



Where Does Your Vote Really Count?

BY WALTER E. WILLIAMS

To encourage us to participate in the political process, we are told that every vote counts. That is true if one is adding up the total votes, but what is the likelihood of any one person's vote affecting the outcome of a presidential election? Simply put, it is equal to the probability that the person's state will be necessary for an electoral college win multiplied by the probability that the vote in his state will be tied without that additional vote. According to Professors Andrew Gelman, Nate Silver, and Aaron Edlin's paper, "What Is the Probability Your Vote Will Make a Difference?" the chances that the average American's vote would have made a difference in the 2008 presidential election was about one in 60 million. The chances of winning your state lotto are about one in 15 million—about four times greater than the chances of your vote determining the outcome of last year's presidential election.

Don't misinterpret me. I am not suggesting that people not vote. Most Americans see voting as their civic duty and, despite the evidence shown by Professors Gelman, Silver, and Edlin, people have a feeling that their vote counts. If one thinks that his vote makes a difference, that is a worthy benefit deserving of the time and effort it takes to vote.

You Get What You Pay For

Voting has other problems in addition to the relative unimportance of each individual vote. When one votes for a particular candidate, is there any way to be sure that one will get what one votes for? There's no older story in the political arena than that of the candidate who promises one thing when he campaigns and

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does something else when he wins office. Moreover, if he lives up to a promise made to one group of Americans, it will always come at the expense of another. Some political promises are incredible, such as Barack Obama's promise that he would work to unite Christians, Muslims, and Jews. That's true political arrogance in light of the hundreds of years of sometimes murderous conflict between these groups.

Americans cast millions upon millions of votes—that is, they make decisions—in the non-political arena where individual votes do count and where there is a much higher probability of being satisfied with the outcome. Moreover, what they get in return for their vote does not come at the expense of another. That arena is the marketplace.

In our wallets we have what amounts to ballot slips; we can think of them as dollar votes. When we take, say, nine of them and "vote" for two pounds of steak, we are fairly certain about the outcome. We get the two pounds of steak. If we don't get the outcome we voted for—we get, say, steak of poor quality—there is swift retribution. We can simply fire the seller by taking our business elsewhere. We act unilaterally and don't have to bother with costly organizing. Very often simply the threat of taking our business elsewhere is enough to get some kind of remedy.

An individual's threat to vote for a politician's opponent as an expression of dissatisfaction with the politician's actions, on the other hand, is not likely to carry as much weight.

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There is another contrast between the market arena and the political arena that can be appreciated by asking what draws the greatest public complaints: Is it market-provided goods and services, such as computers, televisions, clothing, and food? Or is it government-provided services, such as public schools, postal services, and motor vehicle departments? In the case of market-provided goods and services, the prospect of profit gives providers an incentive to please customers. The government sector, however, is not-for-profit, so it suffers no losses when it fails to please “customers.”

Better for Poor People, Too

You might say, “That’s okay, Williams, if you have enough dollar votes. But what about poor people?” Poor people are far better served in the market arena than the political arena. Check this out. If you visit a poor neighborhood, you will see some nice clothing, some nice cars, some nice food, and maybe even some nice homes—no nice schools. Why not at least some nice schools? The explanation is simple. Clothing, cars, food, and houses are allocated through the market mechanism. Schools are allocated through the political mechanism. By the way, if you are a member of a minority, it is in your interest to minimize those decisions over your life made in the political arena, where the majority rules.

There is another unappreciated feature of the market arena. It reduces the potential for human conflict. Different Americans have different and intense preferences for cars, food, clothing, and entertainment. When is the last time you heard about Chrysler lovers fight-

ing with Lexus lovers? It seldom if ever happens. Why? Those who love Chryslers get what they want, and those who love Lexuses get what they want, and each can live in peace with one another.

It is a different story in government-provided education. Some parents wish for their children to recite a morning prayer in schools. Other parents are repulsed by the idea. The fact that education is produced by government means there is either going to be prayer in school or no prayer in school. Parents must enter into

conflict with one another. Why? If, for example, the parent who wishes for prayers in school loses the political battle, that parent will not have his wishes met. Of course he can send his child to a non-government school that has morning prayers, but through the tax code he is forced to continue paying for school services for which he has no use.

If government decided whether Chryslers or Lexuses would be produced, we would see conflict between lovers of Chryslers and Lexuses.

The prime feature of political decision-making is that it’s a zero-sum game. One person’s or group’s gain, of necessity, comes at the expense of another person or group. As such, political allocation of resources is conflict-enhancing while market allocation is conflict-reducing. The greater the number of decisions made in the political arena the greater the potential for conflict.

I never cease to be amazed by Americans’ faith in government and the political arena, whose essence is coercion, and their suspicion of the market arena, whose essence is peaceable, voluntary exchange. **FRE**

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