

Review — The Persuadable Voter

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American elections classically involve a two-step: the candidate runs to the extreme in the primary, then back to the centre for the general. *The Economist*, 5.7.2008.

2008 looks exciting — at least for those of us who do not live in the US. In what might be the most expensive election ever, Barack Obama might be able to break through a fairly considerable barrier and go on to achieve much, both domestically and internationally, and not only as he impacts on US foreign policy, but indirectly too, not least in Africa where, from Kenya to Zimbabwe, democracy desperately needs a role model.

On closer inspection, of course, the picture is not so pretty. US presidential elections are won and lost in ‘battleground states’ by ‘persuadable voters’. And, as in any two-party system, only a tiny percentage of the population may swing the result, one way or the other.

Originally, the US presidential electoral system was rather different: the winner of the plurality vote became the president and the runner-up became the vice-president. George Washington and others were fiercely opposed to the (British) two-party system of politics, and they tried to create a more inclusive polity. Alas, by 1804, it was all over; this was not just because political parties had come into existence — in theory, and as often happens in practice, people from different political parties can and do work together — rather it was because of the introduction of party political patronage.

The result is the two-party system we have today. It is still a plurality vote, in theory; in practice, however, while other candidates do indeed put their names forward — Ralph Nader and others — it is basically a two-horse race. This book [1] concentrates on just these two horses: the elephant and

the donkey, and the way they both try to woo not so much those who would opt to vote either for neither or even not at all, but rather those whom they regard as indeed ‘persuadable’, either the “waverers”, (p 30), or those of the other side who, on one or more policies, are at odds with their own party.

As is well known, people’s political persuasions bear a remarkable resemblance to our other characteristics, and often tend to fall on a normal distribution curve. If the x-axis varies from Democrat to Republican, then there are the relatively small numbers of those committed partisans, who always vote ‘this’ or ‘that’, regardless of the campaign and sometimes regardless of events. But a large number of people are in the centre — middle America — and like their counterparts in the UK — middle England — if they swing just a little bit this way or that, the effect can be crucial. Needless to say, both parties tend to woo this centre ground, and the inevitable consequence is that the two political parties sometimes become similar. . . as happened in our own UK election of 1997 between John Major’s Tories and Tony Blair’s Labour Party. A two-party system, then, can be a form of one-party state. As Mikhail Gorbachev observed, “Today the Republicans stand at the helm. . . tomorrow it will be the Democrats. There is no particular difference.”*

The party system in the US is not as rigid as its equivalent in the UK, and voting for a different party — ‘voter volatility’ is the phrase some politicians use, normally the losers — is perhaps more common on their side of the Atlantic. We are told that 35 per cent of the voting public regard themselves as Republicans, and 32 per cent as Democrats (p 10); and of these, “25 per cent were persuadable partisans, (another 9 per cent persuadable Independents),” (p 8).

If I may express a personal viewpoint, a further feature of life on both sides of the Atlantic is that democracy, which should be a collective exercise, is in fact very individualist. In theory, it is a coming together, a process by which all come to a communal

For this publication, see www.votingmatters.org.uk

* *Perestroika*, Collins, 1987, p 216.

agreement on who should govern and on what programme. In practice, however, it has become the opposite: a win-or-lose contest between two opposing teams in which the individual supporter is motivated by the principle, 'I-vote-for-me'. In a word, people often vote the way they do for selfish reasons; and the more unscrupulous politician will often react by exploiting two of our more basic selfish instincts: greed, or worse, fear.

Greed is often catered for by generous pre-election budgets and promises of tax breaks, and the party in power usually directs these at certain members of society, the ones more likely to vote for them. Fear is even more effective. Little wonder, then, that with but one exception, the winner of the US presidential election throughout the period of the Cold War was he — it was always a he — who was the more anti-Soviet. It did not matter which party he came from. Whether it was the Democratic Kennedy and his missile gap or, as the authors recall, (p 82), the Republican Reagan and his empire of evil, the winner was always the one who was the more belligerent. Thus the US (and UK) two-party systems, standing as they did supposedly to defend democracy, were actually part of the arms race which threatened to destroy it.

The one exception was Jimmy Carter. In the rather introspective mood which prevailed in the US after the disaster of Vietnam, he came to power in 1976 on a ticket of human rights. But even he fell to militarism, the khaki election stuff: and doubtless, if his attempt to rescue the hostages in Iran had not ended in a fiasco, he might well have been re-elected; when the US helicopters were shot down in the desert, however, so too were his chances of a second term.

I think the main reason why George W Bush won the 2004 contest was related to militarism: the Sept 2001 attack on the twin towers, the war against terror, the US attack on Afghanistan, and the subsequent invasion of Iraq. These topics get barely a mention in this book even though, "economic and foreign policy issues, in particular, are almost always the centrepiece of presidential campaigns," (p 110). Instead, the authors try to justify the unjustifiable. They appear to have no views, one way or the other, on the electoral system itself. Rather, it is a very subjective work, looking only at that percentage of the population — middle America — and at how they have been used, or abused, by presidential candidates.

Militarism, then, was not covered. Instead, the book concentrates on those topics which were contentious in the most recent elections: 'bible belt'

politics on stem-cell research, gay marriage, and abortion; the gun lobby; race or rather affirmative action; the environment, which was dealt with rather glibly; and there was, as always, "the economy, stupid". On such issues, the book argues, "some 2.8 million partisans switched... in the sixteen key battleground states of 2004. Bush's margin of victory over Kerry in those states was just 200,000 votes," (p 8). Now the authors do admit that Bush focused in Ohio, for example, on 'national security' (p 9) — i.e., militarism — and points out, in a footnote, that in one state, "60 per cent of Bush ads mentioned terrorism or domestic security compared to 37 per cent for Kerry," (p 167), but reverts in the main to discussing, and basing all its conclusions on, the above domestic matters.

We then enter a land of jargon. A political party is indeed a coalition, (p 50); and in a two-party system, each of the two parties is inevitably a very broad church; so, needless to say, there will be those voters who do not agree with literally everything in their party manifesto (and thank God for that!): these, apparently, are "incongruent" or "cross-pressured voters" (p 39) or even "policy-conflicted out-partisans" (p 144), all sorts of facts on whom is not only demographic but "psychographic" (p 46). This information, along with a lot of personal trivia, becomes "hyperinformation" (p 13) which is then available for "data-mining", (p 155). Now while voters may vary from "congruent partisans" (p 85) to "independent leaners" (p 25), the candidates also vary in their behaviour: they talk in general on TV, but in their e-mails and text messages and more traditional newsletters, they often micro-target very specific "wedge issues" (p 6) to specific groups of people in a tactic known as "dog-whistle politics" (p 6). Furthermore, such appeals are more likely to be directed at "ticket splitters" (p 45) or "pivotal or swing voters" in "pivotal states" (p 11), while those in safe seats along with any "nonbase voters" (p 149) are less likely to be contacted. And just in case all of this isn't enough, the authors add other bits of jargon which are tautological, phrases like "cross-sectional surveys," (p 35), and "mixed-method research," (p 57).

Once all of these terms have been translated, there are the even more tautological sentences: "...the fractures in the Democratic Party are fundamentally rooted in policy differences among different groups in the Democratic coalition," (p 78); "Partisans who are ideologically conflicted with their party are more likely to defect," (p 83); "the decision of a persuadable partisan to defect depends on the issue context of the campaign," (p 128); "Independents and

cross-pressured partisans are much more likely to be undecided... and much more likely to change their candidate selection than are congruent partisans,” (p 86); and maybe the prize goes to this one: “campaign responsiveness is a function of psychological tension between the compelling considerations underlying the vote decision,” (p 31), whatever that means. Such statements make this work a turgid tome.

Having sizzled their own minds in this sometimes repetitive and verbose gobbledegook, the authors then try to make some sense of it all by stating the blindingly obvious: “our findings reinforce the conclusions of earlier research that shows political context helps to show how voters make up their minds,” (p 91). Eventually, however, we have something definite, even if rather predictable: “we find compelling evidence that mail sent to persuadable voters was more likely to contain wedge issues than that received by the partisan base,” (p 175), and “wedge strategies were more often used when the cleavages within a party coalition were readily apparent and when the issue not only divided the opposition but also created consensus among the candidate’s own supporters,” (p 151). Little wonder, then that in 2004, “thirty-three states received no television advertising dollars... while battleground states received more than \$8 million, and Florida alone received \$36 million,” (p 11). Consolation comes, perhaps, when the authors tell us that the voters “appear to judge the policy positions of the candidates and to support the candidate that most closely matches their preferences on the salient issues of the campaign, even when that candidate is not their party’s nominee, (p 93).” But I do not think we needed this book to tell us that!

There is some meat in these pages, however, albeit of a disturbing taste. Needless to say — but this book says it *many* times — advances in modern technology have allowed politicians to run a very different campaign from that of yesteryear. The worrying trend comes in the ‘big brother’ side of things: today, candidates have “enormous databases that include information about nearly every one of the roughly 168 million registered voters...” (p 157) “in which they have mapped consumer data, individual party registration, vote history, and other information from voter registration files,” (p 47), “... your age and the age of your children, whether you smoke cigars, where you shop, where you attend church, what kind of car you drive, how old it is, whether you’re on a diet, and what type of pet you have,” (p 46), not to mention “your hobbies and habits, vices and virtues, favourite foods, sports

and vacation venues,” (p 151), and even “criminal records,” (p 159). When all of this is on the computer, it is of course all too easy to micro-target specific groups of voters on very specific issues. A further worry lies in the fact that this practice is now spreading to our side of the pond and to “the British Labour party in particular,” (p 195).

I suppose there is little that we can do to prevent the spread of relevant (and much of what should be regarded as irrelevant) information. But “vote history”? At a recent seminar run by the (Northern Ireland) Electoral Commission, I suggested that while political parties should indeed have access to the *unmarked* register, the *marked* register should definitely be regarded as sensitive material, in the same way as are used ballot papers and so on. The idea that Mugabe or Milošević, to take two extreme examples, should be able to see who has voted and who has not, is obviously unwise. In like manner, any information on “vote history” should be classified; the book does not say whether this refers to, not just whether or not the voter has voted, but also *for whom* he/she voted and how this information was gleaned. “Voters’ registration records,” however, “include [this] history... [and] are available to political parties and candidates (twenty-two states have no restriction on who can access these files),” (p 158).

There are, then, two underlying questions: one concerns the electoral system itself, the other covers the conduct of the campaign. It states somewhat dogmatically that “political parties should present distinct policy alternatives, so that a vote cast for one candidate over the other provides a clear signal of the voters’ preferred policy direction,” (p 188). As mentioned above, however, the very dynamics of the two-party system mitigate against this and work instead towards ‘middle America’. Admittedly, the politicians try to paint the picture that the two candidates represent diametrically opposed alternatives, and it quotes J F Kennedy who suggested, “the two parties are wholly different,” (p 44). Well he would, wouldn’t he? It is what many UK politicians call the politics of clear blue water. The fact remains, however: the US presidential electoral system is “a blunt instrument,” (p 13).

So while the authors do not constructively criticize the system let alone suggest alternatives, they do accept that it has its limitations. “In a complex and pluralistic society, a two-party system ensures the parties will be coalitional in nature,” (p 50). Therefore, as noted above, both parties are broad; the Republican Party, to quote Robert Dole, “represents many streams of opinion and many points of

view,” (p 27). No wonder there is much “cognitive dissonance” (p 27) and umpteen wedge issues, but this is an inherent weakness of such a simplistic voting system, the defects of which have rather worrying implications for both the candidate and the voter. The former “should focus on moderate, middle-of-the-road policies rather than taking ideologically extreme positions on divisive issues *because these are the preferences of the median voter*,” (p 39). And for the voter? “By forcing a choice between only two alternatives... casting a ballot for one candidate or the other masks the complexity of attitudes that might motivate [such] behaviour,” (p 24). Granted, the “choice of only two major parties ensures that some partisans will be cross pressured on some issues,” (p 73). And hence this book. If, however, “candidates had been purely policy motivated, there would have been less reason to communicate different messages to different audiences,” (p 169). This all rather suggests, not only that the system is pretty rotten, but that this book is researching the rotten.

The authors’ references to other electoral systems are minimal. “We might expect,” they suggest, “that campaigns in proportional electoral systems, by lowering the hurdles to office, would see fewer divisive issues used in the campaign,” (p 195). I think the logic of the argument, however, is rather different: the word ‘divisive’, after all, implies a binary comparison; so if there are more than two parties debating the issue, it will be seen as controversial perhaps, but not so starkly divisive. Furthermore, it would seem that the authors’ knowledge of PR is a little suspect, not least because their only example of a country which “maintains a proportional electoral system” is Australia, (p 196).

Then comes the question of the campaign. It is perhaps regrettable that Obama has opted out of public finance, which would have limited his campaigning to a ceiling of \$84.1 million. This policy shift may have been motivated by self-interest, but it already seems to have backfired, as John McCain is now “attracting millions more dollars than expected,” (*The Guardian*, 12.7.2008.) On this theme, the book has little to say, except to report some “potentially grim prospects,” (p 186). The first is that the practice of micro-targeting will turn democracy “‘of and by’ the people” into one “‘of and by’ a myriad of swing voters,” (p 187). I rather think the conduct of the 2004 contest shows that it has already achieved that definition. Unfortunately, of course, the system is self-perpetuating, as winning candidates often ignore any deficiencies of the system, without which they might not have won. The book quotes George W who said that the 2004 elec-

tion had given him, “political capital,” (p 188) and yet, under the existing system, “what ‘the people’ said they wanted was not very clear at all,” (p 189); but that, too, is just another inevitable defect of the system.

Democracy in the US (and elsewhere) is already in a fairly weak state of health, as declining turnout figures over the years have demonstrated. Granted, the numbers went up a little in 2004, and they might do the same with McCain and Obama, but overall, the trend is still downwards. This again is partly because of the weakness of the two-party system; and partly due to the often unscrupulous behaviour of the candidates, not only in the way they whip up the voters’ emotions, but also in the almost uncontrollable way they are allowed to conduct their campaigns. At the very least, spending should indeed be capped. And maybe, just a personal thought, advertising should be banned. Again, the book does not comment.

To a large extent, then, the conclusions of the book are subjective, and not a little self-evident. The research which underlies this book, however, should be scrutinised. Many scholars — the authors often refer to these ‘scholars’, hoping no doubt that they too will be counted as such — consider “open-ended questions the gold standard for gauging attitude strength and importance,” (p 65). That said, the book uses a series of *closed* questions. One classic example is the following: “Do you agree or disagree that it should be legal for a woman to have an abortion?” (p 209). Well, even the Pope allows for ectopic abortions. (Admittedly, the question also asks a multi-option question — ‘multi’ on a scale of three — as to the circumstances under which an abortion should be considered legal. This, too, is a very inadequate degree of sophistication.)

Part of the whole problem lies in the very concept of the book, and in the simple fact that “it is a simplification to label someone as persuadable or not — persuadability is undoubtedly a continuum,” (p 68). The authors have only made the problem worse: “being undecided about candidate preference is a behavioural consequence, rather than a determinant, of persuadability,” (p 24), even if the candidate will sometimes be “ambiguous on policy issues in an attempt to vie for the pivotal voter,” (p 39). They are lost in a bowl of candy-floss.

Other aspects to the research are also a cause of concern. The authors “classify voters as cross-pressured or not... in order to make a rough estimate,” (p 93), although, to be fair, they also say, “we must be careful about generalising these results,” (p 104), and “we want to recognise some of the lim-

itations of our analysis,” (p 109). At the end of it all, on micro-targeting for example, they say, “it remains unclear whether these messages are...more effective,” (p 155), and “It is likely the case...that we actually underestimate the extent to which divisive issues were prevalent in the 2004 campaign,” (p 163); instead, they ask rhetorically, “Did microtargeting bring 4 million lost evangelicals to the polls in 2004?” (p 181).

Indeed, the book seems to fail, even in its own limited purpose, in many regards. It announces in the beginning that it will concentrate on the most recent presidential campaigns, yet it bounces around, referring to campaigns from earlier times, some from the first half of the 20th century, some even from the 19th. In addition, there is a huge section on Nixon’s campaign, which seems a little out of place.

Finally, the conclusions of the book are as suspect as the content. In earlier pages, it points out that elections are won and lost on “razor-thin margins,” (p 7), and in “a handful of states,” (p 144). It is concerned that, “More than ever before, presidential candidates can now ignore large portions of the public — non-voters, those committed to the opposition, and those living in uncompetitive states,” (p 179). And yet, despite this, it comes to a seemingly bold conclusion: “the balance of power in American democracy is still held by its citizens. And our analysis suggests that these citizens have the capacity and motivation to deliberate about their vote decision. It is still in the interaction of citizens and government during an American presidential election campaign that we find the basic structure, however imperfect, of a democratic process,” (p 201).

However imperfect. Alas, I fear these imperfections will stay and, if it does anything at all, this book will only help the system last longer than it should.

1 References

- [1] D Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G Shields. *The Persuadable Voter*. Princeton University Press. ISBN 0691133417 2008.