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a virtual seminar presenting

https://www.interfluidity.com/v2/7687.html

Weakness is provocative

thank you!

The fierce urgency of now ↘

⇒ It might already be too late for "ideas" to matter.

⇒ But it might not.

⇒ Just as we've too complacently relied on the invisible hand of markets, I think it's not sufficient to let professional incentives and institutions guide our contributions to the social and natural catastrophes unfolding among us.

⇒ Ideas are irrelevant without communities to inhabit and give effect to them.

⇒ Shit is real and it might kill us all. Let's do our best to prevent that.

Disclaimers ↘

⇒ What follows is presentation of a perspective or framework for thinking about politics that may or may not useful.

⇒ It definitely isn't the one, true, uniquely useful perspective.

⇒ It's not a hypothesis, to be falsified or supported. It's not "science", social or otherwise.

⇒ It's conjectural, presented evidence-free.

⇒ It's not mostly about Donald Trump or the current election.

- _Donald Trump's ascendance in 2016 would have constituted an unusual perturbation in an ordinarily more placid dynamic, from this perspective._

Systems perspective

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Systems perspective

⇒ Especially in politics, especially activists, have a tendency to understand problems in terms of villains and heroes.

⇒ Whether or not that's right or wrong _(I think it's often right!)_, it leaves us with no way forward but to fight things out…

⇒ …even where the consequences of the fight might be so catastrophic it is no way forward at all!

Systems perspective ↘

⇒ When we can recast problems in terms of the systems and institutions that structure our interactions, systems that in some sense pit us against one another as villains or heroes, it gives us a potential way out.

⇒ Especially when it's not clear *cui bono* from the perspective of the current moment's conflicts, understanding how alternative structures might defuse the civil wars we are on the verge of provides a new way forward, one in which none of the *status quo* combatants are required to concede defeat.

Plurality voting and Duverger's "Law" ↘

⇒ In the United States, for most elective offices, we use a simple voting system in which people who wish to hold an office run, and whoever gets the most votes wins.

⇒ That sounds very democratic, but it has a number of arguably untoward effects.

⇒ As French political scientist Maurice Duverger famously argued, this system creates a strong tendency (it is not really a "law") for polities to organize into two competing, permanent factions, to prevent somewhat aligned groups from splitting their electorate and spoiling elections in favor of a mutual opponent.

Aside: Duverger's "Law" and proportional representation ↘

⇒ The usual complaint about plurality voting, motivated by Duverger's Law, is that it prevents people from organizing into parties that genuinely reflect their values and interests. I share this complaint.

⇒ Voting systems that yield *proportional representation* would (partially) address this.

⇒ But proportional representation can have its own pathologies. Sometimes it simply transports the pathologies of plurality voting from the electoral to the parliamentary level.

⇒ I have thoughts on how to address this (maybe so do you!), but they'll have to wait for another time.
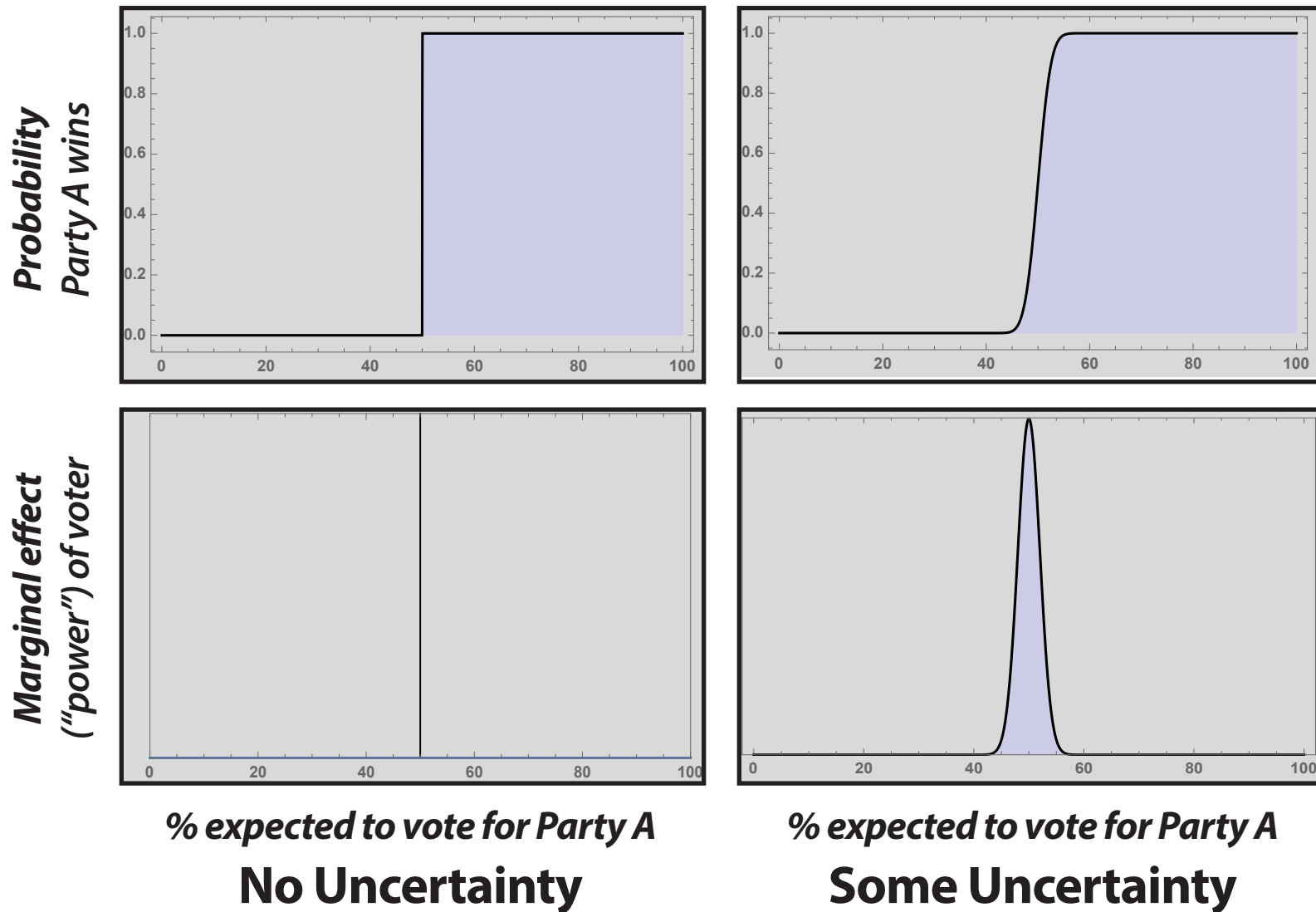
Weakness is provocative ↘

⇒ Plurality voting favors a two-party system, where the two parties represent broad, heterogeneous strategic coalitions rather than strongly-held ideologies.

⇒ Because these coalitions constitute & reconstitute themselves strategically, neither will be content to stay "in the wilderness" very long.

⇒ They'll alter their constitution and commitments, poaching from their opponent if necessary, to remain in contention for power.

⇒ So we should expect the most crucial elections to be close to 50/50 pretty often.

Weakness is provocative ↘

⇒ Under plurality voting, when elections are *not* about 50/50, they are overdetermined. All voters are inframarginal, none has any power.

⇒ Under plurality voting, when elections *are* about 50/50, they are extremely fragile. A tiny subset of "swing" (or potential entrant) voters holds all the power.

⇒ Swing (or steal, or suppress) a tiny subset of voters and you swing (or steal) all of the power.

⇒ ***Corruption is endogenous to this system***, in the same way that theft would be endogenous to leaving an envelope stuffed with cash on a public bench.

Provocative fragility (two parties, A & B)

Probability Party A wins

Marginal effect ("power") of voter

% expected to vote for Party A
No Uncertainty
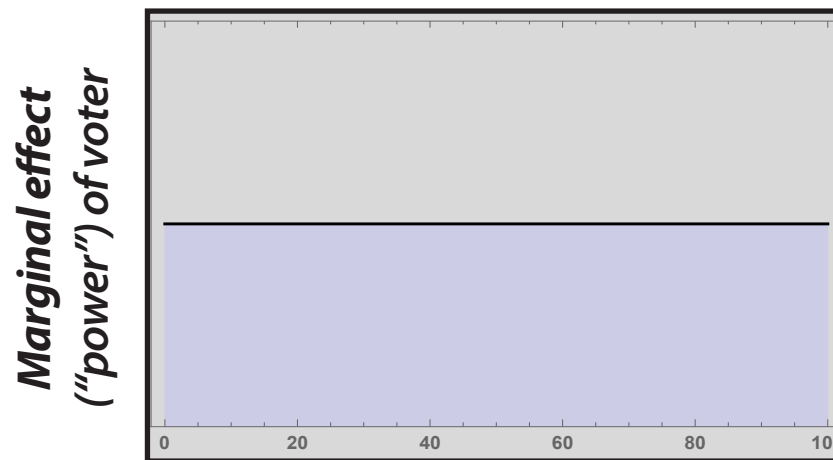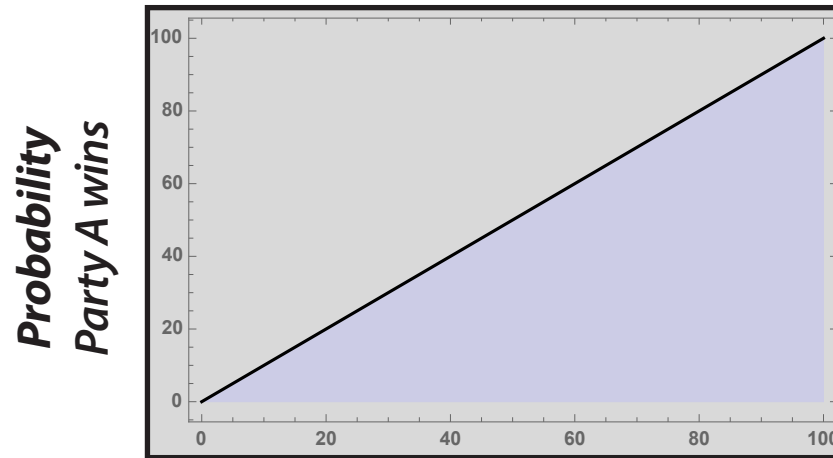
% expected to vote for Party A
Some Uncertainty

Weakness is provocative ↘

⇒ These pathologies (I do think they are pathologies) are not inevitable to democracy.

⇒ They are an artifact of winner-take-all, first-past-the-post, single-winner, plurality voting.

⇒ For example, under "random ballot" voting, no voter is inframarginal, every voter has identical power regardless of the expected distribution of votes.

⇒ _Random ballot voting may be great for some purposes (e.g. House elections), but not so good for others. The purpose here isn't to advocate random ballot, but to show that the pathologies of_ status quo _democracy are a function of the procedures we've (often badly) chosen, and there exist other procedures which would be accompanied by fewer or at least different pathologies._

Weakness is provocative ↘

Random Ballot
Fair, stable, difficult to corrupt...

% expected to vote for Party A

Regardless of Uncertainty

A cooperative, as well as a competitive, game ↘

⇒ Plurality voting, by encouraging a two-party system, pretty directly engenders a kind of political oligopoly.

⇒ With only two parties, both of which are generally in real contention for power (so that neither has "nothing to lose" by defecting), behavior in the parties' mutual interest but disliked by voters can be sustained as a form of tacit cartel.

A cooperative, as well as a competitive, game ↘

⇒ Some mutual interests of party insiders:
- *Structural guard rails of the two party system (e.g. electoral fusion bans)*
- *Support for stable incumbency*
- *Eschewing competition for voters that would transgress the class interests of donors, who finance party and paraparty institutions*

⇒ Speculatively *(not essential to the argument)*, parties do have incentives to dominate, but they also arguably have incentives not to stray too far, too long from 50/50.
- *Close contests generate funding*
- *Oscillation of power helps support the perceived democratic legitimacy of the system*

A 50/50 dance

⇒ Overall, I think it's best to understand the system as one in which parties jointly understand a near 50/50 division of the influence-weighted *(not one person one vote!)* electorate as an attractor and effectively a constraint.

⇒ They cooperate and compete to decide just *how* the electorate will be so divided, what commitments shall be ours, and what shall be theirs (and what commitments shall be off the table) consistent with that constraint.

A 50/50 dance ↘

⇒ Path dependence necessarily shapes party coevolution

- *Party commitments are embedded in personnel, relationships, and institutions which <u>change slowly</u>*
- *It's risky not to mostly retain past voters, who understand the parties at any given time as having ideological content, rather than as the flexible, strategic actors they are over longer periods of time*

⇒ This path dependence, along with accident and error, mean that slippage does occur.

- *During some election cycles, the parties are not in close contention at all.*
- *But on average, in a lot of the most crucial elections, they will be!*
- *There's a <u>race</u> between the pace of party (co)evolution and the (faster) events and circumstances parties respond to.*

A 50/50 dance

⇒ Electorates *constrain* party (co)evolution. But they don't *direct* or *determine* it.

⇒ The parties decide, along which dimensions they allow their commitments to diverge, and also along which dimensions *not to compete*, subject to the constraint that the divergences must divide the electorate roughly 50/50.

⇒ Since electorate preferences have many, many dimensions, the parties jointly have a great deal of freedom to decide which controversies will be subject to electoral competition, and which will not, if they can maintain a tacit consensus that holds between them.

Endogenous bullshit ↘

⇒ *Conjecture:* The institutional commitments of the two parties at the time of any given election are basically fixed, and are fairly transparent to the interested public.

⇒ In close elections, then, the marginal "swing" (or potential entrant) voters who decide elections are those most indifferent to the actual commitments of the two parties.

⇒ Despite this, elections are characterized by a lot of communication tailored to motivate these people most indifferent to the actual stakes of the election to get out and vote one way or another.
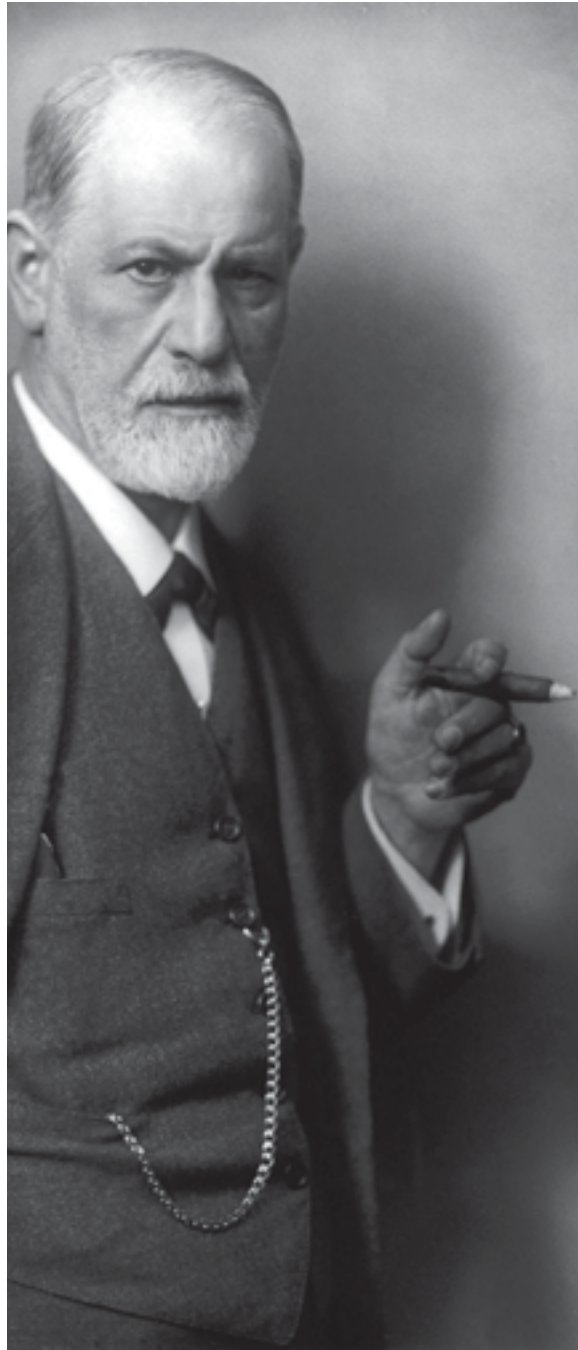
Endogenous bullshit ↘

⇒ This communication is, in Harry Frankfurt's technical sense, necessarily bullshit.

⇒ Some common forms of electoral bullshit:

- _Amplification of fake/misleading/poorly-sourced news_
- _Emphasizing "values" / "culture war" issues out of proportion to the parties' commitment or ability to address them politically_
- _Emphasizing personal virtue (of people associated with our party) and vice (of people associated with theirs) out of proportion to the manner in which those personal characteristics are likely to condition political behavior_
- _Misleadingly uncharitable interpretations of statements or actions by people in the other party_
- _Attributions of extreme ideology to parties that are mostly instrumental_

Inverse Freud Metaphor ↘

Person	Party
Ego	**Ego**
Small	Small
Verbal	Verbal
Public	Public
Rational	*Irrational*
Id	**Id**
Vast	Vast
—	—
Private	Private
—	—
Tacit	Tacit
Source	Source
of	of
Desires	Desires
Ego	Ego
Works	Works
to	to
Satisfy	Satisfy
Irrational	*Rational*

⇒ This is a bad system. We should change it.

- *Provocative weakness breeds corruption and foreign interference, rewards voter suppression and manipulation*

- *Extremely attenuated democratic governance, it leaves undesirably much control and discretion to party insiders with parochial as well as public interests*

- *Disenfranchises all voters but those with the most irrelevant concerns in close elections*

- *Endogenous polarization*

- *Endogenous bullshit*

- *Polarization and bullshit outlive the elections that generate them, damaging a wide variety of institutions and challenging our social epistemology*

⇒ ***Voting rights will never be safe in this system.***

Implications — Inside ↘

⇒ While we retain this bad system, ***meaningful politics happens within the parties much more than between them.***

⇒ Party-insider politics, contesting primary elections, and forming pressure groups that can credibly threaten to withhold votes that a party relies upon are more effective means towards resisted political ends than persuading the broad public or contesting a general election.

⇒ This is bad, since the parties are only two, particular, largely opaque, institutions, immunized from competition by new entrants, managed by active, strategic gatekeepers.

thank you ☀️ again!

Related work ↘

⇒ I haven't read it yet, but I'm eager to read [Lee Drutman's *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America*](#)

⇒ Learn more about "random ballot" or "lottery voting". See [*Choosing Representatives By Lottery Voting,* by Akhil Reed Amar](#) and [*Towards a more perfect democracy* by David MacIver](#).

⇒ The graphs in this presentation are lifted from [another, more sprawling presentation](#) that considers some more speculative solutions.

Credits ↘

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