

THE ACQUISITION OF POLITICAL INFORMATION: TESTS OF INSTRUMENTAL
VERSUS CONSUMPTION THEORIES

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ABSTRACT

Downs (1957) first noted the twin enigmas of democracy: that it is not in the self interest of citizens either to vote or to become informed about politics. Much attention has been given to the voting problem, but less attention has been given to the second enigma. Herein, I focus upon the question of why individuals acquire political information. I argue that the inclusion of weak altruism solves both enigmas.

I present a formal, decision-theoretic analysis of information acquisition, which produces informed voters. The model offers an instrumental explanation, as opposed to the normative and civic duty explanations, which now dominate the literature. I then test three hypotheses which follow from the comparative statics that: weak altruism, income and knowledge all increase the incentive of an individual to acquire political information. The evidence supports all the hypotheses from my analysis. By contrast, the central prediction of the non-instrumental analyses is that independent voters will acquire more information than partisans. The evidence rejects this prediction.

Democratic government by definition is rule by the people, and as such, it requires that citizens have electoral control of their representatives. Yet, Downs (1957) shows that it is not in the rational, self interest of citizens to vote, nor to be politically informed, nor, to participate in the political process, more generally. The reason political participation in a democracy is problematic is that each individual has only a very a low probability of affecting the outcome of an election, and therefore, of affecting the policies adopted by the government.

In addition, it is not even in the self interest of individuals to become informed about politics. The expected benefits from getting informed are the same as that from voting, but the costs of acquiring information are greater than the costs of physically voting. Hence, the costs of getting informed exceed the expected benefits by a larger amount. Thus, the possibility of democratic government seems to be undermined by these twin enigmas: that it is irrational to vote and irrational to become informed about politics.

However, we observe that individuals engage in a myriad of different types of political activities as they: vote; contribute to parties, interest groups and candidates; voluntarily work in parties and political campaigns; contact their representatives; demonstrate; and engage in many other forms of political participation. Hence, the conflict between observed behavior and the predictions of rational choice theory are foundational. Green and Shapiro (1994) have argued that rational choice theory's inability to explain the most basic form of political participation, i.e., voting, brings into question the entire rational-choice analysis.

Most attention has been given to the first enigma, and substantially less to the second. The focus of this paper is on the second enigma, i.e., that it is not in the self interest of citizens to become informed about politics. I review the proposed non-instrumental (civic duty and expressive) explanations and predictions of why individuals acquire political information. A common prediction from these analyses is that independent voters will acquire more political information than partisan voters.

I then present a formal model of the decision to acquire information, and empirical tests of several predictions of the model. The essential feature of the analysis is that I modify the self interested assumption by introducing weak altruism as a motivation for potential voters. In this, I follow Fowler (2006) and Jankowski (2007) who introduce altruism to solve the voting enigma. Evidence is presented that altruism is the single strongest predictor for the level of information obtained by citizens. By contrast, the evidence rejects the non-instrumental prediction that independents are more politically informed than partisans. Just the opposite holds.

I. Political Information and Voting

Downs' twin enigmas are based upon a cost-benefit analysis, which ultimately assumes instrumental human behavior. As a result, attempts at explaining why individuals vote and acquire political information have shifted to non-instrumental explanations of human behavior, specifically: expressive and civic duty explanations. These explanations now dominate the political science literature (Ansolabehere, 2006).

The first attempts at explaining why individuals vote were made by adding civic duty into

the voting calculus (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1976). More recently, there have been attempts to incorporate civic duty to explain the acquisition of political information. The two studies that best reflect this approach are Feddersen and Sandroni (2006) and Degan (2006). Their formal models are somewhat different; but, a key prediction emerges which is common to both. Both versions have two types of voters: partisans and independents. Since partisans are committed to vote for their candidate, they have little or no incentive to acquire costly political information. By contrast, only independent voters, because they are not committed to one candidate, acquire political information.

In the Feddersen and Sandroni version, one group of independents remain uninformed, and just vote for the candidate that is lagging in support among partisans. This creates a tie between the candidates. Of the remaining independents, one group acquires political information, and then votes. Hence, this group determines the outcome of an election. The second group does not acquire political information, nor do they vote, because their vote is redundant, and there is an ethical rule to minimize the costs of political information for independents. On balance, independents acquire political information when its cost is less than the benefit from their sense of performing their civic duty; while partisans do not acquire political information.

The Degan (2006) analysis differs in structure, but has a similar prediction. Individuals have policy preferences, but experience regret only if they vote for the wrong candidate. They do not experience a benefit from voting for the right candidate. The benefit from doing their civic duty is the only positive benefit they obtain. Because policy moderates vary their vote between Democrat or Republican, depending upon the candidates' policy positions, they have the greatest

potential regret if they are wrong. Hence, moderates have a greater incentive, than partisans, to invest in political information.

The second category of non-instrumental explanations is expressive or consumption theories of political behavior. Expressive voting (Fiorina, 1976; Brennan and Lomasky, 1994, and Schussler, 2000) is a form of non-instrumental behavior, in that individuals obtain a direct benefit from the act of voting itself, not from the consequences of voting. The analogy is drawn from rooting for one's favorite sports team. Individuals develop attachments to individuals, groups or policies. The cheering on of one's team, the buying of a jersey with the team's logo, will not affect a team's performance, rather, it is to express one's identification with the team. When this analysis is extended to political behavior, such as voting, the expressive benefit one obtains is independent of the probability that one's vote is decisive. Hence, even a relatively small expressive benefit can exceed the costs of voting.

A major weakness of expressive explanations of political behavior is that they focus upon the decision to vote, and do not address the question of why individuals obtain political information. Once an individual develops an attachment, for whatever reason, to an individual or group, there is no incentive to become informed about other candidates or parties.

Schussler (2000) presents the only example, to my knowledge, of an expressive analysis of political information acquisition. He argues that partisan attachment to a candidate or party is based upon ambiguity as to the candidates' true position on issues. In the absence of information on the candidates, individuals develop a psychological attachment to candidates or their supporters, and they experience expressive benefits from voting. Since expressive benefits are more effective in inducing individuals to vote, less-informed voters are predicted to be more

likely to vote than informed voters. Moreover, the analysis posits that as individuals acquire more information, they are less likely to engage in expressive voting.

Thus, both non-instrumental theories (civic duty and expressive) predict that independents will be more informed politically than partisans. I now propose an instrumental explanation of political information acquisition, which modifies the Downsian analysis with a weak altruistic motivation for individuals.

II. A Model of Information Acquisition via Altruism

The decision to vote requires a prior decision to acquire political information. Hence, I start with the classic equation for the voting decision:

$$EV = pB - C(V) \quad (1)$$

B is the net difference in benefit obtained by an individual when the candidates are different in terms of their policies and/or abilities. P is the probability that one's vote is decisive, and C is the cost of voting.

This version of the vote decision assumes that individuals are fully informed about the policy/competence differences between the candidates. If, however, voters cannot differentiate between the candidates, B equals zero, and hence, there is no incentive to vote. Voters can acquire information as to B, but information is costly. This cost of acquiring information then must be included in the decision as to whether to acquire information. [Hence, Downs' basic equation is modified to reflect the incomplete information of voters, and their decision as to

whether to acquire political information.]

The expected value, EI , from being informed is the expected benefit, i.e., the probability that one's vote is decisive, p , times the benefit, B , minus the costs of getting informed, C .

[However, the expected benefit is now uncertain, because of incomplete information as to the candidates' abilities etc., and the future state of nature. I specify the degree of uncertainty as θ .

An individual's degree of uncertainty is a function of the political information they possess and can acquire (i), and their knowledge of how the political process works (k). Hence, we can rewrite equation #1 as:

$$EI = pB\theta(i, k) - C(I) \quad (2)$$

C is now the cost of acquiring political information. Thus, we have a cost-benefit analysis of the decision as to whether acquire political information which parallels the cost-benefit analysis of the decision to vote. It can also be used to analyze the purchase of political information.

The cost of acquiring political information is greater than the physical costs of voting, as voting only requires a fraction of the time required to become politically informed. If the expected benefits are the same from voting, then it is even more irrational to acquire political information than vote. Hence, we have the second of Downs' enigmas, that it is irrational to be informed about politics. It remains an enigma, because many individuals do become informed. Myerson (1998) finds that when we consider the case of the physical costs of voting, self interest generates an equilibrium of only about 32 voters out of a population of 3 million. The costs of acquiring political information are greater than the physical costs of voting. Hence, self interest will generate even fewer informed voters in equilibrium. However, we observe that a relatively large number of voters are politically informed (Zaller, 1993). To generate the observed levels of

voting and acquisition of political information, self interest is not sufficient. Benefits have to be substantially increased. Weak altruism in the political process serves this function. In the next section, this hypothesis is tested. Ultimately, this enigma exists because in Downs' and other analyses, the benefit to potential voters is purely self-interested benefit. To resolve this enigma, I modify the underlying self-interested assumption of Downs and others by introducing weak altruism.

A. What Do We Mean by Altruistic Giving?

Sen (1977) notes that there are two alternative views of altruism. The one view is that altruism is based upon ethical norms; the other view is that it stems from a feeling of sympathy we experience when observing the state of others. Becker (1976), and Stark (1995) analyze human behavior using a sympathy-based notion of altruism. I follow Becker and Stark in adopting a sympathy-based version of altruism in my analysis.

The next question is what do we mean by altruism as sympathy? Altruism-as-sympathy entails that the beneficiary's utility is some function of the recipient's increased happiness. Hence, the greater the happiness of the recipient, the greater the happiness/utility of the donor. Hence, the utility functions of individuals can be written as:

$$U_i = U(x + \sum_{j \neq i} \alpha_j (x_i - x_j) x_j), \quad (3)$$

where x is individual i 's consumption of private goods, and x_j is the consumption of private

goods by those other than individual i .¹ Individuals derive happiness when the less fortunate are made better off. This is captured by the term $(x_i - x_j)$.² α is the weight we attach to the happiness of others, where $0 \leq \alpha \leq 1$. Clearly, there cannot be a dollar-for-dollar substitution between private consumption and the consumption of others in an individual's utility function.

Otherwise, individuals would give most of their wealth to charity. The implicit weight for our own consumption is 1, and α captures the relative utility to oneself of others' consumption. An α less than zero would indicate that the individual is spiteful, i.e., one that derives happiness from the misery of others. An α equal to 0 indicates the individual is purely self-interested.

Government policies affect tens of millions of individuals. For example, the recently enacted Health Care Bill will cost over \$1 trillion over 10 years, and help tens of millions of individuals. Hence, the altruistic benefit, even if discounted, can be in the hundreds of billions of dollars. Thus, even if the probability of being decisive is extremely small, the expected benefit (pB) from voting and being informed will be greater than the cost of voting, $C(V)$. Thus, when the expected utility as specified in equation #3 replaces B in equation #1, Downs' twin enigmas are overcome.

To see how altruism solves the Downsean problems, note that equation #3 is net utility because the costs of various programs to help others are paid for by taxes imposed on citizens. Crucially then, declining marginal utility of income is assumed. Alternatively, it can be argued

¹ The consumption goods can be public goods as well. I present the analysis in terms of private goods only, because the introduction of public goods complicates the presentation, but does not change any of the conclusions.

² There are several forms of interdependent utility functions. For the purposes of this paper, this representation is the most direct. See Sobel (2005) for a good review of alternative specifications.

that altruism is group specific. Thus, policies that redistribute income from the rich to the poor increase the total utility for altruistic individuals.

There is substantial evidence that humans do exhibit altruistic behavior and goals. Individuals routinely donate blood to the Red Cross, even though a commercial market in blood exists. Tullock (1983) has shown that Americans donate about 5% of their income to charity. This 5% figure is probably an exaggerated estimate of actual altruistic giving because a tax credit is provided for charitable giving. Thus most individuals would not, simply because of altruism, voluntarily give more than 5% of their income, e.g., or voluntarily pay their income taxes. The dominant force in human behavior is still self interest, but we cannot deny that altruism does play a limited role in human motivation. The problem is how to incorporate altruistic goals, and still retain the basic self-interested nature of humans. I propose a limited view of the extent and scope of altruism.

Hence, I assume that human goals are not exclusively self-interested, but rather, include a weak altruism, to the extent people are willing to give some low amount (5%) of their income to help others or to help society in general. Moreover, this altruistic impulse is not uniformly distributed in the human population. Some individuals are Scrooges, whose altruistic impulses are zero, and others are like Mother Theresa, whose altruistic impulses are to sacrifice most of their lives to help others. The majority of us fall in between. Hence, I assume that altruistic preferences follow a normal distribution in the population with a mean of 5% of income.

For altruism to be a factor affecting acquisition of political information, it must be the case that both groups of partisans, Democratic and Republican voters, be altruistic. But it is sometimes argued that Democrats are “bleeding heart liberals”; while Republicans are “cold

hearted conservatives.” However, Jankowski (2007) and Brooks (2007) have presented evidence that conservatives and liberals are equally altruistic. Hence, altruism can motivate both conservatives and liberals to acquire political information..

B. A Model of Information Acquisition

To better understand how weak altruism overcomes Downs’ second enigma an electoral model with information acquisition is necessary. The extremely low probability that any one voter is decisive produces Downs’ enigmas. Hence, a substantial increase in benefits must transpire to offset the very low probability that one’s actions will affect public policy, and thus overcome the twin dilemmas. I present a standard model of information acquisition to highlight this relationship. In addition, the model generates additional testable hypotheses. These additional factors then become the control variables in the empirical analysis.

I assume that there are two candidates ($t=\{1,2\}$) with alternative public policies. Voters support the different candidates based upon the expected voters’ benefits from their policies, the voters’ perception of the state of the world, and the voters’ belief in the relative ability of candidates to implement their policies. Thus, the utility to an individual for candidate 1 winning is $V(1)$ and $V(2)$ if candidate 2 wins. This utility is a function of both the policies, etc., of the respective candidates $Z(t)$, and the states of the world (M). Or: $V(t) = MZ(t)$. I define $Z = Z(1) - Z(2)$, where $M \in \{1, -1\}$ and $Z \in \{1, -1\}$.³ Thus an individual will favor candidate 1 if $MZ = 1$,

³ By definition, $V(1) - V(2) = MZ(1) - MZ(2) = V$. If the two candidates are of the same type, this requires having the same platforms, $Z = 0$, and $V = 0$. This case represents convergence between the candidates.

and candidate 2 if $MZ = -1$. The individual, however, needs information as to both Z and M .

Next, we define the degree of certainty “ λ ” of the individual as to Z and M . The expected benefit from a preferred candidate is:

$$EB = \lambda * B + (1 - \lambda) * (-B) = B(2\lambda - 1)$$

λ is on the interval $[0.5, 1]$. If the voters are completely uncertain about the candidates and the states of the world, $\lambda=0.5$, because there is a 50/50 chance of either candidate being the better candidate, then, the expected benefit = 0. If $\lambda=1$, the individual is completely certain as to which of the two candidates is best for the current state of the world.

Next, we need to analyze the roles of information and knowledge that affect an individual’s degree of uncertainty, λ . Define k as an individual’s prior probability that $M = 1$. Let k be an element of $[0, 1]$. If $k = 0.5$ the individual has no contextual knowledge. If $k = 0$ or $k = 1$, the person has perfect knowledge. We define “ i ” as the amount of information that an individual acquires. The probability that this information is accurate or correct is given by $\pi \in [0, 1]$. It is assumed that $\pi(i)$ is continuous, increasing and concave. The more information one acquires, the greater is one’s certainty as to the politicians and state of nature.

Thus, an individual’s certainty depends both on general knowledge, k , which affects the understanding of the state of the world, M , and information, i , which impacts our uncertainty regarding Z , the candidates’ policies and competencies.

Then we have the degree of certainty, $\lambda = f(\pi(i), k)$. If we start with $k = 0.5$ (complete uncertainty), and receive information, then updating priors by Bayes’s rule gives:

$$\lambda = (\pi(i), k) = k\pi + (1 - k)(1 - \pi(i))$$

The certainty of one's choice increases with one's knowledge and information.

Next, I introduce a private good, x , which is consumed by the individual, and a budget constraint: $y = qi + x$, where y is a person's income. The price of x has been normalized to 1, and q is the price of information in terms of x . A person receives utility from the consumption of x , and from the expected benefits derived from voting.

The individual also must decide on how much information to acquire, which is made before the decision as to whether to vote. The expected benefit from voting is $pB(2\lambda-1) - C$. The individual will know fully the cost of voting only when the day of voting arrives. Hence, when acquiring information, the individual only knows the distribution of C , which is assumed to be uniform over $[0, 1]$. The expected cost of voting therefore is C times the probability of voting, or $p(2\lambda-1)C$.

Hence the expected benefit of the election, e , can be written as:

$$e(\pi(i), k) = 0.5p^2(2\lambda - 1)^2(B - .5)$$

This stems from the fact that the benefit of voting is $p(2\lambda-1)B$, and the cost is C . The utility of voting then is $p(2\lambda-1)B - C$. Since C is distributed uniformly over $[0,1]$, the expected cost of voting is $0.5p(2\lambda-1)$; and the probability of voting is $p(2\lambda-1)$. Hence, the expected election utility is:

$$e(\pi, k) = p(2\lambda - 1)[p(2\lambda - 1)B - 0.5p(2\lambda - 1)] = p^2(2\lambda - 1)^2(B - .5)$$

(I drop the cost of voting = 0.5 in subsequent versions, because the expected cost is vanishingly small.)

Thus, the more informed an individual, the greater the certainty that she had made a correct decision, and hence, the greater the expected utility of voting.

Thus, we have a constrained optimization problem for the citizen:

$$\begin{aligned} \max_{x,i} u(x + e(\pi(i), k)) \\ s.t. y = qi + x \end{aligned} \quad (6)$$

If we assume a concave utility function, and that the budget constraint is binding, then, the equilibrium to the optimization problem is straightforward. The FOC is:

$$qu'(y - qi) = p^2 \pi'(2\lambda - 1)\lambda B \quad (7)$$

Or, the marginal utility of a dollar spent on private goods equals the marginal utility of a dollar spent on political information.

However, for the problem at hand, the comparative statics are essential. In particular, how do changes in B, y and k affect i. Thus, we indicate the solution to equation #7 as I*.

Then, we eliminate x (via substitution) and define a new function:

$$G(i, B, y, q, k) = y - qi + 0.5p^2(2\lambda - 1)^2 B$$

Now i* is defined by $G(i^*, B, y, q, k) = 0$.

Following the standard technique for comparative statics by using the implicit function theorem, we know, for example,

$$\frac{\delta i^*}{\delta k} = - \frac{G_{ik}}{G_{ii}}$$

and from the second order conditions we have $G_{ii} < 0$.

Thus, knowing just the signs of the cross-partials of the objective function, we can derive the signs of:

$$\frac{\delta i^*}{\delta k}; \frac{\delta i^*}{\delta y}; \frac{\delta i^*}{\delta B} \quad . \text{ and perform the comparative statics.}$$

First, we analyze the impact of knowledge on information acquisition. From the definition of λ , we get $G_{ik} = \pi'(\lambda_k \lambda_\pi + \lambda \lambda_{k\pi})$. Since, all the terms are positive,

$$k \in [0,1] \quad \pi \in [0.5,1] \quad G_{ik} > 0 \quad . \text{ Then } \frac{\delta i^*}{\delta k} > 0. \quad , \text{ and thus,}$$

Thus, the more knowledgeable the individuals, the more information they acquire.

Second, we analyze the impact of income on information acquisition. All we need to know is the sign of the cross partial, G_{i^*y} which = qu' . Since both parameters are positive, the

$$\text{cross partial is positive, and hence, } \frac{\delta i^*}{\delta y} > 0. \quad \text{Thus, as individuals' income increases, the}$$

amount of information they acquire increases. This assumes that the income effect dominates the substitution effect.

Last and most importantly, we need to know the effects of increased benefits from voting on information acquisition. The cross-partial, $G_{i^*B} = p'(\lambda(\pi(i), k) - 1)\lambda_\pi > 0$. Hence

$$\frac{\delta i^*}{\delta B} > 0.$$

Thus, the greater the expected benefit from voting, the more information is acquired.

This last hypothesis is the central focus of the analysis. The formal analysis does not differentiate between self interest and weak altruism, because both are present in the utility functions of individuals. All that it shows is that the greater the expected benefits, the more political information is acquired. Myerson (1998) finds that when we consider the case of the physical costs of voting, self interest generates an equilibrium of only about 32 voters out of a population of 3 million. The costs of acquiring political information are greater than the physical costs of voting. Hence, self interest will generate even fewer informed voters in equilibrium. However, we observe that a relatively large number of voters are politically informed (Zaller, 1993). To generate the observed levels of voting and acquisition of political information, self interest is not sufficient. Benefits have to be substantially increased. Weak altruism in the political process serves this function. In the next section, this hypothesis is tested.

The model assumes a representative individual. However, there are both self interested individuals ($\alpha = 0$), and weakly altruistic individuals ($\alpha > 0$). The self interested individuals will remain rationally ignorant, because the costs of acquiring political information outweigh their private benefits. This reflects the reality that a substantial number of individuals are politically uninformed. Only the altruistic individuals will acquire political information.

Thus, the comparative statics generate three hypotheses: the more altruistic an individual, the higher the income of individuals, and the more knowledgeable the individual, then, the more political information is acquired. We will now test these three hypotheses using a unique data set

from the NES.

III. Empirical Tests

To my knowledge, there have been no empirical tests linking citizens' political information and altruism. One of the reasons for this lacuna is that measures of altruism are lacking in voting surveys, which are the basic tool used in analyzing voter turnout. However, the 1995 Pilot Study for the American National Election Study incorporates eleven questions specifically designed to measure "humanitarianism." These measures are only ordinal preference relations, but they allow me to test for a link between ALTRUISM and POLITICAL INFORMATION.

The statistical test herein is an ordered logistic regression relating the political knowledge of individuals and the degree to which the individuals espouse altruistic sentiments. The dependent variable is the score of respondents on eight political information questions.⁴ The questions range from: who are Gore, Rehnquist, Yeltsin and Foley; who nominates Federal judges; and which party has a majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The measures range from zero to eight correct answers.⁵

The primary independent variable is a measure of the altruism expressed by the

⁴ The 1995 Pilot Survey entailed a re-survey of the 1994 NES study. Hence, the data file was a merger of the two surveys. Of the original 1994 respondents, only a subgroup was re-interviewed, and of the sub-sample only 486 responded to the 1995 Pilot.

⁵ Before any question is added to the NES, it is thoroughly tested for validity. Hence, these questions have been found to be a valid measure of political information (Zaller, 1993).

respondents. The eleven questions of the 1995 Pilot Study fall into two categories. There are questions which elicit a simple dichotomous response (agree/disagree) to humanitarian concerns, and questions which elicit a five-point ordinal response to humanitarian concerns. The five potential responses to these questions are: agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat and disagree strongly. The five-point scale responses are preferable because they elicit the intensity of one's altruism. The NES coding of responses is 1 = strongly agree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree.

Two other hypotheses were generated by the comparative statics. Specifically, INCOME and knowledge are hypothesized to increase the acquisition of political information. I have included both measures of years of EDUCATION (as a proxy for knowledge), and income to test these hypotheses.

Lastly, I include a control for strength of PARTY IDENTIFICATION. Both civic duty and expressive explanations of political information predict that independents will be more informed than partisans, because strong party attachment reduces the need for political information. Hence, the partisan measure will test these alternative theories of information acquisition.

I use party identification as a measure of the partisanship of individuals. In this I follow Kan and Yang (2001) who in an empirical test of expressive voting use partisan identification as a measure of expressive benefit. This is not a completely satisfactory measure of expressive benefit since there are a number of alternative interpretations of partisan identification. In particular, Fiorina (1980) has presented evidence that partisan identification is a combination of

retrospective and prospective considerations, which follow from an instrumental view of voting. But, since it is the only available measure, I will use it with reservation. Partisanship might entail both expressive and instrumental correlates, but, it is clear that independents are not expressive voters. Hence, testing whether there is a difference between partisans and independents in political information should entail a test of the competing hypotheses.

Other factors might affect an individual's level of political information. Hence, I reviewed the literature and found additional control variables for the statistical analysis. The most common factors cited to affect the acquisition of political information are: AGE and GENDER. Age is hypothesized to have a positive impact on the acquisition of political information (See, for example, Teixeira, 1987). In addition, I included a control for gender because it has been found that men are more politically informed than women.

No one claims that the acquisition of political information makes one more altruistic. Hence, a test for simultaneity is not needed. (All variables come from the 1994 NES or 1995 NES Pilot survey and specification of variables and their description are in the appendix.)

Table 1 About Here

Table 1 presents the results from an ordered logistic regression analysis of the hypotheses⁶. The dependent variable is always the respondent's score on the eight political questions. The control variables age and gender are statistically significant. The probability that males will be better informed is statistically significant. Likewise, age has a positive impact upon the probability of being informed.

The primary hypothesis of the importance of weak altruism is supported by the data. However, the findings with regard to the role of altruism need careful reading, because of the coding used by the NES, which I did not modify. The first three altruism questions (Q #6-8), are phrased such that strong agreement indicates the person is more self interested, and hence, less altruistic. The wording is: Question #6: It is better not to be too kind to people, because kindness will only be abused; Question #7: It is best not to get too involved in taking care of other people's needs; and Question #8: People tend to pay more attention to the well-being of others than they should. As hypothesized, the more self-interested the individual, the lower the

⁶ The PLUM procedure in SPSS was used for the estimation. Though the dependent variable is monotonically increasing, the difference between agreeing strongly and agreeing moderately is difficult to quantify, and is based entirely upon subjective perceptions. Hence, the measure appears to be non-linear. See McCullagh (1980, 1988) for an overview of the estimation procedure.

probability of scoring highly on the information questions.

The remaining two questions, numbers 5 and 11, are phrased such that agreement indicates a more altruistic attitude. Hence, those who “disagree somewhat” (Q#5) are self-interested individuals. And again, the probability of their doing well on the information questions declines. Lastly, a dichotomous question (#11) indicates those agreeing with the proposition, “A person should always be concerned about the dignity and well-being of others,” have an increased probability of being better informed.

Of the eleven questions measuring altruism and self interest, five were significantly related to the level of political information. In addition, all the questions were in the hypothesized direction. Altruism does promote the acquisition of political information. For the most part, the remaining tests had the hypothesized sign, but were statistically insignificant. I just report the statistically significant findings. Overall, the hypothesized relationship between weak altruism and the acquisition of political information is substantiated.⁷

Moreover, the goodness-of-fit measure, though inexact, increases by approximately 50 % with the addition of the altruism/self-interest questions. Hence, altruism is the single strongest predictor of the acquisition of political information.

An outstanding puzzle regarding the empirical analysis is why don't all eleven questions produce statistically significant evidence for the hypothesized relationship? I can discern no pattern in the questions that would explain this difference. Two potential explanations are suggested by the literature. Harsanyi (1977) and Andreoni and Miller (2002) argue that

⁷ I cannot test directly for the size of α in the empirical test. Because of mathematical restrictions, the formal model assumes that the degree of altruism is the same for everyone.

Rawlsians, though altruistic, prefer private charity to government assistance. The reason for this preference is that government policies help not just the worst off in society, but also additional individuals from the middle and upper classes. A second potential explanation is due to the fact that as the members of religious groups increase their participation in religious activity, they reduce their political involvement (Campbell, 2004). I cannot control for either of these hypotheses in the context of the NES data, and hence, these hypotheses are left for future investigation.

The hypotheses that knowledge and income increase the acquisition of political information find strong and statistically significant support in all the measures of altruism.

The test rejects all the non-instrumental theories of political information. Please note that partisan attachment is coded such that strong attachment equals one, and weaker attachment two and above. Thus, a negative sign indicates an inverse relationship between the partisan attachment measure and information, i.e., those with strong partisan attachments are better informed. Instead of having a negative impact upon being politically informed as hypothesized by the non-instrumental theories, partisanship has a significant positive impact. This finding is not new, as it was anticipated by previous studies, Campbell et. al., (1960); as well as Palfrey and Poole's (1987) which present evidence that partisans are better informed than independents.

Complicating the empirical tests, individuals acquire political information for reasons unrelated to voting. Public policies impact individuals and business firms in a myriad of ways. Hence, individuals may become politically informed for self-interested reasons unrelated to voting. For example, individuals who correctly anticipated the Bush 2001 tax cuts would have deferred capital gains until after the tax cuts were adopted.

A new set of firms has emerged in Washington, D.C., that specialize in collecting political information for business firms so that they can anticipate government policies, and adjust their actions accordingly (WSJ, 2006). Likewise, day traders, and the various stock markets, respond to events in government. Hence, political information can be used for economic gain. The goal of obtaining this political information is not primarily to determine one's vote, but rather, for self-interested, economic gain.

Ideally, a comprehensive test of the acquisition of political information would also control for these motives. At present, I have not been able to incorporate these motives in my tests.

IV. Discussion

In response to Downs' twin enigmas of democracy, a number of non-instrumentalist theories of human behavior have come to dominate the literature explaining why individuals vote and acquire political information. Adding a civic duty or expressive benefit logically solves the first enigma. However, the same explanations should also explain why individuals acquire information, contribute money to campaigns, partake in political activities, etc. We don't want different explanations for different types of political behavior. A parsimonious theory that can explain diverse forms of political behavior is necessary. In addition, any theory of political behavior must also explain the major known facts of political behavior. Non-instrumental theories, as presently formulated, fail in both categories. Civic duty and expressive explanations of voting do not successfully transition to explain the acquisition of political information.

An outstanding question is why are partisans more likely than independents to acquire political information. Nothing in my formal analysis produces this relationship. However, there is empirical evidence (Jankowski, 2007; Brooks, 2007), that strong partisans are more altruistic than weak partisans, which in turn, are more altruistic than independents. I leave this question for future research.

The empirical rejection of the expressive predictions does not mean that altruism and expressive motives are logically incompatible. For example, Andreoni's (1989) analysis of impure altruism entails a synthesis of altruism and "warm glow" from charitable giving. My findings just imply that altruism plays a dominant role; while expressive incentives might explain phenomena like the wearing of candidate pins.

The evidence presented supports all three hypotheses generated by the formal model. The proposed weak altruism theory at core is an instrumental explanation of human behavior. The three goals of voting, acquiring of political information or the contribution of money to candidates are to affect public policy.

There are several advantages from an analysis of political behavior based upon weak altruism. First, there is extensive evidence that individuals behave altruistically, if only in a weak fashion. By contrast, the evidence of expressive and civic duty behavior is quite limited.⁸ Second, weak altruism provides an explanation for a broad range of political behavior – voting,

⁸ The NES stopped asking questions to ascertain civic duty in 1988. This was partially because the evidence in support of civic duty was weak, and because of the cost. Hence, it is difficult to test for the relationship between civic duty and political information in a nested test that includes weak altruism. Rosenstone and Hansen (1992) present evidence from the NES that civic duty can explain about 5% of the turnout. But, Blais (2000) presents evidence that civic duty plays a more substantial role.

the acquisition of political information; the contribution to public interest groups (Jankowski, 2006), etc. The recent use of the Internet to fund presidential campaigns has shown that voluntary contributions are effective. Hence, the addition of weak altruism provides a parsimonious explanation of a diverse range of political behaviors, which is not presently provided by the expressive analysis. Lastly, the introduction of weak altruism necessitates the least modification of the standard homo-economicus analysis that dominates rational choice theorizing. The addition of weak altruism, at the same time, means that the primacy of self interest is retained. Most of human behavior is predicated upon self interest; we are only weakly altruistic. Moreover, there is no fundamental incompatibility between weak altruism and self interest. Some, however, argue to the contrary.

Sen (1977) argues that the inclusion of altruism in rational-actor models creates inconsistencies. Specifically, he argues that moral obligation entails a lexicographic ordering which undermines von Neumann-Morgenstern utility theory, and hence, expected utility analysis. Lexicographic orderings violate the continuity condition, and hence, cannot be represented by a utility function. Sen is correct with regard to strong moral obligations. However, his objection does not hold for altruism as sympathy.

Altruism as sympathy is compatible with formal, rational-choice theory to the extent that preference orderings are: transitive, complete and reflective. Andreoni and Miller (2002) show that altruism as sympathy meets these conditions and thus satisfies the general axioms of revealed preference. In addition, altruism as sympathy satisfies the continuity condition and hence is compatible with expected utility analysis.

This study is just one step in establishing the altruism-political participation hypothesis.

As usual, much more empirical work needs to be done. Theoretically, normative theories of political participation need to be developed. As indicated by Sen (1977), commitment is an alternative view of altruism. But, any empirical test of sympathy versus commitment as the basis of voting requires that clear predictions be generated by an ethical theory of voting; and as noted, such a theory is still lacking. Likewise, further elaboration of the expressive analysis is required, especially in explaining other forms of political behavior.

Hence, the standard, self interested model, modified by the inclusion of weak altruism, is the preferred explanation of political behavior. It has the greatest empirical support, and explains the greatest range of political behavior.⁹

⁹ There is no logical incompatibility between altruism and expressive benefits, i.e., both could be driving factors in human behavior. But, which one is supported by the evidence, and explains a greater diversity of political behavior is crucial in developing a parsimonious model of human behavior.

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Table 1: Ordinal Logistic Regression Analyzing Role of Altruism in Acquisition of Political Information

		Altruism #6	Altruism #7	Altruism #8	Altruism #5	Altruism #11
Age	0.014*** (.024)	0.030*** (.008)	0.030*** (.008)	0.027*** (.008)	0.026*** (.008)	0.021*** (.007)
Education	0.284*** (.039)	0.275*** (.057)	0.295*** (.056)	0.299*** (.056)	0.300*** (.056)	0.024*** (.0057)
Income	0.041** (.016)	0.064*** (.024)	0.056** (.024)	0.071*** (.024)	0.073*** (.033)	0.018 (.022)
Gender (Male = 0, Female = 1)	-.777*** (.174)	-1.199*** (.264)	-1.140*** (.259)	-1.144*** (.259)	-1.086*** (.254)	-0.615** (.248)
Strength of Partisan Attachment	-.323*** (.090)	-0.347*** (.127)	-0.364*** (.126)	-0.304** (.126)	-0.360*** (.126)	-0.317** (.133)
Altruism/Self Interest: Agree Strongly		-1.541*** (.421)	-1.010** (.4750)	-.358 (.505)	-0.709 (.816)	
Agree Somewhat		-0.143 (.350)	-.380 (.320)	-.643* (.387)	-.401 (.838)	
Disagree Somewhat		0.034 (.298)	0.124 (.315)	1.463 (1.821)	-2.074* (1.151)	
Should Always be Concerned		----	-----	-----	-----	0.602* (.357)
Pseudo-R ²	.261	.382	.388	.383	.381	.288

Standard errors in parentheses.

*** probability less than .001

** probability less than .050

* probability less than .100

Pseudo-R-squared is Nagelkerke measure.

Appendix

Humanitarianism Measures

Q#1: VAR 952236 One should always find ways to help others less fortunate than oneself.

Q#2: VAR 952237 The dignity and well-being of all should be the most important concerns in any society.

Q#3: VAR 952238 One of the problems of today's society is that people are often not kind enough to others.

Q#4: VAR 952239 All people who are unable to provide for their own needs should be helped by others.

Q#5: VAR 952240 A person should always be concerned about the well-being of others.

Q#6: VAR 952241 It is better not to be too kind to people, because kindness will only be abused.

Q#7: VAR 952242 It is best not to get too involved in taking care of other people's needs.

Q#8: VAR 952243 People tend to pay more attention to the well-being of others than they should.

- 1 "AGREE STRONGLY"
- 2 "AGREE SOMEWHAT"
- 3 "NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE"
- 4 "DISAGREE SOMEWHAT"
- 5 "DISAGREE STRONGLY"

Q#9: VAR 952244 Which of the following statements is closer to your view: One, it is best not to get too involved in taking care of other people's needs; or Two, all people who are unable to provide for their own needs should be helped by others.

Q#10: VAR 952245 (Which of the following statements is closer to your view:

One, one of the problems of today's society is that people are often not kind enough to others or, Two, it is better not to be too kind to people, because kindness

will only be abused.

Q#11: VAR 952246 (Which of the following statements is closer to your view?)
One, a person should always be concerned about the dignity and well-being of others, or, Two, people tend to pay more attention to the dignity and well-being of others than they should.

1. SHOULD ALWAYS BE CONCERNED
2. PAY MORE ATTENTION THAN THEY SHOULD
8. DK
9. RF, NA
0. INAP; FORM A

Income of Family: 941404

Education (number of years of schooling): 941206

Age: Age reconstructed from date of birth. 941203

Party Attachment: Summary measure: 940655.

"STRONG DEMOCRAT"

1 "WEAK DEMOCRAT"

2 "INDEPENDENT-DEMOCRAT"

3 "INDEPENDENT-INDEPENDENT"

4 "INDEPENDENT-REPUBLICAN"

5 "WEAK REPUBLICAN"

6 "STRONG REPUBLICAN"

Recoded Strong (both Democrat and Republican) = 1.

Moderate (both Democrat and Republican) = 2.