voters. Ideologies also “mean” something in terms of policy, in a way first formalized by Hinich and Pollard (1981), and developed by Enelow and Hinich (1982b, 1984b).

To illustrate the link between abstract ideological positions and concrete policy positions, imagine that there are only two issues that concern a society: (1) how much to change spending on school lunches (to ensure poor children get at least one nutritious meal each day), and (2) how much to change spending on tanks (for protection against outside aggression). Imagine further that there are two parties, one of them “liberal” and the other “conservative.” What are the implications of “liberalism” or “conservatism” for policy positions?

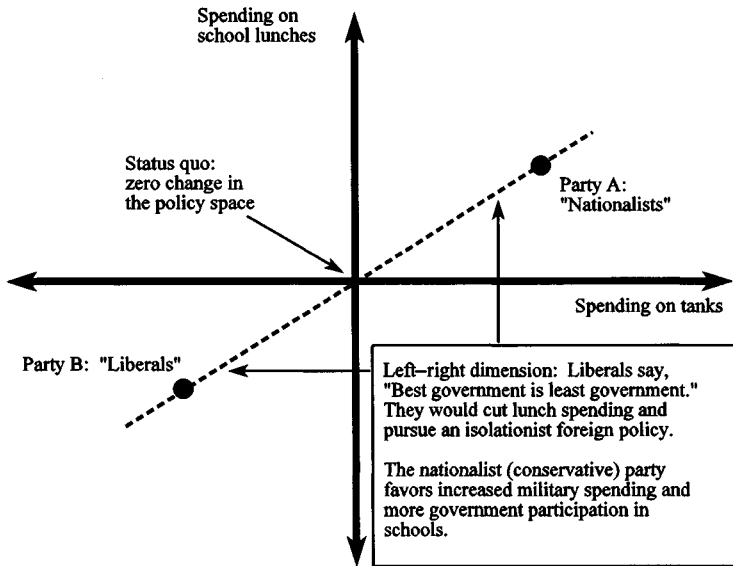
Interestingly, there is no clear answer, because the meaning of “ideology” is not fixed by theory or language. Instead, as a comparison of panels (a) and (b) in Figure 9.4 shows, the meaning of ideology is determined by the shared understanding of the correspondence between ideological statements and the associated policy positions. In panel (a), liberal means “libertarian,” with a distrust of government generally. The conservative “nationalist” party pursues a corporatist conception of government, with a strong military and heavy investment in public schools and the vitality of the nation’s youth.

In panel (b), the ideological dimension means something altogether different. This example could arise from a balanced budget requirement combined with a stricture against tax increases. The liberals want to increase school spending, in accordance with their philosophy of helping those least well off. But to finance this spending, the liberals will have to cut defense spending. Conservatives want to increase defense spending, but recognize they will have to cut school spending to find the money and meet the budget constraint.

Though these two examples are profoundly different in terms of their depiction of the understanding voters have of the correspondence between ideology and policy, they share one important characteristic: Ideologies impose *constraint*, to use the classic phrase of Converse (1963). Converse argued that ideologies do not constrain the beliefs of most people. And he was perfectly right, *given* his narrow definition of “ideologies” as internally consistent, highly structured belief systems. Converse seized on empirical inconsistencies among basic beliefs and expressed political preferences as evidence that “ideology” is a nonexistent concept. He argued that policy preferences are not structured by any shared beliefs.

There are three important problems with this perspective. First, there is a growing body of empirical evidence that voter beliefs are not *completely* unconstrained. In fact, as Feldman and Zaller (1992) have shown, when it comes to core political beliefs people struggle to reconcile apparently contradictory values so that their policy preferences are consistent. Beliefs and preferences are not perfectly inconsistent, as a cursory reading of the political behavior literature from the 1960s to the mid-1980s might lead one to believe. Recent research in voting behavior finds there is some shared structure in beliefs.¹³

Panel (a)



Panel (b)

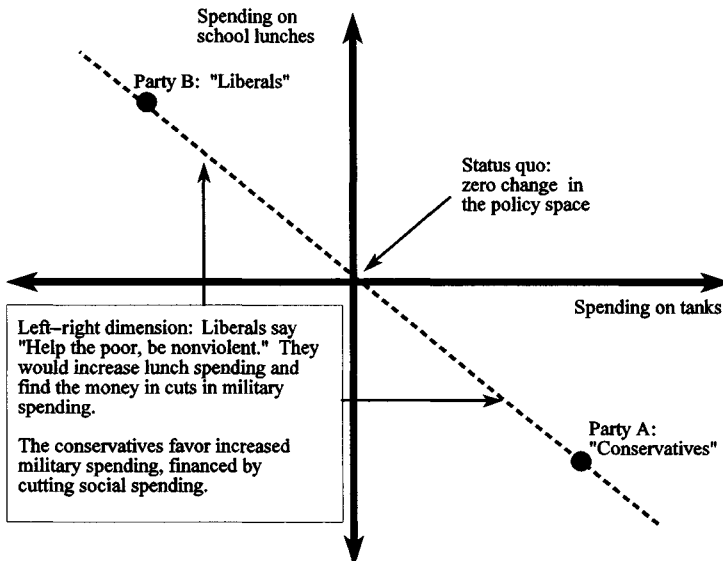


Figure 9.4. School lunches, tanks, and a left–right dimension: “Ideology” has no fixed meaning.

Contrary to the evidence of “ideological innocence,” we argue that Americans do, for the most part, understand the philosophical underpinnings of the policies they endorse, and that, much more often than the belief systems literature would lead one to expect, Americans make use of cultural values and principles in explicating and justifying their political preferences. (Feldman and Zaller, 1992, p. 269)

The second problem with Converse’s claim is that he defined the problem of political “choice” too narrowly, considering only how mass publics react to a given set of alternatives. But choices in representative democracies come from parties, so that the set of alternatives is highly constrained. If ideology determines the choices available, then voters must react to ideologies even if the voters themselves are not “ideological.” As we saw in Figure 9.4, the choices on many issues may come down to which party (representing issue clusters) the voter likes best.

The third difficulty with Converse’s argument is that it is too extreme. Arguments against the use of tightly integrated ideological constraint as an *axiom* of social science were well founded, of course, and Converse’s contribution is justly recognized. There really is no reason to believe in general that beliefs are internally consistent across all citizens. But we are going too far if we refuse to entertain the possibility that ideological consistency is a *variable*. Different people, at a point in time, and some of the same people at different times, will exhibit variation in the level of constraint imposed by basic values.¹⁴ In some ways, respect for basic values and the constraints these values impose on actions by citizens is the only thing that separates civilizations from the Hobbesian nightmare world of the war of all against all.

The spatial theory of ideology. Imagine that voters have preferences over n distinct issues. Each voter i , with ideal point \mathbf{x}_i in the policy space, chooses between two candidates (A and B) based on their imputed platforms $\{\mathbf{x}_A, \mathbf{x}_B\}$ in \mathcal{P} . We will assume that the choice is based on a quadratic utility function and for notation use $[\]$ to mean the SED calculated between the two points:

$$U(\mathbf{x}_\alpha) = -[\mathbf{x}_i - \mathbf{x}_\alpha]^2 \quad (9.3a)$$

$$U(\mathbf{x}_\beta) = -[\mathbf{x}_i - \mathbf{x}_\beta]^2 \quad (9.3b)$$

But the imputed platforms \mathbf{x}_A and \mathbf{x}_B have to come from somewhere. What is the source of voters’ belief that these positions represent the likely policies of A and B if elected? Our claim is that though voters

care about points in \mathcal{P} (which has n dimensions), political competition takes place in the ideological space Π (with p dimensions, where $p \ll n$). Consequently, the choices voters can identify (and candidates can commit to) are constrained by ideology.¹⁵ The mapping from the ideological space to the policy space can be expressed as a linear function of the various ideological dimensions. Though the model can handle multiple dimensions (see Enelow and Hinich, 1984; and Hinich and Munger, 1994), let us assume $p = 1$ for simplicity.¹⁶ The imputed platform (for A, for example) can then be written as follows:

$$\mathbf{x}_A = \mathbf{b} + \mathbf{v}\pi_A \quad (9.4)$$

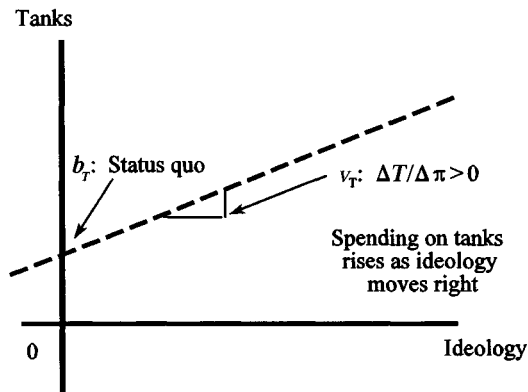
The $(n \times 1)$ \mathbf{b} vector is the set of status quo policies. The $(n \times 1)$ \mathbf{v} vector is the set of mappings from the ideological space to the policy space. The ideological position of each candidate is drawn from the set of feasible positions (i.e., $\pi_k \in \Pi$, where in this case π_k is scalar).

The elements of \mathbf{v} reflect the beliefs of voters that the prevailing ideology has implications for policies. For example, if $v_j \neq 0$, then voters believe abstract ideological statements are highly meaningful for policy j . Conversely, if $v_h = 0$, then issue h is not accounted for by the ideology of the prevailing party system. This does *not* mean voters don't care about the issue. Instead, if $v_h = 0$, then h is outside the issues voters associate with the orthodox political debate they hear from parties and candidates.

An example will clarify the status quo (\mathbf{b}) and mapping (\mathbf{v}) vectors. Consider again our earlier example of two policies: tanks and schools. T is spending on tanks for the military, a policy embraced by A, the party on the right, which advocates ideological position π_A . S represents spending on school lunches, advocated by party B, which runs on a leftist position π_B . We can depict the relation between ideological position and policy position graphically, as shown in Figure 9.5. Panel (a) presents a mapping from a left–right ideology on the horizontal axis to tanks on the vertical axis: Movements to the right represent increased military spending in voters' minds, so the slope of the linear relation is *positive*. Panel (b) depicts the analogous mapping from Π to S : Since rightists favor less school spending, the slope of the linear relation is *negative*.

The implied linkage between tanks and school lunches could have any of the origins discussed above. Budget laws may require offsetting

Panel (a)



Panel (b)

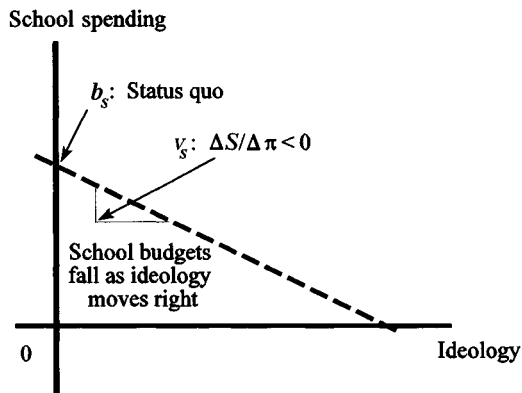


Figure 9.5. The relation between ideology and tanks (panel a) and between ideology and schools (panel b).

cuts to finance spending increases, parties may focus on their image as “tough” on foreign policy or “strongly supportive” of social programs, and so on. If issues are linked in this way, and this understanding of the linkage is shared by many people, ideology is a useful conception of political competition.¹⁷

The ideological model depicts the induced utility function, given a winning candidate (here, candidate A; the utility function if B wins is analogously defined), as follows:

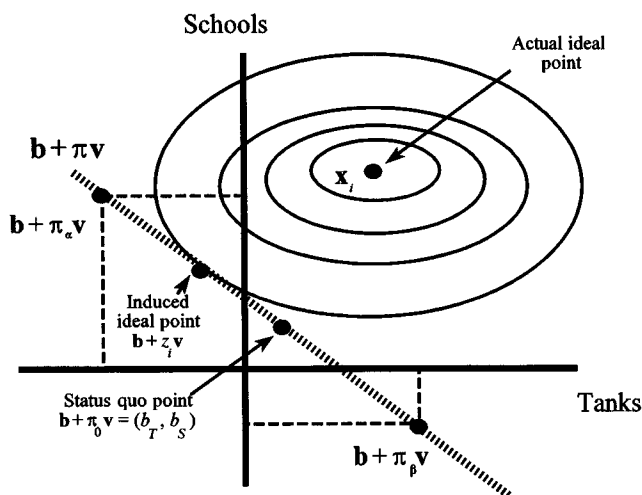


Figure 9.6. Voter i chooses A, the candidate closest to z_i in Π and closest to x_i in Ω .

$$U(x_A) = U(\mathbf{b} + \mathbf{v}\pi_A) = -[\mathbf{x}_i - (\mathbf{b} - \mathbf{v}\pi_A)]^2 \quad (9.5)$$

Thus, voters compare the utility of the candidates' positions, π_A and π_B , on the ideological dimension.

We can now consider voter utility in the policy space \mathcal{P} . This is exactly the same problem, in a slightly different informational setting. Suppose voter i has an ideal point $\mathbf{x}_i = (x_{i1}, x_{i2})$ and must choose between A and B. Let preferences around \mathbf{x}_i be described by ellipsoidal indifference curves (preferences are not necessarily separable, nor are issues necessarily equally salient). The correspondence between the policy space \mathcal{P} and the ideological dimension Π is given by Equation (9.4). We can depict this correspondence in Figure 9.6. The feasible positions in \mathcal{P} are constrained to lie along Π , the ideological dimension. The status quo point in the policy space is represented by $\mathbf{b} = (b_T, b_S)$ and the status quo ideological position is π_0 . Note that this correspondence is quite consistent with any of the three theoretical justifications given above, but is closest to the "budget" justification, particularly if the slope of the $\mathbf{b} + \mathbf{v}\pi$ line is $-\$1.00$.

The induced ideal point on the $\mathbf{b} + \mathbf{v}\pi$ line is $\mathbf{b} + \mathbf{v}z_i$, the point tangent to the highest attainable indifference curve. The corresponding

ideal point in the ideological space Π is z_i (i.e., z_i is a scalar). The voter would prefer the policy position \mathbf{x}_i . But ideology constrains the positions that politicians can take and expect to be understood or believed, so \mathbf{x}_i is not available to either politicians or voters.¹⁸ The choice is between the partisans of the right, who favor tanks, and the partisans of the left, who favor school lunch programs. You can't get both, or neither, out of such a political system.

Consequently, in Figure 9.6 voter i chooses candidate A over B, because π_A is closer (in *weighted* Euclidean space) than π_B to \mathbf{x}_i . We will find it useful to define more formally the *induced ideal point* (denoted $\mathbf{b} + v z_i$ in Figure 9.6) of voter i on the ideological dimension. Enelow and Hinich (1984b) show that if spatial preferences are based on SED, then the ideal point of a voter constrained to choose along a single ideological dimension is:

$$z_i = \frac{\sum_{k=1}^m v_k (x_{ik} - b_k)}{\sum_{k=1}^m v_k^2} \quad (9.6)$$

Thus, the voter's induced ideal point on the ideological dimension is a weighted sum of the differences between the voter's ideal point \mathbf{x}_i and the status quo policy vector \mathbf{b} . The weights are a function of the ratio of the ideological mapping terms v_k to the sum of the squares of the weights on all issues. The expression in Equation (9.6) is a simple model of voter choice: Choose the candidate whose ideological position is closest to the induced ideal point z_i on Π .

We have claimed that ideology is an important mediating influence in voter choice among parties in representative democracies. A key difficulty with this formulation is the common usage of "ideology" to mean constraint or even sophistication in voters' belief systems. In fact, exactly the opposite is true; as Popkin (1994) points out:

Ideology is not the mark of sophistication and education, but of uncertainty and lack of ability to connect policies with benefits. . . . Parties use ideologies to highlight critical differences between themselves, and to remind voters of their past successes. They do this because voters do not perceive all the differences, cannot remember all the past performances, and cannot relate all future policies to their own benefits. But unavailability of data is not the only reason voters revert to default values. They do this when they are so satisfied with their past choices that they see no reason to collect any data. (pp. 51–2)

Ideology, constraint, and credibility

Ideology transmits information to voters and creates enthusiasm for political action. These two features alone are enough to make ideology a powerful competitive advantage in political discourse and in electoral politics. But there is an additional attribute of ideology, alluded to but not completely developed earlier, that makes it crucial for candidates and parties. This is its capacity to constrain the positions political actors can take. Campaigns, after all, must accomplish two things. First, they establish a candidate's or a party's position in the policy space. Second, and no less important, they persuade citizens that, once in office, the candidate or party will support or enact policies close to those they promised. Elections reflect the aggregation of individual voters' assessment of the candidate's or party's success in *both* of these endeavors.

Establishing credibility and commitment appears to be more important than simply taking a position. The reason is that debate centers on the ideological dimensions, not the policy space. Most voters know little of a candidate's actual policy stands, and establishing a position in the reduced-dimensional ideological space is more easily accomplished. The problem then quickly becomes convincing voters both that the candidate genuinely believes this position and will pursue it, and that it is the right thing to do.¹⁹ Further, voters want to know about each candidate's character, integrity, ability to lead, and vision. The policy issues on which an elected official must decide are very difficult for voters to predict.

Consequently, voters must depend on the candidate's commitment to an ideological position as a guide for judgment. Future issues are unknowable, but the voter can try to ensure that the principles that the candidate will apply to deciding on new issues are the ones the voter also holds dear. The classical spatial model focused primarily on specific platforms, but campaigns appear to be about making general commitments to principles. Incumbents run on, and challengers run against, the record the incumbent has established. Even in open seat elections, there are party cues, endorsements by political elites, or prior experience by the candidates to give voters some means of guessing what the candidates claim they will do.

Classical spatial theory assumes that each politician chooses the po-

sition that maximizes his or her vote share given the expected platform of the opponent(s). This approach to modeling is extremely convenient and can be used to motivate experiments in which participants choose policy positions to maximize their payoffs. Such an approach is interesting from a scientific perspective, but may be of little use in describing real-world politics. For such an approach to work, voters must believe that a candidate who takes a position is likely to deliver that position. Analytical political theorists say that the candidate's promise must be "credible."

But why would anyone always believe the promises of politicians, whose public statements are often mocked as unreliable as guides to future behavior? One approach is to model voters' use of information. Recent work by Banks and Sobel (1987), Austen-Smith (1990), Banks (1990, 1991), Harrington (1992), and Chappell (1994) addresses how voters might rationally process candidate promises. This work is important, for it highlights the shortcomings in previous work in spatial models. But the signaling game approach simply substitutes an impossibly complex set of informational requirements for the impossibly unrealistic classical model of the campaign. Voters are assumed to know what they want on each of a large number of policy dimensions. Voters must also know just what candidates have promised to do. The only problem voters face is whether or not to believe the candidates.

By contrast, ideology offers two advantages that the games of asymmetric information lack. The first, noted by Downs, is that ideology serves as a means of reducing the costs of gathering information. What Downs did not recognize is the attenuated incentive to gather information, even on one's own most desired policies; voters simply do not know which policies are being considered, much less which position on these policies they most prefer. Ideology offers a means for parties and candidates to communicate, and for voters to decide, even when neither candidates nor voters know very much.

The logic of the classical model is a search for equilibria, or median positions. If the status quo is not an equilibrium, we imagine that at least one of the candidates changes his or her platform. But the primary goal of real campaigns is to persuade voters that the candidate or party will *not* move under any circumstances and is deeply committed to the

promised platform. The fact is that voters evaluate candidates based on their reputations for probity, commitment, and consistency. Movement devalues these reputations. By constraining the possibilities for movement and by offering well-known justifications for particular clusters of policy positions, ideology solves the two key problems facing political systems: (1) How can politicians communicate their positions clearly? (2) How can politicians commit to those positions?

Conclusions

Both of the models in this chapter, directional theory and the ideology model, seem to have little to say about where alternatives come from. The great strength of the “Downsian” spatial model was its ability to say which proposals would win, and therefore to predict what positions candidates would take (if candidates wanted to win). The directional model takes “issues” as given and describes voters’ reactions to them. The ideology model assumes even more preexisting structure for voter preferences, with linkages across issues and a lower-dimensional “ideological” space in which actual political debate takes place.

What these models do is make voter choice more realistic than the depiction of choice in the classical model. One possibility is that candidates’ issue positions might be arrived at just as the classical model points out, but that the mass-level responses depicted by the models in this chapter provide a more realistic foundation for how voters choose once the alternatives are established. However, the logic of the two models actually implies an entirely different form of candidate strategy. Both directional theory and ideology theory are able to make predictions about what platform or set of proposals will win. The difference is that candidates may have only limited control over the set of characteristics or information that voters use in making their choices.

Final remarks

In this book, we have taken on a variety of normative and positive questions about human political action using analytical political theory. The theory itself is hard: It uses unfamiliar language and pitches its arguments in mathematical, or formal logical, terms. The hardest

thing for many people is the use of simplifying assumptions, which make formal models seem far removed from real politics.

But that is what simplifying assumptions are for. Real politics is complicated, with lots of room for manipulation, bluffing, persuasion, and absurdity. Formal theories help social scientists explore “what if?” questions by deducing the implications of a set of premises. This approach has several advantages over other forms of theorizing. One of the most important advantages is the ability of analytical theory to help us evaluate claims about the quality of democratic choices and different ways of making those choices.

The key normative claim formal theorists have tried to evaluate is the existence of something like Rousseau’s “general will.” The general will must be a single choice, among mutually exclusive alternatives, achievable through democratic means and defensible based on ethical goals. The middle, or the center of the distribution of enfranchised citizens, is where political power is believed to reside. The contribution of analytical theory has been to make precise the consequences of different forms of choice and conflicting desires of citizens.

We first considered the concept of the median voter, under the assumption that government must choose just one policy. This use of the median as the definition of the center was then extended to account for the fact that government must in fact make many choices, all at once. Unfortunately, it turns out that the “middle” may not exist, if voters disagree. This is the worst possible news, since the only time we must really depend on voting is when there is disagreement. If we all agree, there is no real choice to be made: Government can simply implement the unanimous will of the people. The fact that there may be no defensible determinate choice in the face of disagreement means that democratic processes are most likely to fail when we need them most.

Further, this problem of indeterminacy of democracy is not confined to any one way of choosing. Arrow showed that *all* institutions of aggregation exhibit an inability to make a unique choice among three or more alternatives. The only exception is dictatorship, which “solves” the problem of disagreement in democracy by giving only one person a voice in choosing. What are the implications of this apparent incoherence of social choice rules?

One of the most famous scholars who contributed to the research reviewed in this book was William Riker. Much of his work questioned

the validity of the “populist” interpretation of voting, which goes beyond advocacy of democracy simply as a way of choosing and attaches a moral force to the will of majorities. He argued:

Populism puts democracy at risk. Democracy requires control of rulers by electoral sanctions; the spirit of populism and populist institutions allows rulers to tamper with this sanction, thereby rendering it a weak defense against the tyranny of officials. The maintenance of democracy requires therefore the minimization of the risk in populism. . . . The main defense against populist excesses is the maintenance of the constitutional limitations. . . . It would probably help also to have a citizenry aware of the emptiness of the populist interpretation of voting. And surely a wide dissemination of the discoveries of social choice theory is a desirable additional defense. (Riker, 1982, p. 252)

We hope in this book to have helped disseminate some of the discoveries of social choice theory. In closing we would like to add one other thought: The faith that people have placed in political deliberation as a means of discovering truth is not wholly misplaced. Good democratic choices aren’t impossible, but they are hard. We hope that knowing the limitations of institutions and rules will make making good choices a little easier.

