

Downs' Theory of Voting: A Research Paper

I. Introduction (Why I am writing this paper. Note that this is a statement, not a question.)

What we know about voting rates. Barely 50% of American adults vote in presidential elections (as compared with 80-95% participation rates on other democratic nations). Even fewer people vote in state and local elections. Voter turnout is generally declining.

Why voting is important? Why is it important that we understand why people vote and do something about it?

II. Theoretical Section

Anthony Downs tells us the decision to vote is a function of 4 factors: Probability of affecting the outcome (P), the benefits of your candidate or party winning (B), the costs of voting (C) and the value of Democracy (D):

$$V = P*B - C + D$$

Four “bivariate” hypotheses can be expressed to summarize this model:

1. Ceteris paribus, as the probability of affecting the outcome of an election increases, the likelihood of voting increases.
2. Ceteris paribus, as the value (benefits from winning) of my preferred candidate increases, the likelihood of voting increases.
3. Ceteris paribus, as the cost of voting increases, the likelihood of voting increases.
4. Ceteris paribus, as the value of Democracy increases, the likelihood of voting increases.

The “ceteris paribus” condition means, “all other things being equal”. Another way of saying this might be “controlling for all other variables”.

III. Operationalizing Variables

In order to test Downs theory, we need to operationalize his variables using. This process has been discussed elsewhere.

IV. Collecting Data

What data have been collected to test Downs theory? Describe the population, the size of the sample, the way in which the data were collected from the sample, etc.

It is also appropriate to report the uni-variate frequencies or other summary statistics (mean, median, mode, standard deviation, minimum, maximum) describing the key variables in the analysis to follow.

V. Testing Downs Model: Bivariate Relationships

Once we have data associated with each of the terms in his model we can estimate the associations hypothesized by Downs

In testing Downs model this is where you explain the bi-variate hypotheses, setting aside for the moment the ceteris paribus condition.

Crosstabulate:

1. V by P
2. V by B
3. V by C
4. V by D

The crosstabulations can be reported or summary statistics may be sufficient. For example,

	Gamma	Significant
V by P	-.41	Yes
V by B	-.39	Yes
V by C	.44	Yes
V by D	.00	No

VI. Testing Downs Model: Multi-variate Relationships

The bi-variate results suggest that P, B, and C are all powerful determinants of voter turnout. But, are some of these results spurious? Alternatively, do these independent variables “interact” so that

combinations of them stimulate voter turnout?
Multiple 3-way crosstabulations are necessary to investigate these questions.

Crosstabulate (for example)

V by P by B

What you will discover is that...

P matters most when B is low. (There is a strong relationship between V and P when B is small.

P matters least when B is high. (There is no relationship between V and P when B is high)

Alternatively, by looking at the V by B by P crosstab, you can see the effect of P on the V by B relationship...

B matters most when P is low.

B matters less when P is high.

VII. Extra Twists

One aspect of Downs' model that the results cause us to question is the value of the D term. Why is it apparently unrelated to voter turnout? Another way of investigating the question might be to ask "Although D doesn't matter typically, does it matter under certain conditions?" When might it matter? Well, look at the turnout by citizens for whom the reasons to vote are hard to find. That is, look at the citizens who see little impact of their vote (Low P) and few if any differences between the parties (Low B) and face high costs of voting. They have little reason to vote. But do any of these people vote? If so, it is because they see it as their duty as citizens of a democratic nation to do so? Is it the D term that motivates them to vote?

Examine the crosstab between V and D for this special subset of respondents.

VIII. Conclusions and Implications

What have we learned about voting?

Are there any policy implications from our research? (Do we expect reforms that focus on the costs of voting to be effective? Will the new “motor voter” laws that make it easier to register increase turnout? Would we endorse changes in the size of electorates? Will the increasing ideological “purity” of the parties influence voters?)

What are we missing about the voting process in Downs model? Is education important? Is the failure to vote a failure of the parties and candidates or the voters?