How Voters Decide: Crash Course Government and Politics #38

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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Hi, I'm Craig and this is Crash Course Government and Politics and today, I'm gonna get inside the head of the American voter, and then we are going to win every election ever ahaha! No. Not literally. That would require some sort of shrink ray technology that hasn't been invented, although I understand there is an Antman movie. Today we're going to look at how voters make decisions, and when it comes right down to it, we don't really know.

After all, voting is like any other decision. It results from a number of factors, only some of which are conscious at the time, and the main way we can tell about what caused someone to vote one way or another is to ask them, and human beings are notoriously unreliable when it comes to knowing their own motivations. So when I say we're gonna try to figure out how voters decide, really we'll be looking at what political scientists have decided are the factors that influence voting decisions - which is way less exciting than saying we'll be inside the heads of voters. So we're gonna say we'll be inside the heads of voters!

[Intro]

Political scientists have identified three main factors that influence how a person will vote. These are party loyalty, the issues involved in an election, and characteristics of the candidates running for office. If you stop to think about it, this makes total sense and may cause you to wonder whether we should be paying political scientists their exorbitant salaries. Let's start with party loyalty since this is supposedly the single largest predictor of how a person will vote. Many voters identify as members of a political party, usually democrat or republican, although a large percentage of people call themselves independents too. We'll discuss the makeup of these parties in another episode. Really we're gonna discuss makeup, Stan? Oh, okay.

For now, we should acknowledge that party loyalty is very very important in predicting voter behavior. In fact, it is usually in the range of 90%. People identify with a political party for a number of reasons. Some develop a psychological attachment to their party, often from youth. I've mentioned this before, but your parents can have a powerful effect on whether you identify as a democrat or republican, although it's not always easy to predict how this effect will work. I know plenty of staunch republicans who adopted their party in rebellion against their parents, and vice versa, and there's some evidence that these political parties - democrat and republican - are becoming more opposed to each other, which political writers describe as "increasing polarization".

One piece of evidence for this polarization are polls showing a greater percentage of Americans reporting that they'd be disappointed if their child married someone who was from the opposing political party. Yikes. Many people identify with a particular party because they believe that the party's ideals coincided with their personal ideology. This is where we get the democrats are liberals and republicans are conservatives dichotomy. Past experience with political leaders and representatives also contributes to an individual's party identity. A good example on the democratic side is that people who grew up during the Great Depression and formed a positive view of FDR tended to become, and to stay, democrat. Something similar happened in the 1980s with Ronald Reagan who appealed to voters across party lines. 'Cos he was just so jovial and folksy! Gibbity gibbity!

The second factor that influences voter decisions is candidate characteristics. Again, political scientists and common sense are in agreement here. People often vote for candidates with characteristics that they like. Which characteristics seem to matter? Well, the ones you'd expect. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Voters may be attracted to, or repelled by, a candidate's race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or beard. Sometimes these characteristics are more obvious than other times, and uninformed voters may rely on stereotypes of candidates, especially when it comes to ethnicity or religion. Another personal characteristic that seems important is geography, which in this case, means the region that the candidate is identified as being from. Joe Biden, when he was a senator, did a lot to identify himself with Delaware, including pointing out how he took Amtrak home from Washington. Which, if you're familiar with U.S. geography, or have ridden in the northeast corridor trains, you'll know is actually pretty close to Delaware. Sometimes though, geography doesn't seem to matter at all. Hillary Clinton hadn't spent much time in New York before voters in that state elected her to the senate. If anything, she was associated more with Arkansas, but in that case her gender and probably more important her star power were enough to overcome complaints that she was a carpet bagger. And she and Bill did buy a sweet place in Chappaqua, mkay?

One characteristic that is supposed to make a difference to voters is social background. The assumption here is that voters will choose candidates whom they believe are similar to themselves in terms of social class. Candidates certainly strive to appear like regular Joes and Janes, but I'm a bit skeptical on this one. That's not like me at all, my name is Craig. A remarkably high number of congressmen and senators are millionaires, for example, but most Americans decidedly are not. Same goes for college education. Most congressmen and all presidents since Harry Truman have graduated from college, but only about 30% of Americans have. Many voters are also influenced by a candidate's personality. These include virtues like a reputation for honesty, energy, and decisiveness, but maybe all candidates are decisive and that's why they ran in the first place. I don't know, I can't decide. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So the third factor that influences how voters make their choices is where the candidates stand on issues. We would hope that this would be the voters' top priority, but in fact it's pretty far down the list. There are two types of issue voting, retrospective and prospective, and both add information costs to voters' decisions. Retrospective voting is when a voter chooses a candidate based on that candidate's past performance. Like if your main issue was eagle punching, you would know from my past experience that there is a whole lot of eagle punching going on, [punches eagle off the desk] even my current experience. But a common problem with this is that finding out how a candidate has performed does take some time and research.

Prospective voting, as you might have guessed, is voting based on the imagined future performance of a candidate. Like let's imagine how I would perform in the future. [Craig imagines himself punching eagle off the desk again.] Ahh, I love the future. [Reflecting] Oh yeah, I thought so. Imagining what a candidate will do in the future seems like it will be easy, just watch the debates, they will tell you what they're gonna do-- but is that really what they're gonna do? I don't have a time machine, at least one that you know about.

If you'll allow me to indulge in some poli-sci jargon at this point, I'd like to mention that there are at least two types of political issues. There are spatial issues and valence issues. Spatial issues are those for which there is a range of possible options or choices. Think of them as existing on a spectrum. Minimum wage is a good example of a spatial issue, some voters want it to be higher, and some want it to be lowered. Some want it to be basically infra-red, cause they don't want any of it at all. Abortion is sometimes considered a spatial issue as well, although there are probably fewer points on the continuum for it than something like minimum wage, or taxes, jeez, that's a crazy spectrum!

Valence issues are those for which all voters will prefer a higher value. One example here might be government transparency, it's hard to find a voters who wants a candidate to run against transparency, although I'm sure they're out there, maybe.

So there you have the basic idea of how voters make decisions. Much of this seems pretty common sensical, but there's a couple things to point out. First, even though political scientists have identified these three factors: party loyalty, candidate characteristics, and issues, there are probably others that play a role and there are probably also factors that interact with each other. For example, personal prejudices aren't really mentioned, but I'm sure they matter and they interact with candidate characteristics. One example of this is the so-called Bradley Effect, named after former L.A. mayor Tom Bradley. Bradley was leading in all the polls for California governor in 1982, but he lost. Political scientists surmise that the polls were off because white voters told pollsters that they were willing to vote for Bradley, when they really weren't. The idea is that Bradley's race was more important than his political party, even though voters claimed that it wouldn't be a factor in their decision.

So which of these factors is best at predicting election outcomes? Well, party loyalty is probably your best bet, but as so-called Reagan Democrats show us, party loyalty might matter less when a candidate is particularly charismatic, or if the issues line up in their favor. One thing that political scientists have discovered is that the more informed the electorate is, the more heavily issues and candidate characteristics matter. But since, as we've seen, Americans are generally not well-informed voters, party affiliation looms particularly large in American campaigns, and that's what we'll be looking at next time-- campaigns. Thanks for watching, see you next time.

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[Outro]