



DISCUSSION NOTE

PEOPLE DO NOT HAVE A DUTY TO AVOID VOTING BADLY: REPLY TO BRENNAN

BY MARCUS ARVAN

People Do Not Have a Duty to Avoid Voting Badly: Reply to Brennan

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JASON BRENNAN ARGUES THAT PEOPLE are morally obligated not to vote badly, where voting badly is voting “without sufficient reason” for harmful or unjust policies or candidates.¹ His argument is:

- (1) One has an obligation not to engage in collectively harmful activities when refraining from such activities does not impose significant personal costs.
- (2) Voting badly is to engage in a collectively harmful activity, while abstaining imposes low personal costs.
- (3) Therefore, one should not vote badly.²

This paper shows that Brennan never adequately clarifies (1) and that, on every plausible clarification, (2) is false.

1. Clarifying (1)

Brennan is never entirely clear about how he understands the phrase “significant personal costs” in (1). First, he writes:

If restraining oneself caused significant personal harm, then individuals might be permitted to vote badly. ... However, elections decided by bad voters mean that citizens have to live with racist and sexist laws, unnecessary wars, lower economic opportunities, lower levels of welfare, etc. The type of harm or loss of pleasure suffered by the bad voter from abstention seems relatively trivial compared to the type of harm suffered by the citizen who bears the burden of bad policy.³

These remarks suggest the following reading of (1):

(1)-Same Burdens as Harms Caused: One has an obligation not to engage in collectively harmful activities when, by refraining, one would bear personal costs *equal to or less than the personal costs the collectively harmful action imposes on those harmed.*

In the immediately following passage, however, Brennan also writes:

In parallel, an individual might drive a gas-guzzling Hummer to promote his self-image, getting real pleasure from this activity. I do not take his pleasure to be sufficient to counterbalance the harms imposed on all by smog and global warming. This is not to say that one must never drive, or even that one may not pollute in the pursuit of

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¹ Jason Brennan, “Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (2009): 535-550, p. 537.

² *Ibid*: 535.

³ *Ibid*: 541-2.

pleasure. We all have reason to favor principles that allow us to live happy lives.⁴

These remarks suggest an alternative reading of (1),

(1)-Happy Lives: One has an obligation not to engage in collectively harmful activities when, by refraining, *one is still capable of living a happy life.*

Let us investigate Brennan's argument on each reading of (1) – specifically, whether (2) is plausibly true on either reading.

2. The Real Personal Costs of Avoiding Bad Voting

According to Brennan, one votes badly when one votes (a) “without sufficient reason” for (b) harmful or unjust policies or candidates.⁵ Brennan cleverly avoids defining precisely what it is to vote “without sufficient reason.” He writes, “I won't try to settle the standards for justified belief here.”⁶ Brennan does, however, give three examples of voting without sufficient reason: “the most common forms of bad voting are voting 1) from immoral beliefs, 2) from ignorance, or 3) from epistemic irrationality and bias.”⁷ On Brennan's analysis, then, in order to avoid voting badly, a would-be bad voter must reliably judge that she is likely to either (a) vote for a harmful or unjust policy or candidate or (b) vote from immoral beliefs, from ignorance, from epistemic irrationality or bias, or some other relevantly similar error. Notice that reliability in the first type of judgment – reliably judging that one is likely to vote for a harmful or unjust policy or candidate – presupposes reliability in the second type judgment: recognizing that one is likely to vote from false, immoral, irrational or biased beliefs. In order to correctly judge that one is likely to vote badly, one must correctly judge that one has made an epistemic *mistake* of some sort. Accordingly, the question of which personal costs avoiding bad voting involves amounts to this: *which sorts of personal costs is a person likely to face in reliably judging that s/he is likely to vote from immoral beliefs, ignorance, irrationality or bias?*

Brennan seems to think that abstention from bad voting carries only mild psychological costs. He writes, “Individual bad voters receive significant psychological payoffs from voting – it makes them feel good about themselves for a short time.”⁸ Surprisingly, these are the only personal costs Brennan mentions. Let us consider, however, the actual situations of many bad voters. Brennan gives three specific examples of bad voting: (a) a racist (who votes from immoral beliefs), (b) an individual who is *totally* ignorant of propositions on a ballot (who votes from ignorance) and (c) someone who

⁴ Ibid: 542.

⁵ Ibid: 536-539.

⁶ Ibid: 538.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid: 541.

espouses a regressive neo-mercantilist economy on emotional grounds (who votes from epistemic irrationality and bias).⁹ Notice that Brennan's use of these extreme examples is a bit misleading. Brennan is not merely arguing that people have duty to avoid *extremely* bad voting (i.e. voting for *profoundly* insufficient reasons for *profoundly* harmful or unjust policies or candidates). He argues that we have a duty to avoid voting badly *simpliciter*. Less extreme examples, then, are equally relevant. Let us consider one.

Suppose I am a political conservative and conservatism turns out to be *subtly* morally and economically flawed.¹⁰ Liberal-egalitarians typically argue, for example, that capitalism is subtly unjust, and that it takes sophisticated moral argument to see why this is the case. Suppose, further, that capitalism is also subtly irrational (perhaps because, as Marx argued, capitalism inevitably undermines itself).¹¹ If these things are the case and I am a voter who believes in free-market capitalism, then in order to avoid voting badly I must come to (correctly) suspect that my moral and economic beliefs are subtly false and harmful. However, the process I might have to endure in reaching such a judgment may be monumentally costly. First, if I am like many bad voters, I am likely surrounded by family, friends and political propaganda that strongly reinforce my false beliefs. Moreover, I may be woefully undereducated. In order to see that my conservative views are likely false (and harmful), I would have to understand relatively sophisticated moral and economic arguments. Yet, being undereducated, I may not be exposed to those arguments. Worse, even if I were exposed to them, I might not have the cognitive or critical-thinking skills necessary for adequately understanding those arguments. In order to develop the relevant skills, I might need

⁹ Ibid: 538-9.

¹⁰ My intention is not to assert that political conservatism is flawed or harmful. I mean the point hypothetically, for the sake of argument. I might as well have assumed that liberal-egalitarianism (or some other political view) is harmfully flawed. As an aside, this raises an important issue that Brennan only casually discusses: disagreement about who is a bad voter. How are bad voters to avoid voting badly when they typically think they are *good* voters? Brennan alludes to this problem himself when he writes:

I think people who would vote badly should not vote. However, the people I describe as bad voters are not likely to recognize that they are among those that are obligated not to vote. To confirm this in at least one instance ... I discussed my thesis with a person who I believe exemplifies bad voting. He agreed that *other* people should not vote. (Ibid: 547)

Brennan's reply is that (a) he is merely giving a criterion of right, not a method of decision-making, and (b) people sometimes can recognize that they are bad voters and correct their behavior as a result (Ibid: 547-8). However, Brennan's criterion of right includes a claim about personal costs. He argues that people have a duty not to vote badly *because* the costs of avoiding bad voting are low. Brennan is thus mistaken to ignore the kinds of personal costs associated with determining whether one is likely to vote badly.

¹¹ Again, I do not mean to assert this; I mean it hypothetically, for the sake of argument. See e.g., Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1948.

something like a complete university-level education (e.g., in critical thinking, moral philosophy and economics). Formal education, however, is costly. One might reply that voters can always educate themselves. However, adequate self-education – to the level of understanding sophisticated moral, political and economic arguments – can take a great deal of time, energy and personal investment (in part because bad voters are, for obvious reasons, likely to self-educate badly).

Let us now return to the two readings of (1) arrived at in section 1. Begin with,

(1)-Same Burdens as Harms Caused. One has an obligation not to engage in collectively harmful activities when, by refraining, one would bear personal costs *equal to or less than the personal costs the collectively harmful action imposes on those harmed.*

Is Brennan's premise (2) true on this reading? Are the costs of avoiding bad voting always (or even usually) *less than or equal to* the collective harms caused by bad voting? No. Consider one of Brennan's own examples: citizens voting badly for a harmful economic policy that costs the economy 33 billion dollars the following year.¹² If we assume there to be 300 million citizens (roughly the number of citizens in the U.S. today), the collective harm averages out to a \$200 cost per citizen. That is a significant harm. Yet what costs would an individual bad voter have to incur to avoid voting badly? Getting a university education in critical thinking, philosophy and economics costs far more than \$200. So too, in many cases, does self-education. Although self-education may not literally cost one more than \$200 (education is possible for free via the Internet or public library), the time, energy and other personal investments involved (e.g. neglecting family and leisure time) could surely be worth more than \$200 to oneself.¹³ Thus, on *(1)-Same Burdens as Harms Caused*, (2) appears to be false.

Some readers might object that I have mischaracterized the harms caused by bad voting. I described the harmful economic policy Brennan describes as imposing an *average* cost of \$200 per citizen. This, however, is hardly the normal distribution of the harm of bad economic policies. Bad economic policies typically affect some citizens far more than others, leading to unemployment, homelessness, etc. – harms far greater to those who suffer them than a mere \$200. Although this is right, the problem then is with *(1)-Same Burdens as Harms Caused*. For consider what this reading of (1) entails in the case at hand. If voting for bad economic policies leads to unemployment and homelessness, *(1)-Same Burdens as Harms Caused* requires would-be bad

¹² Brennan (2009): 539.

¹³ An objection: couldn't these "costs" actually be a net gain for the person (given the collateral benefits of education, such as greater earning potential, etc.)? Reply: in some cases they might be a net gain, but this is not plausibly true of many other cases, especially given the many other inter- and intra-personal costs bad voters can expect to face (to be discussed shortly).

voters to endure personal costs *up to and including unemployment or homelessness* to avoid voting for those policies. This, however, is a fantastically strong moral claim, one requiring defense that Brennan never gives (and for which I am aware of no good argument).

Turn, finally, to *(1)-Happy Lives*. Is (2) true on this reading? No. As we have already seen, to avoid voting badly, one will probably need to spend a good deal of time, effort and money to educate oneself (especially if one is undereducated). Even if one shouldered these considerable costs, consider the kinds of additional intra- and inter-personal costs that one would likely face as a consequence of judging that one is likely a bad voter. First, doubting or rejecting one's most cherished moral, political or economic beliefs can be a rather devastating experience. Indeed, it is little exaggeration to say that these kinds of realizations can lead to great personal crises. A person who comes to believe that she has patterned her entire life around false or doubtful moral, political or social ideals may come to believe that she has lived much of her life poorly and harmfully – which can lead to despondency and great regret. Finally, when one comes to believe very different things than one's family, friends and community – when one's beliefs and values become fundamentally opposed to theirs – this can undermine important relationships, lead to social ostracism, isolation, public condemnation, etc. Suppose a person wants to avoid these costs. Would such a person live a *happy life* by avoiding voting badly? Not plausibly. In order to avoid voting badly, such a person would have to forego many, if not most, of the things they value most in life.¹⁴ On *(1)-Happy Lives*, then, (2) is false.

3. Conclusion

Jason Brennan argues that we have a moral duty to avoid voting badly. However, on every plausible reading of his first premise, his second premise is false. Because the costs of avoiding bad voting are often high, if Brennan wishes to persuasively defend the claim that we have a duty to avoid voting badly, he will have to defend a much more demanding view of citizenship than he has to date.

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¹⁴ Objection: couldn't learning the errors of one's ways actually *enable* one to live a happy life (e.g. one freer from moral and economic error, etc.)? Answer: in some cases it may, but in many cases it will not, particularly when the harm of bad policies is minor and the life-changes involved in abstention from bad voting are major.