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INTRODUCTION

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Everything but Death and Taxes

Uncertainty and American Politics

Barry C. Burden

Our Constitution is in actual operation; everything appears to promise that it will last; but nothing in this world is certain but death and taxes.

—Benjamin Franklin 1789

Proverbs like Ben Franklin's tend to remind audiences of universal truths rather than inform them about new insights. In this case, humor quickly reminds us that the political world is fundamentally uncertain. In Franklin's view, uncertainty stems from the unpredictable nature of social life. Political scientists and practitioners alike know this of course, which is why prediction into the political future is seldom done. Just a few years ago it would have been difficult to find academics willing to predict publicly that Republicans would take control of Congress any time soon, that a budget surplus would be the nation's biggest problem, that a professional wrestler would become Minnesota's governor, or that a Democratic president would push aggressively for free trade. Lack of sure knowledge about the future is a key aspect of politics. While the unpredictable nature of the future surely makes political life uncertain, this important conception of uncertainty represents only a portion of the intriguing dynamics of modern U.S. politics.

As I argue in this introduction and is demonstrated throughout the chapters in this book, uncertainty arises from many sources, can take on multiple forms, and has a variety of consequences. Although most readers have an intuitive feeling for what uncertainty is, it is more important and complex than most of us assume. This revelation is important because Franklin's instinct was correct: uncertainty is everywhere. In some ways, the authors represented in this book are doing the footwork for a proverb by reminding political scientists of this basic fact, although the long-term desire of this

I thank Richard Zeckhauser for his comments.

project is to incorporate uncertainty in new ways and in new substantive areas of the discipline.

Before preceding much further, I should acknowledge that the uncertainty concept is not being introduced for the first time in this edited volume. It has already been used successfully in a number of scholarly literatures, including many fields in political science.¹ Unfortunately, its use is sometimes overly crude, often unconnected to other conceptions of uncertainty, and typically found on the margins rather than the mainstream of American politics research. Political science is an interdisciplinary field, so we learn from others' successes. It is to our advantage to learn from those who have already handled uncertainty in their theories, models, explanations, arguments, and tests.² The chapters in this book and research that follows them will borrow from disciplines as disparate as sociology, economics, philosophy, and psychology plus interdisciplinary efforts such as behavioral decision theory, although they all wish to say something about U.S. politics in the end. I will not try to argue that introducing uncertainty into substantive work on politics will turn a fledgling field into a natural science, but I am asserting that much research can be improved by reexamining implicit assumptions that motives, actions, structures, and outcomes in politics are certain.

I hesitate to say more about uncertainty here because the chapters to follow will largely speak for themselves. They are examples of how uncertainty has been used, is beginning to be considered in political science, and ways in which it might be incorporated in future work. They demonstrate that uncertainty is not a concept that is limited to a particular methodology or even a substantive area. Indeed, this is a critical theme motivating this project. Although it is impossible to cover all subfields in a single volume, these authors and their subjects are diverse enough to suggest how parallel studies in other fields might look.

In the remainder of this chapter I make five assertions about uncertainty and the study of American politics. They range from quite general statements

¹ Indeed, academics and practitioners in economics and business and management schools already devote significant attention to uncertainty, particularly in decision theory. Among other places, one can find economic treatments in the *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*. I lack the space to review this deep literature here. For now, I propose that political science can learn a great deal about uncertainty from this work but that our applications are often more complicated because such things as the consequences of decisions, nature of the choice set, sources of uncertainty, and even who is responsible for a course of action are seldom as clear.

² To remind readers that uncertainty is a concept available to all researchers, I use inclusive language. Some analysts strive for general explanations, others for parsimonious models, and yet others for complete theories. So I use the terms model, theory, test, argument, explanation, and like as a group. Also, I often refer to political decision makers as "actors." Although a dispassionate term, it prevents debates about the proper unit of analysis, because an actor could be a cabinet secretary, interest group, congressional committee, voter, or executive branch agency.

that border on the philosophical to pragmatic advice for researchers, in largely that order. Although it seems that each assertion flows almost logically from those before it, each is probably more contentious than the last. I necessarily fail to make a watertight case for each assertion. Instead, I appeal to readers' wisdom and intuition and use a few examples from the subfields with which I am most familiar to underscore the points. My hope is merely that the attention this volume pays to uncertainty in U.S. politics will awaken researchers to its role as a useful concept and will provoke them to at least consider its role in the descriptions, explanations, models, and theories they develop. Much like the new institutionalism, political economy, and political psychology have begun to do, it can lead to the redevelopment of some existing work and possibly to the creation of new lines of inquiry. Let us turn now to the five assertions.

ASSERTION 1: UNCERTAINTY PERVADES POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Uncertainty is an inherent part of everything humans do. It is especially acute in the political realm. This is because politics is largely about making decisions, and decisions are seldom certain. Because people and the institutions they create are involved, uncertainty is part of what politics is. Whether one defines politics as the "authoritative allocation of values in society" (Easton 1965) or "who gets what, when, where, how" (Lasswell 1958), politics is often about choosing.³ It follows that the study of politics – political science – is predominantly the study of how political actors make decisions. These actors include such diverse things as interest groups, state legislatures, party leaders, voters, and bureaucracies. The consequences of their choices might seem relevant only to oneself, to a group, an institution, or even the entire nation.

Political decisions are not so different from choices made in other realms, say the workplace or one's personal life. A key difference is that political stimuli are often more ambiguous. Although choosing a mate, finding a vocation, and purchasing an automobile are all affected by uncertainty, the information associated with these decisions is more immediate and concrete than is information about political choices. One might say that political stimuli are poorly defined. Perhaps because of this, the consequences of political decisions are less clear, thus heightening uncertainty. As Dahl notes in the context of the Supreme Court, "a policy decision might be defined as an effective choice among alternatives about which there is, at least initially, some uncertainty" (1957, 279). Even outside of "policy" decisions, it is the

³ A decision could be made deliberately and intentionally as I imply here, or it could result as the unintentional by-product of institutional design and collective interaction. I shall refer mostly to former type, although this portrayal understates the amount of uncertainty that results for political decision making.

uncertainty that makes politics challenging for participants and interesting to those who study it.⁴

Take the case of citizens' knowledge about politics. It is widely known that Americans do not know much factual information about their political system or even its current staff (e.g., Bennett 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Lack of data simply makes it difficult to reach confident decisions. The informational deficit is less severe in personal, localized choices such as which breakfast cereal to purchase at the supermarket or whether to shoot or pass to a teammate in a game of basketball.

Although raising information levels often increases certainty, especially in nonpolitical settings, I argue below that this relationship is not always so simple (Assertion 3). Even in the many cases in which information is helpful, it will almost never eliminate all uncertainty about some kinds of decisions. It is impossible to acquire all of the relevant information in most settings; in other situations uncertainty would remain even in the presence of this data. Humans worry about their decisions for one reason: they are uncertain. Decision making would be trivial if all actors were certain about all relevant causes and consequences of a choice. Here is the real kicker: the necessity of decision making makes uncertainty important, whereas the ubiquity of uncertainty in decision making makes choosing difficult.

Uncertainty "may range from a falling short of certainty to an almost complete lack of conviction or knowledge especially about an outcome or result" (Merriam-Webster dictionary; <www.m-w.com>). Even this rather general definition suggests that uncertainty lies on a continuum. Accordingly, it is more accurate to think of uncertainty as an amount or degree rather than a quality that is merely present or absent. In terms of probabilities, it runs from 0 (an impossibility) to 1.0 (a certainty). Note that impossibilities are just certainties turned upside down; one is sure that something will *not* happen.

In some settings, the probability scale could be folded at the midpoint so that it runs from completely unsure to completely sure about something. (What this "something" is comes later.) Research that assumes certainty – often by remaining silent about the ways in which uncertainty enters – unrealistically requires that political actors usually find themselves at one of the endpoints of the full probability scale when making decisions. This assumption is difficult to sustain in sophisticated analyses. Moreover, in most applications it is even inappropriate to describe actors as simply "certain" or "uncertain." This artificially dichotomizes the scale by putting the two endpoints on one side and all other values on the other. At the most basic level, then, uncertainty is a variable that takes on different values across actors,

⁴ Without moving into a philosophical discussion, I note that the constant force of entropy in the environment and lack of mortal omnipotence (even in a limited domain) guarantee that uncertainty is always with us.

situations, and time. When we say that a decision maker is uncertain, the next question asked ought to be “How uncertain?” When this issue is buttressed, the analyst moves to determining the sources, type, and eventually the consequences of the uncertainty. The chapters in this volume deal with all of the questions.

Take Downs’s definition of uncertainty as simply the “lack of sure knowledge” (1957, 77). He argues that one’s level of confidence depends on three factors: the removability, intensity, and relevance of the uncertainty. In other words, an actor can be quite confident about what will happen in a situation only to the degree that uncertainty is easily vanquished, is weakly felt, and is only tangentially related. Although all researchers might not agree that these three particular dimensions are the most important components of uncertainty in every application, Downs has made a genuine contribution by acknowledging that all uncertainties are not the same. Although a simple probability is a useful way to capture certainty levels in many settings, some applications require more than this common denominator to make sense of the political phenomena at hand. In line with much of their work on institutions, March and Olsen (1979) argue convincingly that organizations are plagued by several types of what they label ambiguity, a notion not far from uncertainty.

Processes that unfold over time are subject to uncertainty at the macro level, because later events are affected by earlier events. These small early events have more weight in determining outcomes but also are more likely to be random. This sort of “path dependence” suggests that many outcomes thought to be inevitable (because of efficiency or functionality) are nearly accidental (Pierson 2000). Carmines and Stimson (1989) demonstrate these points in their study of the “evolution” of race in transforming the American party system. Some important formative but largely accidental events, such as the 1958 Senate elections, began a dynamic that eventually resulted in elite and mass polarization around issues of race. Even if one could rerun the last half century of history, it is unlikely that the same chain of events would unfold.

The point of this discussion is to remind readers, as did Benjamin Franklin at the founding of our republic, that uncertainty is everywhere. It is especially keen in political contexts in which stimuli are ambiguous. Ironically, political decisions have the potential to affect a wider group of people and institutions. The idea that uncertainty is ubiquitous is not new to political scientists. Downs warns that “uncertainty is so basic to human life that it influences the structure of almost every social institution” (1957, 88). “To our minds, politics is a dynamic process filled with uncertainty” acknowledge Wright and Goldberg (1985, 716). Fenno’s (1978, 10) depiction of legislators’ “home styles” portrays representatives as “fraught with *uncertainty*,” most of it subjective. Finally, as Cioffi-Revilla (1998) argues in his treatment of the international relations literature, uncertainty is not only ubiquitous

and ineradicable, but it is consequential. It is the consequences of uncertainty that fascinate most scholars of American politics.

ASSERTION 2: AN ACTOR MAY BE UNCERTAIN ABOUT THE
 ACTIONS OF OTHERS, THE CONSEQUENCES OF HER OWN
 ACTIONS, OR EVEN HER OWN INTENTIONS

The object of uncertainty is a crucial variable in any analysis. In conceptualizing such a variable, I make a rough distinction between internal (or local) and external (or distant) sources of uncertainty. Uncertainty plays a different role for the Supreme Court justice who is unsure about how she will vote on an upcoming case than for the interest group that can not predict the outcome of a committee meeting with much confidence. The former is uncertain about her own (future or expected) behavior, while the latter is uncertain about what situation will arise or what the state of nature will be. The justice has a local source, while the interest group faces uncertainty beyond its control. They share in common the fact that uncertainty is typically related to future events, but the nature of the events differs in important ways.

Consider again the first situation, in which an actor does not know exactly what he will do when forced to make a choice. The old saying “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it” captures the idea well. This is not a bad strategy because one usually has more information about the alternatives the closer their proximity, either in time or space. Just as a college student is not sure which major he will select until forced to choose, a member of Congress is uncertain about whether she will cosponsor a potentially controversial piece of legislation. In classic political science terms, we might say the individual is cross-pressured. For both the student and the congressman, uncertainty about their own intentions arises in part from uncertainty about the consequences of their choices. The student wonders about the relative difficulty of the two majors he is considering and how helpful, again in relative terms, each will be in finding a job after graduation. The sources of uncertainty for the member of Congress are more numerous and immediate (see Kessler and Krehbiel 1996; Schiller 1995). Will her support for the bill affect how colleagues, constituents, and interest groups perceive her? How will the decision affect her credibility? Will it help or hinder the prospects for logrolling or vote trading with other members who have a substantial stake in the outcome? Are the intended consequences of the bill going to be realized and are there unintended consequences that might be realized, too? Being uncertain about the consequences of a choice makes a person even more uncertain about even what her decision will be. Uncertainty induces further uncertainty. At a minimum, uncertainty about what one will do encourages delay and further information gathering.

In the second situation, one is uncertain about something external. In rational choice settings, an actor might associate probabilities with each possible outcome. In these cases, more information might reduce uncertainty as it did in the “internal” examples above. Consider a federal agency planning its annual budget request. Because the agency is uncertain about how much of the request will actually be funded by Congress, it determines the request strategically, often asking for substantially more than it hopes to receive. The tactic of padding the budget can backfire, however, if Congress views the request as unreasonable and chooses to punish the agency by cutting more from their budget than it would have otherwise. Knowing this, the agency would like to make the largest possible request that does not inspire such a reaction. There is tremendous uncertainty in such decisions and the consequences of the funding level are grave for an organization whose existence depends on them. The agency is uncertain about what governs the interaction between the agency’s choice and Congress’ reaction. This uncertainty might be reduced by looking at previous interactions, because the budget process occurs annually and the same sets of players tend to interact repeatedly year after year. But environmental changes in congressional membership or economic conditions could alter the relationship in unknown ways.

A final point should be made about the targets and sources of uncertainty. Although in theory an actor could be uncertain about its own behavior or about something external such as an event or condition, being unsure about the latter usually heightens uncertainty in the former. Not knowing what the world will be like when a decision is made, what the consequences of the decision will be, or perhaps even what alternatives will be available at the time all induces uncertainty about one’s own intentions. Intentions are merely planned or expected actions that can easily be confused by things outside of one’s control (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975).

ASSERTION 3: UNCERTAINTY AND INFORMATION ARE OFTEN BUT NOT ALWAYS INVERSELY RELATED

Information is most useful when uncertainty arises from a mere lack of knowledge. In this case, the simple gathering of facts makes one more confident about what will occur or what the proper decision ought to be. Our modern presidency is supplied with an amazing number of information pipelines via bureaucracies such as the National Security Agency (NSC), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Department of Justice, the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA), and cabinet agencies that serve this function. The consequences of presidential actions loom large and information is relatively cheap, so it is well worth an executive’s time to pursue large amounts of data. Knowing the details about disparities in welfare benefits across the states makes an administration more confident when planning a new formula for allocating welfare funds. Knowing about the military capabilities

of an international terrorist group similarly makes a presidential staff more certain about how it handles the situation. There are endless examples. In the end, all other factors held constant, when available, a fact is always more useful than speculation.⁵

Other times, gathering all of the possible data, even the most difficult to acquire, would not reduce uncertainty much and would definitely not eliminate it. The marginal benefit of pursuing uncertainty-reducing information might not justify the effort either. The reason is that facts about current or past situations or events are more trustworthy than expectations about possible events, whether they be actions or the consequences of them.

Although it is true that polling, focus groups, and other research could make a presidential campaign team more certain about its fate in the upcoming election, uncertainty always remains. And this uncertainty, however small, plays a disproportionate role in the campaign organization's behavior. As in so many other contexts, there are diminishing returns from efforts to raise one's confidence about the likelihood of future events, yet uncertainty is difficult to ignore. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that small amounts of uncertainty drive out large amounts of certainty.⁶ This asymmetry in weight between certainty and uncertainty is akin to an old Swedish proverb: "Worry gives a small thing a big shadow." Even a touch of uncertainty can overwhelm large amounts of sure knowledge.

Even for those motivated to pursue information to reduce uncertainty, it is possible for newly acquired data to heighten uncertainty as I have defined it.⁷ Well-informed actors could actually be less certain than poorly informed actors about what will occur. New information increases uncertainty when it is inconsistent with prior information or an actor's predispositions.⁸ Even though data are usually helpful, "additional information may contradict what he knows already, so that his confidence falls as he learns more"

⁵ One might suppose that data have uncertainty associated with them as well. A belief might be just a datum about which one is (nearly) certain. I am pretty sure what the high temperature was yesterday (to the degree that I trust thermometers and those using them), but I am much less certain about what the high temperature will be tomorrow. It is a "fact" with high uncertainty that can be decreased as more information is gathered about it. It is easy to see how this argument leads to an infinite regress because one is always uncertain about the data that determine uncertainty levels associated with other data.

⁶ This is akin to what Popkin (1996) calls Gresham's Law of Information: recent and personal information drives out old and impersonal information.

⁷ This view of uncertainty differs from Alvarez's portrayal in which uncertainty can be removed with adequate information (Alvarez 1998; Alvarez and Brehm 1997; Alvarez and Franklin 1994; Alvarez, Brehm, and Wilson, this volume). By treating ambivalence as a form of uncertainty (about one's own opinions or intentions), I am expanding his definition of uncertainty. The differences between the two are largely semantic, but disagreements about what uncertainty is will naturally arise when many researchers deal with the concept simultaneously.

⁸ For those inclined to think this way, current data that are discrepant with one's prior could increase the variance of the posterior distribution.