Irrationalizing the rational choice model of voting: The moderating effects of partisanship on turnout decisions in Western and postcommunist democracies

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ABSTRACT

The rational choice model of voting has been criticized for the fact that citizens expecting greater costs than the benefits associated with voting still turn out. This article focuses on the function of partisanship by which the effect of the rational calculation on voting is moderated. Previous studies have only tested the effect of partisanship on turnout additively failing to explore its interactions with the costs and benefits of voting. My multilevel analyses using the CSES data show that partisanship significantly moderates the effects of the information costs and intrinsic benefits of voting on turnout. These results, however, are not found in the postcommunist new democracies with unstable party systems hindering partisanship from serving as a political cue and from providing an expressive satisfaction of voting.

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1. Introduction

The rational choice model of voting assumes that people decide whether to vote as a consequence of the calculation of the benefits and costs associated with voting (Downs, 1957; Franklin, 2004; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). According to the model, only those who expect the benefits they will receive to exceed the costs they have to pay would turn out to vote. Often, however, the assumption of rationality betrays the reality; people still vote even though they are clearly aware that the benefits will not be greater than the costs. In this paper, I particularly focus on partisanship as one of the factors that could motivate voters to behave in such an irrational manner.

Partisanship, commonly defined as one's psychological attachments to particular political party or parties (Campbell et al., 1960; Dalton, 2008), has been regarded as one of the most consistent predictors of turnout (Adams and Merrill III, 2003; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008; Plutzer, 2002; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Singh, 2011, 2014; Tillman, 2008). Those who have close feelings towards a party are inclined to have stronger motivations to participate in elections. Despite the popularity of partisanship as an independent

turnout predictor in the literature, however, its interactions with the costs and benefits of voting have been underexplored. Due to its emotional aspect largely stemming from its social roots, partisanship in itself may induce people to make a choice that seems at odds with the rational choice theory (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015). Also, as put forth by a large body of scholarship, partisanship influences one's political attitudes and behaviors by shaping, sometimes distorting, their perceptions and evaluations of a variety of political issues and events (Bartels, 2002; Brader, Tucker, and Duell, 2013; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Evans and Pickup, 2010; Gerber and Huber, 2010). Although the costs and benefits of voting still affect one's turnout calculi, therefore, their effects might reduce when partisanship is involved. To put it differently, partisan allegiances may contribute to *irrationalizing*[1] individuals' turnout calculi.

This paper seeks to bridge the gap by investigating how

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[1] By irrationalizing, I am referring to moderation of the effects involving in an individual's turnout calculi such as the costs and benefits of voting. Admittedly, a distinction between rationality and irrationality becomes less clear as attempts have been increasingly made to embrace irrational aspects of human choices within a framework of rationality by treating irrationality as an additive term of the rational model and/or by adding a probabilistic component to the model (Ordeshook, 1992). However, I employ the term of irrationality in this analysis just as an expression that contrasts the rational choice theory commonly used in the turnout literature.

partisanship works together with the factors composed of the rational turnout model in determining an individual's turnout likelihood. I will further see whether and how the relationships vary across the phases of democratic development as an attempt to contribute to the recent scholarship that examines new and old democracies with regard to the development of partisanship and its electoral impacts (Dalton, 2010; Gallego et al., 2012; Karp and Banducci, 2007; Tillman, 2008; Walczak et al., 2012; to name a few). Not only the duration of democracy, but a number of contextual differences between old and new democracies such as socioeconomic development, government effectiveness, party system institutionalization and the development of civil society, render one to suspect that partisanship should have differently linked to turnout calculi across the contexts. Particularly, this paper focuses on postcommunist new democracies which are distinct not only from Western established democracies but even from the other Third-wave new democracies in many senses such as no previous democratic history and no socioeconomic class stratifications induced by the development of Capitalistic market economy (Bunce, 2003). This uniqueness, by presenting a striking contrast to Western democracies with long histories of democracy, provides an ideal laboratory for testing how differently voters behave depending on the stage of democratic development.

This paper is organized in the following manner. In the following section, I will review the exiting literature regarding the rational choice model of voting and present theoretical considerations about the moderating effects of partisanship on the rational turnout calculation. I will then construct a set of hypotheses on the moderating effects, both in general and separately in the contexts of Western and postcommunist democracies. Next, I will test the hypotheses using statistical regressions and analyze the results. The last section will be devoted to summarizing and discussing the findings of the analyses.

2. Rational turnout models and partisanship

Ever since Down's (1957) seminal work on the spatial model of voter turnout based on the assumption of rationality, a line of scholarship has developed the rational choice model of voting claiming that voters make decisions on turnout through the comparison of the costs and benefits associated with voting; they turn out when the benefits exceed the costs. This rational choice model is commonly delineated with the following equation: $Pr_i(Vote) = p_ib_i - c_i + d_i$, where p indicative of the probability that an individual i's voting determines the outcome, b representing the expected benefits of voting when the i's preferred party is elected, c denoting the costs made to participate in elections, and d referring to the intrinsic benefits associated with the act of voting.

This rational choice model, however, has been criticized for its failure to explain why people still vote despite the infinitesimal chance of their votes being decisive for the results in today's mass elections (Ferejohn and Fiorina, 1974; Fiorina, 1990). The so-called *paradox of voting* has been one of the most heated debates in political science (Green and Shapiro, 1994), and such a criticism has led many scholars to seek alternative theories that can account for the irrational aspect of voter turnout. First of all, there have been studies that seek to relax the very assumption of rationality of the model. For instance, Bendor, Diermeier, and Ting (2003) and Collins, Kumar, and Bendor (2009), in their theory of *adaptive* rationality, assert that citizens "learn to vote or to stay home" (2003, 262) according to how satisfied they are with the results of the previous elections. In addition, a group of studies claim that voting is a habitual behavior rather than a rational one, largely determined by one's early experiences in elections in their life cycles (Denny and Doyle, 2009; Fowler, 2006; Gerber, Green and Shachar, 2003;

Plutzer, 2002).

Another tradition of research has attempted to account for why people vote despite such an infinitesimal p term by emphasizing the subjective overestimation of the decisiveness of their votes. Blais (2000) and Duffy and Tavits (2008) argue that people routinely overestimate how pivotal their votes would be for the electoral outcomes, so decide to vote. Some scholars also stress the stakes of the elections; voters have abilities to distinguish important elections from less important ones, thereby turning out in first-order elections for the country's dominant institutions as they believe their votes count in such elections (Elgie and Fauvelle-Aymar 2012; Pacek, Pop-Eleches and Tucker. 2009; Söderlund, Wass and Blais, 2011).

In addition, a body of scholarship has added external effects to the turnout equation. Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008) and Schmitt-Beck and Mackenrodt (2010) regard voting as a group behavior emphasizing the role of social networks and personal communications that imposes sanctions on those who do not abide by the group's norms and values. Moreover, some scholars stress the importance of campaign processes and party mobilization in influencing voter turnout arguing that frequent contacts with party members and longer exposures to the campaign processes increase the likelihood of voting (Karp and Banducci, 2007; Vowles, 2002).

To these alternative theories, this paper attempts to add another factor that might improve the classical turnout model, namely, partisanship. Partisanship of course may be seen as rational, especially in its formation stage. The two partisanship formation models widely discussed in the literature − the *social identity* and *running tally* models − are, at least in part, based on rational aspects of human choices in that they assume voters to structure partisan loyalty towards a party that most likely represents the interests of the social groups they belong to and/or that has shown so satisfactory performance that they are assured of its capability of doing so (Achen, 1992; Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Campbell et al., 1960; Fiorina, 1981; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967).

Although there are rational components in partisanship as such, however, partisanship comes to function rather irrationally once the connection between the voters and their parties becomes established. Particularly in today's Western democracies where political parties have taken deep roots in the society over centuries, partisanship acts as an affective identity that is closely associated with a voter's emotions toward his or her party (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015). Under this circumstance, as Mason (2015) puts forth, "a partisan behaves more like a sports fan than like a banker choosing an investment" (129). Partisanship as an affective identity rooted in social cleavages as such tends to cause people to form political preferences and opinions in line with their identified party's political stands (Brader and Tucker, 2009; Brader, Tucker, and Duell, 2013; Dancey and Goren, 2010). Even though the supporters of the running-tally model could contend that voters alter their party allegiances according to their evaluations of party performance, it has been argued that such change of partisanship occurs rather gradually as they update past information in a cumulative fashion (Achen, 1992), and that the very perception of party performance could also be shaped by their partisan orientations (Evans and Andersen, 2006; Evans and Pickup, 2010; Gerber and Huber, 2010).

These considerations led me to presume that partisanship may also work in a different way the rational turnout model would predict. The previous literature has tested the effect of partisanship on turnout in an additive manner rather than in relation to the components of the rational choice model. If partisanship works together with those components to affect turnout, however, the effects of the costs and benefits of voting should diminish among partisans in comparison to non-partisans. If this is the case,