Vindicating Anthony Downs

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Positive turnout rates in the United States and elsewhere are widely considered "an embarrassing limitation of the economic approach to politics" because, for any one voter, "the costs of casting a ballot in any large election are almost always greater than the potential benefits, which are dependent on the unlikely occurrence of casting the winning or tie vote in an election" (Knack 1992, 133). Green and Shapiro (1994), whose scathing critique of the rational choice field centers on the work of Anthony Downs (1957), trenchantly put it: "Rational choice theorists have trotted out an astonishing variety of conjectures about the costs and benefits of voting, in the process generating an enormous literature, possibly larger in terms of academic citations and sheer bibliographic length than any other rational choice literature in American politics" (47–48), yet they still have no answer as to why people vote when, according to their arguments, reason says they ought not.[1] Grofman (1993), paraphrasing Morris Fiorina, has referred to the failure of rational choice theory to explain turnout as the "paradox that ate rational choice."[2]

We disagree. Our rejoinder is a simple one. Downs was right. You shouldn't vote. And, as more people come to recognize that fact, they'll stop.

Our proof proceeds in four parts. First we demonstrate that Downs is rising in importance in the academic literature on voting and turnout relative to classic works emphasizing civic duty (Berelson et al. 1954; Almond and Verba 1963) or partisan attachments (Campbell et al. 1960). Second, we demonstrate that the rise in Downs' influence relative to these other works is accompanied by a general decline in voting in the U.S., with the increased turnout in the 2004 election an easily explainable minor blip. Third, we provide limited but suggestive evidence that those who presumably know Downs best and are most likely to find his arguments credible—economists—are much less likely to vote than their level of education might predict. Finally, we account for the fact that people still vote by providing compelling evidence that most people have never heard of Downs, and thus are unlikely to be familiar with the ideas that made him "famous" (sic!).

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(1) Downs is a Rising Star

That Downs is a rising star in academia is undisputed. Still, evidence never hurts. For the period 1956 through 2004, Figure 1 (adapted and extended from Wattenberg 1991) shows citations to Downs (1957) in comparison with citations to those of other classic books on voting and political participation.[3]

(2) As Downs Goes Up, U.S. Turnout Goes Down

In a little-known 1980 article[4] that inspired the present work, Brunk (1980) reported results of a quasi-experimental study in which he discussed Downs' model with his undergraduate classes and checked to see if their willingness to vote had subsequently decreased.[5] His findings are clear: "An introduction to rational participation has a major impact on the attitudes of individuals towards elections. As a result of discussing a model of participation a month earlier, the number of individuals who indicated that they would vote in various contests decreased. Interest in the outcome of an election was no longer sufficient to insure voting" (561–562). While his study was limited to the college classroom, Brunk hypothesized that his results would generalize. "If rational participation were routinely discussed, Individuals would be better able to maximize their personal utility. They would do so by choosing not to vote in many elections. This would result in an accelerated decline of voter turnout" (561).

Turnout in the United States has indeed been in decline from its high point of 63% of the voting age population (VAP) in the 1960 presidential election to a low in 1996 of 49%. The patterns of change correlate well with citations to Downs, as shown in Figure 2. Explaining 61% of the variance in voter turnout during the 40-year period, the average number of citations of Downs (1957) in the four-year period preceding a presidential election is perhaps the most impressive single predictor of change in turnout identified to date.[6] It would thus seem that, as more people read Downs, more people get the message.[7]

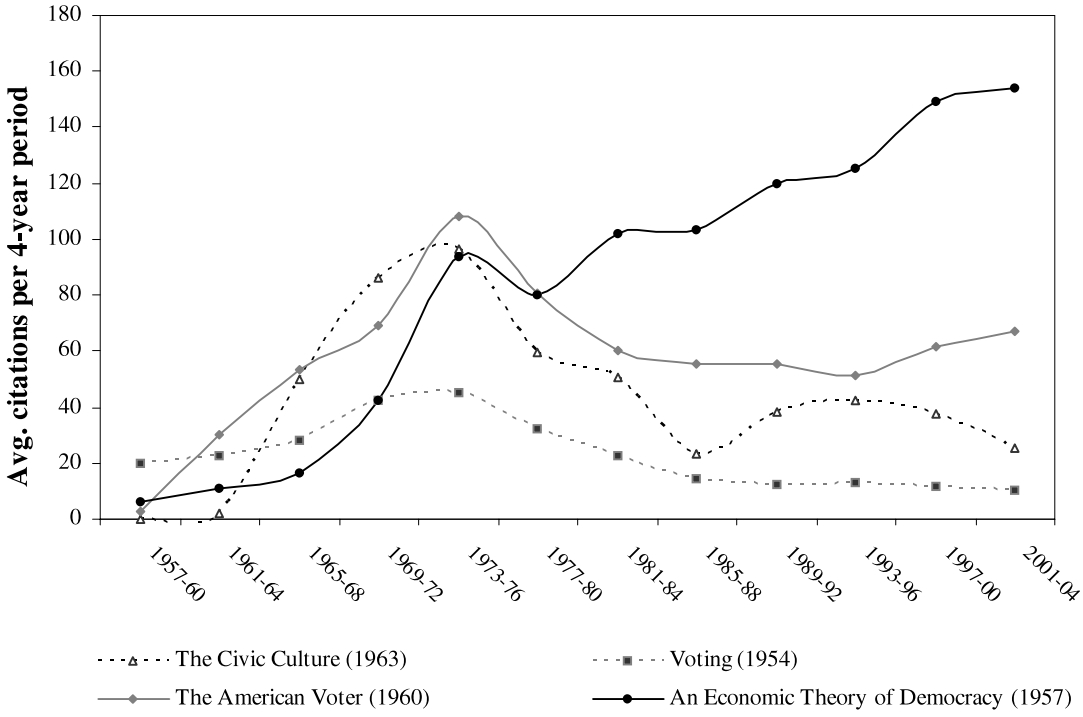
Although the slight increase in turnout in 2004 as compared to 2000 may seem an anomaly, it is easy to explain within the Downsian framework.[8] Downs predicts higher turnout in elections where the possibility that any individual's vote could be decisive increases. Following the 2000 election, where essentially the margin of victory was zero, and with polls indicating similar closeness between Bush and Kerry in 2004, some of those who had closely read Downs may have realized that this might be one of those rare elections where their vote could actually matter.[9] We expect this effect will wane significantly in 2008 as the memories of 2000 continue to fade, especially since the margin of victory in the 2004 presidential election returned to more "normal" proportions.

Moreover, there is another intriguing argument as to why presidential turnout may have been higher in 2004 than in 2000. Downs (1957) was out of print in 2001 and, while it did come back into print before the 2004 election, it was only in the form of a reprint that cost $47.00. The higher cost of his book may have deterred some voters from learning about the Downsian cost-benefit analysis of turnout. Indeed, exactly as Downs (an economist) might have expected, as we report below, purchases of *An Economic Theory of Democracy* did fall off with this price increase.

We can provide further evidence of Downsian impact by looking at turnout levels among political scientists as compared to economists. Economists are those likely to be most exposed to Downsian views and most likely to find

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Figure 1
Voting by Citation: The Dominance of Downs



them credible. Frank, Gilovich, and Regan (1993) have found some evidence of more rational, self-interested behavior among those studying to be economists. We take this one step further and compare the voter turnout rates for a selected set of economists and political scientists. Our key hypothesis is that economists will vote at lower levels than political scientists; but we also expect that, in departments exposed to Downsian ideas, even political scientists will have a turnout less than 100%.

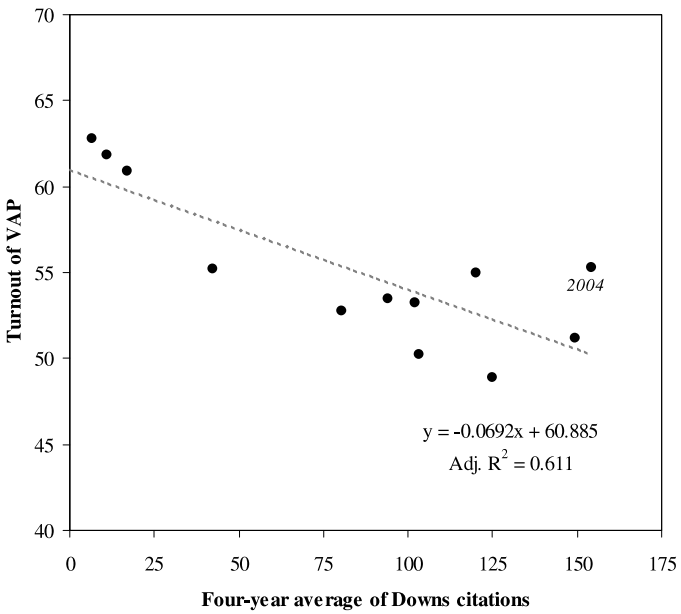
Using official voter history data collected by Gray (2003) from registrars of voters in Los Angeles and Orange counties (California) we analyze the voting behavior of permanent faculty members in the economics and political science departments at three Ph.D.-granting institutions, the University of California, Irvine, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the California Institute of Technology.[10] We look at turnout data for three different types of elections: the 2003 special state election that led to Arnold Schwarzenegger replacing Gov. Gray Davis, and general elections in 2000 (a presidential election year) and in 2002 (a mid-term election year).

In each of the three elections, turnout among economists was lower than that among political scientists. For economists, the turnout values (as a proportion of potential eligible voters) for 2000, 2002, and 2003 were 61%, 50%, and 70%, respectively; while, for political scientists, the corresponding turnout figures were 82%, 66%, and 80%. Only in the recall election was turnout among political scientists not at least 20 percentage points higher than that among economists. And, we can readily explain that narrowed gap once we recognize that (a) this special plurality-based election included a field of 135 candidates and was expected to be relatively close *and* (b) the University of California faculties were, in essence, selecting their boss.

In these elections turnout among economists is well below what we would expect among individuals of their education level.[11] As we see from Figure 3,[12] reporting data for the 2000 election, *economists teaching at elite southern California institutions of higher education have turnout levels comparable to what we would expect of junior college graduates*.

However, we can at best give only two cheers for the political involvement of the political scientists in our sample. Southern California political scientists with Ph.D.s teaching at elite institutions do not vote at rates higher rather than others with doctorates. Either a career focused on the study of politics does not motivate greater political participation (or may even inhibit it, thanks to the greater knowledge of the true nature of political competition),[13] or we are observing contamination effects from the presence of rational choice scholars at these institutions.[14]

Figure 2
Downs and the Decline of U.S. Voter Turnout, 1960–2004



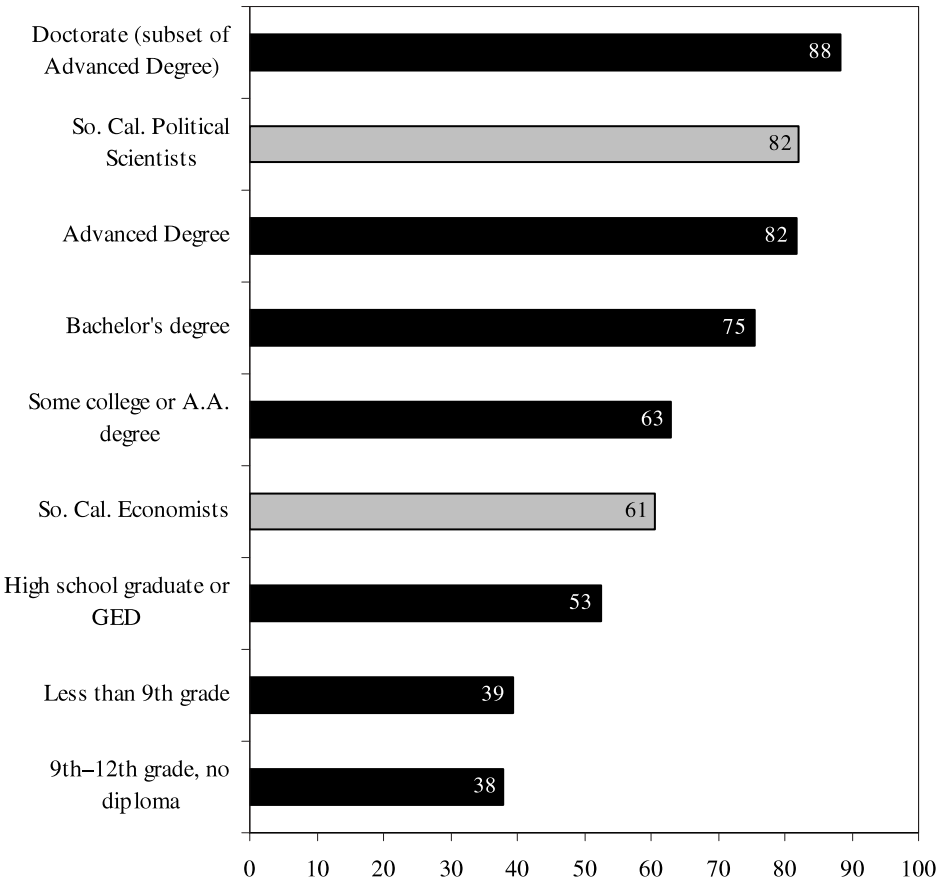
(3) Explaining the Limited Impact of Downs

While we have clearly established the impact of Downsian ideas both on the general electorate and among economists, two important questions remain. First, why have rational choice ideas not yet driven turnout nearer zero?[15] And second, when, if ever, might we expect to see this occur?

The first question has an obvious answer. While Downs may be a "best seller"

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Figure 3
Turnout in 2000: Southern Cal. Political Scientists and Economists as Compared to the Citizens in General at Various Levels of Education



Source: U.S. Census (CPS) and L.A. and O.C. Registrars

as academic tomes go, in the real world that doesn't mean much. *An Economic Theory of Democracy* has been in and out of print in recent years. Even taking account of used book sales it ranked as only 81,242 on the Amazon.com sales rankings in 2001. And, after it went out of print and was reprinted with a new price of $47, its rank slipped to 225,075 in 2005.[16] Thus, the Downsian penetration of the market has been far from strong.

Hence, few citizens are acquainted with Downs' compelling arguments against wasting your time voting. Thus, it's not at all surprising that so many are still voting.[17] Moreover, as Ledyard notes, the self-evident rationality of abstention must compete with "political activists" who, in his apt phrasing, "operate to interfere with the natural forces" (1984, 37). We might expect that only until Downs becomes as widely known and popular as some of these political activists such as, for example, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs and his "Vote or Die" campaign of 2004, could we expect turnout to decrease more substantially.[18]

Conclusion

The influence of Downs is undeniable on those who know him best. If the positive time trend in citations to Downs continues then, absent another pipsqueaker like 2000, we should look forward to a continuing very slow decline in average levels of turnout in U.S. elections.[19]

Notes

*We are indebted to Clover Behrend-Gethard for bibliographic assistance.

1. There have been various attempts at reworking the calculus to solve the paradox (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974), but these attempts are widely seen as having fallen short of the prize—leading some to have lost faith, e.g., Aldrich (1993) asserted that the economic approach just is not going to work with turnout. Green and Shapiro sarcastically refer to this retreat as a "peace with honor" solution (1994, 58). For a strongly contrary point of view to that of Green and Shapiro, see Hanks and Grofman (1998); Grofman (1996); cf. Grofman (2004).

2. Of course, in fairness, rational choice theory is not the only theory that turnout might have been said to have eaten. For example, survey-based studies of turnout have long associated a respondent's education level with their likelihood of casting a ballot (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Yet education levels have risen in the U.S. (and worldwide) while turnout has generally decreased.

3. Data are taken from the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI).

4. Brunk's article averages less than one citation per year.

5. An initial survey of student attitudes was done near the start of the semester.

6. Perhaps the next best single predictor already in the literature is the square root of the number of federal, state, and local laws overturned by the Supreme Court (Klinkner 1993). The Klinker time series, involving a longer timeline (1840–1988) than our work, achieves a very respectable adjusted R^2 of 49.5%. (Of course, correlation is not causation—but when has that caveat ever prevented regression results from appearing in print?)

7. Of course, we do have to be careful with our operationalization of the independent variable. That an academic cites Downs doesn't necessarily mean that he or she has read him.

8. Excluding 2004, the regression line shifts to $y = -0.0848x + 61.626$ with an R^2 of 77.5%.

9. The 2000 election complicates the calculus of voting slightly because it is now evident that the margin of error for counting votes in the United States is significantly larger than one vote. Thus, no presidential election, using the current voting equipment, can ever realistically be decided by one vote; unless, of course, the only votes that count are those of the nine Supreme Court justices.

10. We exclude visiting faculty, adjuncts, instructors, and professors emeritus not currently teaching as they may not be permanent or current residents. We searched for each faculty member in the entire registration and history files. We also reviewed each faculty members' publicly available biography and/or curriculum vitae to evaluate the voting eligibility of those who were not registered to vote—removing those who either explicitly indicate that they are non-citizens or those with any indication that they may not be a citizen (degrees from universities abroad). CVs were also used to gauge when these professors were present in southern California (time and place of appointments). Additionally, we include seven other economists and political scientists located at other graduate-degree-granting universities within the Los Angeles and Orange County area who presented papers at the Public Choice Society annual meetings in either 2004 or 2005. This provides an N of more than 110 potential voters for each election.

11. Moreover, the difference in turnout levels between economists and political scientists

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was contrary to what we would expect from party affiliation. Democrats vote at lower rates than Republicans, but the economists in our sample were more likely to be registered as Republicans than were the political scientists in our sample (26% versus 11%). One in ten economists was registered under a "third party" (Libertarian, Green, or American Independent) whereas no political scientists were. Economists were less likely to be registered as Democrats (49% versus 73%). About 15% of political scientists and economists each decline to state a party affiliation.

12. The data in Figure 3 is taken from Current Population Survey (CPS) estimates. Although survey respondents in general are slightly more likely to indicate voting, of all the polls measuring turnout, the CPS has the smallest problem of over-reports. McDonald and Popkin (2001) estimate that 55.6% of the voting eligible population (VEP) cast ballots in 2000 and the Census CPS for this election estimates 60% participation (over-report of 4.4 percentage points). Even if one subtracts 4.4 percentage points to each of the CPS totals in Figure 3, the economists are only about as likely to vote as an American with an associate's degree or some college.

13. Cf. the famous quote about "making sausages."

14. The three Southern California universities that make up the bulk of our data are each ones where we might expect rational choice ideas to have had some impact on the political science faculty, since each has a significant concentration of modelers and game theorists in political science, and a graduate focus in at least one area related to rational choice modeling. Moreover, each of these universities includes at least one faculty member who has made significant contributions specifically on the issue of turnout. Unfortunately, our small sample size does not allow us to meaningfully compare the turnout rates of the political scientists in our sample who have rational choice leanings with the turnout levels of their peers who lack such inclinations.

15. We use "near zero" turnout in reference to game theoretic models (Ledyard 1984; Palfrey and Rosenthal 1983) that postulate small positive turnout rates when voters are acting strategically. In particular, if nobody else was voting then you really could be the pivotal voter!

16. As noted above, this drop in sales may in part explain the slight increase in turnout in 2004 compared to 2000. But we, perhaps, should not make too much of a blip in a time trend. Visual inspection of the regression line in Figure 2 reveals six elections which fall below the line and six which are above it, including 2004.

17. And, of course, there is another possible explanation we might suggest: Keynes long ago noted that everyone is the slave to some dead economist. But Downs is still alive. (One of us (Wuffle) has characterized this as the *Paradox of the long-lived economist*: "If an economist lived long enough to see the impact of his/her work—s/he wouldn't.")

18. Yet, even some of the celebrity turnout activists in southern California have had trouble motivating themselves for every election. For example, a well-known actress and producer who starred in a documentary film for MTV in 2004 specifically designed to increase participation among young people had not cast a ballot in either the 2003 recall or the 2002 general election. Similarly, a young heartthrob actor (a former Bostonian now living in Los Angeles) described his get out the youth vote campaigning with John Kerry as "a once in a lifetime experience" (quoted in Rosen 2004)—which is similar to his voting history between November 2000 and October 2003, since he only cast a ballot in the 2002 general election.

19. Heckleman and Whaples (2003) trace the close parallels between the views of randomly chosen economists and those of Public Choice scholars in both economics and political science. Hence, one obvious way we might do even better at lowering turnout than having them read Downs, would be to persuade more Americans to study economics. (Still we must be careful about the direction of causality. The distinguished European Public Choice economist Bruno Frey recently conducted a study showing that business students gave less money to charity than other students. But, that study also showed that their behavior "is not due to their education in economics. Rather, persons choosing to study business are less inclined to help others even before they have been subject to any economics teaching" (Frey 2005).)

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