

# 11 When Do Voters Act Strategically? Institutional and Individual Variation in the Incidence of Strategic Voting in Democracies

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The single most obvious observation that flows from the earliest survey research on voting (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Campbell et al. 1960) is that voters tend to be remarkably ill-informed about the fundamentals of politics, and, as Converse famously showed (1964), they are often perceived to be what has become known as “innocent” of ideology. While there is variation to that, the basic outlines of these points are invariably true across the decades and among nations.

It seems a short step from those observations to the claim that the voter is best understood as making very simple decisions using very simple decision rules (as suggested by Kelley and Mirer 1974), quite different from the complex reasoning attributed to candidates, party leaders, and the like. One reason, for example, that rational choice models of politics are often thought more appropriate and useful for studying the actions and choices of the political elite is that game theoretic and strategic decision-making seem more at home with those whose livelihoods depend upon the outcome than with those who are mostly inattentive to the day-to-day workings of politics.

And yet economic theory often treats consumers as strategic actors. Should we expect citizens to act strategically as consumers but to totally disavow acting to advance their interests as voters? Perhaps we should, because, after all, livelihoods do depend in part on consumption decisions. Conversely, however, game theoretic models are meant to apply to conventional, regular, small-scale actions such as daily purchases of bread and milk. Is that really all that different from decisions about casting a vote in a media-rich national election?