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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND INCOME LEVEL: AN EXCHANGE

In a recent issue of this journal, Bruno S. Frey [2] offers an interesting explanation for the observed positive correlation between income level and general political participation. The purpose of this paper is to provide additional explanations for the phenomena discussed by Frey.

Let us first consider voting behavior. Frey's explanation seems to imply one (or more) of several things: (1) that high income individuals are more efficient in the consummation of voting, where the act includes getting to the polling place, deciding upon whom to vote for, etc.; (2) that voting involves activities somewhat akin to those undertaken by high income individuals in the course of their daily business; or (3) that high income occupations involve relatively higher mental effort and lower physical effort than low income occupations.

Several considerations would tend to vitiate these points. First of all, we can think of no reasons why high income people should be more efficient in the physical and mental acts necessary to successful voting. Except for very low income groups, who may have little access to private automobiles, this factor would tend to be of little importance. With respect to the second and third points, it is indeed true that casting a vote is primarily a mental process, and that the generally positive correlation between working conditions and income levels (where working conditions are a rough proxy for the degree of physical or mental efforts involved) would be a reason for this aspect of the benefit calculation to have weight, nonetheless we believe that an alternative explanation would seem preferable.¹

Labor economists are generally convinced of the existence of a positive correlation between income and hours of leisure (i.e., hours not worked). This is, of course, the backward-bending portion of the labor supply curve and is commonly explained as the positive income effect outweighing the negative substitution effect (see, however, Buchanan [1] for a reformulation of the basis for the hours-income relationship). This fact in turn implies directly that higher income individuals choose to have, on average, *more time available for non-work activities*, such as voting (and general political participation, though here we are emphasizing the voting behavior).² Indeed, consideration of the factors governing work-leisure decisions partly invalidates the accepted opportunity cost aspect of voting behavior. Indirectly, labor market studies also imply that higher income individuals have

¹We should note that we are dealing with basically empirical questions which, though they involve some tremendous problems of measurements, must rely upon quantitative evidence to be accepted or refuted.

²Though, as Frey notes, high income people still use this (free) time more efficiently.

greater *flexibility of hours*, and this in conjunction with aspects of the work-leisure decision calculus provides, we believe, a better explanation for voting behavior of high income individuals. With respect to general political participation, Frey's analysis is quite analogous to the public good rationale for revolution discussed (and criticized) in the same issue by Tullock [3]. That is, higher income individuals participate more in political activities since the marginal cost involved in, say, writing a letter to a Congressman is very small (since he has a secretary already taking and typing letters). This act of participation is of the nature of a public good, since the scale of the participation is such that there is no *direct* private return to the individual. We consider, on the other hand, strictly a private motive in the allocation of time to political activity. Put most simply, a fifty dollar contribution by one individual will have different effects than a one dollar contribution by each of fifty persons. If individuals' utility functions express any "selfishness" characteristics, and the *marginal* private benefits increase as scale of activity increases, then in fact higher income individuals would be expected to participate more in political activity.³ Again, this is independent of the efficiencies which would accrue to higher income (e.g., business) vs. lower income (e.g., manual labor) groups as a result of their normal workday activities.

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- [2] Frey, Bruno S. "Why Do High Income People Participate More in Politics?" *Public Choice*, XI (Fall 1971).
- [3] Tullock, Gordon. "The Paradox of Revolution". *Public Choice*, XI (Fall 1971).

³Note that an opportunity cost argument *could* be made here regarding the differential effects of legislation, regulation, etc. upon various groups. Specifically, higher income groups may be more than proportionally interested in attempting to affect legislation which may, in turn, affect their income positions.

This note is intended as a rebuttal to Frey's [3] recent article purporting to explain the positive correlation between income and political participation. To briefly outline his major points of argument:

- (1) It is well established that income is positively correlated with political participation.
- (2) This is anomalous since "a straightforward application of economic reasoning apparently leads to the opposite conclusion: Higher income people have higher opportunity costs of their time and should therefore participate *less* in politics."
- (3) The apparent contradiction between (1) and (2) is resolved by considering another factor: the "productivity in the use of time to perform political activities."

Since Frey is concerned solely with the time spent away from *work* and the efficiency of its expenditure (although it does not appear necessary to limit the applicability of his principles only to this domain), I shall consider only the advisability of making the assumptions that he does about work differences between income groups as they pertain to political participation.

With respect to point (1), I accept as a fact the positive correlation between income and political participation. With respect to point (2), I question that higher income people have relatively higher opportunity costs. Frey would apparently compute the opportunity cost for an act of political participation by $c=wt$, where c is opportunity cost, w is wage per hour and t is the time away from work necessary to commit the act. This is much too gross for computing the real opportunity costs involved for the following reasons:

- (a) Many acts of political participation do not require time loss from paying jobs. Voting itself (the example Frey most frequently mentions) often does not involve taking time off the job. Polling places are typically open a minimum of twelve hours, giving almost anyone who really wants to vote (and who is not sick, in prison, disenfranchised, or otherwise indisposed) the opportunity. Likewise, many elections are held on Saturdays. In addition measures of political participation normally are weighted such that non-voting political actions are also included. Such acts as talking about politics, contributing to campaigns, attending political meetings, running for office, writing letters to editors and public officials (an example Frey mentions), are routinely included in indexes of political participation. All these acts are correlated with income, but it is not clear that opportunity costs for

them are higher for the rich. Many of them are acts which would typically be performed outside of working hours.

- (b) Higher income people are more likely to participate in politics as an *extension* of their job. Being prohibited from advertising, lawyers frequently get politically active in order to win name recognition and make contacts, thereby expanding their clientele. Many corporations and universities require or strongly urge "community service" for their executives and faculty, and certain types of political activity would normally be accepted as evidence of this. Businessmen also sometimes need to get involved politically in order to gain favored treatment in contracts, administrative rulings, laws, ordinances, and court rulings. Given the pervasiveness of such activities, it is inaccurate to make the statement that higher income people have higher opportunity costs. In the cases just mentioned, time spent in political activity is *not* time off the job but, instead, is a necessary part of the job. If we actually used the above formula, the opportunity costs of much political participation for such people would be 0.
- (c) Even if time loss from a paying job is required, high income people (relative to low income people) are generally less likely to be paid on an hourly basis, are more likely to be paid on the basis of the quality of their work rather than on the amount of time spent at it, are less likely to punch time clocks, and are more likely to be allowed "to work at home" part of the time, take long lunches, and otherwise be away from their normal job location without explanation. Thus, the facts that individual A makes \$1600 per month (which can be averaged to \$10 an hour) and individual B makes \$2 an hour, and that both take an hour away from work to vote does not prove that A loses \$10 and B loses \$2. They may both lose nothing, or A may lose nothing and B may lose \$2.
- (d) Even ignoring arguments (a), (b), and (c), if A loses \$10 and B loses \$2 this does not prove that A loses more in *utils* than B does. This would depend on the marginal utility curves of money for each of them. By itself this is the weakest objection to Frey's discussion, but it ought to be at least considered. Particularly when it is combined with argument (b), however, the possible application of the principle of diminishing marginal utility of money makes Frey's statement that the opportunity costs of political participation are higher for the rich than for the poor dubious.

Acceptance of any or all of the above four arguments make Frey's argument concerning opportunity costs more or less implausible. In fact, Frey gives no empirical evidence whatever for his assertion that the opportunity costs for the rich are higher than they are for the poor—except that they make more money per hour. This is a grossly misleading piece of evidence.

Frey's assertion that high income people are more efficient in the performance of political activities, since they can often apply work-related skills to these activities, is not as dubious as that concerned with the opportunity costs of participation, but the example of voting is the worst one he could have selected to illustrate it. Assuming that high income people think relatively more about work-related problems while proceeding to and from the voting place is not sound economic reasoning but speculative psychologizing of the flimsiest sort. And there exist rival plausible explanations for voting turnout differences between income groups which *have* been empirically demonstrated. I shall mention just three of many explanatory factors (which tend to have additive effects).

The history of modern electoral systems has been that the poor are relatively more likely to be legally or illegally disenfranchised. While, generally, in recent years this effect has gradually been reduced, it is shortsighted to ignore it when examining political participation rates in the 1950s and 1960s in the U. S. (the sources for Frey's generalization about the correlation between income and political participation). Perhaps the most striking example of this was the continued coerced non-participation of Southern blacks (who, of course, also tended to be poor) in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, people in prison, convicted felons out of prison, people on active military duty, illiterates, and students away from home tended to have rather low incomes and also found it impossible or difficult to vote. Cumulatively, the effects of these factors appear to be impressive [4]. In these cases, non-voting has nothing to do with transferring work skills to political contexts. Second, it has been repeatedly demonstrated in U. S. election studies that high income people are characterized by high feelings that citizens have a moral obligation to vote, and this is a remarkably effective factor from which to predict participation in voting [1, Chapter 4]. Third, data from the same election studies (supplemented by innumerable replications) demonstrate that compared to high income people, the poor tend to feel that voting is a rather useless activity—that its political consequences are not significant. This "sense of efficacy" is also strongly correlated with voting participation. In light of this kind of evidence (as well as other evidence which brevity prohibits mentioning), it seems unwise to replace known generalizations about voting behavior with unconfirmed speculation.

With respect to non-voting political participation, political scientists have argued for some time that skills acquired and used in work contexts may be usefully applied in political ones and that this helps account for rich-poor

differences in some types of political participation. Typically such skill differences are viewed as one example of differences in resources (which are correlated with income) for political participation, but there are other important resource differences usually considered as well [2, Chapter 3 and 4]. Thus, Frey's productivity principle is essentially nothing new, but it has the disadvantages of asserting relevance to situations where it probably is not particularly important (voting) and of failing to recognize differences in resources/efficiencies not connected to work experiences.

To summarize, Frey's explanation for why high income people participate more in politics than low income people is deficient because: (1) there is no evidence given that the opportunity costs of voting (calculated in terms of money presumptively lost by being away from work) are greater for high income people, and in fact there are some plausible reasons for believing that they are not; (2) his argument that high income people vote more efficiently is dubious in that empirically verified rival plausible explanations for the income-participation correlation exist which do not involve making unwarranted psychological inferences. If hypotheses referring to opportunity costs and productivity purporting to explain political participation are to actually play a role in acceptable political explanations they will require much revision from the form given by Frey. While it may be the case that opportunity costs and productivity of time use are significant variables for explaining political participation, Frey gives no acceptable evidence that they explain why income is correlated with political participation.

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4. Roper, Elmo, "How to Lose Your Vote," *Saturday Review* (March 18, 1961), 14-15.

Reply

It is an honor to receive two comments [1, 4] on such a short paper as mine [2]. Fraser and Russell mention several interesting additional factors connected with political participation. My reply is concerned, however, only with the criticism against my approach. Section I deals with two points raised by both authors, Section II and III with the explanations offered by Fraser and Russell, respectively.

I. *Voting, political participation and opportunity costs.*

1. Both critics think that my approach fits badly for the case of voting, as little time is required. However, the act of voting does not only consist in going to the polling place but also in choosing how to cast one's vote. Moreover, voting is not only on elections, but also on referenda. In both cases the choice requires time. The better information on political matters (which is positively correlated with income), the more time is probably needed to come to a decision because the perceived degree of complexity increases. This would be an additional factor raising the relative participation costs for high income groups.

2. Both critics doubt that high income people have relatively higher opportunity costs for the time necessary for political participation. Fraser even believes the contrary to be true. Opportunity costs in the form of wage income does not only apply to work time but has direct repercussions on all other forms of time use. As Staffan Linder has shown in his excellent and amusing book [3] high income people must *also* use free (or non work) time more efficiently than low income people. Free time is mostly used for consumption, i.e. consumption goods and time are complementary. Individual equilibrium is achieved only if every activity undertaken in non-work time yields so much (marginal) utility as to be able to compete with the high (marginal) productivity (and income) of work time. This explains the paradox of a "Hurried Leisure Class," which uses its time for intensive consumption, but have extremely little idleness in which they have time to, e.g., perform political activities (unconnected with their job). "Opportunity Costs" are thus relevant whether political participation is performed during or outside working hours, or whether they are paid on an hourly basis or not.

II. *Fraser's explanations*

Fraser analyses voting participation in the traditional way used in Political Science. This gives an opportunity to contrast that approach to the one proposed by the "economics of politics."

He mentions three "explanatory factors" which have been empirically demonstrated to influence turnout differences:

(1) "... the poor are more likely to be legally or illegally disenfranchised." This is certainly correct for the U. S. (but today less so for European countries) but need *itself* explanation.

(2) "... high income people are characterized by high feelings that citizens have a moral obligation to vote." This is, of course, no explanation as such, because it (almost) only says that people vote because they vote. The "explanation" consists in falling back on *moral values*, a quite illusive concept. Compared to this "sociological" stress on *preferences* (and their changes), economists rather consider *constraints* (and changes thereof) which are in general much more easy to identify in reality. Values are taken as exogenous, and (rightly) considered to be beyond their area of competence. In the case of political participation, the major constraint suggested in my paper is the cost of time, "corrected" by the productivity of time use in political activities.

(3) "... compared to high income people, the poor tend to feel that voting is a rather useless activity..." Again, this offers no explanation but is purely "behavioristic." Such a remark is only worth making if it is at the same time shown *why* the poor consider voting to be useless (which may or may not be true).

III. Russell's suggestions

It is useful at this point to give a simplified mathematical formulation of my approach.

Both income (Y) and political success (P) yield utility (U):

$$U = U(Y, P); U_Y \geq 0, U_P \geq 0. \quad (1)$$

People are assumed to allocate total time available (T) between working time (T_w) and time used in political activities (T_p) such that (1) is maximized. The restrictions are:

$$T_w + T_p = 1, \quad (2)$$

$$Y = w \cdot T_w, \quad (3)$$

$$P = P(T_p); P' > 0, \quad (4)$$

Where w = wage rate.

Eq. (4) shows how the success in political affairs is related to the input of work in politics.

Inserting (2), (3), (4) into (1) and maximizing with respect to T_p yields

$$\frac{\frac{\partial U/\partial Y}{\partial U/\partial P}}{\frac{dP/dT_p}{w}}$$

The left hand side gives the relative marginal utility of income compared to political success; the right hand side the relative marginal productivities of political activities (w), or (equivalently) the relative opportunity costs of time spent in the market compared to political participation.

Figure 1 shows the time spent in politics and in the market place assuming that the relative marginal utilities and the wage rate are independent of the allocation of time, and a diminishing marginal productivity in politics ($P'' < 0$).

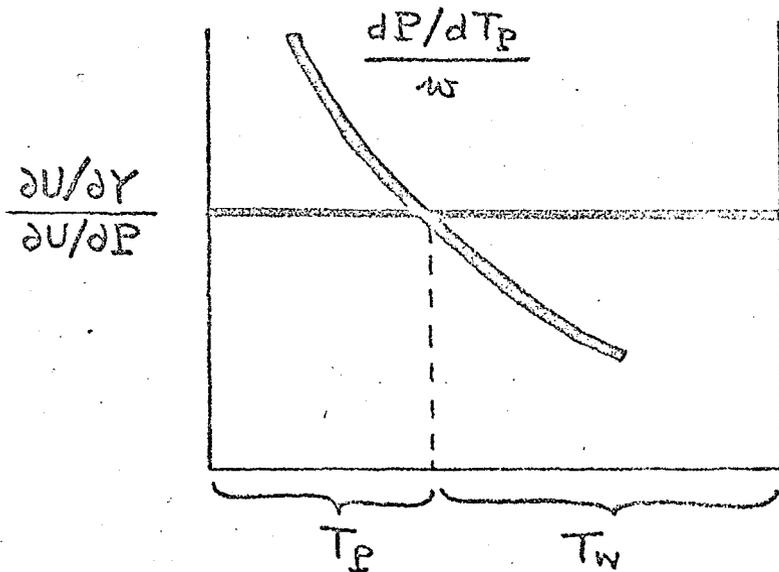


Fig. 1.

As stated in my original paper, when the wage rate is high (low) and marginal productivity in politics is low (high), there is little (much) political participation.

Russell makes two points:

- (1) If political participation is a public good, little (or no) *private* marginal benefit is derived. The horizontal curve in Figure 1 shifts upwards, i.e. there is correspondingly little time spent in politics.

I have (implicitly) assumed that there is indeed *some* amount of personal benefit derived from political activities (such as prestige, etc.).

- (2) He suggests that there may be "increasing marginal private benefits as the scale of (political) activity increases." This statement is unclear. It may mean that $U_{pp} > 0$, such that the curve of relative marginal *utilities* has a negative slope. As can be derived from Figure 1, this only serves to *accentuate* the effects of changing opportunity costs on the allocation of time as presented in my paper.

Russell's statement may also mean that marginal *productivity* in politics increases, i.e. $P'' > 0$. The opportunity cost curve thus increases with T_p and e.g. an increase in the wage rate now *increases* time spent for political participation, as Russell correctly notes. In my view, however, assuming increasing marginal utility and/or productivity is dubious, and should therefore be supported by very convincing empirical evidence (which is not presented).

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RAWLS ON JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS*

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When I first encountered John Rawls' conception of "justice as fairness," I was wholly sympathetic. I interpreted his approach to be closely analogous, even if not identical, to that aimed at explaining the voluntary emergence of "fair games," with widely divergent applications. Stimulated by Frank Knight and, more directly, by Rutledge Vining (both economists who worked independently of and prior to Rawls), I sensed the possible extensions in the explanatory-descriptive power of models for "rules of games," derived in accordance with some criteria of "fairness." As readers of *The Calculus of Consent* recognize, Gordon Tullock and I employed such models in our derivation of the "logical foundations of constitutional democracy" (our subtitle), of a political structure not grossly divergent from that envisioned by the Founding Fathers and embodied in the United States Constitution, at least in its initial conception. For these, and other reasons, I looked forward to publication of Rawls' long-promised treatise.

Now that the book has appeared, I find myself less sympathetic with Rawls than I might have anticipated from my early reading of his basic papers. There are two distinct reasons for this temporal difference in assessment, and this review incorporates a two-part argument. Rawls has extended his allegedly contractarian conception and thereby increased its vulnerability. On closer examination, Rawls does not seem to say what I thought he was saying. His approach now appears quite different from that which I shared in 1960.

The second reason for a change in my own reaction to Rawls' work lies in a shift in my own thinking since 1960. I am less of a contractarian, although just where my own position would now be classified remains an open question.

I.

Consider several persons voluntarily discussing the rules for an ordinary card game which they are to play. No one can predict the particular run of cards on any series of plays or rounds. These persons attempt to agree on a classification scheme that allows them to separate "fair" and "good" games (defined by sets of rules) from "unfair" and "bad" games. Agreement requires predictions about the working properties of alternative sets of rules, but since these predictions are at least

* A review article on John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).