

On the Moral Duties of Voters

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ABSTRACT – Voting is morally significant insofar as it is an act by which citizens indirectly exercise power over others, by taking part in the causal chain that ends up shaping the laws of a country (under minimal democratic conditions). Considering this, I argue that the most fundamental duty of voters is a duty of decentration, i.e., a duty to look beyond the impact of their single vote and to acknowledge their responsibility for others when deciding whether and how to vote. From this fundamental duty, at least three more concrete duties can be derived. 1) A duty to give primary attention to non-personal considerations like justice and well-being. 2) A duty to acquire sufficient and balanced information, and to fairly engage with opposing views. 3) A duty to vote (tactically) when we have sufficient reasons to believe that we can contribute to alleviating injustice or suffering. Although these duties are demanding, they do not entail that many people should abstain, and even less that universal suffrage should be questioned. In many cases, voters will have weightier reasons to vote than to abstain. And recognizing these duties should invite us to consider institutional ways of facilitating voters' fulfillment of their duties.

Keywords: ethics of voting; moral duties; decentration; deliberation; abstention

I. INTRODUCTION

Does our commitment to democratic self-government imply that citizens should feel free to vote however they want, based on whatever considerations they find relevant? Such a relativistic stance, support for which can be found in the work of Hans Kelsen (2013 [1929]), for example, would be hard to defend from a moral point of view. Since the act of voting, when considered in aggregation, potentially has a significant impact on other people's lives, and since representatives that it is our responsibility to choose may commit injustice in our name (Beerbohm 2012), it seems hard to believe that all forms of voting are of equal moral value. It is doubtful that those most affected by our votes would find it acceptable for us to vote without much thought or in a purely self-centered way, for example. They would have reasons to blame us for the self-indulgent way in which we vote and we would likely struggle to offer them appropriate justification in response.

Considering this, the aim of this article is to highlight the main moral duties of voters and to tie them together. A new academic literature has fairly recently emerged on the ethics of voting (Brennan 2011; Beerbohm 2012; Maskivker 2019; Lever 2023). This article seeks to contribute to it by showing how different duties that have been identified and studied separately in this literature can be grounded in a more general duty of decentration, i.e., a duty to enlarge our perspective and to take other people's interests and aspirations into account when

considering whether and how to vote. I will consider three more specific duties that can be derived from this general one. The first is a duty to give priority to non-personal considerations such as justice or well-being. The second is a duty to acquire sufficient and balanced information and to engage with opposing views, to be able to fulfill the first one. The third is a conditional duty to vote (tactically), rather than abstaining, when we have reasons to believe that we can contribute to fighting injustice or relieving suffering through our vote.

These three duties may not exhaust the moral obligations faced by voters. And they certainly do not exhaust the moral obligations faced by citizens in other roles or spheres of their lives. However, they appear to me as the duties least likely to face *reasonable* objections. One might think that it would be more interesting to discuss more controversial duties, but my aim here is to identify what could serve as the bedrock of a widely sharable voting ethic. Furthermore, as we shall see, despite having the potential for reasonable agreement, these duties do face some disagreements and need specification. One strong source of disagreement is the reluctance of many democrats to recognize demanding preconditions for the use of a right that is meant to be unconditionally accessible to all. Yet the premise that there are strong preconditions to voting well does by no means imply that universal franchise should be questioned. Although the moral duties of voters presented below are demanding, I shall argue that they do not have the exclusionary implications of Jason Brennan's (2011) ethic of voting. They should rather invite us to consider institutional ways of facilitating voters' fulfillment of their duties.

II. WHY VOTING IS MORALLY SIGNIFICANT

For the first theorists of modern democracies, the existence of a moral responsibility faced by voters was not to be doubted. Rousseau (2018 [1762]) famously argued that citizens should, through their votes, express not their particular or private will, but the general will. John Stuart Mill (1975 [1861]) also considered it essential that citizens be driven by a sense of the common good or public interest, and that they set aside their particular interests in the use of their right to vote. It was this concern for the common good that nourished the suspicion of many of these thinkers towards the secret ballot, which they feared would trivialize self-centered voting by removing this crucial citizen act from the public gaze (see Elster 2015).

The use of secret ballots can be justified on many grounds – be they instrumental (Brennan & Pettit 1990; Manin 2015) or privacy-based (Lever 2007). However, the fact that voters are freed from *formal* or *institutionalized* accountability for their electoral choices by our

use of secret ballots does not entail that they are relieved of any *moral* duty at the ballot box. Voting is one of those acts that, by (deeply) affecting other people's lives, inevitably raise moral questions, and arguably generate a right to justification for the victims of ill-formed or ill-intentioned voting choices (Vandamme 2018).

After all, by voting, we are exercising power over other people. Not only over representatives whose "tenure in office depend[s] on what the electorate decides" (Maskivker 2019, 12), but also indirectly over our fellow citizens, as our votes contribute to authorizing coercive actions by the government (Brennan 2011; Beerbohm 2012). Admittedly, some people may vote for purely instrumental reasons, without any intention to authorize state coercion (Ramelet 2020). Others vote for minor parties or candidates who do not influence governmental coercion. Yet the very act of taking part in an election entails that one engages in a collective action whose result will in most cases lead to state coercion – one of the reasons why some anarchists (Dupuis-Déri 2019), but also some Amish people and aboriginal communities (Häggrot 2023b) prefer to abstain.

State coercion is not necessarily undesirable. It is sometimes necessary to protect people's rights, facilitate cooperation, or enforce people's positive moral duties. But what matters here is that it is undeniably morally *significant*. State coercion may indeed highly affect some people's lives: their welfare, their opportunities, the resources available to them, and even their life expectancy. This, by extension, makes the act allowing this coercion also morally significant.

Arguably, in the absence of imperative mandates, voters are not entirely responsible for the decisions made (and coercion exercised) by their representatives, which may deviate significantly from what they expected them to do. In this respect, voters' moral responsibility may be higher in a binding referendum than in an election. However, in contexts where governments are minimally responsive to citizens' demands¹, where some of the coercive actions governments engage in are influenced by the general aims set by citizen votes, voters' moral responsibility is engaged, at least to some extent.

Albeit indirect, the power exercised through voting is not negligible at all when considered in the aggregate. To take a telling example, if people who elected G. W. Bush in 2000 buying his promise of a humbler and less interventionist foreign policy had voted differently or abstained, perhaps the world would be more at peace today, considering the

¹ As argued by Beerbohm (2012) and Maskivker (2019), voters probably do not face the same duties in undemocratic regimes, where their votes may not have any influence other than legitimizing the authoritarian incumbents.

unintended effects of the 2003 Iraq War on the destabilization of a whole region. More trivially, people's access to basic social rights, other people's prospects of fleeing misery by immigrating, or resource depletion and pollution are telling examples of morally significant effects of general elections.

Granted, a person's vote in a general election or referendum is usually not decisive. Furthermore, the process by which governments take action is complex, involves many agents, with different degrees of power, and is only partly responsive to citizens' input, which arguably dilutes citizens' responsibility (Lawford-Smith 2019). However, as I shall argue in the next section, it is a moral mistake to look at our actions in isolation from the actions of our peers. Just as individuals are blameworthy for harming the environment even though their actions taken in isolation are not decisive in this harm, they can be blamed for harming their fellow citizens or other affected parties when their vote, aggregated to their fellows', contributes to creating this harm – in other words, when they take an active part in the causal chain that produces the harm (Goldman 1999)². As has been argued, it is not necessary to *be* fully responsible or culpable to *take* responsibility for state actions (Lawford-Smith 2019, chap. 5). Considering this, what should be our voting ethic, what moral³ considerations should guide us when deciding whether to vote, preparing our vote, and voting?

III. A GENERAL DUTY OF DECENTRATION

The first and most fundamental duty of voters, I believe, is a duty of “decentration”. Decentration (or “decentering”) is a concept initially forged by the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget to refer to the ability to break with self-centeredness, to distance oneself from one's singular perspective and one's interests by taking other people's perspectives into account. It has been taken up among others⁴ by Lawrence Kohlberg in his theory of moral development and Jürgen Habermas in his theory of communicative action (see Peterman 1997). The concept is useful in that it describes a *process* without a fixed end, thereby avoiding the extreme demandingness and illusory aspect of a requirement of moral “impartiality” or “objectivity”. Furthermore, it does not have the self-sacrificial connotation of “altruism”. Finally, it is more cognitive, and less emotion-based than “empathy”.

² I will leave aside the question of implicit or passive complicity in political harms. On this, see Beerbohm 2012, chap. 9.

³ In this article, I do not make any distinction between “ethics” and “morality”.

⁴ The concept is also often used by anthropologists to describe the break with ethnocentrism.

I interpret the requirement to decenter one's perspective as involving the acknowledgment of two moral facts. First, as interdependent social beings, we are inescapably participating, voluntarily or not, in collective actions. Second, our mutual dependence engenders responsibility towards others. Let me consider these two forms of decentration in turn, in the context of voting.

Taking a We-perspective

When considering whether and how to vote, it may seem rational but it is morally mistaken to consider merely the impact of one's vote⁵. Rational choice theory is a non-starter for an ethic of voting⁶ because voting is a *collective act* that starts making sense only when it is recognized as such. First, it is the act by which, in a democracy, the community of citizens determines its political orientation and contributes to shaping its laws. From this perspective, the collective agent is highly symbolic; it has no or little collective intentionality, as it is usually deeply divided. Hence, the act that unites the community is taking part in the vote, regardless of the content of the vote. At a second level, however, voting is an act by which sub-groups of citizens join forces and unite around shared goals. By giving our vote to a candidate or party, we join others in a collective attempt to improve our society. Universal suffrage recognizes that the primary moral unit is the individual. Individuals are free to make their own political judgments and vote accordingly. However, their electoral power becomes effective only by joining forces. It is only if voters manage to form a plurality or majority in support of an option that their political aspirations have a chance to be met. This may require a certain degree of direct and indirect coordination, such as rallying and anticipating other people's votes to vote tactically (more on which later).

It is from these We-perspectives (We, the citizens, and We, the supporters of this political project) that the act of voting matters morally. The question, therefore, is not whether *my* vote will make a difference, but whether votes, taken in aggregation, will. Or, to use Parfit's apt words, whether my act (or lack of action) is part of a set of acts that, together, harm or benefit people (Parfit 1984, 69) – or are morally appropriate on other grounds⁷. And under minimally democratic institutions at least, with some degree of responsiveness to citizens'

⁵ For a typical example of such an individualistic approach, see Lomasky & Brennan 2000. This can be taken as one example of the "mistakes in moral mathematics" discussed in Parfit 1984, section 3.

⁶ It has also limited explanatory force for the empirical study of voting. See Blais 2000.

⁷ As Parfit himself acknowledges, this applies not only to utilitarianism but to any plausible moral theory.

demands, votes *will* make a morally significant difference, which gives rise to more specific moral duties to which I will come back shortly.

One may object that we have not chosen to belong to this We, to this collective action. This is often true but it is irrelevant. Whether we like it or not, by having the right to vote, we find ourselves included in a collective action – collective self-government – that engages our responsibility towards others. The way we behave as an individual in this collective matters simply because the way the collective behaves matters importantly for many people: we are all dependent on the choices of our fellow citizens for matters of the highest importance, such as our rights, resources, and opportunities.

Acknowledging one's responsibility for others

In close connection to this, decentration involves the acknowledgment that we are not the only person who matters, that others have needs, interests, and aspirations, and that we are collectively responsible for their fate when our collective decisions – including our decision not to act to remedy existing injustice or sources of harm – affect them (see Young 2011). Acknowledging this responsibility entails that we should make the effort to take into account other people's interests and aspirations in our judgments and actions.

Why is it so, one may ask? Since everyone presumptively has a right to vote, why cannot we just expect everyone to promote their own interests or personal aspirations and let the political process arbitrate between these potentially conflicting demands? Am I not trying to turn players into umpires⁸? The answer is that no invisible hand will turn the aggregation of individual self-centered perspectives into morally desirable decisions. All democratic processes are imperfect in at least two ways. First, the inclusion of affected persons is always limited, as a result of which some excluded interests need to be taken up by those included (Goodin 2003)⁹. Second, majority rule is unavoidable and fair in many respects (Schwartzberg 2014), but is inherently biased against minorities, whose legitimate interests and aspirations must be taken up by other voters for democracy to produce just outcomes. These are the reasons why, qua

⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

⁹ In this respect, the exercise in moral decentration implies going beyond the We-perspective of the community of citizens and taking a broader yet We-perspective. We should ideally consider the implications of our votes for foreigners, future generations, and other species, whether or not we identify with them as members of a collective project. Hence, we must make a distinction between the collective agent that is engaged in self-government and the agents whose interests and aspirations are to be considered in the process of decentration, for the simple reason that political communities' decisions often go beyond *self-government* by imposing significant constraints on third parties.

voters, we are responsible for the fate of others, why we cannot just let everyone take care of themselves.

Some have argued that citizens ought to vote in an “impartial” way (see in particular Maskivker 2019, chap. 3). Although impartiality may be seen as the perspective potentially achieved as a result of full decentration, a requirement of impartiality may be excessive¹⁰. Just as we do not expect citizens to be perfectly informed when voting, we cannot expect them to be perfectly impartial. Biases of all sorts are probably inevitable, to some extent. Yet voters should aim at reducing their partiality and their biases to avoid complicity in injustice. Impartiality, in this respect, is at most a regulative ideal, like perfect information. It is worth noting, however, that as many critics of impartiality have pointed out, the *claim to* (as opposed to the aim at) impartiality can be a dangerous mystification hiding forms of partiality, domination, or hegemony (Friedman 1989; Young 2000, 108). This is why it seems preferable for voters to see their primary duty as a demand, not to take an impartial perspective that they will never achieve, but to engage in a never-ending process of decentration requiring relentless self-criticism and fight against one’s partly inevitable biases¹¹.

It also matters to clarify that decentration does not require the suppression of the personal standpoint or a purely selfless attitude. Firstly, in many cases, what is desirable from a personal standpoint will be aligned with what is desirable from a wider perspective as well. If one is involuntarily unemployed, for example, one may consider it both fair to all *and* in one’s interest that work be better shared or that there be more jobs. All those who suffer from a disadvantage probably have an interest in living in a fairer world¹². In general, though, we should be wary of such convergence between our interests and what we see as required by justice. The “test” of decentration consists in asking ourselves: “Is it because it is in my interest that I hold this belief or that I am attracted to this particular policy option or candidate? Could I defend the same view from a different perspective?” It is only when we have reasons to believe that the same point of view could be generalized or defended from other relevant positions as well that we can legitimately pursue what is in our interest. Nevertheless, we should remain aware in this intellectual exercise of how our interests often tend to corrupt our political judgments.

¹⁰ Maskivker (2019) also uses the notion of “fair-mindedness”, which seems preferable to describe the required attitude.

¹¹ That biases are inevitable does not imply that nothing can be done to reduce them. One can gain in impartiality in the same way as scientists can try to gain in objectivity even though full objectivity is inaccessible.

¹² In this sense, the ethic of voting defended here may be said to be agent-relative, because some agents are allowed to vote in their own interest and others are not. However, it is not *entirely* agent-relative.

Secondly, personal prerogatives (Scheffler 1982) may be morally relevant. A citizen may, for example, legitimately vote against a policy proposal that, for some impersonal reason, would entail an excessive sacrifice of her personal prerogatives. What the duty of decentration invites us to do can be described as activating what Robert Goodin (2003) called “deliberation within”, i.e. weighing the reasons for and against different courses of action by making all affected agents present in our imagination¹³, and weighing our personal reasons and interests against theirs. Hence, personal reasons and prerogatives can weigh in the balance, as long as they are not given excessive weight.

Let us now examine how this general and widely acceptable duty of decentration can inform our internal deliberations about whether and how to vote, and what more particular duties can be derived from it. The logically prior question to consider would be whether to vote. Nevertheless, I will discuss it only after the question of how to vote, because as we shall see, the answer to the first question depends on the answer to the second.

IV. A DUTY TO GIVE PRIORITY TO NON-PERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS

By decentering their perspective, voters acknowledge that they do not vote merely for themselves, but take part in a collective action meant to determine the laws and actions of their country. They also acknowledge a responsibility for others – for those potentially affected by this collective decision in particular. What matters, then, cannot be merely one’s personal fate, or one’s particular sympathy for some candidates or parties – these considerations would be too self-centered. Decentration requires wider considerations about the good of the whole community of the affected or the fate of everyone among the affected. Thus, a first implication of the general duty of decentration may be a duty to give priority to *non-personal* considerations over more personal ones when we vote or when we decide whether to vote.

Non-personal considerations are typically considerations of justice or collective well-being. They can either be interpersonal, as in Scanlon’s (1998) moral contractualism, or impersonal as in utilitarianism. I have more sympathy for moral contractualism and share the Rawlsian view that justice should have priority and constrain the pursuit of collective well-being (Rawls 1971), but this is not the place to defend this view since the aim is to outline a widely sharable ethic of voting. Utilitarians would likely agree with the claim that voters’

¹³ This does not qualitatively replace genuine deliberations with a diversity of viewpoints, as highlighted by Habermas (1990), but as Goodin (2003) argues, it compensates for the impossibility of deliberating all the time with other people and of enfranchising all affected interests.

primary considerations should be non-personal. Parfit (1984, 443), for example, famously argued that “our reasons for acting should become *more impersonal*”.

As suggested earlier, non-personal goals (be they justice or general utility) may sometimes be aligned with our personal aspirations, but what makes them non-personal in those cases is the fact that they are not *merely* personal. Hence, when judging the just character of a proposal in a referendum, we should ideally not consider merely whether it is just or unjust *to ourselves*, but in more general terms. Or when we consider the effects of a policy on well-being, it should be either on collective well-being, or the well-being of the least well-off if we give the latter some form of priority. It should not just be our well-being.

Beyond the common good

As the empirical literature on voters’ attitudes reveals, many voters already picture themselves as voting for the common good, not merely their own good (Kinder & Kiewiet 1981; Mackie 2008). One might thus believe that they do give priority to non-personal considerations. However, beyond the fact that their appreciation of the common good may be biased by their own interests or particular conception of the good, another difficulty comes from the fact that many politicians invoke the common good or the public interest to legitimize the policies they advocate, giving voters the illusion that private interests or class conflict are not at stake in elections or referendums. These deceiving appeals to the common good or the public interest can be highly misleading and invite questioning these normative aims.

That it is appropriate to vote for the common good, in the public interest or the general interest seems to have been taken for granted by many theorists from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Jason Brennan’s voting ethic. This, however, should not be accepted without further question. Let me explore here only one reason to be wary of the rhetoric of the common good (and see Lever 2017 for a deeper and different analysis of this issue). Admittedly, some goods are in the interest of all to pursue: peace, general prosperity and quality social relationships for example. These goods are perhaps not in the immediate interest of all, but at least in their long-term, best interest. The common good or the public interest, in this perspective, is nothing more than the set of interests that all citizens have in common (Barry 1961)¹⁴.

¹⁴ There are many other possible understandings of the common good or public interest, but this one is probably the least controversial.

The voting choices that we generally face, however, do not have the simplicity that seductive political rhetoric portrays. We are usually not being asked to choose between war and peace, misery or prosperity for all. We are being asked to choose between competing political platforms that usually claim to serve the interests of all but will most of the time have the effect of serving only part of them. On one side, for example, a candidate proposes increasing the purchasing power of those who have the least to boost the economy for the benefit of all. On the other side, it is argued that it is by removing barriers to hiring such as minimum wage regulations or employers' tax contributions that we will stimulate the economy for the benefit of all. To arbitrate between these competing claims, a voter should ideally be capable of demasking the deceiving harmony of interests and broadly identifying the contrasted distributive effects of both policies¹⁵.

The vocabulary of the common good and the public interest can play an ideological function: masking the reality of social division. In most of the policies at stake in elections and referendums, the interests of all citizens do not converge. On the contrary, there will be winners and losers. What is right, or just, will often be distinct from the common good or public interest in that it is not necessarily in the interest (even in the "best" or "enlightened" interest) of all (Barry 1989). Hence, it is not enough, from a moral viewpoint, to connect one's interests to those of one's fellow citizens by seeking what benefits everyone. It would be morally preferable to consider the diversity of effects of competing policies and to examine whom they really benefit and to what extent (and whether the losses for some are compensated by the benefits for others or acceptable to all).

Policy vs personal considerations

An implication of this duty to give priority to non-personal considerations is that considerations such as whether we personally like a candidate in an election are at most of secondary importance when they are not completely irrelevant. Considerations of justice and well-being impose that, in elections, we consider first and foremost the projects and platforms of the different candidates or parties to assess the impact of different options with respect to these impersonal values. While this may be more intuitive in party-centered political systems,

¹⁵ Which does not require expertise in macroeconomics, as informational shortcuts are usually available. It may nonetheless seem excessively demanding, but denying citizens' capacity to understand such debates and make sound judgments about them would weaken the case for democracy. I come back to the issue of demandingness later.

where the personality of the candidates seems to matter less, it is also relevant in more personalized political systems, since (actual, not proclaimed) political ideology is still the most relevant criterion of distinction between two candidates, being the most impactful.

Consider the following example. Jane votes in a two-round presidential election. The candidate she supported was eliminated in the first round. In the second round, she is invited to make a choice between two candidates she hates: E and M. I would argue that her hate, as such, is not relevant to her choice. What should matter is the two candidates' projects, and the credibility of these projects. Of course, Jane may hate both candidates because she hates their projects, because she finds them unjust for example. Then, Jane's considerations become less personal. What she should do is vote for the project that seems the least morally objectionable. And in that respect, the fact that she feels a strong personal resentment for both may not be relevant. As long as one of the projects is more appealing or less repelling than the other in terms of its capacity to promote impersonal values, she has strong moral reasons to support it. These moral reasons could only be overridden by stronger moral reasons of a non-personal sort, such as the possible benefits of a massive abstention (more on which later).

While the *personal appeal* of different candidates is usually morally irrelevant, some personal qualities of different candidates can be morally relevant when we can relate them to non-personal goals. For example, the authenticity of their concern for justice; their honesty; their realism as to the most promising means of action; their leadership; their capacity to compromise when necessary; their perseverance, etc. Even descriptive characteristics that denote a commonality of experience – such as being a woman, an African-American, or coming from the working class – may sometimes be relevant since they may help fight representational biases that are a source of injustice¹⁶ (see Mansbridge 1999). These criteria, important though they are, should nevertheless be secondary in comparison with political projects. In most cases, they should guide our choices between candidates of the same party, or between candidates with broadly similar political views, but not discriminate between all candidates or parties. Let me illustrate this with an example.

Would it not be wrong to give a vote to a candidate from party B because she seems nicer to us than the candidate from party A, even though we consider the policies defended by A preferable to (and as credible and feasible as) those defended by B? Individuals do not make policies on their own or based on their character. Apart from strong presidential systems where

¹⁶ And not because it can be legitimate in itself to vote according to social identity (Fumagalli, Giavazzi & Ottonelli 2023, 199-200).

the President can issue laws by decree, reforms are usually the result of endorsement by at least one political party. Voting, from this point of view, means above all giving support to a political project¹⁷. Even if we observe a growing shift of power from the legislative to the executive, a “presidentialization” and personalization of politics (Rosanvallon 2015), and even if it is fashionable to affirm that traditional parties now all pursue relatively similar policies, it is still partisan orientation that remains the main indicator of the policies that will be pursued once in power (Bartels 2008; Maravall 2016)¹⁸. And this, it seems to me, is what Michael Baumann and Geoffrey Brennan (2009) fail to consider when they argue that it is rational for voters to give primary attention to the personal characteristics and intrinsic motivations of candidates that make them likely to track their preferences once in power.

As a general rule, it therefore seems that we should make the first choice in favor of a party¹⁹ or candidate based on its program – its normative appeal, its viability and its achievability. Then, we can ask if personality-based considerations weigh so much in favor or disfavor of some that they could reverse our program-based presumption in favor of a given candidate (or party). Thus, to be clear, the claim is not that personality-based considerations do not matter in elections. They matter importantly (see Dovi 2007; Rosanvallon 2015) and they may arguably be a more accessible source of information for voters than the parties’ policy program (Baumann & Brennan 2009). The claim here defended is merely that they are *usually* of secondary normative importance in comparison with less personal, policy-based considerations since the latter usually have deeper consequences on people’s lives. The exceptions include situations where the ideas defended by different candidates are broadly similar, or when we have reasons to doubt the sincerity of the ideas defended by a candidate or a party, for example. In the latter case, a judgment about the personality of the candidate(s) – honesty in particular – may be essential to the pursuit of justice or collective welfare, since it can help us try to anticipate the kind of policies that will actually be implemented following the election.

V. A DUTY TO COLLECT SUFFICIENT AND BALANCED INFORMATION

¹⁷ From this perspective, in contexts where party discipline is strong, personality considerations are even less relevant (Mráz & Lever 2023, 232).

¹⁸ This may be less the case in local politics, where leadership and other personal qualities may arguably be more important.

¹⁹ In open-list proportional representation systems, voters have the opportunity to select candidates from a list. At this further stage, once the preferred party is selected, the criterion of personality obviously becomes more central, as a subsidiary consideration.

One rather obvious direct implication of the preceding section is that voting ethically requires voters to be properly informed. Otherwise, they will not be able to assess the different options' capacity to promote the non-personal goals they pursue. Here is how this duty of information derives from the duty of decentration: we, as voters, have collective power, and we are responsible for others; therefore we care about the impact of our decisions on others; therefore we need to be able to assess this impact.

The claim that we have a moral duty to inform ourselves before voting is not controversial in itself, and it has been endorsed by most people interested in the ethics of voting (see Lomasky & Brennan 2000; Brennan 2011; Flanders 2016; Maskivker 2019), although often evasively (see Häggrot 2023a). It is worth discussing, however, because it needs to be specified more than it has been and because its implications for the duty to vote are much more controversial, as we shall see.

It seems hard to deny that some voting choices are better informed than others. And it seems similarly hard to deny that disposing of better information about a candidate, a party's platform, or the credibility and viability of the policies included in different platforms brings us in a better position to vote ethically. Therefore, we could all acknowledge a *duty to be sufficiently informed before voting*. Such duty does not demand that voters be capable of accurately assessing the aggregate consequences of their vote. This would be implausible given the bounds of rationality. Additionally, an over-demanding voting ethic would fail to accommodate the sensible demand to "preserve ample space for our nonpublic strivings and projects" (Beerbohm 2012, 7). The very logic of elections relies on a political division of labor that relieves citizens from the duty to become experts on all issues of public policy. What citizens therefore need is not policy expertise, but the epistemic capacity to identify the representatives that are the most likely to pursue the non-personal aims that they deem important.

"Sufficiently" informed, it must be admitted, is an undetermined demand. There will inevitably be disagreements as to where the sufficiency threshold should lie. On a minimalist account, citizens should at least know what kind of aims the different competitors promote. This, however, does not seem sufficient since, as mentioned above, different parties or candidates may claim to be pursuing the same aims through different means. So, the epistemic capacity to assess competing means, i.e., competing public policies seems also required. And this is quite demanding. A voting advice application will help to some extent by telling us who aligns with our policy preferences, but we first need to figure out which policies are preferable

to meet our normative aspirations. A plausible interpretation of the sufficiency threshold offered by Maskivker (2016) is that we should try to make sure that our political judgments are likely to be better than random. If enough people managed to be better than random, the epistemic properties of large numbers would be more likely to play out and the outcome of the collective vote would have more chances to be beneficial than harmful. However, it remains very hard to tell, at the individual level, when we can be confident to be more likely right than wrong. In any case, my point here is more modest than that: we could all recognize the existence of such a duty of information while disagreeing about its most plausible interpretation, or about what counts as “sufficient” information.

However, it is important to add that the *amount* of information we gather is not the only thing that matters for a well-informed vote. We should also, as much as possible, be exposed to balanced information and opposing views if we want to increase our chances of making a sound choice (Manin 2017). And even being merely *exposed* to contrasted views might not be enough. Ideally, we should *engage* with opposing views and take them as seriously as we can – an attitude that may be hindered by strong partisan affiliation²⁰. Empirical research shows that information relevant to one’s political judgment is assimilated very differently according to ideological preconceptions. To borrow an example from Larry Bartels, when confronted with figures on the increase in income inequality, most progressives (Bartels’ label) come to recognize this increase, while the number of conservatives who recognize this fact decreases (Bartels 2008: 155-158). In other words, conservatives may be closer to the truth on this issue when they are misinformed. This would be explained, according to Bartels, by a mistrust of intellectual elites, leading conservative publics to believe that these elites want to make them think that way. Yet, more generally, it is now widely acknowledged that we tend to only take on board the information that confirms our initial views to reduce cognitive dissonance or protect our firmly held beliefs (Nickerson 1998; Taber and Lodge 2006). Hence, our duty should more accurately be formulated as a duty to *acquire sufficient and balanced information, and to fairly engage with opposing views*.

This, for sure, is a demanding duty. At a time of information bubbles and polarization, few people spend time engaging (or even have the time to engage) with opposing political views. It is so demanding, according to some, that many people would better not vote than vote

²⁰ From this perspective, the duty of information here defended seems largely incompatible with the alleged duty of loyalty towards one’s party (Fumagalli, Giavazzi & Ottonelli 2023, 200-201). Our duties *qua* voters or citizens trump our possible duties *qua* partisans since serving justice has in general more normative value than being loyal to a specific group.

poorly. Jason Brennan (2011) has thus argued that many of us may have a moral duty to abstain. In his view, we should only exercise our right to vote when we feel confident that we have sufficient information to make a good-faith judgment that the candidate or policy we support will contribute to the common good. In case of doubt, he argues that it is preferable to abstain from voting and from running a risk of taking part in a collectively harmful activity. For reasons I will explain below, I reject the presumption in favor of abstaining, although I accept the premise about the duty to be informed. As I shall argue in the next section, the general duty of decentration also grounds a duty to vote on some conditions that are often likely to be met in sufficiently democratic contexts.

VI. A CONDITIONAL DUTY TO VOTE

To vote or not to vote?

The duty of decentration can indeed also have important implications regarding our choice to vote or not to vote. It seems difficult to believe that we have an *unconditional* moral duty to vote because, as argued in previous sections, there are demanding preconditions to voting well or voting “with care” (Maskivker 2019, chap. 3; see also Lomasky & Brennan 2000, 73; Saunders 2020; Volacu 2020). A morally committed voter may in some cases be legitimately agnostic about the better option submitted to her judgment and hence refuse to take sides (in a referendum, for example)²¹. She may also legitimately refuse to vote, based on non-personal moral considerations, because she has reasons to believe that the voting procedure is unfair, that the result is determined in advance, and that her vote will only perform the undesirable function of legitimizing an authoritarian government (in a hybrid regime, with non-competitive elections, for example).

Nevertheless, this is compatible with the belief that abstention is seldom morally justified in countries with competitive elections. Once again, the reasoning goes like this: we, as voters, have collective power, and we are responsible for others; therefore we care about the impact of our decisions on others; therefore we should primarily care about the effects that our decision to vote or to abstain will have on others.

²¹ To be precise, this would count more as a reason to cast a blank vote than to abstain from voting, but I count the blank vote as a form of abstention here.

When we have an idea of what kind of injustices exist and could be redressed, for example, and when the offer of candidates or parties is sufficiently diversified, so that it is hard to deny that some options will benefit disadvantaged groups more than others, abstention can be considered at least regrettable, if not simply wrong (Vandamme 2023a). In such circumstances, abstaining amounts to giving up a significant part of our power to help remedy some injustices or alleviate suffering. Although the power conferred by the individual vote is causally very weak, abstaining from doing one's bit in the fight against injustice makes one complicit, to some extent, in the perpetuation of the injustice (Goldman 1999; Young 2011; Beerbohm 2012)²².

Admittedly, there are actions other than voting that can contribute to fighting injustices or suffering, and a morally committed citizen may prefer these actions to voting. Yet, we do not have to choose between voting and other means of action; voting does not reduce our opportunities to act by means we may consider more important. Furthermore, we could easily imagine a victim of government-imposed injustice reasonably objecting to our decision to abstain. Suppose, for example, that a xenophobic party wins an election partly because some people have abstained instead of voting against it. A victim of the increase in xenophobia could reasonably argue that the burden imposed on her as a result of this collective abstention is much higher than the burden that voting would have imposed on each abstainer. Arguably, those who fight this injustice through other means than voting will be less blameworthy for abstaining, but it will not suffice to justify their abstention since they could easily have voted as well.

To justify one's decision to abstain, when at least one option seems morally preferable to another, one would have to make the case, for example, that abstention has a good chance to be more beneficial, to the whole society or the least well-off. This could be the case, for example, if a massive abstention could be expected to lead to a regime change, with reasons to expect a more just regime to take its place. In most cases, though, the rates of abstention can be expected to be too low for collective abstention to produce political change. And even if that were not the case, as such, we do not have strong reasons to believe that the result of a regime change would necessarily be morally preferable (why would a desirable regime change be more

²² In addition to this justice-based argument, one may see appeal in a democracy-based argument: elections will fully succeed in their function of linking citizens with representatives only if all citizens vote (Elliott 2023). From this perspective, voting is a way to support representative democracy. However, this argument is more vulnerable to many abstentionists' hostility towards representative democracy. It will not convince those who refuse to lend support to this system through their vote (as we shall see below).

likely than an undesirable one?). In contrast, when voting for pro-change parties or candidates, we have a better idea of the expected changes.

Some may respond to the refusal to be complicit in the perpetuation of injustice with a refusal to be complicit in the perpetuation of such an oppressive system as electoral representation (Dupuis-Déri 2019). The difference, however, is that in the first case (assuming minimally competitive elections), we have reasons to believe that there is an alternative that would reduce injustice, whereas in the second case, we simply do not currently know whether a more democratic alternative to electoral representation would be viable and, more importantly here, whether its implementation would be the result of a genuinely massive abstention. In such a context of uncertainty, the more urgent demand to alleviate injustice or suffering seems to take priority. Not because we should always preserve the institutional status quo in the face of uncertainty, but because the expected utility or expected justice of abstention, even in the long run, seems lower.

Some may reject these consequentialist considerations and insist on a deontological opposition to voting. As it happens, many anarchists do, as well as Amish people and some aboriginal communities, based on a rejection of state coercion (Häggrot 2023b). However, deontological opposition cannot just be proclaimed; it must be justified and withstand reasonable objection (Scanlon 1998). Yet, in a process of mutual justification, this deontological opposition might seem to give excessive weight to the self, to one's moral purity, over the interests of others. After all, whether or not a person votes, coercion exists. Not only can coercion exist – and perhaps to an even greater extent – in the absence of the state, but by abstaining from voting, one runs the risk of seeing a candidate or party that would make even greater or more unjust use of state coercion prevail. So, either the conscientious abstentionists attach more importance to preserving their moral purity than to effectively combating (unjust) coercion, or they turn a blind eye to all consequentialist considerations to cling to a categorical moral principle that suffers no compromise. In either case, it seems to me that they expose themselves to reasonable objections. Victims of coercion – those whose point of view matters most if we morally reject coercion – might reasonably argue that their suffering weighs more heavily in the moral balance than the objectors' moral purity, and that even if their abstention is motivated by a project of justice, their principle contributes little, in fact, to the fight against injustice. In other words, the categorical principle of abstention as a form of conscientious objection could reasonably be rejected. Not because consequences are all that matters, but because the principle does not pay sufficient attention to consequences and because of the burden it places on the victims of unjust coercion.

Similarly, it would show a lack of decentration to refuse to vote *merely* because one does not like elections, lacks enthusiasm about the candidates, or wants to avoid getting one's hands dirty by voting for someone whose ideas one partly (or even largely) rejects. This would amount to giving excessive weight to one's personal feelings and preferences over less personal and morally weightier considerations.

Who should vote?

We could therefore recognize a *conditional* duty to vote – a duty to vote when one has reasons to believe to be placed in a position to contribute to remedying injustices or relieving suffering²³, and one does not have reasons to expect this action to create a more significant harm. From this perspective, abstention would only be justified in some particular cases: when elections are not competitive; when one is genuinely agnostic about the better option; or when one has reasons to believe that voting is more likely to be harmful than beneficial to others.

This is a very different conclusion from Brennan's (2011) encouragement to abstain. Whereas I think that one can hardly reject his premise that voting ethically requires being sufficiently informed (and his assessment that the latter is demanding), one can reject his conclusion that many people should abstain. His main concern is with avoiding taking part in a collectively harmful activity, and as a libertarian, he sees the state coercion associated with voting as likely to be harmful. Yet this view is unjustifiably biased in favor of the status quo. In many cases, the decision to abstain by a conscientious citizen who is doubting whether to vote is likely to be more harmful than voting. We live in societies replete with injustices that need to be corrected. In such contexts at least, giving up one's (bit of collective) power to try to make the situation slightly better for some victims of injustice might be more condemnable than trying, failing, and trying better the next time.

What is more, less conscientious political opponents who have an interest in maintaining their privileges do not hesitate much to vote and maybe financially support candidates who have their favors. And with the strong correlation that is likely to exist between the lack of confidence in one's political judgments (or degree of information) and being the victim of a series of disadvantages, if people adopted Brennan's voting ethic, the rich, men and white people would have much higher chances to vote – and influence political decisions – than the poor, women and racialized people. In his view, this is not a decisive objection (Brennan 2011, 105-107). He

²³ For a convincing defense of a duty to vote framed as a duty of assistance, see Maskivker 2019.

admits that this reflects an obvious social problem but states that ill-informed people are in any case usually unable to select the policies that will adequately address their social problems. Admittedly, it happens quite often that disadvantaged people vote against what could be seen as their objective interest (Bartels 2008) or against their professed values (Lauener 2020). However, it is unclear whether we can rely on other people to defend the legitimate interests of the most disadvantaged better than they do themselves. Disenfranchised groups have rarely been treated fairly in the history of democracy. So, even if they are bad guardians of their interests, it might still be true that as Mill (1975 [1861]) pointed out in his time, participation by everyone remains the best bet if we want everyone's legitimate interests to be considered in public policy²⁴. There is, for example, empirical evidence that voters are better represented than nonvoters (Griffin & Newman 2005), even if it is not entirely clear whether worse representation is primarily an effect or a cause of abstention.

Hence, it seems consistent to believe that the most disadvantaged citizens must be encouraged both to participate *and* assisted to become better informed. In this respect, quality public education has a fundamental role to play. The duty to be well informed does not fall exclusively on citizens' shoulders; it is also (and above all) public authorities that have a duty to provide them with the best possible political education, as well as a media environment favorable to the formation of a well-informed and balanced judgment (Girard 2019).

In sum, the duty to vote is conditional, and one of the conditions is set by the duty to be sufficiently informed. Yet, even though we could all probably make efforts to be better informed, we will often have reasons to believe that we can contribute to fighting injustice or suffering through our vote, and that provides us with a sufficient reason to vote, even if we can never be sure that our vote will not have undesirable consequences.

Note that this conclusion about the moral duty to vote does not have direct implications for the older debate on the acceptability of compulsory voting (Lacroix 2007; Lever 2010; Brennan & Hill 2014; Volacu 2020). Since the latter usually means compulsory *turnout*, yet with the possibility of casting a blank or null vote (Lever 2010, 898; 902-903), it is not necessarily in tension with the conditionality of the moral duty to vote. However, an additional argument to the ones examined here would need to be added to justify such an obligation. From the claim that people often have good reasons to vote, it does not necessarily follow that they

²⁴ One might think that expecting voters to defend their interests is in tension with the duty of decentration. Yet the expectation is that people defend their *legitimate* interests, those being unjustly disregarded and aligned with the demands of justice.

should be institutionally incentivized to do so – although it is an argument that can be made (see Elliott 2017).

Tactical vs sincere voting

Finally, it is worth pointing to another interesting implication of the view so far defended. If our primary concern, when (and if) we vote, is to pursue non-personal aims such as collective well-being or justice, we have reasons to want our vote to weigh on the result. In referendums, this is obvious, but in elections with more than two candidates, it is not. Under uninominal voting methods (where we can only pick one option), voters sometimes have to choose between the candidate or party they prefer (let's call it "sincere voting") and the one most likely to win or to take part in a ruling coalition among those they consider acceptable ("tactical voting"). If we vote primarily to promote desirable consequences (which does not entail being a consequentialist²⁵), it seems that there would be a presumption in favor of tactical voting, because we do not want to give up a chance to express an opinion among the main contenders (those most likely to win or to rule). Yet, by voting for a minor, lowly supported candidate or party, we may relinquish this chance. In that specific sense, a non-tactical vote can be "wasted"; it may not be the best use we can make of our modest political power. Therefore, it is doubtful that we may have a duty to vote sincerely – against a claim made by Fumagalli, Giavazzi & Ottonelli (2023, 201-202). Rather than misrepresenting voters' preferences, tactical voting represents voters' preferences adjusted to other people's voting intentions. It is not a betrayal of one's convictions, but a more effective way of promoting them.

However, this presumption in favor of tactical voting must be qualified by at least two considerations. First, the expected utility or justice of supporting a less popular candidate or party might be higher in some cases, if there is a reasonable chance of seeing this option gain popular support through time (partly thanks to our vote) and reach a position to bring about desirable social change. This is admittedly hard to assess, but this way of reasoning would certainly count as sufficiently decentered and non-personal. Tactical voting as defined above, in such a case, would maybe not be the best tactic in the long run – not the action with the highest "expected normative value" (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith 2012). This contrasts with someone who would reject tactical voting for the simple reason that they want to express their

²⁵ As Rawls (1971, 50) says, no plausible moral theory can ignore consequences, and the question is whether it is only consequences that matter, which I leave open here.

genuine preference or are reluctant to give support to a candidate or party that they do not fully endorse – which would show a lack of decentration.

Second, voters might have both a duty to vote tactically (or at least to give central consideration to consequences) and a right to voting methods that do not force them to sacrifice the expression of their genuine preference (Vandamme 2023b). Uninominal voting methods may be the most frequently used, but they are not a fatality, and there exist many alternatives that would reduce the pressure on tactical voting (see for example Balinski & Laraki 2010). Thus, we may consistently affirm that voters ought to vote tactically under prevailing voting methods and that they ought to be relieved from what has been aptly characterized as a burdensome voting dilemma (Mráz & Lever 2023).

VII. CONCLUSION

This article defended the claim that the fundamental duty of voters is a duty of decentration, asking us to depart from a self-centered perspective and to see voting as a collective act that can deeply affect the lives of other people (and other species) for whom we are morally responsible. From this general duty, we can derive at least three more specific duties: 1) A duty to acquire sufficient and balanced information, and to fairly engage with opposing views. 2) A duty to give primary attention to non-personal considerations such as justice or well-being. 3) A duty to vote (tactically if needed) when we have reasons to believe that we can contribute to fighting injustice or suffering. It is the moral decentration process that must lead us to see voting above all as a means of fighting injustice and suffering, and to give priority to such concerns over more personal considerations. And it is the decentered pursuit of justice or collective well-being that requires us to make efforts to acquire sufficient information and to engage with opposed views to minimize the risks of biased judgments.

These duties are demanding, as morality is, but I believe that they are both useful and worth striving for if we take them as regulative ideals for individual conduct and political reforms instead of preconditions for being allowed to vote. Of course, one could argue that it is unrealistic to expect citizens to spend time collecting diverse information, engaging with opposing views, and deliberating with people of different social profiles before they reach firm political judgments. This, however, does not suffice to disqualify the voting ethic outlined here. Even granting the widely held moral assumption that “ought implies can”, we can see aspirational value in moral rules that are not simply adapted to our moral and political failures (Estlund 2019). It is not because many of us fail to act morally that we should redefine moral

norms to make them easier to respect. And it is not because our societies are structured in ways that impede many of us from becoming responsible and committed citizens (Maskivker 2019, 82-83) that we should give up on a strong ideal of citizenship.

Furthermore, however utopian they may sound to some, the moral duties discussed above can be action-guiding for citizens who lack the time and skills to become political experts. They invite them to focus on policy considerations from a perspective of justice or collective well-being and to look for the informational shortcuts that will allow them to assess competing candidates against this background. Making this effort already makes one a better citizen. We do not need to be perfectly informed and impartial or to understand all the intricacies of political debates to be morally responsible and committed citizens.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the difficulties that citizens face in fulfilling their moral duties as voters are largely a social responsibility. It is the whole society – and the government in particular – that is responsible for an educational system that fails to deliver quality political education and the critical skills to acquire appropriate information, as well as for a social order that leaves little room for experiences of political deliberation across social groups. Hence, recognizing the moral duties of voters presented in this article should lead us to consider institutional ways of facilitating voters' fulfillment of their duties, and to do so with an awareness of the inequalities faced by voters in the exercise of these duties (see Beckman & Volacu 2023) instead of blaming “ignorant” citizens. This is ground for future research.

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