SOLVING THE PARADOX

THE EXPRESSIVE RATIONALITY OF THE DECISION TO VOTE

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ABSTRACT

The renowned paradox of voting arises when one tries to explain the decision to go out and vote in an exclusively instrumental framework. Instead of postulating that voters always derive utility from the act of voting, I want to search for the reasons that underlie the absence or presence of a preference for voting. In my non-instrumental account of expressive rationality, citizens want to express who they are and what they care about. Whether or not one votes therefore depends on the force of one's commitments to principles, norms, ideologies or particular persons. This has been confirmed by empirical research showing that citizens vote because they feel they have to, not because they like doing so. Complementing instrumental rationality, this concept of expressive rationality gives a fuller, deeper and more adequate view of the way citizens make political decisions, thereby solving the paradox of voting.

KEY WORDS • expressive rationality • instrumental rationality • paradox of voting • voting decisions

1. Paradox of Instrumentally Explaining the Decision to Vote

Explaining the decision to vote has become a major challenge for rational choice theorists. This basic political act cannot be understood if one thinks of individuals as continuously trying to realize certain goals by means of their acts. With this framework of instrumental rationality, it is hard to grasp why anyone would ever vote, since the impact of one person's vote on the electoral outcome is infinitesimal.¹ Downs and Tullock have argued that a rational citizen will vote only if the expected costs (C) do not exceed the expected

benefits (B) (Downs 1957: 260–76; Tullock 1967: 110–14). The latter, however, only arises if his vote has an impact on the electoral result, which depends on the extremely low probability of one vote being decisive (P). The resulting condition under which a rational citizen would vote ($PB > C$) is therefore almost never met. The prediction that nobody ever votes blatantly contradicts the fact that many citizens still do; hence ‘the paradox of voting’ (Blais 2000: 2). However, voting can hardly be called a paradox. If a paradox is ‘a tenet contrary to received opinion’,² it is not so much voting that is paradoxical but the theory that no citizen ever votes. It is only within an exclusively instrumental account of human behaviour that voting becomes a mystery. The problem is that this situation resembles a classic prisoner’s dilemma in which it is rational for every individual to free ride by not contributing to the public good. Even though all citizens want the democratic system to continue, the instrumentally motivated ones will give in to the incentive to abstain and leave it up to the others to choose a government.

Although this analysis assumes a fixed environment of high turnout, the decision to vote is a strategic rather than a parametric one. Whether it is rational for me to vote depends on the decisions of my fellow citizens. If everybody thinks it rational to abstain, turnout drops to zero. This increases P drastically and makes voting the rational thing to do. If, however, everybody thinks this way, everybody will rationally decide to vote, resulting in the initial situation of high turnout in which no individual votes. The conclusion that nobody votes if everybody votes and vice versa forms a genuine paradox (Carling 1998: 21–4), defined as ‘an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises’. This also fits the standard account of what a paradox is, namely an ‘apparently self-contradictory statement, the underlying meaning of which is revealed only by careful scrutiny’.³ To conduct this scrutiny and explain why so many citizens vote, several strategies have been deployed (Blais 2000: 3–10; Dowding 2005: 442–53). Most of the authors have stressed that rationality is wholly subjective in nature, thereby allowing for individual differences in aims, beliefs, preferences and acts (Carling 1998: 29). This insight entails a huge step forward in solving the paradox as I have described it.

2. Trying to Solve the Paradox of Instrumentally Explaining the Decision to Vote

A first argument states that it does not matter what the odds are of an election being decided by one vote, but how the individual estimates this chance (P). One can rationally decide to vote on the basis of the irrational belief that this probability is quite large (Riker and Ordeshook 1968: 38–9). Some studies have indeed found that ‘many people are prone to overestimate P ’ (Blais 2000: 81). This can also explain why close elections usually coincide with higher turnout (Mueller 2003: 314–318).⁴ However, this must not distract from the fact that ‘on any reading, the probability of any one voter’s being decisive (or more generally the extent of any individual voter’s influence on electoral outcomes) is bound to be small’ (Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 73). As a matter of fact, the available empirical evidence shows that P only plays a small role in explaining turnout (Aldrich 1997: 387–389; Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 120; Mueller 2003: 309–12, 319). The most straightforward of such findings can be found in questionnaires: ‘when asked why they vote few people cite the probability that their vote will be decisive’ (Dowding 2005: 448).

A second argument asserts that what matters is how the individual perceives the expected costs (C) and benefits (B). The standard argument is that even a small cost (C) will discourage a rational citizen to vote, since the expected benefits (PB) are negligibly small (Barry 1970: 14–15). Most citizens, however, think that voting takes very little trouble and time (Blais 2000: 87). Some citizens also stress that there is a small chance of their vote bringing about enormous benefits, either for themselves⁵ or for society as a whole. However, this way of minimising C and maximizing B does not solve the paradox, as long as P is infinitesimal.

A third argument states that an individual may enjoy the act of voting itself, independently of their impact on the electoral result: ‘the act of voting can be deduced from private gains (‘psychic rewards’) which exist regardless of whether the voter’s preferred candidate wins or not’ (Overbye 1995: 372). This theory of expressive voting states that one will vote if one experiences satisfaction from the very act of expressing one’s preferences. It introduces a new term in the comparison (D), which ensures that the condition under which a rational citizen votes ($PB + D > C$) is met more

often (Riker and Ordeshook 1968: 27–8). This argument still holds that citizens only vote if they derive utility from it. Next to the instrumental benefits of voting (*PB*), one must also weigh the expressive benefits from voting (*D*) against its costs.

Several authors have followed this line of reasoning. First, Fiorina has distinguished between partisan and independent citizens, the first of which he claims experience satisfaction for expressing their party identification (Fiorina 1976: 396). This way, he is able to argue that *D* plays a role for some citizens but not for others. Second, Brennan and Lomasky (1993: 33) have argued that ‘revealing a preference is a direct consumption activity, yielding benefits to the individual in and of itself’. This allows one to distinguish between instrumental voters who, like investors, seek to bring about something that benefits them and expressive voters who, like consumers, gain utility from the act itself (Goodin and Roberts 1975: 926).⁶ Third, Schuessler has applied this ‘logic of expressive choice’ (Schuessler 2000a) to a wide range of political phenomena, among which individual voter decisions. The basic thought remains the same, namely that voting does not really entail costs, because the act itself is thought of as agreeable. Waiting in line to vote is not perceived as an impediment to be overcome, but as an additional benefit of voting (Schuessler 2000a: 25, 56).

I want to claim that these authors do not adequately answer the question of why citizens vote. Postulating that the expression of one’s vote gives them satisfaction is an ad hoc hypothesis which lacks predictive content and explanatory power. Unless one can show why ‘some people have this kind of motivation more strongly than others’ (Barry 1970: 16), such an expressive account becomes trivial or even tautological (Blais 2000: 9–10; Boudon 1997: 221; Mueller 2003: 306; Overbye 1995: 372; Schuessler 2000a: 47). Instead of explaining the observed behaviour with some preference for voting, this line of thought deduces the presence of such a preference from the observed behaviour. With Barry, I want to object to systematically postulating a preference or taste for voting because this simply rephrases the problem and thus does not really explain anything. Furthermore, it cannot be falsified and is therefore completely unscientific. It is thus fair to say that none of the proposed explanations of the decision to vote ‘have been able to convince the critics so far’ (Overbye 1995: 371).

3. Expressive Rationality of the Decision to Vote

In order to understand why some people prefer to vote while others do not, one has to search for ‘deeper reasons’ (Dowding 2005: 453) that underlie such preferences. In doing so, I will move away from the instrumental framework that is dominant in all of the above explanations. I try to show that a purely non-instrumental account can solve the paradox, since this arises only if one assumes that individuals are always motivated instrumentally (Boudon 1997: 222; Schuessler 2000a: ix–x, 2000b: 88).

3.1. Strategy of Instrumentally Rationalizing Expressive Aspects of the Decision to Vote

Rational choice theorists like the ones mentioned above have typically tried to instrumentally rationalise the expressive aspects of the decision to vote. Assuming that an individual always enjoys the act he performs, they tend to represent these aspects as parts of an all encompassing utility function. I want to stress that their analysis remains wholly instrumental in nature, because it still compares benefits and costs and states that voting is not done for its own sake, but for the satisfaction one derives from it (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974: 525).

Most of the time, this strategy is applied quite explicitly by arguing that citizens vote in order to experience the utility that they derive from expressing their preferences. In this respect, the expressive account of voting simply postulates an extra source of benefit:

the utility gain from voting comes from the act of voting itself and the opportunity for expression that this act affords, not from the expected payoff from the outcome of the election. This utility gain from expression becomes another candidate for inclusion in D to explain the act of voting. (Mueller 2003: 320)

Riker and Ordeshook (1968: 28) already argued that expressing one’s vote can bring about various sorts of satisfaction: ‘1. the satisfaction from compliance with the ethic of voting . . . 2. the satisfaction from affirming allegiance to the political system . . . 3. the satisfaction from affirming a partisan preference . . . 4. the satisfaction of deciding, going to the polls’. Fiorina states that the expressive rationality of voting lies in ‘the utility or disutility of satisfying or violating one’s party allegiance’ (Fiorina 1976: 395). Brennan and

Lomasky (1993: 61) also analyse the expressive aspects of voter choices in purely instrumental terms: 'many citizens vote for the intrinsic benefits derived from the act of voting'. Similarly, Schuessler defines expressive acts wholly in terms of their 'expressive benefits', 'expressive returns' and even 'expressive utility' (Schuessler 2000a: 107–9, 2000b: 103–5). These authors thus interpret expressive acts wholly within an instrumental framework. They simply adapt the calculus of voting by arguing that one votes if one experiences benefits of doing so (*D*) that outweigh the costs (*C*) (Carling 1998: 27).

Other authors apply this strategy of instrumental rationalization in a more indirect way. Overbye for example argues that people vote in order to build a reputation of cooperation that will benefit them in the long run. Since expressing one's identity consists of sending signals to fellow citizens, people will take into account the possible effect of their acts on their social capital: 'I argue that voting may be regarded as a rational investment decision: not an investment in a particular electoral outcome, but in a type of reputation which the individual is interested in maintaining when carrying out his/her everyday activities' (Overbye 1995: 369). In Schuessler's (2000b: 88) expressive account, 'voting is a means to express political beliefs and preferences and, in doing so, to establish or reaffirm their own political identity'. To uphold the distinction between instrumental and expressive rationality, he distinguishes 'between strict electoral-outcome-oriented rationality and expressively focused motivation which targets an outcome other than the electoral result' (2000b: 116). Once more, I want to make clear that both sorts of acts are aimed at a goal external to the act of voting itself and are therefore both instrumentally motivated: citizens are expected to vote (or abstain) in order to experience satisfaction.

There are several objections to such strategies of instrumentally rationalising expressive acts. As I have already mentioned, systematically positing expressive benefits is basically an ad hoc explanation. Furthermore, it does not take seriously the thought that something can be valued intrinsically and not as a means to the goal of experiencing pleasure. Since an expressive act has no other goal than performing the act itself, it cannot be understood in an instrumental framework in which acts are mere means to achieve goals (Frankfurt 1999: 82).

Another grave objection is that 'voters obviously do not consciously impute the above type of complicated calculations before

they decide whether or not to vote' (Overbye 1995: 381). Rational choice theorists typically answer that people do not necessarily maximize their utility in a deliberate manner, but act as if they do. Ferejohn and Satz (1994: 76) argue that rational choice theory should try to understand behaviour as if individuals always maximize their utility even though the explanatory power of this assumption depends on the choice situation at hand. According to them, rational choice explanations of voting behaviour are generally weak because the electoral context provides an environment without strong constraints on individual preferences (1994: 80). However, Ferejohn and Satz also allow for the possibility of claiming that in some settings individuals do not act as if they are maximising utility agents but base their decisions on other reasons. In this respect, the electoral context can be said to provide a setting where individuals do not act in an instrumental way because 'they don't have reason to care greatly about the consequences of their acts' (Ferejohn and Satz 1995: 78). In my view, this strategy of dropping the assumption that individuals always act as if they maximize their utility, is more apt to distinguish expressive from instrumental rationality and define both as conceptually clear as possible. In what follows, I will explain this claim more fully.

Since I want to focus on the question of why people vote, it should be clear that I am searching for reasons that justify their acts. While all sorts of causes may determine their behaviour, they do not always qualify as reasons (Davidson 1980: 3–19). In this light, I want to stress the intentionality of rational acts: '*explaining* an action as rational requires . . . a demonstration that the action was carried out *because* it was rational and not by some accidental cause that just happened to produce a rational action' (Elster 1987: 69). Expressive acts are intentional without aiming at change in the outside world: their purpose is simply to express one's identity.⁷

3.2. Why Is a Non-instrumental Account of the Decision to Vote Necessary?

In contrast with the above mentioned and predominant interpretation of expressive acts in an instrumental framework, I want to provide a completely non-instrumental account of expressive acts. Before doing so, however, I want to further emphasise the need to move away from an instrumental account of voting. The

main argument is that the electoral context induces people to base their decisions on things other than instrumental considerations:

in the market the agent is *decisive*. . . . The chooser actually gets what he chooses. . . . At the ballot box, in particular contrast, the agent is non-decisive. . . . Whether option *A* or option *B* actually emerges as the electoral outcome is a matter not of how I vote, but of how everyone else does. Electoral outcome is *detached* from electoral 'choice' for each voter in a crucial way. (Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 15)

While Brennan and Lomasky focus on the decision of how to vote, I would like to apply this argument to the decision of whether or not to vote.

This is possible because citizens are sensible enough to realise that a single vote will not decide an election (Mueller 2003: 329). If a potential voter knows that he will not necessarily get what he chooses, he will not, in the first place, choose to vote in order to get what he wants. I consequently avoid assuming that, from any statistical and common sense point of view, a majority of citizens is seriously deluded about the consequences of their acts (Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 171; Mueller 2003: 319). Given the dissociation between an individual's decision and the outcome, rationality does not require standard instrumental cost-benefit analysis here (Brennan and Buchanan 1984: 196–7; Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 21, 30). Rather, it recommends one to discount the possible consequences of one's vote. Since whatever I decide to do (vote or abstain) has no significant impact on the outcome, my vote is not intended to establish some outcome, but only to express my predilection for voting. As I shall argue later on, this often means that I have a predilection for voting in a particular way.

Since it is reasonable to assume that one will generally not decide whether or not to vote on the basis of an assessment of the possible consequences of one's vote, non-instrumental considerations tend to play a bigger role: 'even without an extensive psychological examination of voters, there is some empirical evidence that desire to affect outcomes is not the only or primary motive for voting. . . . We maintain that voters are not predominantly irrational, and thus they vote as they do for reasons *that have little to do with an intention to affect outcomes*' (Brennan and Lomasky 1989: 49).

Refusing to ban the decision to vote 'to the mysterious and inexplicable world of the irrational' (Riker and Ordeshook 1968: 25), I want to broaden the concept of rationality beyond its instru-

mental meaning (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974: 535; Schuessler 2000a: 6–8). I want to argue that individuals can be rationally motivated by two sorts of considerations. The first are instrumental motivations that drive individuals to perform an act in order to reach some external goal. The second are expressive motivations that drive individuals to express the way they see themselves. Both types of considerations form legitimate reasons on which a person can decide to act.

In this respect, I want to define as rational those acts that are based on considerations which the individual itself judges to be reasons worth acting on (Scanlon 1998: 23).⁸ In doing so, I completely agree with Brennan and Hamlin whose ‘first and most basic point to stress is that voters are rational: whether they vote instrumentally or expressively in any particular situation, they do so as a rational response to that situation’ (Brennan and Hamlin 1998: 167). What I thus want to argue for is the claim that the concept of rationality is not to be reduced to its instrumental meaning. To explain this, I try to give a non-instrumental conception of expressive rationality by suggesting that there are other sorts of reasons besides goals.

3.3. A Non-instrumental Account of the Decision to Vote

To further define expressive versus instrumental rationality, I want to argue that instrumental acts are typically forward-looking (prospective rationality), while expressive acts are predominantly backward-looking (retrospective rationality). Instrumental acts always refer to the future consequences that individual citizens want to achieve: I vote because I think my vote will influence policy goals as I prefer them (*PB*) or because I will experience satisfaction from the act of voting itself (*D*). In contrast, expressive acts refer to certain commitments I am engaged in. If certain things are constitutive of my identity, I will decide to base my actions upon these, irrespective of whatever enjoyment this may yield me. I use the general term ‘things’ to refer to ‘the things we care about most and with which, accordingly, we are most closely identified’ (Frankfurt 1988: 91). In Frankfurt’s terminology, I would like to think of expressive acts as reflecting the commitments and loyalties that I care about and that constitute my identity. Such acts can be called rational since they are performed on the basis of considerations that the individual judges to be reasons worth acting on.

Voting can thus often be explained as the expression of one's commitment to democracy: I vote because I think it is my civic duty to do so.⁹ Whatever the consequences of this act are, they do not form the primary reason for performing it. Blais (2000: 143) illustrates this motivation to vote: 'like many of my fellow citizens, I feel that I must act in accordance with the principle I believe in. As I think of myself as a democrat, it would be incongruous not to vote. I vote, then, because I want to be consistent with my principles.'

Furthermore, I want to argue that acting in accordance with principles is perfectly rational insofar as one takes these to constitute good reasons to act (Boudon 1997: 223–4). Understanding the presence of a sense of duty as 'the main reason to vote' (Blais 2000: 104–12), I avoid Blais' conclusion that this most prominent motivation to vote cannot be understood as rational (2000: 14). I thus want to argue that voting out of duty fits the requirements of expressive rationality, even though it is not necessarily instrumentally rational.

An expressively rational citizen wants to express what kind of a person he is and what he values highly in life: 'individuals do not necessarily participate in collective action in order to produce outcomes, but instead often do so in order to express who they are' (Schuessler 2000a: 5). Instead of trying to reach a goal external to the act itself, such individuals are 'relatively strongly oriented toward purely expressive or symbolic action, action that is undertaken for its own sake rather than to bring about particular consequences' (Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 25). Voting does indeed seem to be an activity that is valued intrinsically and not instrumentally: 'the action itself, rather than the outcome it can be expected to produce, is what matters' (Elster 1986: 24).

A rational individual is not a solitary being, continuously calculating how best to achieve maximum satisfaction. Expressive rationality situates him in a broader social and institutional context and states that he behaves in accordance with this context. In this respect, voting is not a means to experiencing utility, but simply a way of living up to the social expectations, norms and values that stipulate what it is to be a good citizen. Empirical research has indeed shown that voters often refer to shared norms or to a civic sense of duty, according to which voting is a good thing to do in a democracy. Such research shows that 'duty is the overriding motiva-

tion for about half of those who vote and a clear majority of regular voters. Those with a strong sense of duty almost always vote' (Blais 2000: 112). Indeed, the number of citizens that decide to vote range from 13% among those with a low sense of duty to 85% of those with high sense of duty (Campbell et al. 1960: 105–6). The former tend to give greater weight to instrumental cost–benefit comparisons: '*B*, *P*, and *C* do a much better job of explaining the vote among those with a weak sense of duty' (Blais 2000: 102). The latter are expressively rational if they decide to vote, since this would reflect their identity, the way that they see themselves.

My main point of contention is that the motivation of expressive voters cannot be understood in a purely instrumental framework. As moral philosophers have known for quite a while now, people who feel they have to obey a duty will often do so even when they derive no satisfaction from it (Blais 2000: 93; Boudon 1997: 222). Such citizens do not weigh the benefits of fulfilling one's duty (*D*) against the costs of doing so (*C*), since they often experience this duty itself as costly. They vote because they feel they have to, not because they like doing so.

This concept of expressive rationality is not mutually exclusive to that of instrumental rationality. It may happen, for example, that one citizen votes out of a sense of duty while another abstains because of instrumental considerations. Since both have good reasons for their acts, they must similarly be called rational. This, however, does not imply that the meaning of rationality is broadened in such a way that it becomes empty. One can still argue that the former citizen is instrumentally irrational. Moreover, if the latter authentically believes that voting would be a good thing to do, he is expressively irrational if he abstains. Furthermore, a single individual might act on both expressive and instrumental motivations even though these do not always have the same weight. The argument that the electoral context evokes mainly expressive motivations does not entail that instrumental considerations play no role at all: 'persons' voting behavior may have many explanations, but one that must usually have relatively *little* weight is the intention to produce a favored outcome' (Brennan and Lomasky 1989: 46). This relation between expressive and instrumental rationality fits nicely with the above mentioned contention that not every rational individual necessarily thinks, prefers and acts the same. Since different individuals are motivated by different

considerations, different concepts of rationality are better able to explain their acts than a homogenous concept that focuses exclusively on one sort of individual motivations (Schuessler 2000a: 160–1). In the conclusion, I will go further into the status of the different concepts of rationality and their mutual relation.

4. Expressive Rationality of Cheering

To further illustrate the expressive rationality of voting, it is often compared to cheering for one's favourite sports team. Cheering, like voting, is intended not to influence the outcome of the contest, but to express support for one of the competitors: 'although spectators care about the outcome, they do not act to determine it, and they do not conceive themselves to be so acting' (Brennan and Buchanan 1984: 201). Because fans, like voters, are aware that their acts do not influence the outcome, it is rational for them to put aside cost–benefit calculations in such situations and act in a non-instrumental way.

Here too, rational choice theorists hurry to argue that cheering, like voting, is instrumentally rational, because it is a cost-effective way of acting according to one's values: 'expressing support for an outcome can be much less costly than actually bringing about that outcome' (Brennan and Lomasky 1989: 51). It is argued that 'in each case the actor obtains personal pleasure from the act (. . .). A fan's cheering is rewarded if his team wins; most fans cheer for the home team. Winning home teams provide more positive reinforcement for their supporters. Winning home teams tend to have higher attendance levels and more vocal fans than do losing teams' (Mueller 2003: 328). There is thus no fun if there is no cheering: 'the sports fan's expression of team support is required for him to enjoy his participation' (Schuessler 2000a: 46). Cheering is perceived not as a cost (it takes trouble), but as a benefit (it is agreeable in itself).

In contrast, I want to argue that cheering, like voting, does not always bring about a sense of joy. Fans do not cheer because it brings them cheer. This dual meaning of the word 'cheer' corresponds with the tendency to reduce the act of cheering (a cheer as an encouragement for one's favourite team) to the pleasure this may produce (a cheer as a happy feeling). In my opinion, the attempt

to explain cheering instrumentally leads to the paradoxical prediction that nobody will cheer for a losing team. It cannot explain why fans continue to cheer for a losing team or why most people tend to support the underdog. The bottom line is that people do not cheer in order to attain, but to express the pleasure they feel when their team wins.¹⁰

In this light, I want to refer to a comment of Kramer: 'rational choice modellers will be able to explain voting and nonvoting as soon as they solve the problem of why people salute the flag when they know that nobody is looking' (Grofman 1983: 57). He seems to suggest that such acts are close to absurdity or at least close to irrationality. Instead of stressing the apparently private nature of such a decision,¹¹ I want to employ this comparison to show the importance of personal loyalties and commitments of the individual. In the terminology of Frankfurt, I have already argued that a rational person typically acts according to what he cares about and what he is identified with. In this respect, I want to argue that voters may not only care about democratic values and norms, but also about particular (groups of) persons. Insofar as one cares about some social norm, principle, tradition or person, it is expressively rational to act in accordance with these. Likewise, if I care more about leisure time, I decide to abstain.

In order to avoid an 'ad hoc' explanation of the decision to vote (I vote because I care about voting), I have focused on the presence and importance of intermediary variables like the social expectations, moral principles and democratic awareness according to which voting is a good thing to do.¹² In doing so, I hope to have addressed Barry's objection to the basically tautological assertion that voters like voting and abstainers do not.

People act expressively because their destiny is connected to that of the things they care about.¹³ Whether this connection stems from socialization (education, family, friends), indoctrination (media, propaganda) or rational deliberation is irrelevant in this respect. What matters is that one is identified with certain things and that one regards them as authentically one's own. Expressive acts also imply a certain level of psychological and emotional involvement: 'the motivation that guides individuals' participation in these activities is one of *expressive attachment*: through their participation, these voters and consumers *express* who they are, and they *attach* to a collective that they feel is like them' (Schuessler 2000a: ix).

Empirical research, for example, has shown that an individual's party identification (including its underlying social and psychological determinants and its continuous re-evaluation by the individual himself) is an important variable in explaining his voting behaviour. If he experiences such a 'sense of attachment with one party or the other' (Campbell et al. 1960: 121), it is rational to express one's support for one's preferred party. In such cases however, the question of whether to vote never presents itself independently of the question of how to vote. This suggests that the standard distinction between deciding why to vote and how to vote is often irrelevant or even misleading.

5. Distinction between the Decisions Why and How to Vote (and Its Irrelevance)

Nevertheless, rational choice theorists have always distinguished between these two moments of choice. In my view, their instrumental framework has resulted in this dichotomization, which in turn contributed to the renowned paradox I discussed above. An instrumentally motivated citizen will first calculate whether or not going out to vote is worth it (why vote). If voting is deemed beneficial, he still has to make up his mind whom to vote for (how to vote).

While this distinction seems to clarify things, I think it is inadequate to describe the decision process as most rational citizens experience it. It abstracts from the political psychology of most citizens, thereby confounding matters only further (Brennan and Buchanan 1984: 196–7; Campbell et al. 1960: 89). The analogy with cheering can clarify this point more fully. A fan does not first make up his mind whether or not to go to the game (1), after which he has to decide whether to cheer or not (2) and for which team to cheer (3). Rather, it is because he is involved with a particular team (3) that he will cheer to express his support (2) and that he may even take the trouble of going to their games (1). Likewise, expressive voters have already acquired a certain party identification (3), which they express by supporting their favourite party (2), even before having decided whether to go out and vote (1). This example shows the presence of a degree of partisanship that is more important in deciding whether or not to vote than standard rational choice theorists are likely to admit.

The concept of expressive rationality illustrates that people often know how to vote before they decide whether to vote or not. If I vote to express my loyalty to a particular candidate, my decision to vote is secondary to my decision of how to vote. A devoted republican will vote republican, without first considering in some distinct moment of choice whether to vote or not, because he considers voting to be a unique opportunity to express this aspect of his identity. Even if one actually ponders whether or not to go out and vote, this often happens with a mind already made up about whom to vote for.

One could argue that this thought does not apply to citizens who vote because they experience a sense of duty to vote or because they want to express their faith in democracy (Blais 2000: 111). Since they are mainly concerned about the act of voting itself, they have no clear preference about whom to favour, once they are inside the voting booth. While this may be an accurate description of some cases, I think it is too far-fetched to form a generalized account of voter choices. The fact that these voters care about their civic duty and thus want to honour certain basic democratic values shows that they are not so indifferent that they will vote completely at random (Fiorina 1997: 403). Even though their reasons for showing up do not provide a straightforward guide when deciding how to vote, they at least indicate a certain direction (for example, by eliminating some candidates as inconsistent with their basic commitments).

Following this line of reasoning, I want to argue that these decisions, insofar as they can be distinguished, are often made on the basis of the same considerations. In contrast, most political theorists argue that citizens vote because of psychological characteristics such as political interest, political efficacy and sense of duty. To explain how they vote they refer to completely different factors such as candidate qualities, campaign issues, party identification and group loyalties (Fiorina 1976: 391). This kind of task division is also present in most of the rational choice literature on voting. In order to explain the decision whether or not to vote, one is compelled to assume that voters experience satisfaction from voting itself (*D*). However, this leads to the counterintuitive view that most voters do not really know whom to vote for. In this sense, the claim that 'some individuals get utility from expressing their preferences for a particular candidate through the act of voting . . . provides an explanation for *why* a person votes, but not for how

she votes' (Mueller 2003: 329). In order to explain how they make up their mind on this issue, one therefore goes back to the Downsian view 'that each citizen casts his vote for the party he believes will provide him with more benefits than any other' (Downs 1957: 36). Referring to the instrumental benefits one's vote produces (B), however, faces the problem that such instrumentally motivated citizens will not even take the trouble to show up at the polling station, since they realise that their vote will hardly influence the electoral outcome (P) and will thus hardly help them realise their goals. In practice, therefore, rational choice theory generally relies on a combination of both lines of thought, arguing that citizens decide to vote because they experience pleasure from doing so, but change gears when deciding whom to vote for.¹⁴

In order to avoid using two different explanations for two decisions, I want to claim that the factors that play a role in deciding how to vote also influence the decision of whether or not to vote: 'turnout and candidate choice are not necessarily two separate decisions, but rather a joint decision based on the same sorts of factors' (Marquette and Hinckley 1988: 57). Besides party identification, which, as I have already shown, influences candidate as well as turnout decisions, I want to refer to the fact that citizens are more likely to vote if they perceive large differences between the candidates. As these differences fade, more and more citizens feel that it does not really matter who gets elected and start to question whether voting is worth the effort. The fact that people without a clear preference of whom to vote for abstain more often, shows that the issues of whether and how to vote are strongly related. Even though this can be incorporated within an instrumental model (Mueller 2003: 312), it also fits the expressive vocabulary, according to which citizens decide to vote (why to vote) in order to support what they are identified with (how to vote). In my view, this way of stressing the importance of the question of how citizens vote (partly) solves the paradox of why they vote.

6. Conclusion

The instrumental paradigm analyses voting as an investment or consumption act. While the first model predicts abstention ($PB < C$), the second states that people vote for the pleasure of doing so ($D > C$) without actually caring about the electoral result. Because

both do not correspond to one's intuitive image of voters, I have stressed the importance of expressive aspects of the decision to vote. I have argued that the awareness of most citizens of their minimal impact on the electoral result induces them to give more weight to non-instrumental considerations: 'citizens voting in mass elections neither bear the full consequences of their decision nor have much impact on the outcomes. The combination of these two features of large elections means that any concept of voting behavior that is instrumental in nature is highly suspect' (Fiorina 1997: 403). My emphasis on these reasons for stressing non-instrumental aspects ensures that expressive rationality does not function as an ad hoc explanation whenever instrumental rationality is deemed inadequate.

Instrumental and expressive motivations, as I have analysed them, are two opposing ends of a single scale. Citizens who are motivated purely instrumentally will calculate whether the perceived benefits of voting outweigh its perceived costs. Citizens who are motivated purely expressively will vote if they are committed to democracy or to a particular political candidate or party. If they feel a strong sense of duty to vote; they will vote, without paying much attention to the consequences of this decision. These are, of course, ideal-type descriptions. In real life, people are motivated by a combination or mixture of such considerations (Blais 2000: 126; Fiorina 1976: 393).

What motivates one to vote is best understood as 'a combination of an internal push and an external pull: the internal push is the sense of duty which is the psychological reflection of the social identification (to identify is, in this conception, to feel the push); the external pull is the (imagined or experienced) social sanction consequent upon abstention' (Carling 1998: 31). This illustrates nicely the relation between expressive and instrumental aspects of voting, of which the relative weight depends on the institutional context:

if we imagine a spectrum running from the case in which the chooser is decisive through cases in which the chances of his being decisive are increasingly remote, then the role of expressive relative to instrumental elements in preference revelation increases along that spectrum. (Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 26)

That is why, in an electoral context, internal or expressive motivations are at least as important as external or instrumental ones.

In my view, people generally decide whether or not to vote based on socially shared norms, traditions and expectations about what is the right thing to do. This is also supported by a vast body of

empirical research, which supports a model that emphasises the importance of expressive factors such as citizen duty and party loyalty.¹⁵ This does not imply that instrumental calculations are wholly absent, but only that they come into play at the margin (Blais 2000: 10, 81, 137; Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 65; Dowding 2005: 443–6). Instrumental factors can only explain changes in turnout, because they only apply to citizens whose sense of duty is severely weakened: ‘among those with a weak sense of civic duty, *B*, *P*, and *C* each has an independent impact on the propensity to vote. The elements of the calculus of voting play only at the margin, and only among a fraction of the electorate’ (Blais 2000: 139). In contrast, citizens with a high sense of duty vote, regardless of the pleasure, satisfaction or psychic benefit this might provide. Instead of framing their sense of duty as a part of one’s overall utility function, I have analysed it as a non-instrumental starting point for a citizen deciding whether or not to vote.

This alternative theoretical framework solves the paradox of relatively high turnout, without banning it to the domain of irrationality (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974: 535; Schuessler 2000a: 35, 54). My conception of expressive rationality enables me to think of non-instrumental aspects of human acts as rational, insofar as these are based on good reasons. Even though builds on suggestions from Fiorina, Brennan, Lomasky and Schuessler, I have refused to follow their strategy of reducing expressive aspects of voting to instrumental benefits one may experience in doing so. Nevertheless, my notion of expressive rationality is intended to complement rather than replace that of instrumental rationality (Hargreaves Heap 1989: 148–52, 172–4).

Providing an expressive account of the decision to vote explains it as perfectly rational (the voter judges there to be good reasons to vote) without interpreting it as instrumentally motivated (the voter does not primarily consider his vote as a means towards an end). It also leads to a fuller, deeper and more adequate view of the way in which citizens actually make political decisions, thereby closing the gap between theoretical analyses and the actual decision processes of rational citizens. As a result, the paradox as I have described it vanishes into thin air.

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NOTES

1. An extreme example occurs when the electoral outcome is already known before citizens decide whether or not to vote, as was the case with voters living in the West Coast states during the Nixon landslides in the 1980s (Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 35).
2. All definitions come from Merriam-Webster Online (<http://m-w.com>).
3. This definition comes from the Encyclopaedia Concise Britannica (<http://concise.britannica.com>).
4. One can also argue in favour of an alternative explanation: 'candidates and interest groups have a greater incentive to mobilise their supporters when elections are expected to be close. Thus voter turnout can increase in close elections not because voters have an enhanced opinion of the efficacy of their votes, but because more pressure has been placed on them to vote' (Mueller 2003: 317).
5. According to Ferejohn and Fiorina, voting is the best way to prevent the regret of having abstained. In this so-called 'minimax regret criterion', citizens do not decide on probability estimates (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974: 527–8). Because they face uncertainty rather than risk, P is eliminated from the comparison. However, citizens are not wholly ignorant of and insensitive to such estimates, even if they do not attach an exact probability to each of the possible outcomes (Beck 1975; Mayer and Good 1975). Because information about the closeness of an election is widely available, the situation is one of quasi-risk rather than complete uncertainty: 'people are more inclined to vote when the election is close. . . . This does not mean that they think specifically about the possibility that the election may be decided by a single vote. In fact, it is not clear what precisely goes on in peoples' minds; it seems to be a vague feeling that each vote counts more' (Blais 2000: 78).
6. While Downs and Tullock analysed the decision to vote as an investment, Riker and Ordeshook modelled it as a consumption decision (Ferejohn and Fiorina 1974: 526). However, Brennan, Buchanan and Lomasky have argued that voting is unlike consumption, because there is no connection between the individual's act and the resulting outcome. While the citizen decides to vote irrespective of whether they actually gets the outcome they prefer, consumers only pay the price if they know they will receive the desired product (Brennan and Buchanan 1984: 194–5; Brennan and Lomasky 1989: 44). I will discuss this argument and its repercussions in greater detail later on.

7. I thus agree with Ferejohn and Satz that good explanations within the social sciences should be based on Davidson's charity principle according to which individuals in general attribute intentionality to others (Ferejohn and Satz 1995: 80–82). In this respect, I also sympathize with their view that rational choice theory should be recast on the basis of folk psychology. Nevertheless, I think the latter is not to be understood in the narrow sense of the maximization of preference satisfaction. Instead, I favour a broader view in which a wider array of motivations (like duties, commitments, etc.) can be taken into account. This will be able to encompass both instrumentally as expressively rational behaviour.
8. I want to focus exclusively on the rationality of acts and abstract from the question when a belief, a preference or a reason is rational. In order to define what exactly a reason is, I want to refer to Scanlon: 'to take there to be a reason for something is just to see some consideration as counting in favor of it' (Scanlon 1998: 50).
9. In other cases, voting is more adequately explained as the expression of one's commitment to a particular political identity, party or politician. I will go into this issue more fully later on.
10. This basically comes down to the point I have already made previously, namely that systematically postulating that individuals enjoy expressing their preferences does not really explain things. Not only does it provide a tautological and even circular account immune to empirical criticism (I cheer because I like to cheer and I like to cheer because I enjoy doing so), it also runs counters to one's spontaneous intuitions and personal experiences with respect to cheering (I cheer because I care about my team). With a completely non-instrumental account of expressive acts, I hope to avoid these problems.
11. Even though nobody sees whether or not one really votes inside the polling booth, I think the decision to go out and vote is public rather than private, since this is a very visible act. Furthermore, I think it is not necessarily irrational to express one's loyalty to a team or political party even if nobody is watching (Schuessler 2000a: 15). Cheering on one's own, which is not as unusual as Kramer may think it is (Brennan and Buchanan 1984: 186), can plausibly be analysed as an expressive act, since it is not aimed at a goal external to the act itself, even not the goal of letting others know what one stands for. Fans cheer simply to express their involvement. The fact that fans often cheer louder when watching a game with others is nevertheless consistent with my concept of expressive rationality, because the tendency to manifest one's identity is bigger if there is a public to interpret one's expressions.
12. In contrast with the postulate that one votes because one prefers to, there are quite a lot of strings attached to the claim that one votes because one cares about democracy. According to Frankfurt, the things a person cares about are more fundamental than his preferences and form the basis of his whole volitional system (Frankfurt 1988: 21). The fact that one cares about democracy will thus influence much more decisions than the one whether or not to vote.
13. One might argue that the relation between an individual's acts and the things they care about has to be understood in an instrumental sense after all, because one acts in order to protect what one deems valuable. In this respect however, I would like to argue that 'honouring' and 'promoting' are two possible responses to values that do not necessarily come down to the same thing (Pettit 1991: 230–1). A citizen who votes is honouring what they care about (democracy, for

example) rather than promoting it, because they would otherwise have to try and persuade two other persons to vote.

14. Even though this does not apply to all authors, there is a general tendency within rational choice theory to focus on one aspect of voting behaviour while making abstraction from the other. Merrill and Grofman, for example, present extensive support for rational choice explanations of how people vote, but explicitly abstract from the question why people choose to vote (Merrill & Grofman 1999: 164).

I also grant the fact that there is some evidence to support both accounts of the decision how to vote. With respect to the first, one can refer to the so-called phenomenon of 'donkey voting' (after the game in which a blindfolded child randomly 'pins the tail on the donkey'). Empirical research, however, supports the common sense view that this only applies to a small fraction of the electorate (Orr 2002: 575). With respect to the second (Downsian) account of the decision of how to vote, there is quite a lot of empirical support for the so-called phenomena of 'pocketbook voting' (I vote in favour of the candidate I think will benefit me most) and 'sociotropic voting' (I vote in favour of the candidate I think will realise some desirable public good) (Fiorina 1997: 407–8). In my view, however, such (limited) empirical evidence only shows that instrumental considerations are not completely absent in voting decisions. I explain my views on this more fully in the conclusion.

15. Expressive and instrumental motivations do not necessarily come into conflict, but can even mutually reinforce each other. The fact that turnout typically keeps on dropping after compulsory attendance at elections is abolished can be explained by postulating that the social norm and its accompanying sense of duty to vote (expressive aspect) erode gradually in time when they are no longer supported by the threat of sanctions (instrumental aspect) (Hill 2002: 95). Still, it remains true that expressive aspects are at least as important as instrumental aspects. Empirical research has shown, for example, that the motivational force of social norms depends more on their degree of internalisation than on the social sanctions supporting their compliance: 'the question, therefore, is what matters the most, the personal belief that voting is a moral obligation or the perception that abstaining would be disapproved by one's milieu? The answer is clear, it is the former' (Blais 2000: 104).

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