

Stone, Walter. *Candidates and Voters: Ideology, Valence and Representation in U.S. Elections.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 228 pp. (\$39.99 paper).

The highest praise that I can offer to a book is that I approach the text dispositionally skeptical of the argument but largely convinced of the data analysis by the end. Stone's book provides compelling evidence that legislative elections are far more effective vehicles for democratic responsiveness than most skeptical readers may believe.

Stone approaches the topic of legislative elections with broad ambitions. He is interested in the topic from the perspective of individual voters, aggregate election results, and their normative implications for spatial theory and democratic theory. Spatial models have become a staple in studies of legislative elections, and within the theoretical realm, we have adopted the use of Stokes's concept of "valence" to incorporate a valence dimension along with a policy dimension to consider the competing incentives voters have when faced with the possibility of one candidate having a policy advantage, while the other holds an advantage with respect to traits like competence and honesty. Testing these models, though, has always been difficult, and that is where Stone's book impresses.

The book continues Stone's past use of an important methodological technique in assessing candidates in legislative elections—local expert surveys. Surveying local experts allows Stone to put *both* candidates on the same scale with respect to both ideology and valence. In *Candidates and Voters*, Stone takes this technique to its logical conclusion by asking a set of questions, together, giving us the most comprehensive empirical analysis of spatial-valence models to date.

How often do voters actually vote for the most proximate candidate? How often do they vote for the most qualified, by experts' assessments of qualification? Combining those characteristics, how often do voters vote "correctly" at the individual level, and what does that indicate about the success of democratic institutions at the aggregate level?

Stone's ambitions are nothing less than to answer all of those questions, and the value of the expert survey methodology is the ability to do so in a systematic way. Stone finds that voters, given the constraints they face, make relatively rational choices, although I shall return to the constraint issue shortly. Voters tend to vote for the most proximate candidate, and they tend to vote for the most qualified candidate, even given the possibility of those being in conflict, which is an important issue that Stone addresses throughout the analysis because it is central to the spatial models that incorporate valence dimensions.

The primary critique I can offer from an empirical perspective is the same critique I offer from a normative perspective, and it is one of which Stone is well aware. Candidates' choices may be, in game theoretic terms, endogenous, yet voters are constrained by the choices that the candidates make. To the degree that voters create effective responsiveness by voting "correctly," for example, it can only be in the context of the choices with which they are presented. They can vote for the most proximate and most qualified candidate, but if the most proximate candidate

is ideologically distant, then that choice, while scored as a victory in a relative sense, is a minor one. They can vote correctly for the most qualified candidate as experts assess them, but if that candidate is objectively not particularly competent, then they have chosen best among weak choices. So what? From an empirical perspective, that process is worth teasing out, and from a normative perspective, without an absolute standard against which to measure democratic responsiveness, what have we really found?

Stone's framework is to study voters' choices within the constrained context of an election because that is how they make their choices. Writing the phrase, "median voter" in the write-in section of a ballot in response to two candidates who are alternately somewhat distant and very distant from the median is a refusal to make a real choice. At a pragmatic level, then, Stone's framework is difficult to dispute.

However, as Stone observes throughout, the choices that candidates and *potential* candidates make are choices that constrain voters, and those choices are made in at least loose anticipation of voter responses. How, then, do we measure democratic responsiveness? Stone measures the frequency of correct voting with his improved measures over past approaches, and the frequency of representative election outcomes, again with his improved measures, and given the constraints that voters face, he finds relative health in the electoral system. If, however, we assess voters by the incentives they create for parties and candidates to make different choices and create different constraints, then we miss something by focusing on how voters behave within the constraints that Stone takes as given for the sake of his methodology.

To be sure, the expert survey methodology is not suited to addressing these kinds of questions, and Stone is fully aware of the questions that go unanswered by his approach. How do voters behave given their constrained choices, at the individual and aggregate level, and what does that indicate about the health of democracy? These remain valid questions, best addressed using methods such as the expert survey approach that generates the vital data for *Candidates and Voters*. As of now, Stone's text is the most compelling one I have read assessing voters' responses to candidate ideology and non-ideological characteristics. Building more dynamic models around such an approach may be necessary to tease out how voters' behavior creates, or fails to create, incentives for better representative behavior among candidates and legislators. Until then, scholars of legislative elections need to read this book.

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