

Chapter 14.

The Causes and Effects of Rational Abstention

Introduction

Citizens who are eligible to vote in democratic elections often fail to do so. In fact, some citizens never vote, and in some elections abstainers outnumber voters. In this chapter we examine the conditions under which abstention is rational. Throughout this analysis, we assume that every rational man decides whether to vote just as he makes all other decisions: if the returns outweigh the costs, he votes; if not, he abstains.

1. PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS WHEN VOTING IS COSTLESS

When the cost of voting is zero, any return whatsoever, no matter how small, makes it rational to vote and irrational to abstain. Therefore, whether abstention is rational depends entirely on the nature of the returns from voting.

A. WHY ONLY THOSE CITIZENS WHO ARE INDIFFERENT ABSTAIN

In the last chapter we pointed out that a citizen's reward for voting correctly consists of his vote value, i.e., his party differential discounted to allow for the influence of other voters upon the election's outcome. If the citizen is indifferent among parties, his party differential is zero, so his vote value must also be zero. It appears that he obtains no return from voting unless he prefers one party over the others; hence indifferent citizens always abstain. However, this conclusion is false, because the return from voting per se is not the same thing as the return from voting correctly. The alternative to voting per se is abstaining; whereas the alternative to voting correctly is voting incorrectly—at least so we have viewed it in our analysis. But an incorrect vote is still a vote; so if there is any gain from voting per se, a man who votes incorrectly procures it, though a man who abstains does not.

The advantage of voting per se is that it makes democracy possible. If no one votes, then the system collapses because no government is chosen. We assume that the citizens of a democracy subscribe to its principles and therefore derive benefits from its continuance; hence they do not want it to collapse.' For this reason they attach value to the act of voting per se and receive a return from it.

Paradoxically, the size of this return depends upon the cost of voting. When voting costs are zero, the return from voting per se is also zero but when voting is costly, the return from voting per se is positive. The second of these assertions we discuss later; now let us examine the first one.

Democracy cannot operate rationally if everyone is indifferent about who wins each election. Of course, not everyone has to have a party preference, but someone must if the election is to be a meaningful act of choice. Therefore we assume throughout this chapter that (1) at least one citizen is not indifferent, (2) no tie votes occur, and (3) indifference does not reflect equal disgust with the candidates but rather equal satisfaction with them.

When the cost of voting is zero, everyone who is not indifferent votes, because his return from doing so, though small, is larger than zero. Therefore citizens who are indifferent know that the election will work and democracy will continue to function even if they abstain. This conclusion holds even when the vast majority of the electorate is indifferent; in fact, only one man need vote. The parties running still must cater to the interests of the whole electorate, because (1) they do not know in advance who will be indifferent and (2) once elected, they know that the citizens who were indifferent may vote in the future. Thus parties compete with each other to attract the potential votes of men who previously abstained as well as the actual votes of those who voted.

As a result, men who are indifferent about who wins have nothing to gain from voting, so they abstain. Hence when the cost of voting is zero, every citizen who is perfectly indifferent abstains. However, the above reasoning does not apply when voting is costly.

II. PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS WHEN VOTING IS COSTLY

VOTING COSTS AND THEIR BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS

Heretofore we have assumed that voting is a costless act, but this assumption is self-contradictory because every act takes time. In fact, time is the principal cost of voting: time to register, to discover what parties are running, to deliberate, to go to the polls, and to mark the ballot. Since time is a scarce resource, voting is inherently costly.

This fact alters our previous conclusion that everyone votes if he has any party preference at all. When there are costs to voting they may outweigh the returns thereof; hence rational abstention becomes possible even for citizens who want a particular party to win. In fact, since the returns from voting are often miniscule, even low voting costs may cause many partisan citizens to abstain.

The importance of their abstention depends on the effects it has upon the distribution of political power. Such effects can stem from two sources: (1) biases in the distribution of ability to bear the costs. By real returns we mean those which each citizen would perceive in a perfectly informed world of voting, and (2) biases in the distribution of high returns from voting.

The only direct money costs connected with registering to vote and voting are any poll taxes extant and the cost of transportation. Ability to bear these costs varies inversely with income, so upper-income citizens have an advantage. Where poll taxes do not exist, the principal cost of voting is usually the utility income lost by devoting time to it rather than something else. If the time must be taken out of working hours, this cost can be quite high, in which case high-income

groups again have an advantage. But if the time comes during leisure hours, there is no reason to suppose any such income-correlated disparity exists.

At first glance, all of these costs may appear trivial, and biases in ability to bear them seem irrelevant. However, the returns from voting are usually so low that tiny variations in its cost may have tremendous effects on the distribution of political power. This fact explains why such simple practices as holding elections on holidays, keeping polls open late, repealing small poll taxes, and providing free rides to the polls may strikingly affect election results.

THE NATURE, SIZE, AND IMPACT OF THE RETURNS FROM VOTING

The return a citizen receives from voting is compounded of several factors. The first is the strength of his desire to see one party win instead of the others, i.e., the size of his party differential. As we pointed out in Chapter 3, party policies determine this factor. A second factor is the degree to which he discounts his party differential to allow for the influence of other voters. These two factors together constitute his vote value.

The third factor is independent of the other two; it is the value of voting per se. Although we discussed it briefly earlier in the chapter, we must examine it more carefully here because of the vital role it plays when voting is costly.

We assume that everyone in our model world derives utility from living in a democracy. When the cost of voting is zero, receipt of this utility is not jeopardized by abstention, because only those who are indifferent abstain. But positive voting costs alter this situation by causing some men who have definite preferences to abstain also. In fact, since each citizen's vote value is usually quite small, any cost at all may threaten the political system with collapse through lack of participation.

Further analysis is complicated by an oligopoly problem. If each partisan voter expects many others to vote, his own vote value is tiny; hence it is outweighed by a very small cost of voting. The more voters there are who feel this way, the smaller is the total vote. But a small total vote raises the probability that any one ballot will be decisive; hence the vote value of each citizen may rise to a point where it outweighs the cost of voting. Therefore citizens who think others expect many to vote will themselves expect few to vote, and they will want to be among those few.

Each citizen is thus trapped in a maze of conjectural variation. The importance of his own vote depends upon how important other people think their votes are, which in turn depends on how important he thinks his vote is. He can conclude either that (1) since so many others are going to vote, his ballot is not worth casting or (2) since most others reason this way, they will abstain and therefore he should vote. If everyone arrives at the first conclusion, no one votes; whereas if everyone arrives at the second conclusion, every citizen votes unless he is indifferent.

Both these outcomes are self-defeating. When no one votes, democracy collapses. Yet if everyone who is not indifferent votes, in the next election each will abstain, since his ballot had so little effect previously (i.e., when everyone voted). Thus if we assume all men think alike,

democracy seems unable to function rationally. What rule can we posit within the framework of our model to show how rational men can arrive at different conclusions though viewing the same situation?

The answer consists of two parts:

1. Rational men in a democracy are motivated to some extent by a sense of social responsibility relatively independent of their own short-run gains and losses.
2. If we view such responsibility as one part of the return from voting, it is possible that the cost of voting is outweighed by its returns for some but not all rational men.

Let us examine these propositions in order. One thing that all citizens in our model have in common is the desire to see democracy work. Yet if voting costs exist, pursuit of short-run rationality can conceivably cause democracy to break down. However improbable this outcome may seem, it is so disastrous that every citizen is willing to bear at least some cost in order to insure himself against it. The more probable it appears, the more cost he is willing to bear.

Since voting is one form of insurance against this catastrophe, every rational citizen receives some return from voting per se when voting is costly. Its magnitude (1) is never zero, (2) varies directly with the benefits he gains from democracy, and (3) varies inversely with the number of others he expects to vote. The last of these factors depends upon the cost of voting and the returns he thinks others get from it. Thus we have not completely eliminated the oligopoly problem, but we have introduced another factor which tends to offset its importance.

Participation in elections is one of the rules of the game in a democracy, because without it democracy cannot work. Since the consequences of universal failure to vote are both obvious and disastrous, and since the cost of voting is small, at least some men can rationally be motivated to vote even when their personal gains in the short run are outweighed by their personal costs.

Thus the total return which a rational citizen receives from voting in a given election consists of his long-run participation value plus his vote value. In other words, the reward a man obtains for voting depends upon (1) how much he values living in a democracy, (2) how much he cares which party wins, (3) how close he thinks the election will be, and (4) how many other citizens he thinks will vote." These four variables insure a relatively wide range of possible returns from voting for different individuals. The range of possible costs is also wide, as we saw before. Therefore a matching of returns and costs can easily result in a mixed outcome-i.e., a large number of voters whose returns exceed their costs and a large number of abstainers whose costs exceed their returns.

Without abandoning our assumption that all men are rational, we can thus explain the following phenomena by means of our model:

1. Some men abstain all the time, others abstain sometimes, and others never abstain.

2. The percentage of the electorate abstaining varies from election to election.
3. Many men who vote do not become well-informed before voting. Only a few men who become well-informed do not vote.

Furthermore, our analysis has isolated several factors upon which the incidence of rational abstention depends. Hence it may be useful in designing methods of predicting how many voters will abstain in a given election.

A REVISED SUMMARY OF HOW RATIONAL CITIZENS DECIDE HOW TO VOTE

The introduction of voting costs into our model forces us to revise again the behavior rule first formulated in Chapter 3. In an uncertain world, each rational citizen makes his voting decision in the following manner:

- 1) He makes preliminary estimates of his expected party differential, the cost of voting, his long-run participation value, and the number of other citizens he believes will vote.
- 2) If his party differential is zero because all party policies and platforms appear identical to him, he weighs his long-run participation value plus the expected value of "change" as opposed to "no change" (or vice versa) against the cost of voting.
 - a) If returns outweigh costs and he favors "change," he votes for the opposition party.
 - b) If returns outweigh costs and he favors "no change," he votes for the incumbent party.
 - c) If costs outweigh returns, he abstains.
- 3) If the party differential is zero because he expects identical utility incomes from all parties even though their policies and platforms differ, he weighs only the long-run participation value against the cost of voting.
 - a) If returns outweigh costs, he votes for a party chosen at random.
 - b) If costs outweigh returns, he abstains.
- 4) If his party differential is not zero, he estimates how close the election will be and discounts his party differential accordingly.
 - a) If the discounted party differential plus the long-run participation value exceed the cost of voting, he votes for his favorite party.
 - b) If the sum of these quantities is smaller than the cost of voting, he abstains.
- 5) Throughout the above processes he procures more information about all the entities involved whenever its expected pay-off exceeds its cost. Since this information may alter his estimate of any entity, he may shift from one category to another in the midst of his deliberations. He votes according to the rules applicable to the category he is in on election-day.