

## Why You Should Vote

### When the social motive for voting defeats the rational choosers' voting dilemma.

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I've discussed in several past posts the fact that the traditional view of economic theory regarding voting and democracy varies from the more nuanced view supported by behavioral and experimental economists. The oft-heard idea that your vote doesn't count comes quite close to the traditional view of economic theory,

which says, more precisely, that you have a vanishingly small chance of affecting most electoral outcomes, so it's irrational to vote if it carries any cost to you. This leaves it to theories of social norms, conditional cooperation, and identity to explain why many people vote in spite of the "rational actor theory" predictions. However, we don't only have to explain why some people vote, but also why many people don't vote, acting as if they've taken the old conventional theory to heart. The more people fail to vote, the belief that votes don't matter becomes closer to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our right to choose our leaders by voting is only a few generations old, and today's democracies, including the United States, may be standing now in a genuine "use it or lose it" moment.



In a 2018 book from Harvard University Press— *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*—political scientist Yascha Mounk reviews the evidence that liberal democracy is an idea that's lately been losing traction. The number of democratic countries in the world was on the rise during most of the 20th century but has now gone into decline, with increasing numbers of countries including Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Venezuela now marked by the trappings of holding elections but the absence of freedom of the press and meaningful political contestation. Observers such as Mounk voice concern that institutions of political competition, judicial independence, freedom of expression, and the guarantee that majorities will not strip minorities of their own basic rights, could prove to be a short-lived blip on the landscape of top-down rule that marks most of the last five thousand years. That tens of millions of Americans seem undisturbed by recent trends fits well with Mounk's suggestion that the generation to whom democracy was precious, the one that fought fascism and

Communist totalitarianism and that saw the voting rights spread to women and African Americans, is giving way to large numbers apathetic to or unconvinced of the preciousness of democracy. American democracy remains highly imperfect, with a popular vote that can be overridden by an archaic electoral college, rampant gerrymandering, massive influence of money, and outright disenfranchisement through rouses like the recent denial of the vote to Native Americans in North Dakota whose homes lack street addresses. But abandoning democracy rather than fighting to improve it is a solution we may live to regret.

A similar treatment of these issues is provided by another recent book, political scientist Francis Fukuyama's *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. Although Fukuyama provides a distinctive explanation of recent trends that bears discussion in its own right, putting forward a thesis about the morphing of the liberal/conservative spectrum into a fragmenting landscape of competing identity-based demands for respect and recognition, his description of the anti-democratic clouds on the horizon today closely resembles that of Mounk. Fukuyama's concern for the future of democracy is all the more noteworthy because he burst upon the public intellectual scene at the end of the 1980s with a thesis about "the end of history," an approach that most took to be an argument that liberal democracy is the logical institutional endpoint towards which social evolution has been moving since at least the Middle Ages. When a one-time hailer of democracy's consolidation worries that it is giving way to a worldwide wave of undemocratic nationalisms, it looks like time to wake up and take notice. This week, there's something more we can do: go and vote.

Among the many reasons one ought to vote, despite the relative unlikelihood of any single vote changing the outcome, is that reasoning from individual cost and benefit fails to consider the positive externality of one's vote to society as a whole. If everyone acted on strictly selfish considerations, we would all be worse off in the voter's dilemma, just as in the famous prisoner's dilemma. Society's well-being is better served if each of us reasons in Kantian rather than individualistic fashion—act as we would want all to act, not as serves our own private interest only. (I toyed with the idea of titling this post "Yes We Kant"). If we value the principle of a government accountable to all of its people, then we need—and they need—to vote. That flesh-and-blood human beings sometimes respond to social (and not only private) interests is clear from any number of examples, including extreme cases in which people put themselves in harm's way to serve a cause or to help others facing immediate danger.

Kantian reasoning might be a helpful teaching tool, but not a strong enough motivator for many, in its own right. It gets a large boost, though, when it helps to support a normative environment in which people believe that others consider voting to be a sign of social virtue. Fanatically orthodox economists and other rational choice aficionados might fear being seen by their fellows at a polling place, as this might suggest they don't quite get the concept of infinitesimally small probability. But most people in a society with effective civics education and norms of democracy would be glad to be seen by their neighbors at their local polling place, or to be seen later on wearing their "I voted" sticker.

A clever survey designed by economists Stefano della Vigna, John List, Ulrike Malmendier, and Gautam Rao allowed them to estimate the value people in a neighborhood of South Chicago

placed on being able to tell their friends that they had voted in the 2010 midterm elections. The approach and data of their 2016 article “Voting to tell others” were found sufficiently convincing by reviewers to be awarded a publication perch in the prestigious *Review of Economic Studies*, one of the world’s top economics journals. Incorporating other researchers’ estimates of the average psychological cost of lying, they concluded that a typical voter valued the ability to tell a friend (if asked) that she had voted at about \$3, thus gaining a total of about \$15 worth of subjective well-being by voting, if she expected to be asked about her voting by the average number of friends, family members, and co-workers, roughly five. They argued that the value of voting, so as to be able to say so if asked, would have been about twice as high in a presidential election, given that the average number of times asked is about twice as large, as other survey data show. The \$30 sacrifice these relatively low-income individuals appeared willing to make was not negligible. The average individual in the study placed a tangible value on voting. Finally, by informing other survey respondents in advance that they would be surveying them about their voting, they found that the participants thus informed ended up voting in larger numbers, implying that this “experimental treatment” had a turnout-raising effect.

Past generations held their right to vote as precious, and as a right that engendered a duty they could feel proud of having fulfilled. Do something old fashioned. Use, this Tuesday, a right that future generations might—if recent trends are as dire as Mounk and Fukuyama observe—envy you for having had. Go and vote.

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