U.S. National Elections
17.263/264

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Week 11: Participation

Themes of the Day (Back by Popular Demand)

- Voting as (ir)rational choice
- Different forms of participation have different determinants.
- Participation and social context (networks, pressure)
- Resource inequalities imply inequalities of political voice.

Why Do People Choose to Vote?

The "calculus of voting" (Riker & Ordeshook 1968)

■ Basic ingredients:

C_i: costs of voting (time, attention) for individual i
B_i: benefits to i of her preferred election outcome
p_i: probability that i's vote will affect the outcome

Individual i votes if the utility (U_i) she receives is positive:

$$U_i(\text{Voting}) = (B_i \times p_i) \quad C_i > 0$$

Question: How large is p_i likely to be in most elections?

The "Paradox of Voting"

Why do people vote?

- Misjudge probabilities? Possibly.
- Benefits that do not depend on outcome

Calculus of voting, including D term ("civic duty")

$$U_i(\text{Voting}) = (B_i \times p_i) \quad C_i + D_i > 0$$

Suggests that we should focus on C_i and D_i and ignore $B_i \times p_i$.

Political Participation

- Other forms of participation feature the same collective action problem, but different sets of costs and benefits.

- Why *don't* people participate in politics?
  1. They can't → resources
  2. They don't want to → engagement
  3. Nobody asked them to → social networks

- Socioeconomic status (income/education/occupation) strongly predicts participation, but for different reasons.

Political Resources

- Time (life circumstances)
  - $\rightarrow$ time-intensive activities, like protesting
- Money (income)
  - $\rightarrow$ campaign donations
- Skills (job, orgs, church)
  - $\rightarrow$ time/skill-intensive activities, like board membership

Political Engagement

- Subjective psychological constructs:
  - Interest in politics/policy
  - Sense of efficacy
  - Identification as member of group with shared interest

- Difficult to separate from participation itself (endogenous)

- Engagement is most important for voting, where costs are low and resources matter less.

Social Networks

$$U_i(\text{Participation}) = (B_i \times p_i) \quad C_i + D_i > 0$$

- Two components of D term:
    - Intrinsic: personal satisfaction at fulfilling civic duty, etc.
    - Extrinsic: social consequences (others must observe)
- Social pressure is very powerful:
    - $\rightarrow$ Experiment: tell voters you will publicize whether they voted
- Voters/activists must be mobilized/recruited.
    - $\rightarrow$ Most effective from people you know or have connection to
- Explanation for long-term decline in voter turnout?

Voice and Equality

- Who do politicians "hear"? Voters but also donors/activists
- Biases in political "voice":

  Voting: engaged citizens
  Donating: wealthy citizens
  Activism: citizens with skills and time

- All correlated with SES, but for different reasons.

- Inequality of voice may result in biases in representation (next week).

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