

L2929 Week 02: The Rational Choice Approach

Essential Readings Questions to Consider

Classes: Thursdays, 11:00 – 13:00, LT313

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 16:00 – 17:00, MC431

Essential Reading Key Questions:

1. Aldrich, and Riker and Ordeshook, outline the basic components of the rational calculus of voting. What are those components, and what does each component encompass?
 - a) Can the expected utility of a particular electoral outcome be compared to the costs of voting on the same scale? If so, how?
 - b) Riker and Ordeshook introduce two additional terms into the rational calculus of voting. What are they, and how important are they?
 - c) Aldrich also outlines the minimax regret model. How does it alter the basic model?
 - d) What do you think are the origins of the values that people apply to each term in the model? What does this imply, if anything, about their rationality?
2. Aldrich argues that 'turnout is not a particularly good example of the problem of collective action. The main reason is that turnout is, for many people most of the time, a low-cost, low-benefit action.' Do you agree, and why?
 - a) How can the model be extended to other forms of political behaviour and what amendments would it require?
 - b) What things do you think are included in the *B*, *P*, *C*, and *D* terms for other forms of political behaviour?
3. Aldrich argues that the actions of, and signals sent by, strategic political candidates are an important influence on voters' choices about whether to vote and whether to vote tactically. What implications, if any, does this have for the rationality of voters?
 - a) If the behaviour of candidates provides important cues for the public, how plausible must those cues be?
 - b) If elite cues matter, what do you think the role of trust is in political behaviour? How can this be reconciled with a rational account of political behaviour?
 - c) Do you think that political candidates are more rational than voters? Why?
4. Stokes outlines Downs' theory of how party position relates to voting. What are the key components of that theory, and what does it suggest?
 - a) What is Stokes' view of the comparability of the economic and political spaces between which the spatial model of competition has been transposed?
 - b) Can we consider the salience of particular issues to be a dimension on which different parties and voters have positions?
 - c) What are valence issues and how do they relate to the spatial model of party competition? How clear is the boundary between valence and positional issues?

Essential Readings Further Questions:

5. Aldrich suspects that, when accounting for the decision about whether to vote or not, 'most of the action is, in fact, in the intrinsic value of voting per se (i.e., in *C* and *D* terms)'. Where do you think people's assessments of the intrinsic costs and benefits of voting come from?
 - a) Does *D* vary from person to person, and election to election? How might the person election interact to shape *D*?
 - b) More widely, where do people's assessments of which party or candidate is better, and the probabilities involved in voting, come from?
 - c) Do your answers to the above have implications for how rational we believe members of the public are?
 - d) To what extent does demonstrating that *P* and *B* matter in turnout decisions, as Riker and Ordeshook do, demonstrate that those decisions are rational?
 - e) How well do you think people estimate the probability of their vote being important? How well do you think they need to estimate that probability?
6. Stokes argues that 'it is in the nature of models not to represent the real world exactly.' To what extent should we sacrifice parsimony for realism?
 - a) Stokes also argues that 'If [rational choice] is to be empirically successful the theory itself must be extended to take account of the varying cognitive elements found in the competition of parties in the real world.' What does this imply, if anything, about the relevance of psychological accounts of political behaviour?
7. Is it better to think of rational choice as a mode of analysis than as theory of political behaviour?

Essential Readings for Next Week:

- John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson (1973), "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 100-108. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0034449>.
- Noam Gidron and Peter A. Hall (2017), 'The politics of social status: economic and cultural roots of the populist right', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 68, No. 1, pp. S57-S84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12319>.
- Alan Hamlin and Colin Jennings (2011), 'Expressive Political Behaviour: Foundations, Scope and Implications', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 645-670. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123411000020>.
- Jennifer Oser and Marc Hooghe (2018) 'Democratic ideals and levels of political participation: The role of political and social conceptualisations of democracy', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 711-730. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148118768140>.

Note: the essential readings are all available via the L2929 page on Myplace.