



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Boekbespreking van: Five Theories of Voting Action: Strategy and Structure of Psychological Explanation

Rossema, M.

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should be incorporated and integrated in other fields in political science and public administration, for example in theories about political behaviour, power and parties.

Leo Huberts

Max Visser, *Five Theories of Voting Action: Strategy and Structure of Psychological Explanation*. Twente University Press, Enschede 1998, ISBN 9036511429, Dfl. 43.50

Max Visser's dissertation mainly consists of five overviews of a psychological approach to voting that has been or can be a source of inspiration for theories of voting. Additionally, the theoretical implications of these perspectives for (future) voting research are discussed. This is a theoretical rather than an empirical study: no data analyses are presented, a theoretical overview is given.

In the introductory chapter Visser distinguishes three aspects which differ in the various approaches to electoral research: (1) the underlying theories of human behaviour (based on sociology, psychology or economics), (2) the basic unit of analysis (individual voter versus collective electorate), and (3) the time perspective (single moment versus time period). Visser's study focuses on psychology-based theories, oriented to the individual voter, using both time perspectives. More precisely, "the *research purpose* of the dissertation is to describe, analyze and uncover convergences between different existing psychological theories of voting behavior at the individual level, both with regard to their structure and to the various strategies of explanation these theories imply." (pp.8-9) Four research questions are formulated:

1. Which intervening variables do psychology-oriented schools employ in voting action research?
2. What are the (historical) antecedents of these intervening variables in psychological theory?
3. What strategies of explanation do psychology-oriented schools employ in voting research?
4. To what extent and in which ways may theoretical convergences between the intervening variables be discerned?

With respect to strategies of explanation a nomothetic, causal model and an idiographic, teleological or functional model are distinguished, which correspond with both time perspectives and concentrate respectively on *inter*-individual and *intra*-individual differences.

The second chapter, "The empirical analysis of voting action", starts with brief discussions about the Würzburg and Vienna schools. Visser discusses some of Paul Lazarsfeld's conceptual and methodological ideas before devoting three pages to the classic voting studies of the Columbia school. In the final paragraph only one sentence

is devoted to each of the first three research questions. The absence of any elaboration on the intervening variables (and their definitions) is particularly disappointing.

"The field theory of voting action", the next chapter, has a similar structure to the second. First, the Gestalt school is discussed briefly. Next, some of Kurt Lewin's conceptual ideas are discussed, before three pages are devoted to the approach of the Michigan school. Having briefly noted some problems of the party identification concept, it is concluded – contrary to claims made by scholars of the Michigan school – that the Columbia and Michigan schools are quite similar, both in theoretical and in methodological terms.

"The cognitive theory of voting action" starts with some elaboration on theories of balance and dissonance, and on the New Look movement. After a short sketch of the rise of the computer metaphor and the information processing approach within psychology, its applications to voting behaviour are discussed, focusing especially on the schema concept. Visser concludes that the cognitive approach "has not yet developed into an all-encompassing theory of voting action" (p.59) and that, moreover, it cannot provide satisfying answers when applied alone. Probably, similar remarks could and should have been made in the two preceding chapters.

"The psychodynamic theory of voting action" begins with a brief discussion of Sigmund Freud's views and their impact on thinking about personality. The most central concept in this chapter is that of authoritarian personality, which is associated with voting research predominantly through its correlation with fascist and extreme right political preferences. Visser concludes that the main contribution of this approach with respect to the intervening psychological variables is the addition of the need concept.

"The humanistic theory of voting action" first elaborates upon the Vienna school, Gestalt psychology, and Abraham Maslow's ideas about a hierarchy of needs. Next, Ronald Inglehart's conception of materialist and postmaterialist values is discussed. Its relevance for voting research lies in the fact that postmaterialist voters favour leftist, environmental parties. According to Visser, Inglehart added the concepts of need and value to the existing stock of intervening variables in voting research. As with the psychodynamic theory of voting research, the originally adopted functional approach that characterized the psychological antecedents faded in favour of a causal approach. This has also been adopted in the other three psychological approaches and is characteristic of the mass surveys that are typically employed for voting research.

The final chapter, "Converging theories of voting action", presents an overview of the intervening variables that correspond with each of the five 'schools'. The Columbia school is associated with perception, opinion, attitude, and identification, and the other four added the concepts of cognitive structure, evaluation, schema, cue, need and value. Next, Visser sketches his view on the voting action, which he later refers to as "a general model of voting action" (p.102). Voting is the result of a number of interacting factors, which should be studied as a whole rather than in isolation. These 'mutually interdependent coexisting facts' together constitute a field, in which

perceived elements such as party images, party performances, party leaders, issue positions, and elements of the person's social environment are part. These elements are 'charged with positive or negative energy', from which attracting or repelling forces result. Visser calls the corresponding action tendencies 'attitudes'. Needs come into play because they determine the 'charges' and thereby ultimately determine behaviour, and because they determine the cognitive structure: elements that are significant for satisfying needs must be part of the field. Different forces that determine the vote may be in conflict, resulting in a tension that has to be resolved by increasing consistency. In what ways this view differs from other approaches, such as that of the Michigan school, is not, unfortunately, made fully explicit.

Finally, Visser concludes that five decades of voting research 'failed to establish a generally adopted theoretical framework, around which knowledge could have accumulated.' (p.102) Visser's solution mainly lies in the idea of adopting an additional functional approach, along the lines of humanistic psychology. This implies adding the concept of needs to a dynamic field theory, and using panel studies rather than the traditional cross-sectional surveys. Additionally, he pleads for research to be done on relationships between authoritarianism, need hierarchy and voting. For this, the (in)famous F-scale can be used, as well as a to-be-developed M-scale (after Maslow), which would indicate an individual's position in a hierarchy of needs, and Inglehart's (post)materialist value scales.

How should we evaluate this study? Let me start by focusing on the title: *Five Theories of Voting Action*. These words imply more than is to be found in the book. There is only a limited amount of text covering the voting theories of the Columbia and Michigan schools – one could even question whether they are in fact theories of voting action. The other three chapters are about psychological perspectives and concepts that have implications for theories about voting, but they are not theories of voting.

Another way to judge the book is by focusing on the original research questions. The first question about which variables are employed is answered clearly, but very unsatisfactorily. Four to six concepts are listed for each school. However, these concepts largely have no foundation. How they relate to the preceding discussion remains unclear. The second research question, about the psychological, historical antecedents of these variables, is answered (indirectly) by the sketches given of the psychological schools that correspond with the five approaches discussed. The third research question about what strategies of explanation are employed is answered by discussing whether a causal or a functional approach is adopted by each school. The fourth research question about convergences between variables is dealt with only in the concluding chapter. In fact, this chapter is more a mixture of concluding remarks and directions for future research than an actual answer to a research question.

Arguably the best way to view the book is as five sketches of different psychological approaches that have implications for voting theories. However, it is generally not the implications – let alone the voting theories – that are discussed, but rather an overview

is given of what the approaches more or less stand for. The book, which is not very critical, is not so much about voting, as about psychology. Unfortunately, the relationship between psychology and voting theories has been elaborated upon too superficially to be of any real importance for electoral research.

Visser's approach in itself is praiseworthy: taking a broad perspective and returning to the basics is done too rarely in today's social sciences. The richness of psychological theories, perspectives and concepts that becomes clear in the book is striking. Old psychology can obviously be a great inspiration for much needed new views on voting theories. However, the translation still has to be made. Visser's recommendations present just one of many possible lines of conclusion and it remains to be seen whether he is on the right track. His 'model of voting action' is (as yet) nothing more than a number of remarks that result in a vague, too abstract, preliminary sketch. How these ideas should be applied empirically remains unclear. The plea for a more dynamic approach and hence a more important role for panel studies rather than cross-sectional surveys is worth taking into consideration. His most valuable contribution is the emphasis on incorporating concepts such as needs and values into voting research, in order to examine where, for example, opinions, attitudes or evaluations stem from. After all, these latter concepts cannot be regarded as facts, but require explanation. Otherwise, our understanding remains limited. If psychological perspectives, theories and concepts are translated into voting research more concretely, they may fulfil their potential and substantially increase our understanding of voting behaviour.

Martin Rosema