Week 10. Rationality of Voting

1 Separate Questions

Here are some separate questions we might ask about voting:

— Is it rational to vote?
— Is there a (moral) duty to vote?
— Is there sometimes a (moral) duty *not* to vote?
— Who has the (moral) right to vote?
— When is the (moral) right to vote gained or lost?
— Is it permissible to punish people for *not* voting?

To some degree, these are independent questions. In this session, we will start with the first two questions.

2 Dowding, "Is it rational to vote?"

The basic formula for the utility of voting is

$$u = pB - C + D$$

where p is the probability of your vote making a difference, B are the benefits your voting would bring about, C are the costs of voting, and D are other benefits you might get from voting.

> *Questions for Discussion.* (i) How do we compute p? (2) What should be included in B?

The problem for the social scientist is the following,

1. Rational choice theory (RCT) explains human behaviour.
2. According to RCT, voting is irrational.
3. Most people vote.

So we have to conclude either that (i) most people are blatantly irrational, or (ii) that RCT does *not* explain human behaviour.

To avoid these conclusions, we should look for ways to deny premise (2). How could rational choice theory explain that voting is rational? Dowding discusses five possibilities.

The Marginalist Solution

Proposal: RCT still has explanatory power even if most people don't vote, because it can explain how people react to changes in p, B, C and D.

Dowding: but we are still stuck with the irrationality of voting.

C–term solution

Proposal: because the costs of voting are trivial, people ignore it and act as if $C = 0$. Then u becomes positive, because $pB > 0$.

Dowding: the true issue concerns information costs—i.e., the costs of acquiring information before voting. These costs are non-trivial.

B–term solution

Proposal: altruistic benefits should be included in B (e.g., the utility received by others), which makes pB sizeable.

Dowding: any such proposal cannot get around the fact that p is tiny.

p–term solution

Dowding here discusses various proposals that attempt to show that p does not matter, or should be computed in some different way.

Questions for Discussion. (i) What are those proposals? (ii) Why does Dowding reject them? (iii) Are there other ways to think about the "decisiveness" of one's vote?

D-term solution

Proposal: people receive some fixed benefit from voting, especially an expressive benefit (e.g., by "affirming a partisan preference").

Common Critique: this isn't really an explanation at all. We are given no deeper reasons why D is the way it is.

Dowding: this demand for "deeper reasons" is mistaken. People have preferences to express their views at the voting ballot; given that they have these preferences, their voting is rational. Inquiring into where people get these preferences from is a matter of psychology.

Questions for Discussion. (i) Why are many economists disappointed with a "D-term solution"? (ii) Does the theory of expressive voting contradict the idea that individuals are utility maximizers?

3 Lomasky/Brennan, "Is There A Duty to Vote?"

I. Introduction

Patriotic appeals that one has a duty to vote are common; but these appeals are mistaken, Lomasky/Brennan want to argue. Not only is there no duty to vote, "voting is not morally superior to abstention" (63).

II. The Argument Delimited (63)

Some special cases where one has a duty to vote: e.g., if one is a juror, or has promised to vote.

III. The Argument from Prudence (65)

Brennan/Lomasky use a formula for the utility of voting similar to Dowding's (66). They argue that, even where elections are close, it is normally irrational to vote.

Thus, we can reduce the formula for the utility of voting to $u = S - C$ where C are the costs, and S are the direct returns. This formula turns voting into a consumption good like others (67).

Questions for Discussion. (i) How does Brennan/Lomasky's formula differ from Dowding's? (Does it matter?) (ii) What does it mean to call voting a "consumption good"?

IV. The Argument from Act–Consequentialism (67)

The act-consequentialist claims that we should vote because doing so produces the impartially best consequences. For the consequentialist, everyone's utility matters. So B will be much larger.

Brennan/Lomasky: It is very hard to know what precisely B will be. There are enormous epistemic obstacles to knowing which of two policies will be better (70). We should thus apply an "epistemic discount rate" (71).

Second, all the argument supports is that *knowledgeable* people should vote (72). It does not support the conclusion that *everyone* has a duty to vote.

Third, the Median Voter Theorem means that the difference between parties will be minimal. So B will be smaller than many consequentialists claim.

V. The Argument from Generalization (75)

It is not clear what scenario we should imagine "if no one voted". But we can accept for argument's sake that the consequences would be terrible (76).

Brennan/Lomasky: what is at issue here is not generalization, but unfairness (77). E.g., deciding to leave farming for dentistry cannot be generalized, but it is not unfair.

However, if we abstain from voting, we are not free-riding. Quite the contrary: we are making the votes of others more important! (78)

Questions for Discussion. (i) What are other public goods that voting might produce? (ii) In which other ways might non-voters be "free-riding" on voters' contribution?

VI. Expressive Ethics and Voting (79)

A Bad Argument: if you do not vote, then you have no right to complain (79-80).

A Better Argument: aside from consequentialist considerations, there are "norms of expression" (80). E.g., being a Yankees fan means expressing certain attitudes, even if they have no consequential impact. Similarly for friendship (80-1).

Problems: turning up every four years to vote does not look important enough to express genuine concern for the common good (82). Also, abstaining from the vote can be just as expressive as voting.

Questions for Discussion. (i) What might voting express? (ii) How does expressive voting in this sense relate to Jason Brennan's rejection of "semiotic" arguments? (iii) How does this argument relate to Dowding's endorsement of a "D-term solution"?

VII. Belief in a Duty to Vote (84)

Despite these arguments, people widely believe that there is a duty to vote. Why? Brennan/Lomasky offer some suggestions:

(1) We might still be in thrall to outdated theories meant for small-scale politics.
(2) Belief in a duty to vote promotes voters' self-esteem.
(3) It stops citizens from being alienated from politics. This benefits the political elites.

Questions for Discussion. (i) Are these explanations why people still believe in a duty to vote convincing? (ii) In general, if philosophical theory and actual beliefs differ so widely, how should we react?