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Toward a Democratic Morality

Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky

A phenomenon noticeable throughout history regardless of place or period is the pursuit by governments of policies contrary to their own interests. Man-kind, it seems, makes a poorer performance of government than of almost any other human activity. In this sphere, wisdom – which may be defined as the exercise of judgment acting on experience, common sense and available information – is less operative and more frustrated than it should be. Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why does intelligent mental process seem so often not to function?

Barbara Tuchman, The March of Folly

By the People?

Democracy, so the popular maxim assures us, is government of the people, by the people, for the people – and it is unique among political regimes in being so. In this chapter we seek to interrogate that species of democratic piety. To be more precise, we shall question two-thirds of it. That democracy is government of the people is hardly to be denied. But this is not what makes democracy unique: All functioning political regimes govern “the people.” It is rather democracy’s status as rule by the people and for the people that is the distinctive core of the democrat’s faith.

The two elements – the by-ness and for-ness – are not unrelated. Although government for the people by a beneficent elite is a conceptual possibility, it is a highly improbable one. Elites cannot be relied on to pursue individuals’ interests with anything like the consistency or intensity that the individuals themselves regularly do: Benevolent despots are considerably more likely to remain despotic than benevolent. Moreover, effective benevolence requires that one determine what genuinely constitutes the
treated as a cloistered minor is demeaning to one who has morally come of age.

It is, therefore, a central element of the democratic brief that the people genuinely have the status of responsible political actors if and only if they are self-governing. Accordingly, should the coherence of government by the people be at risk, then the notion of political responsibility will have to be rethought, and with it much in the lexicon of democratic civic morality: How should I vote? Should I vote at all? Why? And so on. And, as we shall argue, if the construction of a democratic civic morality is problematic, so is much that passes for justification of democratic institutions.

It is helpful to a normative analysis of the practice of democracy to distinguish between democratic “macroethics” and democratic “microethics.” The former embraces questions of global institutional design: Are decisions of such and such kind to be made collectively or through decentralized individual choice? If collectively, are determinations to be made democratically or via some other procedure? If democratically, what should the voting rules be, and should they be constrained or unconstrained (e.g., by judicial review)? Who will be permitted/required to participate in elections? And so on. Microethical questions concern the performances of individual voters: Should I vote? If I do vote, how should I determine the direction of my ballot? How much investment should I make in securing political information? And so on.

In this chapter, we want to refocus the argument [of the foregoing chapters] on microethical issues specifically. The linchpin of the analysis is the concept of political responsibility, the alleged by-ness of democratic procedures. We shall argue in the upcoming section that that concept, as normally construed, is highly dubious. We thereafter ask whether the idea of democracy being for the people might nevertheless be rescued to some extent, and what would be required to make any such rescue operation successful. The following section constitutes the bulk of this chapter and is where we consider whether and how one might construct a civic morality that coherently engages individuals on the level of their particular voting performances. We argue that an expressly based understanding of voting not only does service as a positive theory of electoral phenomena, but also affords the most plausible grounding of democratic microethics that can be constructed. The final section builds on these results to show how one can effect a transition from judgments of individual voter responsibility to the global macroethical concern that democratic governance be reliably for the people. [That, in turn, prepares the way for the book’s final chapter in which we turn to macroethical democratic policy making.]
The Dubious Status of “Collective Self-Determination”

The proposition that democracy is government by the people and thus for the people depends, in its naïve version, on a picture of democratic action as individual choice writ large. The intuition is that just as an individual chooses among options to produce intended results in the private arena, so all individuals, acting in concert, choose among social outcomes via explicit collective decision-making processes. When an individual chooses the maximally preferred set of achievable outcomes from among the alternatives open to her, she thereby acts rationally. Similarly, collective choice is rational insofar as “society” has evaluated alternatives and chooses from them those deemed best. This organic conception of society currently enjoys much less currency than it once did—an eclipse we applaud. Within the rational actor tradition with which we associate our own work, the organicist view embodies a gross conceptual confusion. As countless examples of the prisoners’ dilemma attest, the processes through which individual actions are translated into social outcomes are complex and sometimes perverse. Any theory that treats social aggregates as choosing entities, much like individuals, sweeps away many of the most interesting intellectual questions in social analysis and many of the most pressing practical problems in social policy design.

Consider the simple analogy of the littered beach. The litter arises as a result of human action—we can plausibly say that the beach is littered by the people. But there can be no suggestion that the litter arises as a result of users’ careful computations of alternative states of the beach and that the litter is there because the people prefer it. While there may be a natural presumption that a choice made by an individual is for that individual, no such presumption applies in the collective case. Even if there is an intelligible sense in which beach litter is by the people, that sense does not legitimate the inference that a littered beach is their preferred outcome, that it is expressive of their will—that the outcome brought about by the people is, therefore, for the people. Because the littered beach is not in any meaningful sense collectively chosen (or, for that matter, chosen by any one of the individual litterers), the sense in which the litter is by the people must be quite different from that involved in the individual case. Individual and collective choice are sharply dissimilar in this respect.

The robustness or lack of same of such analogies would matter little in practice if we could be sure that democratic procedures ruled out prisoners’ dilemma problems. But this is what needs to be proved. And, of course, both public choice orthodoxy and the alternative theory (developed in the preceding chapters) emphasize the relevance of prisoners’ dilemma problems to majoritarian decision-making procedures. Public choice orthodoxy focuses on the problems of revolving coalitions and political instability; our alternative emphasizes the disproportionate influence of expressive considerations at the ballot box. In the development of our central propositions [in Chapter 2], we took particular care to stress the underlying prisoners’ dilemma potential of the collective decision-making problem. Because of that potential, the fact that government is by the people does not necessarily mean that it is for the people—and we would expect that in a significant number of cases it will not be. The alleged connection between by-ness and for-ness, the fulcrum of the democratic faith, is severed.

A yet deeper question needs to be broached. Is there any significant sense in which democracy constitutes government by the people? It may seem that this must be so. In a democracy political outcomes do not merely happen but rather are the product—even if not a collectively chosen product—of the various voting acts of the citizenry. It is through their agency, and not some other thing, that outcomes are determined, and since they are, taken together, “the people,” democratic governance—whatever its deviations from a hypothesized social welfare optimum—is government by them.

The conclusion is too quick, at least if there is to remain any link whatsoever between government by the people and citizens’ political responsibility. To see that that is so, consider the following “electoral” setting. As with our elections, every two or four or some other number of years voters march to the polls and select levers to pull. As with our elections, the quantity of pulls determines the success of one of the standing candidates/policies/parties. Unlike the running of our elections, however, these levers are unmarked. No voter knows which lever-pulling action supports which candidate. Nonetheless, levers get pulled, totals cumulated, winners determined, and policies enacted. Do we have here an instance of government by the people?

Well, one could choose to call it such. But this is very cheap talk indeed. Clearly it is talk too impoverished to support any imputation of moral responsibility for what has been brought about “by” the voters. Government by unmarked levers is government by lottery. As with other (fair) lottery forms, it induces no attempt on the part of candidates to secure support. And voters will have no reason to pull one lever rather than another—or at least no reason connected with an intention to secure a particular political outcome. The role of levers is purely causal. But by-ness in this attenuated sense is palpably insufficient to sustain an argument that governance in a democracy is something that the people do, that it is
something for which they bear moral responsibility (and not just causal responsibility in the way a lightning strike is causally responsible for the felling of the tree). If democratic governance is to be an activity of the people, we need not merely causation but also, at a minimum, intent. There lies the democrat’s problem. In elections where the numbers are even modestly large, the political outcome is, for each and every voter, essentially incidental to his action — and that is so whether or not the levers are identified. That is, what presents itself for the voter’s choice is not the political outcome, and any voter who believes otherwise must be deluded. One who intends through his vote to bring about the election of candidate X is on all fours with someone who steps on a crack with the intention thereby of breaking his grandmother’s back. Irrespective of what they may believe they are doing, they are in fact not acting intentionally to secure favored outcomes. Each is in need of a patient course of instruction in the workings of the causal order. Conversely, undeluded X-voters are doing something other than intentionally choosing political outcomes. And when a large number of persons all engaged in doing something else produce as an incidental byproduct of their action a particular state of affairs, then the insinuation that this state of affairs is, in some meaningful sense, expressive of their will must be regarded as highly suspect.

We do not mean by this observation to imply that any state of affairs so generated will necessarily be the worse for being undesigned. It has been a familiar theme in political economy since Mandle and Smith that benign outcomes may be produced by invisible hand mechanisms rather than via deliberate construction. Whether a possible invisible hand lurks nearby in this case is, however, a quite complex matter — as far as we know unargued in the literature on democracy, or at least unargued in any explicit way. Some such argument would, however, seem to be crucial to any reasoned defense of democracy, and so it is to that argument we now turn.

**Quasi-Invisible Hands and Public-Interested Voting**

The most familiar picture of the operation of invisible hand institutions is that offered by Smith in his description of well-ordered markets, nowadays thoroughly absorbed (with some modification) into mainstream welfare economics. In this context, agents who are predominantly egotistic promote through their actions the interest of others. Competitive markets locate each actor in a network of what may be conceived as bribes — less pejoratively, prices — paid to the actor to modify her conduct in the interest of others.

The institutional structure is crucial here. In the absence of well-defined property rights and appropriate arrangements to enforce them, and without the possibility of enforceable contracts between agents, the alchemy of the idealized market cannot work. And it is worth emphasizing that this institutional structure is supported by a range of benign prisoners’ dilemma interactions. It will often be in the interest of a subset of the community to coordinate behavior at the expense of nonmembers of that subset: This is precisely what happens when sellers of a commodity form a monopolistic cartel. However, any member of such a cartel can typically steal a personal advantage by free-riding on other members; and it is this free-riding behavior that inhibits the emergence of cartels, undermines those that do materialize, allows the freely competitive market to flourish, and empowers the invisible hand to shower its blessings on the multitude. The implication of the Smithian analysis is that there is no warrant for the assumption that prisoners’ dilemma interactions are necessarily welfare diminishing for all affected parties. We must examine and assess the outcomes of such interactions as best we can on a case-by-case basis.

Does the democratic political process with electoral competition under majority rule constitute an incentive structure that induces political agents (specifically, political decision makers, whether politicians or bureaucrats) to act in the interests of citizens? Is politics like the market in this sense? The answer generally offered by public choice scholarship is no! Majority rule does not aggregate preferences in a determinate way, and in the absence of further restriction there is no bound on the political outcomes to which majority rule can give rise. To that difficulty, we insist, must be added another — namely, that the inputs to the majoritarian aggregation process are not of the right kind: They are not reflections of voter preferences over political outcomes.

Perhaps, though, the second difficulty mitigates rather than exacerbates the first. It will do so if voter inconsequentiality itself ("as if by an invisible hand") induces persons to forgo in some measure the political predation they would undertake were they to enjoy the capacity to act decisively. The suggestion carries credibility because inconsequentiality radically lowers the costs of indulging one’s benign sentiments toward others. The preference aggregation that external institutional procedures are unable to effect may, then, occur internally in the minds of appropriately motivated individuals. Suppose specifically that citizen-voters are impelled not by self-interest but by a desire to express the public interest as they perceive it. If their perceptions are not too divergent, it seems plausible that the kinds of instability emphasized in public choice orthodoxy might be significantly moderated if not totally solved. To majority rule would be left the modest
role of sorting out minor differences in voter judgments of the public interest, rather than settling irreconcilable conflicts over whose particular interests are to be served. This scenario may strike the economist (and political skeptics, cynics, and other low forms of life) as hopelessly quixotic. Nonetheless, other political theorists, notably those who situate themselves in the republican tradition, do seriously entertain the likelihood of a vigorously public-spirited citizenry, and the expressive theory of electoral preference may buttress their hope that the propensities of democratic governance are fundamentally benign. That hypothesis now merits further attention.

The clear message of the redistribution example [discussed at length in Chapter 3] is that the collective nature of voting does indeed lower the cost of “voting morally.” Individuals who believe in the abstract that poverty ought to be relieved, that they have a strict duty to aid the poor, may in the arena of private action be observed to relinquish a very small percentage of their assets toward redistributive ends. This is hardly puzzling. Although aiding the poor is judged to be the morally right thing to do and therefore assigned a positive valuation in utility functions, a yet higher valuation is assigned to personal consumption. A dollar given away to the poor is a dollar’s consumption forgone, and so the poor will fare quite badly. If, though, the cost of a dollar’s worth of poverty alleviation dropped to a dime, to a fraction of a penny, then the poor might make out much better.

Because voting does lower the cost of acting on one’s perceived moral duties, individuals will find it less onerous to vote morally than they would if they stood to bear the full costs of their actions. Self-interest, we might say, no longer blinds them from seeing where their moral duty lies, and weakness of will does not hobble them from carrying it out. The voter’s dilemma [of Table 3.1; not included here] is, from this perspective, altogether auspicious rather than symptomatic of some deep-seated pathology of democratic procedures. True, each voter gets the outcome he desires less, but it is nonetheless the outcome that he acknowledges to be the morally better one. It can hardly be a damning indictment of democracy that voting substantially mutates the voracious acquisitive appetite that dominates market behavior and thereby amplifies the too often inaudible voice of conscience. In this vein, J. S. Mill says of the individual who participates in public functions:

He is called upon, while so engaged, to weigh interests not his own: to be guided, in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities; to apply at every turn, principles and maxims which have for their reason of existence the common good. He is made to feel himself one of the public, and whatever is for their benefit to be for his benefit. (1858, p. 54)

By way of contrast, where citizens are generally excluded from political activity, Mill states:

Scarcely any sense is entertained that private persons, in no eminent social situation, owe any duties to society, except to obey the laws and submit to the government. There is no selfish sentiment of identification with the public. Every thought or feeling, either of interest or of duty, is absorbed in the individual and in the family. The man never thinks of any collective interest, of any object to be pursued jointly with others, but only in competition with them, and in some measure at their expense. Thus even private morality suffers, while public is actually extinct. (pp. 54–5)

Mill is, of course, speaking of public participation extending beyond the mere exercise of the franchise, but his reasoning nicely fits the narrower case of voting. Society, he believes, is the recipient of substantial benefits when citizens actively involve themselves in the conduct of public business. Individuals have not only one persona but at least two: the practical but unlovely visage of homo economicus and a public-spirited self of greater comeliness but lamentable shyness. Mill, and exponents of democracy more generally, can present the following syllogism: Institutional structures that encourage a shift in concern away from the acquisitive, reflexively absorbed self toward the greater community merit support. Democratic institutions do encourage this shift. Therefore democratic institutions ought to be supported.

But we must be careful, not least because it would be so reassuring to be persuaded by the argument. Such reassurance, it seems to us, is precarious for at least three reasons. First, although voter inconsequentiality lowers the cost of voting one’s moral principles, it also lowers the cost of voting on the basis of whim, fancy, or prejudice. That is, although public-interest considerations are among those that may drive individuals’ expressive activities, expressive preferences can, as a pure matter of logic, take any content whatever. It is a pious hope to imagine otherwise. Expressions of malice and/or envy no less than expressions of altruism are cheaper in the voting booth than in the market. A German voter who in 1933 cast a ballot for Hitler was able to indulge his antisemitic sentiments at much less cost than he would have borne by organizing a pogrom.

Second, there are grounds for fearing that voting, particularly voting under conditions of secrecy, favors more than does market activity the
"darker side of the force." Because votes are anonymous, recipients of altruistic concern expressed through the voting act will be unable to identify and express gratitude toward their benefactors. If someone places value not only on helping other persons, but also on being seen by them to have helped, he will receive a greater return from a dollar of direct giving than from incurring an equal expense through his vote. Although voting remains a relative bargain for one prone to economize on the expression of altruism, there is at least some countervailing tendency for persons to channel their altruistic impulses into private giving rather than philanthropic ballots. The reverse is true with respect to malice. Here, anonymity stands to become a benefit rather than a cost because it insulates one from the reproach and reciprocation of one's victim. Admittedly, the sadistic and vengeful may not only desire to harm someone but also desire that their target know whence his harm comes. But this is surely the exception; more people will vote for capital punishment than will volunteer for duty in the firing squad, and many Germans noted with equanimity the disappearance of the Jewish population from their communities without desiring to become more deeply involved in the machinations of the Third Reich. Between altruism and malice, there is some grounds for anxiety that democratic procedures tend to favor the latter. Consequently, an apology for democracy on the grounds that it encourages greater public-interest than would be observed in private transactions is in some jeopardy – at least under conditions of secret voting. Whether unveiling the vote might encourage increased "civic virtue" is a matter we take up in Chapter 11 (of Democracy and Decision). The point to be made here is that because voting is virtually cost free, it is likely to prove conducive to extremes of expression, both altruistic and malicious and that at least under prevailing conditions of secrecy, the malicious extreme might be differentially encouraged.

Third, even if voting does engage the moral impulses of the citizenry, there can be no guarantee that these moral impulses will in fact generate social goods. We have already referred to the difficulty that some commentators, and most notably Hayek, have identified as attaching to judgments of others' interests. On this argument, even if voters were to aim at some internal analogue of the aggregation process that serves public interest in the market case, their success could not be assumed. Moreover, voters are far more likely to fasten onto emotionally vivid features of candidates and policy proposals as a vehicle for the identification and expression of their moral principles than onto broader and more subtle components of the public interest. Where the candidates stand on, say, abortion or South Africa may influence votes even though the office in question has virtually nothing to do with the formulation of policy in those areas. Political folklore informs us that kissing babies garners votes – and that kissing episodes that reach the front pages of the lurid tabloids sold in supermarkets do rather the opposite. Are moral impulses at work in these cases? No doubt. Do they reliably advance a public interest? That is considerably more dubious.

**Responsibility and Voter Morality**

If public-interest voting, or morally defensible voting more generally, is to predominate in large-scale settings, electoral conduct will have to be the subject of a prevailing civic morality, one that gives a satisfactory account of why individuals should exercise the franchise and why they should do so in a publicly interested way. As noted earlier, the inconsequentiality of individual votes seems to provide fertile soil in which such a civic morality might take root, since moral injunctions do not have to overcome the clamorous urgings of self-interest. And certainly there is no shortage of moral charges to the effect that, as citizens, we ought to vote, that we ought to do so in an informed and responsible manner, that one who takes the performance of voting lightly is derelict in civic duty, and so on. The question is, How can such injunctions be grounded? The very inconsequentiality of the individual vote – that which suggests the possible potency of electoral morality – also seems to undermine the most natural route toward justification; for how can it be the case that a citizen can properly be blamed or praised for an action the performance or non-performance of which almost certainly makes no difference? And for an action, moreover, that she knows almost certainly make no difference? Unless some plausible account can be given, democratic macroethics will entirely lack an adequate microethical foundation.

To the question Why vote? there are broadly three kinds of answers. The first focuses on the probability of being decisive. It claims that it is wrong to suggest that a vote will "almost certainly" make no difference – that, in fact, there is a reasonable chance of exercising some effect. The second reasons instead on the magnitude of the moral stakes involved. It accepts that the chances of actually deciding the electoral outcome are extremely remote but argues that the consequences of generating the wrong electoral outcome are sufficiently grave most of the time to justify voting, and voting in the right way. The third focuses directly on the content of expressive preferences. It maintains that one is morally obligated to express one's views on significant political issues whether or not one is likely to have an impact on electoral outcomes, and that one is morally answerable for one's views as such (or for failing to have any) and for giving them expression in
most advance overall well-being. These are central tenets of the democratic faith, yet a straightforward consequentialism leaves them embarrassingly vulnerable. The failure of consequentialism to ground a civic morality does not, however, entail the demise of democratic microethics. Although we stop short of categorically maintaining that individuals do have a duty to vote, do have a duty to investigate the issues, and do have a duty to cast ballots for the candidate/policy deemed best for the polity, we argue that these injunctions derive at least some prima facie support from an expressive ethics. To put it another way, if there does exist a well-grounded democratic microethics, its contours are expressive rather than directly consequentialist.

**Why should I vote?**

We take it as given that voting is costly, in both the objective and the opportunity cost sense. The fact that not all citizens vote (even in places like Australia where voting is nominally compulsory) and that *many* do not vote on some occasions in other places, indicates that citizens place positive value on alternative uses of their time and energy. Even if turnouts were total, the time and energy used up in voting would have alternative uses that may be deemed to be of higher value. Those California voters, for example, who voted in the Reagan and Bush elections when the outcomes were already known, could arguably have devoted their energies to more personally or socially productive activities than voting. To the extent that they voted out of civic duty, for example, an act utilitarian could argue that they behaved on the basis of a mistaken morality and that a correct utilitarian calculus would have indicated some other activity as more desirable. If the satisfaction they derived from the act of voting was sufficiently great, then these "irrelevant" Californian voters do right to vote, but there is no basis for encouraging other citizens to follow their example. In any event, we take it to be nonaxiomatic that everyone ought to vote, that the optimal turnout is the entire set of enfranchised persons. Whether one ought to vote, whether one's responsibility to vote is a matter simply of getting the optimal turnout, and, if so, what that optimal turnout is all matters to be determined.

We also take it to be nonaxiomatic that actual turnouts are necessarily suboptimal. One might argue that, although optimal turnouts may be less than 100%, the importance of a vibrant civic morality constitutes strong presumptive reason for believing that turnouts in which a significant slice of the eligible citizenry fails to vote are suboptimal. However, once it is accepted that citizens may have reasons to go to the polls that are independent of moral duty, or that civic morality can be potent and potentially
they do so only at the periphery. Accordingly, we turn to the central microethical justificatory routes.

The influence factor. Consider the three alternative foci for morally based admonitions to vote: the probability of influence, the magnitude of the stakes, and the moral content of expressive preferences as such. As a representative example of the first genre, we offer the following editorial comment, fortuitously encountered by one of us (invisible hand?), while trying to break the boredom of travel, in the October 1982 issue of United Airlines’ inflight magazine and penned by its CEO at the time, Richard J. Ferris:

Why do so many Americans take for granted the right to vote? Perhaps it’s because they are politically apathetic, distrustful of the system, unwilling to take the time, unbending in their belief that their vote can’t possibly have an impact on the outcome of an election. How wrong and how wasteful. By voting, a person chooses leaders, endows them with power, and holds them accountable. (Emphasis added)

Heartening though it is to find among our great corporate executives such abiding respect for the political potency of the average (non)voter, the central empirical claims here are just plain wrong. A person does not, in fact, choose leaders; his influence on their power is asymptotically negligible; and since he cannot unilaterally bundle them out, it is hard to see how he can hold them accountable. Pace Mr. Ferris, the belief that a single voter is extremely unlikely to have an impact on the outcome of an election is true. Perhaps to assert otherwise is a noble lie, but it is a lie just the same.

But is it even noble? Suppose that the Ferris strategy worked, that voters came to believe that the probability of being decisive was considerable. Then individuals would presumably be encouraged to vote as they act in other arenas where they are decisive — that is, according to private outcome-oriented interest. Such private interest would, incidentally, be unlikely to be congruent with United’s or Mr. Ferris’s interests, which supports the suspicion that Ferris himself does not actually believe the propositions he is urging. More to the point for our purposes, all the traditional anxieties troubling an interest-based voting system, familiar from orthodox public choice, would reemerge. Suppose next, for the sake of argument, that Ferris is right, that one who does not vote would have a significant chance of affecting electoral outcomes if she did vote. Then it follows that democracy as it actually works, and in particular with the levels of turnout that actually prevail, generates electoral outcomes that we would expect to be very different if turnovers were larger. What authority then do the actual outcomes
have? What confidence can we have that emergent outcomes reflect any reliable measure of the public interest? Surely the Ferris depiction is an indictment of American democracy as a process of collective decision making. To be sure, nondemocratic processes may be yet worse; but it must be sobering news for the democraphile that electoral outcomes are so arbitrary.

Our own view, as we said, is that Ferris is wrong on this matter. We may have grounds for anxiety about democratic outcomes, but sensitivity to small changes in voter turnout is not among them. There is, though, one qualification to be entered. Individuals may en masse refrain from voting as a means of expressing lack of support for the current incarnation of a traditionally favored party. A seasoned Democrat who finds it impossible to vote for the Republican candidate however much she detests her own party's candidate may simply stay away from the polls. If she is one among many such, the electoral outcome will respond—but the response is not arbitrary, and one presumably would not want to insist that such a non-voter should vote. Nonvoting is precisely the means whereby her preference is given effect.

The stakes. The second route to civic morality is to accept that each voter has a minute probability of being decisive, but to emphasize the magnitude of the stakes involved. Brian Barry (1978) pursues this consequentialist line in the voting context specifically:

If an act-utilitarian really gives full weight to the consequences for everyone that he expects will be affected, this will normally provide an adequate reason for voting. If I think that one party will increase the GNP by 1/4 per cent over five years more than the other party, that for a utilitarian is a big aggregate difference. Are there really so many more beneficial things one could do with fifteen minutes? (p. 39)

On the more general issue of the moral grounds for taking account of small chances, Derek Parfit (1984) has this to say:

It may be objected that it is irrational to consider very tiny chances. When our acts cannot affect more than a few people, this may be so. But this is because the stakes are here comparatively low. Consider the risks of causing accidental death. It may be irrational to give any thought to a one-in-a-million chance of killing one person. But if I was a nuclear engineer, would I be irrational to give any thought to the same chance of killing a million people? This is what most of us believe.... When the stakes are very high, no chance, however small, should be ignored. (pp. 74–5)

Barry and Parfit concede, in effect, that from a perspective of self-interested prudence, investment in a trip to the polls is irrational. The individual does not stand to gain enough for himself. However, when the relevant stake is the sum of benefits to the citizenry at large, calculations are radically transformed. And it is, of course, the overall social good on which the utilitarian fastens. So far so good. Those who maintain on consequentialist grounds that there is a moral duty to vote surely do not mean to say that the balance of advantage accrues exclusively or primarily to the individual voter. Such self-derived benefits are incidental. Their claim is that voting is a public good, and that an adequate civic morality bids us each to supply that good to our fellows.

Is the utilitarian ideal, then, a citizenry in which all participate at the polls? That question cannot be answered as it stands; for here, as elsewhere, what it is that I should do to produce the best overall consequences crucially depends on what others will do. Barry and Parfit fail to address the various possibilities; we now do so by exploring variants of the voter's dilemma [introduced in Chapter 3].

The standard “egoistic” version is depicted in Table 9.1. Recalling that each voter's valuations are taken to be identical, the total cost of outcome A is not a benefit of 100 forgone but a benefit of 100 to each citizen-voter—that is, a total benefit of 100n (where n is the number of citizen-voters). Thus the matrix relevant to a utilitarian is the one depicted in Table 9.2. An expected payoff calculation will require the agent to weight the benefit (7) of voting for A against the benefit (100n) of voting for B. All that seems required to induce the agent to vote is a probability of being decisive larger

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<tr>
<th>Each</th>
<th>Majority for A</th>
<th>Majority for B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Votes for A</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Votes for B</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
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Table 9.2 The utilitarian calculus

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<tr>
<th>Each</th>
<th>Majority for A</th>
<th>Majority for B</th>
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<tr>
<td>Votes for A</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100n + 7(S + 1)</td>
<td>7 + 7n/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes for B</td>
<td>7n</td>
<td>100n + 7S</td>
<td>100n + 7n/2</td>
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Note: n is the number of (other) voters for A when A wins, S is the number of (other) voters for A when B wins, and n is total citizen population (all of whom are assumed to vote).
than \(7/100n\). With citizens numbering in the millions, this requirement seems a weak one.\(^8\) So, one might conclude, each person should vote, and each should vote for \(B\) over \(A\).

But this is too quick. One may not ignore what others are doing. So let us begin by universalizing table 9.2. Suppose that the utilitarian argument is a compelling one, and all voters can be relied on to vote for \(B\) over \(A\). Then we should need only one voter to secure the preferred electoral outcome. To have \(n\) votes for \(B\) is to have \((n-1)\) too many. Resources are being squandered that could be employed elsewhere to generate utility.

Less restrictively, we can allow for mistakes in pulling levers and errors of judgment, but unless the probability of a representative individual supplying the correct vote is very close to one-half,\(^9\) the proportion of the electorate required to vote in order to ensure that the right outcome emerges is very small. For example, the probability of my being decisive if 100 other voters vote for \(B\) with a probability of .9 is (using Equation (4.6)) \(3.6 \times 10^{-24}\). If there are 100 million citizens (or otherwise affected parties), then the payoff to each would have to be of the order of 10 thousand trillion \((10^{13})\) dollars in order for it to be worth a forgone \$3.60 for the 101st person to vote. In other words, in a community composed entirely of individuals who are motivated by concern for the general weal and whose judgment of where the weal lies is fairly reliable, the turnout required to generate the correct outcome is quite small – only a tiny fraction of the enfranchised group. Of course, as we noted above, one would have to allow here for any benefits of increased legitimacy or compliance (whether soundly grounded or not) that flowed from electoral participation; if such benefits exceed the cost of voting for some or all voters, then turnout should be larger on that account. But such considerations do not seem to be connected to the stakes at issue in any election and are certainly not what Parfit and Barry have in mind, so we shall set them aside. There is, however, a further complication that is relevant to the utilitarian calculus. Note that there is an expressive return to the individual from going to the polls and voting for \(A\). Since the probability for the 100th voter of doing any harm by voting for \(A\) when the other 99 all vote for \(B\) with probability .9 is truly negligible, it increases overall preference satisfaction for that voter to go to the polls and cast a ballot against the utilitarian-preferred candidate.

Suppose we set aside the problem of mistakes. Then the true utilitarian ideal will not necessarily be where one person votes for \(B\) and no one else votes, but may instead be where everyone votes, with a simple majority of exactly one voter for \(B\). This will be so if the expressive benefit from voting for \(A\) is at least twice the cost of voting, because for each additional \(A\)-voter we allow we must admit an additional \(B\)-voter to ensure that the correct outcome is assured. Of course, no such outcome is really feasible unless there is an appropriate coordination mechanism in place. If each must vote for \(A\) or \(B\) probabilistically, because the does not know deterministically how others will vote, then the ideal stochastic outcome will be one in which \(B\) defeats \(A\) (on average) but in which each votes for \(A\) with sufficient probability that the expected expressive benefit from voting exceeds the cost.

If we drop the assumption of identical voters, we can suppose that some will derive smaller expressive benefits from voting for \(A\) than will others. It is the former group that should vote for \(B\), if indeed they should vote at all. And among the latter group, it may well be that some of them should not vote, even though it is individually rational for them to do so, because their voting in the “wrong way” requires that someone else may have to vote in the “right way” to ensure that getting the desired outcome is appropriately likely. Actual turnout could indeed be too large.

All this may seem like an excessively elaborate way of making the following simple point: Once expressive considerations are allowed for, what each ought to do depends critically on what all others do, even if the merits of the competing electoral contenders are unambiguous and even if all citizens are moved by concern for the public interest. That is, it may be best for me to vote for \(A\), to vote for \(B\), or not to vote at all, depending on what I think others are going to do. And this is so even if the stakes involved in the electoral success of \(B\) over \(A\) are quite large.

But how plausible is it to suppose, given assumptions of general public-spiritedness and reliable judgment, that the stakes are substantial? In that envisioned world, any forces of electoral competition that are operative will force parties to adopt policy platforms that are perceived by voters to aim at the overall social good. Thus, if the appeal to the public interest is compelling, and parties respond to electoral demands, they will converge on roughly the same point in electoral space.\(^{10}\) The electoral landscape simply will not exhibit contests such as those in table 9.2 in which there is a clear and significant consequentialist demarcation between the contending parties. Differences will be almost entirely matters of “style,” alternate paths to the political sumnum bonum, rather than differences of substance. Insofar as individuals accrue greater or lesser or negligible expressive returns from one of these paths, they will rationally vote for \(A\), vote for \(B\), or not vote at all. But the claim that each is morally obligated to vote in virtue of the gravity of the stakes evaporates.

Barry and Parfit could protest that the preceding analysis is beside the point. We do not, alas, live in a world in which each intends the public interest. If we did live in such a world, all the prisoners’ dilemma problems on which so much of welfare economics and political philosophy hang
would be solved. Provision of public goods would no longer be a problem that required for its solution large-scale collective action. To be sure, coordination problems of various kinds might still arise, and so anarchy would not necessarily provide the optimal level of spending on public goods, but the standard cases of internal and external defense provision, littered beaches, excessive greenhouse-gas emissions, and so on would be removed. But this is a pipe dream. The average level of benevolence we in fact experience is distinctly suboptimal, and there is considerable variance around that mean. We do better, therefore, to take Barry and Parfit to be prescribing for the actual world and its near neighbors rather than an envisioned utilitarian paradise. Specifically, we can take them to be assuming that many individuals will not vote even if there would be a non-negligible public benefit to their exercise of the franchise, and that many of those who do bestir themselves to vote will be moved by a private interest that diverges from the public interest. Moreover, the argument will not be directed toward the moral saints, of whom there are too few within electoral precincts to have any discernible impact, but rather toward men and women who can be induced to do the moral thing if the costs are not too great and if they perceive that benefits to the general public are substantial. This revised scenario is analytically messy. Escaping as it does any neatly simplifying hypothesis about what “all others” will do, it is indeterminate. Still, we can say something about it—and why we did better if he hope to assess the consequentialist argument as it applies to the actual world.

The question then becomes: In a world where special interest as well as whim, malice, and ideology are dominant electoral forces, should I vote? And if I do vote, should I cast my ballot for the candidate whose election I judge would maximize the utilitarian sum? We take Barry and Parfit to be answering in the affirmative to them both, explicitly concerning the former and implicitly with regard to the latter. Both answers, we contend, are undersupported by consequentialist considerations.

Consider first the claim that voting is morally preferable to not voting (or, yet stronger, that voting is a moral duty). There are at least four points to be noted against this version of the utilitarian argument. First, as noted previously, the argument rests on the assumption that it is not generally compelling. If it were a compelling argument, then the “moral equilibrium” would be one in which we should be morally indifferent as to whether turnout was marginally larger or not, and the political equilibrium would be one in which differences in policy platforms would be small in utilitarian terms. The more the argument persuades, the less inherently persuasive it becomes.

Second, since we are being called on to assume that we are located a long way from any such moral equilibrium, it follows that collective decision making produced under real-world democratic situations is likely to be extremely inadequate. If the stakes are sufficiently high that individuals are morally obligated to vote even though the probability of being decisive is very low, then the expected cost of getting the “wrong outcome” must also be high enough to cause alarm. In other words, there are echoes here of the implication of Fereira’s argument on turnout: If it is so manifestly clear that one ought to vote in the kinds of electoral situations that actually prevail (whether because one is likely to be decisive or because the stakes are so high), prevailing electoral situations must be held to be highly defective. The democrat’s faith has then, a distinctly otherworldly tenor.

Third, the Barry–Parfit “real-world” consequentialist analysis is itself infected by a disabling unrealism. Barry stylizes the electoral choice as one for or against higher GNP; Parfit analogizes it to a nuclear accident in which one million perish. Can one imagine any actual electoral contests being waged under such banners? Party platforms do not declare, “We promise exactly what our opponents do–except that we will give you less economic growth or nuclear safety.” (The electoral prospects of any such platform would merit derision rather than derision.) A realistic construal of political competition in democracies will instead recognize that all credible candidates insist that it is through enactment of their platforms that the public interest will be best served, that they endeavor through their public actions to render this claim persuasive to a skeptical electorate, that they adopt policies that can never be known with anything approaching certainty to be efficacious in achieving their declared ends, and that they must necessarily endorse trading off more of one good for less of another, the net balancing of which is excruciatingly difficult. Instead of a transparently facile choice between more or less GNP, more or less nuclear safety, an electorate will instead confront the alternative of slightly more economic growth versus slightly lower inflation, increased safety but higher energy costs. How clear is it in these cases where the utility balance lies?

Let us then reformulate Barry’s calculus. Suppose one judges that the victory of party B will result in a 0.25% increase in GNP compared with what would result from the victory of A. Performing the straightforward utilitarian calculation of multiplying the probability that one’s vote will be decisive times the utility of such an increase in GNP will be justified only if one knows with a certainty approaching 1.0 that those consequences have been estimated correctly. But political life simply does not admit of such certainty. So one must bring into one’s accounting a whole host of additional considerations: the likelihood that party B will indeed, should it gain
power, pursue the policy that it says it will; the likelihood that one’s theory about the determinants of GNP is correct; the likelihood that party A would, if elected, pursue a less optimistic policy; the adequacy of one’s judgment that a heightened GNP will produce more aggregate well-being than the alternative under which, perhaps, the inflation rate would be a percentage point lower; and a host of ceteris paribus conditions.

Voters are prone to claim great prodigies of knowledge and insight for themselves, and many will contend that they do indeed know such relevant facts.11 We confess ourselves guilty of such hubris from time to time. A more accurate epistemic test, then, might be to ask what degree of confidence one has that one’s neighbor (political affiliation unknown) has the degree of knowledge and moral motivation required for the expected payoff to his vote to be strongly positive. We believe it is not implausible to maintain that if political prejudices are recognized for what they are and appropriately discounted, it will generally be the case that the likelihood that any given voter will hit on the utility-enhancing line is not appreciably greater than the chance that he will select the one that is utility diminishing. It is the difference between these two possibilities that gives the net expected payoff to a vote. When that sharply reduced sum is multiplied by the probability of being decisive, the utilitarian rationale for a vote becomes exceedingly problematic.

Fourth, individuals are not homogeneous with regard to their ability to assess accurately the effects of political policies. Some are more easily gulled by sharp-talking political operatives; some have a greater understanding of what genuinely comprises the public interest. It follows that a blanket consequentialist endorsement of voting is unjustifiable. If electoral participation is a serious business, then it ought to be consigned to those with the expertise to conduct it most responsibly. A consequentialist argument that properly attends to voter heterogeneity, therefore, does not extend to the general electorate; it is, rather, addressed to the Wise and the Good. Persons who lack a full quota of wisdom and moral motivation do better not to vote at all. Their ballots add “noise” (that is at best random) to the total electoral outpouring, thus making it more likely that those best equipped to ascertain the common good will find themselves among the overall minority. Rather than an argument for democracy, the argument becomes a curiously backhanded brief for a reign of philosophers.

The upshot is, then, that we can find no good utilitarian case for increased turnout as such. Expressive returns to the individual voter aside, it is very likely that one could do better for overall utility by doing something else. A perhaps surprising corollary of this result is that there is no good utilitarian reason why one who does vote should cast a ballot for the candidate whose election it is judged would be most conducive to the greatest good of the greatest number. Given the minute chance of being decisive and the imponderables surrounding political postdictive, little stands to be gained through so directing a ballot. If, however, the individual can accrue significant expressive returns through a vote for some one of the (nonutilitarian preferred) candidates, then a concern for consequences dictates that she snatch the bird in the hand rather than stalk utility in a bush that is almost certainly unreachable and that may not even exist. Ordinary standard consequentialism, we therefore conclude, cannot sustain a robust democratic faith.

The expressive domain. To this point the quest for for an adequate democratic microethics has been unavailing. This suggests that it may be a mistake to construe the moral significance of voting as a matter of achieving “optimal turnout” and wrong to think of voters as bearing responsibility for their electoral behavior only insofar as it affects, or seems likely to affect, electoral outcomes. Suppose that in an election involving two outcomes A and B, it is a foregone conclusion that A will win. Clearly, a vote for either option will not alter the probabilities in any non-negligible way. Nonetheless, we might want to say that the A-voters bear responsibility for their candidate’s victory, and that they bear it no less fully when the preelection polls indicate a 70–30% margin for A than they would if the polls had indicated the election too close to call. To approach the point from a slightly different direction, it seems intuitively acceptable to hold up to reproach someone who voted for the Ku Klux Klan party candidate for president even though the Klandidate was not listed on the ballots of enough states to comprise a majority of the Electoral College, and hence could never win. One who registers himself as supporting the thoroughly unsavory is culpable irrespective of the tendency that such expression has to generate the repugnant state of affairs. Why that should be so deserves a closer look.

To cast a Klan ballot is to identify oneself in a morally significant way with the racist policies that the organization espouses. One thereby lays oneself open to associated moral liability whether that candidate has a small, large, or zero probability of gaining victory, and whether or not one’s own vote has an appreciable likelihood of affecting the election result. Even stronger, to express such support in a forum in which no outcomes will be decided, such as in casual conversation or in response to a survey, is also odious. That is not, of course, to deny that any influence on electoral outcomes is morally relevant: To express support for A and to bring about the victory of
$A$ is worse than merely to express support for $A$. The point is not that effects on political outcomes do not matter, but they are not all that matters.

It may be that outcome considerations enter not so much into the choice of action as in assessing the significance of the context within which the expression of one's views takes place. If one cheers as the lion devours a Christian, the act is laden with more significance than is cheering at a football game in which the Lions are devouring the Bears; the moral stakes are higher. Nothing in this necessarily commits one to a view of cheering as a means to bring about a preferred result. Neither, importantly, does it entail an outcome-oriented account of why cheering one way or another merits commendation.

One who writes a letter to a newspaper in which it is contended that Hitler's assumption of the chancellorship was a good thing, as were the events that followed therefrom, throws oneself open to rebuke. The grounds for criticism are not simply that one has made an intellectual error—for which correction and not castigation would be the appropriate response—nor any alleged tendency of one's public expression to influence others to build a Fourth Reich that resembles the Third. Even assuming that such manifestos have any discernible public impact at all, they cannot be assumed more likely to generate increased bigotry than to renew vigilance against bigotry. But we need not indulge in such far-fetched causal speculations to identify sufficient grounds for moral disapproval. Persons are morally responsible not only for what they bring about, what they intend to bring about, and what they help to bring about; they are also responsible for what they endorse and for that with which they choose to identify themselves.

One might indeed go further and maintain that persons bear responsibility for their characters and attitudes whether or not they choose to give them expression. An anti-Semite who never expresses her loathing for the Jews may still be accounted morally defective, and this whether she refrains from public expression because she judges it to be imprudent or because she herself recognizes and loathes the bigotry to which she finds herself chained. If that is correct, then persons are responsible not only for that which they voluntarily perform, but for that which, quite nonvoluntarily, they are. This reflection matches common intuitions and would, we believe, be seen more widely as plausible were it not for the continuing grip of philosophical theories insisting that the connection between willing and responsibility must be universal. There is nothing unusual or paradoxical about esteeming someone who is unreflectively and instinctively kind and compassionate toward others despite querulous Kantian suggestions that benevolent states resulting from natural inclination merit no moral credit. It would be extravagant to push this line of argument further. Whether or not individuals bear responsibility for their characters and attitudes, all we need to maintain for present purposes is that they are accountable for that which they choose to express.

There is, then, a logic of moral discourse appropriate to expressive activity. It is impossible here to do more than to begin to sketch its contours, but no involved exercise in cartography is needed to render its likeness familiar; our ordinary activity richly exemplifies the play of normative considerations underlying expressive acts. When we sympathize with a sick friend (or are left cold by someone "too busy" to do so), mourn the irretrievably lost, and bristle at injustice, our activity is laden with moral significance. These entirely familiar performances are, in the first instance, expressive. They may be indirectly consequential for good or ill, but that is not their point. Similarly explicable as expressively based are versions of the frequently voiced claim that citizens in a democracy have a duty to vote. Such appeals reach a crescendo in the flurry of media pronouncements preceding national elections. One who turns on a television set will be regaled with emotive messages about patriots who have done their part by defending the nation at the cost of their lives. One is solemnly informed that the least an ordinary citizen can do to fulfill his end of the social compact is to exercise the franchise. In Australia this sentiment is given legal force via a requirement bucked up by fines that all adult citizens able to vote do so. And many of those who do not recognize the existence of a strict duty to vote will nonetheless concede that it is a good thing that citizens vote, that voting is an act to the individual's moral credit.

As we have noted, these pronouncements are often buttressed with strained claims about the chances of being decisive or the magnitude of the stakes involved. No such claims, even where plausible, seem to be required. What is wrong with abstention does not need to be tied to any effect on outcomes: The wrong inheres in the apathy thereby displayed. In great national elections or referenda, principles of undeniable moral salience are at stake. Political parties prepare lengthy platforms stating their positions on the major issues of the day, and candidates contend with each other concerning the ends to which the nation ought to devote itself and the appropriateness of rival means to those ends. What is done and how burdens and benefits come to be assigned will depend on who gets in and who is tossed out. This is the stuff of which serious commitment is made. By the stand one takes, one displays to oneself and to others what sort of person one is.

Or rather, one who takes some stand or other does so. But the individual who declines to get involved, who is so unmoved by the debate before her
that she will not give up a few minutes of her time to register her views in the electoral precincts provided for that purpose can present the appearance of a political neutral. She is too diffident or too detached from events of great moment to bestir herself. In showing herself unmoved by that to which her fellow citizens assign considerable weight, she displays an insensitivity for which they can reasonably take her to task.

We believe that this is, in embryo, the strongest argument that can be made for the claim that individuals do wrong by not voting. Is it compelling? To adjudicate that point we would have to develop a fully-fledged normative theory of expression and that is beyond our current aspirations. What we claim here for the expressive argument is not conclusiveness but intrinsic cogency. It is a contender as an account of why citizens ought to vote, while consequentialist arguments that one should vote because the chance of being decisive is substantial or because the magnitude of the stakes mandates a trip to the polls are summarily dismissable.

**How ought I vote?**

The question of which considerations should weigh in deciding how to vote is, in our view, a more significant one than persuading persons to go to the polls, at least in Western democracies as they actually function. Whether because they are impelled by a civic morality of electoral participation or for other reasons, voters turn out for significant elections in sufficient numbers to make the possibility of excessive influence by any one voter suitably remote and to confer on electoral verdicts whatever legitimacy may be forthcoming from the vox populi. The important macroethical consideration is to secure tolerable outcomes, not merely to get more voters to the polls. And in that process, the critical thing is to induce voters to vote in an appropriate way.

As we have emphasized, the question of how I should vote is closely connected with the question of whether I should vote, and much of the foregoing discussion is obviously germane. We can therefore be brief in discussing this second question.

Directly consequentialist considerations are, except in the most exceptional circumstances, mute. Virtually nothing (in the relevant expected sense) pertaining to political outcomes hinges on how the individual chooses to direct his ballot. So he might as well — indeed, he must if he is to give due weight to his own utility — vote as he prefers. Whether these preferences are egoistic or other-directed, well considered or whimsical, is immaterial. For a consistent consequentialism, voting behavior is the pro-

curement of consumer goods from which externalities are almost entirely absent. *De gustibus non est disputandum.*

An expressively grounded theory of democratic microethics will have rather more to say. If the quality of expressive acts matters, it is not enough merely to go to the polls and vote any old how. Unless the act of voting is performed with the requisite preparation and attentiveness, it will not satisfy canons of good citizenship. Certainly this view accords with the message of common morality. Merely to vote, we are told, is insufficient; one who goes to the polls only vaguely aware of who the candidates are and what they stand for, who pulls the lever closest to his hand so that he can be done with the business and return to his couch and television, stands hardly, if at all, higher than one who never left the couch. That is in part because one who votes in so desultory and absent-minded a fashion is not to be credited with taking a stand on anything. One may also fault the voter who knows well enough what he favors but does not have any good reason for favoring it. He has voted the straight Republican ticket in every election since he came of age, and his mother and father did so before him; therefore, he will vote the Republican ticket again in this election. The phenomenon may be common, but nonetheless can be judged an inadequate performance. One who votes should know the issues, scrutinize candidates’ statements, and make up one’s mind after weighing all the facts: This is how the voter’s duty is often expressed.

It is often observed that the return to voters’ expenditures of time and resources in the pursuit of political information is minuscule. When the probability of the direction of one’s vote being improved by more information is multiplied by the probability that one’s vote will be decisive, an investment in political information seems to be one of the lowest return ventures one might undertake. In the light of such demonstrations of the irrationality of the exercise, it might seem utterly incongruous that “knowing the issues” is so widely endorsed by common democratic morality. However, that incongruity dissolves once we drop the assumptions that voting behavior is to be justified on the basis of effects on outcomes and that the basis for evaluating the pursuit of political information is derived from such effects. The proposition that individuals ought to take a principled stand on issues of great moment includes the notion that they ought to do so intelligently. If expressive activity matters in its own right, then high-quality expression is valuable irrespective of its causal product. A utilitarian calculus exhibits little difference with respect to overall optimization between an ignorant voter and one who is well informed (and none at all should they happen to support the same candidates), but a normative theory of expressive discourse can present such voters as sharply separated.
Again, what we claim for that theory is considerable congruence with the dictates of common morality. That is to insist on its truth. But it is to locate the position within the wider framework common morality affords. One who comes down on the “right side” of an issue but does so for largely irrelevant and ill-informed reasons can be held up to criticism. This is so with respect to voting decisions but also holds, and for essentially the same reasons, for other expressive acts. An ignorant and poorly reasoned letter to the editor is disreputable for much the same reasons as is an ignorant ballot. To express disdain for the Nazis because they swaggered a bit, made interminable speeches, and wore those horridly unstylish brown shirts is simply to get the grounds for disapproval wrong. Both inside and outside voting booths, it matters what one stands for and why one stands for it.

The upshot of these considerations is this: Sense can be made of the assertion that individuals in a democracy are responsible for how and whether they vote. Even though an individual ballot is causally insalubrious, people are nonetheless morally answerable for their electoral conduct. To be sure, consequences up the moral ante. Moral deeds do speak louder than mere words. And in contexts where an agent acts to bring about a particular outcome, its characteristics will be a central part of any moral appraisal. So one can understand the temptation to construe civic morality as outcome oriented. But the standard arguments advanced in this connection are, upon analysis, found to be unpersuasive.

A more promising line focuses on the expressive dimension of voting. The object of an expressive civic morality is to inculcate an ethic of well-informed, responsible political participation more or less for its own sake. It directs attention to the character of the citizen rather than to the alternative electoral outcomes that the citizen might leave in her wake. Whether such an ethic can ultimately be vindicated and, if it can, whether it will be supportive of a satisfactory democratic macroethics must be left here as somewhat open questions. We can, though, offer a conditional judgment: If the democratic faith in government by a politically responsible people is sustainable, that faith will hinge on the potency of a largely expressive ethic of political conduct among citizen-voters.

Notes

1 The difficulty of such judgments has been an important theme in the Austrian discussion of the feasibility of “socialist calculation.” For a recent relevant statement, see Hayek (1988).

2 Although the respective contexts differ markedly, this proposed solution to the problem of distilling a public interest from the interplay of private interests is interestingly reminiscent of Rousseau’s project of extracting from citizens’ particular judgments political outcomes that are authentically indicative of general will.

3 See Chapter 5 of Democracy and Decision, from which the present chapter in this volume is taken, for a more detailed discussion of the implications of expressive voting for public choice orthodoxy.

4 See, e.g., Pettit (1989) and Bratthwaite and Pettit (1990).

5 This argument receives more extended treatment in Chapter 8 of Democracy and Decision.

6 This argument was initially suggested to us by a reading of the account of sympathy in Adam Smith’s The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1982), especially pp. 113–34. It is buttressed by Smith’s reflections in The Wealth of Nations concerning the “man of low condition”: “While he remains in a country village, his conduct may be attended to, and he may be obliged to attend to it himself. In this situation, and in this situation only, he may have what is called a character to lose. But as soon as he comes into a great city, he is sunk in obscurity and darkness. His conduct is observed and attended to by nobody, and he is therefore very likely to neglect it himself, and to abandon himself to every sort of low profligacy and vice” (1930, Bk. V p. 705). The parallel between the anonymity of urban existence and that of the voting booth is suggestive. A Smithian moral psychology is extremely congenial to our argument though not strictly presupposed by it. See Brennan and Lomasky (1985) for a fuller discussion.

7 To avoid complexities not directly relevant to the issue under consideration, we note but do not further discuss the fact that those California ballots also contained local races and referenda. If, for one already at the polls, a further lever pull comes at virtually zero utility cost, then a presidential vote does not display a calculative error. Neither, though, is it, from a utilitarian perspective, morally preferable to abstention.

8 It is weaker still if, as will often be the case, benefits extend to individuals beyond the policy’s boundaries. Recurring to Barry’s example, if America’s GNP increases by 0.25%, the consequences for those who trade with Americans will also be positive. Should it be an issue of war or peace on which the election turns, such external effects will be yet more pronounced.

9 If that probability is less than .5, then the smaller the turnout, the greater the likelihood of the correct outcome. If that probability is more than slightly greater than .5, larger turnouts are wasteful of resources.

10 Note that this analysis, unlike those assuming predominantly egoistic voters, is not sensitive to the number of contending parties.

11 Why, in the face of a multitude of factors that should incline one toward caution, do individuals tend to be so obstinately convinced of the soundness of their political judgments? Although we disclaim expertise in political
psychology, two explanations suggest themselves. First, it is the business of political parties and candidates to sell unquestioning conviction. True believers vote more reliably than do those who profess Socratic ignorance, and so it is to the creation of true belief and the destruction of doubts that political actors bend their efforts. Political evangelism is, in this regard, very much akin to religious evangelism. Second, expressive returns will usually be an increasing function of strength of conviction. We can presume that the fans who cheer most vociferously and unyieldingly are the ones who most enjoy themselves. To delight in following the shifting fortunes of the Yankees is incompatible with persistently questioning whether they deserve one’s support. For the political analogue, substitute, for Yankees, Republicans or Democrats.

Some will object that a person can be morally accountable for her attitudes and character only to the extent that she acted to produce them in herself or to the extent that it is now up to her whether to change them. The contention that individuals are responsible only so far as their voluntary agency extends. We do not find it obvious that that is so. Indeed, the claim is especially questionable in the first-person case. To recognize in oneself a vice, and to recognize it as a vice is, we think, incompatible with taking the trait to be a matter of utter moral indifference. What of third-person ascriptions? Again, we find it implausible that the nonvoluntary is necessarily immune from moral categorization. There may be no point to blaming or punishing someone for the fact that is not within his voluntary control, but other moral stances (e.g., scorn, contempt) may nonetheless be appropriate.

Conscientious abstention, on this reading, to be accounted very differently, though the effect, if any, on electoral outcomes is the same. Indeed, this observation exposes one strength of the expressive account—that it not only provides a case for why individuals typically ought to vote but also enables one to draw moral distinctions between different reasons for nonvoting. Consider someone who declines to vote not out of apathy or inertia but as a principled protest against the grounds on which the election is fought or because he believes the political process of which it is a part to be corrupt. We might disagree with the substantive position taken by this person, but we could hardly contend that his abstention on grounds of principle is dereliction of an obligation to take a stand on momentous issues. On strictly outcome-related grounds, however, the efficacy of a lazy abstention and a principled one are exactly the same.

10

A Causal Responsibility Approach to Voting

Alvin Goldman

I. Some Rationales for Voting

Why should a citizen vote? There are two ways to interpret this question: in a prudential sense, and in a moral (or quasi-moral) sense. Under the first interpretation, the question asks why—or under what circumstances—it is in a citizen’s self-interest to vote. Under the second interpretation, it asks what moral (or quasi-moral) reasons citizens have for voting. I shall mainly try to answer the moral version of the question, but my answer may also, in some circumstances, bear on the prudential question. Before proceeding to my own approach, let me briefly survey alternatives in the field.

Many theorists approach the issue from an economic or rational-choice perspective, and they usually have in mind the prudential question. On a standard version of this approach, it is considered rational for a citizen to vote if and only if the expected personal benefit of voting exceeds the expected cost. Confronted with a choice between two candidates, C and C', a prospective voter should ask how much he values getting his more preferred candidate as compared with his less preferred one. This difference in value should be multiplied by the probability that his ballot, if cast, would change what would otherwise happen. The resulting expected value should then be compared with the expected cost of voting, which might include the time lost from work, and the inconvenience of traveling to the polling site, standing in line, and so forth. Voting is prudentially rational if and only if the expected benefit exceeds the expected cost. Most theorists who analyze the subject from this angle conclude that it is rarely rational for a citizen to vote, especially in large elections. The expected benefit from voting is usually quite small because the probability of casting the deciding ballot in large elections is tiny. The expected cost of casting a vote, on the other hand, is not insignificant.