

Why voters vote the way they do?

Byron A. Ellis- May 14, 2016



The Jethro Project - To answer the question of why voters vote the way they do, we must understand preference formation. Even on a single issue, voters will have judgmental latitudes, a range of positions that is within acceptance, rejection or indifference.

The postulate of rationality indicates that for all possible pairs of alternatives, individuals know whether they prefer candidate A's policies to candidate B's or B's to A's, or whether they are indifferent between them. However, only one of the three possibilities is true for any pair of choices. Thus, if voters prefer candidate A's policies to candidate B's and candidate B's to candidate C's, they will prefer candidate A to C under the postulate of rationality.

Nonetheless, some voters are partisans. Therefore, even when the outcome of a candidate's policy is beneficial to them, if they believe that the candidate is not affiliated with their party, they will find that candidate unacceptable; and other voters have difficulty associating policies with outcomes. Thus, more often than not, the voting process is irrational.

Many voters do not know the candidates on down-ballot races; even if the candidates are incumbents, they do not know how they performed in office. However, some social scientists believe that voter irrationality does not matter, because, on the average, voter irrationality cancels out. On the other hand, voter irrationality is often reinforcing.

The postulate of rationality merely requires the voter to rank candidates in order of preferences. Thus, suppose there are three possible policies, P1, P2, and P3 and three voters, V1, V2, and V3 and they revealed their preference rankings, such that voter V1's policy ranking is P1, P2, and P3 (i.e., P1 preferred to P2, and P2 preferred to P3); voter V2's is P2, P3, and P1; and voter V3's is P3, P1, and P2 or in table format:

Policy Ranking	Voter		
	V1	V2	V3
1	P1	P2	P3
2	P2	P3	P1
3	P3	P1	P2

A vote between policies P1 and P2 would result in a win for the candidate advocating policy P1 ($P1 > P2$) since voters V1 and V3 would vote for P1 over P2 and only voter V2 would vote for P2 over P1. Similarly, a vote between policies P2 and P3 would result in a win for the candidate advocating policy P2 ($P2 > P3$), since voter V1 and V2 would vote for P2 over P3 and only voter V3 would vote for P3 over P2. Likewise, policy P3 would be preferred over P1, because voters V2 and V3 prefer P3 over P1, and only voter V1 would prefer P1 over P3.

From this exercise, voters' preferences are P1>P2, P2>P3, P3>P1, which violates the need for transitivity. That is, if policy P1 is preferred to P2 and P2 to P3, then P1 must be preferred to P3, but in this voting example, it is not. The result demonstrates the circularity of the voting process. Economist Arrow attributed this circularity to too much diversity of preferences among voters. However, it is more than too much diversity. It is too much partisanship among voters that blinds their critical thinking skills.

According to social justice theory, only by understanding a person's judgment on the various alternative positions on an issue, we can understand their reaction to persuasive messages. Moreover, as a person's level of ego-involvement varies with the issue, so does the structure of judgment latitudes.¹ Therefore, a highly ego-involved person will have a large latitude of rejection and small latitudes of acceptance and non-commitment.

A person is ego involved when the issue is personally significant and central to them. Thus, a candidate that understands voters' irrationality towards certain issues, such as immigration, foreigners, government spending on the poor, militarism, and so on can, if not countered, successfully exploit voters' fears.

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¹ O'Keefe, Persuasion, Theory and Research.