duty, to express their preference on national issues, to play their part in a democracy, to go with the flow and to avoid free-riding on the efforts of others. In this way, we can move people to the polling place while still, perhaps, maintaining the proposition that narrow self-interest reappears there (we can also add that, since most electors in most democracies do not vote at most elections, rational abstention does appear to be widespread).

The second objection proceeds along similar lines. Since no single ballot is likely to be decisive, why should Downs’s voters go to the expense of acquiring the information needed to cast a rational vote? A full understanding of party programmes requires time and effort. Certainly, Downs’s assumption that voters are perfectly informed seems particularly unrealistic, given the avalanche of polls revealing the limits of voters’ understanding of parties, candidates, and the national political process. This ignorance may be rational, or simply ignorance, but surely our starting point should be what voters do not know, rather than what they do (Green and Shapiro, 1994).

Studies of voters’ use of information offer a little solace. It does appear that many electors in liberal democracies are effective in interpreting the information that does come their way. They focus on essentials, discount information from biased sources, and listen to experts. As with many students taking an examination, they are pragmatic and intelligent users of the limited information they have acquired (Kuklinski and Peyton, 2007). They are shrewd, if not knowledgeable.

It is also worth noting that small shifts in election results, initiated by a minority of attentive voters, can send messages to rulers even if most voters are unaware of current developments. For example, judgements of a government’s record do show up in changes in party support from one election to the next. As Erikson et al. (2002, p. 5) teach us, this miracle of aggregation means that the electorate as a whole can, in a sense, be judged more rational than the average voter. Referring to the USA, they write:

One can agree that the average citizen is not particularly informed, not particularly thoughtful, and not particularly attentive, but still find these characteristics emerge in the aggregate … Those at the low end of the scale have little input on aggregate movement; those at the high end have major input. The net result is that the more informed, thoughtful and attentive citizens contribute disproportionately to aggregate movement.

The third objection to Downs’s view of the voter is more fundamental. We can question the assumption that elections are best understood as debates over policies on which voters adopt different positions, as suggested by Figure 12.1. Often, in fact, the objectives are agreed and the main difference between parties – and the factor which shapes the outcome – is their perceived competence at delivering these goals. For example, everyone wants peace, prosperity, and a government that can handle the unexpected. The question is which party is best at execution, a question that raises issues of skill, integrity, experience, unity, and leadership.

Recognizing the importance of valence (or performance) issues leads to a challenge for the median voter theorem. As Ansolabehere (2006, p. 33) says, when performance issues matter, ‘some voters will choose a more competent candidate, even if the other is ideologically closer to those voters’ ideal points’. A competent party can secure the support of rational voters even if its location on position issues is away from the median voter.