
COGNITIVE MISERS:

How People Calculate the Worth of Their Vote

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Each election ushers in a torrent of political analysis venturing to predict what voter turnout will look like— which demographics of people will participate in the highest numbers, and which will stay home. Whether the analysis is based on gender, race, education, age, or level of political awareness, no single attribute can capture the enigma of voter turnout. This piece confronts the question of how people decide that voting is worthwhile. In light of human tendency to act as cognitive misers who seek to minimize effort and maximize reward, voting, as a rational choice and collective action problem, defies logic. The nature of voting is such that costs are incurred at the outset (learning about candidates and registering), but rewards (victory for one’s ideal candidate and feelings of personal virtuosity) cannot be redeemed until Election Day. In examining the social, mental, and objective reasons for voting, this article analyzes voter motivation and examines the paradoxical factors that push citizens to the voting booth.

The decision to vote conflicts with the concept of humans as “cognitive misers” seeking to minimize effort and maximize reward. The nature of voting as a collective action problem provides almost no prospect of reward, but rather, an incentive to free ride on the greater voter turnout. People decide that voting is important to them based on several rational, social, and psychological factors. Their decisions are based on basic norms and heuristics that pertain to self-interest, group loyalty, information gathering, and political efficacy. The decision to vote is also based on several external factors, such as the closeness of the election and gaps between candidate policies. Ultimately, citizens decide that voting is important to them when the confluence of these internal and external factors arrange in such a way to maximize the motivation to vote, while minimizing the costs and difficulties of voting.

The question of why people vote is enigmatic because it defies economic logic. Voting is a rational choice problem, meaning a citizen engages in cost-benefit analysis, voting only after ascertaining a high probability that his or her own vote will determine the outcome of the upcoming election.¹ Voting requires careful thought and patient foresight. The nature of voting is such that the costs, such as learning about candidates and registering, come at the beginning, but the rewards, such as victory for one’s ideal candidate and feelings of personal virtuosity, cannot be redeemed until Election Day.²

Voting is also a collective action problem. If no one votes, it constitutes a deeply troubling problem for democracy, but if a smaller proportion of the population does not vote, the election will probably unravel in the same way and democracy will march forward. When over 60% of the populace can be counted on to turn out for presidential elections,

voters think it is irrational for a citizen to vote. The benefit of ‘cheating,’ or staying home, outweighs the mental cost of skipping out on the vote.

Under the rational choice method of thinking, there are two reasons why people would believe the benefit of voting outweighs the cost. The first reason is that voters make naïve and erroneous assumptions about their political efficacy. They overestimate how much potency their single vote has to sway the election. These are the optimists. The second reason is that voters value the act of voting more than its result.³

People who value the act of voting more than the outcome of the election differentiate between outcome expectations and efficacy expectations. Outcome expectation refers to a person’s calculation that a single action will lead to concrete end

“The decision to vote is further based on three factors: motivation, ability, and difficulty.”

products. Efficacy expectation, however, refers only to a person’s conviction that he or she can successfully carry out the behavior necessary to produce such outcomes.⁴ An outcome expectation voter would not expend effort to vote because he or she knows that a single ballot will not affect the outcome of the race. Efficacy expectation voters, on the other hand, vote because success to them is defined as having the ability to vote, the aggregate of which determines the election.

A related facet of the efficacy expectation is what Blais and Rheault call “external political efficacy.” This refers to how a voter perceives the relationship between government and its constituents.⁵ In some sense it is a continuation of the “benevolent

leader hypothesis” into adulthood. When people believe the government cares for their needs and values their opinions, they are more likely to believe in the efficacy of their vote.

It is important to note how people mentally process the decision to vote. Much of the decision-making process takes place subconsciously. First, a voter “forms an initial view on the matter on the basis of her disposition system, the part

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of the brain that routinely manages daily life decisions.”⁶ This entails an assessment of effort and the prospects of success regarding voting. There are many situations in which people overestimate the potency of their vote. One is among attentive information-gatherers.⁷ Blais and Rheault differentiate between “sophisticated” and “unsophisticated” voters and assert that these two groups, in fact, take essentially different pathways in calculating the worth of their vote. Voters who are privy to campaign information are more likely to believe their vote counts because such exposure “awakens their surveillance system, thus activating belief updates regarding the competitiveness of the electoral race. These more aware respondents become more optimistic about the value of their single vote when there is a close race, while being skeptic when there is little uncertainty about the outcome.”⁸ Belief in casting a pivotal vote, therefore, is a function of long-term predispositions and the situational con-

text of electoral conditions, represented by the formula:

$$E(S_i) = \gamma D_i + \delta(R | A_i) + \sigma \epsilon_i$$

Where $E(S_i)$ represents the expected success of voting (casting the decisive vote), D_i represents the disposition system of efficacious persons, R represents the closeness of the Race, and A_i represents exposure to campaign information. γ and δ represent the magnitudinal impact of their respective variables, while σ represents unexplained voter characteristics. This model shows that the most instrumental factors in inducing a person to believe his or her vote is important are “the person’s disposition, particularly her sense of efficacy, plus objective data about the closeness of the race (competitiveness), conditional on one being exposed to such data (awareness).”⁹ This formula is useful because it allows for the integration of the surveillance system process by making it a perpetually recalibrated part of the function given that R is conditional upon A . In summation, a person is likely to believe in the decisiveness of their vote when $E(S_1)$ is high.

Political awareness (A), however, can have a negative effect on a voter’s belief in the efficacy of her vote. Informed voters give up hope in their political agency when the outcome of the election is known from the start.¹⁰ Conversely, when the race is more competitive, informed voters become optimistic in higher numbers than those who are uninformed. Informed voters, therefore, occupy both extreme ends of the voting spectrum when it comes to decisive optimism. The specifics of each election also have different effects on sophisticated and unsophisticated voters. For inattentive voters, the closeness of the race has essentially no impact on

their perception of voting efficacy.¹¹

One of the most basic formulas explaining voter turnout is proposed by Downs:

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

Where R is the total reward a citizen will gain from casting a ballot, B is the benefit a person believes will materialize from having his or her ideal candidate take office, P is the probability of casting the decisive vote, C is cost of voting in terms of time, money, and effort, and D refers to mental gratification a person earns from voting.¹²

An issue that arises when using this formula to explain voter turnout, which is often between 60 and 70% for presidential elections, is the presence of the “paradox of voting.” The “paradox of voting” describes voting as a collective action problem; according to this theory, voting yields benefits only when it is the product of collective organization. Therefore, a large amount of people should shirk the costs of voting because it can never ensure the acquisition of these benefits from a single ballot. In other words, P is infinitesimally small. The probability that a person’s ballot will be the decisive one is virtually never large enough to produce a positive value of R that would justify voting.¹³

The decision to vote is further based on three factors: motivation, ability, and difficulty. Harder and Krosnick propose that “a person’s likelihood of turning out on election day is a multiplicative function of his or her ability to vote, his or her motivation to vote, and the difficulty of obtaining the needed information and carrying out the behavior of voting.”¹⁴ Turnout, therefore, is a function of the subsets of motivation, ability, and difficulty: social location, psychological disposition, voting pro-

cedure, and election-specific events.

Harder and Krosnick propose a modified formula that relies on their three pillars of voter turnout:

$$\text{Likelihood of Voting} = \frac{(\text{Motivation to vote} \times \text{Ability to Vote})}{\text{Difficulty of Voting}}$$

Wherein motivation and ability are directly proportional to the likelihood of voting, and difficulty is inversely proportional to the likelihood of voting.

A person’s ability to vote refers to his or her capacity to form political opinions by absorbing and synthesizing political information, as well as his or her ability to comprehend and fulfill voting and registration requirements. This is where education functions as a predictor of voter turnout. Each additional year of education a person receives is associated with a higher likelihood they will vote. Education affects a person’s ability to vote because it teaches him or her how the political process works and how to navigate bureaucratic requirements like voter registration. Education fosters interest in the political process and places voters in a social situation where voting is the norm.¹⁵ Income is another demographic factor that impacts a person’s ability to vote. For example, wealthier people vote at higher rates. Some possible reasons for this are that poor, middle, or working-class people tend to have less time to learn about political candidates and go out to vote, or that wealthy people believe they have a higher stake in policy, especially financial policy.

Age is another example of an “ability factor” that influences voters. People are more likely to consider voting important as they progress through adulthood. Since 1986, Americans over 65 have outperformed all other age groups in terms of voter turnout. The rate of turnout for

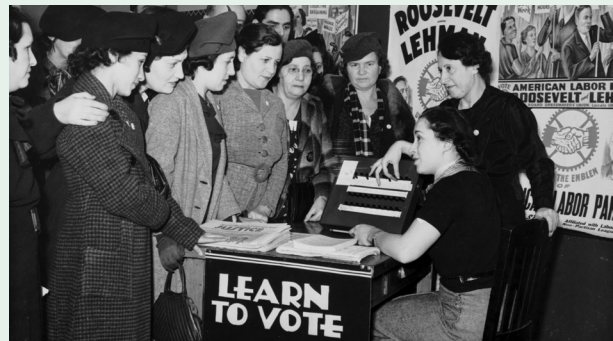
18-34 year olds has had the lowest rank in every Congressional election since 1978.¹⁶ Age is correlated with voter turnout largely because age also correlates with greater ability. Potential reasons for this are that older people have gained more bureaucratic exposure and political knowledge. They can more easily discern which candidate to vote for and how to make sure they meet registration requirements. Aging may diminish the information costs of voting, “because people may become more knowledgeable about the parties and the political process by watching them in action for many years, especially early in adulthood.”¹⁷ Voter turnout decreases only after age 75, when physical ailments become the primary hindrance to the ability to vote.

Motivation to vote is a runoff of several objective and rational components, including strong support for one candidate over the other, commitment to being a responsible citizen, pressure from friends and family, and the particulars of an election. Educational achievement augments motivation, as well as ability, to vote. Education instills a sense of civic duty, and it also creates an environment that is conducive to political participation. Interestingly, educated people show more motivation to vote when their social circle is comprised of those with less education. Disparity in education levels does more to encourage turnout than education itself. People compare themselves to their peers and are motivated to participate in politics if they feel especially qualified to exercise their civic responsibilities.¹⁸

Another example of a motivating factor to vote is profession. Profession generally does not influence voter turnout, except in the case of government employees. Government em-

ployees turn out to vote at a much higher rate because their level of motivation is exceedingly high. In order to retain their jobs, certain candidates must win office. Additionally, the achievement of their political goals may depend on a certain party being in the majority.¹⁹ Similarly, farmers often decide that voting is important because government policy correlates strongly to their welfare in the form of trade policy, environmental regulations, and agricultural subsidies.²⁰

Difficulty associated with voting refers to external constraints on the voter’s ability to transform the desire to vote into the act of casting a ballot. Such constraints include strict registration policies, the ambiguity and location of polling places, and availability of candidate information. As “cognitive misers,” humans are wired to minimize cognitive effort, which can prove especially troublesome for



Women surrounded by posters in Yiddish and English supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt, Herbert H. Lehman, and the American Labor party teach other women how to vote, 1935. *Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

a task like voting, which requires mental effort in the form of political information gathering and physical effort in the form of registering and voting. Voter registration is a powerful barrier to voter turnout. Harder and Krosnick state simply, “Turnout is made more difficult and less likely by onerous registration procedures.”²¹

In terms of cost-benefit analysis, registration is unfavorable. Registration requires that a citizen “expend effort to gain relevant knowledge and then expend effort to comply with registration.” Citizens must set aside time to decide where, when, and for which party to register, which is a cost that cannot be countered until election time with the slight probability of casting a decisive ballot. To register, a person must adhere to rules about how and when to register, as well as have the ability to produce the necessary identification documents and reside in the corresponding location.

Even after registration, voters may calculate that the cost of voting is too high. In landslide elections, for example, voters’ ever-present cost-benefit calculation mechanism tells them that there is nothing they can do to change the outcome. This manifests into decisive apathy; they will reap the benefit without voting if their preferred candidate is in the lead, or they will save time by not voting if they know their preferred candidate is going to lose. There is no change in reward dependent on their ballot. On a related note, the media affects people’s decisions to vote. There is direct evidence that if the news predicts the outcomes of an election before polls have closed, voters discount the efficacy of their ballot, and voter turnout dwindles.

Decisive apathy also occurs when candidates have similar policies and the voter has no preference between candidates.²² Voter preferences in an election increase voter turnout because they modify the cost-benefit analysis of voting. When voters have a higher stake in who wins, it makes the risk of not participating a much more burdensome cost. This is referred to as *minimax regret analysis*.²³ Voters motivated by this risk are those who believe that the risk of staying home when they could have cast the decisive vote is more burdensome than the costs of voting.

Although some inhibiting factors have been outlawed (poll taxes, literacy tests), barriers to registration efforts that remain include limited hours of registration, early cutoff dates, accessibility of physical registration locations, and annual re-registration. Whenever a voter moves, for example, he or she must re-register in the new precinct, a task that often is delayed while higher-priority roots are re-established.²⁴ Of these barriers, early cut-off dates prove the most burdensome; they preclude voters from registering when they are most inclined to do so – around election time. The burden of registration accounts for a 7% to 9% depression in voter turnout.²⁵ Additionally, voters may be placed on an inactive voter roll if they do not respond to their local census. After a certain period of time, this may render them unable to vote. In Massachusetts, for example, citizens are removed from the list of registered voters after having failed to vote in two consecutive biennial state elections.²⁶

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Outside of registration is the need for the voter to engage in information-gathering to decide for which candidate to cast his or her ballot. The greater the effort a person has to expend “in order to determine candidates’ ideological positions, the higher the person’s “information costs” and the less likely he or she is to vote.”²⁷ In California, for example, thousands of precincts were consolidated in 2003, making it harder for voters to both de-

termine their candidates and ascertain the location of their polling place, causing a decrease in voter turnout for that year.

These difficulties may prove fatal to some voting efforts because, as stated above, people are constantly engaged in subconscious cost-benefit analysis. Awareness of the costs of voting accumulate to the point that some voters abandon the effort to cast a ballot. Efforts to combat these difficulties have seen muted results. Registration drives, for example, increase turnout rates, but at a smaller rate than self-registered voters who are more likely to vote anyways.

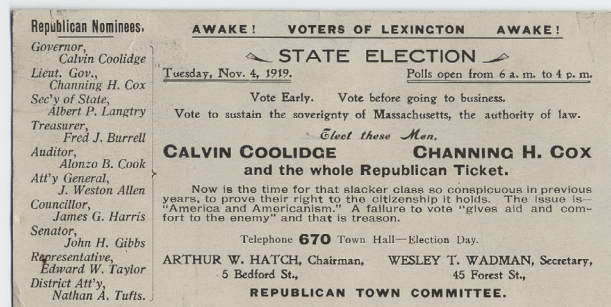
The three factors of motivation, ability, and difficulty are shaped by social and psychological factors that dictate a citizen's belief in his or her value as a voter. As already stated, highly educated individuals vote more frequently because they are confident in their qualification to effect change, especially among those with less education. The motivational undercurrents of these social and psychological factors are evident. African Americans, after controlling for education and income, vote at higher rates than do Caucasians. They capitalize on their efficacy and maximize utility as voters to rectify social, economic, and political disparities.²⁸ Voting produces a greater reward for minority groups because their sense of voting efficacy is boosted by the perception that their groups rely on them to articulate grievances and motivate change.

Another social factor that augments motivational potency is a person's participation in civic organizations.²⁹ The more a person is engaged in collective tasks, the more success he or she believes will come from the collective action of voting. Putnam identifies *social capital* as the network of interpersonal relations and trust-building connections that exist between members of organized society. Social capital, a product of civic engagement, boosts

voter turnout. People who are more trusting of their peers are more likely to vote, and people who possess group loyalties feel responsible to advocate for the interests of their group.³⁰ They engage in in-group favoritism, by which they treat members of their own group more favorably than they do outsiders. This convinces members that their group is worthy of their vote.

Participants in a voting research study were exposed to four electoral cases that featured high electoral competition, global warming, and taxes. Results showed that participants invoked civic duty 22% of the time on issues for the greater good, but only 15% of the time on issues concerning only self-interest. Group loyalty, in this case, accounts for a 7% increase in voter turnout. Additionally, group membership affirms a citizen's belief in their ability to play an effective role as part of a group. Group members are more likely to vote as a function of perceived self-efficacy as well as being mechanistically more prepared to vote in terms of civic knowledge and bureaucratic navigation skills.

A psychological factor impacting voter self-worth is a personal sense of democratic responsibility. This is why door-to-door canvassing is one of the most effective techniques to "get out the vote." When personally asked by campaign workers to vote on Election Day, citizens are prone to take



Coolidge-Cox Postcard, ca. 1919, encouraging people to vote. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

that request to heart, either out of pride or guilt. People know that voting is the norm, so there exists a strong motivation to conform so as to satisfy the social desirability bias. Canvassing is effective because the wellspring of civic duty is the attempt by others to influence individual feelings by appealing to common interests.³²

Canvassing, especially knocking on doors and reminding people to vote, is an effective way to appeal to democratic responsibility. It lowers the cost of voter turnout because “it helps citizens determine where to go to vote, reminds them about the election date to permit advance planning, enables citizens by giving them information about the candidates and issues, or induces citizens to make oral commitments to participating in the election, which can be self-fulfilling.”³³ Canvassing decreases costs associated with voting while increasing motivation to vote. After interacting with a canvasser, voters do not have to engage in as much information gathering, and they also have made a promise to the canvasser that recalibrates their cost-benefit calculation. Citizens do not want to feel as if they are shirking their civic duty, especially after they have been reminded of it, so the cost of not voting becomes more mentally burdensome than the cost of voting. After interacting with a canvasser, citizens reap additional benefits from voting, including preservation of reputation, satisfaction of fulfilling a commitment, and a feeling of civic virtue.

Voters especially those who feel an acute sense of civic duty, “believe they have a moral obligation to participate in politics and are especially likely to vote in elections.”³⁴ A rational voter decides for which candidate or policy to vote based on expected social consequences distinct from self-interest.³⁵ Baron identifies the

“culture of honor,” the idea that voting is a responsibility to defend both self- and group- interests.³⁶ He concedes, however, that the norm of self-interest in relation to voting is a worthless heuristic. He suggests, like many others, that the probability of casting a decisive vote is so miniscule that one’s ballot is a flimsy shield for protecting one’s interests.

In conclusion, citizens decide that voting is important to them when there is a convergence of favorable factors. Since voting is a collective action problem with infinitesimally small prospects that a single ballot will decide the election, people decide that voting is important to them based on both rational and irrational conditions. These factors affect the three personal considerations in cost-benefit analysis: motivation, ability, and difficulty. Voter turnout increases with motivation and ability, and decreases with difficulty. The decision to vote, in terms of rational choice, is a function of reward, cost, probability of casting the decisive vote, closeness of elections, belief in government, group interest, and civic duty. People decide to vote when they are more readily exposed to political motivation, educational incentive, and societal norms. Pursuant to their roles as “cognitive misers,” people decide voting is important to them when it is unchallenging for them to see and understand its importance.

ENDNOTES

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³Robert S. Goldfarb and Lee Sigelman, “Does ‘Civic Duty’ ‘Solve’ The Rational Choice Voter Turnout Puzzle?” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 22 (3) (2010): 277.

⁴Blais and Rheault, “Optimists and Skeptics,” 78.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Blais and Rheault, “Optimists and Skeptics,” 78.

⁷Blais and Rheault, “Optimists and Skeptics,” 78.

⁸Blais and Rheault, “Optimists and Skeptics,” 81.

⁹Blais and Rheault, “Optimists and Skeptics,” 80.

¹⁰Blais and Rheault, “Optimists and Skeptics,” 81.

¹¹Blais and Rheault, “Optimists and Skeptics,” 82.

¹²Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 526.

¹³Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 526.

¹⁴Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 525.

¹⁵Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 530.

¹⁶Thom File, “Who Votes? Congressional Elections and the American Electorate: 1978–2014,” *Population Characteristics*, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC (2015): 5.

¹⁷Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 532.

¹⁸Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 534.

¹⁹Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 531.

²⁰Raymond E. Wolfinger and Steven J. Rosenstone, “Who Votes?” Yale University Press (1980): 30-31.

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²⁵Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 528.

²⁶“Elections and Voting,” <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/eleenr/enridx.htm>

²⁷Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 530.

²⁸Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 534.

²⁹Robert D. Putnam, “Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America.” *Political Science and Politics* 28 (1995): 664-683.

³⁰Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 536.

³¹Johnathon Baron “The ‘culture of Honor’ in Citizens’ Concepts of Their Duty as Voters.” *Rationality and Society* 24, no.1 (2012): 57-58.

³²Schram and van Winden, “Why People Vote,”600.

³³Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 540.

³⁴Harder and Krosnick, “Why Do People Vote?” 536.

³⁵Noah Kaplan, Aaron Edlin, and Andrew Gelman “Voting as a Rational Choice: Why and How People Vote to Improve the Well-Being of Others.” National Bureau of Economic Research. Working Paper Series No. W13562 (2007).

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