

# Theoretical models of voting behaviour <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article reviews the main theoretical models that explain the electoral behavior — sociological model of voting behavior, psychosocial model of voting behavior and rational choice theory —, stressing the continuity and theoretical complementarity between them. It also proposes a reconceptualization of the concept of partisanship in order to integrate all relevant contributions of the three main models of voting behavior in a holistic approach to electoral behavior.

## Key-words

Electoral behavior, Partisanship, Self-categorization, Voting

## Resumo

Neste artigo analisam-se os principais modelos teóricos utilizados para explicitar o comportamento eleitoral — modelo sociológico do comportamento eleitoral, modelo psicossocial do comportamento eleitoral e a teoria da escolha racional —, acentuando a continuidade e a complementaridade teórica que os une. Propõe-se também uma reconceptualização do conceito de partidarismo, a fim de integrar, em uma abordagem holística para o comportamento eleitoral, todas as contribuições relevantes dos três principais modelos de comportamento eleitoral.

## Palavras-chave

Comportamento eleitoral, Identificação partidária, Auto-categorização, Voto

The scientific study of voting behavior is marked by three major research schools: the sociological model, often identified as School of Columbia, with the main reference in Applied Bureau of Social Research of Columbia University, whose work begins with the publication of the book *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) and focuses on the influences of social factors; The psychosocial model, also identified as School of Michigan, which has its major reference in the work of Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) —*The American Voter*— and assumes that party identification is the main factor behind the behavior of voters; and rational choice theory, also referred to as a model of economic voting, or even as School of Rochester, whose landmark work is the work of Anthony Downs (1957) —*An Economic Theory of Democracy*— and that puts emphasis on variables such as rationality, choice, uncertainty and information.

In this article we present the main theoretical assumptions of these three models, emphasizing the continuity and theoretical complementarity linking the psychosocial model to sociological model and the rational choice theory.

### **1 - Sociological model of voting behavior**

The theoretical assumptions of the sociological model of voting behavior are defined in three essential works: *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954) and *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The research conducted by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) at Ohio State (Erie County), using questionnaire as a technique of investigation for the first time in the study of a U.S. presidential election — one which opposed Franklin Roosevelt to Wendell Willkie in 1940 — cuts away from the type methodological approach that hitherto characterized the study of voting behavior (Barnes & Kaase, 1979). Paul Lazarsfeld, whose previous interests had focused on the study of the psychological mechanisms involved in the processes of choice and in the effects of publicity, advertising and mass media on consumer behavior had two main objectives in this research: to study the effects of exposure to the media, that is, to know how voters arrive at their decisions and the role of media in this process; and to test a new methodology of successive interviews with a panel of subjects and a control group (Rossi, 1964). The study, whose report was published under the title *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), begins by characterizing the supporters of the two main political parties in the U.S. using a panel of 600 subjects who were interviewed seven times over the seven months of campaign, to then identify the voters who changed their position during the campaign period, comparing three groups: those who decided their vote before beginning the campaign, those whose decision was taken during the party convention and those that decided their vote only at an advanced stage of the campaign.

The central hypothesis of Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) was that the act of voting is an individual act, affected mainly by the personality of the voter and his exposure to the media. The results, however, contradict the main thesis, suggesting that the effect of the media in electoral decision was minimal and that the decisive influence was the social groups to which they belonged. In the final two chapters of his book — “The Political homogeneity of Social Groups” and “The Nature of Personal Influence” — the focus is exactly on the theoretical elaboration of these conclusions, which are presented as revealed by news research: “The significance of this area of political behavior was highlighted by the study but further investigation is necessary to establish it more firmly” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, p. 69).

### 1.1 Political homogeneity of social groups

The main finding of Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) was that the majority of voters voted according to their original political predisposition. Of the 600 subjects who were included, only 54 changed their position throughout the process. The association between electoral behavior and the social groups to which they belonged was so strong that it was possible to explain the electoral choices using only the three factors that defined the Index of Political Predisposition used in research: socio-economic status, religion and area of residence.

*There is a familiar adage in American folklore to the effect that a person is only what he thinks he is, an adage which reflects the typically American notion of unlimited opportunity, the tendency toward self-betterment, etc. Now we find that the reverse of the adage is true: a person thinks, politically, as he is, socially. Social characteristics determine political preference.* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, p. 69)

The effect of conversion and modification of the voting option identified in the study is primarily distributed among voters who were previously classified by investigators as independent, i.e., those who had initial predispositions opposed to candidates — cross-pressures — which according to the authors, were mostly social in nature and linked to divergent policy preferences associated with one or more social groups to which the subjects belonged. However, contrary to initial expectations, these voters are persuaded to vote for a candidate, not as the result of an analysis of the proposals submitted by each candidate or the issues under discussion in the campaign but following pressure from members of their community. As the authors write:

*In short, the party changers — relatively, the people whose votes still remained to be definitely determined during the last stages of the campaign, the people who could swing an election during those last days — were, so to speak, available to the person who saw them*

*last before Election Day. The notion that people who switch parties during the campaign are mainly the reasoned, thoughtful, conscientious people who were convinced by issues of the election is just plain wrong. Actually, they were mainly just the opposite.* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, p. 69)

## 1.2 Activation, reinforcement and conversion

With regard specifically to the role of electoral campaigns and communication processes associated with them, the study identifies three types of possible effects: activation of the indifferent, strengthening the link to the political party, and conversion of the undecided. It was found that the greatest impact of the campaign is focused on voters who are already predisposed to vote for the candidate backed by this party, strengthening and / or activating that prior predisposition. Only 8% of voters changed their initial position following the election campaign: *“In sum, then, this is what the campaign does: reinforcement (potential) 53%; activation 14%; reconversion 3%; partial conversion 6%; conversion 8%; no effect 16%.”* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, p. 103). These results do not mean, however, that the authors conclude that electoral campaigns are considered useless. Its effect is not living up to initial expectations, since the role seems to be more to solidify the cohesiveness of party supporters around their electoral proposals than to convince voters of other parties to change their position. This result seems to be linked to a phenomenon of selective attention of voters on the election campaign, which was reflected in the fact that those who had more interest in politics and had already set his option to vote are also those who paid more attention to the campaign on radio and in newspapers: *“In other words, the group which the campaign manager is presumably most eager to reach — the as-yet undecided — is the very group which is less likely to read or listen to his propaganda”* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, p. 124).

But also with regard to the role of the election campaign, it was found that the influence of social groups to which the individual belongs is crucial for the results, since it identified a mediation process — starring members of those groups who were committed to opinion leaders — between communication conveyed by mass media and voters. This process was called two-step-flow of communication:

*A special role in the network of personal relationships is played by the ‘opinion leaders’. In Chapter V, we noted that they engaged in political discussion much more than the rest of the respondents. But they reported that the formal media were more effective as sources of influence than personal relationships. This suggest that ideas often flow from radio and print to the opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population.* (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, p. 151)

These results clearly contradict the initial hypothesis that the act of voting is an individual act. The relationship between social groups to which subjects belong, their political choice and the decisive role of personal contacts in the definition of electoral choices indicate that the decisions of voters are processes of group cohesion, rather than individual acts: “*In a way, the content of this chapter can be summarized by saying that people vote, not only with their social group, but also for it*” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968, p. 148).

This first study, conducted in Erie County (Ohio), was criticized because it is a study unsupported by previous theoretical options, which translated into explanations constructed later to give intelligibility to the findings (Rossi, 1964). One example of these explanations is the subsequent use of the concept of two-step-flow of communication in this work that appears as a hypothesis developed to explain the role of opinion leaders in mediating the communication flow between the media and voters. Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) only refer to it for the first time in the last chapter of the book *The People’s Choice* - titled “*The Nature of Personal Influence*” - by giving it only three short paragraphs. The concept was subsequently developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld in “*Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*” (1955), considered one of the most influential works in research of mass communication, where the authors reaffirmed and developed the idea that the subjects’ responses to media messages are mediated through interpersonal relationships and their groups to which subjects belong, and that some individuals act as opinion leaders, building and rebuilding the meaning of the messages of media in their social circles.

### **1.3 Social transmission of political choices**

The insufficiency of the study conducted in Erie County led these authors to replicate it, with some changes, in the presidential elections of 1948, which opposed Harry Truman, incumbent President, to Thomas Dewey, governor of New York. The results were published by Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) in “*Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*”. As the authors themselves point out, this research, now held in a small community in upstate New York — Elmira —, aimed not only to be a result of the previous study, but also to be an opportunity to correct problems pointed to the methodological and conceptual research conducted earlier. The findings of this study, as in Erie County, indicate that (1) the *social differentiation* — based on socio-economic status, religion, race and place of residence — is a precondition for political dissent and subsequent electoral cleavage; (2) there are conditions of *transmissibility* which ensure the maintenance and persistence of this differentiation from generation to generation; (3) and that the conditions for greater *social and physical proximity* between members of a group, as opposed to less closeness with members

of other groups, facilitates and maintains electoral cleavage. These three processes — differentiation, transmission and contact — guarantees the social transmission and political choices, as the authors have written: “*In contemporary America these conditions are best met in class, in ethnic and in ecological divisions of the population. They continue to provide, then, the most durable social bases for political cleavage.*” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954, p. 75).

The results again showed that the political predisposition of the subjects, established on the basis of their socioeconomic status, race, religion, area of esidence, correlated markedly with his voting option and even those subjects initially move away from this initial position end, mostly, by “returning” to it. The electoral proposals that fit with a dominant position in the social group of voters are more likely to materialize in the voting choices of these voters at the end of the campaign. This return to the ‘natural’ position of the voters in their social group — explained by the fact that the subjects make use of people from their social relationships to expose their doubts and ask for advice, which leads them to obtain advice that leads back to electoral position of the majority of their social group — is considered the most interesting psychological phenomenon, and simultaneously the most relevant in the political point of view. The authors refer to this psychological phenomenon as *reactivation* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954).

#### 1.4 Perception and political differentiation

Among the changes introduced by this second study, we emphasize the analysis of the role of campaign themes that, in the initial study, was done only on basis of materials produced by radio and press, and that now was the subject of a different methodological approach, since the authors also evaluate the position and perception of the subjects in relation to these issues and how they were treated by the two campaigns.

The analysis of this topic was done by dividing the campaign themes into two types of information: position issues, focused on domestic policy, and political themes, focused on international politics. The results showed a division among the subjects in the evaluation of economic issues, based on socioeconomic status, party affiliation and interest in elections, and a consensus in the evaluation of political issues. In the latter group, Republicans and Democrats agreed among themselves in defining the important campaign issues, as well as in some criteria used to evaluate candidates and had similar expectations about future political events, but disagreed in the assessment of who the best candidate to deliver the policies they agreed with (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954).

However, despite the importance attached to economic issues, the authors found

that only half of the subjects was in line with the position of his party in relation to the economic proposals, though they tended to assess the position of their candidate as being congruent with his and the opposing candidate's as being contrary. Likewise, the subjects tended not to perceive the differences in relation to their candidate or the similarities with the candidate opponent. That is, the voters, while seeking to maintain a consistency between their positions and the candidate they supported, did not solve the inconsistencies by changing their voting option, but by changing their perception of the candidate.

*Under the increased pressures of a campaign, people have an increased tendency toward consistency, in all relevant aspects. As times goes on as we compare materials collected early in the campaign with those obtained at later stages, we find that people abandon deviant opinions on specific issues to agree with the position taken by their party (or at least to perceive such agreement); (...) In 1948, focusing on primary groups, we found that disagreements between friends and families disappear and make way for a homogeneity of attitude within various social groups. The tendency for a "strong Gestalt" within individuals — and analogously within groups — certainly receives support in our material (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & Mcphee, 1954, p. 285).*

### **1.5 Democratic practice and theory**

From the theoretical point of view the most relevant contribution of this second study is the conceptualization of electoral behavior in a sociological model that attempts to reconcile the assumptions of the democratic organization of society and the electoral behavior of the subjects, which is considered to be in apparent contradiction with these assumptions. The authors identify the political features of voters that we would expect find in a democratic system — interest, discussion and motivation, knowledge, principles and rationale — to conclude that, in reality, according to data from their investigations, most subjects have no interest or motivation on matters of political nature: "(...) it is a curious quality of voting behavior that the large numbers of people motivation is weak if not almost absent" (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & Mcphee, 1954, p. 308); have a limited and poor knowledge of political affairs: "He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their story is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are. By such standards the vote falls short" (p. 308); have not decided their vote on the basis of principles: "many voters vote not for principle in the usual sense but "for" a group to which they are attached — their group" (p. 309); and do not support their electoral decisions on reason: "In short, it appears that a sense of fitness is more striking feature of political preference than reason and calculation (p. 311).

Against this backdrop in which voters do not seem to satisfy the conditions necessary in a democratic regime, the authors argue that democracies have not collapsed and, instead, have become stronger because the logic of a democracy works in an aggregate and not individual level. If all voters had a high degree of interest and political motivation that would also be reflected in greater division among voters in a climate of greater political cleavage and antagonism that could endanger the system itself. Rather than require individuals who are highly interested and motivated by political, democracy needs that society is composed of heterogeneous groups to ensure the plurality of ideas and political proposals (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954, p. 314).

### **1.6 Social cleavage**

Although the work of Lazarsfeld and Berelson are associated with sociological models of electoral behavior, it is important to note that the micro-sociological approach they use in their research identifies several processes of psychological nature, ranging from perception, social identity and ingroup preference, through the use of Gestalt principles to explain the propensity of voters to choose “good form” in this case, the “natural” position of their social group which, though not theorized as such, are anticipations of later psychosocial approaches. In fact, although these authors do not draw theoretical relevant conclusions from a psychosocial point of view, opting instead for explanations that emphasize the sociological approach, they pioneered the research generated by the school of Michigan and what is known as psychosocial approach to voting behavior.

The extension and further development of the sociological model of voting behavior, as such, are associated with the book “Political Man” (Lipset SM, 1960) and the publication of “Party Systems and Voter Alignment: Cross-National Perspectives” (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) focused on development of the party system in Western Europe. Unlike Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) and Berelson et al. (1954), Lipset and Rokkan (1967) start from a historical and macro-sociological approach that understands the party system in the countries of Western Europe as reflecting historical divisions with origins in national revolution — divisions between center and periphery and state / church — and industrial revolution — cleavages between urban / rural and capital / labor. These become important political cleavages when social groups develop perceptions of these differences and, in consequence, it becomes institutionalized in the political system (Manza & Brooks, 1999). The link between social cleavages and political system is revealed when social divisions are felt in three different levels: as empirical components rooted in the social structure, as regulatory components that result in conflicting forms of social consciousness, and as institutional components that are expressed in individual interactions or in interactions between organizations and/or institutions (Bartolini & Mair, 1990). Deschouwer &



Luther (1999) separate everything that refers to different types of individual behavior that results of the previous components from the institutional and organizational component, which they see as a fourth component — behavioral — and includes, among other examples, the voting behavior.

The sociological model has, however, limitations in explaining the variations that occur in voting due economic factors specific to each election. Social factors may explain the long-term stability of voting behavior, but do not explain the variations that occur in the behavior of voters in different elections, just as they do not explain why individuals who belong to certain social groups vote according to what one would expect of individuals belonging to different social groups. Although there are attempts to overcome these difficulties within the sociological approach, for example investigations that argue that the study of voting behavior should not be done from the voter's perspective but valuing contextual factors as the political programs of parties, the role of media, the countries' economic structure and the context in which the relationship between voters and parties becomes stronger (Curtice, 2002; van der Eijk, 2002; van der Eijk, Franklin & Oppenhuis, 1996; Glasgow & Alvarez, 2005 Johnson, Shively, & Stein, 2002; Wright, 1977). These limitations have led to the Michigan psychosocial model that attempts to overcome them using the concept of partisanship, with which it seeks to link the influence of sociological and historical long-term factors, identified in the sociological model, and the social and political short-term factors that characterize each election.

## **2 Psychosocial model of voting behavior**

The psychosocial model has its origin in studies conducted by the Survey Research Centre at the University of Michigan during the 1948 U.S. presidential elections, its results analyzed by Campbell and Kahn (1952) in *The People Elect a President*; the elections of 1952's report was presented by Campbell, Gurin and Miller (1954) in *The Voter Decides*; and elections in 1956, where results, combined with those obtained in previous investigations, have led to the book *The American Voter*, written by Campbell, Converse Miller and Stokes (1960). These works mark the beginning of a long series of studies conducted by the Survey Research Centre and more recently by the Center of Political Studies at the University of Michigan, which extend to the present day, although currently falling under American National Electoral Studies (ANES), investigations that involve a greater variety of institutions, maintaining, however, the initial theoretical basis. The questionnaires and databases of these investigations are references in most election studies conducted in the United States of America.

## 2.1 Partisanship

The central concept of this model of voting behavior is partisanship, which is designed as a psychological affinity, stable and lasting relationship with a political party that does not necessarily translate into a concrete link, namely registration, or consistently voting and systematically militancy with this party:

*In characterizing the relation of individual to party as a psychological identification we invoke a concept that has played an important if somewhat varied role in psychological theories of the relation of individual to individual or of individual to group. We use the concept here to characterize the individual's affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment. Both reference group theory and small-group studies of influence have converged upon the attracting or repelling quality of the group as the generalized dimension most critical in defining the individual-group relationship, and it is this dimension that we will call identification (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, p. 121).*

The notion of partisanship, introduced in the study of voting behavior by Campbell et al. (1960), was influenced by the concept of reference group (Hyman & Singer, 1968) and has similarities with the idea of anticipatory socialization introduced by Merton and Kitt (1950) to define the situations in which individuals choose a reference group to which they do not belong and begin to act according to what they perceive as the rules of that group. According to these authors, partisanship is acquired through a socialization process, influenced by the values and attitudes of family, colleagues and peers, a process that Miller and Shanks (1996) considered similar to that which leads subjects to identify with a religion. This emotional link the subject to “their” political party can be achieved with varying degrees of involvement in a process analogous to what happens with the connection of individuals to a religion, manifested in ways as different as going from non-religious to deeply religious. In this perspective, partisanship is a genuine form of social identification in which “*citizens have an enduring sense of what sorts of people belong to various parties and whether they identify with these social groups*” (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002, p. ix).

Notably, the model also does not match partisanship with the voter's choice. This separation between the psychological nature of partisanship and the objective nature of voting behavior is reflected, in methodological terms, in the option of not measuring this variable from the actual voting of the subject, but through their self-positioning: “*Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?*”, followed by another which asks the subject to classify the strength of this identification: “*Would you call yourself a strong (Republican, Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican, Democrat)?*”. Those who classify themselves as Independents are also asked whether, despite their independent status, they consider themselves close to any

of the parties “*Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?*” (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, p. 122).

In this perspective, partisanship is not seen as a variable that tells us directly and unambiguously which is the vote option of an elector. Campbell et al. (1960) described partisanship as a perceptual filter through which the voters appreciate that which is favorable to the orientation of his party and ignore or devalue that which is unfavorable. Taking into account that political life in democratic societies is almost exclusively focused on parties and considering that the evaluation of policy proposals requires, in most cases, knowledge and information that citizens do not have, partisanship becomes then a central variable in the political experience of the subjects functioning as an instrument of “reading” of the election and the candidates’ proposals.

## 2.2 Funnel of causality

The explanatory model of relations between the variables involved in the definition of electoral behavior is called a funnel of causality. This metaphor represents the chain of events that contributes to the vote of the subjects, distinguishing distal factors (socio-economic and historical factors, values and attitudes and membership groups) and proximal factors (issues, candidates, election campaign, political and economic situation, the government action, influence of friends). At the entrance of the funnel are the sociological and social characteristics that influence the next element of this sequence that is partisanship. Partisanship has, in turn, a decisive role in evaluating candidates, the issues, the incidents of the campaign that are reported in the media and the conversations that voters have with family and friends about the election. The output of this funnel is the vote. This scheme clarifies the central role of partisanship as a result of the combination of dispositional and long-term factors and as a factor moderating the effect of short-term variables on voting behavior.

*To think of a funnel in this way greatly enlarges our explanatory chore, for in the ideal case we want to take measurements that refer to states not at one cross section alone, but at a great number. Each cross section contains all the elements that will successfully predict the next, and so on, until we have arrived at the final act* (Campbell et al., 1960).

Although the model encompasses all these factors, it focuses its attention on the relationship of partisanship, candidates and issues and less on social factors and communication systems (Niemi & Weisberg, 2001).

### 2.3 Proximal and distal factors

Causal model outlined above shows that changes in long-term factors that can lead to changes in party identification of voters. In general the factors considered by the model are those the sociological approaches conceptualize as determinants of voting behavior. According to Campbell et al. (1960) changes in party identification are rare and occur as reactions to events of great impact. Study findings suggest that changes in party identification occur at the individual level when there are adjustments in the social status of the subjects (e.g., entry into an institution of higher education, marriage, change of area of residence, change of job, etc..) or when changes occur in the broader field of social and political organization, (e.g., the end of the fascist regime in Portugal, entry into the European Union; the end of the Soviet Union, etc.). As we can see, in both cases these changes are relatively rare and, although changes in the social status of individuals occur in greater numbers and with more diligence, the effect on change in partisanship is faster and has more electoral impact when they occur in the political and / or social structure, such as the repercussions of the end of the Soviet Union in electoral expression of the communist parties of southern Europe.

If changes in social factors can produce long-term changes in partisanship, the short-term factors are seen as just being able to change the electoral choice of subjects in a given election, without affecting their partisanship (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, Green & Palmquist, 1990). The relationship between partisanship and short-term factors is manifested through attitudes toward policy proposals, candidates and group benefits (Harrop and Miller, 1987). However, while partisanship influences the perception of situational variables, it is also possible that the proposals, the speech, or the candidates are so totally against the expectations, values or interests of voters, that this situation is unlikely to be shaped by this perceptual filter and bring the subject to not vote or even vote for another party. According to the assumptions of the model, this would not affect the partisanship that would continue, despite this circumstantial disloyalty, to maintain their prior identification.

The role of partisanship has been, however, contested since its formulation in the 60s, not only based on difficulty in applying it to the electoral systems that are not essentially bi-partisan, as is the case in most Western European countries (Budge, Crewe, & Farlie, 1976) but especially with the argument that there is a progressive weakening of the connection of individuals to political parties in the U.S. (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1976, Stanley & Niemi, 1991; Stanley & Niemi, 2000) and in Europe (Crewe & Denver 1985; Dalton, 1984; Dalton, 2000; Dalton, Flanagan, & Beck, 1984, Schmitt & Holmberg, 1995), which calls into question the thesis of the stability of partisanship and points to a progressive misalignment of voters in relation to political parties. The way the model

conceives the relationship between psychosocial factors and partisanship is challenged by researchers who believe that the Michigan model overestimates the role of long-term partisan loyalties (Dalton, Flanagan, & Beck, 1984; Dalton, 2000, Fiorina 1981; Franklin, Mackie & Valen, 1992; Kiewiet, 1983; Wattenberg, 1994). In general, all these criticisms of the psychosocial model focus on the difficulty that this theoretical approach shows in explaining the reasons why some voters who identify with a party a process that has an underlying emotional relationship in nature and consequently, loyalty is of crucial importance vote for another party or to refrain from participating in an election. For these researchers it is the proximal factors that play a decisive role in misalignment of the voters and the consequent volatility that characterizes the Western democracies since the early 1960s. In this perspective, voters adjust their connection to political parties according to the evaluation they make, in every election, of economic conditions and how the parties and their leaders deal with them. Party identification works, at best, merely as a cognitive shortcut and not as a social identity that allows voters to cope with the extra information required to review all proposals, without implying the existence of an affective and emotional link between these voters and political parties.

These criticisms are, in general, presented by authors who argue that the explanation of changes in voting choices of voters should be sought not through the use of a psychosocial variable but by considering factors related to information processing and the rationality of voters and the political and electoral system. In the following section we present the theoretical model that led to these approaches.

### **3 Theory of rational choice**

The theoretical background for an economic explanation of voting behavior has been submitted by Anthony Downs (1957) work on “An Economic Theory of Democracy.” This theory is commonly referred to as rational choice theory. This is an attempt to explain electoral behavior taking as its starting point the work done within the political economy by Kenneth Arrow (1951, 1986) that relate economic parameters resources, goods and technology with a political outcome or choice. The premise is simple: if the assumptions of rational choice are able to explain the market, then they can explain the political functioning. It establishes a direct analogy between consumers and voters and between enterprises and political parties. If companies seek to maximize profits and consumers act to maximize the utility, we can, then, theorize in the sense that voters seek to maximize the utility of their vote as the parties act to maximize electoral gains obtained from their political proposals.

*Our main thesis is that parties in democratic politics are analogous to entrepreneurs in a profit-seeking economy. So as, to attain their private ends, they formulate whatever policies they believe will gain the most votes, just as entrepreneurs produce whatever products they believe will gain the most profits for the same reason. In order to examine the implications of this thesis, we have assumed that citizens behave rationally in politics. This premise is itself a second major hypothesis(Downs, 1957, pp. 295-296).*

The operation of the model is based on three fundamental premises: (1) all decisions — those that are made by voters and political parties — are rational, ie, guided by self interest and enforced in accordance with the principle of maximization of action's utility; ( 2) the democratic political system implies a level of consistency that supports predictions about the consequences of decisions made by voters and political parties, ie, their agents — voters, parties and government — are responsible and trustworthy, which makes it possible to make predictions about the consequences that result from different choices, and (3) the democratic system assumes — despite the consistency stated in the previous point — a level of uncertainty, sufficiently important to allow different options.

### **3.1 Maximizing the action's utility**

The concept of rationality is of key importance in understanding the theory of rational choice and it is important to clarify that in Downs' economic theory, rationality is the assumption that voters and political parties act directly according to the their own interests. From this perspective, the term rationality is applied in the sense that the means used are appropriate to the goals,

*This follows from the definition of rational as efficient, i.e., maximizing output for a given input, or minimizing input for a given output. Thus, whenever economists refer to a 'rational man' they are not designating a man whose thought processes consist exclusively of logical propositions, or a man without prejudices, or a man whose emotions are inoperative. In normal usage all of these could be considered rational men. But the economic definition refers solely to a man who moves toward his goals in a way which, to the best of his knowledge, uses the least possible input of scarce resources per unit of valued output (Downs, 1957, p. 5)*

According to this understanding of rationality, elections serve to choose a government and, consequently, rational behavior in an election is one that is oriented towards this objective and not to any other.

The axiom of self-interest applies equally to activities of political parties. According to rational choice theory, political parties seek to win elections, not by any altruistic

motive relating to the application of a political program, but to gain prestige for itself and the gains inherent to being in power. Since the prestige and profits that political parties pursue is concretized by electoral victories, then we can say that the main objective of parties is winning elections. The rational objective is materialized if they can get more votes than any other party. Namely, the activities of political parties is itself guided by the principle of utility maximization of action: *"Upon this reasoning rests the fundamental hypothesis of our model: parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies."*(Downs, 1957, p. 28)

### 3.2 Consistency

The rationality of the political system derives from the fact that voters, political parties and government have always several interconnected options available to choose from, ordered from most to least favorable. The order of preference is transitive so that if the subject prefers A to B and B to C then also prefers A to C (Downs, 1957).

Under this approach, when faced with two alternatives, the rational subjects compare the expected benefits of each option. In cases of electoral choice, they compare the expected results for the election of the party in government, with the expectation of earnings in case of winning the opposition party. If the difference between these two values is positive, they vote for the governing party. If the difference is negative, they vote for the opposition. If the value is zero, they will abstain from voting.

The rational choice presupposes, therefore, not only the possibility of making predictions about the behavior of other individuals, political parties and government, but also the possibility to compare them. The question that arises is how that subjects calculate the expected value in each of the alternatives. In relation to the government party, they may calculate the expected value according to the previous action of that party, assuming there will be continuity of policy pursued while in government, however, the opposition party does not have an indicator of the same nature. Once the hypothesis is that the rational comparison is one that uses the same time unit as a benchmark, ie, the mandate that expires, then the voter compares the performance of the government party to what is supposed that each opposition party would have done if they had still been in government. Of course, calculating this differential can only be done if we assume that parties are responsible and reliable, ie that there is consistency in their behavior. If there is any consistency in the behavior of political parties and government, this situation leads to the impossibility of rational choice and consequently the collapse of the democratic system.

### 3.3 Uncertainty

We saw earlier that the rational choice theory argues that the rationality of political behavior leads voters and parties to act according to their own interests. In the case of political parties is their interest to enjoy the benefits of exercising power and the benefits it brings. Once that is achieved only by obtaining more votes than other parties, we would expect rational behavior of parties would lead them to defend the proposals that safeguard the interests of the majority of the electorate and that this move would lead inevitably to a situation of non-differentiation of their proposals. We note, however, that this is not what happens. Political parties argue and present proposals to the electorate sufficiently differentiated to mobilize voters to turnout. According to Downs (1957) the diversity of societies and social conflicts introduce levels of uncertainty that lead both to the emergence of ideologies and ambiguity in relation to social groups that may be more useful for the electoral victory, and consequently, the differentiation of the proposals submitted by political parties.

The dynamism of democratic societies also highlights the uncertainty about the electoral effects that can be obtained with proposals that appeal to some social groups but displease others. According to the model, the parties define their ideologies in order to maximize support among the largest possible number of social groups. We have, once again, a perfect analogy with the economic explanation for the functioning of the markets. If the electoral market (political system) is dominated by one brand (political party), other brands only can grow if they bet on strategies that enhance the specific needs of a market niche (social minority groups) not satisfied with the products (policy proposals) provided by the big brand (dominant party) and/or the specific needs of a significant fringes of consumers (voters) of this dominant brand (party).

*For example, let us assume that three parties form and appeal to three different social groups, and one of these parties consistently wins by overwhelming votes. In order to 'get back in the swim', the other two parties must revise their ideologies to attract votes from the same groups as perennial winner. Then each party will be trying to combine a specific segment of the predominant group with parts of minority groups for electoral votes (Downs, 1957, p. 101).*

This movement to adjust the parties' election proposals to the interests of social groups is limited by the need for consistency to which we referred earlier. So that voters may consider a party in their calculations on the differential gain, it is important that they can predict their future behavior from their political discourse and in relation to their actions in the past, ie the party must be reliable and responsible. The consistency required to produce forecasts of the performance of the parties is, therefore, implied by the existence of ideological coherence and inertia.



The rational choice theory considers that what matters to voters is not ideology but concrete actions that governments take. However, voters do not know in detail all government decisions and it takes effort to fully understand and evaluate all the consequences. Thus, the ideologies of parties allows them to focus their analysis on only a few variables and making generalizations from this sample for all other proposals of that party: *“With this short cut a voter can save himself the cost of being informed upon a wider range of issues”* (Downs, 1957, p. 98).

Although what matters to voters are not the intentions or the political discourse of the parties, ie, their ideology, but their concrete actions, the rational choice theory argues that the comparison between ideologies is only used if the voter already has previously concrete indicators relating to actions carried out effectively. If the voter does not have any previous data on the concrete actions of the parties and they are only able to distinguish them by their ideology, this means in practice that they are equal with regard to the interests of the voter.

### 3.4 Spatial representation

Downs (1957) represents the relative positioning of political parties and voters using a spatial analogy build on the work of Harold Hotelling (1929) and Smithies (1941) that consists in representing the political preferences of voters on a linear scale numbered from left to right, from zero to one hundred. Voters and political parties have a certain place on the scale according to their political position. As mentioned above, voters tend to choose the parties that are closest to their position and the parties will tend to position themselves at a point on the scale that maximizes the number of electoral votes. If a voter is placed in the position 35 of the scale, we can deduce that when he have to choose between a party located at position 30 and another located in the position 25, he will choose that one that is in the position 30. Likewise, he will prefer a political party in the position 40 for another in position 45. This means that if voters are scattered in the range according to a distribution with only a mode, parties tend to put themselves also on this mode and, therefore, to approach each other. If voters are spread to create multiple modes over the scale, that fact will lead each of the political parties to put up near one of these mode which will cause a breach between them<sup>2</sup>.

### 3.5 Strategic vote

According to the model, the decision to vote in an election is supported by an irrational belief about the effectiveness of such action. As the elections are aimed at choosing the government and not the expression of preferences, the voter will evaluate

the chances of that party winning the election: “Each citizen uses his forecast to determine whether the party he most prefers is really a part of the relevant range of choice. If he believes it is not, then rationally commands him to vote for some other party” (Downs, 1957, p. 48).

This decision by strategic voting depends not only on the assessment of the chances of the favorite party winning, but also the risk of the elections being won by a political party considered undesirable. The decision by strategic voting will depend largely on the importance that the subject goes to the need to keep a certain party out of government.

*For example, let us assume that there are three parties: Right, Centre and Left. Voter X prefers Right to Centre and Centre to Left, but he believes that Right has the least chance of winning. If he greatly prefers Right to Centre and is almost indifferent between Centre and Left, he is less likely to switch his vote from right to Centre than if he slightly prefers Right to Centre but abhors Left* (Downs, 1957, p. 49).

According to the model of rational choice, the likelihood of citizens to vote is higher if their expectations regarding the critical importance of their vote and the expected benefits from voting are larger than the costs. Faced with the choice between several candidates the voter must determine what the difference to their interests, resulting in victory (or loss) of candidate A, B or C. If this analysis does not expect significant differences associated with victory or defeat of any candidates, the potential benefit of voting is zero and the higher the probability of not participating in the elections. Likewise, if the voters realize that their vote will not have decisive importance for the election result, the probability of not voting increases.

Blais (2000) presents a critical analysis of this theory based on the finding that, “*unfortunately for the theory, many people do vote. In fact, a clear majority vote in the most important elections, where the numbers of voters is extremely large and the probability of casting a decisive vote is minuscule*” (p. 2). Research conducted by Blais allowed him to conclude that the rational choice model has a very low explanatory power of voting behavior. In fact, the results of their study show that about half of voters vote without making any calculation of costs and benefits, but being driven by duty to vote. Even among those whose sense of duty is not so strong, the variables related to the benefits and costs of voting do not have the influence that the rational choice model predicts. Blais (2000) concludes that even the cost seems to have no significant influence on voting behavior. Given the initial estimates of the model, he found that voters are more likely to vote if they feel that their vote can make a difference, but overestimate its importance. What seems to work is not the perception that one vote can make a difference, but that the result can be very close:

*Some people may reason that they decide not to vote, that decision would imply that others*

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with similar political attitudes will also abstain ... that is each citizen may regard his or her single vote as diagnostic of millions of votes, which would substantially inflate the subjective probability of one's vote making a difference (Blais, 2000, p. 139).

This same criticism had been made previously by Uhlan (1989), who concluded that the rational theory has difficulty in explaining individual participation in collective action, which in the case of voting behavior, was tantamount to finding that "*Unfortunately for theory, people do vote*" (p. 300). Green and Shapiro (1994) took this and other arguments of a methodological nature in what is one of the most important critics of rational choice theory. The approach of these authors focuses on methodological issues, which criticize the post hoc development of the theory: "*many of the methodological failings of applied rational choice scholarship are traceable to a style that places great evidence on the development of post hoc accounts of known facts*" (Green & Shapiro, 1994, p. 34), the absence of empirical tests: "*those who seek to derive testable propositions from rational choice models frequently find, moreover, that these theories are constructed in ways that insulate them against untoward encounters with evidence*" (p. 38), as well as the selection, use and interpretation of selected data: "*the biased fashion in which evidence is selected. (...) subtler ways in which evidence is projected from theory rather than gathered independently from it. (...) the strategic retreat from domains in which the theory is found to perform poorly*" (p. 42). Voter turnout, which the authors analyze in detail in his book, is used to illustrate the methodological weaknesses that link to rational choice theory:

*For our purposes, the case of voter turnout is interesting not because it is a failure but because it illustrates the characteristic ways that rational choice theorists have reacted to discrepancies between theory and observation. In their resolute determination to declare some variant of rational choice theory victorious over evidence (or, alternatively, to declare peace with honor through artful domain restriction), rational choice theorists have trotted out an astonishing variety of conjectures about the costs and benefits of voting, in the process generating an enormous literature, possibly larger in terms of academic citations and sheer bibliographic length than any other rational choice literature in American politics. (Green & Shapiro, 1994, pp. 47-48).*

This underlying requirement that voters have accurate and detailed information about their interests and parties proposals is the main weakness of this model. The proponents of this approach try to overcome this weakness using the concept of heuristics and cognitive shortcut to explain how voters would be able to make decisions based on little information (Lupia, McCubbins, & Popkin, 2000; Popkin, 1994; Simon HA, 1955, Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991). It is argued that voters, unable to cope with the complexity and information overload, used indicators such as the positions taken in relation to candidates and electoral issues by certain media, public figures,

organizations or entities, heuristics for reasoning about the interest of the electoral proposals. What we are talking about is not, however, information about political issues and electoral proposals, but the trust that voters have in sources of heuristic reasoning. Lacking information on the issues and electoral proposals, voters believe the position of a candidate is favorable or unfavorable to their interests according to the trust they place in a medium of mass communication, in an organization, an entity or a personality. That is, voters decide, in fact, based on trust, not based on the information. Then we returned to the proposals of the sociological model — that people vote according to their social group —, and psychosocial — that people vote according to their partisanship.

This brief presentation of the main explanatory models of electoral behavior allows us to identify a complementarity between them. The sociological models value the contribution of social and historical contexts that gave rise to the emergence of political parties and that, according to this view, justify the party political divisions and the resulting behavior of voters; the rational or economic models that considers the crucial role in shaping the voting behavior is played by the evaluation of political and economic factors that characterize each election *per se*; the psychosocial models put emphasis on the relationship between these two types of factors (distal and proximal), a relationship that is mediated and moderated by the psychological link established between voters and political parties, ie, partisanship.

Antunes (2008), in a study into the reasons that lead individuals to change their vote from one election to another, argues that studies which take as a theoretical reference to the sociological model (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) or psychosocial approach (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, Miller & Shanks, 1996) provide a consistent explanation for the stability of electoral choices, but show to be quite fragile in clarifying the reasons why some voters to vote differently in consecutive elections. In turn, the approaches in the framework of rational choice theory (Buchanan & Tullock, 2001; Downs, 1957), although they provide interesting clues for understanding the fluctuations in voting behavior, are insufficient when it comes to explain the fact that a considerable majority of voters vote with a remarkable stability.

To bridge this gap and integrate the contributions of all these approaches Antunes (2008) proposes a revision of the central concept of the psychosocial approach partisanship in the light of current studies of social identity, trying to show, theoretically and empirically, that the reconceptualization of the concept of partisanship helps to explain situations where changes in electoral behaviour occur, maintaining the potential of the psychosocial model in understanding the stability of voting options.

As we have seen, in its traditional sense, the concept of partisanship was modelled

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from the concept of reference group (Hyman & Singer, 1968; Merton & Kitt, 1950) paradigm of research groups led by social psychology in the middle of last century that emphasized subjective belonging to a group. Also relevant in this adaptation of research from social psychology to the study of voting behavior was the idea of anticipatory socialization, introduced by Merton and Kitt (1950) to define the situations in which the subjects chose a reference group to which they did not belong, acting according to what they perceive as being the standards of that group. The importance of this perspective of partisanship as a subjective belonging to a group is better understood if we consider that the psychosocial model of electoral behavior has emerged as a response to difficulties of the sociological model (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) to effectively articulate the influence of belonging to social groups with the intervention of proximal factors. The sociological model, although it provides a plausible explanation for the fact that most people from one social group vote a certain way, can not explain, equally plausibly, the reason why people belonging to certain social groups do not vote according with the majority choice among members of these groups. By shifting the focus of the membership belongs to the subjective lens, placing the definition of partisanship on the interaction between distal social factors and proximal economic variables, Campbell et al. (1960) solved this theoretical problem quite effectively. However, the decisive role of partisanship in the definition of the options to vote is challenged, because it appears that, contrary to the psychosocial model advocated, in each election a significant number of voters vote for a party other than that they identify with. In general, these critics use arguments which are based on rational choice theory (Downs, 1957), an approach focusing only on the influence of electoral proximal variables, namely economic factors.

It is therefore in this context that Antunes (2008, 2010) reconceptualised the concept of partisanship using the actual approach that the social psychology make to the social identity to support the general hypothesis that the changes that occur in the electoral choices of voters are not unpredictable but likely to advance according to their partisanship. It is argued that the limitations of the traditional concept of partisanship rooted in its conception as a stable cognitive entity and not as a process of self-categorization, dynamic and responsive to changes in the context, in which different levels of the same electoral identity coexist and are mutually interconnected (Oakes, 1987, 2003, Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2003; Turner, Hogg, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

In this scheme, the categories available to the subject, ie, political parties, would be organized in each voter — what Antunes (2008) has called the *subjective political field* — depending on their ability to describe reality and its emotional significance and relevance to the subject. The category which became more frequently used, due to its

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better adaptation to the political contexts in which the subject acts more frequently, takes a higher emotional value and occupies the central place in his *subjective political field*, becoming central in their electoral identity. It is that category (party) which, *in general* (as is asked in the evaluation question of partisanship), is adequate for most electoral and political situations. The other categories are organized in two groups according to whether or not that may be used in other contexts: those parties that are considered as referring always to outgroups, whatever is the situation (ie, those that are not, under any circumstances, electoral options); all other political parties that are *secondary partisanship identities*, that are accessible to the subject and can be mobilized if the specific context is set as the most appropriate.

This way of understanding party identification can accommodate the contribution of the three main theoretical approaches of electoral behavior, keeping the specific contribution of each one in the definition of the variables they consider essential in the definition of electoral choice.

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## **Notas**

1 This work is based on a chapter of the author's doctoral thesis, presented to the University of Coimbra in October 2008 titled "Party identification and voting behavior: structural factors, attitudes and changes in voting."

2 The model of spatial representation proposed by Downs sees the electoral choice based on proximity of the voters on the proposals of political parties. Other authors have developed models of spatial representation in which the choice does not arise only in the proximity, but also on variables such as directionality and intensity (Grofman, 1985; Matthews, 1979; Merrill III & Grofman, 1999; Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989).

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