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Rationality and Voting

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Several years ago, in An Economic Theory of Democracy, Anthony Downs concluded that voting is likely to be an irrational act for an individual. That is, the likelihood that a single vote will determine the outcome of a national election is extremely small. Even granting a free election and a significant perceived difference between candidates or political parties, the costs of making up one’s mind and going to the polls are likely to exceed the individual’s probable utility or gain in terms of influencing the outcome of the election. Voting may thus be irrational in the economic sense of maximizing utility. Downs’ argument has spawned a series of attempts by mathematically-oriented formal theorists to demonstrate and operationalize the thesis that voting can indeed be considered rational. Several such attempts have appeared as articles in the American Political Science Review. Of particular interest here is the September, 1975 issue of the APSR, which contained an article by Gerald Strom, accompanied by four commentaries on a previous article dealing with the same subject, entitled “The Paradox of Not Voting: A Decision-Theoretic Analysis,” by Ferejohn and Fiorina.

* A revision of a paper presented at the 1979 Annual Meeting of the South Carolina Political Science Association.

** I would like to thank Thomas Halper and George Graham for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.


Ferejohn and Fiorina argue that voting can be considered rational (defined as purposeful) behavior by setting aside the usual criterion of maximizing utility. They propose a "minimax regret" principle, on the basis of which the rational citizen votes not because he holds any illusions about influencing the results of the election, but because of a calculation of the degree of regret he would feel if his candidate lost by a single vote. One of the commentaries on this article is by Stephen Stephens, who in two memorable pages utterly destroys the "minimax regret" principle. He attacks this particular piece on its own grounds, but in passing, Stephens inserts a single sentence which—to my mind—seriously damages most of the APSR articles on the subject. He writes:

We cannot pause to consider whether the voting act, any more than the sex act or any other darkly functional social behavior suffused with myth and ritual, is adequately treated with economic categories.\(^4\)

Stephens' point will be clear to anyone familiar with the literature of Psychology or Anthropology, with functionalism in Sociology and Political Science, or with discussions of symbolic politics. Murray Edelman (The Symbolic Uses of Politics) writes that politics always takes place on two distinct, but interrelated levels. On one level, politics is the calculating struggle for tangible benefits—for money, power and prestige. In this "real" world, feedback exists. Actions have direct, observable consequences, and mistakes can be corrected. (On this level, politics may be aptly described in terms of [economic] means-end rationality.) On a second level, however, politics consists of a series of pictures in the mind, of media images with emotional content. The pictures generated by the news media take place in a world with which the mass public has no direct contact, yet one which its members come to fear and applaud. Since politics in this sense is obviously important, yet remote, its processes are ideal objects for the displacement of private emotions, especially strong anxieties and hopes.\(^5\) On this level, economic categories are not appropriate. The means-end distinction breaks down, and efficiency—in terms of which economic rationality is usually evaluated—is not a relevant criterion.

It seems strange that a series of articles in the most prestigious of American political science journals could sustain serious damage from a

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\(^4\) Stephens, p. 914.

single sentence. The objective of this paper is to explain how and why this could happen, and to suggest an alternative approach to the problem of rationality and voting. More specifically, I suggest that positivist voting analysts would do well to base their work upon a more comprehensive understanding of "rationality."  

There is little question that formal theorists understand why people vote as well as do other political scientists. Gordon Tullock, for example, writes that there is a tendency to vote because of social pressure to do so, and that people have been socialized in such a fashion that they feel good after having voted.\(^6\) The real problem, it seems to me, is that these theorists begin with a technique—that of mathematical analysis—and this technique implies a particular theoretical, and indeed philosophical position. The best-known way to explain and describe voting with numbers is to adopt economic categories, and to consider the voting act in terms of utility.\(^8\) This in turn implies an economic definition of "rationality." However, since the entire meaning of voting cannot be explained in terms of rational choice by using Downs' definition of economic rationality, the formal theorists expand their definitions of the concept. In so doing, they misunderstand and distort the meaning of "rationality," plunge into realms where numbers may easily be misleading, and arrive at descriptions of the voting act which fly in the face


\(^7\) Tullock, p. 919. Some of these theorists do seem to misunderstand the nature of the voting act, however. Riker and Zavoina, for example, in the otherwise useful article cited above, write that "political followers, when they act politically (as in voting), are mainly engaged in joining coalitions. Hence the same activity of making coalitions is very much like the essential activity of politics." Ibid., p. 51. In saying this, they miss Edelman's point about politics occurring on two different levels. True enough, politics as the struggle for tangible benefits may resemble coalition games, but it would take a very special coalition game to simulate the "remoteness" of election politics for most people and the resultant lack of reliable feedback. Edelman, pp. 6-7, describes the function of remoteness in facilitating the employment of condensation symbols—as opposed to referential symbols. (Referential symbols are quick ways of referring to objective elements in a given situation—i.e. elements which different people in different situations identify in the same way. Condensation symbols evoke the emotions associated with the situation). Condensation symbols are less important where the immediate environment serves as a check on reality—as in most coalition games. In such games, one knows what is at stake and mistakes can be corrected. Most voters, however, cannot directly verify their impressions of candidates or policies.

\(^8\) Riker and Ordeshook (p. 25, ft. 2) note that Downs' theory is characterized as positive, but not descriptive. Thus, there is no reason to expect descriptive accuracy, "although in science one would expect to discard positive theories that are inadequate as descriptions." They go on to say that Gordon Tullock's theory of voting, in *Toward a Mathematics of Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 1968) Ch. 7, is intended to be descriptive. What seems inappropriate is these writers' insistence that an adequate theory must explain everything.
of common sense and observed experience—not to speak of the psychological literature on voting.°

To begin, it is instructive to compare the ways in which Anthony Downs and Ferejohn/Fiorina employ the concept “rationality.” Downs, writing in 1957, dedicates eight pages to a careful explication of his usage of the term. He initially defines rational action as that which is reasonably directed toward the achievement of conscious goals. What is most significant is that Downs limits himself to a narrowly economic view of rationality. Economic analysis, he notes, involves the fitting of means to ends. However, if multiple goals exist, means appropriate to one goal may block the attainment of another goal, and no unique course will be available to the rational decision-maker. To avoid this difficulty, it is assumed that firms maximize profits and consumers maximize utility. The term “rational” is applied only to means, not to ends, a point which follows from the definition of “rational” action as efficient action. An economically rational man is thus one who moves toward his goals in a manner which, to the best of his knowledge, uses the least possible input of scarce resources per unit of valued output. Downs wishes to avoid the circular conclusion that every man’s behavior is always rational because: “1) it is aimed at some end and 2) its returns must have outweighed its costs in his eyes or he would not have undertaken it.” 10

To avoid this pitfall, Downs focuses only upon the explicit political or economic goals of the particular individual or group. He gives the example of a man who for political reasons prefers one party, but votes for another to keep his wife from having tantrums. Such behavior, he notes, is quite rational personally for this man, but in Downs’ model is considered irrational because it employs a political device for a non-political purpose.” 11

In contrast to Downs, Ferejohn and Fiorina devote only one sentence of a footnote to explaining their use of “rationality.” They say that “... we use the expression ‘rational behavior’ in a nontechnical sense denoting purposeful behavior.” 12 The objective of their article is to demonstrate that voting can indeed be considered rational behavior, but upon close examination, a very curious fact appears. The “minimax-regret” principle means in essence that the rational citizen votes because he doesn’t want to feel bad, not because he thinks that he has any real

9 For citations to the key literature from both the “rational” and “psychological” schools of voting behavior, see H. T. Reynolds, “Rationality and Attitudes Toward Political Parties and Candidates,” Journal of Politics 37 (November 1974): 983-1005.
10 Downs, p. 7.
11 This summary of Downs’ position is from pp. 4-11 of his book.
12 P. 525.
chance of influencing the election. In other words, Ferejohn and Fiorina's "rational voter" is employing a political device for a non-political purpose—i.e. to keep from feeling bad. This is precisely what Downs considers irrational behavior in his more carefully defined model. What these authors have done, then, is to say that voting can be made a rational act by changing the definition of rationality. In doing so, to be sure, they are following the lead of Riker and Ordeshook, in their 1969 APSR article. These theorists are somewhat more explicit in explaining (again in a footnote) that they have adopted a broader conception of rationality, recognizing its tautological character. They define rationality as "the ability to order preferences and to choose the more preferred action over the less preferred," and say that "in this sense, almost all behavior is rational . . . ." 13

Riker/Ordeshook, Ferejohn/Fiorina, and Strom are all disturbed at the idea that voting may be an irrational act. Riker and Ordeshook say that their interest lies not with any ideological embarrassment which may result from this idea, but with the "bizarre" character of a non-explanatory theory. They write that "it is clearly no explanation to assign a sizeable part of politics to the mysterious and inexplicable world of the irrational." 14 Ferejohn and Fiorina echo these words, but complain that the earlier authors have not satisfactorily solved the problem. 15 Finally, and most recently, Strom says:

If Downs is correct, at least half of the American electorate is irrational. But of what validity is a rational choice theory which characterizes most individuals as irrational? 16

The above statements indicate a profound misunderstanding of the nature of "rationality." To begin with, Strom is unfair to Downs. Downs claimed only that voting is likely to be economically irrational, and was quite willing to admit that the voting act might be rational in non-economic terms. The subsequent theorists cited, however, apparently believe that economic rationality—defined as broadly as possible—is the only kind of rationality. Furthermore, they see irrationality as the only alternative to rationality. This is unfortunate, not only because it is untrue, but also because the term "irrational" has negative connotations in our culture. It is bad to be irrational. "Irrational" is also undesirable to these writers in a social science sense, in that the term seems to imply "inexplicable," and the purpose of a theory is, of course, to explain.

14 Ibid., p. 25.
15 Ferejohn and Fiorina, p. 525.
16 Strom, p. 908.
None of these conclusions is valid. Economic rationality is *not* the only kind of rationality, and serious difficulties follow when this claim is made. An action which is not rational is *not* necessarily irrational, and a "non-rational" action need *not* be considered inexplicable or bad.

It is a peculiar characteristic of the "voting paradox" literature that so many of its difficulties may be resolved by a re-reading of *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, the book which provoked the entire controversy. I have already noted the tendency of subsequent writers to reach "new" conclusions by re-defining "rationality." In broadening their definitions, however, these authors lose sight of the ambiguities, conflicts, and limitations inherent in the concept. They forget, for example, that rational behavior requires a predictable social order. Downs makes this clear in arguing that an economically rational man who knows what his preferred ends are cannot decide how to act in a chaotic, quasi-Hobbesian "state of nature."

Because government provides the framework of order upon which the rest of society is built, political rationality has a function much more fundamental than the mere elimination of waste in governing. Rational behavior is impossible without the ordered stability which government furnishes. But government will continue to furnish such stability only so long as it is rational. Thus political rationality is the *sine qua non* of all forms of rational behavior.\(^\text{17}\)

If Downs is correct, all rationality is contextual. In the absence of a context, action is not irrational (which implies an incorrect decision), but simply non-rational (which means that correct decisions are not possible). It also follows from what Downs has written that there are different types of rationality (political and economic at a minimum). And while this is less clearly implied, each type of rationality is applicable and relevant only under certain conditions.

Ironically, the "voting paradox" theorists, though for the most part political scientists and not economists like Downs, neglect political rationality. These writers rarely, if ever, explain voting in terms of the electoral function of maintaining the stability and legitimacy of the political order.\(^\text{18}\) It is important to understand just why this happens. The explanation, it seems to me, is very simple: the "political" function of elections does not fall within the economic definition of rationality. Political rationality can be independent of individual, purposive be-

\(^{17}\) Downs, pp. 10-11.

\(^{18}\) Shapiro, cited above, does distinguish between different aspects or "levels" of rationality, and is cognizant of political issues.
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behavior. Large numbers of people may vote because they consider it their duty to do so, but very few, it would seem, vote because they consider their vote to be required for the continued stability of the political system. Furthermore, even those who do believe this are likely to be mistaken. Several years ago, Seymour Martin Lipset popularized (but did not originate) the idea that a very high level of participation may be harmful to a democracy.\(^{19}\) Political rationality is not primarily a purpose of voting; it is a possible function of elections. Elections may serve to legitimate a political system (although in some circumstances an election may polarize the citizenry and in effect delegitimate the system), but this does not mean that people consciously do or should vote for this reason. Indeed, the stability of political systems does not depend in any very direct manner upon the conscious intent of individual citizens. All this is to say that political rationality is in large part reflected in collective and systemic behavior patterns, rather than in individual actions, or in actions of single organizations. Elections may thus be politically rational at the same time that voting is economically irrational for individuals.

Downs noted the interdependence of economic and political rationality, but it is also necessary to see the potential for conflict and incongruence between these and other types of rationality. Students of comparative politics, for example, have seen that the “rational” process of economic development is not always conducive to the equally “rational” process of political development.\(^{20}\) This point is also made in Paul Diesing’s book, *Reason in Society: Five Types of Decisions and Their Social Conditions* (1962),\(^{21}\) upon which my own understanding of “rationality” is fundamentally based. Attempts to predict, explain, or describe the individual voting act entirely in terms of means-end rationality are thus futile. In fact, much of the value of voting may depend upon economically irrational behavior. Elections give people a chance to express themselves and to enjoy a sense of participation. As Edelman observes, however, such participation is largely in the nature of a ritualistic act:

Like all ritual, whether in primitive or modern societies, elections draw attention to common social ties and to the importance and apparent reasonableness of accepting the public policies that are


\(^{20}\) Samuel P. Huntington notes that the frequency of revolution in Latin American countries is directly related to levels of economic development. *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 44.

adopted. Without some such device no polity can survive and retain the support or acquiescence of its members. The key point is, however, that elections could not serve this vital social function if the common belief in direct popular control over governmental policy through elections were to be widely questioned. The insistence of the most involved upon general participation in the rite is both understandable and functional in this light. So is the impression individual voters have of the reasoned basis for their votes.22

Considerable confusion might be avoided if formal theorists would adopt the multi-faceted conception of “rationality” elaborated in *Reason in Society*.23 Diesing describes two “aspects” and five types of rationality. The “substantial” and “functional” aspects of rationality are described as follows:

A decision or action is substantially rational when it takes account of the possibilities and limitations of a given situation and reorganizes it so as to produce, or increase, or preserve, some good. . . . An organization is functionally rational . . . when it is so structured as to produce, or increase, or preserve, some good in a consistent, dependable fashion.24

Formal theorists and many policy analysts tend to neglect the functional aspect of rationality. The central point, however, is that Diesing describes and interrelates five types of rationality: technical, economic, social, legal and political. The limitations of an analysis framed in terms of one type of rationality can thus be seen in light of the other modes of practical reason. Diesing’s description of social rationality is particularly relevant to the question of voting. It thus seems appropriate—without describing all five types of reason—to contrast his conception of social rationality with Downs’ view of economic rationality, which has already been presented.

Diesing describes rationality in terms of effectiveness, which he sees as being “the successful production of any kind of value, leaving

22 Edelman, p. 3.
23 Riker and Zavoina mention *Reason in Society* in a footnote, but have not adopted Diesing’s conceptualization of “rationality.”
24 A substantially rational decision:
“must be an effective response to the situation in that it produces some possible good, and the effectiveness must be based on intelligent insight rather than on luck.”

With respect to functional rationality:
“The consistently good results must be based primarily on an internal structure which is able to continue effective operation through variations of personnel and through changes of environment” (Diesing, pp. 3-4).
open and problematic the question of what kinds of value there may be.” Efficiency is simply a special kind of effectiveness. The value of efficiency is relevant to, and indeed defines, technical and economic rationality. Technical rationality is the efficient achievement of a single goal, and economic rationality is “the maximum achievement of a plurality of goals.” The economic definition of rationality can be expanded, but to do so—as has been done by proponents of systems analysis and program budgeting, as well as by our formal theorists—is to risk missing important distinctions and to ignore potential conflicts between the different types of rationality.

Social rationality, to Diesing, is the rationality of social systems. The basic trend of isolated social systems is toward greater integration, which produces stability and resistance to change because of the mutual support provided by the parts of an integrated social network.

A social system is integrated when the roles of which it is composed are internally consistent and fit together. More specifically, it is integrated when all the obligations belonging to a single role are consistent with one another, when the obligations of each role agree with the expectations other people have for that role, when both obligations and expectations are as consistent with ideals as external circumstances permit, and when the sequence of roles a person is expected to take are so similar and graduated that it is psychologically possible to grow into each successive role.

Diesing argues that the integrative trend would not be universal if it were not effective in some fundamental sense. This effectiveness, he writes, is that of promoting action.

Integration is a logical precondition for the successful completion of any social action. It makes action possible by (1) channeling the necessary emotional energy and preventing it from being diffused and lost; (2) eliminating conflicts, which would block action; (3) providing supporting factors which strengthen action and carry it to completion. Also (4) it makes action meaningful by relating it to past actions which it fulfills and to future actions which preserve and continue its achievement. An isolated action,

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25 Diesing, pp. 1-3.
27 See Diesing, pp. 2-3.
28 Ibid., p. 76.
with no history and no consequences, is insignificant; it disappears and is forgotten.\textsuperscript{29}

The fundamental characteristics of an integrated social system (role consistency, fitness of pairs of roles, continuity of role sequences, and adaptation to environment) become more pronounced as integration proceeds. Moreover, these structural characteristics imply a value system characterized by particularism, ascription and loyalty—values normally not conducive to means-end rationality.\textsuperscript{30}

The contrast between particularism, loyalty, and ascription values and universalism, impartiality and achievement values is part of a larger contrast between the ideally rational social and economic organization. These two stand as polar opposites in most respects. A social mode of organization relates and unites people with personal ties; an economic mode of organization separates people and things into distinct commodities. Each social relation is unique, personal, irreplaceable; each commodity is impersonal and interchangeable with all others.\textsuperscript{31}

Maximizing (economic) decisions begin with given ends, which are treated as isolated entities and are compared on some scale. In integrative (social) decision-making, ends are treated as symbols of hidden values, fears, and strains. There are no definite ends, means, or predictable outcomes, "because the desires and interests that could serve as ends are subject to unpredictable changes in the course of a decision . . . \textsuperscript{32} The means-end approach, which is characteristic of economic rationality, is essentially irrelevant. Only general situational goals such as "increase of problem-solving ability, balance of tension and

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., pp. 84-85.

\textsuperscript{30} For a defense of this position, see ibid., pp. 90-91.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., pp. 91-92. An interesting, although implicit, discussion of social rationality is found in \textit{Victims of Groupthink}, by Irving L. Janis (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967). Janis describes "Groupthink" as "a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures" (p. 9). He gives the following example:

"When conducting research on groups of heavy smokers at a clinic set up to help people stop smoking, I noticed a seemingly irrational tendency for the members to exert pressure on each other to increase their smoking as the time for the final meeting approached. This appeared to be a collusive effort to display mutual dependence and resistance to the termination of the group sessions" (ibid. p. 8).

What Janis considers an irrational tendency would be an example of social rationality in Diesing's framework. The fundamental problem with this book is that of failing to recognize the necessity of social rationality or Groupthink. People cannot function without emotional support.

ego-strength or improvement of communication . . ." are at all relevant—and these are not homogeneous, quantifiable goals. Integrative and economic decision-making also differ in that the former is largely an unconscious process in individuals and groups. But in spite of these differences, each type of decision-making depends upon and presupposes the other. The stability provided by integrated social organizations and personalities is a prerequisite for the existence of stable goals, and thus means-end reasoning. At the same time, socially rational organizations can only survive if they are economically rational to some extent.

Diesing's description of social rationality is of obvious relevance to the "darkly functional social behavior suffused with myth and ritual" that is voting. Tullock's point that social pressure often leads people to vote is explicable in this context, as are arguments to the effect that voting and other political activity may be psychologically functional for an individual. That is, a "civic minded" peer group may, in both con-

33 Ibid., pp. 2-3. On p. 45 of Reason in Society, Diesing writes that: "... economizing is possible only insofar as the problematic, alternative ends are comparable on some scale. When this condition is not met, there is no way of finding out which end or combination of ends will bring the greatest return, and so there is no economic way of choosing among them. For example, it is difficult to compare the value of going to church on Sunday with the value of conversation with a friend, in terms of which would bring the greatest return, supposing that the two were somehow alternative. The two are hardly comparable since there is no unit of measurement common to both of them. The two values are, indeed, hardly measurable at all; both of them are, traditionally at least, absolute values, not susceptible to division into parts or change of degree."

34 Ibid., p. 95.

35 Diesing's conception of social rationality seems more useful than the alternatives to utility maximizing theory which have been proposed by some formal theorists. Riker and Zavoina, for example, in their 1970 APSR article, write that learning theory and psychoanalytic theory compete with utility theory as explanatory models of political behavior (pp. 49-50). There are several problems with this approach. One is that the economic model refers to "rational" action, while the other models deal with "irrational" and thus implicitly inferior modes of behavior. Second, psychoanalytic theory and learning theory are evidently used as individualistic models. Consequently, they neglect "functional" rationality and do not adequately explain group behavior—e.g. Tullock's point about social pressure leading to voting. Diesing's broader conception of social rationality more easily incorporates psychological and sociological variables. Third, Riker and Zavoina, finding no suitable way to integrate the conflicting theories, attempt to choose between them. Thus, they conclude that "utility maximization is the theory that fits political behavior best." Ibid., p. 60. This would seem to be the wrong approach. It is acceptable to argue that utility maximization may fit one type of political behavior better than another. For example, means-end rationality might be better suited for an analysis of candidate electoral strategy than for a study of mass voting patterns. It is unacceptable, however, to argue that one model is most appropriate to all political analysis, all of the time, thereby eliminating alternative explanations without serious refutation.

For a more sophisticated effort to integrate economic and non-economic explanatory models, see John C. Harsanyi's article, "Rational-Choice Models of Political Behavior vs. Functionalist and Conformist Theories," World Politics 21 (July 1969): 513-538. However, even in Harsanyi's article, there are seeds of trouble in the author's
scious and unconscious fashion, induce an otherwise politically apathetic person to vote. In such a situation, voting would serve to integrate and/or prevent conflict in the peer group. It is likewise well known that some people find stimulation and emotional release in politics, as well as in religion and other activities. Voting and other forms of political action are socially rational in this sense as well, in that the activity provides a channel and integrative focus for the emotional energy of the individual in question. Politics may also create meaning by relating his actions to a larger context. This does not mean that technical or economic modes of rationality are irrelevant to the voting act. Much voting can indeed be seen as reflecting calculations of means and ends. My point is rather that several types and aspects of rationality are reflected in the voting act.

An extreme example may serve to illustrate the point that multiple types of rationality are necessarily manifested in voting decisions. Machine politics, as traditionally practiced in American cities, is such an example. Banfield and Wilson write that a political "machine" is a party organization that depends crucially upon specific and material inducements. They write:

A political machine is a business organization in a particular field of business—getting votes and winning elections. As a Chicago Machine boss once said of the machine in that city, it is "just like any sales organization trying to sell its product."

If there is any type of voting which is susceptible to explanation and description in terms of economic, means-end rationality, it is surely voting in the "ideal" machine politics situation. The voter casts his ballot for the candidate designated by the precinct captain without considera-

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37 Ibid.
tion of the merits of the candidate or of political principle. This is done in the expectation of favorable treatment by the political authorities, should the need arise. The arrangement is *technically* rational so long as both parties achieve their goals—i.e. machine candidates regularly win primary elections, the precinct captain gets a patronage job, and garbage is collected on time in the neighborhood. The machine is *economically* rational, however, only to the extent that participants maximize their utility through a correct choice of means. That is, while a “ward healer” may still be helpful in obtaining a job for a constituent, it may no longer be “rational” for this constituent to cooperate with the “healer” if a comparable or better job is to be had without such intervention.

A machine is distinguished from other types of political organization in that specific, material incentives are employed in order to secure dependable results at election time. However, even though the classic machine exists for itself, and is indifferent to matters of principle, it is crucial for our purposes to understand that machines cannot survive on the basis of material incentives alone. To cite Banfield and Wilson once more:

> Even though the precinct captain asks for something that is almost worthless to the [generally lower-class] voter, he must offer something in return. What he offers is usually a personal, nonmaterial incentive, ‘friendship.’ A Chicago captain explained, ‘I never take leaflets or mention issues or conduct rallies in my precinct. After all, this is a question of personal friendship between me and my neighbors.’

Political machines indeed offer favors of various kinds, but they cannot afford to pay cash to all voters. This means that even in machine politics, voting is largely based upon affect, and reflects social, as well as technical and economic rationality. Again, voting in such situations is largely based upon friendship, or more generally, upon the voters’ participation and emotional involvement in a community-wide network of ethnic-familial ties linked to the political system. It might be replied at this point that friendship too can be a matter of means-end calculation, and that this pattern of voter motivation may also be understood on the basis of economic rationality. However, while it is true that “friendship” in one sense may be understood in terms of means-end rationality, the meaning of the term changes considerably when used in

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38 Ibid., p. 117.
this manner. The friendship of a prostitute or of a geisha girl is indeed something which can be bought and sold, and which has a definite price. Such friendship is a commodity, and its value can be compared in monetary terms to the value of alternative commodities. However, even here, an element of social rationality is involved. Prostitutes are paid in good part to create the illusion that the client is valued as a person, and for his own sexual attraction, rather than simply for his money. And to be persuasive, such an illusion must be based partly upon fact. Similarly, while the friendship of the precinct captain is no doubt calculated, it must also be partially genuine—meaning that it is valued in and of itself, and in some degree reflects an emotional response which occurs independently of conscious decision-making. On the part of machine voters, perhaps less calculation is involved, with a greater share of the motivation to vote being friendship, or possibly the attractive aura of power which surrounds a successful politician, and which invites identification.

In more abstract terms, the difference between calculated and “genuine” friendship reflects the difference between economic and non-economic activity. As Diesing writes, an economy is that part of a society’s institutions devoted to the production, exchange, and distribution of commodities. It is an open system, with both inputs and outputs. Consumption is the ultimate goal of an economy, while matter and energy are the ultimate means. However, neither goals nor means are themselves part of the economy. Rather, they set the limits of economic activity. The difference between production and consumption, economic and non-economic activity, is a valuational, means-end distinction.39

Those activities whose occurrence needs to be justified by its results are economic, while those activities whose occurrence provides a justification for other activities but does not itself need justification are noneconomic. Eating, learning, and exercising are productive activities if they are justified by their effect on the productivity of labor; they constitute consumption if they are regarded as the maintenance of a standard of living. Production is the creation of an instrumental value while consumption is the achievement of an intrinsic value.40

It seems clear then, that machine politics involves both “economic” and noneconomic activity, and thus both technical/economic rationality

40 Ibid., p. 15.
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and social rationality. And if social rationality is to be found in machine politics voting, it is surely to be found in all voting.

This example could be extended to embrace the other types of rationality which Diesing describes. Legal rationality, for example, is seen as the rationality of fundamental rules, embracing not only constitutions and laws, but also the moral order and elements of the status system as well. Voting on the basis of felt-obligation might be explained along these lines. Political rationality, on the other hand, might be observed in the vote of an individual who chooses to support a particular ticket in order to promote strong, as opposed to weak, government—to the extent that such a vote is intended to create or perpetuate an effective decision-making structure, and does not simply reflect an authoritarian personality.

For our purposes, it is enough to say that the meaning of the voting act cannot be determined once and for all; it clearly changes according to the highly complex and variable contexts in which voting occurs. In the classic machine-politics of the “delivery wards,” economic, means-end rationality may furnish the most reliable and satisfactory single-mode explanations. In another context, social rationality may be the dominant influence upon voting behavior. For example, in an election polarized along racial lines, the pull of group identity, in response to perceived threats and individual needs for reassurance, would most likely be the dominant factor influencing voting decisions, overriding generalized norms of right and wrong, and overshadowing underlying “economic” causes of conflict. Social/psychological explanations of voting are often decisive in another way as well, to the extent that the key factor of party identification is based upon socialization and affect, rather than upon conscious calculation. In non-controversial elections, a decision to go to the polls might be based upon “legal” rationality—i.e. the belief that one has a duty to vote—while the content of the vote might be more appropriately explained in terms of social rationality—i.e. party identification or affect.

It is generally agreed that Anthony Downs decisively increased our understanding of politics by investigating political behavior from an economic perspective. The virtue of economic analysis lies in its rigor and simplicity. The danger lies in hoping, to the point of believing, that such rigor and simplicity can be extended to all aspects of politics. The persistent attempts by formal theorists to refute Downs’ claim that

41 Legal rationality is discussed in Reason in Society, pp. 124-168.
42 For a discussion of political rationality, see ibid., pp. 169-234.
voting may be economically irrational can be seen as efforts to break through the boundaries of economic reasoning. This has been attempted by expanding the economic definition of rationality to the point that it presumably encompasses nearly all behavior. I have argued that this approach is mistaken. It remains only to ask how scholars could believe, in the face of all evidence, that voting can be adequately understood in terms of economic rationality.

Perhaps our words deceive us. Since the eighteenth century, and before, "Reason" has been a beacon for enlightened men. Reason, flowered into Science, has promised to free us from poverty, war, and ignorance. Rationality is man's salvation and irrationality the path toward destruction. It is the language of good and evil; there is no middle ground. Moreover, Reason has been seen in Anglo-American culture as characteristic of individuals, not groups. Emerging from an England experiencing industrialization and concomitant rapid economic growth, Reason evolved into Utilitarianism, which, as Diesing writes, has dominated Western ethical thought for two centuries.

The main ideas of this theory appear in a number of schools of thought which disagree in details... but there is widespread agreement that the good is something that is maximizable, that it is an end to be achieved by the wise use of means, that it is scarce in the sense that possession by one individual prevents possession by others, and that people are impartially entitled to a chance to pursue it.43

Economic rationality has come to be synonymous with rationality, just as economic progress was once synonymous with progress.

Perhaps the formal theorists have done us a service in carrying the "voting paradox" argument to extreme conclusions. These conclusions are either that voting is irrational or that the concept of "rationality" is ambiguous.44 Unacceptable conclusions lead to the questioning of initial premises, and in this case the questionable premise is that there can be but one kind of rationality. For when Anthony Downs reasoned that voting may be economically irrational, the lesson we should have learned is that not all rationality is economic.

43 Diesing, Reason in Society, p. 37.
44 See Riker and Zavoina, p. 50. Here, the authors note that in the earlier Riker and Ordeshook article, which attempted to interpret voting on the basis of utility theory, one term of the equation looks as if it had originated in learning theory. But since they concede that learning theory decisions are not based upon calculations of utility, the concept of rationality employed in the earlier article was clearly ambiguous.