M. Kanji and K. Archer, “The Theories of Voting and Their Applicability in Canada,” in J. Everitt and B. O’Neill, eds, *Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour* (Toronto, 2002)

**Overview**

Most voting research centres on 2 primary concerns: (1) why do citizens vote the way they do? And (2) what are the key factors explaining electoral choice. The chapter reviews theories of voting behaviour.

**Background**

Three main theories of voting:

The sociological model

* “The Columbia School” proposed that voters are driven largely by their *social group affiliations* – that is, a person thinks, politically, as he/she is socially. Electoral decisions, according to this theory, are simply responses to various sociological pressures and cross-pressures resulting from differences in factors such as social class, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and/or urban vs. rural residency, etc.
* Model poses no limit on the number of socio-demographic attachments that may impact a voter’s electoral choice, however, a distinction is made between those factors that are more important (primary factors: socio-economic status, religious and ethnic group affiliation, and regional/rural-urban differences), and those that are less important (secondary factors: sex, age)
* Model is not without its drawbacks – it explains only a small fraction of the total variations in vote and accounts for very little, if any, change over time

Testing the model in Canada

* Attempts to test model in Canada have produced mixed results. Model has been criticized widely for both its lack of generalizability and its remarkably weak explanatory significance
* Alford argues the problem is not so much the model itself, but the fact that both the Cdn electorate and Cdn party system are immensely fragmented, and there are few “collective social group experiences” and few political parties consistently appeal to those who share collective experiences
* Some results include:
  + Ethnoreligious cleavage – religious differences continue to be important even in today’s more secular climate is in some ways puzzling
    - The most resilient cleavages, Mendelsohn and Nadeau argue, are between regular church-goers with low media exposure, and heavily exposed non-practicers
  + Regional cleavage
  + Social class cleavage

The socio-psychological model

* Developed out of the Michigan School – beginning with the premise that voting is inherently complex, it contends that no single-factor theory is likely to suffice
* The most powerful predictors – in this theory – are the most *proximate* and *psychological* in nature
* The core determinant within this model is *party identification*, or the affective tie that is believed to bind voters to their most preferred political parties. Voters are expected to use their partisan ties to filter their political attitudes and opinions towards key issues and party candidates
* While party ID has often been found to be a strong determinant of electoral choice, a key drawback of the socio-psychological model is that it focuses primarily on explanations likely to be closely intertwined with the vote itself, decreasing its ability to provide any real additional insight

Testing the model in Canada

* Meisel declared party ID (and thus the larger model) to be largely inapplicable in the Cdn case – based on prima facie evidence for the 1965 and 1968 Cdn elections, party ID seemed as volatile as vote itself
* Jenson separates voter ID from the act of the individual vote: “to know a voter’s party ID is to know *something* about how the vote will be case, but it is not to *know* how that individual will vote”
* Nonetheless, the proposed stability of partisan attachment is still very much in doubt

The rational-choice model

* Evidence suggests voters are more interested in politics and more motivated to become involved politically – significant proportions of the mass public now have “the level of political skills and resources necessary to become self-sufficient in politics” and they appear more critical of political elites
* This is not to suggest all voters are highly sophisticated but rather that voters may base their decisions on their rational evaluations of where competing parties stand on key issues
* Model assumes that “all citizens act rationally in politics” – citizens vote for a party because it provides the best politics, best candidates, and/or the best benefits overall
* Most obvious weakness of the theory is that it rests entirely on the assumption that voters behave rationally in politics. But if they do, voters may conclude it is entirely irrational to vote.

Testing the model in Canada

* Using a rolling cross section, Johnston et al., demonstrate that while parties commonly work to activate interest in their own camp and thus reinforce long-standing patters, they also work to split other camps and they choose which interests within their own camp to activate – their conclusion being that voters are far from immune to change, and are indeed responsive to the information they receive during an election campaign