

U.S. National Elections

17.263/264

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Week 10: Vote Choice

The Ideal Voter

What would the “ideal” voter look like?
How would he/she approach the voting decision?

Why Don't Voters Act "Ideally"?

What prevents voters from acting ideally?

- Lack of information
- Cognitive limitations
- Not worth the effort

How Do Voters Actually Decide?

The traditional “Michigan School” view:

- **Funnel of causality**: long-term factors → proximate factors
 - e.g., race → **party ID** → candidate evaluations
- Most important factors:
 - 1 **Party** (socialized identity, direct and indirect effects)
 - 2 **Issues** (proximity, salience)
 - 3 **Candidates** (ideology, competence)

Okay, but how do voters make sense of all this information?

Shortcuts to Rationality?

Heuristic: decision rule or cue that requires little information or cognitive effort

- Party (most important)
- Incumbency
- Groups (“likability”)

→ can approximate fully informed voting (but not necessarily)

Evaluating the Competence of Candidates

- **Prospective** → evaluate candidate traits
 - **Retrospective**:
 - **Naive** (easy): recessions, natural disasters, football games?
 - **Rational** (hard): only hold responsible for what can control
- Should voters reward/punish Obama for Hurricane Sandy?

Evaluating the Issue Positions of Candidates

Economic: Raise taxes over \$1m, increase minimum wage,...

Social: Federal marriage amendment, Arctic drilling ban,...

Foreign Policy: Patriot Act, prohibit US use of torture,...

Not Rational, but Reasonable?

- Limited-information rationality
- Collective rationality
- But do errors really cancel out?

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