

Why Vote?

by Alex Rothenberg and Robert F. Graboyes
Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond
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[Alex graduated from the Governor's School for Government and International Studies in Richmond, was a member of the Richmond District's winning Fed Challenge team in 2000, and has worked as an intern at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond.]

While the memory of Election 2000 still lingers—dimpled chads, butterfly ballots, and the rest—it's a good time to note that economists, for many years, have thought a lot about the logic of voting. This literature is part of Public Choice economics (see *Equilibria* #1, "[Public Choice: The Economics of Government](#)" for a description).

The boiling and roiling in Florida brought to mind an issue that economists call "rational abstention." The question is why anyone, anywhere, ever bothers to vote. The kind of answers you might find in a civics textbook—"because it makes you a good citizen," "because it shows you're committed to democracy"—don't calm the throbbing headache that voting gives Public Choice economists. Most economists would agree that democracy is good and voting is great, but that doesn't tell them why any individual voter bothers to get out of bed and trundle down to queue up at the polling station.

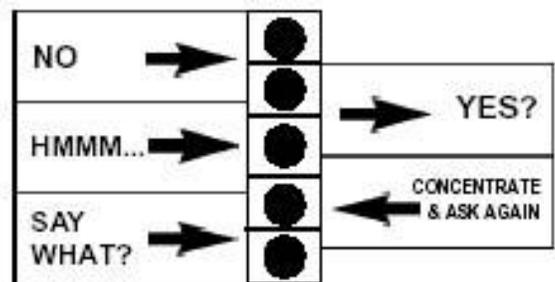
Are Consumers Rational?

Economists treat voters as they would any consumers or producers in the marketplace by assuming that they are rational. That is, voters, just like consumers, act in such a way as to maximize their utility—their happiness. Consumers maximize happiness by buying goods and services (netting out the inconvenience of getting the money to buy it). Beneath every purchase hides a cost-benefit analysis—"What do I get out of this, and what is it going to cost me to get it?"

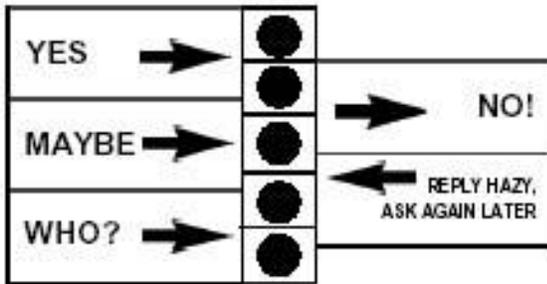
So a new-car-buyer says, "The benefit is I get to drive around in style and look cool. The cost is I have to work nights for three years to meet the payments. ... Nah. I'll keep driving the wheezer." Public choice economists say that what's good for the consumer is good for the voter. When people go to the polling place, they ought to ask, "What do I get out of voting, and what is it going to cost me to vote?" and therein lies the problem.

Are Voters Rational?

In some ways, voting is like consumption. By voting, individuals in society try to maximize their own happiness and the good of society. (Most of us would like to think that these are one and the same—but sometimes we know better.) All voters have their own individual thoughts about what government ought to do for them (or society). And they express it through the ballot. But why? It's easy to calculate the costs of voting, but the benefits are only obvious if you don't think about it.



The costs of voting are pretty simple: You have to go somewhere and register. You have to spend time learning about the proposed policies of the candidates on the ballot. You have to schedule your day around the election. For every hour you spend doing these things, you could have been doing something more fun.



What are the benefits? The first thought is by voting for your candidate, you get the policies you prefer. But that's not really the case. Your candidate might not win. Your candidate might not support the policies that were promised during the campaign. Your candidate might support the policies as promised but might not get them passed. And—here's the biggest thing—even if your candidate wins, sticks to the program, and gets it all passed, the chance is just about zero that your

single vote is what put him or her in to office. So why bother to vote in the first place? Why not rationally abstain? Voter apathy doesn't surprise economists a bit. To economists, the question isn't why so few people vote; the question is why so many people do.

But this doesn't lead economists to conclude it's not rational to vote, or one shouldn't vote, or people vote because they're too foolish to realize there's no point in doing so. Perhaps more than any other social science, economics is grounded in a profound respect for people. Instead, the apparent wisdom of abstention leads economists to ask, "Why do intelligent, sensible, rational, people engage in an activity that costs them a lot of time and doesn't yield much in the way of benefits?"

The problem is exactly analogous to the problem of people cutting across the grass instead of staying on the sidewalk. Walking across the grass is bad because it kills the grass and leaves ugly paths, so everyone knows it's a good thing if everyone stays off the grass. But everyone also thinks, "If everyone else cuts across the grass, my cutting across won't make it any worse. And if no one else cuts across the grass, my cutting across alone isn't enough to damage the grass. I see the benefit of my cutting across, but where are the costs?" Since everyone has the same thoughts, the question isn't why so many people cut across, but rather why so few do so.

Maybe through winks and nods, we all agree to foist a little cost on everyone who cuts across the grass. We stare at them, nag them, whine at them, and maybe even threaten them—just enough to stop most from cutting. Maybe people vote for the same reasons—voting has its costs, but not voting forces you to spend time answering questions from nagging neighbors about why you don't vote. That's just one explanation; for now, rational abstention is a question and a set of not-completely-satisfying answers. This brings us back to Florida. In late 2000, as the spread between George Bush and Al Gore shrank toward zero, one wag at the Richmond Fed noted, "It's getting pretty rational to vote in Florida these days.



Alex ponders his choices.