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Parties, politicians, and policies

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This book focuses on voters’ reasoning, or the process by which individuals reach vote choice. In the literature on voting and elections this is also referred to as the calculus of voting. It is usually assumed that such reasoning does not vary among voters. While classical studies in electoral research discuss variation in voters’ reasoning (Campbell et al. 1960), state of the art empirical electoral research still implicitly assumes that such differences do not exist and that a single model of vote choice applies to the entire electorate in the same way. In contrast, the thesis of this book is that the reasoning underlying voting is not homogenous. Generally speaking, not all voters will base their vote choice on the same reasoning. Rather they can be expected to rely on different considerations when casting a ballot.

Such variation in the calculus of voting may occur across voters. Under seemingly identical conditions, one voter may choose the party with the perceived highest competence in economic affairs and another voter may cast a ballot for the party with the preferred foreign policy. Such variation in voters’ reasoning may, however, also occur across contexts. A voter may consider predominantly environmental issues in one election and in a subsequent election this voter may change his or her mind, disregarding the previous reasoning based on environmental issues, and vote for the most reliable politician instead. The objective of this book is to shed light on these differences. The main focus is therefore not to analyse citizens’ actual votes or election outcomes but the processes by which voters come to such choices.
But why are these processes of significance? What is relevant about research on the calculus of voting that makes it interesting beyond scientific curiosity? Two central arguments can be put forward. First, in several democracies there is a heated discussion between political actors and scholars of political science alike about the consequences of the institutional settings of political systems. This occurs not only new democracies, like the transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but also established democracies, as illustrated by electoral reforms in France, Italy, and New Zealand. Institutional settings are the object of intense debate because they are presumed to affect voters’ behaviour and thereby election outcomes (e.g., Nohlen & Kasapovic 1996; Sartori 1997). Certain conjectures as to the consequences which institutional settings have appear repeatedly. But as far as individual voters are concerned, there is little empirical evidence for the impact of institutional settings on voters’ reasoning. Empirical results of this book demonstrate how contextual settings impact on individuals’ calculus of voting and therefore provide ground for more informed inferences on the consequences of institutional engineering.

The second reason for the practical use of research on the calculus of voting is the continuous reflection in scientific and public debates on changes in voting behaviour. Several scientific hypothesis on electoral behaviour have also been influential in public debate and it seems accepted by many political observers that voting has become increasingly personalised (cf. Lass 1995), party loyalties are diminishing (e.g., Dalton & Wattenberg 2000), or that we are currently witnessing the death of ideology (Bell 1965). All such inferences implicitly refer to the individual calculus of voting, which, for example, is expected to relate less to ideology and more to the personal qualities of politicians. In that respect, an empirical analysis of the calculus of voting can give an idea whether such expectations are (un)founded and what changes may be expected in the future in different democracies.
To fully understand the calculus of voting it is necessary not only to have information on different voters but also to have information on different voters casting ballots under different contextual settings. That is why the empirical analysis of this book is based on an individual level model of voting behaviour across several democracies, a research design that is often referred to as multilevel analysis. Such an empirical approach provides an opportunity to incorporate traits of voters as well as traits of political contexts in an individual level explanation of voters’ reasoning.

The empirical analysis of the calculus of voting in this book is based on voters’ evaluations of three political objects they presumably take into account when casting ballots: the party as an object of affection, the political leader of a party, and the policy of a party. In other words, voters may regard voting in different ways: as a choice between parties, as the selection of personnel for public office, and/or as a preference for policy positions. More detailed information on the vote function will be provided in Chapters 1 and 2. The calculus of voting as decision-making process is estimated by linking such party, politician, and policy orientations to vote choice. The alternative to estimating the calculus of voting is to use respondents’ self report on the reasons for their voting behaviour as indicative of their calculus of voting. The latter measure though appears less reliable as will be elaborated in Chapter 2. That is why the calculus of voting is retrieved and not observed. The extent to which voters from different contexts or voters with different individual characteristics are more sensitive to parties, political leaders, or policies will be tested by means of interactions between such characteristics and political objects.

Data
The most suitable data currently available to approach the research outlined above have been collected in the context of the so-called Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project. This is a collaborative project of election
study teams around the world. Each of these teams included a module of identical questions in respective national election surveys. Data on thirty parliamentary elections held in twenty-seven democracies between 1996 and 2002 is analysed in this book. The range of countries analysed in the book covers democracies from all over the world. Besides established democracies, countries from Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America are also included in the analysis. CSES is in this respect a unique dataset that notably describes individual political behaviour under very different political circumstances. A full report on the data will be provided in Chapter 2.

Contents of the Book
The subsequent chapters are structured as follows. First, research on the calculus of voting is related to existing theories of voters’ reasoning. Also, prior studies on differences in such reasoning are briefly reviewed and discussed. Two general approaches are distinguished in Chapter 1: studies emphasising the role of voters’ individual characteristics for differences in their reasoning of vote choice and studies focusing on political contexts being determinants of such variation. The empirical approach adopted in this book lends itself to analyse both individual and contextual accounts in a single model. Major questions of research design and the strategy of analysis are explicated in Chapter 2. The conceptual and statistical intricacies of a multilevel approach will be discussed in particular. More mundane but also crucial problems related to incomplete data in surveys are discussed in the chapter as well. Associated with Chapter 2 is set of appendices that reports specifics of practical procedures and measurement of variables. Chapter 3 reports how the importance of parties, leaders, and policies varies systematically across political systems. This supports the central thesis of the book, namely, that voting can be regarded as a heterogeneous choice process. Yet, this result does not tell what may account for the differences reported.
In accordance with the distinction between individual and contextual explanations, Chapter 4 elaborates this heterogeneity on the individual level and Chapter 5 does the same at the contextual level. In Chapter 4, demographic background and the political awareness of respondents are analysed as moderating factors between party, politician, and policy evaluations and vote choice. The contextual Chapter 5 contains a wide range of characteristics of political systems as potential moderators: institutional settings, party system, availability of mass media, and the economic context of countries. A final empirical analysis of Chapter 6 integrates all individual and contextual variables into a single model. This makes it possible to address the question whether individual differences or contextual variation are more important to explain heterogeneity in the choice process. In a final Chapter 7 central results are summarised and their theoretical as well as practical implications are discussed.

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Approaching the research of this book would not be possible without the collaborative efforts of the many national election study teams around the world contributing to the CSES project. I would like to express my gratitude to those who enable by their comparative aspiration a growing body on electoral data across political systems, and with any luck, across time as well.

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Martin Kroh
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