Chapter 7

Voting and Elections: Some Simple Ideas

The purpose of this chapter and the next is to discuss elections. Public Choice has developed three rather simple but major insights regarding elections. The first concerns the act of voting. Public Choice theorists have pointed out that it is not usually profitable for a voter to use his voting right for the purpose of influencing government. The money value of the benefits that a voter expects from public goods or other government actions due to his vote are less than the money value of the benefits he gives up in order to vote. This observation has led them to ask deeper questions about why people vote and why they acquire information about candidates and issues. The second insight concerns how candidates or political parties can win votes. Public Choice theorists have discovered that if they make some simple assumptions about voter preferences and about candidates or parties, they can show that, if political candidates and parties aim to win elections, they will ordinarily avoid taking extreme positions on issues. This idea is called the *median voter theorem*. This theorem helps explain why it often appears that there is very little difference between the positions taken by opposing candidates in a two-party election. The third insight deals with majority voting. Public Choice theorists show that under fairly typical voting conditions, the candidate or policy that is chosen may not be the one that

most people would regard as best. This basic insight is called the voters' paradox.

  In this chapter, we consider the first two of these insights. We expand on these simple ideas and describe the third insight in Chapter Eight.