THE MACRO POLITY

*The Macro Polity* provides the first comprehensive model of American politics at the system level. Focusing on the interactions between citizen evaluations and preferences, government activity and policy, and how the combined acts of citizens and governments influence one another over time, it integrates understandings of matters such as economic outcomes, presidential approval, partisanship, elections, and government policy making into a single model. Borrowing from the perspective of macroeconomics, it treats electorates, politicians, and governments as unitary actors, making decisions in response to the behavior of other actors. The macro and longitudinal focus makes it possible to directly connect the behaviors of electorate and government. The surprise of macro-level analysis, emerging anew in every chapter, is that order and rationality dominate explanations. This book argues that the electorates and governments that emerge from these analyses respond to one another in orderly and predictable ways.

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Preface

Filing into the voting booths in November 1994, most American voters knew almost nothing about the Republican Party’s “Contract with America.” Most could not say who would lead that party if its contract succeeded. Many were even unsure which party was in control going into the election, although American voters make better guesses at party control in those increasingly rare instances, like 1994, of one-party control of both White House and congress. Most Americans did not vote at all, and as usual that familiar majority of nonvoters knew even less than those who did.

This story of unmotivated, ill-informed, and inattentive voters is as old as the first examinations of individual voters, and it is confirmed anew by every subsequent voting study. Looked upon as individuals, most Americans care little about politics and possess a level of knowledge of the details of political life that is consistent with not caring. Whereas large numbers could cite NFL football standings, list the details of the private lives of celebrities from the entertainment industry, and recall almost verbatim the scripts of television commercials, relatively few know much about government beyond the identity of the president. The minority who vote with any regularity do so, it appears, from a sense of obligation more than anything else. Good citizens, they believe, watch their diets, floss their teeth daily, and vote from time to time.

All this is true for voters as individuals. All of it is well documented and well known. But it is also wrong for voters when considered as a collective electorate. All these facts, insofar as they lead us to believe that the electorate acts without purpose, lead us astray. For when we look to whole electorates, we see a different picture entirely.

We now know that the American electorate of 1994 was in a relatively conservative mood after the liberalism of Bill Clinton’s first two years. We have no doubt whatsoever that the ideologically active electorate knew which party would propose and enact more conservative policies.
Preface

We believe that it acted, in the aggregate, with purpose, and got some of what it wanted from Newt Gingrich and the G.O.P. 104th Congress.¹

What we see here is a radical discontinuity between the impressions and conclusions reached from the study of individuals and aggregates. That discontinuity does not require us to deny one or the other set of facts. Although they have strikingly different implications for the democratic polity, both sets of facts are simultaneously true. Both even are known – but the individual-level facts are much better known, and their implications more often believed.

Analysts of the early voting studies were impressed with the degree to which experiences long in the past shaped party preferences and loyalties. Respondents in the 1950s and 1960s repeatedly referred to Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt when asked to account for their current party views. From this, the natural inference is of great sluggishness in response to the events of current politics. Thus we have the view of an electorate slow to acquire new information and slow to adapt to it when it does, a view of backward-looking and inertial behavior. These are the individual-level facts.

The aggregate of such an inertial electorate should show a very slow and very partial adaptation to the stream of events in politics. And that is wrong. The real aggregate is quite nimble, changing its partisan balance in response, for example, to real economic indicators of the last quarter or two, reacting to the president more swiftly. That reaction, far from being a slow adaptation to a new stream of facts, adjusts itself to expected “facts” about the future before they occur.

If we ask again which of these views is correct, historically rooted and slow-adapting individuals or the nimble aggregate, the answer again is that both are. The implications that flow and the inferences one draws cannot both be correct, but the simple facts are. Our task will be to draw the right inferences for the right level of analysis, which is a matter of perspective.

The lore of the cloakroom holds that overwhelming proportions of voters cannot recall how their member or senator voted on a single issue during a session of congress. And that lore is undoubtedly rooted in fact. We know that large numbers of voters cannot recall the name of the member, let alone his or her behavior in office. Details about congress sink into that large gray zone of inattention to politics. More visible than important acts of the Federal Reserve governors or the FTC, congress

¹ This is not to suggest that it wanted all of what it got. The data are consistent with a story of an electorate demanding a moderate correction to the right, but not a “Republican Revolution.”
Preface

still is no competitor to sports, romance, and work life, the things that most often command attention.

That lore would be consistent with a casual decision style for members; voting “right” can’t matter when voters have no memories of what members do. That again is starkly inconsistent with what we observe. Members behave as if their every action were monitored in exquisite detail, a committee of constituents viewing from the gallery. How can members simultaneously believe that constituents are largely uninformed about their behavior and still fear for their political lives from a bad vote? They fear because they have seen others, friends and opponents, lose elections when they could not defend their public positions. But why should this inattentive public opinion monster rear up on them? For that we need to return to the familiar contradiction of individual and aggregate, micro and macro. There we see that most individuals need not remember a vote in order for the member to get into electoral trouble. Elections are won and lost in the aggregate. And the aggregate moves at the margin; a few percent doing this or that systematically produce big, sometimes shocking, aggregate effects.

Professionals in politics – journalists and politicians – see issues as bundles of similar debates over similar concerns. Ordinary Americans draw only loose connections. The data seem to suggest that they come to each issue policy controversy anew, without concern for how what they believe about other controversies might impinge upon what they ought to believe about the current one. They are largely, in Converse’s (1964) term, “unconstrained.” Where professionals see issues as instances for the application of higher abstractions, ordinary citizens seem often to lack this abstract structuring mechanism. When asked to describe their preferences, their words are rich in reactions to the persons and events of politics, relatively impoverished in ideological classification. Abstractions that do arise are typically quite limited in connotation, unlike similar language used by those who make their living from public life.

This lack of connection suggests an electorate in which every issue is sui generis, a function only of the facts and context of the times. In such an electorate, thinking about change over time would be pointless. Lacking a stable set of relationships between issues, there are only particulars, nothing general worth observing. This is not the case. When we look to the associations of issues with one another over time, they are quite predictable and quite high. High associations within bundles of issues suggest that something stable lies beneath them. This something, public-policy mood, turns out to be orderly and predictable, moving through time in response to the events of politics. It is as if the aggregate order were impossible to square with the individual-level disorder we so commonly observe.
Preface

Which of these views is correct, individual disorder or aggregate order? In one, conventional views – and no less, democratic theory – square with observed behavior. In the other, politics is characterized by large elements of randomness and only small elements of order. It is a politics of chance, where nothing is orderly or particularly meaningful. Both views we will see to be correct. We will build a portrait of orderly aggregate behavior in this book without challenging the consensus that individual behavior involves large elements of caprice and disorder. Choosing between the views becomes a matter of what questions are to be answered. Questions about citizens are answered with individual data and individual conclusions. Questions about how electorates interact with parties, candidates, and events over time are answered with the aggregate, orderly view.

What individual voters know about economics is much less documented than what they know about politics. We presume that this is true in part because voters know so little about macroeconomic policy debates that it is pointless to ask for preferences on surveys.2 We think it safe to assert nonetheless that most individuals lack any working knowledge of fiscal or monetary policy, do not know the function of the Federal Reserve or the identity of its leadership. Faced with a serious debate on alternative courses of national economic policy, most voters would not understand the key terms of the discussion.

We can get some gauge of the matter by looking at the language politicians use to address their audience. There serious debates about the possible role of the federal deficit as a lever on real interest rates become homilies about government operating just like the typical family, balancing what comes in with what goes out. Expansive monetary policy is “government printing money” – and we would not be surprised to find the Bureau of the Mint chosen by many citizens as a key economic policy maker. Virtually every act of taxing and spending is described by proponents as “producing jobs” and by opponents as “costing jobs,” all with little apparent concern that both claims cannot be simultaneously true.

2 We do have some modest experience with the related issue of taxation. There, attempts to gauge sentiment toward progressivity, the central issue of taxation controversies, run afoul of voter misunderstanding. The evidence is that large numbers of lowest income and least educated respondents gravitate to response options that would substantially increase their own tax burdens relative to the wealthy. The political popularity of “flat tax” ideas – at least so long as they are not implemented – is related evidence of the same propensity. An intriguing question is whether evident enthusiasm for a flat tax seen in surveys erodes when the issue becomes the focus of a salient political campaign.
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Americans are quite well aware that many of the goods they consume are made in other countries, and they worry about the impact on American jobs. They are quite unaware that huge numbers of American jobs, and maybe even their own, are dependent upon exports to many of those same countries. Debates about foreign trade consequently must take place on two levels, where decision makers deal with real balances between gains and losses, and most of the public knows only rhetoric, for example, “the giant sucking sound.” Political leaders regularly ignore expressed public preferences on these matters, knowing that the preferences arise from a weak grasp of the central facts.

But all this changes when we look to macro politics. There we learn that public expectations of the future course of the national economy closely mirror those of economic forecasters. We learn that presidential approval rises and falls with revised expectations about the future. We learn that incumbent success at reelection is predictably dependent upon the state of the economy and expectations for its future. Again it is tempting to regard these two accounts as contrasts, one true and one false. But they are both true. It is true that individual Americans have a weak grasp on the essentials of economics and economic policy, and it is also true that Americans, in the aggregate, are highly sensitive to real economic performance. After worrying about the terrible effects of the combination of cynical politicians with myopic electorates, we now know that electorates are not myopic; they cannot be manipulated by the here and now because they attend to the future.

This book is a sustained examination of American politics from the aggregate perspective. We will see routinely that implications from the best sustained generalizations from the study of individual attitudes and behavior do not hold at the macro level. At one level, this is just a tired restatement of the maxim that we ought to restrict generalizations to the level of data that support them. And this would be a sermon to our readers about the dangers of cross-level inference. But our interest is the substance of American politics, not methodological sermons. We care about what is believed to be true about how American politics works. Our goal is to contribute to that body of knowledge by a systematic analysis of the whole. We will not achieve that goal. But at least we will be as systematic as we know how to be, and we will cover as much of the whole as we can grasp and squeeze between two covers.

As we move from topic to topic, we will keep returning to one set of questions. We will ask: Which is the real American politics? Is it ignorant or informed? Is it sensitive to real political context or the aggregate of a kind of meaningless babble? Is it the expression of, and governing response to, real preferences, or is it manufactured symbols that move voters and politicians in a surreal dance? The answers will usually be
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“both.” And then the important question becomes which of the contrasting perspectives is more appropriate for the particular question at hand.

Our starting point, and a major theme of this book, is the point of our several examples: The operation of the macro-political system produces a more sophisticated and intelligent response than we would expect from what we know about the individual actors who compose it.
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