

RESEÑAS/NOTAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Modeling Electoral Psychology. Understanding Voting Behavior in the 21st Century

Modelizando la Psicología Electoral. Comprendiendo el comportamiento del votante en el siglo XXI

- Bruter, Michael and Sarah Harrison (2020) *Inside the Mind of a Voter. A New Approach to Electoral Psychology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press ■

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Recibido: 25 de mayo de 2021

Aceptado: 6 de septiembre de 2021

Among the existing literature on the understanding of electoral behaviour, a new work has appeared: *Inside the Mind of a Voter. A New Approach to Electoral Psychology*, authored by Michael Bruter and Sarah Harrison, two researchers from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and founders of the Electoral Psychology Observatory (EPO). The monograph is structured in 10 chapters and studies all key aspects related to the research of electoral behaviour from the perspective of electoral psychology.

Since the 1940s, social scientists have created different models with the goal of understanding voter behaviour. The Columbia school, which today its named as Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, is considered one of the first political science institutions globally. Colum-

bia professors of political science proposed a model based on the use of surveys for electoral research with a sociological understanding of vote (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954). Moreover, the Michigan school, another academic institution and nowadays the Centre of Political Science of the University of Michigan, proposed an alternative model based on survey data with focus on partisan attitudes, which led into the publication of a historical book on political science and political psychology, *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960). Both models placed partisan identification at the heart of citizens' political behaviour. Today, citizens rarely refer to parties in their identification discourse (Bruter, 2005). In recent years, in the field of political psychology, elections

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have become a minor focus compared to fields such as campaigning and persuasion (Norris, Wynter and Cameron, 2018), cues and communication (Schuck *et al.*, 2013). This book builds on these insights in the fields of socialization, emotion, cognition and communication, among others. It provides a fresh update on the psychology of voting given the new social and individual context, which is different from the classical models presented by the Columbia and Michigan schools.

The text aims to introduce the reader into the *mind of the voter*, to understand their psychology, emotions, experiences and personality, as well as the continuing growth of their identity as political subjects (Bruter and Harrison, 2020: 9). In other words, this book is intrinsically related to the very act of voting, the only moment of convergence between the civil community, the citizen and the political system. Thus, the relevance of this book arises from bringing the psychological analysis of voting to the forefront of the research, whereas recent Political Science has studied elections mainly from the perspective of political sociology or to political economy.

Already in the first chapter, the authors note that the existing terms and concepts for the psychological analysis of voting suffer from important gaps, which leads them to propose and develop some basic concepts needed to introduce the subject. First, they present the *Homo Suffragator*, which means *person who can vote* and reflects the power and the changes in the human condition and social interactions that have led to millions of citizens having a new individual and social capacity: being able to vote. This constitutes the next step in our evo-

lution as human beings, which determines a difference between the present and previous stages and therefore begs the question of how democracy has changed the human condition. *Homo Suffragator* also expresses the idea that voting alters the perception of our own function, role and responsibility in the civic context and, consequently, that democracy shapes the civic context in which we as citizens show our preferences independently.

The conceptual basis of the research is based on four concepts. The first, *empathic displacement*, refers to the individual, who considers how the rest of the electorate will behave with important implications in terms of strategic voting. The second concept is *projected efficacy*, the individual's perceived ability to influence the political direction of their community, sometimes in contrast to the practical reality of everyday life. The third is *electoral hostility*, designating negative emotions towards other citizens due to their current/predictable vote. The fourth and last concept is the *electoral atmosphere*, the climate that each citizen perceives during the electoral period and which remains in their memory for future electoral processes.

The second chapter deals in depth with the methodological aspects that underpin the study. The authors determine a triple interrelationship to build the dependent variable: electoral behaviour, electoral experience and electoral resolution. The sample of this study presents six countries to be compared in the period from 2010 to 2017 (the US, the UK, Germany, South Africa, Georgia, and France). The approach was based on a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology. Panel studies

and surveys were the two quantitative pillars, combining different public sources from the countries studied. The qualitative data was provided by in-depth semi-structured interviews, on-the-spot interviews, diaries of international electoral observants and direct Election Day observations at the polling stations conducted by the authors in collaboration with the governments and provided an external vision of how the citizen behaved when he was voting, these four pillars provided information regarding the experiences, habits and emotions associated with the act of vote and the electoral process.

In the fourth chapter, the authors study the personality and morals of voters and their behaviour. The book studies what happens 24 hours before the elections and how the voter considers during this period all the issues which he or she considers important, and reflects on how their own decisions affect them. The voters who live these 24 hours most intensely are those who are still undecided, which generates a third factor: the citizen's fear of *losing* or *winning* the election, or the need for their electoral experience to allow them to feel excited and positive (Bruter and Harrison, 2020: 115).

Certainly, not all fields of our personality affect or can condition our vote, but those that can and on which the model is constructed include anxiety (which entails negativity, particularly relegating the importance of choices), alienation (citizens' perception of being included—or not—in society, so they are predisposed to follow patterns), aspiring to freedom (defence of thinking differently from other groups and different visions of public order),

extroversion (implies having the ability to relate emotionally and intellectually to other people) and, lastly, risk aversion (people can present a high level of attraction to risk, or the impact that their behaviour can have). This led to the finding that in Germany and the United Kingdom the significance of morality and personality partly explains the electoral result, being conditions of the vote to the left or ideological right, while in France or South Africa, they do not have much influence (Bruter and Harrison, 2020: 140).

In chapters five to seven, the authors turn to the hypothesis of voter memory in previous elections and how it influences voting (or abstention). The concept of *electoral atmosphere* now comes into play, because it is not only based on the election's results on a personal and internal level, but also on the atmosphere experienced by the citizen, which is specially relevant in two moments: first, we are highly conditioned in terms of *electoral memory* in our first participation in an election (even if it was abstention); second, the lingering memory of the last elections still has a certain influence. The construction of this memory begins in our youth before the ballots, in the posters of the electoral campaigns, the way we live in school and family conversations, among others. Thus, 90 % of first-time voters reflect that their motivation is that "it is something important for the country" (Bruter and Harrison, 2020: 161). The countries that show the greatest relationship between *electoral memory* and maintaining the last behaviour of previous elections, *i.e.* voting or abstaining, are the United States and the United Kingdom, which show a 45 % influence on the continuity of electoral

behaviour due to *electoral memory*, whereas Germany, France and South Africa barely reach 15 % (Bruter and Harrison, 2020: 183).

The eighth chapter analyses how the act of voting itself affects the citizen, especially based on exit polls: it shows the emotions that voters have on election day, concluding that more than half of the respondents across the research countries feel neutral or excited after having voted. In the cases of France and Germany, the feeling of neutrality after having voted was greater than the emotion of having done so; for the remaining countries, the degree of emotion was equal or greater. The impression of the vote being a boring process barely reaches 12 %, and is mainly present among German voters by mail, not at the polls. Thus, the people who vote in democratic countries feel comfortable with the act of voting, not just as a way to be represented in the political party system, but to reflect the support to the system itself.

What elections bring to the voters is covered in the ninth chapter and has to do with an electoral resolution, specifically the voter's feelings after having voted and seen the election results: hope or hostility. The authors argue that those who are satisfied with the result have a positive evaluation of the elections, which is hardly surprising. Some feel they have *lost out*, because what the elections have brought them *could have been worse*. The data used for the surveys on this subject in most of the countries studied show that the feeling is neutral, or barely hopeless (Bruter and Harrison, 2020: 278). Support for the democratic system as a tool to legitimise the government's power is therefore strongly supported in all cases.

Finally, the book ends with a reflection by the authors on the complex being that is the *Homo Suffragator* and how it can further develop in the Age of Reason. It is difficult to reflect on the reason of human beings during the boom of populism, *fake news* and post-truth, but beyond the intrinsic difficulties this reflection entails from the academic and political science world, it is certainly interesting to see how it highlights the fact that, with respect to electoral reasoning and morality, the relationship is more statistically binding for abstainers: if you have not voted, your electoral memory will make it more likely that you will refrain from doing so again in a sort of *path dependency*, which is not so common among those who vote because their motivations are different.

This, unfortunately, is not an easy book to read. It is more like a thesis on electoral psychology, and it covers many aspects and topics for which some academic mastery of social sciences is required to keep pace with the reading; additionally, a minimum knowledge of statistics is necessary for fully understanding some of the data tables. In other words, it is not intended for the general public. It is also important to note its medium scope: it studies six countries, and although they present good examples of democracies with international relevance, this does not mean that it can be extended to an absolute generalisation; far from it. All that being said, this text can serve as a guide to understanding the electoral behaviour of today's democracies: a new way to study elections from the perspective of the targeted citizen, instead of society as a whole or the field of electoral administration.

About the author

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