

The Psychology of Voting

by

Jon A. Krosnick

Professor of Psychology and Political Science

Ohio State University

Screen 1: Choosing a President is Like Choosing a Movie Chooser

Imagine that this coming Saturday, you're going out to the movies with a friend; to be nice, you've decided to let your friend pick the movie you'll see. Who would you rather the friend be: (1) someone who shares your taste in movies but doesn't read movie reviews and knows nothing about which movies in the theaters now are dogs, (2) someone who reads lots of movie reviews but doesn't like all the things you like, or (3) someone who once picked out a movie for you to see that you liked? In other words, should you choose someone who shares your preferences, has expertise, or has a small track record of success in the past?

That's the sort of decision all Americans face every time they have to vote in a presidential election. Should we endorse the candidate who agrees with us most about what government should do (Keep abortion legal or outlaw it? Make it harder to buy a handgun in America, or make it easier?)? Or should we endorse the candidate who knows the most about solving the nation's problems? Or should we throw our support to a candidate whose party has proven to be the most successful in running the country in the recent past?

Rarely do we find all these desirable qualities in one candidate, so we have to decide how to decide – which criterion should rule the day this time around?

Screen 2: Representative Democracy

If you vote for the candidate who shares your vision of what government should do, you're living by the principles of representative democracy, in which elected representatives do what their constituents want them to do. This is like preferring to go the movies with a friend who likes the types of movies you like, at the risk that he or she will pick out a real loser sometimes.

But voting this way is hard: you have to know what you want government to do on policy issues, and you have to know what the candidates want government to do. When the issues involved are complicated and require you to know a lot before you can make up your mind, it may be tough for you to decide what you want government to do,

unless you stop everything else in your life to study the country and its needs (ridiculous, eh?). Of course, if the candidates don't explain where they stand on issues you care about, you may not be able to tell for sure. And even when candidates do say where they stand on issues, you may not be confident that they will follow through on what they promise during a campaign.

Screen 3: Guardianship Democracy and Performance Approval

If that seems too difficult, you might throw up your hands and decide to vote in a different way: choose the candidate who seems the most intelligent and knowledgeable and will be best at figuring out how to solve the country's problems. If you do this, you're endorsing guardianship democracy, where elected representatives decide on their own how government should operate. In this world, representatives lead the people, rather than following the people's instructions. This is like preferring to go to the movies with someone who knows a lot about what's in the theaters, so you're sure to avoid the awful films out there, even if the one you see doesn't perfectly fit your taste.

Discerning which presidential candidate is the most intelligent and knowledgeable may be easy in some elections and difficult in others. So if it proves too hard, you can always look back at the person who is currently President and decide how good a job he (or she?!) has been doing while in office. If the country's economy is in good shape, crime rates are low, poverty is low, and we're not threatened by foreign countries or terrorists, you might decide the party now in the White House is doing well enough to deserve to continue in control. "If it ain't broke, no need to fix it," goes the old saying. But if things seem to be going badly for the country, it might be a good time to change leadership. This way of thinking is called performance approval.

Screen 4: How Do Americans Really Vote?

Well, all that is in theory – those are some of the approaches people can in principle take when choosing their President. But how do Americans actually vote?

For over 50 years, political psychologists have been studying Americans' voting decisions in Presidential elections, and they've come up with some fascinating insights. These studies have been of two sorts. Some involved surveys of representative samples of Americans, asking them how they perceive the candidates and the country, what they want done in the future, and how they voted. Other studies involved presenting hypothetical candidates to participants in laboratory experiments, manipulating the characteristics of the candidates, and seeing how people's hypothetical vote choices are affected.

The first lesson learned is that the single most powerful predictor of a person's vote choice is his or her political party identification, as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or a member of another party. Usually, a person affiliates with a party because that party shares his or her preferences on the handful of policy issues that he or

she cares most deeply about. So voting based on party is an easy way to vote for the candidate who will push government to do what you want it to do most.

Second, research has shown that voters' perceptions of candidates' personalities (their intelligence, their knowledge, their trustworthiness, and their ability to be strong leaders) also predict some people's votes very well. And people's assessments of the health of the country predict other people's votes. So it looks like most Americans vote according to the principles of representative democracy, but guardianship democracy and performance appraisal are approaches alive and well, too.

Screen 5: Quirks in Implementation

Recent psychological research has turned up some interesting quirks in the ways people evaluate presidential candidates, many of which are surprises to political consultants and campaign advisors. For example, most campaigns save their advertising money for the end of the campaign, so they can put ads on television during the final weeks or days of the campaign. This approach is based on the assumption that voters are most influenced by what they learn most recently. But it turns out that in politics as in all other areas of life, first impressions are very powerful and inertial. Once you form an impression of a person, it colors how you interpret new information about the person. So candidates would get more bang for a buck spent on advertising if they spent it early in a campaign rather than late.

Another popular assumption among political observers is that most Americans are pretty cynical about politicians and expect the worst from them. But instead, political psychologists have found that when Americans begin to learn about a new politician, they approach him or her optimistically, hoping for a "white knight" to appear who will be competent, trustworthy, and effective. That means that new politicians coming onto the national scene for the first time aren't fighting quite the uphill battle many observers think they will.

Another interesting finding from political psychological research is that people don't treat good and bad information about a candidate equally. If a little creature is to survive in the forest, it must optimistically look everywhere and anywhere for food, but it must also be hyper vigilant for any signs of danger, so it can make a quick escape when necessary. In a similar way, voters are especially attuned to unfavorable information about political candidates. Learning one bad thing about a candidate does much more damage to the candidate's image than learning one good thing helps. So it is no surprise that we see so much negative advertising: a dollar spent criticizing your opponent will help you more than a dollar spent spreading the word of your good qualities.

Screen 6: What Happens When A Voter is Conflicted?

What happens when a voter is torn – for example, preferring one candidate's policy stands but believing the other candidate is the most intelligent, experienced, and knowledgeable? All the time while driving to vote, he might mull the decision over in

his head – trying to decide. And even as he walks into the voting booth, he may know he has to make up his mind, but the two candidates seem equally good and equally bad. What will he do?

One thing voters sometimes do is vote for the first name they read on the ballot, just to get the decision over with. As a result, candidates get about 2.3% more votes on average when their names are listed first on a ballot than when they're listed later. And that's the average gain – in about half of races, the first-listed candidate gets even more votes, as much as 6% or 7% sometimes.

Voters are least inclined toward the first-listed candidate when they know a lot about a race (because an incumbent is running for re-election or because the news media have paid a lot of attention to the race), and people who are very interested in politics are least likely to be influenced by name order, presumably because they know the most about the race. But even in races for the U.S. Presidency, a small number of voters have cast their ballots for the first candidate listed, regardless of who that was, presumably because they are torn about whom to vote for.

In a few states, laws recognize this bias and assure that no candidate is unfairly advantaged. In Ohio, for example, the order of candidates' names is rotated from precinct to precinct, so every candidate is listed first an equal number of times. But in most states, this isn't done. For example, in Florida, the political party that won the governorship most recently gets to list all of its candidates first on the ballots across the state. As a result, George W. Bush was listed first on all of the Florida ballots this year. Most likely, that gave him an edge in winning votes from people who felt torn about which candidate to support. And it wouldn't be surprising if lots of Florida voters felt torn this year – many Americans recognized that our economy, crime rate, and international standing are in very good shape but are disappointed by the lack of morality displayed by President Clinton.

Screen 7: Conclusion

But voting based on the order of candidate's names on the ballot happens only a very small fraction of the time. Of course, this year, even a small fraction of the time may have been enough to affect the outcome of the presidential contest. But usually, voters' decisions are driven by considerations that make sense and that show people do their best to contribute to the electoral process in a constructive and rational way. That's reassuring about the future of democracy in America.

And all this nicely illustrates the fun that political psychologists have when studying human decision-making in an important real-world context. I've told you just a small fraction of the fascinating findings that fill the political psychology literature. Studies of voting and campaigning are complemented by studies of protests and riots, discrimination and prejudice, international conflict and conflict resolution, and much more. The insights gained through this work do a lot to help us understand ourselves and

the workings of our nations. Sometimes, political psychology even helps to bring about peace, prosperity, and happiness world-wide.