

Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 14: Retrospective Voting

Asya Magazinnik (Professor)

Zeyu Chris Peng (Teaching Assistant)

March 29, 2022

MIT

1. Timeline for the Remainder of the Course

2. From Institutions to Behavior

3. Readings

Achen and Bartels, “Democracy for Realists”

Fowler, “Football games, shark attacks, and why voters may not be so incompetent after all”

Lenz, “Follow the Leader”

Timeline for the Remainder of the Course

Please note: class will take place over Zoom this Thursday.

- Regular time, attendance still required
- Zoom link will be posted on Canvas

Final Essay Assignment of the Semester

- Essay prompts have been posted on Canvas
 - Emphasis on in-class sources
 - Please use sources from throughout the class (Fundamentals, Institutions, Behavior, Where We Are)
- Revision, Revision, Revision
 - **First draft due:** Tuesday, April 19
 - Written feedback from Kate (on writing) and from me/Chris (on substance) by April 24
 - Individual conferences with Kate: April 25-27
 - **Peer review** with small groups: reviews due Tuesday, April 26; group meetings in recitation on April 29
 - **Final draft due:** Tuesday, May 10

From Institutions to Behavior

From Institutions to Behavior

Recall the conditions under which rational choice theory is useful:

1. Players understand the “game” they’re playing
2. “Social glue”: shared understanding of the rules of the game (shared history, culture)
3. Significant incentives to act like a decision theorist

In studying political behavior, rational choice recedes and **psychology** comes to the forefront:

1. Information processing, knowledge, memory, beliefs...
2. Group identification, identity, self-interest (individual and collective)
3. Likability, trust, etc.

Readings

Readings

Achen and Bartels, “Democracy for Realists”

The Folk Theory of Democracy

The **folk theory of democracy**: government by the people, for the people

- Depends on informed and engaged citizens
- Has achieved near universal acceptance as a goal and an ideal.

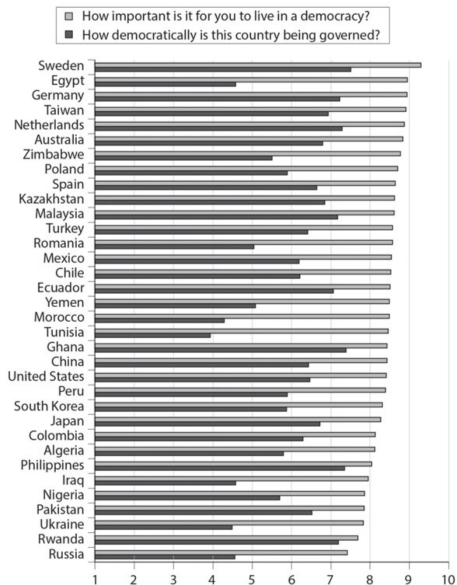


Figure 1.1. Democratic Aspirations and Perceptions, 2010–2014

The Critical Tradition

Lazarsfeld et al. 1954, Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1964

- A portrait of voting behavior as **socially determined**: family, school, church, media bubble...
- Rather than coherent policy views, voters have thin, disorganized, ideologically incoherent “belief systems” formed by their social environments
- Even well-informed citizens turn out to be *“just a rather mechanical reflection of what their favorite group and party leaders have instructed them to think.”*

From deliberative democracy to leadership selection

Two forms of democracy to consider:

1. Populist democracy

- Representative democracy
- Direct democracy
- Downsian competition

2. Leadership selection

- Retrospective voting

Retrospective Voting: What It Is

*“Voters could exert substantial control over their leaders, despite knowing little about the details of public policy, simply by assessing the **performance** of incumbent officials, rewarding success and punishing failure.”*

- *“In order to ascertain whether the incumbents have performed poorly or well, citizens need only calculate the changes in their own welfare.”*

Retrospective Voting: How It Works (In Theory)

Two logics of retrospective voting, familiar from principal-agent theory (bureaucracy):

1. Selecting good types
2. Sanctioning as an incentive for good performance

When Retrospective Voting Works

What conditions are necessary for retrospective voting to produce responsive government?

- Attribution
- Common standards of success in the electorate
- Past performance → future results

Discussion:

- Can we construct an example when it is not rational for a voter to vote retrospectively?
- Can we construct an example when it is (boundedly) rational for a voter to vote retrospectively, but it still does not produce responsive government?

Question: What could an empirical test of retrospective voting theory look like?

Empirical Test 1: Vote-Switching

Key's *The Responsible Electorate* (1966)

- In each of FDR's reelections, beneficiaries of the New Deal (poorer people and blue-collar workers) were less likely than wealthy people to switch their votes from Democrats to Republicans
- Moreover, people who reported supporting specific policies of the incumbent administration were less likely to defect than those who reported opposing those policies

Empirical Test 2: Partisan Identification

Fiorina's *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (1981)

- Repeated interviews with the same survey respondents to assess how evaluations of economic and other conditions as “good” or “bad” correlates with party-switching
- Correlation between “bad” evaluations and party switching is positive

Observational Equivalence

Retrospective assessments → vote choice?

*Retrospective assessments **inform** vote choice.*

? → vote choice → retrospective assessments?

*Retrospective assessments are constructed to **rationalize** vote choice, the determinants of which lie elsewhere.*

Question: Where might these other determinants of political attitudes lie?

Getting Around the Observational Equivalence Problem

1. Repeated measurements of the same individuals (Lenz)
2. Using objective economic indicators (unemployment, real income, inflation)
 - Voters' recent economic circumstances influence electoral outcomes (Gosnell, 1940s)
 - National conditions also influence congressional elections (Kramer 1971)

As a *minimal* test, we do find some evidence of retrospective voting based on personal and macro-level economic assessments.

Then what is the problem with retrospective voting?



The problem is “blind retrospection.”

Achen and Bartels: Study Design

Treatment: Beach county (specifically, a series of shark attacks on the Jersey Shore in 1916)

Outcome: Incumbent vote share in 1916 Presidential election

Statistical adjustments:

- Control for 1912 vote share
- Control for “machine” counties
 - *“defined as those counties with at least 30,000 voters in 1916 and 60% or more “foreign” citizens in the census of 1910.”*
- Exclusion of Essex County from the sample
 - *“Simply put, Essex County in this electoral period does not act like the rest of New Jersey at the polls; we therefore excluded it from our analysis. The other 20 New Jersey counties make up our sample.”*

Machine Counties

“One other control variable is needed to capture an important change in New Jersey politics between 1912 and 1916. Having supported Wilson for governor in 1910, the New Jersey bosses turned against him shortly after his election. They initially opposed his nomination for president in 1912, but fell in line once it became inevitable (Link 1947, chaps. 8–9 and 427–428). After he became president, however, Wilson’s control of the New Jersey Democratic Party, once nearly complete, slipped away (Blum 1951, 39, 76; Link 1947, 288). For example, the infamous Jersey City political boss Frank Hague supplanted a progressive Wilson ally during this period (McKean 1940, chap. 3; Connors 1971, chap. 3). To take account of Wilson’s reduced power over the bosses in 1916, we include a control variable for “machine counties,” defined as those counties with at least 30,000 voters in 1916 and 60% or more “foreign” citizens in the census of 1910. The counties so defined are Bergen, Hudson, Essex, and Union, adjacent to each other and just across the state line from New York City.”

Achen and Bartels: Results

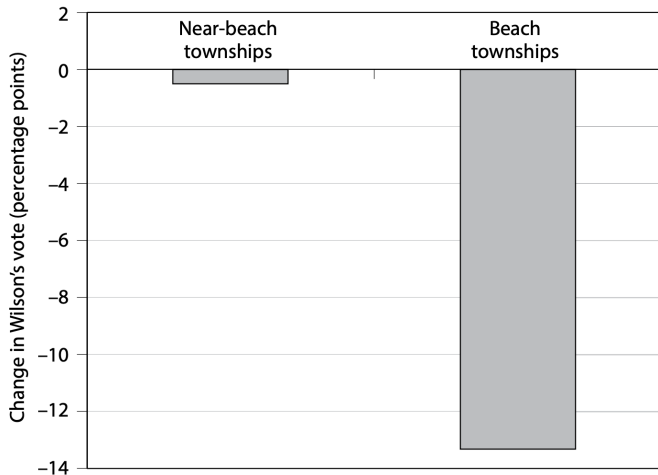


Figure 5.3. Change in Woodrow Wilson's Vote Share (1912-1916) in Ocean County Townships

Readings

Fowler, “Football games, shark attacks,
and why voters may not be so
incompetent after all”

Replication of Achen and Bartels:

1. Collected data on every fatal shark attack in the U.S. and every presidential election between 1872 and 2012
 - No *systematic* evidence of an effect.
2. Replicated original study to check for *robustness* to:
 - Coding of treated counties (on the beach? had a shark attack?)
 - Inclusion/exclusion of outliers
 - Statistical control for “machine counties”

The Achen-Bartels vs. Fowler-Hall Debate

The **science** vs. the **political** in political science.

- Tension between substantive expertise and statistical rigor/generalizability
- The researcher always exercises judgment (preregistration debate)
- Importance of **honesty in presentation** and **replication**

Publication bias in favor of surprising or unexpected results?

- Proposed solution: publication on the basis of research designs

Readings

Lenz, “Follow the Leader”

Quick Review

Let's recall the three models of democratic accountability we've encountered thus far:

1. **Most demanding:** Issue voting
 - a.k.a. Downsian, median voter, rational choice, direct democracy
2. **Less demanding:** Retrospective voting
3. **Most pessimistic:** Social identities, popularity contests, random noise (shark attacks and football games)

And let's recall the **observational equivalence** of:

- Voters lead, candidates follow (Case 1)
- Candidates lead, voters follow (Cases 2 and 3)

Overcoming Observational Equivalence

Lenz argues that we can overcome the observational equivalence problem in two ways:

1. *The cause must come before the effect.* (David Hume)
 - Repeated measurement of the *same people* before and after a campaign
2. Variation in the cause
 - Changes in voter opinion
 - Political upheaval: war, natural disaster, economic boom/bust

What kind of variation is helpful to observe?

1. **Priming:** Changes in the salience of policy or performance
2. **Persuasion:** Changes in voters' views about policy or performance
3. **Learning:** Changes in voters' knowledge about policy or performance

Results: Priming

Design:

1. **Time 1:** measure voters' approval of the incumbent and their assessments of performance/issue

→ **Prime:** performance/issue becomes more salient

2. **Time 2:** measure *the same voters'* approval of the incumbent

Results:

- Voters pass the easy test (economic performance) but not the hard test (10 issues)

Results: Persuasion

Design:

1. **Time 1:** measure voters' approval of the incumbent and their assessments of performance/issues

→ **Persuasion:** some voters change their minds

2. **Time 2:** measure *the same voters'* approval of the incumbent

Results:

- Again, voters pass the easy test (Gore's honesty) but not the hard test (support for unions)

Results: Learning

Design:

1. **Time 1:** measure voters' approval of the incumbent and where they stand on issues

→ **Learning:** teach voters where the incumbent stands on issues
2. **Time 2:** measure *the same voters'* approval of the incumbent

Results:

- Voters who approve of the incumbent but learn that the incumbent does not share their stance on issues *do not change their vote.*

Discussion: Do you believe Lenz's findings? Do they make you feel more or less optimistic about democracy?