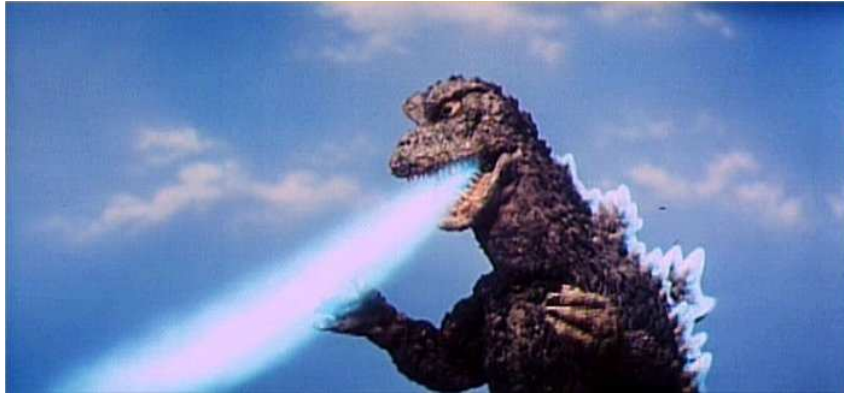


MU MVZ 449
Banishing the Paradox of Voting &
Elections: A Cost-Benefit Analysis



The Paradox of Voting in America

Americans believe voting is important.

They see it as:

- a **civic duty**;
- key to maintaining popular control of government;
- the very essence of democracy.

Paradox, cont'd

At the same time, Americans tend **not to vote**.

- Between 70 and 75 percent of the voting-age population is registered to vote;
- About 50 percent vote in Presidential elections;
- About 33 percent vote in midterm elections;
- Even fewer vote in off-year, special, and primary elections.

Comparative T.O. Levels

Voter turnout levels in other democracies such as South Africa, Denmark, Israel, Germany, Mexico, Britain, Russia, France and Canada range from 15 to 35 percent higher than turnout in American *presidential* elections.

In Australia, over 90 percent of the voting-age population participates in national elections.

What about American culture, society, and politics explain Americans' comparative unwillingness to vote?

Voting: A Cost-Benefit Analysis

Principle of Politics
#1:

All political activity is goal-oriented and purposive.

Some political scientists argue that it is not “rational” for Americans to vote because:

- The “costs” of voting in America are comparatively high.
- The “benefits” of voting in America are comparatively low.

Voting “Costs”

There is a certain bureaucracy to American elections that increase the **costs of voting**.

- Voter registration rules often require voters to register often well in advance of elections.
- Many states have laws that “purge” nonvoters from the registration rolls.

Costs, cont'd

The **costs of voting** in America are also high because of the frequency of American elections.

- Two-year election cycles are nearly half the election cycles of similar democracies.
- Americans' rare use of primary elections doubles the frequency with which Americans are asked to vote.

Costs, cont'd

Finally, in other countries, political parties play important roles in mobilizing voters and thus decrease the costs of voter turnout.

Whereas in the 19th century American parties performed this role, the decline of American party organizations in the 20th century made American parties ill-equipped to perform this mobilization role.

Implications of Costs

If the costs of voting are high in America, many would-be voters perceive the **benefits** of voting to be low.

- Americans often believe that one vote cannot make a difference.
- Many Americans believe that there it does not matter which party controls the government.

Implications & Reform

There are structural features of the American electoral system that undermine the impact of individual votes.

- America's single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system tends to dilute the impact of individual votes in specific geographic areas, particularly when compared to proportional representation (PR) electoral systems.
- The electoral college system of selecting the President also decreases the potential impact of individual votes on electoral outcomes.

Voting CBA

With the **costs of voting** being comparatively high in the United States, it is little wonder that America's voting age population votes less than citizens of other countries that through strong parties and eased voting bureaucracies subsidize voting behavior.

And, with the **benefits of voting** being comparatively low in the United States, it is also not a surprise that countries that have more parties and thus greater choice for voters see higher turnout.

The Benefits of Elections to Elites

Democracies derive *legitimacy* from popular consent and having been elected by the public and political elites work to translate the public support conferred upon them in elections into a tool of governance.

Defining the Ground When You Win

- Individual politicians claim “mandates” for governmental actions based on electoral outcomes.
- When they win, politicians claim that their victories amounted to a referendum for a certain set of policies.
- The larger the margin of victory, the more plausible the case is that voters conferred a “mandate.”

Winning & Agenda-Setting

Claims to “mandates” are often dubious:

- People tend to vote for or against politicians for a variety of reasons including policy, party, and personality;
- There is good evidence that voters vote *retrospectively*, that is, they vote to reward or punish the incumbent party rather than confer a mandate on an opposition candidate.

The Incentives to Vote

If elected officials are the “agents” of voters in a principal-agent relationship, it is clear why there are incentives for each of us to vote.

- Elected officials act in your name. As such, you should play as much a role in their selection as you can.
- Any good principal-agent relationship requires the principal to monitor and guide the agent. Voting helps to enhance the “faithfulness” and accountability of your elected agents.

Elections & Consequences

- Elections are the most direct, equal, and authoritative means of gaining popular control over politicians.
- Failing to turnout in elections surrenders the control of politicians (i.e., your agent) to those who do, in fact, turnout.