

Microeconomic Puzzle #1
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What makes people decide to vote in primaries?

In a February 25, 2000 article in the Wall Street Journal, “Defying Expectations, Turnout At 2000 Primaries Is Soaring,” Greg Hill discusses how turnout rates in this year’s primaries have almost doubled those of 1996. Typically, voter turnout increases are associated with “hard times” and unhappy voters, but the current economic situation is one of prosperity. Polls in 1999, as the presidential candidates began campaigning, showed that Americans were not paying any more attention than usual to the candidates. What accounts for the dramatic change in involvement? Hill argues that there are two factors: 1) there are competitive races for the presidential nomination in each party, and 2) McCain’s recent breakthrough has produced a wave of media attention and has sparked interest in both Democrats and Republicans. Interestingly, a lot of the increase in turnout has come from Democrat and Independent voters who have chosen to turnout for open primaries. What mechanism is fuelling the decision to vote in the primaries?

Voter turnout is a microeconomic issue because it deals with the allocation of scarce resources (time, money to become informed about the candidates) on the basis of an individual’s preferences (over candidates, party policy, etc.). The political science discipline (and rational choice theory) has grappled with why people vote for decades, beginning with the work of Anthony Downs (1957). Downs described the problem as a simple calculation of benefits, costs and duty. His model was expanded by Riker and Ordeshook (1968) and Fiorina (1976), among others. Their contributions were reinterpretations of “duty.” Downs argued that individuals included the value of seeing democracy continue in their vote decision, while Riker and Ordeshook argued that duty is an expressive value of fulfilling one’s “democratic duty.” Fiorina reframed the issue in terms of consumption; that is, he argued that voters choose to vote because of the value of performing the act itself. The model, regardless of the specific interpretation, looks like this:

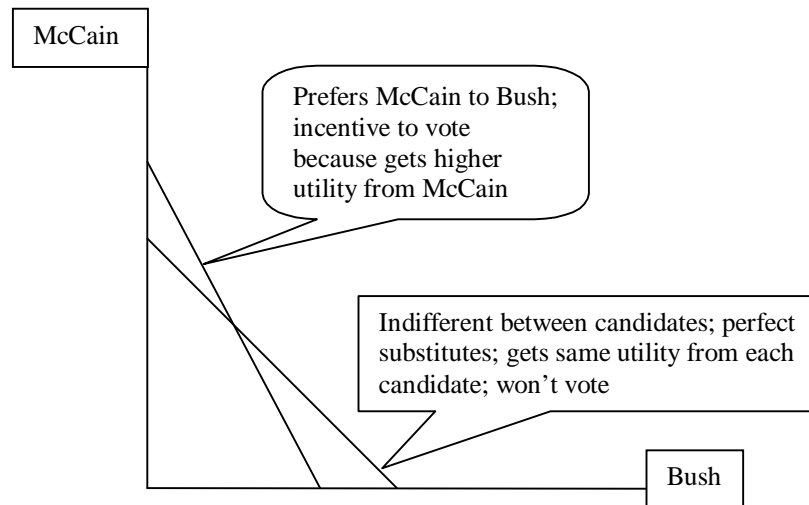
Reward = probability (benefit of one candidate winning over another) – costs + duty

If the value of the equation is positive, a person votes. If negative, they do not.

There is an additional problem in calculating this function, however. A voter does not decide an election by his/herself. Instead, the outcome depends upon the action of many other individuals who perform similar calculations. The probability of receiving a benefit, therefore, is changed only the tiniest bit by an individual actually going to vote, as the chances of breaking a tie between two candidates is highly unlikely. In this way, voting is a collective action problem. Thus, either the costs of voting must be 0 (which they are not) or the value of duty must be large enough to overcome the costs to make people vote.

This description of the decision to vote holds for primary elections as well, and can be used to explain why there has been an increase in voter turnout in 2000. First, consider an individual’s preferences over the candidates. If someone has a preference

between a Democrat or a Republican president, and only cares about party affiliation, there would be no reason to vote in a primary (the benefit term would be zero). Whichever candidate won would be fine, and only the actual vote for president would matter. If someone had preferences over the type of policy that a party proposed, i.e. a moderate vs. a conservative Republican, then these preferences would make a difference. One might believe that voting is necessary to save the party from the bad influence of a candidate. Thus, the benefit term would be larger and the duty term might increase. Alternately, the other party's supporters might also have preferences that become important for turnout. In open primaries, citizens can vote regardless of party affiliation. Therefore, Democrats might vote for one of the candidates because they believe that candidate will be easier for their preferred candidate (a Democrat) to beat, or because they are risk averse and would like to ensure that no matter which party wins the presidential election, a more moderate candidate will take office. The preferences of a Republican voter are shown in the following figure:



Indifference curves of two Republican voters

Now, consider the budget constraint facing a voter, or the costs involved in the decision to vote. An individual only has a certain amount of time and money. In order to vote, one must physically go to the polling booth. Because the primaries are not held only when people are not working, this involves taking time off work or reorganizing busy schedules. There are also information costs to consider, such as deciding which candidate to vote for. Even if an individual places a high value on duty, so that they are predisposed to vote, they still must decide whom to vote for.

These costs can be adjusted during campaigns. As Hill notes, McCain's campaign has brought a lot of media attention to the Republican race. Therefore, the cost of acquiring information has decreased for that race. Also, both the Democratic and Republican contest are competitive. These two factors work together in what Jacobson and Kernell (1983) have called the "strategic politicians" hypothesis. If a race is close, candidates will spend more money on publicity than otherwise. Aldrich (1993:267) writes: "A close, hard, expensively fought contest will, on average, increase interest in it, thereby increasing the likelihood that people will become informed about it out of general

References

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