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### **Voters in Context: The Politics of Citizen Behavior**

Walter J. Stone and Matthew K. Buttice

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*Edited by Jan E. Leighley*

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

Political behavior is a function of individual characteristics, the political and social contexts in which they are embedded, and interactions between context and individual variables. The studies and hypotheses organized on one dimension by two types of citizen response are addressed, these are: *engagement* and *choice*. The article also defines the strategic decisions of candidates and others who define the political context. The two aspects of this dimension are candidate *investment* and *differentials*. It is imperative to take full account of how competition between leaders stimulates citizen response. The study of how citizens react to the context facing them must also include theory and evidence about how that context gets defined. Formal theoretical work on candidate strategic choices, especially with respect to position-taking on the issues, has advanced, but research on many of the other choices that shape the political context is less developed.

Keywords: political behavior, citizen engagement, citizen choice, candidate investment, candidate differentials, voter

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The role of the people in the political system is determined largely by the conflict system, for it is conflict that involves the people in politics and the nature of conflict determines the nature of the public involvement.

E. E. Schattschneider (1975, 126)

Political scientists have profitably borrowed theoretical perspectives from sociology, psychology, and economics to explain why citizens behave as they do. These theoretical traditions, combined with a strong commitment to the sample survey, have resulted in a sophisticated understanding of voting behavior in national elections. Studies of citizen behavior have done an especially good job of incorporating individual characteristics in their explanations. Impressive gains have been made in our understanding of how the

social environment affects citizen behavior, (p. 556) while more work is needed to integrate the explicitly political environment into our research. The relatively low level of attention to the effects of political context is ironic, but understandable. It is ironic because we are, after all, *political* scientists. It is understandable because sample surveys provide individual-level variance and explanations; because the theoretical pedigree of much of our work in economics and social psychology lends itself to methodological individualism; and because of the importance of individualism in the political culture. However, a danger of methodological individualism is that the study of democracy will be reduced to the characteristics, qualifications, and behaviors of individual citizens.

Our starting point is that political behavior is a function of individual characteristics, the political and social contexts in which they are embedded, and interactions between context and individual variables. This point has long been recognized, including in works committed to the individual as the focus of analysis. One of the reasons Anthony Downs' *An Economic Theory of Democracy* is so influential is that spatial models of the sort it pioneered place candidates and parties in the same analytic framework as voters, offering important insights about the relationship between two central actors in a democracy. In a paper that illustrates the value of incorporating the Downsian framework into a study of individual voters, Charles Franklin (1991) concludes: "As we have become adept at studying voters, it is ironic that we have virtually ignored the study of candidates. Yet it is in candidate behavior that politics intrudes into voting behavior. Without the candidates, there is only the psychology of the vote choice and none of the politics."

One of the most important hypotheses from the spatial framework is that parties and candidates in a two-party system will, under certain circumstances, converge toward the preferences of the median voter (cf. D. Black 1958; Downs 1957). The median-voter hypothesis has led to speculation about why the parties and their candidates typically do not converge in the center of the political space. The dominant perspective in this literature is on the behavior of candidates and parties in response to electoral pressures, opportunities, and personal preferences (Adams, Merrill, and Groffman 2005; Enelow and Hinich 1984).

A much less common line of inquiry from the Downsian setup runs the other way: what is the effect of party/candidate positioning on voter behavior? Downs considered the possibility of a "fundamental tension" in his model, arising from parties' pursuit of office in conflict with the voter's interest in the party that promises the most utility. "if any party believes it can increase its chances of gaining office by discouraging voters from being rational, its own rational course is to do so...Thus if parties succeed in obscuring their policy decisions in a mist of generalities, and voters are unable to discover what their votes really mean, a rationality crisis develops" (Downs 1957, 138-9).<sup>1</sup> One hypothesis that emerges (p. 557) from this "crisis" is that when parties diverge voters can more easily distinguish between them and vote on their ideological preferences.

The example of how voters respond to party convergence illustrates the potential in the spatial-modeling tradition for thinking about how party and candidate strategic behavior affects voters. However, as noted, the bulk of the modeling and empirical literature builds on the Downsian setup by exploring the effects of voters on candidate and party behavior rather than vice versa. This strikes us as a significant lacuna, especially in the theoretical literature. What Schattschneider called the “nature of conflict” may be critical to understanding citizen behavior once individual differences, interests, and resources are taken into account. Indeed, differences in individual opinions, perceptions, and interests may reflect variation in the political context that results from candidate behavior.

What might a political theory of the citizen look like? The essential point is that citizens do not act as autonomous individuals. Important gains have been made recognizing the interdependence of citizens whose relationship to the political world depends on their interpersonal networks and social contexts (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992, 1995; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004; Mutz 2002). Emphasizing the political context suggests that it is not enough to think of citizens as motivated by interests because interests are activated or suppressed by the structure of conflict to which citizens respond. Of particular importance, we argue, are the strategic choices candidates make when they decide to invest in an electoral contest (first and foremost by entering as candidates), when they present their issue positions and priorities, and when they emphasize their personal qualities. Understanding the citizen response to these stimuli requires research designs that map these and other aspects of the political context onto survey studies.

## Political Research on the Citizen

Our focus is on studies and hypotheses organized on one dimension by two types of citizen response: *engagement* and *choice*. The second dimension of our concern is defined by the strategic decisions of candidates and others who define the political context. The two aspects of this second dimension are candidate *investment* and *differentials*. The core of our argument is that indicators of contextual variables measuring candidate investment and differentials external to citizen surveys are necessary to test hypotheses fundamental to understanding citizen engagement and choice in politics.

(p. 558)

### Aspects of the Political Context: Candidate Investment and Differentials

The strategic decisions potential candidates, candidates, party leaders, activists, and contributors make define the political context that shapes voter response. These decisions are “strategic” in that candidates and others are governed by their expectations

about success or failure based on how voters and other key actors will react to their decisions and behavior. For example, high-quality candidates run when they expect to win, and refrain from running when they judge their electoral prospects to be poor (Banks and Kiewiet 1989; G. Black 1972; Brace 1984; Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Rohde 1979; Squire 1995).

The first variable of interest in understanding the political context, therefore, is *investment*, the most important of which is made by skilled potential candidates when they decide whether to enter the race. Likewise, activists and professionals must decide whether to invest in a particular campaign by risking such scarce resources as their time, expertise, reputations, and money. These investments depend on the entry decisions of strong candidates. In a two-party system, if one side invests heavily and the other side's investment is minimal or non-existent, the campaign is one-sided with important consequences for how citizens respond (Zaller 1992). As investments equalize, the campaign's intensity grows with increases in visibility and mobilization.<sup>2</sup>

The choices posed by the candidates determine the *differentials* that are the second aspect of the context defined by candidate behavior. One important type of candidate differential is on policy. Candidates may adopt positions at the median voter's ideal point as Downs predicted, or they may be pulled toward the extremes by the preferences of primary constituencies, activists, and others whose preferences are at odds with the general electorate (Aronson and Ordeshook 1978; Baron 1994; Moon 2004). Because candidates often have histories as officeholders and activists, their ability to position themselves strategically may be limited. That may be especially true for incumbents, who have records they must defend. In addition, some models suggest that candidates are "policy seeking" in that their positions reflect sincere preferences on issues as well as strategic calculations (Wittman 1973, 1983).

Candidate valence differentials are defined by non-policy advantages one or the other side might have. The concept of valence issues was first introduced into political science by Donald Stokes (1963, 1992) in his critiques of the spatial model of elections. He defined valence issues as "those that merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the (p. 559) electorate" (Stokes 1963, 373). Political outcomes often turn on which party or candidate is associated with valued outcomes such as integrity in government, peace, and economic prosperity.

Since the publication of Stokes's articles, many have referred to valence as any non-policy advantage enjoyed by one candidate or party over the other. For example, Groseclose (2001, 862) equates a candidate's valence advantage to such factors as "incumbency, greater campaign funds, better name recognition, superior charisma, superior intelligence, and so on."

Rather than the broad definition of valence that includes any non-policy advantage, we limit candidate valence differentials to differences based on outcomes such as a robust economy or to those defined by personal qualities intrinsically valued in candidates by voters, such as personal integrity and competence (Bianco 1994; McCurley and Mondak

1995; Miller 1990; Mondak 1995). Valence differentials based on qualities and outcomes intrinsically favored by voters may affect citizen behavior directly because of differences in candidate skills, qualities, and attributes. In contrast, candidate differentials that reflect differences in investment such as financial resources are not intrinsically valued by voters, although they may be instrumental to winning office. Differences in investment produce citizen response for reasons of visibility, not because they represent qualities voters value in their representatives. They fundamentally reflect differentials based on investment rather than valence, as we define it.

Candidate investments and differentials shape citizen response, but they also interact with one another. For example, candidates and potential candidates who are experienced, competent, and dedicated may be especially reluctant to enter a race unless they are confident of their prospects. Such candidates may also be better able to attract investments both because contributors and activists value these qualities in candidates they support and because these qualities explain which candidates are electable (Stone and Maisel 2003). Another example is in the conditional relationship between candidate valence and position taking. Some studies suggest candidates with a valence advantage take positions closer to the median voter, while others contend that a valence advantage frees candidates to take more extreme positions consistent with their own policy preferences (Adams et al. 2005; Burden 2004; Groseclose 2001; Moon 2004). Disadvantaged candidates on valence or investment grounds may be compelled to take more extreme positions on the issues in order to have a chance of winning (Groseclose 2001; Moon 2004).

Thus, although we can distinguish conceptually between dimensions of the political context that may be relevant for understanding voters' responses,<sup>3</sup> the (p. 560) relationships among contextual factors and the ways they play out in political campaigns are likely to be complex. Valence and policy differentials between candidates and parties may create interesting strategic tradeoffs; investigating how candidate investments and differentials relate to one another should be a high priority.

## Political Context and Citizen Engagement

Citizen engagement, including participation, interest, and awareness, is the subject of an enormous literature (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). As Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and Jan Leighley (1995) point out, much of this research emphasizes individual-level explanations, especially those related to the SES model, without sufficient attention to the mobilizing force of political campaigns and other aspects of the political context. Writing at about the same time, John Aldrich (1993) sought to reinterpret the “failures” of rational-choice models of voter turnout in light of investment decisions made by strategic politicians, while Leighley (1995) emphasized political context as one leg of her tripartite analysis of the sources of political participation. In keeping with the hypothesis that investments by politicians mobilize citizens to participate, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, 164–5)

demonstrate that citizen contacts increase in close elections at the presidential, gubernatorial, or congressional levels. The hypothesis that competitive elections increase turnout receives widespread support (Blais 2000; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Patterson and Caldeira 1983). Alternative modes of participation such as working for the parties and donating money also increase with the competitiveness of the campaign (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 130–1).

Other forms of citizen engagement besides participation are also affected by how competitive the election is. For example, campaign intensity boosts voter awareness of the candidates, as well as voter ability and willingness to express positive or negative affect toward the candidates, especially of the challenger, who is new to the voter (Gronke 2000; Kahn and Kenney 1999). In her study of Senate elections, Kam (2006) demonstrates that intense campaigns increase the amount of “open-minded” and “effortful” thinking by citizens.

Aldrich (1993, 268) states the importance of candidate investment for citizen engagement: “Strategic politicians will invest more heavily in the closest contests, and this investment will be reflected in increasing levels of turnout, even if voters do not consider the closeness of the contest.” The link between the competitiveness of an election and investments made by strategic candidates at the heart of Aldrich's argument offers “a richer, highly political, and strategic account of campaigns and elections” (Aldrich 1993, 274). Aldrich drew on the work of Jacobson and Kernell (1983) showing that strategic entry in congressional (p. 561) elections by high-quality candidates both anticipates and shapes voter response. This account recognizes that candidate investment is an important explanatory factor, although competitiveness may also reflect the underlying distribution of citizen preferences.

In addition to the effects of investment on citizen engagement, candidate policy and valence differentials may stimulate voter participation by influencing the “B” term in the calculus of voting (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). A large valence differential results when one candidate is associated with undesirable outcomes such as a recession or high crime rate. Scandal often signals a valence differential in the personal competence or integrity of the candidates. The burden would be to demonstrate that valence effects of whatever sort on citizen engagement are distinct from investment or policy effects.

## Political Context and Voting Choice

Voter choice, including such closely allied concepts as candidate affect and relative candidate evaluation, is the second category of citizen response. Voter choice should depend on candidate policy and valence differentials. These hypotheses are well known to all political scientists who study citizen behavior, as are the problems with testing them on individual-level data. However, unlike studies of the effects of candidate investment and competition on citizen engagement, research on choice has not typically relied on external indicators of the independent variables. There are exceptions in studies of

candidate differentials on ideology (e.g., Kahn and Kenney 1999; Wright and Berkman 1986; Zaller 2004) and valence studies that link a candidate or party to economic outcomes (Lewis-Beck 1990; Markus 1988; Partin 1995). But we know of no non-experimental studies of the effect of valence differentials based on the personal qualities and skills of the candidates.<sup>4</sup> The typical approach is either to rely on voter perceptions of candidate valence characteristics or issue positions, or, in studies of voting choice, to leave candidate positions implicit and rely on voter positions to motivate choice (Jacobson 2009; Miller and Shanks 1996).

Voting choice may also reflect candidate investments, especially to the extent that investments create differences in candidate visibility. As Fiorina put it in a homage to Stokes and Miller's (1962) seminal article on voting in congressional elections, "to be known at all is to be known favorably" (Fiorina 1989, 22). Strictly speaking, the hypothesis is that visibility *per se* increases support. Problems with (p. 562) testing the hypothesis on ordinary survey data abound. Respondent reports of exposure to candidate messages may be contaminated by a tendency to remember contacts by candidates the respondent is otherwise predisposed to support. Even when such biases are controlled, as in experiments where exposure to information about the candidate is manipulated (Cover and Brumberg 1982; Gerber and Green 2000), the exposure itself usually carries a message about the candidate with substantive content about policy positions or valence. Therefore, it can be difficult to separate exposure effects from valence and policy differentials.

In short, much of the literature on citizen response to political context can be reduced to a two-by-two matrix defined by candidate investment and differentials on one dimension, and by citizen engagement and choice on the other. Thinking of it this way suggests several core hypotheses:

**(1) Mobilization hypotheses:**

- a.** The greater the investment in the campaign by candidates and their surrogates, the higher the level of citizen engagement.
- b.** The greater the policy and valence differentials of candidates, the higher the level of citizen engagement.

**(2) Voting choice hypotheses:**

- a.** All else equal, voters support the candidate with an investment advantage.
- b.** The greater the issue differences between candidates, the stronger the effect of voter issue preferences on choice.
- c.** Voter choice reflects candidate valence differences.

These hypotheses are not startling or new; all are investigated at considerable length in the literature. We state them, in fact, precisely because they are so fundamental, and because they highlight our argument that context has been unevenly and incompletely incorporated into the study of citizen behavior.

## Limitations of a Voter-centered Approach

The study of citizen behavior must not be limited to the citizen. This is best illustrated by reexamining the effects of candidate differentials on voter choice, which are among the most central problems for research on contemporary democracy. Studies that rely on individual perceptions of candidate issue or policy positions or on assessments of candidate traits must contend with perceptual biases and rationalization effects that contaminate estimates of policy and candidate valence differentials. Individuals generally process information with a bias toward maintaining previously held beliefs (Kunda 1987, 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000; Taber and Lodge 2006). Thus, to rely on individual respondents' perceptions of candidate positions on the issues or an ideological scale is to risk hopelessly entangling perception and reality (Bartels 1988; Brody and Page 1972; Conover and Feldman 1986, 1989; Evans and Anderson 2004). Likewise, we want to know whether candidates who are more honest, competent, and dedicated to public service attract votes over competitors low in these qualities, but voter perceptions and the reality of the choices presented them on such valence characteristics are difficult or impossible to sort out (Bartels 2002; Fischle 2000; Lebo and Cassino 2007; McGraw et al. 1996). The ideal is to avoid voter perceptions entirely—to design research that relates voter response to candidate attributes known to the investigator in experimental settings or in field surveys matched to external indicators, rather than as perceived by survey respondents.

The vast “issue voting” literature rests primarily on characteristics of individuals, rather than the choices they are actually presented, and illustrates the benefits of employing explicit measures of the political context, rather than relying on indicators internal to the sample survey. The authors of *The American Voter* specified three conditions for issue voting that have shaped much of the work on the subject (Campbell et al. 1960, 169–70; cf. Converse 1964):

- (1) The issue must be cognized in some form.
- (2) It must arouse some minimal intensity of feeling.
- (3) It must be accompanied by some perception that one party represents the person's own position better than do the other parties.

This way of framing the issue-voting hypothesis places the burden on individual voters by specifying “conditions” that the voter must meet in order for the hypothesis that candidate policy differentials drive voter choice to be accepted. The conditions specified by the authors of *The American Voter* are better considered as related to the mobilization or engagement hypotheses. Thus, for example, voters are more likely to be aware of candidate differentials on the issues when candidates adopt distinct positions. It is possible that voters' issue cognition results from candidate investment; another possibility is that an interaction between candidate investment and differentials is necessary to activate voter awareness. The point is that *both* the opinions and perceptions listed and the phenomenon of interest—voting choice based on candidate differentials—are dependent on unmeasured variables that define the political context (cf. Zaller 1992).



Moreover, the tests offered by *The American Voter* and scholars working in that tradition *fail to address hypotheses implied by an expressly political approach to issue voting*. Put another way, missing data on measures of the *American Voter* conditions for issue voting, such as awareness of candidate differences, has political meaning if it reflects respondent reaction to the political context.

A similar point applies to efforts to assess the effects of valence differentials (often framed around candidate traits). In order to test for either valence or issue voting, we must have independent measures of the relevant candidate differentials said to drive the behavior of voters. The notion of valence is based on the idea that everyone values the qualities or outcomes in question, which means that candidate (p. 564) differentials are critical (is one candidate more honest or competent than the other? Is one party responsible for economic malaise?). Studies that rely on perceptions assume that voter response must be memory-based and that perceptions reflect actual valence differentials, both of which are questionable claims. This is what led to Franklin's previously quoted observation that ignoring candidates leaves only the psychology of voting, without the politics.

Hypotheses incorporating individual and political-context variables often specify conditional, or interactive, relationships. This is evident from the original formulation offered by Downs in spelling out his "rationality crisis." When parties converge they make it difficult or impossible for voters to rely on ideology; when they diverge, voters can choose on the basis of these considerations (Abramowitz 1981; Lachat 2007). In an intriguing analysis of variations in the context of presidential elections between 1948 and 2000, John Zaller (2004) shows that valence effects in the form of presidential performance on the economy vary by individual voters' political information levels. Thus, performance on the economy affects voting choice differentially, with low-information voters more sensitive to variation in the performance of the economy than high-information voters. Likewise, parallel effects of candidate policy differences are evident, as information levels in the electorate temper the impact of policy differences (Zaller 2004, 190).

One of the most developed areas of work on context effects examines "campaign effects" in US congressional elections (Brady and Johnston 2006; Hillygus, this volume, Chapter 18). While there is substantial research on candidate investment in the form of spending and experienced challenger entry (Jacobson 2006), it is often difficult to separate such effects from the impact of candidate valence. For example, Kenny and McBurnett (1994) present a nuanced analysis of the interactive effects of individual and context variables, such as interest and candidate spending, on voter choice. However, without explicit measures of candidate valence differentials, we cannot determine whether the effects are due to visibility owing to investment, or if voters are actually picking up on substantive differences between candidates on valence characteristics.

## Design Implications and an Example

One way of including explicit measures of the political context that are independent of respondent perception or recall is to turn to laboratory experiments. Fortunately an emerging literature employing experimental techniques in political science is making rapid progress toward addressing many of the issues we have pointed out (Davenport, Gerber, and Green, this volume, Chapter 5; Fridkin and Kenney, this volume, Chapter 4). Work on the effects of media advertising that directly or indirectly addresses citizen response to various ways of defining candidate valence and issue differentials is one example, with respect to both citizen (p. 565) engagement (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Brader 2005; Brooks and Geer 2007; Clinton and Lapinski 2004; Freedman, Wood, and Lawton 1999; Geer and Geer 2003) and vote choice (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Brader 2005; Freedman, Wood, and Lawton 1999; Kahn and Geer 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Schultz and Pancer 1997).

A second approach is to incorporate into survey designs conducted in natural settings independent measures of the political context. Research that captures media exposure and broadcast rates in the markets in which respondents reside is an example (Goldstein and Ridout 2004). We conducted a study of the 2006 US House elections designed to assess the relevance of the political context alongside personal factors. Our approach is to rely on political experts sampled from the same districts from which voter respondents were surveyed. In the month before the 2006 election, we posed questions to 2004 Democratic and Republican national convention delegates and state legislators about the incumbent and the challenger, the district, and the content and conduct of the campaign. Of particular interest to this illustration are questions put to experts about the ideological positions of the Republican and Democratic candidates and valence items designed to measure candidates' personal skills, qualities, and attributes of intrinsic interest to voters.<sup>5</sup> We aggregated individual expert valence ratings and perceptions of the candidates' locations to the district level, which provides estimates of the Democratic and Republican candidates' personal qualities and positions on the left-right scale independent of the perceptions of voters in the same districts.<sup>6</sup>

Our example tests the voting-choice hypotheses, each of which, we have argued, require external indicators of the policy and valence differentials that shape voters' context. As noted, *The American Voter* indicated that one important condition for issue voting is that voters are aware of the differences between the candidates. Voter perception of choice between the candidates is best thought of as a form of awareness or engagement and therefore should reflect the actual difference between the candidates, rather than being treated only as a condition that voters must meet in order to vote on the issues. A number of non-memory-based mechanisms such as online processing and opinion-leading in social networks could explain how (p. 566) candidate issue differentials influence voter choice without voters being able to report differences between the candidates on a survey.

Table 29.1 Individual's perception of an ideological choice between candidates

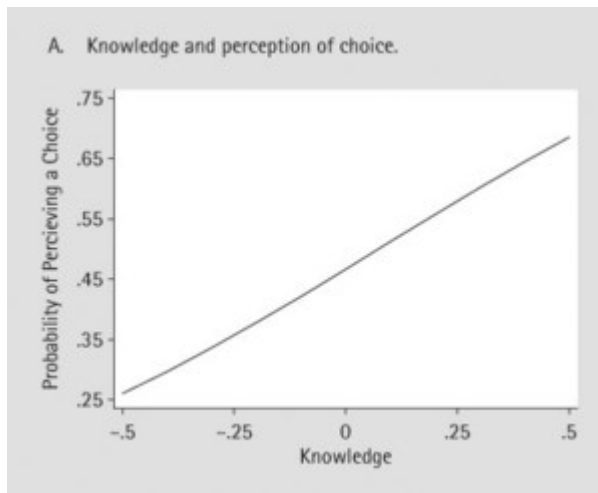
	Perception of Choice
<b>Candidates' Ideological Polarization</b>	<b>0.90 * (0.515)</b>
Individual's Political Sophistication	1.82 (0.128)
Individual's Education	0.04 (0.024)
Individual's Party Identification	0.20 (0.086)
Individual's Partisan Extremity	0.17 (0.024)
Individual's Ideological Extremity	0.02 (0.035)
Constant	-0.72 (0.113)
N	10821

(\*) Logit coefficient estimates and standard errors clustering on district in parentheses;

(\*)  $p < 0.05$  one-tailed test

We begin with voter awareness of an ideological difference between the candidates.<sup>7</sup> In keeping with our argument, awareness of a difference between the candidates should be a function of characteristics of individual respondents and of the political context to which they react. We measure the ideological polarization between the candidates in the district as the difference between informants' placements of the Republican and Democratic candidates. In addition to this aspect of the political context, we have individual characteristics that might affect respondents' perception of whether there was an ideological choice between the candidates in their district, including the political knowledge of the respondent, education, party identification, and ideological extremity. As the results in Table 29.1 show, all of the individual variables save ideological extremity have significant effects on perception of a choice, as does the degree of ideological difference between the two candidates in the district. Independent of these individual-level explanations, in other words, the political reality in the district, as reported by expert district informants, shapes voter perceptions. Figure 29.1 shows the magnitudes of the voter-knowledge and candidate-polarization effects, both of which are substantial.

(p. 567)



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Figure 29.1 The effects of knowledge and candidate polarization on voter perception of a choice between the candidates

The next step is to consider the factors that affected voting choice in 2006. A memory-based or perceptual model of issue voting consistent with the conditions spelled out in *The American Voter* might include the respondent's ideology, whether the respondent perceived a difference between the candidates, and the interaction between perceived choice and ideology. The interaction is

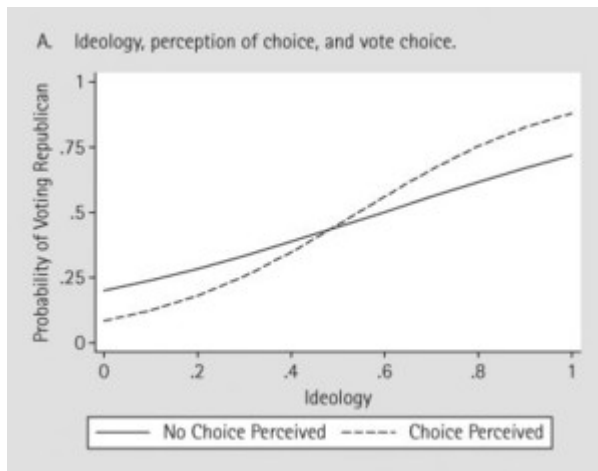
suggested by (p. 568) the expectation that the effect of voter ideology is conditioned on whether the individual perceives a choice between the candidates. We include political knowledge on the grounds that more aware voters should be more likely to rely on complex considerations such as ideology in casting their ballot (Basinger and Lavine 2005). The interactions in the upper section of Table 29.2 indicate that voter ideology has a stronger effect among respondents who perceive a difference between the candidates in their district than it does among those who do not see a difference. Likewise, as voters become more knowledgeable, the impact of ideology on vote choice increases significantly. The effects captured by the interaction coefficients are depicted in Figure 29.2 (A and B).

Table 29.2 Individual traits, contextual characteristics, and vote choice, 2006 House elections

	Vote Republican
<i>Individual-level Effects of Ideology</i>	
Individual's Ideology	2.08(0.379)
Individual's Perception of Choice	−0.99(0.349)
Individual's Political Knowledge	−2.37(0.572)
Ideology X Perception of Choice	2.05(0.526)
Ideology X Political Knowledge	4.44(0.921)
<i>Effect of Ideological Polarization between Candidates</i>	
Candidates' Ideological Polarization	−2.00(1.044)
Ideology X Ideological Polarization	4.08(1.583)
<i>Effect of Candidate Valence Differential</i>	
Candidates' Character Valence Differential	0.21(0.073)
<i>Individual-level Controls</i>	
Party Identification	2.60(0.190)
Presidential Approval	1.20(0.061)
Familiarity with Republican Candidate	0.46(0.190)
Familiarity with Democratic Candidate	−0.89(0.193)
Republican Incumbent	0.39(0.191)
Constant	−5.07(0.297)
N	7777

(\*) Logit coefficients with standard errors clustering on district in parentheses;

(\*)  $p < 0.05$  one-tailed tests

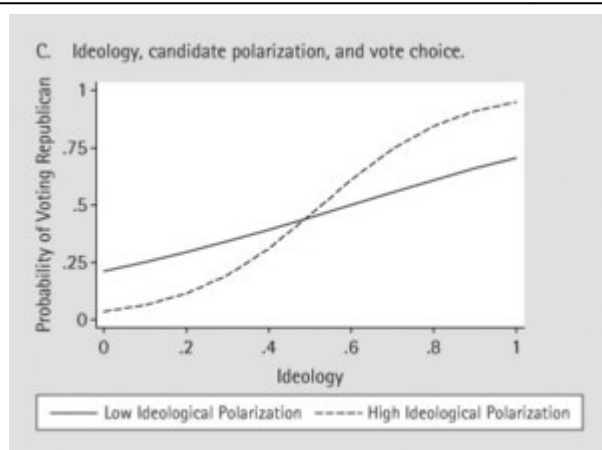


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Continued

The individual effects discussed so far are consistent with a standard treatment of issue voting. In addition to capturing differences linked to perceiving a choice and political knowledge, however, we also have an external indicator of candidate difference from the expert survey measuring how polarized the two major-party

candidates in the district were. The effect is quite strong, as the significant coefficient for the *Ideology X Ideological Polarization* term in Table 29.2, and the graphic representation in Figure 29.2C indicate. Even apart from the perceptual and (p. 569) knowledge conditions included in the statistical model, the effect of the candidates' ideology differential on the relationship between voters' ideology and their vote is strong. In fact, the external measure of ideological choice appears to have a stronger effect on the relationship between ideology and vote choice than individuals' own perception of a choice. In districts where the candidates are clearly differentiated in their ideological stands, respondent ideology has a powerful impact on voting choice. In districts where the candidate differential is low, ideology has a much weaker effect on vote choice. Moreover, *the effect of candidate* (p. 570)



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Figure 29.2 Interactions between ideology, polarization, knowledge, and perception of a choice, 2006

polarization is independent of whether the individual voter perceives a difference between the House candidates in his district. In sum, our analysis supports our contention that the conditions specified in *The American Voter* do not fully address the problem of issue voting because voter awareness about whether there is a difference between the candidates reflects the political context; and

because voter awareness of a choice is not a necessary condition for voter ideology to affect choice. Not only does ideology affect voting choice when voters do not see an ideological difference between the candidates, but the degree of difference between the candidates influences the effect of individuals' ideology on vote choice as much or more than voters' perception of candidate differences.

Note in addition to the conditioning effect of candidate differences, the character valence differential also affects voting choice.<sup>8</sup> The estimated difference in probability of voting Republican over the observed range of the candidate valence differential is .42. When the differential most favors the Democratic candidate, the estimated probability of voting Republican is .34; when the differential most favors the Republican, the probability of voting for that party is .76. This effect is striking, (p. 571) since it is independent of party identification, ideology, and incumbency. It is, to our knowledge, the first estimate of a candidate valence differential based on the personal qualities and skills of both candidates estimated in a national survey employing measures of those qualities external to the survey respondents' perceptions. Thus, we have evidence that both policy and valence candidate differentials affect voting choice independently of a number of individual-level variables commonly incorporated in models of voting choice, including perception of choice, familiarity with the candidates, party identification, and presidential approval.

## Conclusion

Heavy reliance on sample survey methodology combined with dependence on theoretical perspectives borrowed from economics and social psychology has nudged much of the politics out of many studies of citizen behavior. By focusing on the most commonplace questions and hypotheses, we have suggested some limitations associated with studies that do not situate the voter in the political context to which he or she reacts. Decades of research have established that models of the democratic citizen who is highly motivated to become informed about politics are unrealistic. To return to Schattschneider (1975, 138; emphasis in original), “*Democracy is a...political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process.*” In short, it is imperative to take full account of how competition between leaders stimulates citizen response.

Our study of how citizens react to the context facing them must also include theory and evidence about how that context gets defined. Inevitably, this will involve much more work on why and how candidates make the investments they make when they decide whether to run, and why they adopt the positions and emphasize the issue priorities that shape their campaigns. Formal theoretical work on candidate strategic choices, especially with respect to position-taking on the issues, has advanced, but research on many of the other choices that shape the political context is less developed. The implications and meaning of valence in elections, and the links between valence and policy debates, are not well understood. Moreover, as we have noted, the absence of appropriate tests of valence voting along dimensions related to the character and personal quality of candidates in field surveys is a major gap in the empirical literature. Voters care about policy and, given the chance, vote on policy differentials. But voters also care about (p. 572) character and competence in their political leaders. New approaches to supplement laboratory experimentation will have to be adopted to expand our understanding of how politics and the citizen interact if our understanding of citizen behavior is to advance.

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## Notes:

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(1) As Burden (2004, 211) put it: “Because ideology is all that matters [in the spatial model], candidates converge, leading to an election where ideology does not matter.”

(2) Campaign intensity, a variable often included in studies of citizen response to campaigns (Gronke 2000; Partin 1995; Westlye 1991), results from investment. As skilled candidates, parties, activists, and donors invest more in campaigns, more money is spent, candidates become more visible, media attention increases, and the level of competition grows.

(3) For an argument that employs different dimensions of the political context but anticipates ours in pointing to the importance of political context for understanding citizen behavior, see Sniderman (2000) and Sniderman and Levendusky (2007).

(4) In an innovative study of the effects of US House incumbent competence and integrity on voting choice, McCurley and Mondak (1995) incorporate external indicators of incumbent competence and integrity on constituent evaluations and voting choice. But their study lacks comparable data on House challengers, so it cannot measure the valence differential between candidates competing for the same votes.

(5) The items used to construct a valence index for each candidate asked district experts to rate each candidate's personal integrity; ability to work well with other leaders; competence; grasp of the issues; ability to find solutions to problems; qualifications to hold office; and overall strength as a public servant. These items formed an index distinct from campaign skills (by principal components analysis). For more detail, see Stone et al. (2008).

(6) Prior to computing district means of expert ratings, we adjusted individual expert ratings by the partisan congruity, since there is substantial partisan bias, especially in the valence items. We can partially validate the expert-based measure by comparing placements of incumbents by district experts with NOMINATE and ADA scores, which correlate strongly with the informant measure (.94 in both cases). For additional discussion, see Stone et al. (2008).

(7) The mass survey data are from the 2006 CCES common-content study (<<http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/index.html>>). Respondents were asked to place both candidates on a left-right scale. Respondents who said they did not know one or both candidates' locations, or who placed both candidates at the same point, are coded as not recognizing a difference. Respondents who placed the candidates at different points are coded as perceiving a difference; 54% of the sample did not perceive a difference between candidates.

(8) The difference is calculated by subtracting the Democratic candidate's personal-quality rating from the Republican candidate's rating in the district. Because all voters are assumed to prefer candidates whose character valence is high over candidates whose character is low, there is no need for voter perceptual data to test the character-valence hypothesis.

**Walter J. Stone**

Political Science, University of California, Davis

Walter J. Stone is a Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Davis.

**Matthew K. Buttice**

Political Science, University of California, Davis

Matthew K. Buttice is a Ph.D. candidate in the Political Science Department at the University of California, Davis.

