

Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote

1. Introduction

The citizen of a Western democracy has a moral right to vote, founded on justice. Still, the right to vote does not imply the rightness of voting. Voters are not obligated to vote, but if they do vote, they ought to vote well. Most citizens would not vote well, and so for them, voting would be wrong.

People tend to vote in what they perceive to be the national interest rather than their narrow self-interest.¹ However, their perception of the national interest is often wrong, as it is grounded in ignorance and unreliable, irrational processes of belief formation. Their ideological bents reflect bias. Voters make systematic errors and these errors lead to harmful policies. This paper argues that if a person forms her political beliefs in an unreliable or irresponsible way and lives in a society in which the majority of other citizens also form their beliefs in unreliable ways, she ought not vote. In societies in which most people are ignorant, irrational, or irresponsible about politics, ignorant, irrational, or irresponsible citizens ought to abstain from voting.

Individual voters ought to abstain rather than vote badly. This thesis may seem anti-democratic. Yet it is really a claim about voter responsibility and how voters do not seem to be meeting this responsibility. On my view, voters are not obligated to vote, but if they do vote, they owe it to others and themselves to be rational, unbiased, and well informed about

¹ Political scientists generally agree that voters do not tend to vote in their perceived self-interest. E.g., the elderly are not significantly more likely to support social security programs than younger workers. Rather, voters tend to vote in what they perceive to be the national interest. See Carolyn Funk and Patricia Garcia-Monet, "The Relationship Between Personal and National Concerns in Public Perceptions of the Economy", *Political Research Quarterly* 50:2 (1997), 317-342; Carolyn Funk, "The Dual Influence of Self-Interest and Societal Interest in Public Opinion", *Political Research Quarterly* 53:1 (2000), 37-62; Dale Miller, "The Norm of Self-Interest", *American Psychologist* 54:12 (1999), 1053-1060; Diana Mutz and Jeffrey Mondak, "Dimensions of Sociotropic Behavior: Group-Based Judgments of Fairness and Well-Being", *American Journal of Political Science* 41:1 (1997), 284-308. Bryan Caplan lists twelve other references for this claim on p. 229 of *The Myth of the Rational Voter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky, *Democracy and Decision The Pure Theory of Electoral Decision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 108-114. Brennan and Lomasky discuss at length the empirical evidence for and against the self-interested voter hypothesis.

their political beliefs, at least to a higher degree than they are. Similarly, most of us think we are not obligated to become parents, but if we are to be parents, we ought to be responsible, good parents. We are not obligated to become surgeons, but if we do become surgeons, we ought to be responsible, good surgeons. We are not obligated to drive, but if we do drive, we ought to be responsible drivers. The same goes for voting.

In section 2, I first review some of the research purporting to show that voters are irrational or at least ignorant about relevant issues, and thus make systematic errors about economic policy. For the sake of argument, I will assume that the thesis that voters make systematic errors is correct. I will also assume that their voting in error often leads to bad policies being enacted. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to prove these claims. Instead, while I review research on these issues, my concern is to determine what the normative implications would be if these claims are true.

I will then make my argument by considering five sorts of objections to my thesis. In sections 3 and 4, I consider the objection that individual bad votes have only a tiny expected disutility, and so individuals do little harm by voting. I argue that we have a pro tanto duty to refrain from engaging in collectively harmful activities even when our individual contributions are negligible. In section 5, I consider deliberative democrat and civic humanist position that voters have a duty not only to refrain from voting badly, but also to vote well. I argue that no such duty exists in modern democratic societies. In section 6, I consider objections that my view is objectionably epistocratic, i.e., that it cedes too much power to the knowledgeable. I argue that my position avoids some of the main worries about epistocracy. In section 7, I respond to the objection that my thesis is self-effacing. The people who would be obligated not to vote are not likely to self-identify and thus are not likely to follow the duty.

2. Ignorance, Bias, and Irrationality

It is often thought that voters and average citizens are ignorant about politics. Less often, it is thought that they are irrational. Here I discuss some reasons to think that citizens are irrational about their political beliefs. I will not be trying to settle the debate concerning whether voters are ignorant and irrational. My worry is that citizens are systematically wrong

about issues in economics and political science. Their voting from their false beliefs leads to bad policies.

We all exhibit confirmation bias. We are not as open to new evidence as we should be. Instead, we tend to accept evidence that coheres with our current worldviews and reject evidence that contradicts it. Our background beliefs are always a filter—and often a barrier—to our learning something new. This is rampant in politics.

The economist Bryan Caplan holds that most people are not just ignorant, but irrational when it comes to their beliefs about economics.² Caplan theorizes that some beliefs have a big emotional payoff: holding those beliefs allows us to feel good about ourselves. One person advocates a welfare state; this makes him feel compassionate. Another rejects the welfare state; this makes her feel like a champion of responsibility.

Caplan holds that citizens exhibit four biases: a pessimistic tendency to think conditions are worsening even when they are getting better, a tendency to underestimate the value of interacting with foreigners, a tendency to underestimate the ability of the market to improve people's lives, and a tendency to underestimate the value of conserving labor. His evidence for these biases is systematic divergences between the surveyed opinions of professional economists and laypeople on the economy. While overwhelming majority of economists believe government should not use price controls to curb inflation, the overwhelming majority of noneconomists think government should use such controls. Most economists think tariffs and other restrictions on trade usually reduce the general welfare, but the public favors tariffs in order to promote welfare.³ Consider the Survey of Americans and Economists on the Economy (SAEE), conducted in 1996 by the Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University Survey Project. When asked why the economy is not doing better, the public thinks “there are too many immigrants” is between a minor to major reason, while economists think it is not a reason at all. The public thinks “technology is displacing workers”, “business profits are too high”, “companies are sending jobs overseas”, and “companies are downsizing” are reasons why the economy is

² Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*.

³ Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, p. 51. See also Richard M. Alston, J. R. Kearl, Michael B. Vaughan, “Is There a Consensus Among Economists in the 1990's?”, *American Economic Review* 82 (1992), 203-209; J.R. Kearl, Clayne Pope, Gordon Whiting, and Larry Wimmer, “A Confusion of Economists”, *American Economic Review* 69 (1979), 28-37.

not doing better, while economists do not.⁴ The public regards spikes in oil prices as the caprices of corporate greed, while economists overwhelmingly view these as resulting from normal supply and demand.⁵ The SAEI and other surveys provide evidence that the public has a tenuous grasp of basic economics, and continues to exhibit just the sorts of biases Adam Smith was so concerned to correct in 1776.⁶

Caplan posits “rational irrationality” to explain the persistence of economic bias and its resistance to change.⁷ Rational irrationality is the thesis it can be *instrumentally* rational to be *epistemically* irrational. An *epistemically* irrational person ignores and evades evidence against his beliefs, holds his beliefs without evidence or with only weak evidence, has contradictions in his thinking, employs logical fallacies in belief formation, and exhibits characteristic epistemic vices such as close-mindedness. An *instrumentally* rational person chooses the best strategies to achieve his goals. Epistemic irrationality can sometimes be conducive to achieving one’s goals and thus instrumentally rational. False, epistemically irrational beliefs can reinforce one’s self-image, boost one’s self-esteem, make one feel noble, smart, superior, safe, or comfortable, and can help achieve conformity with the group and thus facilitate social acceptance.

We prefer to believe some things rather than others, and within limits, have the power to control our beliefs (largely through indirect means). Epistemic and instrumental rationality sometimes point toward the same belief, but often diverge. Falsely believing the road I am about to cross may kill me. Falsely believing that Toyotas are low quality means I buy a bad car. However, falsely believing import quotas are good for the economy has no directly harmful effects. On the contrary, the belief can have significant instrumental value. It might make me feel patriotic, serve my anti-foreign bias, serve as an outlet to rationalize, sublimate, or redirect racist attitudes, help me to pretend to have solidarity with union workers, etc.

⁴ Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, pp. 61-66. Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University Survey Project, “Survey of Americans and Economists on the Economy”, #1199 October 16, 2006. <<http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolss/1199-econgen.cfm>>.

⁵ Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, p. 72.

⁶ See also Alan Blinder, *Hard Heads, Soft Hearts: Tough-Minded Economics for a Just Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), esp. p. 154; Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), esp. p. 234.

⁷ See Bryan Caplan, “Rational Irrationality”, *Kyklos* 54 (2001), 3-26.

Qua individual, I am powerless to enact protectionist legislation. I can vote for protectionists, but my vote has little probability of causing protectionist legislation to be enacted. The reason individual voters can sustain irrational beliefs is that their irrationality has almost no cost—the same outcomes would be chosen by all other irrational voters regardless of an individual voter’s rationality. The individual’s vote rarely carries the day, and so is irrelevant to the policy outcome. (The expected disutility of individual votes is discussed further below.) Politics is a sphere where I can afford to be epistemically irrational as a voter.

We can achieve emotional payoffs from our favored policies even when the policies don’t work. It’s cheap and easy to assume policies work the way we intend. Rigorous, rational thinking is costly. It takes time and effort. Irrational beliefs about politics have little cost to the believer. If, contrary to established economic theory, I believe that tariffs are usually good for the economy, I might vote accordingly. However, my vote carries so little weight that it does not matter how I voted. The same policies will be enacted regardless of how I vote. The problem is that we are all collectively voting that way. We get to internalize the benefits of epistemic irrationality while externalizing its costs. So, in politics, we tend toward beliefs that make us feel good about ourselves rather than beliefs that are well supported by the evidence. And while it does not matter how you or I vote, it does matter how *we* vote. If we are systematically irrational, we will systematically vote for bad policies.

Caplan’s ideas are supported by at least one independent recent study. The psychologist Drew Westen published an experiment on *motivated reasoning*, the theory that the brain tries to converge on beliefs that produce maximum positive feelings and minimize negative feelings.⁸ He recruited a number of committed, loyal Republicans and Democrats for his experiment. Subjects were shown series of contradictory statements by famous Republicans, Democrats, and neutral figures (such as Tom Hanks and Walter Cronkite). They were also shown “exculpatory statements” that might excuse any apparent contradictions or hypocrisy. Subjects reacted in biased ways. Democrats excused Democratic and neutral figures while condemning Republicans; Republicans excused Republican and neutral figures while condemning Democrats. During the experiment, Westen measured subjects’ brain activity via functional magnetic resonance imaging

⁸ Westen, D., Kilts, C., Blagov, P., Harenski, K., and Hamann, S., "The neural basis of motivated reasoning: An fMRI study of emotional constraints on political judgment during the U.S. Presidential election of 2004", *The Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 18 (2007), 1947-1958.

(fMRI). fMRI showed that subject's pleasure centers were activated when they condemned members of the other party and when they ignored evidence against members of their own party. Apparently, our brains reward us for epistemic vice.

I am not sure if Caplan has correctly identified the particular biases voters have. Also, I would not claim that voters are completely irrational about politics. (Neither does Caplan.) I am much less pessimistic about democracy than Caplan is. Also, it is possible that some or much of the systematic error Caplan ascribes to irrationality comes from ignorance instead. Regardless, as Thomas Christiano says,

It is hard to see how citizens can satisfy any even moderate standards for beliefs about out how best to achieve their political aims. Knowledge of means requires an immense amount of social science and knowledge of particular facts. For citizens to have this kind of knowledge generally would require that we abandon the division of labor in society.⁹

Even when people agree on common ends, such as creating more wealth or promoting universal access to good healthcare, they lack the social scientific knowledge needed to know what means (policies) best achieve these ends. Citizens are not aware of their limitations. Given how little people know about complex issues, they have surprisingly confident opinions about to do. Whether this results from irrationality, as Caplan says, or ignorance, as others say, does not matter for my purposes.

Christiano says there should be a division of labor in democracy. Citizens ought to vote for the ends of government, while experts ought to determine the means of achieving those ends. He says citizens are in a good position to debate the values and goals of government, but not the policies to achieve those goals. If government is a ship, citizens should be the passengers choosing the destination, but expert officials should be the captains steering the ship.¹⁰ Political parties ought to present packages of coherent, weighted, articulate ends for voters to decide among. Yet, even if Christiano's model is appealing, it is not the model governing Western democracies. Voters are not merely choosing ends, but are choosing policies. As Christiano says, they do not know how to choose good policy, even if they know what the right ends are. When citizens come to the voting booth, they

⁹ Thomas Christiano, "Democracy", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2006 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/>.

¹⁰ Thomas Christiano, *The Rule of the Many* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), p. 169.

turn the wheel of a ship they do not know how to steer. This can be bad for everyone, and so it is possible that individual voters are doing something wrong by voting.

3. The Disutility of Individual Bad Votes

Voters do little harm as individuals by voting. Thus, it is hard to move from A to B:

A: It would be better if most irrational people did not vote.

B: Individual irrational people should not vote.

It is harmful for *us* to vote irrationally, but it is not thereby harmful for *me* to vote irrationally. My irrationality makes little difference. If so, this constitutes an objection to my view that individual bad voters ought to refrain from voting, since qua individuals they do so little harm.

Suppose we have two candidates, the Donkey Party candidate (D) and Elephant Party candidate (E). Suppose somehow I know that electing D in the presidential election would result in \$33 billion more GDP growth than electing E would, with all other consequences equal.¹¹ Following Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky's analysis, we can calculate the utility of my voting as $U_i = p[V_i(D) - V_i(E)]$, where U_i is the utility of my vote for D, p is the probability of my vote being decisive, and $[V_i(D) - V_i(E)]$ represents the difference in the value of the two candidates. The likelihood of my vote being decisive is $p = f(N, m)$, where N is the total number of those casting votes and m is the anticipated proportional majority.¹² Brennan and Lomasky have shown that p is "a very quickly decreasing function of m ".¹³ Even small values of m , such as $m = .01$, make p tiny. Suppose that the anticipated proportional majority in a two-candidate election is only .01, such that the probability that a random voter will vote for D is 50.5%. Then, for a turnout of 122,293,332 voters (the number of voters in the last U.S. presidential election), U_i is only

¹¹ Brian Barry, "Comment", in *Political Participation*, ed., Stanley Bern (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978), p. 39, has us imagining a scenario in which one candidate beating another results in 1/4% more GNP growth over the next five years. Here I imagine it leading to 1/4% more GDP growth in one year. The GDP of the U.S. in 2006 was approximately \$13.13 trillion when corrected for purchasing power parity. Its real growth rate was 3.2% in 2006. A 3.2% growth rate of \$13.13 trillion is about \$420 billion. A 3.45% growth rate (1/4 percent higher) is about \$453 billion, for a difference of \$33 billion.

¹² Lomasky and Brennan, "Is There a Duty to Vote", p. 66.

¹³ Lomasky and Brennan, "Is There a Duty to Vote", p. 66.

$\$4.77 \times 10^{-2650}$.¹⁴ As Brennan and Lomasky demonstrate, to explain voter turnout via the expected consequences of voting in an election of over 100 million people when the opportunity cost of voting is a mere \$1, the difference between the good and bad outcome must approach infinity.¹⁵

Imagine instead that E commands the expected majority of .01, and if elected will cost the economy \$33 billion. The expected harmfulness of each vote for E is a mere $\$4.77 \times 10^{-2650}$. The sum of their individual expected harms is a mere $\$2.95 \times 10^{-2642}$. Yet, summing the expected harmfulness of individual votes does not capture their collective harmfulness. Instead, their collective harmfulness is the absolute difference between the values of the candidates, in this case, \$33 billion. Individual irrationality does not hurt, but collective irrationality hurts significantly. In this case, bad voting hurts about as much as Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

Lomasky and Brennan mean to show that the expected value of individual votes is negligible. An altruistic person would help his neighbors more to clean a single piece of litter than to vote well. However, Lomasky and Brennan's analysis shows a problem with my argument. An individual good vote is worth U_i —a trifling amount—but this means an individual bad vote costs a trifling amount. The voter imposes greater expected harm upon his neighbors by driving to the polling station than by voting irrationally when she arrives.¹⁶ One might think that any duty to avoid bad voting must be extraordinarily weak. The duty

¹⁴ This calculation uses the formula for the probability of a vote being decisive given in Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky, *Democracy and Decision: The Pure Theory of Electoral Decision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 56-57, 119. For a criticism of this and related formulae, see A. J. Fischer, "The Probability of Being Decisive", *Public Choice* 101 (1999), 263-267.

¹⁵ Brennan and Lomasky, *Democracy and Decision*, p. 57.

¹⁶ This is not hyperbole. Aaron S. Edlin and Pinar Karaca-Mandic ("The Accident Externality of Driving", *Journal of Political Economy* 114 (2006) 931-955) have estimated the expected accident externalities per driver per year in the U.S. These range from as little as \$10 in low traffic density North Dakota to more than \$1725 in high traffic density California. Suppose a North Dakotan takes five minutes to drive to the polling station. Suppose also that each minute of driving over a given year is as approximately risky as any other. If so, the expected accident externality of the voter's five-minute drive is $\$1.9 \times 10^{-5}$, astronomically larger than the $\$4.77 \times 10^{-2650}$ expected cost of a bad vote in the previous example. The risk of individual bad voting will be worse than the risk of bad driving only in high stakes elections with close to no expected majority. (The assumption that all driving times are equally risky is false. However, the error from the assumption is not enough to account for the 2645 orders of magnitude difference between the expected harm of driving and voting in this example.)

could be easily outweighed by other positive results from voting. For instance, going to the polls might be a community bonding experience producing a slight amount of cohesion. Even this slight good might outweigh such a trivial bad. Individual irrational voters could *over*compensate for their individual expected harms by dropping a penny in a charity collection box before entering the polls.

As a partial response to this objection, we should note that irrational voters do not simply choose the bad candidate over the good one. In the U.S. and elsewhere, we rarely find presidential or other elections having one good candidate and one bad one, with the irrational voters choosing the bad one. Candidates' platforms generally approach the policy preferences of the median voter. Since the median voter exhibits systematic economic biases, this means that platforms will be systematically bad. Voters' irrationality induces the political system to supply them with bad choices.

However, this point only pushes the criticism back. The average vote has only trivial expected negative utility, but an irrational individual's pre-election activities, such as answering polls, donating money, writing letters of support, etc., also have only trivial expected disutility. We must conclude that if there is duty not to vote, it is not grounded in individual expected disutility.

4. The Duty to Refrain From Collective Harms

Eliminating bad voting is a collective action problem. When I refrain from voting badly, this does not fix the problem. Bad voting is collectively, not individually, harmful. Still, it is plausible that I am obligated to refrain from collectively harmful activities, even when my contribution has negligible expected cost, provided I do not incur significant personal costs from my restraint.

What does morality require of us in collective action problems, especially in cases where we are acting in collectively irrational ways? Suppose the problem can be solved only if everyone or the vast majority of people acts differently. In such cases, I do not think morality generally requires me, as an individual, to solve the problem. It can't require me to solve the problem, in part, because I can't solve it. E.g., if I am in a prisoner's dilemma or a tragic commons, restraining myself from contributing to the problem fails to solve problem. Rather, this restraint exposes me to exploitation as a sucker and can actually exacerbate the

problem.

In some cases, I might be able to solve the problem through extraordinary personal effort. Suppose I live in a small village where everyone except for me litters. If I spend ninety hours a week picking up litter, the town will be clean. Here I can solve the problem as an individual, but it is implausible to think morality requires me to do so. It's too much of a burden.

It's more plausible that morality requires me not to be part of the problem, insofar as I can avoid being part of the problem at a low personal cost. In classic prisoner's dilemmas, I can't avoid being part of the problem, because my attempt to avoid the problem opens me up to exploitation. Also, in tragic commons, I often cannot avoid being part of the problem without incurring a high personal cost. Consider an individual fisherman of the Tongan Islands coral reefs. The reefs are a collectively held, unregulated commons with no restrictions on access. Other fishermen have begun bleach fishing, a destructive technique that yields a large short-term harvest but spoils the reef in the long-term. Arguably, an individual fisherman whose livelihood depends on the reef is permitted to bleach fish as well. The individual fisherman has no control over the reef and cannot stop the practice. To feed his children and avoid starvation, his only option is to destroy the coral.¹⁷

In contrast, in the case of voting, I can avoid being part of the problem at a low personal cost. It costs me little to stay home and not vote.

Bad voting is a collective action problem. But it is not like a prisoner's dilemma or a tragic commons. In the prisoner's dilemma or tragic commons, it's not merely individually rational for me to engage in collectively irrational behavior. Rather, it's often down right necessary for me to engage in the behavior. If I don't contribute to problem, I suffer a personal disaster. But bad voting is not like that. Refraining from bad voting doesn't cost much.

Why does morality require me not to be part of the problem (at least in cases where there is little personal cost in not being part of the problem)? The principle that one should not engage in collectively harmful activities (when the cost of restraint is low) is plausible on its own. It needn't be grounded in any particular moral theory. It is a freestanding idea that could be part of an overlapping consensus between a number of plausible background

¹⁷ David Schmidtz, "The Institution of Property", *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11 (1994), 42-62, here pp. 46-47.

theories. Consider Brad Hooker's sophisticated rule consequentialism. In its basic form, his rule consequentialism holds that an action is wrong if it violates the code of norms whose internalization by the overwhelming majority of people would lead to the best consequences.¹⁸ A pro tanto norm against engaging in collectively harmful activity would almost certainly form part of this code.¹⁹ More specifically, a norm that required one to overcome one's biases when one voted would form part of this code, since internalizing that norm would lead to the best consequences. A Kantian might argue that engaging in collectively harmful behavior is not universalizable. Imagine a maxim of the form, "I will feel free to engage in collectively harmful behavior when it boosts my self-esteem to do so." If everyone followed this maxim, it would be harmful to almost everyone. This maxim fails the "contradiction in the will" test, because I also will that we do not engage in collectively harmful activities.²⁰ More specifically, a maxim of the form, "I will feel free to vote badly when it boosts my self-esteem to do so" would also fail the contradiction of the will test. A eudaimonist might claim the type of person who engages in collective harms is vicious. And so on.

For illustrative purposes, I will discuss at greater length how a duty to avoid engaging in collective harms could be grounded in fairness. Consider that the problem of bad voting is analogous to the problem of air pollution and global warming. Solving global warming would require serious institutional and technological changes, yet we still seem to think individuals should do their part. Many would judge that I act wrongly in choosing a gas-guzzler over a more efficient car, even though my marginal contribution to pollution is negligible.

The puzzle we're considering here is that if it is wrong for *us* to vote badly, that does not obviously make it wrong for *me* to vote badly. Rita Manning considers a similar puzzle with a proposed duty not to pollute:

Why then does it sound odd to suggest that each driver is morally obligated to control air pollution? Presumably because air pollution is not caused by any one driver and cannot be ended by the single actions of any one driver. If I were the

¹⁸ Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 32.

¹⁹ Hooker, pp. 159-174.

²⁰ Cf. Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 169-170.

owner of the only car in America, I could drive to my heart's content and not cause any air pollution.²¹

Of course, polluting and bad voting are not completely analogous. If I am the only small-scale polluter, my pollution makes no difference. However, if I am the only voter, my vote makes all the difference. Still, when I am one of many bad voters or many polluters, my individual contribution is negligible, but I am nonetheless part of the problem. Yet, if I stop voting badly or polluting, the problem does not go away.

Manning holds that individual drivers have an obligation to pollute less because they are part of the group causing the problem. Individual obligations might derive from fairness. Suppose pollution would be at acceptable levels if cut in half. Suppose one way to achieve this is to require half the population not to drive, while the other half may continue to drive at their current levels with their current highly polluting cars. One is assigned driver/non-driver status by lottery. This lottery is unfair because it arbitrarily burdens some but not all who cause the problem. The default moral position is that everyone causing the problem should bear at least some of the burden of correcting the problem. More controversially, one might claim either that people should bear this burden equally, or in proportion to how much they contribute to the problem, at least in the absence of countervailing conditions.

Manning's analysis shows us how to bridge the gap between collectively harmful behavior and individual action. *We* should pollute less (in part) because pollution harms all of us, but *I* should pollute less because all things equal it is unfair for me to benefit from polluting as I please while others suffer the burden of polluting less. *Ceteris paribus*, we should share the burdens of not polluting. We have an obligation not to free ride on others' provision of cleaner air.

The duty of the irrational not to vote could follow this pattern. *We* irrational people should not vote because it is harmful to everyone, but *I*, the individual irrational voter, should not vote because it is unfair that I accept the benefits of polluting democracy as I please while others suffer the burden of polluting democracy less. *Ceteris paribus*, we should share the burdens of not polluting the polls.

If restraining oneself from voting caused significant personal harm, then individuals might be permitted to vote badly. In fact, such restraint does have costs. However, we can

²¹ Rita C. Manning, "Air Pollution: Group and Individual Obligations", *Environmental Ethics* 6 (1984) 211-225, p. 217.

compare the kinds of harms people suffer if morality forbade them from voting badly to the harms people would suffer if people were allowed to vote badly. Consider a possible moral principle permitting irrational people to vote under institutional circumstances when the majority of people are irrational about politics. Individual irrational voters receive various psychological payoffs from voting. If they were prohibited (by morality) from voting, they lose these payoffs. However, elections decided by irrational voters mean that citizens have to live with racist and sexist laws, unnecessary wars, lower opportunities, lower levels of welfare, etc. The type of harm suffered by the irrational voter from not voting seems relatively trivial compared to the type of harm suffered by the citizen who bears the burden of bad policy.

Collectively, irrational voters' votes have serious disvalue, harming others and themselves, since they vote for politicians who will implement bad economic policies. In parallel, an individual might drive a gas-guzzling Hummer to promote his self-image, getting real pleasure from this activity. I do not take his pleasure to be sufficient to counterbalance the harms imposed on all by smog and global warming. (This is not to say that one must never drive, or even that one may not pollute in the pursuit of pleasure. We all have reason to favor principles that allow us to lead happy lives. Rather, it is to say that at some point, the pursuit of individual pleasure is outweighed by the need to preserve the healthy environment that makes pleasurable lives possible.) An irrational individual voter might choose to vote. This promotes her self-image, and the activity is pleasurable, even though her beliefs about the value of her voting and the efficacy of her preferred policies are false. I do not take her pleasure to be sufficient to counterbalance a duty to refrain from polluting the polls. By voting, irrational voters consume psychological goods at our collective expense.

5. Doing One's Part in Modern Democracy

My position has been that citizens of modern democracies are not obligated to vote. However, if they do vote, they are obligated to vote well, on the basis of sound political and economic beliefs. If they vote on the basis of irrational beliefs or ignorance, they act wrongly. They should abstain. In contrast, one might object that instead of there being a

duty not to vote when one is irrational, there is instead a duty to become a rational, well-informed political agent and to vote accordingly.

E.g., deliberative democrats tend to think that voters ought to vote and vote well. Christiano holds that voters have an obligation to listen to one another, share their own interests and learn of others' interests, engage in public debate, and deepen their senses of justice.²² I agree that voters ought to do this, but I don't think every citizen has to be a voter.

Christiano espouses ideals of popular sovereignty and political equality. Popular sovereignty requires that all "minimally competent adults come together as one body to make decisions". Each citizen votes. Each participates as an equal. Political equality requires majority decision-making and that each citizen should have equal control over the decision-making process. Each citizen has a right and duty to express her opinions and hear others' opinions.²³

Voter abstention violates these ideals. Suppose we grant that Christiano is right and ideally everyone ought to vote well. If so, this paper is an account of the morality of a second best world, anyways. Suppose I grant that voters ought to be informed and rational. However, in our non-ideal world, we know they often won't be. So, I might agree that they should be informed and vote accordingly, but given that they won't be informed, the best thing for them to do is not vote. The worst thing is for them to vote badly. Since we do not live in ideal deliberative democracies, it doesn't follow that badly informed, irrational voters ought to vote in order to mimic these ideals. The best thing may be for everyone to vote well. The next best thing might be for only the informed, rational voters to vote. It would be worse to have full voter participation when most voters are irrational and uninformed.

Another challenge to my position comes from civic humanism. Civic humanism stresses the importance for the good life of civic virtue, civic engagement, public spiritedness, participation in government, and political debate.²⁴ Civic humanists often

²² Thomas Christiano, *The Rule of the Many* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), p. 80, *passim*.

²³ Christiano, *Rule of the Many*, p. 3.

²⁴ E.g., Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); John Maynor and Cecile Laborde (eds.), *Republicanism and Political Theory* (New York: Blackwell, 2007).

complain that liberals regard people as egoistic, individualistic animals. Yet, civic humanism is controversial, both as an ideal of the meritorious or good life, and as a view about the duties of citizens.

John Rawls says, “in a modern democratic society, taking a continuing and active part in public life has, and may reasonably have, a lesser place in the conceptions of the (complete) good of most citizens. In a modern democratic society politics is not the focus of life as it was for native-born male citizens in the Athenian city-state.²⁵ It is not my purpose here to refute civic humanist views. Rather, I will discuss why their view of civic duty is too demanding from a liberal point of view.

Consider how difficult it is to become rational about politics. As anyone who has taught basic economics knows, overcoming basic economic fallacies takes significant effort. Most people find it painful to contemplate how their (emotionally charged ideological) beliefs could be false. Our biases make economics counterintuitive. Thus, understanding basic economics is difficult. Understanding advanced, graduate-level economics is grueling. Consider what else is needed to form rational policy preferences. One might need some political philosophy to assist one in developing a rationally grounded conception of justice. One will need some knowledge of statistics, political science, sociology, international relations, and the other social sciences to grasp the expected effectiveness of various policies. While political science, economics, and philosophy are all worthwhile endeavors, studying them to develop even an undergraduate level of comprehension requires serious investment.

This investment has major opportunity costs. Time is scarce. Time spent overcoming economic bias is not spent learning violin, becoming a medical doctor, playing football, or watching grass grow. There exist myriad worthwhile life goals, which, due to time scarcity, are incompatible with becoming a levelheaded, dispassionate social scientist. It is not obviously more morally meritorious to exhibit rational economic thinking than to be a fire fighter with standard economic biases. Reading and understanding *American Economic Review* is an exercise of intellectual virtue; whether it is an exercise of moral virtue is another matter. Even if it were an exercise of moral virtue, this does not mean it is required, or even that a just society will seek to implement such virtues among all of its citizens. (However,

²⁵ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 143.

public schools should probably teach mainstream neoclassical economics more frequently and at a younger age.)

Civic humanists might say that people should become rational voters so that they can contribute to social welfare. However, besides voting, debating, rallying, supporting causes, writing senators, writing letters to editors, and so on, there are countless other ways of contributing to society. One contributes one's share of the social surplus just by going to work (or working at home). One makes the world more interesting by participating in culture and counterculture. Oddly, one can even do one's part by being irrational. If Mill is correct, when people are not exposed to a variety of views, they grow unreflective, dogmatic, and overly deferential to authority.²⁶ If so, then having a large, vocal contingent of irrational people helps keep rational people rational.

If the survival of a well-functioning democracy depended on more people becoming rational and voting accordingly, this might impose a duty to vote rationally. E.g., though Rawls rejects civic humanism, he claims that justice as fairness is compatible with classical republicanism. Classic republicanism holds we ought to develop civic virtue, not because it is constitutive of the good life, but because it is a necessary instrument to maintaining a constitutional regime.²⁷

However, Rawls stresses, and I agree, that the extent and type of participation needed from citizens on classical republican grounds is largely an empirical question. It seems that reasonably just constitutional democracies survive despite less than full participation and despite serious shortcomings in citizens' civic virtue. Given the extent of voter irrationality and its effects on policy, these democracies might function better with even *less* participation than is now seen. What contemporary democracies need most to preserve equality and liberty is not full, informed participation, but an electorate that retains a constitutional culture and remains vigilant enough that it will rise against any leader that tries to abuse their liberties.

To live in a well functioning democracy is a great gift and something citizens should be thankful for. Yet one reason democracy is such a great gift is that it does not require us to be political animals. It makes space for many ways of life, including avowedly non-political lives. In parallel, we might say that good feature of well-functioning markets is that

²⁶ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), p. 34.

²⁷ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 144.

they make people rich enough to afford to engage in non-market activities and even to avoid the market altogether. A good democracy makes people safe enough in their status as free and equal citizens that they are able to avoid politics.

A good democracy is an important public good. We should all do our part to maintain it. One way a person can do his part is by bowing out. A bad vote cancels a good vote. By staying home and letting rational people vote, one does one's part to make the world better without having to incur the significant personal cost of becoming epistemically rational. If a good vote is a gift to society, avoiding a bad vote is also a kind of gift. In fact, using Lomasky and Brennan's formulae, we can construct scenarios under which avoiding a bad vote has the same expected value as a good vote.²⁸

6. Epistocracy and Abstention

My position is elitist. This is not so much an objection rather than a description of the view. For it to be an objection, there must be a supporting claim that elitism of this sort is wrong. Some forms of elitism are bad. E.g., focusing on and gloating over one's superiority shows bad character. Yet claiming that only competent people should undertake certain activities is not obviously a bad sort of elitism. A person with an unsteady hand should not perform surgery, nor should a person with an unsteady grasp of comparative advantage vote on trade policy and immigration reform.

David Estlund defines "the epistocracy of the educated thesis" as the view that when "some are well educated and others are not, the polity would (other things equal) be better ruled by the giving the well educated more votes."²⁹ I reject epistocracy, even when we substitute "more rational" for "well educated". However, since I claim that at most only rational people should vote, perhaps his arguments against epistocracy would count against my position.

²⁸ Here is a cartoon case. Suppose there is an election between two candidates. One candidate is a disaster but appeals to irrational people. The other is excellent and appeals to rational people. Each candidate votes for herself. There are two other voters, one well-informed rational person and one ignorant and irrational person. In this case, if the irrational voter abstains, there is a 100% chance of the good candidate winning. If she becomes rational and votes, there is a 100% chance of the good candidate winning. The expected utilities of abstaining and of voting well are thus equal. (This, of course, ignores the cost to the irrational voter of becoming rational.)

²⁹ Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, p. 212.

On grounds of equality and legitimacy, I hold that all adult citizens have an equal right to vote, one vote per person. (I will not defend this position here.) My view is that most citizens should not exercise their right. “I have the right to X” does not imply “It is morally right for me to X”. For instance, I have the right to participate in neo-Nazi rallies. No one may coerce me to prevent me from participating. Yet, it would be morally wrong for me to participate.

Some epistocrats hold that people should have the right to vote only if they demonstrate sufficient knowledge and rationality. I reject this position. Caplan says, “A test of voter competence is no more objectionable than a driving test. Both bad driving and bad voting are dangerous...to innocent bystanders.”³⁰ Driving and voting are similar on many grounds, but not on all grounds. Pace Caplan, one difference is that suffrage is a badge of equality, of equal political personhood. In principle, a poll exam could be an effective instrument to improve voting outcomes in ways that benefit all, including those excluded from voting. However, the poll exam is ripe for abuse and institutional capture. Poll exams would be used to disenfranchise people who might vote against the party in power. Special interest groups would fight to control the agency overseeing the exams. We need not examine whether poll exams are unjust in principle. We can expect them to be unjust in practice. Caplan’s public choice economics speaks against the poll exam rather than for it.

Estlund says to the potential epistocrat, “You might be correct, but who made you boss?”³¹ The rational have no more right to rule than the irrational. Estlund argues that universal suffrage is a default because any other system invites “invidious comparisons”. Making political wisdom a condition of the right to vote would not be generally acceptable to the people under the government’s authority.³² I agree. My position is not the rational should rule by right, or that the irrational are by right forbidden from ruling. Rather, the irrational should exercise their equal right to rule in the way that is most advantageous to themselves and others: by abstaining from politics. I advocate morally compulsory but politically voluntary abstention by the irrational. I.e., the irrational should not vote or rule, but no one should force them not to vote or rule.

³⁰ Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, p. 197.

³¹ Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, pp. 40.

³² Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, p. 36.

Estlund's main worry is about people having unequal voting power. But I hold that people should *have* equal voting power, but many should not *exercise* the power they have. That they retain equal power gives them some insurance against abuse. If only rational voters voted, but began voting to exploit the irrational, then the irrational can always start voting again.

Estlund argues that democratic governments have authority because they have the best epistemic performance among those strategies of decision-making that are generally acceptable. I.e., of all possible decision-making methods that can be justified to all reasonable people, democratic methods have the best chance of picking socially optimal policies. My position is compatible with this view of democratic authority. A democracy in which only rational people vote may perform better than a democracy in which all people, including the majority of irrational people, vote.

Still, one might object that not exercising power is equivalent to not having power. Christiano worries that when citizens allow others to make decisions, this results in a society in which the few rule and the many obey.³³

This need not be the case. Abstention need not be a loss of power. In committees, clubs, and at the polls, I have been asked to vote on issues I did not understand, have much knowledge about, or about which I was biased. My concern was to do the right thing and help make sure the best policy goes through. If I do not know what I am talking about, or if I know that I am prone to error and bad judgment about a given issue, one way of respecting my fellow citizens/committee members/etc. is by abstaining. The times I have abstained did not seem to be a loss of power. While I permitted other people to make the decisions, I did not feel ruled by them.

By abstaining on a particular vote, a voter does not relinquish his equal power to rule to others, because he always holds the power to vote. A fortiori, abstaining is often equivalent to voting indirectly. For instance, suppose we are deciding on a restaurant. I am not indifferent to the outcome; I prefer that we eat at the best place. However, I know I am a poor ex ante judge of restaurants, while the rest of you are excellent judges. I know that you know more and are more reliable than I. Despite your greater knowledge, a concern for fair procedure entails that we should each get an equal vote. You do not have the right to tell me where to eat. You know more, but no one made you boss. Yet, since I want to pick

³³ Christiano, *Rule of the Many*, p. 6.

the best restaurant, I can choose to abstain. In doing so, I am not acting non-autonomously or allowing the rest of you to rule me. Rather, I chose to abstain because I recognized it was contrary to all our interests (including mine) to vote. If we were choosing among a number of restaurants, A through D, I could vote for a specific restaurant, such as C. But, since I don't know which is best, I could also say, "I vote for the best restaurant, but I do not know which one that is. Since the rest of you know better, I vote that my vote reflects your collective wisdom." I then abstain, but in effect vote indirectly.

Voluntary abstention can be thus be an indirect vote for the best results. My goal as a voter might be to choose the policy with the best expected consequences, which is often the policy the experts will pick. However, if I am required to vote, because I am not an expert, I am not likely to pick the right option. It would be nice if the ballot had a box that allowed me to make my vote equivalent to the vote of experts who deserve my trust. Yet, since we cannot realistically design ballots that way, a second best approximation of this option is abstention.

Some might see abstention as a violation of autonomy, perhaps even slave-like, but this seems mistaken. So long as I have an equal right to vote, choosing not to vote can be an autonomous act, a way of expressing my will that the best outcome be achieved. Since I retain a right to vote, I am an equal citizen and the democratic decision-making procedure remains generally acceptable.

7. Self-Effacingness [cut?]

In some ways, the position I take in this paper is self-effacing. I think irrational people should not vote. Yet, irrational people often believe they are rational. They would not recognize that they are among those obligated not to vote. To confirm this in at least one instance, as an unscientific experiment, I discussed my thesis with a person who exemplifies political and economic irrationality. He agreed that *other* people should not vote.

Someone might claim that my position is wrong because it is self-effacing. However, my thesis is simply that the typical person (who is irrational) should not vote. It is not that advertising this thesis would make the world better. Indeed, if this thesis were widely promulgated, it might induce irrational people to vote out of spite. A self-effacing position need not be false. For instance, suppose certain critics of utilitarianism are correct when they claim that if people accepted utilitarianism, this would make the world worse by

utilitarian standards. If so, this does not show that utilitarian standards are false. Rather, it just shows that we should not advertise them.

However, one might argue that self-effacingness does harm my position because ought implies can. People have a duty only if they can follow the duty. One might pose the following dilemma. Either people can't recognize they're irrational, in which case they can't obey the principle and thus are not subject to it. Or, if they do recognize their irrationality, their irrationality goes away, and so again they are not subject to the principle.

In response, it is usually possible (though often unlikely) that one can identify one's biases and irrationality. In moments of clarity we often recognize that our patterns of belief and behavior are not rational. However, identifying our biases and irrationalities is not sufficient to rid ourselves of them. I am aware that I, like everyone else, suffer from various cognitive biases, including confirmation bias, motivated skepticism/disconfirmation bias, hindsight bias, availability bias, anchoring and adjustment bias, etc. Sadly, knowing I have these biases has not made them disappear.

The position that irrational people ought not vote does have a practical upshot. We can work to minimize the harmfulness of our irrationality even when we cannot rid ourselves of it. E.g., overeaters sometimes realize that in future moments of temptation, they will rationalize eating any junk food in easy reach. Thus, some overeaters do not to keep junk food in their homes and take alternative routes to work to avoid passing fast food restaurants. If a person could recognize that she is irrational with regard to politics, she might schedule appointments on voting days to prevent herself from being tempted to vote.

8. Conclusion

I see myself as a defender of democracy. I wish to keep the voting process free of pollution, and what defender of democracy wishes to see her favored system polluted? Most democrats are concerned with both democratic procedures and democratic outcomes.³⁴ Few democrats think any outcome chosen by a democratic procedure is acceptable, or that any outcome aligning with democratic values is acceptable regardless of what procedure produced it. Universal voting by irrational voters might make procedures more democratic than massive abstention by the irrational. Yet, this does not mean the outcome of this

³⁴ See Corey Brettschneider, *Democratic Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

procedure will be align better with democratic values, and thus does not mean that opposing the procedure is inherently undemocratic.

When people call for universal or extended participation, we have to ask what the institution of universal participation is for. If we are passionate lovers of democracy, we might celebrate what universal participation would symbolize. Yet, in the real world, we have to ask how institutions would function. Institutions are not people. They are not ends in themselves. They are not paintings, either, to be judged by their beauty and by what they symbolize. Institutions are more like hammers—they are judged by how well they work. Good institutions get us good results; bad institutions get us bad results. Universal participation in voting when most people are irrational about economics gets us bad results.