3 Behavioural Anomalies Explain Variation in Voter Turnout

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Introduction

Individuals regularly diverge from the courses of action prescribed by expected utility theory or rational choice prescriptions. Some individuals exhibit very high discount rates. Such individuals will take a payment today when an appreciably larger payment a short time later is offered. Others make decisions that suggest a misunderstanding of probability theory. Examples abound, and not only among those who purchase lottery tickets. Such divergences – collectively termed *behavioural anomalies* – are widespread and consistently present. Indeed, they lie at the centre of various behavioural and psychological approaches to social science. Nevertheless, theories of voter turnout have largely ignored the regularity with which citizens do not behave according to the dictums of expected utility. This may not be for the better. As we show in this chapter, such anomalies help explain variation in the decision to vote, an action central to the study of politics and a question central to political science (and especially the work of Blais 2000).

The apparent paradox of voter turnout has been a central challenge to political science at least since Downs (1957), and certainly since Riker and Ordeshook (1968) presented their calculus of voter turnout. Why do individuals choose to vote in elections, in particular when their vote cannot be thought to be decisive, and when the expected benefits of voting are thus so small? The answer, following Riker and Ordeshook, is that citizens experience personal gratification by voting and fulfilling their sense of civic duty.[1] While Riker and Ordeshook's model does highlight this problem and propose a solution, its greater function is