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A Model of the Macro Polity

This book is about politics in the United States. We examine the attitudes and behavior of American citizens. We study their evaluations of the president. We study their perceptions of the economy and the political responses that result. We study their party identifications. We study their policy views and ideological leanings. We study not only attitudes but also one important form of political action, the voting choices people make at the ballot box. And we don’t study just ordinary citizens. We also study politicians and their responses to the voters – and the voters’ responses to the politicians’ actions.

These several topics will be familiar to readers who know the empirical literature on American politics of the post–World War II era. But our book diverges from the norm in one crucial respect. Our focus is on the macro rather than micro level of analysis.

For most studies of political behavior, the unit of analysis is the individual – the mass survey respondent or the member of some political elite. That is the study of “micro politics.” This book is about “macro politics,” not the politics of the individual but the politics of the aggregate – the “macro polity.” Here when we study citizens, the subject under investigation is the electorate rather than the voter. When we study elites, our subject is the institution rather than its members, or even the composite acts of the national government rather than its specific institutions.

We study the macro polity over time. Thus, our statistical analysis consists largely of a series of dynamic time-series equations. We ask questions such as how one aggregate changes when we change another. Ours of course is not the first time-series analysis of macro-level politics. By far the most heavily researched topic in political time series is Presidential Approval. Starting with Mueller’s (1970, 1973) pioneering work, numerous books and articles have been written about the president’s approval rating and, for other nations, the popularity of governments in general. A second familiar type of political time series is the study of
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election results over time. With Kramer (1971) as the pioneer, macro-
level studies of elections have become routine, although often with fore-
casting as the major goal at the expense of explanation.

Typically, whether the focus of explanation is Presidential Approval
or whether it is elections, the dominant predictor variables are from the
realm of economics. Numerous economic variables have been collected;
they vary over time; and there is strong reason to believe that they are
politically relevant. Thus, the macro-level study of political variables has
largely been the study of why economics is important to politics. The
economy is politically important, as subsequent chapters will attest. But
it is not the sole source of changes in the public's evaluation of its leaders.

The kinds of political explanations that are important in micro-level
political behavior research were largely ignored, until recently, in macro-
level research. Micro-level analysis focuses on variables like party iden-
tification, policy positions, and ideology. Why did these explanations
escape macro-level attention? There are two reasons.

Most importantly, these political aggregates were thought to be con-
stants rather than variables, and therefore hardly worthy of dynamic
analysis. Starting with The American Voter (Campbell et al. 1960), it
became widely recognized that people rarely changed their party attach-
ments. Indeed, aggregate stability was evident in the Democrats’
dominant lead over Republicans in reported polls on party identifica-
tion. Policy positions, if meaningful at all, were thought to be constant,
too. While responses to policy questions were fragile and susceptible
to change (or even minor variations in question wording), changes in
response to a specific question were attributed mainly to "doorstep
opinion" rather than thoughtful reappraisal (Converse 1964). Moreover,
opinion polls rarely showed much movement on policy issues in the
aggregate.

A second reason that aggregate-level measures of these political vari-
ables went ignored was that the databases of party identification, liberal-
ism-conservatism, and views on any issue did not exist with sufficiently
regular measurement to form a meaningful time series. Advances in
archiving the historical record show the existence of variability where
none was thought possible. The first systematic measurement of aggreg-
ate party identification was not published until MacKuen, Erikson, and
Stimson's (1989) assembly of quarterly readings of Gallup's party iden-
tification. The change observed in what we labeled Macropartisanship
has been the subject of considerable research and controversy. The next
important breakthrough was the demonstration that macro-level posi-
tions on policy issues changed in meaningful ways. Page and Shapiro
(1992) showed that macro-level positions on policy issues changed and
changed in ways that could be described as a rational response to
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the political environment. About the same time, Stimson (1991, 1998) reported the measurement of the public's Policy Mood as a composite indicator of policy views as they fall on the liberal-conservative continuum. And Wlezien (1995, 1996) showed that mass opinion actually reacts to policy decisions. Public opinion, it turns out, moves after all and in meaningful ways.

This book is made possible by the collection of a rich set of macro-level political explanations and their indicators. From the economic realm, we have both objective indicators of prosperity and the public's subjective perceptions of prosperity (Consumer Sentiment and its components). As political evaluation, we have the omnipresent Presidential Approval and partisanship, our Macropartisanship series. For the public's issue preferences, we have Policy Mood. Of course, we have national election results, every two (congressional) or four (presidential) years.

A crucial set of our measures is for political elites rather than the electorate. We have measures of the ideological direction of the major parties as written in their party platforms (Budge and Hofferbert 1990; McDonald, Budge, and Hofferbert 1999). We have dozens of measures of congressional, presidential, and judicial behavior that go into our measure of the government's Policy Activity. And we develop a measure of the ideological direction of major legislation drawn from Mayhew's (1991) list of major laws. For each congress, the measure is laws; over time, Laws accumulate to form the measure of national Policy.

The “Voter” and the “Electorate”: Macro vs. Micro

The crucial actor in the democratic political process is the individual known as “the voter.” Viewed at the macro-level perspective, the voter transforms into “the electorate.” Although the electorate is simply the sum of voters, our knowledge of the individual voter turns out not to be a reliable guide for generalizing to the electorate and its role in democratic politics.

The Voter at the Micro Level

At the dawn of the era of survey research in social science (circa World War II), it was widely assumed that voters and electorates acted as democratic theories required; that they had preferences over policy alternatives, knowledge about choices, and interest in outcomes; and that all of these were encapsulated in the vote. These attributes, “electoral intelligence” for short, ensured a two-way communication. They produced electoral response to the things government actually did on the one
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hand, and they sent a message about preferences back to government on the other.

This happy picture was dashed by the early voter studies (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954) and then dashed again by the most influential American Voter (Campbell et al. 1960) and the follow-up work of the Michigan voting behavior school. The citizens who emerged from this work had few policy preferences (and little cognitive structure to hold those few together), abysmal levels of knowledge of political facts, and little interest in their citizen role. Nowhere is the impression of voters who don’t measure up more vivid than where they speak for themselves in the American Voter’s “Levels of Conceptualization” analysis. They sounded just like people we knew, but somehow seemed to be aberrations. To see what was typical of American voters was to see a picture that did not resemble any conception of electorate as partner in a dialogue over political choices.

It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the American voter portrayed by early survey research studies was a political fool, hardly equipped to handle the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. More recent scholarship resurrects the voter’s reputation somewhat, by ascribing to the voter what Popkin (1991) calls limited information rationality. The voter is capable of complex, rational judgments, so the argument goes, given the limited information available. (See also Lupia and McCubbins 1998.) Still, the problem of low information remains. Either because of a low supply of information available or the voter’s perhaps rational choice not to use it, our voter – while more sophisticated than once thought – remains ignorant.

Indeed, the best analysis of voters’ attention and awareness shows no appreciable gain in voter knowledge over the years (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Let us imagine that we have a good scale of general political knowledge and can rank people accordingly. The typical voter, at the 50th percentile of general political knowledge, would be challenged to name such commonplace political objects as both home-state senators, the House speaker, and the chief justice of the Supreme Court. This typical voter could name the president, the governor, and probably one home-state senator, but would have only about a 50-50 chance of possessing even a rudimentary knowledge of the terminology of ideological ideology (e.g., “liberal,” and “conservative”) or of the latest hotspot in the world where the United States is involved (e.g., Nicaragua, Kosovo).

How does this typical voter make political judgments and vote in elections? Our typical voter’s political beliefs have no particular ideological structure. If responding in a survey, our voter at the median level of information would offer a mix of liberal and conservative viewpoints on
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different issues – and if given the opportunity, might express agreement with both the liberal and conservative sides of the same issue (Zaller 1992). It is often observed that the typical voter makes judgments not by evaluating facts but by an emotional response to political stimuli. Perhaps fortunately, our typical voter may have the anchor of a party identification, which provides a baseline for voting decisions. But our typical voter has not arrived at this party choice from thoughtful deliberation as much as from family inheritance and habit, much in the same way people who attend religious services decide which one to attend based more on family tradition than a personal theological appraisal.

Our negative portrayal of the typical American voter is one that is ingrained in students of American political behavior with their exposure to the available survey-based literature. Our depiction of the limitations of the typical voter at the 50th percentile of political awareness may exaggerate some (we hope it does), but for the sake of argument, let us accept it as true. What then are the implications for the value of public opinion and ultimately, for the quality of democratic governance?

One obvious answer would be extreme skepticism about any signs of intelligent life, along the lines of the following. When pollsters conduct their polls on presidential approval, party identification, policy issues, and economic performance, we should be wary of subjecting them to elaborate interpretation, as if changes in the mass response had any meaning. And we should not attribute any particular intelligence to the voters’ collective decisions at election time.

Election results would be explained as voter responses to vestigial party identifications, or to candidate promises of bread and circuses, or to orchestrated emotional appeals.

While there is sometimes a grain of truth to this obvious answer, it is largely wrong. To understand the political behavior of the American electorate is not to understand the political behavior of the typical voter. Let us see why.

The Electorate at the Macro Level

One can agree that the average citizen is not particularly informed, not particularly thoughtful, and not particularly attentive, but still find these characteristics emerge in the aggregate. There are many aspects to this argument, but its simplest summary is that citizens at many different levels of information, thought, and attention determine the electorate’s collective behavior. Those at the low end of the scale have little input on aggregate movement; those at the high end have major input. The net result is that the more informed, thoughtful, and attentive citizens contribute disproportionately to aggregate movement.
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The key to the macro-micro discrepancy, of course, is that aggregation accentuates the orderly. One can have an electorate in which large numbers of citizens act as if at random and other large numbers have unchanging loyalties that commit them to the same side for a lifetime – and yet still observe in the aggregate response an orderly response to real political events. When we aggregate over time, those who act as if at random cancel out. Those who act always the same produce no variance. The aggregate “signal” arises almost wholly from those who are orderly in their behavior. The important misconception is that the normal or typical individual attributes dominate the aggregate. They do not. When individuals are disorderly or constant over time, then their attributes contribute trivially to the movement of the whole.

The point is that the macro perspective is – and should be – very different from the micro. To understand (micro) voters, one must focus upon normal and typical behavior. To understand (macro) electorates, the focus must be on their orderly movement over time. And we shall see again and again that such movement is orderly, is responsive to real political events, and does send a message that politicians ignore at their peril. The irony of this shift of perspective is that it is a shift back to the conventional wisdom of political observers before the scientific study of politics.

To elaborate, consider the simplified illustration of an electorate composed of two types of individuals. Group A is composed of ideal informed citizens who pay political attention and respond in meaningful ways to political cues. Group B is composed of people who pay virtually no attention to the political (and economic) environment. Suppose we survey group B at regular intervals. Group B respondents might give random responses to survey questions or reach back to some stable predispositions to provide answers, but in the aggregate there will be no variance. For instance, when the economy changes, they do not see it, and the record of Consumer Sentiment will be a flat line.¹ When the president succeeds or fails, they do not see it, and their degree of Presidential Approval will be a flat line. When the candidates propose new policy solutions, they do not see it, and the election result is unaffected. Meanwhile, in all these circumstances, group A responds to the political stimuli as expected, given its attention and interest in politics.

By definition, our hypothetical two-group electorate consists of the addition of groups A and B. The electorate, that is, is the sum of meaningful variation and a flat line. It is easy to see that the responses of group A are solely what drive the macro-politics indicators. When Consumer

¹ Alternatively, they perceive their personal economic experiences but not the economic experience of the aggregate.
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Sentiment changes, it is people who are informed about the economy who move. When Presidential Approval changes, it is people who are aware of the president’s activity who move. When candidates change their policy positions, it is the interested, informed voters who shift their votes, although in different directions depending on their policy views. Most importantly, in each case the change is not unpredictable or random movement; it is orderly and predictable. Neither informed voters nor uninformed voters are going to collectively move without a collective reason – a net response to available signals.

The electorate of course does not divide simply into groups A and B, but at any one time, some people are attentive and others not. Imagine again our scale of political information, from which we drew the typical voter as the voter at the median. We know that the more informed the voter is, the more responsive the voter will be to the political environment. In this way, the informed electorate drives the macro polity system to a degree that may not be immediately apparent.

At the same time, we should not write as if aggregation from the individual to the aggregate solves all the problems of democracy. And we should see the limits of the argument. At least two important limitations deserve attention. One is that even as they dominate the change in the political indicators, informed voters might be too low in number to have any political impact. If only 10 percent were in the ideal group A category, their influence would be less than if, say, 50 percent were in category A, even though group A's dominance over the aggregate indicators would be the same in either instance.

A second limitation is that circumstances could exist where the "errors" of uninformed voters do not cancel out but instead represent the systematic response to some erroneous signal. Suppose that ignorant voters are just alert enough to respond to some false signal of economic well-being. Or suppose that they evaluate the president not on objective indicators of which they remain ignorant, but rather on superficial indicators like the president's general demeanor when appearing on television news bytes. Similarly, whereas the informed voters respond to candidate issue positions, suppose their votes are swamped by less informed voters who are just attentive enough to follow the siren call of the demagogue.

In theory, macro-level analysis could show the voice of the attentive voter drowned out in these ways. But we do not find that. We are struck by the facts leading in the other direction, to the extraordinary sophistication of the collective electorate. Here is a preview of some examples: When the citizenry forms expectations of the economy, it responds as if to the best information available, and it uses this information rationally to evaluate the president. Similarly, according to our estimates, the
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electorate’s collective policy proximity to the two parties matters at election time to a degree most observers would find surprising. And we find evidence that when national policy responds to assuage public opinion, public opinion responds accordingly, lowering its demands for further action. In each instance, these responses of the collective electorate are far more than we expect the typical voter of survey research lore to be able to perform.  

Political Dynamics

This book is about the American political system. To examine American politics, we do not describe its state at any given moment but instead observe how it changes, how it evolves, over the course of time. We are interested in dynamics, in how each of the various pieces impinges upon each of the others, in how change flows from electorate to government and back again.

The Macro in our title connotes our level of analysis throughout. Our interest is in system-level equations. When we explore how government economic performance affects the electorate’s political support and future elections, or the interrelationships between government policy and citizen preferences for policy, each shaping the other, we focus on the systemic relationships between citizens and governments. We model the system as a system, and explore the interactions of things influencing other things and feeding back through multiple layers of causal relationships.

All of these questions are about the whole, not the parts, of American politics. Consequently, we explore them nearly always with aggregated macro data. This is not, however, an exercise in ecological inference – the inference of individual behavior from aggregate information (Erbing 1990; Achen and Shively 1993; King 1997). For the questions that drive us are macro-level questions; making inferences to micro behavior is another line of research altogether. Often we will start with micro-level models to deduce macro characteristics, but we do not cross levels to go back again to the micro.

Although we deal with research questions – for example, the causes of presidential approval or the influence of government economic performance on political evaluation – that are familiar in the political

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2 The value of studying politics at the macro level is not limited to time-series analyses. It extends as well to cross-sectional analysis (cross-national, cross-states in the United States) of politics. For a discussion of many of the issues raised here as they apply to aggregate-level cross-sectional data, see Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1994.
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Science literature, it is uncommon to design research that focuses relentlessly on the macro side of the ledger. That is what we shall do. Never delving far into the minds of citizens or politicians, our explanatory goals are at the system level. We care about questions such as whether shifts in mass preferences drive government policy. Such questions involve individual citizens and individual politicians. But it is not the individual behaviors that are our primary focus.

As political scientists, our model is the sister discipline of economics, in which the distinction about levels of analysis is formalized into the micro and macro domains. We are quite self-conscious in our emulation of macroeconomics, in its starting idea that movements of aggregates influence one another at a level of analysis removed from the understanding of individual choices. Markets are macro phenomena, interactions of individuals producing properties, which are not themselves the properties of the individuals who engage in market behavior. Along with the economists, we have learned that good macro theory springs from micro foundations, from explicit linking of the models of individual behavior to macro and aggregate consequences.

In this regard, we are better off than the early students of macroeconomics. Thinking about macro and micro questions in economics ran roughly in parallel. Culminating ultimately in the intellectual crisis preceding the rational expectations revolution, it became clear that the absence of micro foundations in macroeconomics allowed confused and contradictory perspectives. We begin perched on the shoulders of five decades of micro-behavior theory and research into the behaviors of citizens, voters, politicians, parties, and the myriad of institutions that structure and constrain their interactions. Not wholly separate enterprises, as was the case early in the history of micro and macro studies of economics, we have good micro theory to build on. And we shall exploit everything we know.

Because our approach is unusual for political science, we have an unusual need to explain ourselves, to lay out what we believe and how we shall proceed in the analyses to come. Sketching out some of our prior beliefs and commenting on our macro approach to politics are the main business of this chapter.

Components of the Model: Micro and Macro

Citizens choose. They vote. They take up or abandon an identification with a political party. They decide to approve or disapprove of the president's performance in office. Politicians also choose. They decide to support or oppose particular policies. If they are legislators, they decide to support or oppose the administration. They choose sometimes to
highlight their acts by seeking publicity for them. At other times, they obscure them by acting quietly, perhaps by taking positions that are contradictory or confusing.

These are acts of the sort that are the main focus of political scientists who study American politics. They are individual behaviors, understood by studying individuals one at a time. Often these acts, micro behaviors, aggregate over the populations of citizens or politicians to a total that is exactly the sum of its parts. In these cases, our understanding of micro behaviors, the micro polity, becomes also an understanding of the whole, the macro polity. When this is the case, the study of micro behavior is exactly the right way to go about a science of politics. This is the dominant style of American political science, and we believe that on balance it is a good one.

Often, too, macro behaviors have a character, which is not well understood by summing the pieces. If we wished to understand, for example, how presidential approval responds to the vicissitudes of events experienced in the presidential term, we would not get far by the study of individual citizens. If we wished to account for their behavior, we would be impressed by explanations that discriminate between them; factors such as partisanship and ideology would dominate our explanations. Things that affect all citizens equally (or nearly so) – factors such as international crises, honeymoons, and the zigs and zags of the macro economy – would not emerge as important understandings. These matters, which vary over time, but not among citizens, do not help to discriminate among citizens at any one moment of time. The reverse is also true; the factors that best discriminate among citizens at a given time vary little over time and do not therefore emerge as dominant understandings of dynamics.

Macro-level understandings differ from micro-level understandings for two classes of reasons. One is that some political behavior is social; groups of people interacting with one another do things, which are different from what would have occurred from the summation of atomized individuals. A good knowledge of the preferences citizens bring to a precinct caucus, for example, does not give impressive leverage in predicting its outcome, because things change when citizens begin to talk to one another. They can change quite dramatically when strategic considerations enter the fray.

But more humble differences between the micro and macro level are also important. Understandings of micro and macro differ also from the design of research appropriate for the two. Macro-approval research, for example, holds nearly constant those factors that discriminate among citizens and emphasizes variation in those that move all together. That makes it possible to observe subtle causes of behavior without the