Parties, politicians, and policies
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Chapter 1
Theoretical Outline

Political scientists often use the term ‘calculus of voting’ when they refer to the process in which voters integrate evaluations and considerations related to different choice alternatives into their decision on how to vote. The use of the phrase ‘calculus’ does not imply that voters consciously ‘compute’ their decision but rather that their behaviour is consistent with the empirical information about their orientations and evaluations and with the construction of such a calculus as modelled by an analyst. The term is most frequently used in the rational choice paradigm (e.g., Riker & Ordeshook 1968). However, this does not imply that the notion of a calculus of voting is merely restricted to a ‘rational’ calculation of ‘expected outcomes’ of supporting one or the other political party or candidate. The evaluations and considerations that voters bring to bear upon their choice can be of all kinds. They may concern questions of politics but they may also be utterly apolitical. Some citizens may try to consciously take into account the ‘costs’ and ‘benefits’ of voting for a specific option while others may, for example, toss a coin to decide which option to support with their vote.

The aim of this book is to investigate the calculus of voting or, more particularly, systematic differences in this calculus between voters. This chapter provides a synopsis of previous research in this field. In doing so, it addresses two points in particular. First, it discusses a number of elements or objects that may be contained in individuals’ calculus of voting. Second, it looks at factors that impinge on the
importance of these objects in the calculus of voting. The first point focuses on the elements of the calculus of voting and their relation to different theoretical traditions in electoral research. The second point is directed to the question of why the calculus may vary between individuals. The answer to this question may be located in differences at the level of individual voters, or alternatively, in differences at the level of contexts in which voters operate and where elections take place.

1.1 Objects of Voters’ Reasoning

The study of the calculus of voting requires the analyst to decide which objects to consider as its elements. This may also be referred to as the definition of a common vote function.¹ This involves the question of which objects can plausibly be considered to be relevant for voters’ choice in parliamentary elections across a wide range of political systems.² This section also discusses how these objects relate to existing theories of electoral research.

¹ Note that the term ‘vote function’ can have two meanings. First, the expression is often used to describe the total collection of factors determining the vote. Second, the term is also used to describe a specific set of factors determining the vote as defined or measured by an analyst. Hence, in the former case ‘vote function’ is used in theoretical terms and in the latter case it is used in empirical terms. The difference between both derives from the fact that the specific measurement of a total (or complete) vote function is always imperfect. To distinguish both interpretations, the specific vote function measured in this book (see Chapter 2 and Appendix 2) will be referred to as the specific, empirical, or selected vote function.

² This approach is not without problems, however. The definition of a common vote function across a large number of systems tends to limit the number of independent variables predicting vote choice that have been measured in a sufficiently comparable way. Compared to a model that explains voting in a single country, a common vote function across
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Which objects are the main external stimuli of vote choice? Harrop and Miller (1987: 106) distinguish five objects of voters’ thoughts: (a) political substance, (b) institutions, (c) politicians, (d) groups, and (e) voters themselves.\(^3\)

Political substance refers to issues, policies, goals, ideologies, or values. When casting a ballot, voters do so to express preference for some policy, ideology, etc. Some citizens may cast a ballot, for example, to support ideas of liberalism or to support a strict abortion policy. The object of institutions includes basically parties and governments. Voters may cast their vote so as to express their preference for a party or government. Politicians are the third object of voters’ thoughts. Individuals may very well cast a ballot solely to support a particular political leader. The remaining two categories of objects of voters’ thoughts distinguished by Harrop and Miller (1987), groups and voters themselves, are in my view conceptually different from the first three. Harrop and Miller (1987: 109) introduce the object ‘group’ by saying that “voters often link parties to social groups”. The alleged representation of one’s own social group by some party (politicians could equally well represent a group) is perhaps a basis for a positive evaluation of a political object. But the political object of vote choice is in this case party (or politician) rather than social group. Finally, the voter-category is also not a truly external object of voters’ thoughts. When people think about themselves in relation to politics, the individual voter is rather the internal reference category.

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\(^3\) Campbell et al. (1960) speak in this respect of the objects of identification. Lasswell (1936) refers to the basic ‘stuff’ of politics and Lau (1989) names candidates, issues, groups, and parties as generic political constructs.
for the evaluation of external political objects such as parties, politicians, or policies.

Evaluations of political objects are in all likelihood interrelated. For instance, voters will presumably not support a political leader without considering his or her party affiliation or policy positions. Likewise, voters will incorporate current leadership and ideological stands when evaluating political institutions such as parties or governments. It is unlikely, however, that orientations towards any one of these objects are completely determined by the other one. In general they will contain unique variance as well as share variance between them.

It is not necessary to assume that each voter holds orientations towards each of these objects. Voters may regard ideological stands or policy positions as the only object that counts and ignore which party or political leader maintains such ideas. Voters may equally well support some politician, maybe due to his or her charisma, without having any idea about that politician’s party affiliation or ideological stands and it is also conceivable that voters solely follow their party and that they are insensitive to its policies and personnel.

When viewed from this perspective, vote choice is a function of evaluations, assessments, ratings, affects, and images of three political objects: institutions, politicians, and political substance (cf. Miller & Shanks 1996; Wessels 2001). By limiting the common vote function to these objects, the question addressed in this book can be specified as whether or not all voters weigh these three political objects to the same extent in their calculus of voting. Hence, variation in the calculus of voting as understood in this study refers to the degree to which individuals differ in the weight they give to parties/governments, leaders/politicians, and policies/ideologies when making their vote choice. Do voters rely on party competition, on leadership, or on abstract ideologies when casting a ballot? And under which circumstances are parties, politicians, or policies more or less
relevant? Are particular kinds of voters more likely than others to base their choice on a specific political object, or, do particular contextual features of elections impinge on the weight of each of these objects?

... And Their Relation to Electoral Research Traditions

Three strands of theory dominate electoral research: a sociological approach, a social-psychological approach, and a rational choice approach (cf. Harrop & Miller 1987; Roth 1998). These three approaches differ in how they conceptualise vote choice. The sociological approach refers to choice as a function of the socio-demographic background of voters (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). The social-psychological approach sees the vote as expressing identification with parties (Campbell et al. 1960), while the rational choice approach emphasises the perceived benefits from governmental activity (Downs 1957). These three approaches are not mutually exclusive, however. Typically, in many empirical studies, each seems to be relevant to some extent. As a consequence, many analysts habitually explain vote choice by combinations of variables that stem from these different theoretical traditions.

Theories of electoral research make different hypothesis about the motivations of individual voting behaviour. They do not disagree, however, in linking political objects to vote choice. The question whether or not views on political objects (parties, politicians, and policies) are motivated by social background, rational weighing of costs and benefits, or psychological identification is a somewhat different one than the question whether or not such views on political objects impact on vote choice. It seems therefore justifiable to adopt a theoretically non-aligned analysis of objects of voters’ thoughts affecting vote choice.

A theoretically non-aligned conceptualisation of the act of voting as the result of the evaluations of political objects is helpful for the comparative analysis in this book.
These concrete objects are in all likelihood applicable across different political systems. Irrespective of characteristics of party systems, cleavage structures, or democratic traditions in different political systems, parliamentary elections relate in one way or the other to parties/governments, politicians, and policies/ideologies. It would be much more difficult to focus on the sources of orientations towards these objects which are specified in the major approaches to electoral research as discussed above. This becomes apparent when notions that have mostly been developed in a particular context are replicated in other contexts. The (lack of) transferability of the idea of party identification and its measurement from the US to different political systems is presumably the most prominent example of this problem (cf. Thomassen 1976; Gluchowski 1978; van der Eijk & Niemöller 1983).

1.2 Variation in Voters’ Reasoning

Studies of voting behaviour frequently estimate individual decision-making processes of vote choice in a way that assumes that respective measured vote functions apply uniformly to all voters in the electorate. They represent a solution for a population that is assumed to be homogeneous in its calculus of voting (Rivers 1988; Glasgow 1999).

While the assumption of a single decision-making processes that is valid for all voters enables the simplification of a complex analysis, it is rather implausible. Some voters may make their vote decision on the basis of, for example, evaluations of politicians while others may emphasise policies in their vote function. Moreover, it may very well be that a single voter relies on different decision rules in different situations. A voter may, for example, give more weight to parties’ economic policies when ‘the’ economy is weak rather than when the economy is booming. A priori assumptions of populations that are homogenous in their vote
function appear in any case unwarranted. Presumably, no single model of vote choice can claim to explain all vote decisions but at best to be applicable to different degrees to different groups of voters. The central expectation of this study is that voters’ decision processes are more appropriately characterised by heterogeneity than by homogeneity.

A growing body of empirical studies offers evidence for such variation in voting behaviour. Rivers (1988) and Glasgow (1999, 2001) show on the basis of data from the US that citizens do not uniformly apply the same considerations in their vote decision. Van der Eijk et al. (1996) and Knutsen (1995a) demonstrate heterogeneity in voting behaviour across countries. Differences in the calculus of voting at different points in time are documented by, for example, Dalton et al. (1984), Crewe and Denver (1985), and Franklin et al. (1992) for several Western democracies. Studies on variation in voters’ reasoning can be clustered in two categories: (a) studies that emphasis heterogeneity in the process of vote choice by focusing on characteristics of individual voters, and (b) studies that emphasise such differences by focusing on the characteristics of the choice situation, the context of elections.

**Individual Determinants of the Calculus of Voting**

Citizens may differ in their political reasoning, that is, in the various stages of the decision-making process that eventually leads to vote choice. Following Converse (1964) there is increasing awareness that differences in political sophistication have to be taken into account. Formation, coherence, and stability of opinions are more likely if people are politically informed (e.g., Sarat 1975; Sniderman et al. 1986; Zaller 1992; Alvarez & Brehm 1997; Bartle 2000). Sophistication is not only found to moderate the structure of political attitudes but also their relevance for vote choice. Highly educated, politically interested, or sophisticated
citizens take issues and ideologies into account more often when casting a ballot than the rest of the electorate (Pattie & Johnston 2001; van der Brug et al. 2002; Kroh 2003).

Voters’ reasoning depends not only on individuals’ political sophistication but also on electoral experiences and political socialisation (Converse 1969; Inglehart 1977). Far reaching social, economic, and technological changes in Western democracies sparked a lively discussion among social scientists about their consequences for people’s political behaviour (e.g., Huntington 1974; Bell 1976; Barnes & Kaase 1979). One key expectation with regards to the calculus of voting was that voters’ reasoning may become more expressive, volatile, and less dependent on traditional loyalties to social groups and parties (Dalton et al. 1984; Franklin et al. 1992). Traditional patterns of voting behaviour based on such loyalties are supposed to decline. Presumably, the process of generational replacement weakens cohorts whose calculus of voting is traditional and strengthens cohorts whose voting behaviour is less determined by social and political cleavages (Franklin et al. 1992). Other manifestations of the changing nature of the voting process are the emergence of so-called ‘new politics’ such as environmental issues, minority politics, and values of democratic participation (e.g., Inglehart 1977; Müller-Rommel 1989).

Another example of variation in the calculus of voting across voters is related to the term of issue saliency. Classic voting studies by Berelson et al. (1954) and Campbell et al. (1960) already argue that issues in an electoral campaign do not have the same impact on all voters. Studies on issue saliency suggest that issues often have their own ‘public’. Abortion, for example, may be more salient for women than for men and issues related to pensions may be more salient for older voters than younger ones. Hence, one would expect that the effects of policies on vote choice are moderated by
saliency (RePass 1971; Rabinowitz et al. 1982; van der Brug 1997).

Yet another basis for heterogeneity in the calculus of voting is to be found in differences in media that voters are exposed to. Priming studies show that the considerations on which political evaluations or choices rest are moderated, or ‘primed’, by exposure to certain information from mass media (Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Krosnick & Kinder 1990; Krosnick & Brannon 1993). Media in this view affect the cognitive processes that lead to a decision by making certain information available, accessible, and in the end applicable for the evaluation of a political object (cf. Peter 2002). Presidential approval is the most frequently used application of priming studies. These studies demonstrate that media priming of new political issues (e.g., Iran-Contras disclosure, war on Iraq) may change their importance for the evaluation of the president from ineffective to highly relevant. Media exposure not only ‘primes’ the evaluation of political objects such as presidents but also moderates considerations of vote choice, as can be shown for the Netherlands (Kroh 2003). Voters exposed to different media outlets rely on somewhat different vote functions when casting a ballot.

To summarise, several scholars see the cause for differences in voting behaviour in the differences between individual voters. Political sophistication, political socialisation, and media consumption are likely to strengthen some considerations in the decision-making process of vote choice and to weaken others. Yet, it may also be argued that voting is not a solely autonomous and self-directed decision of individual voters. It is also heavily dependent on political circumstances. As a consequence, variations in the calculus of voting may also be caused by contextual differences.

Contextual Determinants of the Calculus of Voting
A number of authors stress that differences in the calculus of voting may depend on contextual differences. Duverger
(1954), for example, refers in this respect to the psychological effects of electoral systems. An underlying assumption of related studies is that due to differences in contextual units, individual voting behaviour cannot be considered to be homogenous across contexts. Variation in the calculus of voting across political systems is frequently explained by institutional differences and by variation in political supply (Cox 1997; Klingemann & Wessels 2000). Contextual accounts for individual voters’ reasoning are less common than individual level explanations. This has partly to do with lack of appropriate data sources. The growing number of international collaborative projects in electoral research in recent years, however, indicates increasing scientific interest in patterns of voting behaviour across political systems. The Comparative Study of Electoral Studies (CSES), the data of which are used in this book, the European Election Studies (EES), the Eurobarometer, the European Social Surveys (ESS), and the World Value Surveys (WVS) can all be named in this respect.

A weakness of many empirical studies on electoral behaviour across political systems is that the possibilities of such an approach are often not fully utilized. Sometimes, individual level analysis is limited to a small number of countries (e.g., Granberg & Holmberg 1988; Whitten & Palmer 1996). The comparison of a small number of political systems cannot go beyond a descriptive analysis since it obstructs a conceptual interpretation of contextual effects. Alternatively, some studies integrate a larger number of contexts but aggregate individual behaviour (e.g., Klingemann & Wessels 2000; Curtis & Blais 2001). The strategy of aggregating individual information comprises the

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4 According to Przeworski and Teune’s (1970) discussion of the comparative approach, a contextual analysis of few contextual units should not be regarded as real comparative analysis. When analysing just two or three countries, it is impossible to replace proper country names with explicated theoretical concepts.
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problem of ecological fallacy as far as inferences for the individual level are concerned. This is unfortunate since we are after all interested in individual behaviour. A number of studies on electoral turnout demonstrate that one can fruitfully investigate variation in individual level political behaviour across a large number of contexts. Anduiza-Pere a (1997) or Karp and Banducci (2000), for example, employ the possibilities of an hierarchical analysis in which individual level models are integrated across a high number of contextual units. That this is not yet frequently done for models of vote choice has in my opinion to do with methodological complications related to the study of vote choice in multiparty elections.5

A second limitation of many studies on voters’ reasoning, irrespective of whether they are based on individual or contextual explanations, is the restriction to small numbers of explanatory variables. Previous work in this field often remained disconnected and focused solely on single clusters of explanations, discarding other accounts. Pattie and Johnston (2001), for instance, demonstrate heterogeneity in voters’ decision-making across levels of formal education. However, they do not control for any other individual variables. Likewise, many studies analyse heterogeneity only for single elements of voters’ reasoning and not for more comprehensive vote functions. Curtis and Blais (2001), for example, analyse the relevance of leadership effects across electorates but do not take other possible components of voters’ reasoning into account, such as policies, party evaluations, etc. They are therefore vulnerable, as relevant variables may have been omitted, giving rise to bias in the coefficients that are investigated.

5 The first problem is to analyse vote choice in multiparty contests in one individual-level model. The second problem is to do so equivalently across several contexts, which vary in the number of parties analysed. The third problem lies in estimating voting behaviour by means of a multilevel approach. For a detailed discussion of this point see Chapter 2.
One goal of this study is to overcome these methodological limitations of previous analyses in the calculus of voting. Differences in voting behaviour are analysed simultaneously across multiple levels (individuals and contexts) in an individual level model of vote choice. The application of a multilevel model of voters’ reasoning makes it possible to address questions that could not be analysed before.

This book provides primarily descriptive knowledge on differences in the calculus of voting. The lack of systematic analysis on the calculus of voting across individuals and contexts so far disposes this emphasis. In this respect the study is explorative and not designed to rigorously test any single hypothesis stated in the literature. Certainly, theoretical assertions are used to derive empirically testable expectations. This, however, is not done to test the quality of such theories but to channel the descriptive analysis.