

## Information and electoral choice

It cannot be said that everyone thinks that understanding how citizens think is of value. On the contrary, there is a school of analysts who hold either that citizens do not in any substantial sense think about political choices or that, whether they do think about them or not, the only thing worth knowing about citizens is what they do or fail to do. So viewed, the study of public opinion reduces to the analysis of voting.

Most of the chapters in this book focus on what citizens believe and feel. So it seemed to us worthwhile seeing if our overall scheme had any merit applied to voting. The chapter that follows is an initial attempt to do just this. There is much about our application that seems to us incomplete and unsatisfactory. But its limitations notwithstanding, we think it calls attention to the principal question that a theory of voting should address – namely, what are the *different* ways in which voters make up their mind.

Voting studies have highlighted citizens' low levels of political information – indeed, so much so as to obscure the variance among them. Some members of the public are knowledgeable about politics, follow it closely, understand who stands for what politically; others are ignorant of politics, pay little attention to it, have only a weak grip (or none at all) on who stands for what. So what we should like to explore here is the obvious yet somehow overlooked suggestion that people who are quite well informed about politics and those who pay scarcely any attention to it may not make up their minds about who to vote for in the same way.

This seems to us a worthwhile undertaking for a number of reasons, two of which deserve particular mention. The first concerns the proper shape of a theory of voting. The established practice in electoral research is to aim at *one* single model of voting: to develop a uniform explanation for the electorate as a whole. This is not an obviously winning strategy for different people make up their minds in different ways. And what is needed is a kind of explanation that takes account of this heterogeneity. Or, to put the point more exactly, it is necessary to consider whether there are pivotal factors that not only condition the voting decision in their own right, but also condition the conditioning influence of other causal factors. It is not likely there are many such pivotal factors; but information is quite likely to be one of them.

There is a second reason to focus on information, normative rather than causal. It is a commonplace that information assists rational choice and, by implication,

that the well-informed voter may be capable of it but the poorly informed one is not. This is by no means a foolish idea. Still, what we should like to explore is not merely the relatively straightforward suggestion that voters who are well informed make up their minds in different ways than those who are poorly informed; but also the more challenging idea that precisely by making up their minds in a different way, voters who are *not* well informed about politics – as well as those who are – may make electoral choices that are approximately rational.

### THE STRUCTURE OF ELECTORAL CHOICE

Electoral choices can be organized in two different ways: either as a referendum on the incumbent or as a choice between competing candidates.

Consider. A presidential campaign pivots around two candidates, often an incumbent and a challenger. How can voters approach this choice? The first is for voters to focus on the incumbent, and make a judgment about his past performance. If voters judge the incumbent's record to be satisfactory, they should support him. If the record looks poor to them, voters should consider the alternative. Voters may focus on many aspects of his record or few; interpret the notion of a record broadly or narrowly. It comes down, all the same, to voting the incumbent up or down – that is the choice being offered.

Alternatively, an electoral choice may take the form of an evaluation of the competing candidates. This evaluation may focus on many aspects of the candidates' claims or few; focus on what they have done or are likely to do. However that may be, on this second approach the nub of an electoral choice is comparison of alternatives.

The first kind of choice, then, focuses on the incumbent; the second on both candidates, challenger as well as incumbent. The first involves evaluating the candidates serially, beginning with the incumbent; the second evaluating them simultaneously. And because these choices differ in the form they take, they differ as well in the information they require and in the way they are made.

Imagine two hypothetical voters. One is exceedingly well informed about politics, a daily and devout reader of the *New York Times*, who follows closely the major issues of the day, both national and international. The second, a *Daily News* fan, is hardly overburdened by the amount of time, or effort, she devotes to public affairs – in fact, looks only at the sports page and cares next to nothing about politics. Is it plausible to suppose that these two voters, asked to make a choice about who should be president of the United States, would make up their minds in the same way?

Implausible, it seems to us. It is not reasonable to suppose that the voter who is exceedingly well informed about politics and the one who is largely ignorant of it would enumerate potentially relevant considerations with the same exhaustiveness; or frame alternative considerations with the same precision; or foresee consequences of alternative choices with the same distinctness; or coordinate calculations, both about alternative means and alternative ends, with the same exact-

ness. It is, in short, not plausible to suppose that the well-informed voter and the poorly informed one go about the business of making up their minds in the same way.

Consider how the nature of the choice may vary with a voter's informational level. Presidential elections typically pit an incumbent against a challenger. The incumbent has a prominence the challenger finds hard to match. He has been in the most visible public office for four years. The media have focused on the incumbent for his term; and focus more on him during the campaign in his double role as both president and candidate, highlighting information about his policies and performance. By contrast, the public knows less about the challenger – indeed, may have known next to nothing about him before the nomination. So the challenger lags behind in public awareness.

But not uniformly. Some voters are politically knowledgeable. They have some overall sense of the political landscape; they know, broadly, who stands for what and who opposes whom. So they are less likely to see the challenger as having come from nowhere; more likely to perceive him distinctly. They may know more about the incumbent – he has had, after all, the benefit not only of his term in office but also his run for it. All the same, the well-informed voter is able, and inclined, to compare directly incumbent and challenger to form a vote choice that best advances his interests.

The poorly informed voter is not so fortunately placed. The president is perhaps a familiar enough figure, at any rate in broad outline. Not so the challenger. Before his nomination he was in all probability not well known, and possibly even unknown, at least to voters who habitually pay little attention to politics. Poorly informed voters, moreover, face an uphill battle in overcoming their lack of information about the challenger, partly for the very reasons that lead to their lack of information in the first place. And the consequence is that the incumbent tends to have a prominence that the challenger finds hard to match, especially among voters who are not politically informed or attentive.

Which suggests that the way in which voters make up their minds may vary with informational and attentional levels. Well-informed voters can hinge voting decisions on a comparison of incumbent and challenger – a comparison they can make in terms, not only of personal attributes, but of policy commitments. Precisely because they are well informed, they know something of the policy commitments of the two major parties, at any rate in broad outline. In consequence, they are capable of picking up the policy preferences of the candidates and placing them in the context of the long-term differences in ideological orientation that have distinguished the two major parties over the past fifty years or so. Poorly informed voters, however, are unlikely to make up their minds in quite this way. Certainly, it is unreasonable to suppose that they follow politics sufficiently closely to track carefully the issue commitments of the parties or candidates. But they are in a position to form an opinion about whether the president is doing a satisfactory job. They know how they are faring – maybe not a magnanimous basis for political judgment, but by no means an irrelevant one.

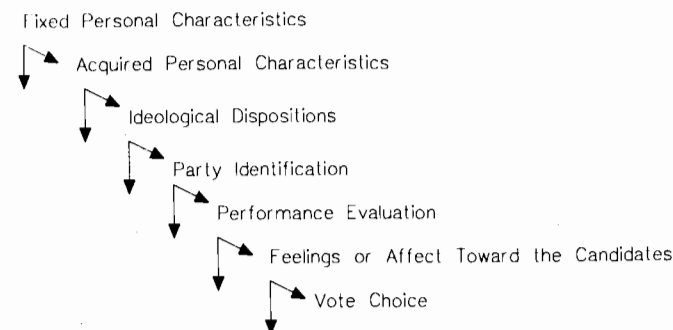


Figure 9.1. The Shanks–Miller model.

And poorly informed or not, they can form a judgment of how the president is doing in broad terms and of whether things are going well in the larger society, at any rate economically, and vote accordingly.

#### A POINT OF DEPARTURE: THE SHANKS–MILLER MODEL

Voting is a field of study repeatedly, and profitably, ploughed. So it is only common sense to recognize and take advantage of the labor of others. The recent model of voting developed by Shanks and Miller (1985), displayed in schematic form in Figure 9.1, seems to us especially suggestive.

The overall structure of the Shanks–Miller model features a single strand causal chain. In this respect, the model exemplifies a consensual approach in the study of voting, specifying one sequence of variables, arranged in temporal order, the same for all voters *ex hypothesi*: Variables furthest removed (in time) from the vote are furthest to the left; those closest to the vote are furthest to the right. The causal chain begins with fixed personal characteristics – gender, for example; ends with the vote choice; and, in between, sets of intervening factors (e.g., partisanship, candidate images) are laid out, in causal (or temporal) order.

The ordering of variables, as displayed in Figure 9.1, is far from decorative: it is rather a concise and hopefully exact representation of the causal relations supposed to hold among variables in the model. Specifically, a variable may be a cause of a variable to its right but only an effect of a variable to its left.

The Shanks–Miller model illustrates well some of the principal conventions of recursive, multistage accounts of voting. But it also has several features that recommend it particularly. The first is its specific analytic objective: to compare the relative importance of two images of the voting decision. One way is to see it as calculus concerning policy. On this view, elections come down to a public judgment – however calculated – on the policy direction that government should take or avoid taking. A second, and quite different image, is to view the voting decision as hinging on performance evaluation. On this view, what is decisive is

not the public's opinion of the policy direction that government should follow but rather its judgment of how good a job the incumbent has done. The distinction between these two images – policy direction and performance evaluation – is potentially of considerable importance to us.

The Shanks–Miller model has a second feature of interest to us, though this is a case of a negative rather than a positive property. The Shanks–Miller model excludes a class of variables other voting models commonly include. These are the so-called issue proximities – a set of variables defining the (mean) discrepancies between the policies a voter prefers and those he perceives the candidates support. This omission seems to us a helpful simplification. So much evidence has piled up on voters' low levels of political information and attention that it is hard to credit them with an altogether steady grip on their own position on many issues, let alone the positions of candidates. Moreover, it is not obvious in just what sense people's perceptions of where they stand on issues and of where the candidates stand are independent. For many voters derive their sense of what candidates think should be done partly from their own beliefs about what should be done. Indeed, it may be more plausible to conceive of the final arrangement of positions attributed to candidates that takes shape in the voter's mind as a result – rather than a cause – of the decision he or she has reached; which is to say that issue proximities, in the case of candidates, can give the appearance of a rational calculus without operating, in fact, as a causal mechanism. Shanks and Miller, in short, have reason to argue that "relatively few citizens actually compare 'issue distances' when they come to a vote decision" (1985, p. 35).

The Shanks–Miller model, though it serves well as a point of departure, for our purposes needs modification in two principal respects. The first, and more superficial, is this. In Figure 9.1 ideological dispositions precede party identification. On this view, the former is cause, the latter effect. It is by no means obvious that this is the most plausible view to take. There is much evidence on two points. First, many voters acquire a party identification early in their life, as a result of everyday socialization to politics. And second, relatively few acquire ideological orientations, and those few tend to do so at a later point in their lives, typically not before attending college. So it seems more reasonable to suppose that party identification precedes, temporally and causally, ideological orientation, not the other way round.

The second, and more fundamental, difference is this. The Shanks–Miller model assumes that acquired personal characteristics should be located very nearly at the beginning of the causal chain and – what makes this assumption crucial – further assumes that there is one set of variables, arranged in one sequence, the same for all respondents. But how much sense does it make to presume a uniformity of causal sequence? Why suppose that all voters make up their minds in the same way? We have argued that it makes more sense to suppose they take account of different considerations, or make different use of the same considerations, depending on how politically well informed they are. And, if we are right in this, the assumption of a single, fixed causal sequence should be

scuttled. It is instead necessary to allow for differing effects of various independent variables for voters of differing levels of information.

#### MEASURES

Some of these measures we deploy are quite familiar – party identification, for instance, and ideological self-identification. Others are less so, and so deserve a word of description.

Two questions tapping retrospective voting concerns were asked. The first involves judgments about the past performance of the incumbent. Specifically, respondents were asked if they approved or disapproved of the way Carter was handling his job as president; and then, if they approved (disapproved), whether they did so strongly or not. This question, then, directly assesses performance evaluation, yielding a 5-point measure, with a range of 0 to 4 and a mean of 2.4, scored so that the higher the number the more negative the evaluation.

The second measure tapping retrospective voting concerns the past performance, not of the incumbent, but of the economy. A voter with even minimal political information can make a determination that too many people are out of work, or that gasoline is too expensive, or that the standard of living is lower than it should be. To get a grip on this kind of judgment, we take advantage of a question on national economic conditions. Specifically, respondents were asked whether, in their opinion, the economy has gotten much better, somewhat better, stayed about the same, become somewhat worse, or become much worse. This variable has a range of 0 to 4, with a mean of 3.2, and is scored so that a larger number indicates a more negative judgment.

Rather than focus on whether the incumbent has done a satisfactory job, the voter may try to determine which of the two candidates will, in his judgment, do the better job. And one way to capture this kind of judgment is to measure the voter's comparative evaluations of the candidates. Accordingly, we have put together a six-item index of comparative competence. This index is based on a list of words or phrases that people use in evaluations of political figures; six were read, with respondents being asked whether each describes the candidates extremely well, quite well, not too well, or not well at all. The six were weak, knowledgeable, inspiring, solve our economic problems, provide strong leadership, and develop good relations with other countries. The comparative competence index was scored such that the larger the number, the stronger the tendency to judge Reagan more favorably than Carter and, conversely, the smaller the number, the stronger the tendency to judge Carter more favorably than Reagan. The competence index has a range of 0 to 12, with a mean of 7.0.

Voters, moreover, may be driven by public policy goals, at any rate when the candidates themselves differ fundamentally in their policy objectives, as Reagan and Carter did. To tap this kind of consideration, a policy index was built. The policy index focuses on four issues: government spending for social services, government job guarantees, government aid to minorities, and defense spending.

Opinions on these issues, it should be observed, are correlated significantly and positively. The policy index is so scored that a larger number indicates a conservative orientation, a smaller number a liberal one. The index has a range of 0 to 24, with a mean of 13.9.

A final point. Conceptually, we speak of variations in information level. Operationally, however, we focus on variations in formal schooling. This may seem arbitrary, even unjustified. Education, clearly, is not the same thing as information level. But the two are highly correlated all the same. The person with considerable formal schooling, on average, is better able to pick up political information than the person with minimal schooling – and what is more, better able to put it to use. Moreover, there is mounting evidence that education has a profound impact on the organization of policy reasoning in mass publics. Somewhat so we expect it to organize the voting choice, too.

### VOTING

To what extent do voters make up their minds in different ways depending on their level of education? Figure 9.2 lays out two causal models of vote choice: The first concerns the poorly educated, that is, those with less than a high school diploma (upper panel); the second the well educated, that is, those with some college or more (lower panel). The variables in each are the same, and laid out in the same arrangement. Their causal impact on the vote is indicated (as is customary) by unstandardized regression coefficients, accompanied (in parentheses) by their standard errors, with statistically insignificant paths omitted.

Obviously, impressions of the candidates are a prime consideration in deciding how to vote. But as we have suggested, there are two different ways to form such impressions. One alternative is to focus on the incumbent, voting for (or against) him depending on approval (or disapproval) of his performance in office. Alternatively, a voter may compare both candidates in one or more respects, and on the basis of this comparison choose between them. The incumbent approval measure captures the first sort of judgment; the relative competence measure, the second.

Look first at the poorly educated, and compare the impact of incumbent approval as against relative competence on their voting decision. Both matter. But clearly one predominates: Judgments about the incumbent are a more important consideration than a comparison of the two candidates.

This reliance on judgments of the incumbent's performance gives to the choice process of the less well educated a flavor of retrospective voting; for the dominant consideration is whether the incumbent is doing a satisfactory job, not whether the incumbent or the challenger might do the better job in the future. This impression of retrospective voting, moreover, is strengthened on further examination of Figure 9.2. Look at the less well educated's view of national economic conditions: It, too, has a direct impact on the voting decision. Its impact is modest – not surprising considering the limitations of a one-item measure. But notwith-

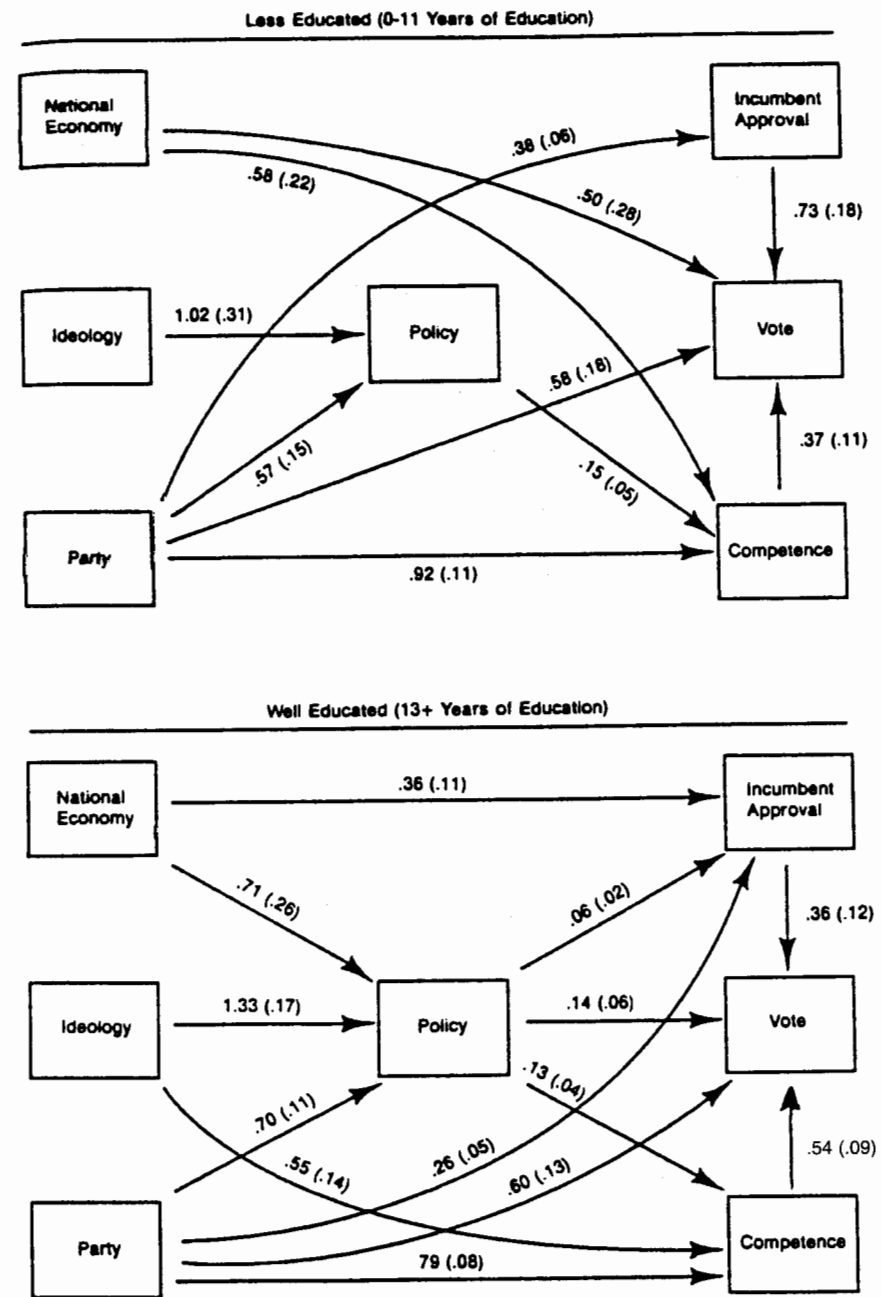


Figure 9.2. A model of vote choice by education, 1980.

standing these, a judgment about how well the economy is doing enters directly in the voting calculus of the poorly educated.

The results for the well educated, however, are quite different. Look first at the role of candidate judgments. It is not the impression of incumbent performance that is the dominant consideration in voting; rather it is a comparison of the two candidates' qualities. So in this respect the kinds of considerations about candidates that drive the voting choice are different for the poorly educated and for the well educated: For the former it is incumbent approval; for the latter, comparative competence.

There is a second point of difference between the poorly and the well educated. As we saw, national economic conditions have a direct impact on the vote choice of the less well educated. Not so for the well educated: There is no statistically significant, direct connection between national economic conditions and vote choice for those who have some college education or more. Which is not to say their view of national economic conditions has no impact; for as Figure 9.2 shows, it is an indirect consideration for them, having an influence on the vote insofar as it has an influence on their assessment of the candidates and their views on policy. In short, by this standard as well, the poorly educated give direct evidence of retrospective voting, the well educated do not.

Consider, now, prospective voting. One expression of it is a vote based on policy orientation. There is no evidence for this kind of voting among the poorly educated. Certainly, there is no significant connection between the policy index and the voting decision for them. It is of course arguable that the poorly educated – precisely because of their lack of education – are unlikely to organize their opinions on issues in the unidimensional, liberal – conservative fashion the policy index presupposes. Accordingly, we analyzed opinions on individual issues, taken separately and put together in various combinations. These analyses, too, testify to an absence of prospective voting, as indicated by policy-driven electoral choice, among the poorly educated.

It is quite different for the well educated. Opinions on major issues are indeed a consideration of direct relevance to their vote. Moreover, the policy opinions of the well, but not of the less well, educated are rooted in broader, political orientations, as indicated by their tendency to put together ideological self-images and issue preferences consistently. This is a difference of no small significance; for it is complex, and burdensome, to vote prospectively, issue by issue, on an ad hoc basis. Making calculations instead in broad policy tendencies – liberal or conservative – economizes on the costs of information required and minimizes the uncertainty of predictions ventured. Finally, the impressions that the well educated form of candidates, and rely on in deciding how to vote, are grounded in their views on policy in a way that reactions to candidates among the less well educated are not. Thus, among the well educated comparative assessments of the relative competence of the two candidates are, in part, a product of policy opinions; in contrast, among the less well educated, judgments of incumbent performance – the crucial aspect for candidate evaluation for them – are not connected to policy stands.

These are some of the particularly salient differences between how the well and the less well educated decide for whom to vote. There are points of similarity, too – the role of party identification, for example. Still, it is worth asking what the differences that we have observed may amount to.

#### DISCUSSION

Some of our results suggest that the less well educated are more likely than the well educated to take advantage of retrospective voting. Fiorina (1985), of course, found just the opposite: that (so far as systematic differences are evident) retrospective voting tends to be the mark of the well educated, not the less educated; the person who is interested in politics, not the one who is disinterested in it; the person who is well informed about politics, not the one who is poorly informed about it. Why this difference?

Part of the explanation, as it seems to us, lies in the properties of (relatively) complex idea systems. It would seem obvious that the person who is well educated, who follows politics closely, and who has considerable information about it should be good at putting his ideas together – certainly as compared with the person who is not especially educated, attentive, or informed. But what does it mean to say a person is apt at putting ideas together? Among other things, that they see connections between different considerations, including considerations that may be relatively remotely (or at any rate not immediately or self-evidently) connected. And because of this tendency to see and to make connections among different considerations, decision making tends to be characterized by a broad focus of attention: Much is relevant in making up one's mind for whom to vote. Or, more colloquially, the better-informed voter tends to take account of nearly everything including the kitchen sink. And because of this "kitchen sink" quality of taking account of diverse considerations, the connection between any given consideration and the vote will tend to be strong for the better educated – when examined at a bivariate level. This credits the impact of any given consideration, which may be quite small, with some of the impact of all other considerations with which it is correlated, some of which will be quite large. Analyzed at a multivariate level, however, the picture will change, since the differential weight of (correlated) considerations will be evident.

There is another consideration. We have seen evidence of voting based on performance evaluation among the less well educated, and of voting based on policy direction among the well educated. It is tempting, then, to suggest that the former engage in prospective and the latter in retrospective voting. But this puts the distinction between these two kinds of voting too starkly; or more exactly, overlooks the difference between direct and indirect effects. Thus, the less well educated do take account of national economic conditions as a direct consideration in deciding for whom to vote; the well educated do not. But the latter take account of national economic conditions as a consideration in deciding their issue preference, which in turn they consult in casting their vote. Now, if taking account of the condition of the economy is a mark of retrospective voting, who

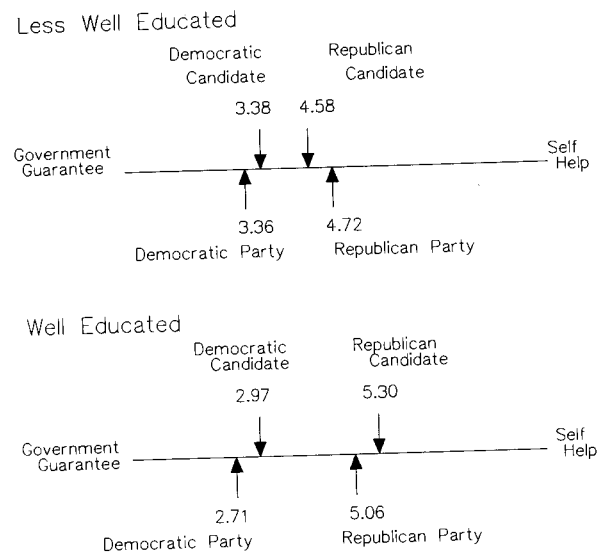


Figure 9.3. Mean positions attributed to candidates and parties, 1980.

should be said to be voting retrospectively: the less well educated who take account of it directly, or the well educated who take account of it indirectly? A false choice, as it seems to us.

Still, it seems worthwhile to consider what, more exactly, the notion of prospective voting entails. Consider, therefore, how well-educated persons tend to make up their mind. On the one side, they take as a prime consideration their views on policy. Also, they give great weight to how the two candidates stack up, compared with one another. On the other side, they attach less importance to their assessment of the incumbent's performance as an immediate basis for making up their minds. And, consistent with this, they do not take the condition of the economy as a direct consideration in casting their vote.

How, then, might the decision making of the well educated be characterized? It is not uncommon to imagine a Downsian space: Voters compare candidate issue positions and pick the one that best matches theirs. The emphasis, here, is on the perception of similarity between the candidates' issue positions and theirs. But one can look on this space from a different perspective, focusing not on similarities between candidates and voters, but concentrating instead on dissimilarities between candidates. From this angle, voters compare candidate issue positions with their eye on not how small is the difference between their views and those of the candidate they support but rather on how large is the difference in views between the two candidates. And looking from this angle provides a glimpse of how well-informed voters tend to make up their minds.

Figure 9.3 displays the positions attributed to the two presidential candidates and the two political parties, in 1980, on the issue of government guarantees for

jobs. The (mean) positions attributed to the candidates and parties are shown separately for voters with different levels of education – first, the less well educated, then the well educated.

The differences between the well and the less well educated are striking. Thus, the well educated see the Democratic candidate and the Democratic party as further to the left than do the less well educated; and, what is more, see the Republican candidate and the Republican party as further to the right than do the less well educated. In a word, the well educated accentuate the differences between the parties and between the candidates; the less well educated minimize them.

This tendency to accentuate dissimilarities between candidates or parties seems to us the mark of the well-informed voter; indeed, it may not exaggerate to say that the mark of the person who understands American politics is precisely that he accentuates – that is, that he exaggerates – the differences between the parties and the candidates who represent them. This is not at all to say that it is always right to accentuate such differences. Quite the contrary. But the person who makes the opposite mistake, who minimizes rather than accentuates the differences between the parties, is very much worse off. For he winds up supposing both parties are centrist – a double mistake; for he perceives both the Republican party to be far less conservative than it in fact is and the Democratic party to be far less liberal than it in fact is. In a word, accentuation enhances the structure of issue conflict; failing to accentuate obscures it.

And accentuation matters because it provides a basis for prospective voting. For even the well-informed voter is sure to lack political information – lacks the information, certainly, to make confident predictions about future actions of successful candidates. Indeed, the very notion of prediction, in the face of so much uncertainty, has been hard to credit; accordingly, many observers have found it more plausible to suppose instead that the sophisticated voter will engage not in prospective but retrospective voting. But in what sense does prospective voting involve a prediction about the future? Only in the sense that one candidate's policy direction is expected to differ from the other's. Now, it would surely be a matter of reading tea leaves to predict the policy choices of the successful candidate except in the context of the issue differences of the political parties. But seen as representatives of their parties, the candidates can be judged comparatively, in context, rather than absolutely, out of context. And, as representatives of their parties, the policy loyalties of the candidates can be predicted; for this prediction is grounded in the dynamic of the American party system. So the well-informed voter, operating as a prospective voter, exploits aspects of the record that are as definite and dependable as those aspects of the record on which the retrospective voter relies. In short, the difference between prospective and retrospective voting is not that the former involves a prediction about the future whereas the latter does not. Both involve a bet that the future will look like the past. They differ only in the aspect of the past they focus on: The prospective voter takes account of dissimilarities in policy; the retrospective voter, of the performance of the incumbent.

Insofar as the well informed hinge the voting decision on a comparative assessment of the candidates, including their policy commitments as well as their personal characteristics, they may be thought of as optimizers. How, then, should the decision of the less well educated be characterized? What strategy, if any, are they following?

Consider how less well educated persons make up their mind. For one thing, they take as a prime consideration the performance of the incumbent, voting for him if they find his performance satisfactory, against him if not. For another, they take into consideration the state of the economy, voting for the incumbent if they find it satisfactory, against him if not. Moreover, in getting some sense of how the less well educated make up their minds, what they do not take into account counts as much as what they do. And especially notable in this respect is their failure to base their vote on their views on policy issues – even, it seems, on long-standing issues.

Accordingly, it would be farfetched to characterize the voting decisions of the less well informed voter as optimizing. For their decisions do not hinge on a comparative assessment of candidates with respect either to policy commitments or to personal characteristics. Rather, it seems fairer to describe their decision rule this way. Decide whether the incumbent's performance is satisfactory – a judgment that can be made either by focusing on his performance directly or on the overall state of the country, as reflected, for example, in the state of the economy. If his performance is satisfactory, support him. The less well informed, though not optimizers, may nevertheless be satisficers.

Now, the use of labels like optimizing and satisficing should certainly be accompanied by a warning. Partly this is because attaching one label to the decision making of the well informed and another to that of the less well informed carries with it a suggestion that the two are making qualitatively different kinds of decisions; and, as a general rule, an empirical analysis that requires demonstration of differences of kind rather than degree has one foot in the grave. So it is important to point out that it is possible to develop a quantitative and not merely qualitative account of voting along the lines we have sketched. Such an account would center on voters' focus of attention. Briefly: The better educated and more aware voters are, the broader their focus of attention – that is, the wider the range of considerations they would take into account in casting their vote; conversely, the less educated and the less aware voters are, the narrower their focus of attention.

But what, more exactly, might it mean to say narrow? What kind of considerations are included? What kind excluded? The less well educated voter, we would suggest, focuses on the terms of the choice, narrowly defined. So he or she, in a presidential campaign, takes the incumbent as primary consideration; and excludes considerations whose relevance is not immediate and obvious. In this sense, the calculations of the less well educated involve a strict calculus. In contrast, well-educated and better-informed voters have a wider focus. They take account of considerations that are at least one remove from the explicit choice. So

they see connections, for example, between their votes and anterior considerations like policy commitments that require some imagination and thoughtfulness to detect – anterior considerations, moreover, that are only imperfectly correlated both with one another and with more immediately relevant considerations. In this sense, the calculations of the well educated involve a loosely rather than strictly elaborated calculus.

There is another consideration. Analyses of voting are at risk of being framed in either-or terms – not always, but often. So it is sometimes asked: Do citizens vote retrospectively? Or do they vote prospectively? Such choices are false choices. The question is not whether voting is retrospective or prospective, but the conditions under which it tends to be the one or the other.

We have tried to illustrate what part of the answer to this question might look like. No doubt, also, the answer is debatable in parts. The measures were those at hand, not those we would have devised given a free hand. Moreover, the causal relations among variables may be conceived differently, and not just in the garden-variety sense of causal relations that supposedly run in one direction arguably running in another. Our model of voting choice hinges on a contrast between two variables, incumbent approval and comparative competence, both at the end of the causal chain. This is an instructive contrast, for a first cut at analysis. It is not, however, an obviously optimal approach for continued analysis. Part of the difficulty is this. The two variables, incumbent approval and comparative competence, are highly intercorrelated and the causal relation between them has not been specified. It is of course possible to overcome this by stipulation. But this is not an appealing strategy and indeed, in our judgment, concentrates on the wrong end of the causal chain; for the point to explore, we think, is the role of party identification, at the beginning of the causal sequence, as against candidate images, at the end.

This has been an exploratory essay, an effort to see what it might mean to say that the structure of choice and the process of choosing are interdependent. And we think our broad argument is a step in the right direction, for it seems to us unreasonable, and unenlightening, to insist that the well-informed voter and the poorly informed one make up their minds in quite the same way. If we are right in this broad argument, it is important to call attention to one of its implications for the study of voting.

That implication concerns the assumption of heterogeneity. To say that voters make up their minds in different ways and, further, that these differences may themselves be systematically accounted for is to say that voters are in some respect systematically heterogenous. This contention may seem plausible on its face – we think so, certainly. But it flies directly in the face of current analytic practice. Thus, it is customary to elaborate a model of voting for voters taken as a whole. This is the approach that Shanks and Miller take, for instance; indeed, the approach that nearly all voting analysts have taken. This approach entails, of course, the assumption that there is no systematic interaction: that how voters decide for whom to vote does not systematically differ depending on some par-

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ticular characteristic of theirs. And it is precisely this assumption that we believe is wrong: At a minimum, it is unreasonable to insist that a person who is extremely well informed about politics will make his voting choice in the same way as a person who habitually pays only minimal attention to public affairs.

It is of course tempting to suppose that this reduces to a matter of some making up their minds well, and others not. This is, however, a temptation to resist.

Elections organize collective choices. But as we have seen, these choices can typically be organized in two rather different ways. One alternative is to treat the decision to be made as hinging on a comparison of the two candidates; the other, as a judgment to be made about the incumbent. And, as we have also seen, the well-informed voter tends to organize the voting choice the first way; the less well informed voter, the second.

These are quite different ways of going about the business of making up one's mind for whom to vote. But the difference between them is not that the well-informed voter who practices the first is making up his mind the right way, whereas the less well informed voter who practices the second is doing it the wrong way. Whether voters are sufficiently informed to behave approximately rationally is a joint product, not just of their capacities for choice, but of the structure of the choice they are making. So the well-informed voter is able to locate the candidates against the background of the competing political parties and the points of view they represent; and it is this that enables him to bring to bear his preferences. Otherwise, he would be at sea; for he is only well informed by comparison with others who know even less about politics. But how about less well informed voters? Are they incapable of making a rational choice because of their lack of information? Not if our analysis is correct. The poorly informed voter, to be sure, lacks the information to make the kind of choice the well informed voter can – that is, a choice that turns on comparison of the candidates, for instance, with respect to their policy commitments. All the same, the less well informed voter may have the information he needs provided he treats the choice before him as a choice for or against the incumbent; for poorly informed or not, he is in a position to judge if the incumbent's performance is satisfactory – satisficing is, after all, the decision strategy par excellence given a lack of information. In these alternative ways, the choices of voters can be approximately rational because of, not merely despite, their shortfalls in information.