

CREDO OF A ‘REASONABLE CHOICE’ MODELER

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ABSTRACT

This note seeks to steer a path between the scylla of dogmatic faith that rational choice models can explain all aspects of human behavior, borrowed from economists such as Gary Becker, and the charybdis of some recent political science work that argues the view that rational choice ‘has no clothes’ and is useless in explaining human behavior. I take what I, along with my colleague Bernard Grofman, identify as the ‘reasonable choice’ view.

KEY WORDS • economic imperialism • public choice • rational choice

1. Most human behavior is rational; some isn’t.
2. There is no such thing as *the* rational choice model of any given phenomena, only *a* rational choice model; different models are based on different assumptions. Empirical science is about testing competing models. Just as God is in the details, so is the power of rational choice in the secondary assumptions.
3. Saying that behavior is rational is not the same thing as saying that it is perfect; what is rational to being q at time t is a function of circumstances and information. What may be rational for being q at time t , may not be rational for being q at time $(t + 1)$, given that being’s new circumstances and information.
4. What may be rational for being q at time t , given that being’s circumstances and information, may not be apparent to an observer who isn’t walking in that being’s shoes.
5. Few people do things for only one reason.
6. Explanations are like dresses: no matter what the makers say, one size does not fit all.

A Wuffle is Assistant to Professor in the School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine. He is the only person at UCI to hold that rank. An earlier draft of this paper was not prepared for delivery, but was left out on chairs, at the Conference on Rational Choice Models in Comparative Politics organized by Bernard Grofman and George Tsebelis at the University of California, Irvine, May 20, 1992, under the joint sponsorship of the UCI Center for the Study of Democracy and the UCI Interdisciplinary Graduate Concentration in Public Choice. None of the above bear any noticeable responsibility for this essay.

7. Rational choice models tend to predict best 'at the margin.'¹
8. Arguing in the abstract about which phenomena can or cannot be explained by rational choice models is not useful; indeed, arguing *in the absence of considered evidence* about which phenomena can or cannot be explained by (rational choice) models is downright stupid. Empirical science is about *testing* competing models.
9. Demonstrating that some particular phenomenon cannot be well accounted for by some particular rational choice model demonstrates only that some particular rational choice model cannot explain that particular phenomenon; such a demonstration cannot invalidate the search for rational choice explanations of behavior. Hence, for example, turn-out cannot be 'the paradox that ate rational choice theory'.²
10. Demonstrating that some particular phenomenon cannot be well accounted for by some particular rational choice model may be of value to the advancement of science (à la Popper's falsification thesis), but, *contra* Popper, science advances most by what comes to be known, not by what is shown to be false. Hence, debunking some particular rational choice model is of limited value unless one has something better to put in its place. Empirical *science* is about testing competing models.
11. Scientific explanation is of the 'if, then' form. Hence no scientific explanation is ever 'complete'. Science is about developing networks of interlinked explanations. Hence, to say, for example, that some particular rational choice model is fatally flawed because it takes underlying preferences as given, is to misunderstand what science is all about.³
12. Often rational choice modelers use mathematics to derive non-trivial implications of sets of assumptions, i.e., to derive theorems. Mathematical theorems that people claim to have proven to be true are very likely to be true. Nonetheless, the *applicability* of *any given model*, no matter how elegant its derivation, is always a matter of empirical

1. For example, economists are better at saying what happens to the consumption of cheeseburgers when the price of hotdogs falls, than telling us why yuppies prefer brie to Velveeta. By and large, for economists, there's no accounting for taste. Indeed an economist like Thorstein Veblen, who addressed the latter question, was dismissed by his fellow economists as not being a 'real economist', but merely 'sociologist in disguise'.

2. The phrase is due to Morris Fiorina (Fiorina, 1990); an empirically oriented rebuttal is found in Grofman (1993a, 1996). Hanks and Grofman (1998) argue that, once we recognize point 10 above, rational choice models do a better job of accounting for *variations* in turn-out over time and across elections than any other models we've got.

3. See note 1, above.

- reality testing. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. *Empirical science is about testing competing models.*⁴
13. Rational choice models in their present state of development are as good, in principle, at taking learning into account as any other species of models now extant – which is to say, not very good.⁵
 14. Much of what is called rational choice theory (especially in the domain of social choice theory) is normative political philosophy written in mathematical notation, not empirical social science. Of course, it includes some of the best political philosophy now being written.⁶
 15. Computer scientists have a saying about programming: ‘Garbage in, garbage out’. Social scientists should have a saying about public choice modeling: ‘Ideological presuppositions in, ideological presuppositions out’. However, even though I was the only person wearing a Mc-Govern button at the 1972 Annual Meeting of the Public Choice Society, there is nothing inherently liberal or inherently conservative about rational choice modeling, even in its public choice form. The search for truth is apt to be upsetting to most dogmas.⁷
 16. The greatest tribute to the success of rational choice modeling in political science is the number of people who now feel compelled to attack it,⁸ but the real glory days are still to come.⁹
 17. Extremism in the defense of rational choice models of human behavior is simply not very reasonable.¹⁰

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4. Social science model-building divorced from concern for (or knowledge about) empirical phenomena can easily degenerate into narcissism: but without the work of the model-builders to draw on, rational choice theorists would have little to say that wasn't already the common wisdom of journalists. There is ‘hard’ rational choice and there is ‘soft’ rational choice, and both are useful. The one thing rational choice modeling cannot be and still deserve the label of rational choice is ‘squishy’.

5. Cf. Grofman (1993b).

6. On the other hand, many social choice impossibility results or ‘cycling’ results are of limited empirical relevance because they rest on possibilities for things going wrong that can't be ruled out but that are simply not that probable.

7. Cf. ‘Truth is more open-minded than fiction.’

8. See e.g., Mansbridge (1990), Cook and Levi (1990); Monroe (1991), Coleman and Fararo (1992), Green and Shapiro (1994), ‘Symposium on Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory’ (1995).

9. My belief is that, with respect to rational choice modeling in political science, comparative politics is the next great frontier.

10. But, then again, neither is extremism in their deprecation.

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I am a mathematical muddler specializing in metrical gibber, muddles of cognitive blintz, applications of macaroni chain theory, the life and works of Mo Fiorina and Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the epistemioincological¹¹ development and literary exposition of the Wuffeauldian paradigm of post-rational research.¹²

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11. For the curious, 'epistemioincological' is a word I have coined to refer to the Wuffeauldian perspective that **Truth is like a truffle**: 'First you have to figure out where to dig; then you have to dig around a lot, and then you have to get rid of all the clinging dirt that obscures what you really want.'

12. For those familiar with earlier versions of this cv, I should note that since 9 April 1985, having met a girl named Sue, I no longer pursue the experimental research on the topology of pretzels, and misbehavior in small (dyadic) groups, that had preoccupied me for so many years.