

Positive Political Theory

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1. Introduction

The purposes of this chapter are to introduce positive political theory and to offer a guide to its use. To these ends, the chapter is organized around two basic questions: what is positive political theory? How can positive political theory be used effectively to address specific research questions? While positive political theory may be developed and employed in any substantive area of politics, in order to focus the discussion, these questions will be addressed in the context of the analysis of democratic institutions and democratic political behaviour and, more specifically, the study of referendums, elections and voting, so that the examples of positive political theory and the research questions discussed will reflect this subject matter.

The next section offers an account of positive political theory that both positions positive political theory relative to its normative counterpart and indicates the wide range of substantive and methodological positions that exist within positive political theory. Section 3 then provides an extended example of positive political theory in the setting of the analysis of democratic referendums and elections, so as to develop a more detailed understanding of the component elements of any exercise in positive political theory. Section 4 then turns to the identification of guidelines for the development of appropriate positive models and arguments that might be deployed in a wide variety of settings. This section builds on the discussion of the two preceding sections to offer a

‘how to..’ guide. While no such guide can offer any absolute guarantee of success, the underlying claim here is that a guide that encourages systematic and explicit consideration of the processes involved in constructing and using positive political theories can only enhance political debate more generally. Section 5 then illustrates the ‘how to..’ guide by using its principles as a guide to reading two recent articles.

2. What is Positive Political Theory?

Political theory, particularly when described as political philosophy, is often taken to be essentially normative in character. However, while it is certainly true that normative concerns are central to the overall ambition of much political thought (where ‘normative concerns’ include both the investigation of normative principles such as justice, well-being or rights and the more practical evaluation or justification of particular social and political institutions and practices), the exploration of these normative concerns does not exhaust political theory.

The study of politics must also be concerned with the explanation and understanding of the operation of social and political institutions and practices and the political behaviour of individuals operating within those institutions and practices. Indeed, this task of explaining and understanding might be argued to be logically prior to the task of justifying or evaluating. If we can not say (at least to some degree of approximation) how a particular institution will operate, how could we satisfactorily evaluate that institution?¹ And explanation and understanding cannot simply be a matter of description or direct empirical observation. This is most obviously true when we seek to understand an institutions that does not currently exist (perhaps in order to consider a reform that might bring it into existence), but it is equally true even where an institution

¹ It might be possible to offer a fully deontic justification of a political institution that does not depend at all on the consequences that follow from the adoption of the institution in question, but most normative approaches would place at least some weight on the outcomes that might be associated with the institution, or the behaviour that might arise within the institution. There is continuing debate as to the extent to which the value of democracy lies in the outcomes it is instrumental in producing, the fairness of the procedures it adopts, or the nature of the deliberation it induces. See, for example, Arneson, R. J. (2003) 'Defending the purely instrumental account of democratic legitimacy', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, **11(1)**, 122-32. Christiano, T. (2004) 'The Authority of Democracy', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, **12(3)**, 266-90, Cohen, J. (1997) Procedure and substance in deliberative democracy. in J. Bohman and W. Rehg (eds) *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, pp. 407–37.

currently exists. A description, however detailed, of the operation of an institution will not count as a full explanation of its operation, or provide a full understanding of its workings, not least because a mere description can only offer us an account of the institution that is limited to particular circumstances, those that we happen to have experienced, while a full explanation and understanding would also offer a counterfactual account of the institution's operation in circumstances that have not arisen but may arise in the future.

Positive political theory is that part of political theory that attempts to fill the gap between description and normative analysis, providing us with explanations of political phenomena and behaviour that are both crucial to our understanding of politics and essential to our normative discussion. Whenever we offer an account of this or that political event or institution, we are drawing on, and engaging in, positive political theory to at least some extent. The ubiquity of positive political theory sometimes renders it invisible, in much the same way that Monsieur Jourdain fails to see that he normally speaks in prose². We can hardly engage in any political discussion without invoking elements of some positive political theory, but we often do so without recognising that fact, or the content and implications of the particular theory or theories that we are invoking. A main theme of this essay is that our discussions would often be improved if the underlying positive political theory component were more explicit and more fully developed.

An interest in, or the use of, positive political theory should not be confused with a commitment to positivism. This is not the place to engage with the wider debate on positivism,³ but it is worth pointing out that while positivism (in at least most of its forms) argues for a commitment to a universal scientific method in which logic, deduction and empirical coherence are emphasised, one can take any of a variety of non-positivist views of the philosophy of social science without undermining the significance of the role of what I wish to refer to as positive political theory. Theories may be Marxist (or post-Marxist), structuralist (or post-structuralist), feminist (or post-

² In Moliere's 'Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme'.

³ See, for example Kincaid, H. (1998) Positivism in the Social Sciences. in E. Craig (ed) *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge, Gordon, H. S. (1993) *The history and philosophy of social science* London Routledge

feminist) or embody any of a wide variety of further commitments but still form part of positive political theory in the sense that I intend it. Similarly, theories may draw on anthropology, economics, psychology, sociology or other disciplines while still maintaining their essentially political character.

If positive political theory is not necessarily 'positivist', we should also note that it need not refrain from all use of normative terms and ideas. Many positive models in politics will involve assumptions about the motivations of individuals as political agents, and many of the motivations that might be studied are 'normative' in character: we might, for example wish to study the behaviour of individuals who are motivated by considerations of 'justice', or by considerations derived from a broader morality. While the motivations under consideration may be essentially normative, our study can still be essentially positive if our focus is on understanding the behaviour of individuals with the specified motivation (or comparing the behaviour of differently motivated individuals) rather than advocating or justifying some particular motivation. In this way, the normative beliefs of the agents in our theoretical model, and any other normative features included in our theoretical model, can be recognised as normative but still taken as the object of positive study. In this way a piece of positive political theory can include reference to normative terms and ideas provided that the relevant reference is of an appropriate kind.

Having roughly defined positive political theory in this very expansive and ecumenical way, I should immediately note that the phrase 'positive political theory' is often used much more narrowly; sometimes to mean 'formal political theory', sometimes to mean 'rational choice political theory' and sometimes to mean 'game-theoretic approaches to politics'⁴. I will say something about each of these usages.

Formal political theory identifies that sub-class of political theory (whether positive or normative) that is expressed in the style of theorems and lemmas using the tools of mathematics or formal logic. The defining feature of formal political theory is simply its mathematical or logical formality rather than the topic that the theory addresses, the

⁴ For related discussion see Forbes, H. D. (2004) *Positive Political Theory*. in G. F. Gaus and C. Kukathas (eds) *Handbook of political theory*. London: Sage, pp. 57- 72. and Riker, W. H. and Ordeshook, P. C. (1973) *An Introduction to Positive Political Theory*, Prentice Hall.

particular nature of the assumptions made within the theory, or whether the theory is positive or normative in character. Formal political theory is often, but by no means always, linked to detailed statistical modelling.⁵

Rational choice political theory identifies that sub-class of political theory that takes the assumption that individuals act rationally as foundational. Within this class we may find both formal and informal theories, and both positive and normative discussion, although it is certainly the case that much of rational choice political theory is both relatively formal and positive in its orientation.⁶

Within the class of rational choice political theory we find the further sub-class of game theoretic political theory. In game theoretic accounts not only are individuals taken to be rational in a particular sense, but the situation under study is taken to constitute a 'game' in the sense that it is the strategic interaction between individuals that is emphasized. While it is possible to discuss game theoretic political theory in a relatively informal way, game theoretic analysis is built on strongly formal (i.e. mathematical) foundations. But game theoretic approaches to politics are not the only possible intersection of formal methods and rational choice, it is possible to identify formal, rational choice models that are not essentially game theoretic.⁷

⁵ See Fiorina, M. P. (1975) 'Formal models in political science', *American Journal of Political Science*, 133-59. Morton, R. B. (1999) *Methods and models: A guide to the empirical analysis of formal models in political science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

⁶ For introductory discussions of the rational choice approach in formal and informal styles see Shepsle, K. A. and Bonchek, M. S. (1997) *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior and Institutions*, New York, Norton. Hindmoor, A. (2006) *Rational Choice*, London, Palgrave. For more advanced discussion see Austen-Smith, D. and Banks, J. S. (2000) *Positive political theory I: collective preference*, Univ of Michigan Press. Satz, D. and Ferejohn, J. (1994) 'Rational Choice and Social Theory', *The Journal of Philosophy*, **91(2)**, 71-87. For critical discussion of the rational choice approach see Green, D. P. and Shapiro, I. (1994) *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*, New Haven, Yale University Press, Friedman, J. (ed) (1996) *The Rational Choice Controversy: Economic Models of Politics Reconsidered*, New Haven, Yale University Press. Hindmoor, A. (2011) "'Major Combat Operations Have Ended'? Arguing about Rational Choice", *British Journal of Political Science*, **41(1)**, 191-210.

⁷ See Ordeshook, P. C. (1986) *Game Theory and Political Theory - An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Austen-Smith, D. and Banks, J. S. (2005) *Positive political theory I I: strategy and structure*, Univ of Michigan Press.

If formal, rational choice and game-theoretic approaches are only sub-sets of positive political theory, why are they sometimes claimed to occupy the whole of the territory? In part this is simply a matter of prominence, there can be little doubt that the literature which uses the language of positive political theory is most closely associated with, if not dominated by, approaches which combine formality, rationality and game-theory in various combinations. But, to revert to the analogy with prose, just because some prose speakers prominently proclaim that they speak in prose, it does not follow that they are the only prose speakers. Informal positive political theory, by the very fact that it is informal, tends to be much less self-conscious and self-aware than its formal cousin, but whenever a writer makes any claim about the behaviour of individuals or social groups in political settings, or the characteristics of a particular political institution, or makes a prediction about political events, they will normally be relying on some understanding of underlying forces or patterns of causality that merits the use of the term ‘positive political theory’.⁸ Of course, many such ‘theories’ are largely implicit, and some may be such that any attempt to make them explicit would reveal them to be little more than prejudice or opinion. But moving from the implicit to the explicit and improving theories (in whatever terms we might define ‘improving’) is not necessarily the same as formalising those theories (in the sense of presenting them in mathematical form) or rendering them within the framework of rational choice or game theory. A positive political theory may be useful, revealing and insightful while being informal and making no significant reference to rational choice; just as a formal, rational choice or game-theoretic theory may also be useful, revealing and insightful.

So, what are the essential elements of a positive political theory? Here there is no clear, universally accepted answer, but it seems relatively uncontentious to begin with the idea of a model. Initially we might think of a model as a limited representation of some element of reality. It is important that the representation of reality is limited, since the reason we create models is that reality is simply too rich and too complex to be studied in its raw form. But it is also important to consider how a model’s representation of reality is limited. There are three key elements here: abstraction, simplification and idealization. Abstraction is essentially the idea that we manage some aspects of the

⁸ It is possible that a prediction might be made purely as some form of extrapolation from historical data. Arguably, such a prediction might not involve any reliance on positive political theory, but we might also think that such a mechanical prediction represents purely statistical, rather than political, analysis.

complexity of the real world by ignoring them; that is, by leaving them out of the model altogether. Clearly, we would like to abstract from those aspects of reality that we think relatively unimportant, but often we may need to abstract from some potentially important areas in order to focus our attention on others. Simplification is essentially the idea that, even when we include an aspect of reality in our model we will typically need to include only some of its features. Again, we would like to focus on the most salient or significant features, but we will often have to sacrifice features of interest in order to focus our study. Idealization is essentially the idea that in modelling some feature of the real world we may need to represent that feature in a rather stylized or ‘pure’ form, rather than the messy and complicated form in which it exists in the real world.

For example, in the context of a study of the comparative voting behaviour of members of different social groups we might refer to a model (whether informal or formal) that abstracts from many of the details of the electoral system in use, simplifies the classification of individuals into social groups by emphasizing only some social distinctions, and idealizes by treating all members of any specified social group as essentially similar, so neglecting further inter-personal differences.

A simple illustrative example of a model from outside of the social sciences may help. Consider the famous map of the London underground. This is a model. It abstracts from many aspects of real-world London, completely ignoring streets and features such as parks or buildings in order to focus on the layout of the underground network. It simplifies the depiction of the underground network, so that, for example, the map is not to scale and does not depict the real geographical relationship between underground stations. It also idealizes the network in terms of a graphically striking image relying on colours and design features that do not correspond to the underlying reality.

This example suggests an important point: models are created for a purpose; they are good models to the extent that they serve that purpose well. In particular, good, useful models do not need to be ‘realistic’ in any general or complete sense; indeed most good models will abstract from, simplify and idealize reality to such an extent that they are clearly ‘unrealistic’. Of course, a good model will typically retain some connection to

the real world; but that connection may be highly stylized, so that the relationship between the model and the real world is less like a detailed photograph to be judged by its accuracy and the level of detail that is captured and more like a caricature sketch which tries to capture one or two key features of reality in a very simplified (and even exaggerated) form while ignoring everything else.

The general point here is that a model is to be judged by its usefulness rather than by any direct appeal to its realism (or the realism of its assumptions). And this in turn suggests that one might want many different models of essentially the same piece of reality, with each model aiming to capture a different aspect of that reality so as to be useful in different ways: just as one might want many different maps of London in addition to the underground map, each serving a rather different function (street maps, maps of bus routes, maps showing underground pipe-work, etc.), so one might want a variety of models of the voting behaviour of individuals, each focusing on a different aspect of the complex whole. Rather than these different models being rivals, they may complement each other, so that each model contributes something to our more general understanding.

Now, in moving from the map of the London underground to models and theories in the social sciences, we need to add further complications. I will discuss two such complications, one concerned with a further aspect of the make-up of most political models, the other with the idea of ‘usefulness’.

So far, the idea of a model has been limited to an abstract, simplified and idealized representation of a part of reality. And this is appropriate for some models in politics, just as it is for the London underground map. But most models in politics involve another feature, one not shared by the London underground map. This is some animating idea that usually adds a structure of causality to the model. It is at this point that a model becomes the carrier of a particular theory.⁹ To return to the study of the

⁹ For discussion of this understanding of the idea of a theory, and its link to causality see Van Evera, S. (1997) *Guide to methods for students of political science*, Ithica NY, Cornell Univ Press. For

comparative voting behaviour of members of different social groups, the sketch of an animating idea might be that the members of a group share a common identity and that this identity is reflected in their voting decisions. Of course this is only one possibly relevant hypothesis. A slightly more complex version of this idea might be that a particular individual's voting behaviour might be explained in part by the group of which they are a member and in part by the extent of that individual's interactions with members of other groups.¹⁰ An idea that seeks to capture a completely different aspect of voters' motivation is that voters vote for the candidate they find most physically attractive.¹¹ Many other ideas with at least some plausibility are possible but, whatever idea is selected, the same principles relate to the specification of an animating idea or causal theory as relate to the construction of the model: principles of abstraction simplification and idealization.

The mere fact that just one or two of the wide range of possible causal ideas are selected in any particular study is sufficient to demonstrate the principal of abstraction in this context. Of course, the motivations of real individuals are hugely complex, both in the sense that any single individual is likely to display a wide range of different motivations and in the sense that different individuals are likely to display different motivations when placed in similar circumstances, but a theory must place some limits on the degree of complexity it admits, and most theories will focus attention on a very small sub-set of potentially motivating influences. Similarly theories will generally need to simplify the form of the particular motivations under consideration, perhaps by restricting the degree of variation across individuals, or perhaps by imposing a particular and somewhat arbitrary definition on what features are considered relevant. Finally, theories will typically idealize the motivation of the individuals under consideration by taking the extreme or pure case, which might entail making unrealistic assumptions about such

more general discussion see Elster, J. (1989) *Nuts and bolts for the social sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ For an elaboration and investigation of this idea see Zuckerman, A. S., Valentino, N. A. and Zuckerman, E. W. (1994) 'A structural theory of vote choice: social and political networks and electoral flows in Britain and the United States', *The Journal of Politics*, **56(4)**, 1008-33. For an analysis which relates social networks to rational voting see Abrams, S., Iversen, T. and David, S. (2011) 'Informal Social Networks and Rational Voting', *British Journal of Political Science*, **41(2)**, 229-57.

¹¹ For an empirical investigation of this idea see Berggren, N., Jordahl, H. and Poutvaara, P. (2009) 'The looks of a winner: Beauty and electoral success', *Journal of Public Economics*, **94(1-2)**, 8-15.

matters as the extent to which individuals have access to relevant information, or the extent to which they are consistent in their behaviour. In short, the theoretical or motivating idea must be specified in a way that is appropriate to its model setting.

A basic model (analogous to the London underground map) provides a setting in which we can isolate what we think of as the key aspects of reality, but without a motivating idea or theory such a model is passive: it does not generate any particular understanding of the ways in which these key aspects interact to produce outcomes. This should not be taken to imply that such basic models are not valuable or useful. A basic model will be useful if it frames and addresses a research question in a way that is helpful: just as the underground map can help one to navigate across London, so a basic political model can help one to navigate the literature on a particular political question. A model of this sort gives us a defined space in which to think. But it is the addition of an animating idea or causal theory that transforms the model into an active tool for political investigation.

I now turn to the second complication, relating to the idea of ‘usefulness’. While the idea of the usefulness of a basic or passive model such as a map is relatively easy to understand, it is much more difficult to be precise about the ‘usefulness’ of a more active model or theory in politics. The general ambition of most models and theories is to contribute to our understanding of some political phenomenon; but how can we tell if a model is indeed useful in this way, and how can we combine the insights offered by different models? Part, but only part, of the answer lies in the relationship between theoretical models (however formal or informal, and whatever their focus) and empirical work (whether quantitative or qualitative).

One way in which a model or theory may be useful is in its ability to explain or predict observed empirical patterns. For example, a theory or model that sets out to help to explain the differences between different voting systems might be expected to cast at least some light on the patterns of results thrown up by those voting systems in the real world, and perhaps even make some predictions about future results. But while this seems reasonable, it may also be difficult to achieve in practice. It is unlikely that direct

empirical observation of two or more voting systems operating in an otherwise identical environment can be achieved, so that the available empirical data will always be at least somewhat difficult to interpret. And in many cases relevant data simply may not exist. But the issue goes rather deeper than this. Until we identify relevant models and theories, we do not even know what data may be relevant, and so what data to collect. If a theory or model tells us that some factor *X* may be important in explaining this or that political phenomenon then this may persuade us to collect data on factor *X* so as to be able to ‘test’ the theory against that data, or at least to investigate the relationship in more detail. But notice that here the data is already theory-laden in the sense that we are sensitized to that particular view of the world because of the particular model/theory adopted. Had we adopted a different theory, one positing a relationship between *Y* and the political phenomenon in question we might have gathered other data and reached other conclusions. Of course, in the spirit of seeing theories/models as potential complements, we might collect data on both *X* and *Y* and so leave open the possibility that both or neither of the models is useful in reaching an empirical understanding of the phenomenon. But we must avoid the trap of thinking that there is some pre-theoretic stock of ‘data’ which can speak for itself in guiding our choice of models and theories.

Even if this trap is avoided, empirical relevance is not the only sort of ‘usefulness’ that a model might achieve. A model will often serve to focus attention on the linkages between research questions and the way in which the exploration of an issue can be extended. In this way, a model can influence the course of development of a literature, by suggesting connections and further developments that might not have appeared especially salient except in the context of the model. If in constructing our basic model we recognize explicitly that we are abstracting away from some potentially relevant factor, this will focus attention on the question of extending the model to incorporate this factor in order to establish whether its inclusion significantly changes the nature of the model and its results. Of course, different models will suggest different developmental paths, and this is another way in which a variety of modelling approaches can be complementary. Models are not just static objects; models can be seen to develop over time with many authors contributing to the model in different ways. Each development will throw up new challenges and criticisms, and these challenges and criticisms will in turn provoke further work both within the same model

and in other models as researchers react to each other's arguments. In this way, the variety of models employed by political analysts may be thought of as a network of pathways that criss-cross the territory of politics. Each pathway may claim something distinctive, but it is the growth of the network that reflects the real range and depth of political research.

3. An Extended Example

At this point it is useful to provide an extended example, to display and illustrate the various points made. The chosen example is one that begins with an extremely simple model of a referendum in the broadly rational choice tradition, and shows at least some of the ways in which that model has developed over time. In keeping with the ideas of abstraction, simplification and idealization we will begin by identifying the minimal necessary ingredients for a model of a referendum: a set of voters, some issue over which the voters disagree, two alternative policy positions with respect to that issue, and a voting rule.

A referendum, in this simple model world, is simply the choice of one of the policy positions by the set of voters acting through the voting rule. To be a little more specific (and to idealize certain features of any real world referendum) assume that the voting rule in force is simple majority voting (note that in this simple world of just two alternatives, almost all plausible voting rules converge on simple majority voting) and that the issue at stake can be described as choosing the value of a particular variable which may in turn be thought of as choosing a point along a left-right spectrum;¹² it might, for example, be the level of public spending on a particular activity, or the tax rate to impose in a particular context. Assume also that each individual voter has an ideal level of the variable at issue in mind and would like the outcome to be as close as possible to that ideal level. This adds an element of motivation to the individuals in the model and is what makes this a model in the broadly rational choice tradition: we assume that each individual will act in the way that she believes will contribute to

¹² Left-right here does not need to carry any particular political significance, in at least many specific cases it might be that the spectrum could be more appropriately labelled.

bringing about the best available outcome seen from her own perspective.¹³ This, then, is essentially the simplest version of a model of democratic decision-making introduced by Downs,¹⁴ and may be illustrated diagrammatically.

In Figure 1 the L-R line represents the issue at stake, with points along the line representing different possible values that might be chosen. X and Y are the two specific policy positions that are ‘candidates’ in this referendum, and the voters may be thought of as spread along the L-R line with each voter positioned at their ideal policy point. If we define point P to be simply the point half-way between X and Y, and we assume that everyone votes (note the idealization here), it should be clear that all voters whose ‘ideal points’ lie to the left of P can be expected to vote for X and all those to the right of P can be expected to vote for Y. Given the simple majority voting rule, X will win if a majority of voters lie to the left of P, Y will win if a majority of voters lie to the right of P.

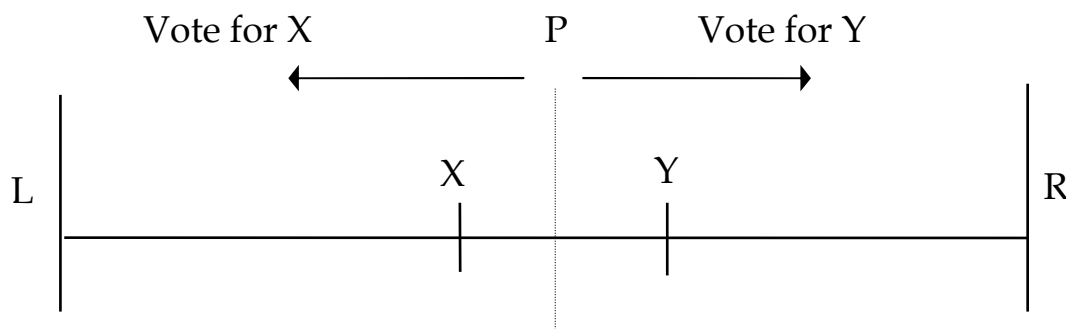


Figure 1 – The Basic Downsian model

So far this model does nothing more than illustrate and articulate the idea of majority voting in a simple, controlled setting. To animate the model further we might add another element.

Consider the strategic choice of X and Y on the assumption that these policy positions are chosen by agents (let’s call them ‘political parties’) whose choice is guided by the desire to maximise the probability of their proposal winning the referendum. Note that we are here

¹³ Note that this does not amount to an assumption of self-interest. The individual may choose their ideal value because they believe it to be in the public interest, or because they believe it is morally best, or for any other reason. All that rationality requires here is that once the individual has identified a relevant ideal, they act so as to bring about the closest possible approximation to that ideal.

¹⁴ Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, Harper & Row.

introducing a second element of motivation, and again we are making that motivation as simple and stark as possible (even though this may be unrealistic).

If, in the initial position depicted by figure 1, X would win the election, the political party that controls Y would face an incentive to shift Y, and they would wish to shift it leftward. By doing so, the position of point P will move to the left, more voters will support Y and fewer will support X. But similarly, the party that controls X will face an incentive to move rightward, so increasing its vote, and reducing its rivals. This suggests that the two policy platforms will converge under the competitive pressure between the two parties, but where might this process stop? One aspect of the answer is that in the absence of any further argument, there is nothing to stop the two platforms converging to a single point, so that we might expect the two parties to offer essentially the same policy.

But this is only half the answer. Imagine that both parties offer policy Y in figure 1, and that more than half of the voters' ideal points lie to the left of Y. It is straightforward to argue that each party now faces an incentive to move to the left. If either party succeeds in positioning itself just to the left of its rival, it will win the referendum. But if both parties face this same incentive, we might expect both to react (given that one of the simplifying features of the model is that the two parties are essentially identical). Similarly, if both parties chose a policy platform such that the majority of voters' ideal points were to the right of that policy, then both would face an incentive to move rightward. And so the model tells us not only that the two parties will converge on the same policy, but that there is a unique policy point at which the two parties will settle: the policy that is the ideal point of the median voter; that is, the point at which exactly half of the voters' ideal points lie to the left and half lie to the right. This then is the 'Median Voter Theorem' that says that in two candidate referendum (or election) of the type described, both candidates will offer a policy platform aimed at the median voter's ideal point.

Now, this is a very simple model, and its simplicity generates both a clarity of argument and a range of suggestions for further work. And these two things are closely related. It is precisely because we can see the mechanics of the model clearly, and understand the forces at work, that we can formulate a range of questions that pinpoint important limitations of the model as it stands and identify further research questions. So, taking each aspect of the model in turn we might ask a series of questions that interrogate the robustness of the model and its basic conclusions to changes in the detailed formulation of the model. What would be the impact of relaxing the assumption that all citizens vote? What would be the impact of introducing a third political party? What would be the impact of assuming that political parties had 'ideal policies' of their own which tempered their motivation to win the election at all costs? What would be the

impact of allowing the vote to operate on more than one political issue (so that it becomes a model of an election rather than a single-issue referendum)? How might we compare different voting systems in this framework? How should the model be reformulated to capture the idea of electing representatives rather than making direct policy choices? Etc.

Some of these questions are relatively simple to address, others require considerable detailed work, but all of these questions, and many more, have been explored in the literature that has developed since Downs.¹⁵ For example, the issue of allowing individual citizens a decision as to whether to vote or not, opens up the question of identifying the factors influencing turnout.¹⁶ One possibility is that voters abstain when they are essentially indifferent across the alternatives on offer; another possibility is that voters abstain when the policy platforms are too far from their own ideal points (voter alienation), these possibilities generate different implications. Clearly, if the political parties converge on identical policy platforms, and individual citizens abstain when they are essentially indifferent between the platforms on offer, we will generate a prediction of zero turnout. Thus the issue of the relationship between the idea of policy convergence and turnout has been seen as a key issue in the development of this model. One step was to introduce the idea that individuals might participate in the vote out of a sense of civic duty, even if they still vote for whichever platform is closer to their ideal.¹⁷ This opens up the idea that the factors that drive turnout (i.e. the decision whether to vote) may be rather different from the factors that drive voting itself (i.e. the decision what or who to vote for).

A second example might relate to the basic animating idea of rational choice on the part of individual voters. We have already noted that the sense of 'rational choice' in play here is just the idea that individuals vote instrumentally to bring about whichever outcome they see as 'best' regardless of exactly how they define 'best'. But perhaps voting behaviour might be modelled differently: in terms of habitual voting, or retrospective voting, or expressive voting. Habitual voting and retrospective voting both operate over time, so it would be necessary to extend the model to incorporate a sequence of elections rather than a single event, once this was done the idea of habitual voting could be incorporated by imposing a pattern of behaviour such that

¹⁵ For a wide-ranging overview of that literature and detailed references see Mueller, D. C. (2003) *Public Choice III* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ See, Aldrich, J. H. (1993) 'Rational Choice and Turnout', *American Journal of Political Science*, **37(1)**, 246-78. Blais, A. (2000) *To vote or not to vote?: The merits and limits of rational choice theory*, University of Pittsburgh Press. For a behavioural alternative to the rational choice framework see Bendor, J., Diermeier, D. and Ting, M. (2003) 'A behavioral model of turnout', *American Political Science Review*, **97(02)**, 261-80.

¹⁷ See Riker, W. H. and Ordeshook, P. C. (1968) 'A Theory of the Calculus of Voting', *American Political Science Review*, **62(1)**, 25-42. Ferejohn, J. A. and Fiorina, M. P. (1974) 'The Paradox of Not Voting: A Decision Theoretic Analysis', *American Political Science Review*, **68(2)**, 525-36.

individual votes in any particular election were largely (but not necessarily wholly) determined by their votes at earlier elections.¹⁸ Note that this might allow parties to pursue non-convergent platforms if they felt that their vote was sufficiently secure, and this in turn focuses attention on the question of what platforms parties would pursue if they were free to do so. The basic idea of retrospective voting is that voters may be backward looking rather than forward looking when choosing how to vote, that is they may reward (or punish) good (or bad) behaviour by parties/candidates in the previous periods, rather than focus on their platforms as they relate to future policy. Clearly the idea of retrospective voting engages with the idea of an incumbency effect.¹⁹ The basic idea of expressive voting is that individuals may vote to express some aspect of their identity or personality rather than voting for a particular platform, and that this is particularly likely in large scale elections where an individual is extremely unlikely to be instrumentally significant in determining the outcome of the election.²⁰

A third example of the development that has arisen from the basic Downsian model might focus on the role of political parties.²¹ In the original model, parties are sketched as if they are independent agents who seek only to win elections, and this immediately raises questions relating to the more structural relationship between political parties, and their members who are themselves also citizens and voters, and further questions relating to the mechanisms and processes by which parties choose their policy platforms. Extensions to the model develop a number of aspects of political parties including: integrating the role of the citizen with the role of the candidate by allowing citizens to stand as candidates, thereby effectively eliminating the party from the model,²² viewing political parties as essentially operating to extend political credibility over time,²³ discussing the decision of individuals to join political groupings,²⁴ and

¹⁸ See Fowler, J. H. (2006) 'Habitual voting and behavioral turnout', *Journal of Politics*, **68(2)**, 335-44.

¹⁹ See Fiorina, M. P. (1981) *Retrospective voting in American national elections*, Yale University Press New Haven, CT. Ferejohn, J. (1986) 'Incumbent performance and electoral control', *Public Choice*, **50(1)**, 5-25. Fiorina, M. P., Abrams, S. and Pope, J. (2003) 'The 2000 US Presidential Election: Can Retrospective Voting Be Saved?', *British Journal of Political Science*, **33(2)**, 163-87, Krehbiel, K. and Wright, J. R. (1983) 'The incumbency effect in congressional elections: A test of two explanations', *American Journal of Political Science*, **27(1)**, 140-57.

²⁰ See Brennan, G. and Lomasky, L. (1993) *Democracy and Decision*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Brennan, G. and Hamlin, A. (1998) 'Expressive voting and electoral equilibrium', *Public Choice*, **95(1)**, 149-75. Hamlin, A. and Jennings, C. (2011) 'Expressive political behaviour: foundations, scope and implications', *British Journal of Political Science*.

²¹ See Duverger, M. (1965) *Political parties: Their organization and activity in the modern state*, London, Wiley, Panebianco, A. (1988) *Political parties: organization and power*, Cambridge University Press, Strøm, K. (1990) 'A behavioral theory of competitive political parties', *American Journal of Political Science*, **34(2)**, 565-98.

²² Besley, T. and Coate, S. (1997) 'An Economic Model of Representative Democracy*', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, **112(1)**, 85-114.

²³ Brennan, G. and Kliemt, H. (1994) 'Finite Lives and Social Institutions', *Kyklos*, **47(4)**, 551-71.

discussing the internal choice of party leaders and the relationship between leaders, activists and policy platforms.²⁵

These examples (and many more would be possible) serve to illustrate the genealogy of models: the way in which models and theories develop over generations of academic debate; and the diversity of the resultant 'family tree'. And, of course, as with the more standard type of family tree, the family trees associated with political models and theories interconnect in all sorts of ways. Understanding how a particular model, used for a particular purpose by a particular author, fits into the broader landscape of such family trees is an important part of appreciating both the richness and the limitations of that model.

4. How to...

While this extended example has, I hope, provided a view of many of the general issues that arise in building, developing, extending, understanding and locating a positive political model/theory, and fleshed out the discussion of the earlier section, it is now time explicitly to try to draw out some of the lessons that have been implicit in the last two sections.

In practice it will often be the case that a model is adopted or adapted from the existing literature (as suggested by our extended example) rather than designed from scratch. But whether you are attempting to build a model from scratch, adapt a model from the literature, or simply understand a model in the literature it is sensible to approach the exercise in much the same way. The remainder of this section will be written as if the exercise in hand is the design and selection of a model for a particular piece of research in the general area of the study of democratic institutions or behaviour, but there should be no substantial difficulty in reading the section more generally (for example as a guide to the critical discussion of models employed by others).

4.1 Identify your research area and basic research question in their simplest possible form

A useful first step is simply to list the major structural features of the research area that you believe are essential in any model that could possibly address your research question, and separately list those that might be excluded at this initial stage even if their inclusion might seem desirable. Remember, the idea is to sketch the ingredients for the simplest possible model

²⁴ Hamlin, A. and Jennings, C. (2004) 'Group Formation and Political Conflict: Instrumental and Expressive Approaches', *Public Choice*, **118**(3), 413-35.

²⁵ Ware, A. (1992) 'Activist-Leader Relations and the Structure of Political Parties: 'Exchange' Models and Vote-Seeking Behaviour in Parties', *British Journal of Political Science*, **22**(1), 71-92. Hamlin, A. and Jennings, C. (2007) 'Leadership and conflict', *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, **64**(1), 49-68.

at this stage. In terms of our extended example of a model of a referendum, the essential elements of the model are listed below, as are at least some of the more obvious structural features that might be seen as optional extras.

Essential Structures	Inessential Structures
Citizens/Voters	Any group structure of individual voters
An issue	Multiple issues
2 policy options /political parties	Multiple options
Voting rule	Other institutional features (representation, repeat elections etc.)
	Etc.

Table 1 Essential elements of a model of a referendum

Of course, the structures that you see as essential will depend upon the precise focus of your research. If the intention is to study a particular institutional structure, for example the impact of campaigning on referendum outcomes, then the simplest specification of the essential structures to include in the model will be rather more complex than that shown here since you will need to include at least some features of campaigning. The point however, is to arrive at the simplest list of ingredients that offer the possibility of modelling the area of your concern.

4.2 Sketch the required relationships between elements of the model

The next step is to impose some shape or structure on the relationships among the identified ingredients of the model. For example, many models in the area of electoral politics will include both ‘citizens/voters’ and ‘political parties’ as structural features, but models will differ in the focus that they wish to place on the relationship between these elements of the model. In some cases (as in the simple Downsian model sketched above) we may wish to simplify and idealize our view of political parties (at least initially) so that parties are seen as independent agents with their own motivations. In other cases, it may be essential to the intended purpose of the model to consider the internal structure of political parties and the way in which their policy platforms emerge.²⁶ Clearly, the structure of the relationship in the models will be quite different in the two cases. It may be useful to transform the simple list of the type illustrated by table 1 into a diagram of the form of figure 2 below, that shows the basic structure of the relationships that are key to the model in its simplest form. The items along the top row are seen as the basic or primary inputs of the model, essentially specified by stipulation. The only item that is actually determined within the model is the outcome of the referendum, and that is

²⁶ For a variety of approaches see the papers collected in Müller, W. and Strøm, K. (eds) (1999) *Policy, office, or votes?: how political parties in Western Europe make hard decisions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

seen as influenced by all of the independently specified features of the model, as indicated by the arrows. As is clear from figure 2, the structure of the basic Downsian model is particularly simple – with a direct relationship between each of the specified feature and the single outcome, and with no complicating features such as interactions among the features, or feedback from one part of the model to another.

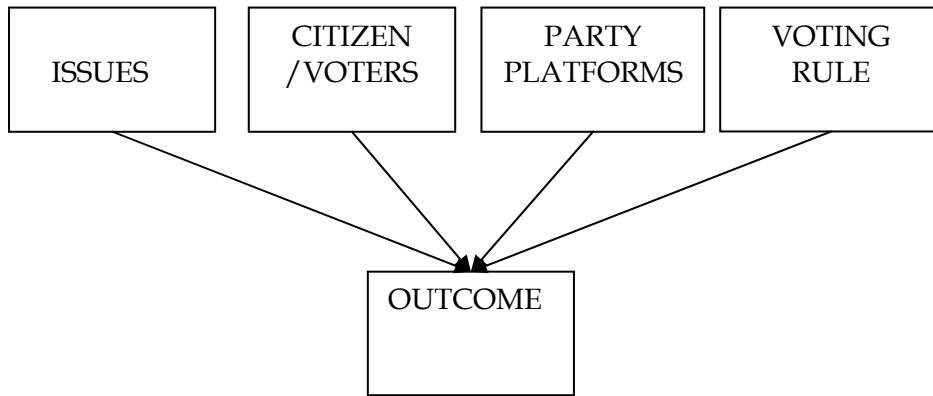


Figure 2 Schematic outline of basic Downsian model

A slightly more complicated version of the model, allowing voters to abstain depending on their view of the platforms adopted by the parties (as discussed above), might be sketched as in figure 3. Note that party platforms now have two effects of the final outcome, a direct effect, as in the simplest model, and an indirect effect via the decision to vote or abstain.

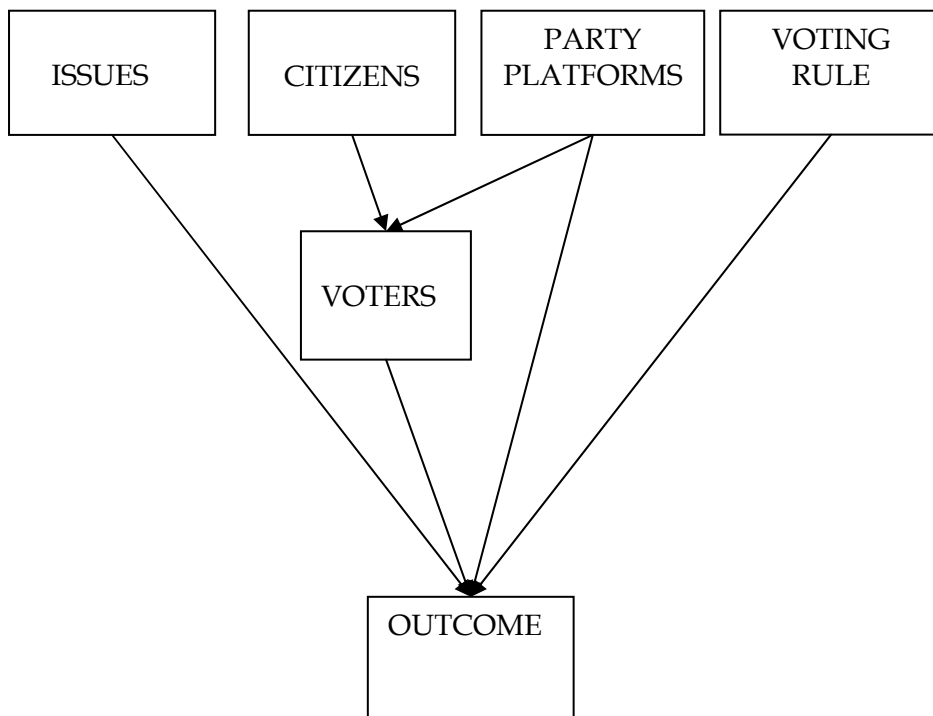


Figure 3 Schematic outline of Downsian model with possible abstention

At this stage we have a basic, passive model that is comparable to the London underground map. It offers us a simple guide to the research area under investigation that allows us to consider the various possible linkages between the identified features. It also suggests ways in which we might extend and complicate the model to include features that we might believe to be important (even if not absolutely essential).

At this stage it is also worthwhile to reflect on your proposed approach to further study, since this will influence the purposes that you want your model to serve. One purpose common to most pieces of research is to provide a structure to reviewing the literature, and making connections between literatures. A basic model of the type constructed so far can be of considerable value here as a way of thinking about and comparing alternative accounts of referenda in the literature or in general political debate. Each account should be capable of being analysed in terms of our basic schematic structure, by means of a series of simple questions: how does the account specify each of the ingredients of the model, for example what assumptions are made, explicitly or implicitly, about the set of citizen voters, or the number and nature of political parties and the way in which they set their policy platforms? What are the properties of the outcome of the referendum in the account under consideration, and how do these properties follow from the assumptions made? But beyond the framing of literature reviews the useful purposes of a model will vary with the approach to be taken. For example, if the intended approach is empirical and quantitative, the model will provide the first step towards specifying the key variables and data requirements. If the intended approach is qualitative and interview based, the model will suggest key questions that should be asked and the nature of the relationships that should be probed. If the intended approach is to build from positive political theory to a normative discussion of behaviour or institutions, the model will suggest the key connections between behaviour and institutional arrangements that will need to feature in the normative account. But, whatever the originally intended approach may have been, the relationship between the first sketch of the model and the first sketch of the approach should be seen as iterative and flexible, rather than uni-directional and fixed. At the early stage of any inquiry, moving back and forth between considering the structural features of the basic model and the intended approach to the proposed research will help to redraft and clarify both.

4.3 Animating the model

The next stage is then to be explicit about motivational or causal aspects of the model. In the case of the basic Downsian model we noted two such aspects, the assumed motivation of the voters in deciding how to vote (and, perhaps, whether to vote) and the assumed motivation of the political parties in setting their platforms. Clearly many other motivational assumptions are possible even within this very simple structure. At this early stage, motivations and causal

forces should be as explicit and as simple as possible. One way of thinking about this is to consider each of the arrows in a figure such as figure 2 or 3, and draft a clear statement of the basic nature of the relationship represented by that arrow. The exercise of drafting such an explicit statement will almost always bring three points to the fore. The first point revolves around the recognition that apparently simple statements of a causal or motivational relationship often leave open a considerable range of interpretation, so that quite detailed thought is required to construct a clear, explicit statement of the relationship you have in mind. The second point revolves around the recognition of a requirement for some degree of coherence or consistency as between the various elements of the model. The third point revolves around the recognition that there are almost always many quite different ways of identifying a particular relationship, each of which carries at least some degree of plausibility, and so many different, but related, theoretical models that could be constructed.

The first of these points is one example of the role of theory construction in the process of conceptual clarification. By setting yourself the task of thinking explicitly about the relationship between two parts of your model and specifying that relationship as clearly and concisely as possible, you are entering into a process that requires careful analytic thought and clarity about the concepts involved. Constructing and understanding your model, albeit a simplified, abstract and idealized representation of an aspect of reality, involves considerable investment in the ideas and concepts that are basic to your research. At this point the style and formality of a theory or model may come under scrutiny. As your understanding of the model and its component parts deepens, you will need to find a means of communicating the nature of the model to others that reflects its structure and the detailed specification that you have decided upon. There is no uniform answer to how best to present a theory/model, but you should at least be aware of a variety of options and make a conscious choice of presentational strategy that fits with the overall research plan. It may be that an entirely textual approach is appropriate, in other cases, the use of a diagram or flow chart, or other device may be helpful and in still other cases a greater degree of formalism may be appropriate. But whatever style is adopted, the underlying aim is clarity of communication that aids discussion and analysis.

The second of these points can be read at a variety of levels. At one level we might ask, for example, whether all of the motivational elements specified as parts of the theory/model are consistent in the sense that they can be read as fitting together. In the simple Downsian model this is easily achieved since the only two motivational elements of the model relate to two quite distinct groups of agents (individual voters and political parties). But in other cases there may be some tension. For example, imagine that we are constructing a model that involves individuals voting and those same individuals making a decision on where to live, as might be the case if

we are interested in political differences between political constituencies or regions. And imagine that we initially specify the motivations guiding the location decision in terms of maximising some notion of self-interest, but at the same time initially specify the motivations guiding the voting decision in terms of some notion of the public interest. This raises the question of how we are conceiving of the individual overall. The tension between self-interest and public-interest should force us to think about the underlying model of the individual and her decision making. Such tension is potentially creative, for example it can help to focus on issues that were not immediately apparent, and can help to develop interesting ideas about the relationship between the public and the private; and a benefit of relatively explicit and detailed modelling/theorising is that it can both help to reveal such tensions and help to ensure that they contribute positively to the overall analysis.²⁷ The third of these points leads directly to the next sub-section.

4.4 Variations on a theme

The recognition that there is no uniquely privileged theory/model in relation to any particular research issue, and that there are many potential models that can claim to be of significant interest may, at first sight, sound like a problem for a proponent of positive political theory. But a second thought reveals a different perspective. A theme of this essay has been that a ‘good’ model is a useful model, and there are many ways to be useful; and, of course, just because there are many good/useful models in any area of politics this does not imply that all models are good/useful. In working towards ensuring that your theory/model is indeed useful, the idea of interrogating variations on the model in question is of considerable significance.

Once a theory/model has been constructed (however formally or informally, and in whatever style) that theory/model should be reconsidered by explicitly viewing variations. Here the general rule is simple enough, vary one aspect of the theory/model at a time in order to consider the impact on the model overall. If a particular variation makes little of now difference to the model, this provides that basis for a generalisation of the model of, on the other hand, a variation does make a significant difference to the overall model you have found a potentially interesting feature that can be incorporated into your analysis.

²⁷ The example of voting and location decisions is pursued in the literature on ‘voting with your feet’ with a classic early reference relating directly to the Downsian model being Tiebout, C. M. (1956) ‘A pure theory of local expenditures’, *The Journal of Political Economy*, **64(5)**, 416-24. The issue of treating the basic motivation of individuals symmetrically in political and private decision-making is discussed in Buchanan, J. M. (1984) *Politics without romance: A sketch of positive public choice theory and its normative implications*. in J. M. Buchanan and R. D. Tollison (eds) *The Theory of Public Choice* 11. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 11–22.

Performing this sort of ‘sensitivity analysis’, exploring the sensitivity of a model to changes in the specification of its component parts, deepens understanding of the model and helps to identify which of the assumptions that are embedded in the model are merely simplifying and which are vital to the model’s structure. To return to the simple Downsian model, it might have been thought that the nature of the distribution of voters’ ideal points along the L-R spectrum would play an important role in determining the way in which political parties would choose their platforms, and whether those platforms would converge or not. But the sensitivity analysis performed by Downs revealed that actually, in the simple setting described by the rest of the model, the precise distribution of voters makes no difference at all, so that he does not need to make any assumption about it. All that matters is that the distribution has a median, and this is true of all well defined distributions in a single dimension. In this way the sensitivity analyses both generalises the model (rather than being a model that applies only when the distribution of voters is of a particular form, it is a model that applies to all single dimensional distributions) and points to a key feature, the existence of a median, that provides the basis for further investigation since distributions in more than one dimension (i.e. models with more than one political issue being decided) do not necessarily have a median.

It is inherent in the nature of a model as an abstraction from reality, a simplification of reality and an idealization of reality that no model (and certainly no useful model) can incorporate all relevant aspects of reality. Thus the fact that a theory/model has limitations, in the sense that it is sensitive to some changes in basic assumptions, is inevitable and is not in itself a criticism of the theory/model. A straightforward recognition of the limitations of a model can only enhance its usefulness.

4.5 Zooming in and zooming out

A particular way of varying a theory/model in order to fully understand its properties and develop them to their greatest advantage might be termed zooming in or zooming out. Any particular model is set at a particular level of detail, it might be a relatively ‘macro’ model that seeks to capture aspects of the big picture, it might be a relatively ‘micro’ model that focuses on specific details within that picture, it might operate in the middle ground of a ‘meso’ model. But whichever level of model one is working with, it can be very useful to explore what, if anything, the model says in relation to other levels. By taking a micro model and zooming out to the macro level, by asking questions like, ‘what would be the implications if the assumptions of this model were applied more generally?’, or taking a macro model and zooming in to more specific details by asking questions like, ‘what would my general model say about some particular case study?’, we can test out the general plausibility of the model and, as with other forms of sensitivity analysis, distinguish the important from the trivial. But sensitivity analysis

can also help to improve the theory/model by pointing to the areas where extensions to the model promise significant results.

5 Application

The approach to positive political theory sketched above is intended to provide a flexible structure for thinking about a wide variety of political questions and issues. Clearly it needs to be fine-tuned to fit any specific purpose. While it has been presented as a way of approaching research, it can also provide a way of reading the literature and, to illustrate its use in this way, this section considers two recent articles in the general area of democracy, elections and voting that are, conveniently, published in the same recent issue of *The British Journal of Political Science*.

Before turning to these articles, one important point should be stressed. There is a crucial difference between the work done in a research project and the report of that work in a final document or documents; and the nature of this difference will depend substantially on the type of document that is seen as the research output. While in some contexts (for example, the production of a PhD thesis or monograph) it may be both appropriate and important for the final document to explicitly display most (if not quite all) of the process of research - the consideration of variations on a theme, the zooming in and zooming out, and so on; in other contexts (such as a journal article) the final document will typically focus on a relatively small part of the overall research, that which carries the key message. Much of the research process will be implicit in the way the article refers to the literature and in the way in which claims and results are framed.

With this thought in mind, consider two recent articles which relate to models of democratic behaviour. One is theoretical and normative, while the other offers empirical analysis aimed at investigating or testing propositions but, despite these different purposes and methodologies, I will point up both the extent to which both depend on underlying positive political theory and how the approach outlined above helps us to read these articles and understand the broader research programmes of which they form part.

The more theoretical article is focussed on the question 'Should voting be compulsory?'²⁸ This is clearly a normative question, but Lever is clear from the outset that her approach requires consideration of the differential practical impact of compulsory and voluntary voting systems, so that "the arguments are a mixture of principle and political calculation" (p897). Lever identifies a general chain of argument in support of compulsory argument that proceeds through a series of steps: voluntary voting results in low turnout, low turnout implies unequal turnout across social groups, unequal turnout reinforces social disadvantage, therefore compulsory voting addresses social disadvantage. Furthermore compulsory voting carries a range of further benefits over and above those that depend on increased turnout. Finally, compulsory voting carries no significant costs and does not threaten liberty, in large part because not-voting is seen as a form of free-riding. She then goes on to criticise each link in this chain of argument and develop her own sceptical view of compulsory voting.

While, by its nature, the explicit focus of the article is normative there are clear indications of the underlying positive structure and equally clear indications of the use of the principles outlined above. The underlying model of the behaviour of voters, the relationship between the decision to vote and other socio-political variables (particularly those associated with disadvantage), the significance of the act of voting relative to other political acts in representative democracies, are not explicitly laid out in the article, but it is clear that these factors are crucial parts of the argument, and equally clear that they have to be viewed as parts of an overall, integrated model of political behaviour. This reliance on an underlying model can be read into the references cited, but is also visible in the argument developed. For example, the discussion of the view of non-voting as a free-rider problem is implicitly (but importantly) embedded in a model of collective action that is game-theoretic in nature. Similarly, the discussion of the possibility that the argument for compulsory voting might depend in part on other features of the voting system (e.g. whether a first-past-the-post or a proportional representation system is in place) provides an example of thinking in terms of variations on a theme.

²⁸ Lever, A. (2010a) 'Compulsory voting: a critical perspective', *British Journal of Political Science*, **40(4)**, 897-915. See also Hill, L. (2010) 'On the Justifiability of Compulsory Voting: Reply to Lever', *British Journal of Political Science*, **40(4)**, 917-23, Lever, A. (2010b) 'Democracy and Voting: A Response to Lisa Hill', *British Journal of Political Science*, **40(4)**, 925-29.

Any comprehensive answer to the question ‘should voting be compulsory?’ would necessarily involve the development of a range of detailed positive political models alongside an understanding of a range of normative considerations. Such a task identifies a major research programme. The article under consideration contributes to that programme, but locating and evaluating that contribution require much more than an internal reading of the article itself. The understanding of positive political theory developed above provides both a way to add value to the reading of such an article, and a way to think about the wider research programme

The more empirical article also directly addresses an explicitly stated research question, ‘does democracy reduce economic inequality?’²⁹ While much of the focus is empirical in the sense that Timmons is concerned with issues such as the country samples utilised in various studies, the time period studied and the empirical methodology employed. There is also a significant focus on identifying arguments that might lead us to expect that democracy may be causally related to economic inequality, and these arise from positive political models. For example, the median voter model (sketched in outline form in section 3 above) together with an empirical observation to the effect that the distribution of income or wealth is skewed (so that the median voter’s income/wealth lies below the mean income/wealth level) can generate an argument that a programme of redistribution from rich to poor can be expected to find majority support. Similarly, one might argue that models that stress that democratic support for expenditure on public goods such as education or health might be expected to benefit the relatively poor more than the relatively rich.

But, as Timmons points out, the links between these positive models and the available empirical data are relatively weak. The median voter model suggests that post tax and benefit income may be more equally distributed than pre tax and benefit income in democracies, and that democracies may be expected to engage in redistribution to the extent that the original distribution is skewed. But neither of these claims translates into the much more general claim that democracies will display more (or less) economic inequality than non-democracies. Considerations of this sort help us to see that the apparently simple question ‘does democracy reduce economic inequality?’ hides a range of further questions which in turn require more detailed modelling.

This article also reveals a further relationship between positive political models and statistical empirical work. As stressed above, a key part of the process of developing positive political models and theories involves the ideas of abstraction, simplification and idealization. And one

²⁹ Timmons, J. F. (2010) 'Does Democracy Reduce Economic Inequality?', *British Journal of Political Science*, **40(4)**, 741-57.

key point here was the importance of being explicit about the abstractions, simplifications and idealizations involved in any model. Now, when we turn to statistical empirical work we need to specify not only the key variables of interest (some measure of economic inequality and some measure of democracy in this case) but also the control variables that might also be expected to influence economic inequality independently of the postulated effects of the variable we are really interested in (democracy). The link from the process of abstraction, simplification and idealization to the specification of control variables should be clear. In a theoretical model we can usefully abstract from an issue, but in a statistical model we need to control for the potential impact of that issue. So, for example, the explicit abstraction from issues like the overall level of economic development, or the demographic mix of the population, in the context of theoretical models such as the median voter model implies that we will need to control for these variables when we turn to statistical analysis.

By considering a range of different positive models, Timmons exemplifies the idea of searching across models and considering variations on a theme. But the mismatch between the rather narrowly focussed models considered and the broadly specified empirical investigation might suggest that the theoretical models are rather 'zoomed in' on the study of micro issues that arise within a democracy, while empirical work has been rather 'zoomed out' on the macro questions that arise in comparing democracies with non-democracies. This in itself points to useful directions for further work on both the theoretical and empirical fronts.

6 Conclusion

No 'how to...' guide to the practice of positive political theorising can offer a failsafe guarantee that the theories models generated will be useful, valuable and interesting. But the steps outlined in the previous section attempt to capture and spell out the benefits of thinking carefully and explicitly about the positive theory/model element of any political analysis.

Early in this essay I suggested that positive political theory had some of the characteristics of prose, in that we use it all the time without necessarily being conscious of that fact. This is a metaphor that I would extend a little further: just as the explicit study of grammar, syntax and punctuation can improve our prose, whether as readers or writers; so the explicit study of the more detailed structure of political theories and models and the motivating and causal forces that they attempt to analyse can improve our political debate, as both readers and writers, and our political

understanding. Just as there are no perfect prose sentences, there are no perfect positive political theories/models. But there are clear ways in which we can clarify meaning and develop greater understanding.

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