

Why are Elections Important
to Democracy?:
Part I
A Rational Choice Framework
for Evaluating Elections &
Electoral Behavior

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Let's Begin Here

Why are elections important to democracy?

What functions do elections perform?

What is necessary for elections to serve those
functions?

How important are elections to the body politic?

How much do we know about elections and
electoral behavior?

How do the *type* and *manner* and *timing* of
elections matter?

What functions do elections serve in a democracy?

1. Supply legitimacy
2. Solve principal-agent problems
3. Ensure governmental responsiveness

1. Ensuring legitimacy of the government

- Legitimacy: acceptance of the right of public officials to hold office and to promulgate policies because of the means by which they were chosen.

What is necessary to ensure legitimacy?

- Acceptance of rules
- Free speech and association
- Equal access to voting
- Accurately count votes
- Fairly weight votes
- Enforceable election laws
- Government must be somewhat effective

2. Solving Principal-Agent Problems

- (Holding representatives in check)
- Principal = voters
- Agent = representative

What conditions allow elections to alleviate principle-agent problems?

- Frequent elections
- Competitive elections
- Political information generally available

3. Ensure governmental responsiveness

- Elections should cause democratic government to translate citizen preferences into policy.

What conditions promote governmental responsiveness?

- Voters have access to information about:
 - policy problems
 - Candidates
 - the performance of incumbents

Part II

Opinions, Choices and Voting: Some Rules for Rationality in Politics & Elections

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Games that Teach

- Monty Hall & TV Game or Quiz Shows
- Budapest vs. Bucharest
- Lottery or sure thing
- Predictions
- Take the last apple
- Biting the apple

- What do we “learn” from these games?

What Does it Mean to be “Rational?”

- Transitive
- Complete & independent – there is an ideal point!
- Ideal point maximizes pleasure – utility.
- Choose object close to ideal point or course of action that will lead to most pleasure.

What is Rational Choice Theory?

- Actors pursue goals
- These goals reflect the actor's self-interest
- Behavior results from conscious choice
- The individual is the basic actor in society
- If there is a choice to be made, actors choose the alternative with the highest expected utility
- Actors possess extensive information on alternatives and the likely consequences of their choices.

Attitudes

- A general evaluation of an object or orientation toward an object.
- We are attracted to objects that correlate with an increase in pleasure or decrease in pain.
- For most objects, our attitudes are multidimensional, which is [somewhat] dependent on the number of attributes of an object.
- Based on a probability distribution over possible characteristics of an attribute (belief).
- From these evaluations, people form rankings over objects (preferences)

Preferences

- Preferences, tastes and values are often used interchangeably.
- Preference = a comparative evaluation of a set of objects (i.e. a ranking).
 - Stored in memory and drawn on when people make decisions.
 - Often based on experienced correlations or associations.
 - May not be necessary or sufficient connections.
 - Ex: taste/smell; babies and warmth

Objects of Preference

- Observable or unobservable
- Substitutable
- Depends on similarities in our cognitive and perceptive architecture
- Depends on personal experience
 - Ex. I do not know if I prefer eating lobster to eating crabs. I do know I prefer Morningstar Farms veggie burgers to Boca veggie burgers.
 - Early preferences directed by problem-solving activity based on feedback
 - Later, we begin to form preferences based on indirect experiences (eg. through stories and brand marketing)

Preference Change

- What happens when you “change your mind?”
- Gain new information?
 - New process of experiencing the stimuli
 - Experience a broader range of senses from your interaction with object.
 - “Developed taste”
- Experience new stimuli/objects?
- “New” preferences often emerge from other preferences and beliefs.