

Information, Participation, and Choice

*An Economic Theory of Democracy
in Perspective*

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Ann Arbor

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CHAPTER 17

On the Gentle Art of Rational Choice Bashing

Bernard Grofman

Rational choice models of both the hard and the soft variety fill the political science journals. In part as a reaction to the increasing importance of both formal models and rational choice ideas, there has been a recent wave of "rational choice bashing."¹ While much of this is an appropriate reaction to the exaggerated claims, confusion of technical elegance with theoretical significance, and limited empirical performance of the literature inspired by rational choice ideas, still I see the usual critiques of rational choice models as often resting on one or more of the following errors.

The most common and perhaps most important error made about rational choice modeling is the belief that there is such a thing as, for example, *the* rational choice model of party competition, *the* rational choice model of voter participation, or *the* rational choice model of voter choice. There are only models—some simple, some complex; some that work (at least sometimes), and some that don't. Most rejections of rational choice models are premature in that they attack a particular model as inaccurate and claim that its predictive failure disqualifies the approach as a whole.² Even the notion that there is such a thing as the Downsian model of voter choice or the Downsian model of

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1. In the space of two years there have been three major edited collections dealing with the limitations of rational choice models: Mansbridge 1990; Cook and Levi 1990; and Monroe 1991. Moreover, within the public policy field there have also been major recent attacks on the public choice perspective, for example, Rhoads 1985; and Reich 1988. Political theorists have been bemoaning rational choice's effects on the narrowing of public discourse and the legitimating of self-interest as the mainspring of political choice (Petraffa 1991). Interchanges between critics and defenders of rational choice also are frequent in journals such as *Rationality and Society*.

2. For example, it is premature to reject a rational choice approach to coalition formation because the minimal winning coalition implication of William H. Riker's (1962) model of coalition formations as a zero sum game is falsified by data on European cabinet formation—especially since newer models have had a considerably better (although still far from perfect) fit (see Laver and Schofield 1991).

party competition is wrong. For example, as I show in a review essay (Grofman 1987), Anthony Downs can be credited with a number of different models of voter choice (e.g., pocketbook voting, retrospective voting, prospective voting, incumbency-oriented voting, party-based voting) in addition to the platform comparison–based policy distance–minimizing model that is the (simplistic) notion most commonly associated with Downs.³

A second common error is the belief that, because rational choice models cannot account for why people salute the flag when no one is looking or cry when they hear “God Bless America,” rational choice modeling is inherently flawed in its ability to explain human behavior. Only an idiot (or an economist) would claim that rational choice models can explain all of human behavior.⁴ And even most economists are not so foolish (Gary S. Becker’s oft-quoted silly assertion to the contrary notwithstanding).⁵ But identifying areas where human behavior is neither calculated nor even a conscious choice does not demonstrate that rational choice modeling is fundamentally misguided. Also, you can’t beat something with nothing, and so it is not enough to show that some given rational choice model does not fit the data, it is necessary to show that some other perspective leads to a model with better fit and predictive power. Moreover, the faults of the rational choice approach are often exaggerated by failure to give credit to the accuracy of its more commonsensical predictions.⁶

As a “reasonable” choice modeler, I do not have any trouble accepting that sometimes it may be more useful to model behavior as operantly conditioned or otherwise socialized rather than as “choice” behavior, or even that, as sociobiologists claim, some types of behavior may be largely “hard wired.” But where a particular rational choice model works and where it must give way to some other approach (rational choice or otherwise) that demonstrates superior explanatory power is a matter for empirical investigation, not a matter that can be resolved by introspective reflections on human nature or impressionistic counterexamples. Indeed, I find most of the ongoing debate

about the limitations of rational choice modeling a waste of time because it does not involve an attempt to test competing models of human behavior.⁷ Let a thousand models bloom, and let the data decide among them! For example, the fact that parties in the United States do not converge does not invalidate rational choice theory; what it does is require us to provide better and more institutionally rich models.⁸

Third, the fact that most rational choice models posit self-interested behavior does not mean either that self-interest must be narrowly defined or that reasonable rational choice modelers would see self-interest as all there is.⁹

Fourth, while it is true that rational choice modelers generally take basic preferences as given, it is a mistake to think that there is anything in the rational choice approach that requires preferences to be fixed and exogenously determined,¹⁰ although the simplicity of this assumption has much to recommend it—especially for models designed to predict short-run changes in behavior. Indeed Downs himself (1957b, 83–88) outlines the beginnings of a rational choice model of persuasion, and some further development of ideas related to rational persuasion is found in chapters 9 and 15 of this volume.

Fifth, while it is certainly true that almost all of the most famous exponents of rational choice modeling are ideologically conservative, there is nothing inherent in the nature of rational choice modeling that makes it a tool of either the left or the right. On the one hand, rational choice modelers seek to understand (changes in) choices as a function of the nature of institutional rules and incentive structures and of constraints on resources, and on the other hand, they seek to explain how preferences for outcomes condition preferences for candidates and preferences for institutions.¹¹

Finally, let me note that I take the almost certainly heretical view that, despite the importance of concepts like party convergence, public goods dilemmas, and rational ignorance, the principal contributions of rational

7. Here my Popperian predispositions are showing.

8. In like manner, the fact that incumbents are almost invariably reelected and that policies do not cycle, while incompatible with expectations fueled by early social choice models, is completely reconcilable with more complex models based on rational choice premises. See, for example, references cited in chapter 12; and Feld and Grofman 1991.

9. It is often in one’s interest to take into account the interests and/or needs of others, or to temper instant gratification with a concern for long-run consequences. See my earlier comment about Becker’s view. Even Gordon Tullock does not believe that behavior is never altruistic. He merely believes that altruistic behavior is rare. But how rare is an empirical question!

10. For example, Carole Jean Uhlaner (1989a; and chap. 4) outlines a theory of group-based choice where political leaders play a role in shaping the preferences of members of their groups.

11. Here I paraphrase John Ferejohn’s well-known characterization of rational choice theory.

3. See also chapter 12.

4. The original meaning of *idiot* was “noncitizen.” And, in Greek philosophy, citizenship was bound up with an idea of republican virtue that recognized a public interest that transcended claims based on private interests (Stockton 1990).

5. According to Becker: “human behavior is not compartmentalized, sometimes based on maximizing, sometimes not, sometimes motivated by stable preferences, sometimes by volatile ones, sometimes resulting in an optimal accumulation of information, sometimes not. Rather, *all* human behavior can be viewed as involving participants who *maximize* their utility from a *stable* set of preferences and accumulate an *optimal* amount of information and other inputs in a variety of markets” (Becker 1976, 14, emphasis mine).

6. See chapter 6.

choice theory to date have been in the questions it asks rather than the answers it has given. For example by showing that citizens motivated only by instrumental rationality would, in general, not vote, Downs created an important puzzle to be solved, where before there was merely a habit to be taken for granted. But rational choice approaches to the understanding of political phenomena are still in their infancy, and the future is, I believe, a very bright one!¹²

12. Moreover, the payoff from rational choice ideas has already been considerable, even in areas where rational choice bashers have been most skeptical of their utility. For example, to name but one instance, rational choice models of turnout do give rise to nontrivial predictions that are confirmed by the evidence once we recognize that short-run instrumental rationality is only one factor affecting the decision to vote, and once we focus our attention on factors that affect *changes* in turnout (chap. 6).