14.770-Fall 2017
Recitation 3 Notes

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Today:

A discussion of

"Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government"
by Achen and Bartels.

A Brief Review of the Book

The spirit of the book is much in line with the themes of this week's lectures.

- In Lectures 1-3, we covered some theoretical models of how/why electoral politics work.

- Lectures 4 and 5 were then about whether these models' predictions hold in real life.

    - Results are mixed: Downsian convergence in its strongest form usually doesn't hold, but there some responsiveness to voters' preferences as well.

Achen and Bartels take a stronger (and to some extent, more provocative) view of the theoretical views of electoral politics.

The book starts by laying out the benchmark theoretical model of electoral politics (or, in Achen and Bartels' words, "folk theory of democracy" – each voter votes for the best alternative for herself and we agree on a policy which is an agreeable compromise for everybody).

It then proceeds to argue why the folk theory does not hold in real life. Most broadly, I'd say the book is comprised of three parts.

1. The first part of the book (Chapters 2 and 3) demonstrate why electoral politics -in the sense we have thought about so far- does not work. It may not work in a setup where political parties act as "intermediaries" between voters' preferences and policies, and it may not work when voters directly vote on policies (rather than politicians).

    - These two chapters are most closely related to this week's themes of class.

2. The second part (Chapters 4 through 7) take an alternative view of electoral politics: the "keeping politicians accountable" model. It does not work either: people sometimes punish politicians for things they cannot possibly control, or act myopically in evaluating a politician's performance.

    - This is more closely related to the idea of "political agency", which we will start covering in Lecture 8.

3. The authors utilize the last part (Chapters 8 through 11) to set forth their view of electoral politics (and democracy in general) the "group theory" model of voter behavior. Voters do not exist in the world as human beings with their own exogenously given preferences: instead, they start off by identifying themselves as the member of a group and then form their preferences/beliefs based on this identity.

   • A nod to the recent discussion on the prevalence of "identity politics". This theory is grounded in psychology/sociology, so perhaps more knowledge of behavioral economics would help an economist to grasp it better.

I plan to spend most of the discussion on the first part of the book – not because other parts are less interesting, but because it is more closely related to our lectures so far.

Below are some random thoughts/my small notes upon reading the book to start the conversation.

Let's Discuss!

• Do you think the models we have covered so far are *positive* or *normative*?

  – The way the class is structured so far (Arrow first, MVT and Downsian convergence later, etc.) makes us think like it's more positive: we're trying to make some predictions on what outcomes electoral politics would produce.

  – One important contribution of Achen and Bartels is to place these theories within historical context. It "flips around" the order in which these theories came up, and helps us see the normative side of MVT/Downsian Convergence clearer. With this interpretation, Arrow is a theoretical response to the optimist conclusions of the folk theory.

• Chapter 2: I've taken notes of three observations on why, in practice, electoral politics won't work either because voters don't know what's best for them. These are: (i) framing effects, (ii) ignorance, (iii) the "reverse causality" of rhetoric/persuasion.

  – Can "better theory" capture and incorporate these observations? If so, would it still have predictive power?

  – Is there a risk of coming off as paternalistic upon making these type of observations?

• Chapter 3: the discussion about historical evolution of "republic vs democracy" is neat and interesting. How should we really define *democracy* anyway? (This question appears repeatedly throughout the book – even though I tend to read this is a book on electoral politics, not on democracy as a whole.)

• Chapter 3: What do you think about the authors' discussion on the history of referendums in the US?

  – Is there too much capture? Do people frequently vote for what's worse for them? Once again, is there a way to make these observations without coming off as paternalistic?

  – I personally think that a usually overlooked reason why we should be suspicious about referendums as a democratic device is: they are almost always "yes/no" questions, killing future possibilities of further discussion/compromise. (Once again this goes back to the earlier question on what the defining feature of a democracy is – and I sense that the thesis laid in the last part is related to this.)

• On "restrospective voting": what do you think about the empirics there? How can we be sure, for instance, that the voters don't punish the incumbents for *not responding* strongly enough to negative shocks? (They have an answer for this question in the book – I'm not entirely sure if I buy it.)

• On "identity politics": how should we place this view in the *post-truth* era?

• Suppose this psychological model of identity formation is true. Is it something we should be concerned about?

- – Once again, is it positive or normative?
- – It seems like people who are really affected by a policy align themselves in their interests (consider the example about the abortion debate). A reason to worry less?

- What about outside of the US?

- If we end up believing in the authors, what should we conclude? Should we have "more democracy" or "less democracy"? What does "more democracy" mean anyway? (For authors' response to these questions –which are well-articulated and I firmly agree– check Chapter 11.)

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