

Public Opinion as an Important Component of the Integral Model of Voter Decision Making

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the main models of electoral activity: rational, sociological, socio-psychological and political-communication models. The analysis reveals that none of monotheories can claim to be an exhaustive explanation of the mechanism of decision making in relation to whether to participate in the elections or not. The multivariate analysis of the electoral behavior requires more universal and integral explanatory model. The article discusses the possibility of building such a model: its main socio-psychosocial components. It is proved that the relationship between the factors of electoral behavior is a function of the multiplicative nature. Special attention is given to such a component of the model, as public opinion, which affects both the decision of the voters on participation in voting and the political preferences.

Key words: Public opinion • Electoral behavior • Integral model of voting behavior • Electoral activity • Motivation • Absenteeism • Social psychology • Politics • Voting • Elections • Voting turnout

INTRODUCTION

In the history of psychology and sociology, there were many attempts to conceptualize democracy. One of the most successful attempts was made in 1957 by American economist and political scientist Anthony Downs, who proposed a formula of rational behavior of a voter. Since then, it serves as a start for almost any scientific debate about the motives of voting behavior [3]. The formula is as follows.

$$R = (B)(P) - C + D,$$

where

- R - Net "profit" from the individual's participation in the elections;
- B - "Benefits", assumed by the voter in case of his preferred candidate wins the election;
- P - Voter's estimate of the probability that his vote will affect the outcome of the election;
- C - Possible "costs" associated with participation in voting;
- D - Direct benefits from visiting the polling stations.

It is clear that the basis of this model is the logic of "maximizing the benefits", borrowed by Downs from the theory of rational choice. It is assumed that the main subject of political participation is free individuals, tending to maximum realization of their interests and acting rationally to effectively achieve their goals. Accordingly, participation of the individual in the election is the more likely, the greater the possible "Bonuses" exceed the costs. However here, we face with the so-called "paradox of voting" [7]. Based on the Downs formula, absenteeism is the much more expected behavior rather than the voting. First, even with a high confidence in the institution of elections and the current government, the voter realizes a small degree of his voice influence on the outcome of election, hence, the first term of the formula tends to null. Second, in contrast to possible political "benefits" significantly delayed in time (B), the "cost" (C) is not probabilistic in nature, but rather noticeable here and now. It turns out that the main active factor in the formula is the immediate instrumental benefit from voting (D), for example, minor awards at the polling station, or a sense of psychological satisfaction. Of course, this is a motivator, but it's sufficiency for making a decision to vote is questionable.

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The Main Part: So, despite the fact that the Downs formula and its variables have been actively used for democracy conceptualization, it contains much for a legitimate criticism [10]. In addition to the theory of rational choice, the voting motives may be explained by three more models: sociological one, emphasizing the solidarity with proper social group; social and psychological, which states that the main motive of participation or abstention in elections is values, attitudes and preferences of a particular party, formed, for example, in the family; and political and communication model, when the people vote under the influence of manipulation and political advertising [8].

It is now generally accepted that none of mono-theories can claim to be an exhaustive explanation of the mechanism of decision-making whether to participate in the elections or not.

The multivariate analysis of voting behavior requires a more universal and integral explanatory model. In our view, it should be wider and should have a greater ecological validity; it should integrate the ideas of existing theories of voting behavior not ignoring the psychological determinants.

Developing the model that satisfies these requirements, we regard the decision of the voters to participate in elections as a function of their motivation to vote and an opportunity to do so. Thus, the basis of the model is two key variables - "want to vote" (motivation) and "can vote" (possibility). Each of them can be positive or negative ("I want / do not want to", "can / can't"). Combination of valences of these variables determines the electoral decision of voters (Table 1).

Agreeing with colleagues from Stanford University, we believe that the relationship between the factors of electoral behavior is a function of a multiplicative character [6]. The multiplicativity is reflected in the fact that non-zero value of each of the factors separately (e.g., motivation or opportunity to vote) does not guarantee the attendance of voters, i.e., is a necessary but insufficient condition of attendance. At that, the zero value of at least one factor leads to absenteeism.

So the integral model of voter decision making can be based on the multiplication of Motivation and Possibility to vote. Each of these factors can be expressed as the sum of several psychological components.

Sources of Motivation: to vote vary. Political and instrumental benefits indicated in the Downs formula by variables (B) (P) and (D) are possible, but not the only components of motivation. Consider other psychological determinants of motivation to vote.

Table 1: Matrix of possible outcomes of electoral decision-making

		Motivation	
		"I want"	"I don't want"
Possibility	"I can"	+	—
	"I can not"	—	—

First, these are *value orientations of the voter*. These include the idea of such a construct, as a civic duty, justice, patriotism and responsibility. Several studies have shown that the percentage of voter attendance is significantly higher among those citizens, who see their participation as a personal civic duty. The category of civic duty is built-in in the hierarchy of personal values in the course of socialization, which agents are family, school, university, the nearest environment and the media. It is interesting that voting out of a sense of civic duty is more specific for graduates of the departments of social sciences and members of voluntary civic organizations.

Secondly, motivation depends on the *social identity* of the voter. Strong identification with the social group, where the electoral activity is a group norm, contributes to the high attendance of the members of this group. Divergence of political views of a voter with the majority from his social environment reduces the likelihood of his attendance at elections [10].

Thirdly, the electoral incentives are strongly influenced by the *psychological qualities of the voter's personality*, for example, the ability to be patient, the level of self-regulation and self-control. Percentage of voter turnout is higher among the citizens, characterized by patience and preference for significant delayed benefit rather than for a less significant, but the momentary benefit. Such a relationship is understandable, since the efforts, required by the voter participation in elections, are "paid off" only after some period of time.

Besides, an important determinant of electoral motivation is the voter's estimate of *internal and external political efficacy*. Under the internal political efficacy (self-efficacy) we mean belief in voter's ability to understand the policy, to take part and to influence the political process. External efficiency - is the belief in responsibility and competence of the political institutions. The higher is the estimate of the external and internal efficiency, the greater the motivation to participate in the vote is.

The opposite pole of the high sense of political self-efficacy is a sense of helplessness, worthlessness of any effort and the phenomenon of *learned helplessness*. The latter is a strong demotivator of

electoral activity and one of the main prerequisites of absenteeism. The name of this phenomenon was borrowed from Seligman's experiments, when the animals were placed in conditions combining punishment with hopelessness [9]. After such experiments the animal did not use the opportunity to save, even if it appeared and did not attempt to regain control of the situation. In the voting behavior, the same laws work: a long lasting feeling of useless effort leads to the fact that the learned helplessness becomes the main form of behavior, even when the environmental conditions change. This phenomenon confirms once again that one of the major sources of motivation to participate in elections is the ability to influence their outcome.

Concluding the passage about the psychological qualities of the individual, note that as it was revealed in the twin studies, a significant variance in turnout can be explained by hereditary factors. Monozygotic twins show a much more similar electoral behavior than dizygotic ones. This, of course, does not prove the presence of some "electoral gene", but the impact of inherited psychological factors on the motivation to participate in the elections.

As for the *situational factors that influence the electoral motivation*, of great importance is the electorate's perception of the characteristics of specific elections: an assessment of their importance, a comparison of the political programs of the candidates and the relationship to a favorite in the race. The greater is the difference between the voter's attitude to the preferred candidate and his rival, the more likely the voter turnout in the elections is. The more similar is the political course of the candidates for the voter, the less likely the voter appears at the polling station.

The variable "I can" (*the opportunity to vote*), in contrast to the discussed motivation, is largely determined by external factors: the availability and completeness of information about the candidates and their political programs, convenient location of the polling station, simplicity of the voting procedure in case of failing to appear at the polling place on election day. Despite the seeming "objectivity", these factors should be considered in the light of their perception by the voter. The same factors (e.g., illness or stay abroad) can act as an obstacle for one voter and be a motivation for absenteeism, but fail to be a valid reason for the absence of the other voter at elections.

Electoral decision-making process is beyond the individual weighing of the *desire and opportunity* to vote. It takes place in a *social context*. In this regard, we

introduce such an important factor as *public opinion* in the developed model. The fact that there is a close relationship between the government and public opinion and its neglect is impossible, was shown as early as in the 1990s in the works of V. Gerasimov and other political psychologists [2]. Let us examine this phenomenon in more detail.

Public opinion appears as a reflection on a specific social event (in particular - its political aspect) and rather rapidly changes under the impact of new circumstances [1]. It is almost always polarized, heterogeneous and pluralistic; it combines rational and evaluative components. "Public opinion is the value judgment that is relatively widespread, intense and stable; it is expressed by social community on the matters of interest to it" [5]. Public assessment of what issues does affect the electoral behavior.

First, it is *public opinion about the institution of elections*, its effectiveness and legitimacy. Public understanding of the meaning of democratic values and procedures and the level of trust in them strongly affect whether the citizen votes or not. A belief about dishonesty of voting procedures and uselessness of participation in them, dominating in society, leads to a significant reduction in the turnout percentage.

Secondly, the electoral activity is influenced by *public opinion on the candidates*. Image of politicians and political parties and their image in the eyes of the public is a zone, where the conflicting interests of different parties overlap and the natural processes of public opinion formation are forced by political propaganda and election campaigns. Features of public opinion manipulation are well described in the monograph by S. Kara-Murza: sensationalism and urgency, emotionality, mixing information and opinions, cover by the authority, activation of stereotypes, repetition, parcelling, removal from the context and totalitarianism of a message source [4].

As an illustration, showing the influence of the public opinion on electoral activity, recall the presidential election of 1996, where the main competitors at the time were considered to be the Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov. Forced and multilevel work with public opinion during the election campaign raised the rating of Boris Yeltsin from a few percent to the level needed to win (53.8% of the vote in the second round). The intensity and prevalence of judgments of public opinion, even being artificial, have led to the fact that in spite of the heat of summer and the holiday season, the Russians showed

a very high electoral activity: in the first round, the turnout was 69.8% of the voters and in the second one - more than 68%. This example clearly demonstrates the power of the public opinion influence on the electorate behavior.

CONCLUSION

So, when building an integrated explanatory model of electoral behavior, along with such variables as motivation and the opportunity to participate in the elections, it is necessary to take into account such factor as public opinion. The beliefs of public opinion are an important social and psychological determinant of voting behavior; they affect both the decision of the voter to participate in elections and their political preferences.

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