WHY CITIZENS SHOULD VOTE:
A CAUSAL RESPONSIBILITY APPROACH*

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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.¹

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¹ William Riker and Peter Ordeshook have estimated the probability of an individual voter being decisive to the outcome of a U.S. presidential election as $p = 10^{-8}$—that is, a 1 in 100,000,000 chance. See Riker and Ordeshook, “A Theory of the Calculus of Voting,” American Political Science Review 62 (March 1968): 25. Perhaps the earliest formulation of the economic approach is due to Anthony Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy (New York:
A different version of the expected-value approach incorporates the benefits that would accrue to the entire electorate, not merely to the voter himself. Derek Parfit argues that the benefits to the entire populace of electing the superior candidate must be taken into account, and the magnitude of these collective benefits, even when multiplied by the voter’s tiny probability of being decisive, might make the expected benefits substantial. Parfit’s analysis is presumably addressed to the second interpretation—the moral or quasi-moral interpretation—of the “Why vote?” question.

A second possible moral rationale for voting is the Kantian approach. According to Kant’s categorical imperative, one must not act according to a principle (maxim) which cannot be willed to become a universal law. Thus, the Kantian approach would lead us to ask whether one can will it to become a universal law that everybody abstains from voting when it does not suit his or her personal economic calculus. Since the upshot would obviously be unacceptable for political democracy, the Kantian approach would not allow citizens to abstain on grounds of personal inconvenience. Presumably, according to Kantianism, only the general practice of voting can be universalized, and that is why one should vote. It is difficult to find full-fledged endorsements of the Kantian theme in the recent literature, but Paul Meehl comes close. He says that you cannot get people to go “rationally” to the polls unless you introduce some sort of quasi-Kantian principle with a distinctly ethical content.

A third rationale for voting is the expressivist rationale. Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky give the following motivating examples. When you send a get-well card to a hospitalized friend, you do not expect the card to effect a therapeutic outcome. When a sports fan goes to the stadium to cheer for his team, he does not expect his scream from the bleachers to enhance the probability of his team’s winning. These are “expressive” acts; they express certain desires or preferences of the actor, without any accompanying assumption that they will cause the desired outcome. Similarly, Brennan and Lomasky suggest, voting for candidate

Harper and Brothers, 1957), ch. 14. Downs formulates matters in terms of the “party differential” rather than the differential between the two individual candidates, but this difference is incidental.


5 Ibid., 13. Later, Meehl sketches his favored rationale as follows: “I would say that some sort of prima facie obligation or obligation vector exists for me as a voter to participate in the electoral process, relying on the general principle that unless people do, the system won’t work . . .” (ibid., 21).

A can be a bona fide and appropriate expression of support even when one knows that the effect on the outcome is miniscule. Stanley Benn endorses the expressivist approach in the following passage: “I am suggesting, in short, that political activity may be a form of moral self-expression, necessary . . . because one could not seriously claim, even to oneself, to be on [the side of the right] without expressing the attitude by the action most appropriate to it in the paradigm situation.”

I shall not try to assess the merits of these approaches in any detail. I shall not pick a quarrel, for example, with the economic analysis of whether and when it is prudent to vote. However, voting might be morally commendable even if it is not prudent. Nor shall I spend time evaluating the three foregoing approaches to the morality of voting. Although each has its difficulties, I believe, it is not essential for me to prove them wrong. This is because the approach I favor is not necessarily a rival to these other approaches; in principle, they could all be legitimate rationales for voting.

The approach I favor—a novel approach, as far as I know—may be called the causal responsibility approach. The first claim of the causal responsibility approach is that a voter can make a partial causal contribution toward the election of a given candidate even if he is not a swing or decisive voter. Even a non-swing voter can help elect a winner. Second, voting in favor of the actual winner counts as a greater causal contribution to her election than merely abstaining. Thus, if the election of a given candidate would be a (socially) good outcome, a person can earn more “credit” by helping to produce that outcome than by sitting on the sidelines. Conversely, if an election might result in a bad candidate being chosen, potential voters who sit on the sidelines may not escape partial blame for that possible outcome, should it occur. They could contribute (more) toward the defeat of that candidate by voting for a rival; and their failure to do so may carry with it some culpability or blameworthiness. They do not avert such blameworthiness or culpability simply because their vote would not have been a decisive, or swing, vote. So potential voters should vote either to help produce a good outcome or to avoid a bad one.

Exactly what kind of credit or blame is in question here? Is it moral credit and blame, or some other kind? This is an issue I shall not try to settle fully. Certainly in some cases moral credit or blame may be apt. In legislative voting and popular referenda, there may be votes on policies that are morally desirable or objectionable; failure to help enact or defeat such policies would be morally culpable. Similarly, in some elections one candidate may be morally inferior to a rival. A voter’s failure to contrib-

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ute as much as possible to the election of the morally preferable candidate may be a moral blemish. More commonly, credit or blame might be in order that is less clearly of a moral stripe. Consider the election of a chair for a social club or professional organization in which neither candidate is morally superior to the other but one is vastly more competent than her rival. She would advance the collective interests of the social entity much more than the rival. If a potential voter, knowing who would be the better officer, nonetheless declines to vote, this might be regarded as a socially irresponsible or socially culpable omission. Is it a morally culpable omission? I doubt it; but it does seem to be culpable in a quasi-moral sense. In either case, the voter’s culpability seems to arise in part from the fact that his action causally influences the outcome. The first step that needs to be taken, then, is to establish that voting or abstaining, even when one is not a prospective swing voter, can nonetheless involve causal responsibility for the outcome. This problem will occupy me for a large chunk of the essay.

II. OVERDETERMINATION AND CAUSAL RESPONSIBILITY

According to one view of causation, a particular vote causes a particular electoral outcome only if a different outcome would have eventuated if that vote had not occurred. This is a simple counterfactual analysis of event causation. More generally, the theory says that event \( c \) causes event \( e \) just in case \( c \) and \( e \) actually occur but if \( c \) had not occurred \( e \) would not have occurred. A theory very close to this is advocated by David Lewis. Lewis does not require precisely this counterfactual, because he says there might be a causal chain from \( c \) to \( d \) to \( e \) such that \( d \) would not have occurred without \( c \), and \( e \) would not have occurred without \( d \), yet \( e \) might have occurred via a different causal route than through \( c \). These types of cases, however, do not matter for the analysis of voting. So I shall write as if Lewis’s account were equivalent to the simple counterfactual analysis. This analysis deals fairly adequately with acts of voting which are decisive. If the citizen had not voted as he did, the outcome would have been different (a tie, at any rate, if not a victory for a different candidate). Such a case will qualify as a cause of the actual electoral outcome under

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9 The term “swing vote” perhaps suggests a vote that tilts the outcome either toward one candidate or toward the other; it does not suggest a tie as a possible outcome. In the present context, however, we want to consider possible abstentions as well as votes for different candidates. And a decision to abstain rather than vote could change the outcome from a victory for one candidate to a tie—perhaps requiring a run-off election. (For that matter, even switching a vote from one candidate to another can result in a tie, when the number of votes is even.) The counterfactual analysis also invites consideration of abstentions. If a citizen votes for candidate X and we ask, “What would have happened if the citizen had not cast this vote?,” one possible scenario is that the citizen abstains rather than votes for an opposing candidate.
the simple counterfactual analysis. But wherever a citizen's alternative action would not be enough to single-handedly cancel the outcome, his vote will not qualify as a cause of the outcome.

So much the worse, I say, for the simple counterfactual analysis. It is a defect of this account that it restricts causation to these cases. All but a few large elections are decided by a margin of more than one vote. In all of these cases, the simple counterfactual account implies that no voter's action is a cause of the outcome. But surely some of the votes—at least those cast for the actual winner—exercised some causal influence toward the outcome. Compare this situation with two others. Consider a firing squad with ten members who all fire simultaneously at a victim and all hit their mark. Is it not bizarre to declare that none of their individual actions has any causal influence on the outcome? Moral responsibility for the death is presumably contingent on playing at least some causal role in the death, so if we declare each shooter causally irrelevant to the death, we commit ourselves to absolving each shooter from any moral responsibility. That seems misguided. Any prospective murderer could then protect himself against culpability by recruiting an accomplice to commit the crime simultaneously. Analogously, suppose that ten friends are recruited to push a car out of a snow bank, when three would suffice for the job. If all ten push simultaneously, the car's being freed does not depend counterfactually on the pushing of any one. But surely this is a case in which each exerts some causal influence, and each deserves some degree of credit and thanks, which are presumably predicated on his partial causal responsibility.10

Both civil and criminal law support the view that in these types of (concurrent) overdetermination cases, each separate set of sufficient conditions qualifies as a cause.11 Where two defendants ride their motorcycles past the victim's horse, which is startled and injures the victim, each defendant causes the injury, despite the sufficiency of the noise from each motorcycle to have done the job. Where two defendants independently stab or shoot the victim, who dies of loss of blood, each is liable for the victim's death.

Lewis groups these types of cases under a category he labels "symmetric overdetermination."12 He says that these are cases in which common sense does not deliver a clear answer as to whether the individual act causes the outcome, so theory can safely say what it likes.13 This strikes me as wrong, or at least inadequate. Although it may not be clear that

10 In other cases, of course, credit or thanks might be given for mere effort, even if it makes no causal contribution. In this case, however, the effort plays a causal role; it is not merely fruitless effort.


12 See David Lewis, "Postscripts to 'Causation'," in Lewis, Philosophical Papers, 2:193–212.

13 Ibid., 194, 212.
these are cases of "full" causation, they are at least instances of a weak species of causation, call it partial causation, or contributory causation, or causal influence.\textsuperscript{14} Lewis points out that in cases of symmetric overdetermination we can always find a larger event that qualifies as a cause, an event that consists in the "sum" of the various causes.\textsuperscript{15} Returning to our earlier examples, the sum of the ten shootings or the ten pushings will satisfy the counterfactual analysis, even if the individual shootings or pushings do not, because the death would not have occurred without the ten shootings, and the freeing of the car would not have occurred without the ten pushings. This may be right, but it does not go far enough.\textsuperscript{16} A satisfactory theory must also assign some causal influence to the individual shootings and pushings; and a satisfactory theory must assign causal influence to individual acts of voting even in wide-margin elections where no single vote is decisive.

Another approach to the theory of causation, which seems more promising for our purposes than the simple counterfactual approach, is presented by J. L. Mackie.\textsuperscript{17} Mackie considers the example of a fire started by a short-circuit. The short-circuit combines with other conditions, such as the presence of flammable material, the absence of a suitably placed sprinkler, and so on, to constitute a complex condition that is sufficient for the fire. Also, the short-circuit is an indispensable part of this complex condition; the other parts of this condition, in the absence of the short-circuit, would not have produced the fire.\textsuperscript{18} Mackie calls this an INUS condition: an insufficient but necessary part of a condition which is itself unnecessary but sufficient for the result. Thus, in typical cases, a cause is an indispensable part of a sufficient condition.

This formulation would nicely handle standard election cases in which the margin of victory is more than one. Consider an electorate of 100 persons, all of whom vote in a given election in which Jones defeats Smith by a 60-to-40 margin. Let citizen Z be one of those who votes for Jones. Is Z's ballot a (partial) cause of Jones's victory? If we focus on all 60 votes for Jones, which is a condition sufficient for Jones's victory, Z's vote does not meet the INUS requirement. Although Z's vote is part of that 60-vote condition, his vote is not a necessary or indispensable part of that sufficient condition. The other 59 votes for Jones still suffice for Jones's victory, even if we subtract Z's vote. Let us instead consider any set of 51 actual votes

\textsuperscript{14} In a similar spirit, Louis Loeb offers an account of causation that includes overdetermining causes. See his "Causal Theories and Causal Overdetermination," Journal of Philosophy 71, no. 15 (1974): 525-44.
\textsuperscript{15} Lewis, "Postscripts," 212.
\textsuperscript{16} I say it "may" be right because it is not entirely clear. If the ten pushings had not occurred, would no pushings have occurred? Not obviously. Perhaps five pushings would still have occurred, which would have been sufficient to free the car.
\textsuperscript{17} J. L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," American Philosophical Quarterly 2, no. 4 (October 1965): 245-64.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 245.
for Jones, including Z’s vote. Such a set of 51 votes is also sufficient for Jones’s victory, and Z’s vote is a necessary or indispensable part of that sufficient condition (given the 100-member electorate). Z’s vote is indispensable because if his vote is subtracted from the 51—that is, if it is left open what Z will do—a Jones victory is not guaranteed. So Z’s vote does satisfy the INUS condition.

It is true, of course, that any other set of 51 Jones votes, not including Z’s vote, is also sufficient for Jones’s victory. Z’s vote is not an indispensable part of those sufficient conditions. But if the INUS approach is going to authorize overdetermining causes to qualify as causes, this should not matter. It should be enough that a given event is an indispensable member of some sufficient condition for the effect. It is not clear that Mackie himself means to allow this. In the fire example, he adds the requirement that “no other sufficient condition of the house’s catching fire was present on this occasion.” This seems intended to exclude overdeterminers as causes, and would thereby exclude wide-margin electoral results from having any causes. This follows, at any rate, if “another sufficient condition” means any sufficient condition not identical with, but possibly overlapping, a selected one. For reasons already adduced, however, this addendum is unfortunate, precisely because it would exclude overdeterminers from qualifying as causes. This is especially unfortunate relative to our project of analyzing the concept of partial or contributory cause (as opposed to the concept of “the cause,” for example). We do better to work with the initial formulation I took from Mackie, not the final formulation he provides.

To clarify how the INUS analysis works, let us ask whether someone’s vote for Jones could ever serve as a partial cause of an opponent’s victory. Setting aside “indirect” effects—for example, one’s own vote influencing the votes of others—the answer is no. If Z votes for Jones but Smith wins by a 60-to-40 margin, there is no (actually present) condition sufficient for Smith’s victory of which Z’s vote is an indispensable part. To be sure, there is the set of decisions consisting of 51 votes for Smith plus Z’s vote for Jones. That set is sufficient for Smith’s victory. But even if we subtract Z’s vote for Jones, the remaining votes are still sufficient for Smith’s victory.

What about abstentions? Can they qualify as partial causes under the INUS approach? Yes. But it depends on whether the number of potential voters is even or odd. If the number is even, an abstention can satisfy the INUS condition; if the number is odd, it cannot. To illustrate, consider first a 100-person electorate. Suppose Z abstains and Jones wins by a 59-to-40 margin. Consider the set of decisions consisting of 50 votes for Jones plus Z’s abstention. This set of decisions suffices for Jones’s victory, because only 49 potential voters remain and they cannot prevent Jones’s victory.

19 Ibid.
victory. If we subtract Z’s abstention, however, there is no longer a guarantee of Jones’s victory. Because 50 voting decisions are still open, there could be a tie. So Z’s abstention is an indispensable part of the originally designated set of conditions for Jones’s victory. In the case of an odd-numbered electorate, however, this scenario cannot happen. To illustrate, consider a 101-person electorate. Where Jones wins with a minimum of 51 votes, we can consider a set consisting of 51 Jones votes plus Z’s abstention. This suffices for Jones’s victory; but subtracting Z’s abstention, there is still enough to guarantee Jones’s victory. So Z’s abstention is not an indispensable member of such a set.20

Proceeding from this analysis, let us ask what can be said to citizen Z who is deciding whether to vote in a forthcoming election. Suppose he knows how he will vote if he votes at all but has not yet decided whether to vote. Assume that candidate Brown, for whom Z would vote, is indeed the best candidate in the race.21 Here is what we can say to citizen Z, to justify his voting: “If you vote for Brown and Brown wins, you will deserve partial causal credit for her victory. If you vote for Brown but her (inferior) opponent Johnson wins, you will be absolved from any causal responsibility for Johnson’s victory. A tie is possible but so improbable that it can be ignored. Thus, if you vote, you are guaranteed either partial causal credit for a good outcome or no causal discredit for a bad outcome. On the other hand, if you abstain from voting, there is no guarantee that either of these scenarios will transpire. If there is an even-numbered electorate, you will earn partial causal credit by abstention in case Brown wins, but you will also earn partial causal discredit if Brown loses. If there is an odd-numbered electorate, you will earn neither causal credit nor causal discredit. So in terms of causal credit or discredit, you are better off voting than abstaining.”

If we adopt the INUS approach to causation, then, we have a rationale for voting in terms of causal responsibility. It is not as smooth and intuitive as one might like; and therefore in the next section, I shall propose an alternative approach. We see, however, how at least one familiar approach to causation provides a basis for rationalizing voting in terms of causal responsibility.

20 There are a number of objections to Mackie’s INUS account. One of them is that it requires causation to feature sufficient conditions, and this ostensibly implies that there is no causation without determinism. This is too restrictive, as many writers point out. Causation can take place even in chancy situations, where merely probabilistic laws hold sway. See Patrick Suppes, A Probabilistic Theory of Causality (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1970); Nancy Cartwright, “Causal Laws and Effective Strategies,” Noûs 13 (1979): 419–37; Wesley Salmon, Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Lewis, “Postscripts,” 175–84. I concede this point, and therefore grant that the INUS account is not fully comprehensive. In the context of voting, however, we do not need to worry about probabilistic causation. Wherever an electoral outcome occurs, some set of votes is sufficient for the outcome. So the analysis sketched above is adequate for present purposes.

21 For simplicity, I assume an election with a single race.
I should emphasize that this type of rationale requires certain explanations, qualifications, and/or provisos. Let me introduce these qualifications by reversing the earlier assumption that the candidate for whom citizen Z plans to vote is the superior candidate. Suppose instead that Z’s preferred candidate Brown is the inferior candidate. Does Z still have good reasons to vote? In other words, should a citizen vote whether or not his preferred candidate is the objectively best choice? Or should he vote only when the preferred candidate is objectively best?

First let us ask what might be meant by the phrase “objectively best candidate.” Elsewhere I have suggested that if candidate A would produce a set of outcomes higher on the preference-ordering of a majority of citizens than the set of outcomes candidate B would produce, then A is a democratically better candidate than B. This is one possible way to give content to the phrase “objectively best candidate,” though others, of course, might be proposed. Now a voter might be said to have objectively good reasons to vote for a certain candidate if that candidate is objectively best. But what if a citizen does not know, and indeed has no idea, which candidate is objectively best? Should such a citizen still be encouraged to vote rather than abstain?

On the approach I favor, citizens should not be encouraged to vote, full stop. Instead they should be encouraged first to gather enough information and then to vote. The point of becoming informed, of course, is to increase the probability of making a good choice, that is, of choosing the objectively best candidate. The upshot is that voting is not necessarily and without qualification a desirable or dutiful act. Consider an uninformed citizen, late on election day, who has no time to become informed before the polls close, but wonders whether he should vote. The present approach would not justify his voting. In this respect, the present rationale differs from both the Kantian and expressivist approaches, which presumably urge people to vote under all circumstances. I do not regard it as a defect of the current rationale that it has this qualified aspect. I am unconvinced that a person ought to vote, or has a duty to vote, even when he is both uninformed and no longer has time to become informed.

Even if a voter collects substantial information about the candidates, he might still be wrong about which would be the best one to elect. Can he still have good reasons to vote under this scenario? Here I introduce the notion of subjectively good reasons to vote, which I define in terms of what a voter is justified in believing about the candidates, rather than what is

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23 The types of relevant information to gather would not be exhausted, of course, by campaign promises and accusations against one’s opponent. Other relevant types of information would include each candidate’s past experience and track record, her party affiliation and supporters, and so forth.

24 The critical role of political information in producing good outcomes is elaborated in my Knowledge in a Social World, ch. 10.
true of them. Citizen Z's information might justify him in believing that Brown is the best candidate in the race, even if she is not. Z would then be justified in believing that by voting for Brown he would either achieve partial causal responsibility for the election of the best candidate or at least avoid all causal responsibility for the best candidate's defeat. His being justified in believing this gives him subjectively good reasons to vote for Brown.

Which class of reasons is more important, one might ask, objective reasons or subjective reasons? Which class of reasons is crucial in determining whether a citizen really should vote? These questions have no answers, I submit. The question of whether a person should vote is simply ambiguous as between an objective sense of "should" and a subjective sense of "should." There are simply two distinct questions here, and there is no reason to expect one of them to take precedence over the other. The important thing, for present purposes, is that in each sense of "should" our account shows why citizens will often be in a situation in which it is true that they should vote.

III. Vectorial and Conventional Causal Systems

Although the INUS analysis of causation provides one basis for justifying a decision to vote, that analysis does not adequately capture the intuitive difference in causal role between voting and abstaining. I shall try to do a better job of capturing that difference by introducing another model of causation: the vectorial model. This is not intended to be a general analysis of causation, for it applies only to a restricted subset of causal relationships, which I shall call vectorial causal systems. Electoral systems are prime examples of such systems.

A vectorial causal system is a system in which states and state-changes result from the interplay among forces that can be represented as vectors. A simple illustration of a natural vectorial system is a tug-of-war. Forces are exerted on a rope in opposite directions, and movements of the rope—and of participants clinging to the rope—are the results of the sum of the vectorial forces. When an element in a vectorial causal system moves in a given direction, this is because the sum of the forces on that element are positive in that direction. This sum is computed from three kinds of forces: (1) forces that are positive in the direction of movement, (2) forces that are negative in the direction of movement, and (3) forces that are zero in the direction of movement.25 Finally, when thinking about the causation of a given movement, we think of each positive force as a contributing

25 John Staddon points out that these forces can be treated as scalars rather than vectors, because there is just one dimension of movement, and forces can be treated as either positive or negative along this dimension. In election cases, however, at least in races where there are more than two candidates, the scalar approach will not work. In any case, the term "vector" is here used loosely to depict an interplay of conflicting forces.
factor in the production of the movement, each negative force as a countering, or resisting, factor in the production of the movement, and each zero force as a neutral factor vis-à-vis the production of the movement.

Elections are what we may call conventional vectorial causal systems. Given the conventions of vote counting, a vote for candidate C is a positive vector vis-à-vis C's possible election. A vote for a rival candidate is a negative vector vis-à-vis C's possible election. And an abstention from voting is a zero vector vis-à-vis C's (and anybody else's) possible election. Now how should we link vector forces with event causation in electoral contexts? The following seems plausible. If the target candidate actually wins, each vote for her is a partial cause of her victory; but neither votes against her nor abstentions from voting are partial causes of her victory.

When we turn to an agent's causal responsibility, however, things are a little different. When we address the responsibility of an agent, we take into account all of the options available to him. We consider not only the options he chooses but those he could have chosen instead. If an available option is not chosen, but would have exerted a causal influence had it been chosen, this is certainly germane in assessing the agent's responsibility. Suppose citizen Z votes for candidate C, but C loses nonetheless. Is Z in any way responsible for C's defeat? No. Z did everything in his electoral power to elect C, so he cannot be held responsible. Now suppose that Z abstains and C loses. Here Z can certainly be held partly responsible for C's loss, because an option available to Z—namely, voting for C—would have been a counteracting causal factor vis-à-vis C's loss. Thus, an abstention certainly opens an agent to charges of causal responsibility, despite the fact that the agent's act of abstention does not qualify as an event-cause of the outcome (under the vectorial model of causation). Of course, this analysis can be flipped on the other side. If an agent can be held partly responsible for a candidate's defeat by virtue of his abstention, shouldn't he equally be held partly responsible for a candidate's victory if he abstains? After all, he could have voted for a rival candidate but did not. This seems to me plausible, as long as we insist that an abstainer bears less responsibility for C's victory than someone who actually voted for C. That seems a clear implication of the vectorial model of causation. Obviously, a positive vote exerts greater causal influence toward a victory than an abstention, and that should weigh heavily in assigning responsibility.

Let us now link this responsibility-based approach to the rationale for voting that can be offered to citizens. The story is similar to the one presented at the end of Section II, but without the complications encountered there (e.g., those relating to odd- or even-numbered electorates). If Brown is the superior candidate, then Z's voting for her rather than

26 There may be ways to influence the outcome above and beyond one's personal vote, for example, by persuading other voters. But this goes beyond the present subject.
abstaining places him in the following position. If Brown wins, Z will have had greater responsibility than an abstainer for the election of the better candidate; if she loses, Z will have had no responsibility for her loss. Furthermore, if Z is justified in believing that Brown is the better candidate, then he is justified in believing that he will have some measure of responsibility for the victory (or no responsibility for the loss) of the better candidate if he votes for Brown. Thus, Z has either objectively good reasons to vote for Brown, or subjectively good reasons, or both.

At this point an important objection must be confronted. The cases I have discussed of overdetermining causes are instances of what Lewis calls "symmetric" overdetermination, where all the redundant causes occur simultaneously. In the case of voting, though, many of the votes occur in sequence. Moreover, by the time many voters cast their ballots, the outcome has already been decided. This is particularly striking in the case of presidential elections in the United States, where several time zones are involved. By the time voters in California or Hawaii go to the polls, the earlier-voting states may already have determined the victor. How can voters in these later-voting districts rationalize their voting? Do their votes really qualify as partial causes of the outcome (even if they vote for the winner)? Are they really responsible for the outcome?

These voting cases, the objection continues, are instances of what is commonly called causal preemption. In preemption, an event \(c_1\) occurs and actually causes \(e\), but another event, \(c_2\), also occurs and would have caused \(e\) if it were not preempted by \(c_1\). As Lewis puts it: "There is the beginning of a causal process running from the preempted alternative to the effect. But this process does not go to completion." An example would be a case in which a would-be assassin sets a timer to fire a gun at an intended victim at the stroke of midnight. A moment before midnight, another assassin shoots and kills the victim. Here intuition dictates that the preempted alternative is not a cause at all of the victim's death. Nor is the agent who sets the timer responsible for the death. Doesn't this equally apply to voters who cast their ballots for Brown but who get preempted by earlier votes for Brown which suffice for her election?

To deal with this objection, we need to make greater use of the notion of a conventional causal system, introduced earlier in this section. A conventional causal system is one in which causal upshots are defined or stipulated by social conventions. For example, property ownership is conventionally conferred and changed as a function of various symbolic acts. When two people make certain verbal utterances and money is exchanged, this conventionally causes the transfer of ownership of some item of property from one individual to the other. Elections are another

\[27\] Thanks to Tom Christiano for calling my attention to this problem and for highlighting its importance.

\[28\] Lewis, "Postscripts," 199.
prime example of a conventional causal system, in which certain types of outcomes are conventionally stipulated to result from assorted collections of voting acts.

An important feature of conventional causal systems is that the time of an outcome is one of the conventionally determined elements. Certain types of sales, for example, do not go into effect until a certain time period has elapsed after the main transactions, to allow a party (especially a buyer) to reconsider. Similarly, I contend, elections standardly feature a certain conventional element with respect to time. Even if voters cast their ballots at different times on election day (or through earlier absentee ballots), the system conventionally abstracts from this actual or "natural" order and considers all the votes on an equal basis. This is reflected in the fact that the votes are not counted, and have no conventional causal up-shot, until all votes in a given electoral district are cast, that is, until the polls close. Nor does the order of counting make any official difference. For these reasons, the temporal asymmetry among different votes is officially voided or obliterated by the conventions of the electoral process. In the United States House or Senate, for example, a roll-call vote is completed even if the outcome is clear long before the last vote has been voiced. This is because, officially, votes are not counted or "registered" until all have been voiced. Because of this conventional feature, the causal impact of a late vote is not really preempted by a collection of early votes. From the official, conventional perspective, they are all simultaneous; hence, their causal statuses are perfectly symmetric.29

Admittedly, this conventional perspective is obscured by national elections featuring different time zones, or by different poll-closing times among districts within the same time zone. All such cases, I would say, are flawed executions of the traditional conceptualization of elections. The idea behind a democratic election is that all votes should have equal weight, and that idea is, to some degree, undercut by counting some people's ballots before other citizens have had an opportunity to vote.30

IV. Objections and Replies

The heart of my (quasi-) moral rationale for voting is that one stands to earn more "credit" for helping to elect the best candidate or stands to avoid "discredit" for letting the best candidate lose. But, it may be asked,

29 There are, to be sure, all sorts of deals made by members of Congress that depend upon voting order. This is not the occasion to enter into a close analysis of what such deals imply or presuppose.

30 It might be objected that not all votes do have equal weights under all systems. For example, under the American system of electing presidents, the electoral college, not all citizens' votes count equally. However, this is not a clear instance of unequal weights. The electoral college involves a two-step system, in which citizens first choose electors who then choose a president. In the race for any given elector, all votes count equally; and in the race for president, all electors' ballots count equally.
who is handing out this credit? Other citizens? God? What I mean to say, in saying that a voter "earns credit" for voting, is that the voter attains a certain (quasi-) moral status, whether or not anybody else knows about this status or does anything about it. Analogously, if someone (appropriately) fulfills a promise to a deceased friend or relative, he thereby attains a certain moral status, whether or not anybody else knows of his promise-keeping or compliments him for it. People of certain persuasions may doubt that the prospect of attaining a certain moral status would be very motivating for prospective voters. I am inclined to disagree with these doubts; but, in any case, I have not yet claimed that the rationale proffered here will necessarily succeed in motivating citizens. Insofar as I am interested in providing a (quasi-) moral rationale for voting, I merely wish to offer normatively sound reasons for voting, however successful or unsuccessful these reasons might be in motivational terms.

It is but a small step, however, from this normative rationale to scenarios that provide voting incentives. Citizens often disclose their voting actions or inactions to their friends and associates. A voter who informs his chums that he voted for their mutually approved candidate may be greeted with verbal approval (credit), whereas an acknowledgment that he did not manage to vote may be greeted with disapproval (discredit). These responses may arise precisely because friends and associates recognize the respective causal effects of voting and abstaining. If a citizen expects approval for voting and disapproval for abstaining, such an expectation creates an incentive in favor of voting. Thus, insofar as my (quasi-) moral rationale underpins peer approval and disapproval, it can also indirectly affect a citizen's prudential rationale for voting. But I do not wish to make much of this.

Let me return, then, to the moral rationale. Readers who are persuaded that causal responsibility gives a citizen a moral reason to vote might still want to know more about this reason; in particular, they might want to know how weighty it is. After all, voting is still somewhat costly, and it would be good to know how to weigh the moral value of helping elect a good candidate—especially when one's help is not essential—against the personal cost of voting. More generally, how is moral credit to be divided when there are more than enough contributors to a socially valuable outcome? It would indeed be nice to have answers to these further questions, but I do not have them. This in no way suggests, however, that

31 Thanks to Ellen Frankel Paul for highlighting this issue.
32 In principle, of course, someone who votes for Brown might incur the wrath of those who oppose Brown's election. But a voter for Brown will probably have fewer associations with people who oppose Brown's election, and is less likely to inform them of his vote.
33 Feeling as if one is part of a team that is working toward victory is undoubtedly a major factor in the psychology of political participation. But the integrity of team spirit derives from the fact that team members can all make causal contributions toward mutually sought outcomes.
34 This question was properly urged on me by David Sobel.
my type of voting rationale is on the wrong track; it merely suggests (unsurprisingly) that more work is left to be done.

Personal cost, moreover, is not the only reason to abstain from casting a vote. At least two other considerations of an entirely different nature can also militate against voting. First, if both candidates in a given race are terrible, a citizen might wish to avoid complicity in electing even the lesser of the two evils.35 Second, one might sometimes wish to abstain in order to “send a message” of some sort. For example, if a citizen objects to the placement of a questionable referendum on the ballot, he might express his opposition by means of abstention.36 Once again, however, the fact that there are sometimes these kinds of reasons to abstain does not cut against the proposal that causal responsibility creates a positive reason to vote. Nor does it undercut the possibility that normally, if citizens become sufficiently informed, their on-balance reasons will favor voting.

The final objection I wish to consider concerns the epistemic conditions of citizens in the contemporary age of scientific polling and rapid communication. Given pollsters’ predictions prior to election day, or the reports of exit polls on election day itself, a prospective voter may either know or be highly justified in believing that one of the candidates is a shoo-in and that his own vote will make no difference to the outcome. In the face of such knowledge or justified belief, how can the responsibility rationale properly move him? How can he incur moral or quasi-moral culpability by not voting?37

This line of argument restates the rational-choice perspective on the voting problem. No doubt it has intuitive appeal, but I do not think it deserves to be either the sole or the dominant perspective on the problem. According to the argument I have offered, when a prospective voter knows or justifiably believes that candidate X will win with or without his vote, this does not cancel his partial responsibility for the electoral outcome. If partial responsibility for the outcome gives him a reason to vote, as I have argued it does, the prospective voter’s epistemic condition does not undercut this reason.

To appreciate the force of my reply, return to the firing-squad example. Suppose a member of a firing-squad offers himself the following argument: “People have counseled me not to shoot because then I won’t incur any moral responsibility for the victim’s death. But I won’t incur any responsibility even if I do shoot. After all, I know that my comrades are all going to shoot, so the outcome will be the same whether I shoot or not. I cannot single-handedly change the outcome, so I won’t be responsible. Therefore, I might as well shoot and not get in trouble with my superiors

35 This consideration was suggested by Roderick Long and Susan Sauvé Meyer.
36 David Schmidtz suggested this consideration.
37 Thanks to Tom Christiano for pressing this problem on me.
for abstaining." This argument is unconvincing, because our criterion of moral responsibility is not tied to the make-a-difference, or decisiveness, criterion. Nor does knowledge that one will not make a difference to the outcome entail absence of moral responsibility. Our criterion of moral responsibility is tied to being a contributing (though possibly redundant) cause, not to being a decisive cause. A member of a firing squad who shoots (accurately) is a contributing cause of the victim’s death. If he shoots, he does bear partial responsibility, although he could not have reversed the outcome by abstaining. Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to a voter. He can earn (more) moral credit by voting for the good candidate even if his vote is not decisive for victory; and he can incur moral culpability by abstaining even if his abstention is not decisive for the candidate’s loss.38

Another possible objection by appeal to epistemic conditions might run as follows: “Even if you (Goldman) are right in claiming that partial causation rather than decisiveness is the crucial de facto ingredient in culpability, there is still a further, epistemic ingredient. To be culpable for an act or omission the agent must know, or be justified in believing, that this act or omission would instantiate that de facto ingredient. Do citizens satisfy this epistemic constraint?”

The answer to this is easy. Since citizens understand the conventional causal system that comprises the electoral process, it is pretty trivial for them to appreciate (at least at a tacit level) the causal role that their voting or abstaining will play in a given election. So the indicated epistemic condition, I suspect, is regularly met. Indeed, I am tempted to speculate that the reason so many people do vote, as a matter of fact, is precisely because of their grasp of the rationale offered here, including their grasp of the “contributing cause” role that their voting occupies within the system. As we saw earlier, if voting is approached from the standard economic or rational-choice perspective (which incorporates the decisiveness test), it seems irrational for most people to vote. From this perspective, it is perplexing why so many people do vote. The current approach offers a possible explanation of this phenomenon. Conceivably, then, the account presented here fulfills the dual function of both normative and explanatory theory. It can explain why people should vote (after obtaining sufficient information), and it can explain why people do vote (in fairly substantial numbers).

V. Conclusion

Political theorists have been hard put to explain why citizens should vote—or why they do vote—because the theorists have largely focused on

38 Similarly, many commentators on the Holocaust morally censure people—especially people in official capacities—who failed to speak out against it at the time, even if such speech would not have single-handedly changed the outcome.
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the expected consequences of an individual’s voting versus not voting. This essay proposes a different approach to the problem. It argues that citizens often have good reasons to vote because they bear partial responsibility for the electoral outcome. Even if an individual’s vote is not decisive for a given candidate’s victory, such a vote can still qualify as a partial cause of that victory. So a voter can earn moral or quasi-moral credit for an electoral outcome even if he is not a swing voter. Thus, the proper treatment of partial causation and causal responsibility provides the underpinning of a good rationale for voting. If citizens intuitively grasp this rationale—and it is not implausible that they do—it may also explain why they actually vote (a fair amount of the time).

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39 Strictly, the causal responsibility approach I propose could be subsumed under the expected-consequences, or rational-choice, perspective. Suppose we view the state of being a partial cause of a good electoral result, or the state of deserving moral credit (or discredit), as themselves possible outcomes or consequences of voting or not voting. Then the approach I favor may just be a special case of the rational-choice framework. The choice matrix now confronting the voter will differ from the matrix that would exist under the standard analysis. In addition to the outcomes being different, the probability of getting a more preferred outcome from voting than from abstaining is no longer linked to the probability of being a swing voter. Even if one is not a swing voter, one’s act of voting can raise the probability of one’s earning more causal credit for a superior candidate’s victory and of avoiding causal discredit for such a candidate’s loss. If citizens value some of these kinds of outcomes over others to a sufficient degree, the new choice matrix might make it “rational” for them to vote on numerous occasions. Since the outcomes have a moral nature, however, it may be controversial whether the choices should be considered a matter of “prudence” or “self-interest.” I do not try to address this issue here.