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Econ 854

Week 9: Expressive Voting

- I. The Instrumental Voting Assumption
 - A. One key assumption we made before the midterm is that voters vote *instrumentally*.
 - B. In other words, voters care about nothing except the policies they get. They aren't interested in personalities, entertainment, impressing their friends with their social conscience, etc.
 1. Slightly different perspective: Is voting *investment* or *consumption*? Do people vote in order to get a later pay-off, or is voting "its own reward"?
 - C. Purely instrumental voting seems unrealistic. Image, symbols, faces, and so on matter at least as much to voters as policy.
 - D. There are many "Mom and apple pie" issues where all candidates agree; they just try to wax more poetic than their competitors.
- II. Instrumental Versus Expressive Value
 - A. Economists usually focus on the *instrumental* value of products - what the products do.
 - B. But empirically, it is hard to ignore the fact that consumers also care about the *expressive* value of products - what they "say about a person," the product's "image," etc.
 1. Is expressive value a means to the end of *signaling* desirable characteristics to other people? Or is expression an end in itself? For purposes of this week's analysis, it makes little difference, but it is an interesting question.
 - C. Examples to make the difference clear:
 1. Cheering at a football game. Are fans cheering in order to help their team win? Or are they primarily *expressing* their "team spirit"?
 2. Getting a get-well card for a sick friend. Are you trying to cure them, or simply *express* sympathy?
 3. Buying perfume. Do you buy it just for the smell? Or are you also buying an "image" created by Calvin Klein's ads?
 4. Joining the Million Mom March. Are you going solely to change gun policy? Or are you also "showing that you care," to *express* your concern for the nation's children?
 - D. Most products provide a *mix* of both instrumental and expressive value.
 - E. But the mix varies. When I buy a pick ax, I'm not doing it to "partake in the legend of Paul Bunyan." But most people think about "image" when they buy a car, or pick their clothes, or make many other kinds of purchases.

- F. What can we learn if we extend this insight - that products provide a mix of instrumental and expressive value - to voting?
 - G. Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky address this question in *Democracy and Decision* - in my judgment, one of the five best books in public choice ever written. The following discussion relies heavily on their work.
- III. Decisiveness Revisited
- A. If part of the motive for voting is expressive, there is a shocking implication: People do NOT necessarily vote for the *policies* that they most prefer.
 - B. Why? Because expressive and instrumental motives could work in different directions. A person might, on instrumental grounds, prefer peace to war; but the expressive value of patriotism might outweigh this.
 - 1. Similarly, if part of the motive for buying a car is expressive, people will not necessarily buy the car with the mechanical properties they most prefer.
 - C. How exactly can one weigh instrumental and expressive values against each other in an election? The critical variable to remember: the *probability of decisiveness*.
 - D. Crucial insight: your vote may not (indeed, almost certainly will not) change the electoral outcome. But you get the expressive value either way!
 - 1. Ex: Even if your candidate loses, you can still feel smugly superior in your devotion to the homeless.
 - E. What then is the total value of a policy to a voter? It is the probability of decisiveness *times* the instrumental value, *plus* the expressive value.
 - F. Let us define one voter's I_A as the instrumental value of policy A, E_A as the expressive value of policy A, and p as the probability of decisiveness.
 - G. Then when the voter chooses between policy A and policy B, he strictly prefers A to B if: $pI_A + E_A > pI_B + E_B$.
 - H. Now recall that for most realistic elections, $p \approx 0$. Then the voter will choose policy A over policy B so long as: $E_A > E_B$. In other words, in a typical election, *expressive value is ALL that matters!*
- IV. Decisiveness and the Relative Prices of Instrumental and Expressive Voting
- A. In markets, the logic of decisiveness reverses. The typical consumer choice in markets is almost *completely* decisive. When you order chicken at a restaurant, you are virtually sure to get chicken: $p \approx 1$.
 - B. Thus, when a diner chooses between meal A and meal B, he strictly prefers A to B if: $I_A + E_A > I_B + E_B$. In others words, in a

typical market transaction, *instrumental and expressive value count EQUALLY.*

- C. Slightly different perspective: In markets, participants will be willing to give up \$1 of expressive value in order to get \$1 in instrumental value.
 - D. In politics, however, participants will be willing to give up \$1 of expressive value only if they receive \$1/p in instrumental value in return.
 - 1. Ex: If p were 1-in-a-million, they would only give up \$1 in expressive value for \$1,000,000 in instrumental value!
 - E. Thus, the relative prices of instrumental and expressive value differ *systematically* between markets and politics. *Expressive value is dramatically cheaper in politics than in markets.*
 - F. This does not mean that we should expect no role for expressive value in markets. But it does mean that we should expect **vastly more** in politics.
 - G. Ex: When you buy a car, you might consider the personality of salesman. But are you willing to pay \$1000 extra to buy your car from the "nice guy"? In contrast, suppose that one politician's policies are \$1000 better for you than his rival's, but the rival has a great smile. If p=1-in-a-100,000, you will vote for the rival so long as that great smile is worth a penny to you.
- V. The Hanson/Cowen Critique
- A. My colleagues Robin Hanson and Tyler Cowen do not buy the preceding argument.
 - B. Basic objection: Why isn't expressive value adjusted for probabilities, too?
 - 1. Ex: You do not feel like a great person when you donate a penny to charity. Why would you feel like a great person when you *vote* against your financial interests? The former is probably a bigger sacrifice than the latter.
 - C. Variant: Perhaps expressive value *depends* on decisiveness. You feel better when you personally "made a difference."
 - D. My reply: Appeal to introspection. B&L's is a more plausible description of how people really think.
 - 1. Query: What does your introspection say?
- VI. Expressive Voting as Political Pollution
- A. At this point, one might say "So what if democracy counts expressive value more?" Human welfare (and efficiency) encompasses BOTH expressive and instrumental values.
 - B. This is a good question, but it has a good answer: *In democracy, instrumental values are a public good!*
 - C. Individual voters personally enjoy all of the expressive value of their vote, but get no personal benefit from voting for policies with high instrumental value.
 - D. Thus, there is a *voter-on-voter* externality of expressive voting.

- E. Similarly, individual polluters personally enjoy all of the benefits of polluting (driving a cheap gas-guzzling car), but get no personal benefit from cutting back their emissions.
 - F. In both cases, there is an inefficient outcome! Polluters ignore the social benefits of clean air; voters ignore the social benefits of instrumentally valuable policies.
 - G. In both cases, "preaching" is unlikely to change behavior. People are optimally responding to the incentives they face.
 - H. At first, the idea that the instrumental and expressive value of policies can diverge is puzzling. But it is quite intuitive.
 1. Is the "most likeable" politician always the one who favors the most sensible policies?
 2. Is the "morally required" policy always the most effective?
Ex: The minimum wage is very popular, even though it is at best a dubious way to help the poor.
 - I. Question: How do politicians respond to expressive voting?
 - J. Answer: Due to electoral competition, they have to give voters what they want. So instead of focusing on "boring" substantive issues, they emphasize personality, catchy slogans, poetic language, flag-burning, gay marriage, etc.
- VII. Inefficient Unanimity
- A. Surely any policy that EVERYONE votes in favor of must be efficient? Brennan and Lomasky prove, surprisingly, that the answer is NO.
 - B. Suppose voters get to decide whether to declare war on a hated national enemy.
 - C. Each voter who votes Yes feels like a brave patriot, getting \$100 in expressive value.
 - D. But if war is actually declared, the country will be thrown into a bloody conflict that costs each voter an average of \$100,000.
 - E. So what does each voter decide? Each person votes Yes so long as $p^* - \$100,000 + \$100 > 0$.
 - F. As long as $p < .001$, then, they vote Yes.
 - G. Since everyone is identical by assumption, it follows that as long as $p < .001$, 100% of all voters vote for war.
 - H. But what is the net per-capita social benefit of war? -\$99,900!
 - I. How is this possible? There are massive externalities of expressive voting.
 - J. Just as all polluters can be better off if everyone polluted less, all voters can be better off if everyone voted differently – or if someone overturns the electoral result.
- VIII. Application: Environmentalism
- A. "Caring about the environment" is probably one of the biggest expressive issues of our time.
 - B. There are of course some instrumental values involved too: Few people want to breath the air of Mexico City.

- C. But most environmental issues look largely expressive:
 1. Recycling
 2. Preserving wild lands
 3. Endangered species
 4. Conservation
 5. Logging
 - D. Moreover, even for the more instrumental-looking problems, voters are usually bizarrely hostile to "the easy way out":
 1. Emissions trading, domestic and international
 2. Planting trees as carbon sinks
 3. Liming lakes to counter acid rain
 4. Privatizing common resources
 5. Geoengineering
 - E. An overwhelming majority of Americans prefer to hang out at malls than camp out in the wilderness for fun. But what politician would dare to advocate privatizing the national parks so Americans have more money to spend at the mall?
 - F. Simple explanation: Voter-on-voter externalities lead democracy to deliver a highly inefficient outcome.
- IX. Answering Wittman, I
- A. To my mind, expressive voting theory is the first pillar of a thoughtful reply to Wittman. It shows that to a large degree, voters aren't even *trying* to "make democracy work."
 - B. Rather, democracy's lack of incentives induces them to focus lop-sidedly on symbols, entertainment, personalities, and so on.
 - C. Key asymmetry between politics and markets: The low probability of being decisive leads to *systematic* under-valuation of instrumental concerns.
 - D. Expressive voting theory helps us understand why the drama of politics dominates over substance. Politicians are just competitively playing to their audience.
 - E. Other supply-side implications?
 - F. Can expressive voting theory breathe new life into old political failures?
 1. Pork barrel politics
 2. Concentrated interests
 3. Bureaucracy
 4. Political advertising and special interests