

# Rational Voters and the Recall Election

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The 2003 California recall election presented voters with a pair of choices. The first was whether or not to recall Gray Davis as Governor of the state. They were then faced with a list of 135 potential replacement candidates, one of whom would be chosen in the event Davis lost on the initial recall question. The two ballot questions were formally separate questions, but they were interrelated and conditional in nature. If I vote in favor of recalling Davis as Governor, whom should I support to replace him? Alternatively, voters who opposed recalling Davis as Governor had to decide who to vote for as replacement candidate to try to insure that, if Davis were recalled, an acceptable replacement candidate would be elected.

The task of choosing among 135 potential replacements for Davis posed some unique challenges of its own. As the campaign progressed, many of the once-prominent candidates, such as Bill Simon, Peter Ueberroth, and Arianna Huffington, dropped out of the race. Despite these departures, there remained a number of serious, well-known candidates—Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom McClintock, and Cruz Bustamante—as well as some lesser-known political figures and celebrities, e.g. Larry Flynt, Gary Coleman and Peter Camejo, as well as hundreds of unknowns.

While the interaction of the two recall election decisions raises several potentially interesting research questions, in this chapter we concentrate on some basic tenets of rational choice theory. Are voters able to order candidates in a rational way? If so, do voters then cast ballots consistent with their ordering? In seeking to answer these questions, we analyze data from a telephone survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in the weeks before the October 7, 2003 election. We find, subject to the limitations of the data we utilize, that all but a small number of voters appear able to order their candidates rationally, and that they appear to have cast their ballots in a manner that was consistent with their preferences.

We view this as an important research question for reasons beyond the proximate question of the administration of the gubernatorial recall election. In recent years there has been considerable controversy in the political science research community over the role of rational choice theory generally (e.g. Green and Shapiro 1994; Friedman 1996), or

over its application to specific domains of political behavior, such as voter turnout (Aldrich 1993; Jackman 1993). This controversy echoes earlier debates concerning the behavioral assumptions of economic approaches to the study of individual behavior (e.g. Kahneman and Tversky 1979).<sup>1</sup> Much of this debate has focused on whether or not individual decision makers make decisions in line with the basic assumptions of rational choice theory.

In elementary form, rational choice theory posits that individuals take actions in order to achieve a purpose, such as getting their most-preferred candidate elected to office. This means that we must define a preference relation for voters, which typically requires assuming that a voter's preferences over outcomes is transitive (Ordeshook 1986). If we consider three outcomes, then transitivity exists "if the first outcome is no worse than the second and the second is no worse than the third, then the first is no worse than the third" (Ordeshook 1986, page 12).

As applied to the context of voter choice in the gubernatorial recall election, this implies that voters should be able to determine whether they strictly prefer one candidate to another or are indifferent between the two candidates. Behaviorally, rational choice theory then posits that if a voter prefers one candidate in a set of transitively ordered candidates, that, barring additional strategic considerations, she is expected to cast a vote for that preferred candidate.<sup>2</sup>

We are not the first to try to study the extent to which individual voters act consistently with rational choice assumptions. Brady and Ansolabehere (1989), using pair-wise comparison data over large numbers of candidates, find that "people's preferences satisfy the requirements of rational choice and that their preference can be represented in a convenient form" (page 148). Radcliff (1993) uses different data and a different methodology, but reaches largely the same conclusion: "the evidence presented here suggests that despite some slippage the bulk of the sample is quite capable of maintaining well-ordered preferences with as many as five alternatives" (page 716).

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<sup>1</sup> An excellent summary of the early debates over rational choice theory is found in Ordeshook (1986, pages 485-486).

<sup>2</sup> Strategic voting occurs when a voter, believing that their most preferred candidate has no chance of winning, opts for a lesser preferred candidate. For an analysis of strategic voting in the 2003 California recall see Alvarez and Kiewiet (2005).

We seek to determine how California voters, when faced with the two-question recall and candidate replacement ballot with a list of 135 candidates—ordered the top candidates, and how their preference orderings were associated with the choices they made on the recall election ballot. In the next section of this paper we discuss our methodology, and we follow that with a presentation of our results. The final section of this paper provides our concluding remarks.

## **Methodology**

The telephone survey data we analyze is taken from the *Los Angeles Times Poll*, distributed by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.<sup>3</sup> The survey was conducted September 25-29, 2003, and was based upon a sample of adult California residents; 1,982 respondents were interviewed. Filter questions on citizenship and registration reduced the sample to 1,496 registered voters.

In order to develop an understanding of voter preference orderings across the primary candidates in the recall election we require questions that ask respondents to evaluate the candidates. In an ideal world, we would adopt Brady and Ansolabahere's (1989) method of paired comparison questions, but unfortunately, the *Los Angeles Times Poll* did not ask this type of question. This survey instead employed a battery that, for Davis, Bustamante, McClintock and Schwarzenegger, asked voters, "What is your impression of [each candidate]? As of today, is it very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, very unfavorable—or haven't you heard enough about him to say?" The responses of those who hadn't heard of the candidate, who said they were unsure about their impression, or otherwise did not answer the question, are treated as missing data.

Previous studies in the area (Radcliff 1993; Feld and Grofman 1988; Niemi and Wright 1987) have generally employed the standard "feeling thermometer" measures of candidate evaluations. Such measures ask respondents to rate how favorably they feel

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<sup>3</sup> We thank Susan Pinkus of the *Los Angeles Times Poll* for her assistance in providing us with these data.

about particular candidates on a 0 to 100 scale. Responses to the questions we are using here would thus appear to be equivalent to a very coarse feeling thermometer. It turns out, however, that feeling thermometer ratings tend to cluster at a small number of points, especially 50, 60, 70, and 85 (Weisberg and Miller 1979). Using a method which allows respondents to assign candidates to only four categories of evaluation may therefore result in little loss of information concerning candidate evaluations. Not surprisingly, the measures we employ here do result in a large number of ties, e.g., rating two or more candidates somewhat favorably, but so too do feeling thermometers. With these caveats in mind, we are hopeful that these measures will provide some us with some ability to assess the extent to which voters are able to order the candidates and then vote consistently with these preference orderings.

We used these evaluations of each of the four major candidates—Davis, Bustamante, McClintock, and Schwarzenegger—to produce each voter’s preference ranking of the four candidates. To give some sense for the preference rankings held by voters at the end of September (a week before the recall election) we list the top fifteen preference orderings in the registered voter sample in Table 1.<sup>4</sup> This table lists each preference order, and the relative frequency in the sample. When registered voters had a clear preference between a pair of candidates, we use the notation (for example, the voter prefers Davis to Bustamante) “D p B.” In situations where the data do not allow for clear ordering, where in other words the evaluations provided by the voters lead to ties between pairs of candidates, we use the notation (for example, where the voter was indifferent between Davis and Bustamante)“DB”.

What we see in Table 1 is a predominance of preference orderings in which McClintock or Schwarzenegger were preferred to Bustamante or Davis. The top five preference orderings in our dataset, held by 333 of the 1483 registered voters who provided an evaluation of at least one of the four candidates, were of this nature. The rest of the respondents reported dozens of different preference orderings, and in these Davis and Bustamante tended to fare better. Still, that Davis lost the recall and Bustamante lost the replacement election are not surprising outcomes in light of these data. It should be

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<sup>4</sup> In the tables that follow, the data reported are weighted by the weight variable provided in the *Los Angeles Times Poll*.

noted that, as expected, the coarseness of the evaluation measure we used, resulted in a very large number of ties involving two or more candidates.

Table 1 about here

### **Were Vote Choices Consistent with Evaluations?**

The next task we undertook was to examine what is probably the most modest expectation that one might derive from rational choice theory, and that is to determine whether voters' choices were consistent with their evaluations. This may seem like a very low bar, but previous studies have found that candidate evaluations, as registered by ratings on feeling thermometer measures, do not always line up that well with vote choice. Respondents often do not vote for the candidate they have assigned the highest thermometer score. Others vote for the candidate they have assigned the lowest score, and some vote for candidates that they did not even rate on the feeling thermometer. All told, in many cases the mismatch between candidate evaluations measured by feeling thermometers and reported vote choice exceeds 20% (Alvarez and Kiewiet 2005). This slippage may arise, of course, because the feeling thermometer methodology is flawed, and not because respondents are inconsistent. This also means that our tests of the consistency between evaluations and vote choice are as much a test of the evaluation questions used as they are of respondent consistency.

We begin by comparing evaluations of Davis to vote choice on the recall question. In these and in the analysis of other candidates' supporters, we confine our analysis initially to those voters who could evaluate all four major candidates. We consider Davis to be the top-ranked candidate in a voter's preference ordering if they gave an evaluation of Davis that was at least as good as all of the other candidates, or in which Davis was evaluated as better than all of the other candidates. Such voters should have voted against the recall. Every voter who evaluated Davis last, of course, should have voted for the recall.

The figures in Table 2 show that of the 280 registered voters who our approach estimated as having Davis as a top-ranked candidate, almost 95% voted against recalling him. On the other hand, 85% of those who did not put Davis at the top of their preference ordering voted for the recall of Davis as governor. This degree of correspondence is remarkably high, and in fact is a good deal higher than the typical level of correspondence that is found between vote choice and feeling thermometer ratings. As indicated earlier, Alvarez and Kiewiet (2005) argue that a number of features of the feeling thermometer measures make them suspect as a source of data from which to infer preference orderings. The findings here thus lend additional support to their critique of these commonly used measures.

Table 2 about here

But why would *any* Davis supporter favor the recall? We also found, conversely, that a similar number of voters who ranked Davis at the bottom of their preference ordering voted against the recall. Some amount of error in survey data is inevitable, but we suspect that some voters were confused as to whether “recalling” Davis meant that he would lose office or retain it. It is sometimes good to be recalled, after an audition, for example, because it means that you have survived a cut. Some voters might have believed that recalling Davis would keep him in office.

The recall question on the actual ballot was most likely more helpful in this regard than the poll question. The *Los Angeles Times Poll* asked, “...would you vote YES to recall Governor Davis or would you vote NO, not to recall Governor Davis? The question that appeared on the California ballot was, “Should Gray Davis be recalled (removed) from the Office of Governor?” Including the word “removed” should have helped reduce confusion as to what it meant to recall Davis.

For supporters of the other three candidates, we assessed the level of agreement between candidate evaluations and vote choice in the replacement election. As before, a voter who evaluated a candidate higher or at least as high as any other candidate was deemed to make that candidate a top choice. Table 3, which reports results for Bustamante supporters, shows that about 68% of the registered voters who evaluated

Bustamante highest or at least as high as other candidates stated that they would vote for Bustamante in the replacement election. 11% said they would cast a vote for some candidate other than Bustamante. This could include any one of several minor candidates, but Peter Camejo, candidate of the Green Party, and liberal commentator Arianna Huffington were the most common such alternatives chosen. Only 2.4% of the voters who did not rank Bustamante at the top indicated an intention to vote for him, compared to 88% who said they would vote for someone else.

Table 3 about here

Table 4 repeats the analysis for Schwarzenegger's supporters. In this case, 76% of registered voters who rated Schwarzenegger higher or at a least as high as any other candidate said they were voting for him to replace Davis as governor, while 13% said they were voting for some other candidate—again, usually one of the many minor candidates on the replacement ballot. Of the registered voters who did not evaluate Schwarzenegger the highest, 78% said they would support another candidate, 20% had no opinion, and fewer than 2% indicated an intention to vote for Schwarzenegger.

Table 4 about here

In Table 5 we examine McClintock's evaluations and voter support. Here we find a much larger gap than previously between evaluations and vote intentions. Less than half (39%) of the registered voters who rated McClintock the top candidate (or tied for top candidate) stated that they would cast a ballot for him to replace Davis as governor, while almost 50% said they were voting for another candidate—in almost all cases fellow Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger. Of those who did not rate McClintock at the top of their preference ordering, 70% said they were voting for other candidates, and a scant 0.5% said they were supporting McClintock. What we have here, then, is a large amount of strategic voting. Believing that McClintock had little or no chance of winning the election, many of his supporters had decided to support an acceptable alternative, Schwarzenegger, who had a far better chance of winning. Breaking down the vote of

respondents who stated that their first preference was McClintock (575 respondents), of those who indicated a vote choice, 230 opted for Schwarzenegger while 222 stayed loyal to McClintock.

We next repeated the cross-tabulations reported in Tables 2 through 5 after including respondents who were only capable of ordering their preferences over three candidates. We find an almost identical pattern of results, even though this added 257 voters to the analysis.

### **Consistency in Choice across the Recall Question and Replacement Election**

In the previous section we found that most voters in the 2003 California recall satisfied what is admittedly a very modest criterion of rationality, that of voting in a manner consistent with their preference orderings on both the recall question and the replacement election. It was common for voters who ranked one of the major candidates highest in the replacement election to announce a vote intention for one of the many minor candidates, and a large share of McClintock voters reported an intention to vote strategically for Schwarzenegger. Those who did not give a candidate the most favorable evaluation, however, rarely indicated that they would vote for that candidate.

The next question we investigate is the relationship between voters' choices on the recall question and in the replacement election. Those who preferred one of the three other major candidates to Davis presumably wanted that candidate to be governor. What we are primarily interested in here, though, is whether such voters nonetheless voted against the recall of Davis because they feared someone they liked even less than Davis might be elected.

Although such voters might be called strategic voters, we will instead call them "hedge" voters to highlight a difference between what they are doing and conventional strategic voting. Strategic voting, as it is commonly understood, occurs when voters believe the candidate they most prefer has no chance of winning and so they opt instead for a less preferred candidate who does have a realistic chance of winning. In so doing they are still choosing to vote for the candidate they want to win the election. In this case, voters are hedging their bets, supporting Davis by voting against the recall so as to

prevent an even worse candidate from winning. The candidate they are voting for in the replacement election can thus win only if the outcome of the recall (Davis is recalled) runs counter to how they voted (against the recall). Those who are not hedge voters, i.e. who vote for their most preferred candidate but for the recall, we will call consistent voters.

Table 6 reports the frequency of hedge voters among the supporters of each of the major candidates. Those whose most preferred candidate was Davis, of course, could not be hedge voters. Not surprisingly, Bustamante supporters were much more likely than Schwarzenegger and McClintock supporters to hedge their bets and vote against the recall of Davis. For one thing, they were much more sanguine about the prospect of fellow Democrat Davis remaining in office, and considerably more negative in their perceptions` of Schwarzenegger, the likely and eventual Republican winner.

This hedging strategy was, in fact, exactly what Democratic leaders during the recall campaign urged voters to do. Many worried, though, that Bustamante supporters would balk at voting against the recall, as the only way Bustamante could win was for Davis to lose. Davis supporters also perceived that Bustamante was soft-pedaling the “no on the recall” message. In any case, these data indicate that the vast majority of Bustamante backers followed the cues of party leaders and hedged on the recall.

Table 6 about here

In order to more comprehensively check for the incidence of hedge voting versus consistent voting we conducted a logit analysis. Consistent voters, as indicated earlier, are those voters who voted for their most preferred candidate in the replacement election and for Davis’s recall. Because so many of McClintock backers voted strategically for Schwarzenegger, we consider such voters to also be consistent. Those who are not consistent in this way are considered hedge voters, and are coded as 1, consistent voters as 0. Only a limited set of independent variables could be derived from the survey, but we were able to specify the respondent’s education level, income, gender, the reported level of interest the respondent has in the election, their party registration (Republican or Democrat), and their ethnicity. The ethnicity variable was converted into a dummy

variable which takes on the value of 1 for Latinos, 0 otherwise. Our expectations were that Democrats were far more likely to be hedge voters than Republicans, but that Latinos, controlling for party registration, would be less likely to hedge due to greater support for Latino candidate Bustamante. We also expected that better educated voters, higher income voters, and those with a high degree of interest in the campaign might be politically more sophisticated and thus more likely to be hedge voters. The reverse expectation holds for first-time voters, who might be suspected of being less likely to adopt a hedging strategy because of political inexperience.

As the results reported in Table 7 indicate, registered Republicans were, as expected, far less likely than Democratic registrants to hedge their bets and vote against the recall. Latino voters, contrary to expectations, were more likely to hedge, giving greater support to Davis in his fight against the recall rather than less. Respondents' income, education, gender was not predictive of what type of voter they were, and whether or not they were a first time voter was also of no consequence. ,

The other significant effect evident from the results in Table 7 is the propensity of voters with a high interest in the campaign to vote consistently, which is also the opposite of what we had hypothesized. A further check of the data reveals that Republican voters in general and Schwarzenegger supporters in particular indicated having a particularly high level of interest in the campaign. Those whose highest ranked candidate was Davis, in contrast, claimed to have considerably less interest in the campaign on average. To many of them, the recall might have seemed like a bad dream that they wished would just go away. As a consequence of these associations, higher interest in the campaign was linked to less, not more, hedge voting.

Table 7 about here

## **Discussion**

Our analysis of voting behavior in the recall election provides support for a number of arguments. First, despite the fact that the recall election was held on short notice, involved a long ballot with an unusual structure, and was subjected to a

substantial amount of confusing pre-election litigation, it appears that voters were able to rationally order the candidates and to state voting intentions consistent with those orderings. Despite the problems associated with the recall election, administrative or otherwise, it appears that that voters by and large got it right. While our data was limited to an analysis of only the top four candidates, and was also limited to what other measures were present on the *Los Angeles Times* survey, we did find that voters rarely stated vote intentions that were not consistent with the way in which they evaluated the candidates.

This result simultaneously serves to bolster the validity of the candidate evaluation questions that were employed, which simply asked respondents to rate their impression of the major candidates as very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable. Despite the coarseness of a measure that allowed for only four response categories, the agreement between candidate evaluations and vote choice. We conclude from this that it is preferable to pose evaluative questions that repeatedly offer the same small number of response categories, rather than to ask for a 0 to 100 rating. It appears that when specific response categories are not offered, respondents have difficulty keeping a consistent calibration in their ratings, and are more prone to make mistakes.

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Table 1: Most Frequent Preference Orderings

Order	Frequency	Percentage
MS p BD	98	6.6%
S p M p BD	87	5.9%
M p S p BD	70	4.7%
MS p BD	46	3.1%
S p M p B p D	32	2.2%
BD p MS	30	2.0%
MS p B p D	25	1.7%
MBD p S	24	1.6%
M p S p B p D	23	1.6%
BD p M p S	22	1.5%
MS p B p D	19	1.3%
BD p S	16	1.1%
BD p MS	16	1.1%
BD p S	15	1.0%
MB p SD	15	1.0%

Table 2: Preference Orderings and Recall Vote Preference

Recall Vote	Davis Top-Ranked	Davis Not Top-Ranked
Against	94.5	13.9
For	5.2	85.2
No Opinion	0.3	0.9
<i>N</i>	280	704

Table 3: Preference Orderings and Replacement Vote: Bustamante

Replacement Vote	Bustamante Top-Ranked	Bustamante Not Top-Ranked
Bustamante	67.9	2.4
Others	10.5	87.8
No Opinion	21.6	9.7
<i>N</i>	316	523

Table 4: Preference Orderings and Replacement Vote: Schwarzenegger

Replacement Vote	Schwarzenegger Top-Ranked	Schwarzenegger Not Top-Ranked
Schwarzenegger	76.0	1.8
Others	12.4	78.2
No Opinion	11.5	20.0
<i>N</i>	515	393

Table 5: Preference Orderings and Replacement Vote: McClintock

Replacement Preference	McClintock Top-Ranked	McClintock Not Top-Ranked
McClintock	38.5	0.5
Others	49.7	70.0
No Opinion	11.7	29.5
Number of Cases	575	247

Table 6: Frequency of Hedge Voters

Most Preferred Candidate	Hedge Voters (in percent)	<i>n</i>
Schwarzenegger	9.0	524
Bustamante	84.2	260
McClintock	30.8	439

Table 7: Logit Analysis of Hedge Voting

Variable	Coefficient (error)
Constant	.36 (.39)
Education	.06 (.04)
Income	-.02 (.02)
First-time voter	.03 (.26)
Interest in election	-.39* (.07)
Female	-.03 (.12)
Democrat	.11 (.15)
Republican	-.75* (.17)
Latino	.34* (.14)

\* =  $p < .05$   
 $n = 1496$

