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**An Epistemic Justification for Voting**  
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Julia Maskivker

Abstract:

Received wisdom in most democracies is that voting should be seen as a political freedom that citizens have a right to exercise or not to exercise. But would liberal democracies be any less liberal if voting were seen as a duty? Contrasting the libertarian argument against the moral duty to vote, this paper proposes that we have a duty to vote well – with knowledge and a sense of impartiality. The obligation is one among many instantiations of a natural duty to promote and support just institutions in society. The paper links justice with democratic epistemic virtues to ground the morality of the electoral duty.

Is it a duty to vote? Or is voting only a right, and is it up to each person to decide whether it is good for them to vote or abstain? Received wisdom in most democracies is that voting should be seen as a political freedom that citizens have a right to exercise or not to exercise. But is this understanding correct? Would liberal democracies be any less liberal if voting were seen as a duty? This article argues that there is a duty to vote and that this duty requires that we vote in a certain fashion, namely, well. In other words, the duty demands that we expend a minimum of effort so that our vote reflects certain standards of rationality, rightness, and knowledge. As the word “minimum” indicates, the duty is not a maximal duty. I will strive to show that voting well is not as unacceptably demanding as some accounts rejecting the duty paint it to be. My case rests on the idea that a moral duty is not necessarily equal to a legal duty enforceable by the coercive force of the state. Arguing for a duty to vote (well) does not amount to supporting compulsory voting laws, although supporting compulsory voting is not inconceivable if one holds a position like mine. The purview of the arguments in defense of a duty to vote well is as follows.

I propose that the duty to vote well is one among many instantiations of a natural duty to promote and support justice. The notion of a natural duty to promote and support just institutions was brought to the forefront of discussion by John Rawls in his work *A Theory of Justice*. There, he suggests that a natural duty of justice is functionally equivalent to political obligations, that is, to what we owe to the state. Rawls puts it in the following way:

“From the standpoint of justice as fairness, a fundamental natural duty is the duty of justice. This duty requires us to support and to comply with just institutions that exist and apply to us. It also constrains us to further just arrangements not yet established, at least when this can be done without too much cost to ourselves [...]” (Rawls 1971: 115)

Unlike Rawls, I am not concerned with issues of allegiance to the state. However, I will argue that voting well is morally required as a mechanism to support and erect just institutions and a just social order more generally. A duty of justice can call for something else besides obedience to the law (as a general rule). It can also call for a duty to vote with care. It is incumbent on me, then, to explain what is so special about voting well that other activities in support of justice cannot fulfill. In other words, even if we accept that voting well is conducive to justice (or to moving society in the direction of justice), what makes it morally required? My main claim is that not voting (minimally) well deprives society of the epistemic attributes of majority decision-making in a democracy. Differently put, by not voting, and by voting with no regard to the quality of our vote, we contribute to denying democracy the epistemic properties that come with the aggregation of (good) votes; thereby contributing to making society unjust by putting in place or keeping officials and policies less consistent with the public interest than we, as a community, otherwise could.

But what are the epistemic attributes of voting? They are encapsulated in the old Aristotelian idea that many heads are better than one as an argument for democracy.<sup>1</sup> Although this notion needs to be fleshed out, its gist is that under certain conditions of background fairness “the decisions of majorities about which policies to pursue can provide good evidence about which policies are in fact best” (Cohen 1989: 34). It is important to clarify that the epistemic democrat is not committed to the view that all decisions should

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<sup>1</sup> This description of the epistemic case for democracy is offered by Landemore (2011)

be subject to popular judgment. She's not committed to the notion that there is a general will on all issues but, rather, "to the claim that on those that bear on the basic principles [of justice and the common good] majority judgments can serve as reasonable and sound indicators of the general will" (Ibid). The epistemic democrat wants to show that democratic decision-making provides evidence about how to advance the common good, understanding the latter on the basis of a thin notion of justice for the basic institutions and arrangements of society. This paper is not focused on defending a notion of epistemic democracy as such; that enterprise has already been engaged in (Cohen 1989, Estlund 2009, Landemore 2011). I will only draw on some of those general arguments to fashion a case for the moral duty to vote well.

### **Epistemic properties of minimally good voting**

The case for epistemic democracy has already been presented in the literature, although not uncontroversially. Its hallmark is the premise that there exists some procedure-independent criteria as to what the best or right outcome is. "A pure epistemic approach tells us that our social decision rules ought be chosen so as to track that truth" (Goodin and Lift 2001:134). The use of the term "truth" is not meant to ignore the need for epistemic conservatism, to which a pluralistic society must necessarily adhere. Epistemic conservatism entails holding "thin" standards of "correctness" that do not concern themselves with comprehensive philosophies of the good life but only with the

reasonableness of principles of justice for the basic structure of society.<sup>2</sup> I will assume here that such pluralism is viable and indeed desirable.<sup>3</sup>

The epistemic case for democracy revolves around the utility of information pooling. Epistemic democrats agree with the notion that “there are right and wrong answers in politics and that those answers can be known if only approximately” (Landemore 2011: 15). The epistemic democrat does not necessarily believe that majority decision-making is the recipe to perfect results. However, compared to other decision-making mechanisms, it generally fares better, although not always. We can certainly find cases of democratic decision-making that have led to suboptimal results, utter disaster, or monumental injustice (think about the election of Hitler in 1932). However, these examples do not undermine the epistemic democratic thesis because that thesis is probabilistic only. Importantly, the (sensible) epistemic democrat does not renege of institutions that act as watchdogs for rights, which were feeble, if present at all, in many of the democracies committing the most atrocious “epistemic mistakes” in history.<sup>4</sup> That said, my notion of a duty to vote minimally well is subject to an important constraint: The epistemic properties of majority rule are unlikely to come about if individual voters fail to attain a certain threshold of competence, which we can label “better than-random” (in plain English, better than a coin flip). The

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<sup>2</sup> For those disinclined to engage with the epistemic arguments for democracy, my thesis will probably remain unpersuasive. However, I must say that my aim here is quite narrow. I intend to show that the duty to vote well may have stringency based on the positive, epistemic consequences (under conditions of liberal inclusion) that it brings about for society. This does not necessarily mean that such duty must always take precedence over personal freedoms and goals and other duties and moral considerations.

<sup>3</sup> One may want to emphasize the notion of reasonableness as a procedure-independent standard of correctness instead of talking about “universal and uncontested truths.” This paper does not assume that the notion of “moral truths” is uncontroversial.

<sup>4</sup> Defenders of epistemic democracy take pains to explain that democracy is only likely to be smart if it is also liberal. Democracies that stifle dissent, disrespect basic rights, and do not abide by the rule of law are not good case studies to confirm the thesis of epistemic democrats. Epistemic democrats are not defenders of unchecked democratic rule (or they should not be).

requirement to vote minimally competently must be taken seriously. Nevertheless, I argue that this requisite is not as burdensome as some theorists suggest. But before I dwell on that issue, I will delineate the mechanisms that produce epistemic advantages in a democracy.

Advocates of epistemic democracy generally concentrate on two distinct dynamics that account for the desirable epistemic attributes of majoritarian decision-making. One of those dynamics is “deliberation” and the other one is “aggregation” (which is paradigmatically realized via voting). These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive because voting can, and usually is, be preceded by a considerable amount of discussion and debate in the public sphere. In this paper, I will concentrate on the aggregation account, however, since it is the one most clearly connected with the dynamics of voting in a democracy.

The epistemic properties of voting are predicated on three distinct accounts of the epistemic attributes of judgment aggregation through majority rule. These three accounts rely on the law of large numbers. They are “The Condorcet Jury Theorem”, “the Miracle of Aggregation, ” and a model based on cognitive diversity called the “Crowds Beats the Average Law” (Landemore 2011). The Jury Theorem in the abstract demonstrates that among large numbers of people voting on some yes-or-no question, majoritarian results are almost certain to track the “truth” provided three conditions hold: 1) voters are better than random (better than a coin flip) at choosing the best proposition; 2) they vote with statistical independence of each other (what one voter chooses does not depend on what the other chooses), and 3) they vote sincerely, not strategically. (Cohen 1989: 11-13).<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> The theorem and the other laws are formally applicable to questions of fact with a verifiable or empirical answer. So, why do epistemic democrats use these laws to defend the ability of majorities to decide well? In

mathematics of the theorem show that the higher the number of voters, the closer the level of certainty about which option is the “correct one.” Despite some scholars’ suspicion that the theorem does not have any practical use because the conditions above do not hold in real-life societies, the literature on epistemic democracy has spawned a large number of studies showing how the three assumptions can be relaxed without invalidating the theorem’s application to real democratic settings. For example, Goodin and Estlund (2004) show that the theorem applies to elections including a plurality of alternatives and to voters with predicting abilities lower than 0.5 percent.<sup>6</sup> Landemore (2011) claims that considering scenarios where two options are at stake is empirically plausible in real democracies due to other mechanisms than can reduce a plurality of alternatives to a sequence of binary choices. Furthermore, the “enlightenment” condition stipulating the need for better-than-random competence is not implausible, and critics have offered a rebuttal of many of the pessimistic conclusions in the literature (Goodin and Estlund 2004). For example, if it is not unreasonable to think that low voter competence may be partly a function of less-than-optimal institutional performance (i.e., bad education, low political accountability, party polarization that alienates citizens), then, one could think that voter competence can be improved via various policies and measures of a non-coercive nature, including better funding for education, more stringent public norms of civility, and reform of local

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a democracy, many questions are questions of value without a conclusive “truth.” But the distinction between truth and verifiable facts is misleading if taken too seriously in the realm of politics. Factual questions of policy (such as how to design a well functioning tax scheme, or where to build the next school, or how to decide what is the most effective crime control strategy) are intertwined with questions of value—or justice. For example, the design of a tax scheme, and whether it works or not, will much hinge on what views of the role of the state in the economy we hold. The same goes for crime control and our normative views on the role of punishment, for example.

<sup>6</sup> Sunstein (2006: 30) also mentions that slightly lower than random competence does not necessarily invalidate the theorem’s application. He explains that lower than random competence in a set of the group does not invalidate the theorem if another set of the group compensates with a slightly higher than random competence.



participation mechanisms, among others. Voter incompetence does not have to be seen as unchangeable. Additionally, the jury theorem has been generalized to the case of correlated votes so long as the interdependence between votes is sufficiently low (Lahda 1992; Bottom et., al 2002). This finding permits us to relax the independence condition and reject the voter atomism that has been traditionally attributed to the theorem. Communication among voters in a plural society is not necessarily detrimental to the theorem's application, as the original formulation of the theorem seems to suggest. Indeed, it can be a good thing if it increases the judgment accuracy of the average voter (Estlund 1989, 1994). Finally, some degree of strategic voting has been found to be compatible with the precepts of the theorem (Dekel and Piccione, 2000).

The second account through which the epistemic properties of voting are thought to come to life is the "miracle of aggregation" (Landemore 2011: 156-60). This mechanism is also dependent on the law of large numbers. It explains why the average guess of large groups of people tends to be uncannily accurate. In its most democratic version, "the distribution of errors around each individual's blurry judgment is such that individual errors cancel each other out in the aggregate; thus the collective aggregate is fairly accurate." (Ibid: 158). In simple words, errors tend to cancel each other out in big enough groups. The third account for explaining collective intelligence is based on the level of cognitive diversity within a group, understanding cognitive diversity as plurality of modes of thinking and interpretations of the world. This account tells us that the group predicts better than particular individuals, and the amount by which it does increases as the group becomes more cognitively diverse. (Page 2007: 197; Landemore 2011: 160). Differently put, one very smart person or a group of like-minded smart persons may predict worse than a group

of less smart persons who have fewer cognitive similarities in common (similarities about how they see the world and how they may approach problems, consequently). This account surely highlights the value of intellectual originality as something not strictly identical with intellectual performance and it suggests that the former may be more useful than the latter.

The foregoing accounts of democracy's epistemic virtues are all based on the law of large numbers and are therefore liable to the problem of systematic biases in the voting population. This means that if the majority of voters are all biased in one same direction (i.e., they are all racially prejudiced or they are all ideologically blind to a particular position) cognitive diversity will be low, errors will not cancel each other out, and majority rule will amplify the mistakes all voters hold instead of eliminating them. However, this theoretical possibility is only truly menacing in practice if individual predictive accuracy does not reach the better-than-random-competence threshold and if group diversity is so low as to make that variable trivial. Optimistically assuming minimally good voters (or the possibility of encouraging their emergence) and a liberal enough society fostering a diversity of views and positions, the worst case "bias scenario" is not necessarily a certainty. Or we shouldn't assume it to be all the time.

Much of the literature rejecting a duty to vote assumes that voting well is difficult. It is not for everyone: some people are prepared to do so, others are not and it is a bad idea to ignore this fact. The assumption is that good political participation requires *skill*. That good political participation requires skill is undeniable. But how burdensome it is to acquire that skill is something that defenders of the no-duty to vote simply take for granted. They assume, without much elaboration, that such preparation is arduous enough not to be demanded from the average citizen. However, the notion that average citizens can acquire

specific skills for public service, for example, is evidenced by the (generally effective) functioning of the jury system, which requires that jurors pay attention to rules of evidence, to standards of fair treatment, and that they have a minimal understanding of the laws in question in a particular case. In this regard, it is worth quoting John Stuart Mill, who, despite his preference for giving the educated more leverage in elections, said about jury duty and political participation more generally that they tended to promote desirable impartiality and good use of human faculties. As he put it:

“If circumstances allow the amount of public duty assigned him [the citizen] to be considerable, it makes him an educated man. [...] A benefit of the same kind [...] is produced on Englishmen of the lower middle class by their liability to be placed on juries and to serve parish offices, which [...] must make them nevertheless very different beings, in range of ideas and development of faculties, from those who have done nothing in their lives but drive a quill or sell goods over a counter. [The citizen] is called upon, while so engaged, to weigh interests not his own; to be guided in case of conflicting claims by another rule than his private partialities, to apply, at every turn, principles and maxims which have for their reason of existence the common good.[...]” (Mill 2006: 254-55).

Whichever stance we take on the effects of participation on the individual strictly, Mill’s description of the standards of behavior and reasoning required by basic public functions such as jury duty is illustrative of the tasks that regular citizens in actual democracies must engage in today. But most importantly, defenders of the no-duty to vote forget one fundamental assumption germane to the epistemic conception of democracy. This is the requirement that the level of competence in voters must *only* be “better than random” (and sometimes not even that good) for the epistemic virtues of majority rule to come about. This “better-than-random” requisite is encapsulated in my concept of *voting minimally well*. In plain language, one doesn’t have to be a professional expert in economics, public affairs, or foreign policy in order to cast an acceptably good ballot. But

one must put some thought into the decision and take the necessary steps to acquire pertinent information. Also, one must be unprejudiced.

The notion that voting (minimally) well is within the reach of the average citizen hinges, to some extent, on the distinction between *having expertise* on the one hand; and *being able to evaluate who, or what political coalition, has the most expertise or is better suited to work for the common good*, on the other. This distinction is evoked by John Dewey, who, ironically, is often identified with a “thick” view of democracy according to which democracy should pervade every aspect of one’s life (Berger 2011). But we don’t need to adhere to Dewey’s comprehensive ideal to share his opinion that:

“it is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations; what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns. It is easy to exaggerate the amount of intelligence and ability demanded to render such judgments fitted for their purposes.” (Dewey 1921: 208).

There is an extensive “revisionist” literature on voter behavior that attempts to debunk the claim that voters are too poorly equipped to vote minimally smartly (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Lupia 2006; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). This literature carefully analyses the use of “cognitive heuristics” (or cognitive “shortcuts”) in political decision-making. Although these cognitive savings require minimal knowledge of the options being evaluated, they serve to keep the information processing demands of the task within bounds. Some of the most common cognitive shortcuts employed by voters are a candidate’s party affiliation, a candidate’s endorsements, and a candidate’s ideology, among others (Popkin 1991; Goren 2001). Low-information rationality, as shortcuts are usually called, is not necessarily akin to bad voting. Thousands of years ago, Aristotle advanced an argument in defense of the competence of the layperson when he suggested that politics is one of

those “arts” whose products are properly judged by the “consumer” not just the “skilled artist.” He said:

[T]here are some arts whose products are not judged of solely, or best, by the artists themselves, namely those arts whose products are recognized even by those who do not possess the art; for example, the knowledge of the house is not limited to the builder only; the user, or, in other words, the master of the house will actually be a better judge than the builder, just as the pilot will judge better of a rudder than the carpenter, and the guest will judge better of a feast than the cook (Aristotle’s *Politics*, book III, ch. XI, from Waldron 1995: 569).

Furthermore, the traditionally held belief that rational voters will not bother to seek information and will not bother to vote because their vote is unlikely to be decisive in the final outcome can be theoretically as well as empirically countered. Informational free-riding is not a fact of nature. People vote for other instrumental reasons than decisiveness such as to increase the margin of victory or to diminish the margin of loss of a candidate, and to enhance democratic legitimacy and stability more generally (Mackie 2014). Negligibility is not the same as futility, and people may have a moral incentive to act however small their individual contribution to a larger outcome may be. They may not be interested in swinging the election, just in contributing in a different, yet instrumental, way.

One may be confused by the foregoing line of reasoning. If one single vote will *not* have a perceptible impact on the result of an election, what makes us think that a single vote will have a perceptible impact on the *margin* of victory or loss of a candidate in that election? But this way of putting things overshadows the distinctiveness of the point that Mackie makes. It is the magnitude, however tiny, of the contribution that a single vote makes that has value, not the vote’s capacity to be overtly perceptible. The point of a “contributory theory of voting” is that the individual loses interest in the capacity to be decisive but values any addition, however marginal and small, that her actions can bring

about in favor (but not causing by itself) her preferred result-- or against her least preferred result. This is a rational collective strategy in the sense that it relies on the reasoning that my efforts will bear fruit *only* as part of a collection of efforts that others also make. In contrast, an emphasis on decisiveness relies on the capacity of *one single* individual to make all the difference. Thus, observing that one's minimal contribution will not change things is a platitude. The person knows this but she acts nevertheless because she also knows that many individually futile contributions may amount to something. The contributory logic, I think, is empirically feasible. Human beings many times act evincing a sense of collective, rather than strictly individual, rationality. We see instances of collective rationality at play all the time. People participate in charity drives, natural disaster relief efforts, and go-fund-me-initiatives on the internet to collect money for a cause, among other things. In fact, most of people's instrumental actions in the context of social and political goals reflect awareness of one's inability to achieve a result *without* the cooperation of others. Many people may care or not that others do not cooperate like they do, but that is a different issue.

Critics of epistemic democracy surely disagree with the foregoing somewhat optimistic view of the citizenry's abilities to understand and navigate politics successfully. Indeed, criticisms of epistemic democracy could be categorized into two types: The first type of objection highlights the problem of voter incompetence. People like Ilya Somin and Bryan Caplan, to name a few, have spilled much ink aiming to show that the average citizen lacks the minimal level of competence necessary to use heuristics and shortcuts meaningfully (Somin 2013)<sup>7</sup> or to understand the most basic questions at stake in elections

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<sup>7</sup> Somin (2013) suggests that the solution to voter incompetence is making government smaller (therefore simplifying the types of decisions available to citizens) as well as incentivizing foot voting rather than

(Caplan 2007). The second objection to epistemic democracy targets the value of cognitive diversity more directly: It points to the fact that for cognitive diversity to start doing any useful work for the quality of democratic decisions, citizens must first reach a minimum level of knowledge that does not seem to exist currently in a widespread fashion. Diversity of dumb perspectives does not help democracy as such (Quirk 2014). Additionally, critics challenge the idea that the law of big numbers will automatically produce cognitive diversity. They suggest that just because we are more, it does not mean that problem-solving skills are evenly distributed in the voting population (Kelly 2014).

Before I proceed with the main argument for the duty to vote, let me address, to the extent that I can given the limited space, the valid points that the skeptics of epistemic democracy make. Let us start with the problem of voter incompetence. Much has been written in reply to the critics but not much systematization has been achieved in the responses. Here, I propose the following line of reply to the argument that voters are overwhelmingly incapable, therefore, that democracy as a minimally intelligent mechanism of decision-making is bound to fail: Voter ignorance is not an unchangeable law of nature. As a matter of fact, the U.S ranks almost last internationally when it comes

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traditional voting as a form of counteracting the lack of individual influence in elections. The underlying reasoning is that our single vote will not change the result of elections whereas where we decide to live and work will definitely make an impact on our lives. But how is Somin to suppose that voters will diligently uncover the information they need to make a decision about where to move? If voters are generally incompetent—as he presumes-- why wouldn't they focus on factors not too relevant to quality of life such as number of sport teams in the area or number of Irish pubs? Besides, it is hard to see how foot voting can become a collective event of enough weight to affect public policy and politicians (which is what elections, at least ideally, are meant and designed to do). Unless a sizable exodus of enough individuals takes place from one place to another in a permanent manner, geographical mobility will not likely serve as an enduring form of political influence. Somin confuses things when he argues that foot voting is better than traditional voting because, like market decisions, individuals can immediately sense the impact of their choices. Democrats should not be primarily concerned with ensuring that individuals feel self-efficacious; they should be concerned with making society and its policies better for people's lives. Finally, for the claim that Somin's evidence "for the superiority of foot voting, based on an analysis of the politics of the Jim Crow-era South, is unpersuasive and internally inconsistent," see Landauer (2014: 438).

to voters' knowledge of political issues.<sup>8</sup> If other voters elsewhere know more than Americans, voter competence is not in principle a rigid human trait bound to persist no matter what. Additionally, the idea that it is assumes that all the knowledge measured matters, which is a controversial assumption. Some of the factual knowledge measured in surveys used to assess voter competence (such as whether the citizen knows who the second candidate in her district is, or whether she knows which party controls the senate) has been argued to not faithfully reflect voters' capacities to identify general ideological trends (such as whether Democrats or Republicans defend universal healthcare or whether Republicans or Democrats support higher taxes on the rich) that are indeed more helpful to make informed decisions at the voting booth. Some of the factual knowledge, however basic, required by surveys of political competence has been said to reflect the elitism of their designers, usually academics (Lupia 2006)

But critics fire back with a strong response: They charge that some voters are even incapable of identifying the right type of information needed to decide. This is where my systematized response to the objection of voter ignorance comes into play. If voter ignorance is not a fixed law of the human constitution (given that it varies significantly cross-country) then, there must be variables that affect it positively as well as negatively. If this is so, one can in principle think that democratic societies may endeavor to improve voter competence instead of retreating towards a deterministic position that sees the electorate as *ipso facto* incapable of producing smart results. The literature on voter

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<sup>8</sup> U.K. pollster *Ipsos Mori* interviewed 11,527 people in 2015 and constructed a 14-country Index of Ignorance. The U.S. is the second most ignorant country on the ignorance list, after Italy. Even though the experiment finds that all country populations get facts wrong, there is considerable difference between those at the bottom and those at the top. See the index construction at <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/Index-of-ignorance-calculation.pdf>



behavior has provided us with suggestions of what the variables that affect political knowledge and political interest may be. I submit that we can group them into three categories: 1) Structural variables, 2) Contextual variables and 3) Cognitive ability variables.

Structural variables are variables that refer to the nature and functioning of the political and party system in a given country. They have been, in my opinion, vastly underexplored as intervening causes of political ignorance (critics like Somin and Caplan, for instance, make little if no mention of them and instead focus primarily on the third category).

A structural variable that affects the general availability of accurate political information is a political party's incentive to profit from income inequality (which is correlated with less access to information for those with lower incomes). For example, Abramovitz and Webster (2015) argue that Republicans in the U.S have an incentive to convince voters of the non-problematic nature of inequality because inequality moves voters to the right, which is the party's preferred ideological orientation. This argument can be coupled with the already widespread thesis in political science that political elites play an important role in influencing public opinion (Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992; Hochschild 2013; Druckman et., al. 2013 ). The public opinion literature shows that people do not form political views that politicians will later attempt to satisfy and match. The picture is not that simple because the causal arrows moves in both directions. Zaller (1992: 9 quoted in Uscinski and Olivella 2015: 4) argues that "members of the public tend to follow the elites sharing their general ideological or partisan predisposition." Sometimes, the process of public opinion formation is tilted in favor of the political elites, who have

interests that not always further the common good, especially if candidates are entangled with corporate groups that donate resources to political campaigns enabling candidates to win expensive elections. For example, Druckman et, al., (2015) show that presidents often use polls to identify the interests of organized groups and lobbies that support their broad agendas. They then respond to these groups, while simultaneously using polls to devise methods to distract other Americans — leading them to focus on personality and image rather than controversial policy.

Climate change is a good example of the influence of elites on the quality of information made available to the electorate. Environmental issues have historically been bipartisan and non-controversial—think, for example, Richard Nixon’s role in creating the Environmental Protection Agency (Uscinski and Olivella 2015). This reality began to change markedly in the mid-1990s when opinions both in Congress and in the public began to polarize along party lines. Historical accounts suggest that economic interests organized in the early 1990s with the intention of sowing doubt over the issue of man-caused global warming given the ties between the oil industry lobby and the republican leadership. (McCright et.al., 2010; Uscinski and Olivella 2015). Due to these efforts, the discourse of Republican politicians generally became rife with climate change denialism (Sharman 2014). These efforts appear to have influenced mass Republican opinion to a point where many republican voters take climate change denialism as a hallmark of their Republican identity (McCright et., al., 2010). Elite manipulation has also been argued to be greatly responsible for policy results such as the Bush Tax cuts that were made possible, in part, by the misinterpretation of economic facts by interested politicians (Graetz and Shapiro 2005).

Work on how political elites influence mass opinion and policy seems to connect neatly with the fact that deregulation of campaign finance and influence of wealth in the higher spheres of government can leave, as a result, a gap between politicians and the common voter's needs and concerns. This gap may be made worse by the latter's ignorance but that ignorance cannot explain by itself why policy that is bad for the bulk of society is ultimately enacted. Or it would be simplistic to assume so. My point, after mentioning the previous research on elite cues, is that blaming bad political results on the "ignorant voter" squarely is not only unfair but it also signals a narrow social-science view of how democratic politics work. Besides elite influence and money in politics, other structural variables that affect the quality of information that flows to the electorate include party polarization,<sup>9</sup> media framing effects (which are connected to the argument that elites

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<sup>9</sup> Using data from the National Elections Survey, Abramovitz and Webster (2015) show that in the last two decades, the U.S. has seen sharp increases in party polarization, which leads voters to have increasing negative opinions of the opposing party and their supporters. Increases in party loyalty, moreover, may lead to less flexible ways of processing information that is not favorable to one's ideological position as well as increasing the instances in which elites manipulate information to broaden the gap between the already polarized parties (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2006) "With highly divided and ideological political parties, political leaders may have increasingly less compunction about attempting to manipulate or even deceive. Such leaders surely deserve our scorn." (Ibid: 24)

influence public opinion)<sup>10</sup>, the complexity of electoral laws,<sup>11</sup> and the responsiveness and transparency of political institutions.<sup>12</sup>

The second type of variable that affects political knowledge is contextual, and it refers to socio-economic characteristics of the individual. It is not news that education level, income, and wealth affect political knowledge. What I want to highlight in defense of the prima facie validity of the epistemic case for democracy is that these variables are modifiable by public policy as a matter of statistical fact. For example, improving civic education and working towards ameliorating economic inequality should result, at least in the medium to long-term, in some appreciable increases in political knowledge and political interest.<sup>13</sup> There is evidence that in countries where equality of income and wealth

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<sup>10</sup> Political polarization and ideological conflict are magnified by a media model that thrives on conflict (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2006: 24) and the public can selectively reinforce their polarized views by only attending to the media outlets that confirm their opinions. However guilty the voter seems for this, one cannot ignore the influence of the media dynamic that purposely incentivizes polarization. Kelly (2014) expands in an illuminating way on the way in which “media frames” interact with frames from parties and other interest groups rendering the possibility of biased provision of information quite real.

<sup>11</sup> For example, studies have shown that complex electoral laws that make multiple elections happen in one ballot do not contribute to clear information for the electorate. They have also shown that too repetitive elections cause voter fatigue and that proportional representation, as opposed to winner takes all, enhances voter knowledge after controlling for education and income (Clark 2013; Gordon and Segura 1997). Also, local and primary elections that do not require party brands for candidates – something quite common in the U.S-- make it difficult for voters to identify issues and are more prone to cause misinformation. Elmendorf and Schleicher (2015)

<sup>12</sup> Clark (2013) defines responsiveness and transparency as the system’s openness to allowing citizens to influence policy. His argument is that where there are electoral or deliberative mechanisms that allow citizens to influence policy, citizens will have more incentives to become informed. These mechanisms could include direct democracy devices such as ballot initiatives, recalls, or various deliberative fora. His argument finds support in Carpini and Keeter (1996), who show that there is a strong link between a sense of political efficacy and political knowledge in the population.

<sup>13</sup> Galston (2001) shows that civic education has decreased or completely disappeared in U.S. schools curricula and argues that, contrary to findings from 30 years ago, recent research suggests that traditional classroom-based civic education can significantly raise political knowledge. Galston claims that if we compare generations rather than cohorts—that is, if we compare today’s young adults not with today’s older adults but with the young adults of the past—we find evidence of diminished civic attachment, which goes together with diminished knowledge. He says: “In the early 1970s, about half of the 18–29-year-olds in the United States voted in presidential elections. By 1996, fewer than one third did. The same pattern holds for congressional elections— about one third voted in the 1970’s compared with fewer than one fifth in 1998.” Galston (2001: 219)

is not high, voters appear to show relatively higher levels of political engagement and political interest (Gronlund and Milner 2006; Birch 2011). Maybe, the most threatening problem for democracy is that people don't always care, not that people don't always know. And maybe they don't care because the system seems too often to be unresponsive or biased in favor of the powerful. A recent study on the oligarchic nature of American democracy stresses this point. In it, Giles and Page (2014) explain that the central point that emerges from their research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence.

Finally, the third type of variable that affects political knowledge is strictly individual and it refers to the ability to use cognition logically. Individual-level characteristics also stress the citizen's lack of information and his or her lack of motivation to obtain it before making a voting decision. I believe that critics of epistemic democracy overemphasize this category, which is not to be dismissed. Yet, by doing so, they lose sight of the big picture. Page (2015: 378) criticizes this individual-level approach when reviewing Ilya Somin's 2013 book on democracy and voter incompetence. For Page, "the chief deficiency of Somin's book may be its focus on low *levels* of political knowledge among citizens, rather than on the more important issue of the nature, extent, and sources (including elite sources) of systematic *biases* in that knowledge." In the face of structural and contextual factors that influence voter competence and voter political interest, one may have reason to be more optimistic about the reduction of knowledge gaps between experts and regular citizens. In considering these structural/conditional factors, one can also have

a sounder response to the objection that cognitive diversity does not automatically obtain by virtue of the law of large numbers (Kelly's argument above).

One reason why cognitive diversity may be lacking in large electorates is the fact that voters are generally all equally misinformed by virtue of the effects of media frames, complex electoral rules, decreasing incomes, unaccountable institutions, and excessive party polarization. However, absent these types of obvious biases and by the mere law of probability, there is no reason to doubt that larger numbers might lead to higher likelihoods of having more options. And thus, higher numbers of people voting may indeed give way to some modest epistemic benefits of cognitive variability. James Madison resorted to a purely mathematical argument of this sort in *Federalist 10*, where he argued that a larger republic, with more people in it, would lead to higher chances of finding good representatives. This argument entails the assumption that the more people we can choose from, the higher the chance of finding the variation necessary to satisfy our goal. In his words:

“In the first place, it is to be remarked that, however small the republic may be, the representatives must be raised to a certain number, in order to guard against the cabals of a few; and that, however large it may be, they must be limited to a certain number, in order to guard against the confusion of a multitude. Hence, the number of representatives in the two cases not being in proportion to that of the two constituents, and being proportionally greater in the small republic, it follows that, if the proportion of fit characters be not less in the large than in the small republic, the former will present a greater option, and consequently a greater probability of a fit choice.”

This probabilistic argument also applies to Madison's claim in *Federalist 10* that in a larger and more populated republic, diversity of opinions and interests would be more likely, making the threat of majority oppression less pressing. Again, this logic seems to me quite sound, always under the assumption that its mathematical truth is not corrupted by biases that would make certain probabilities weighted vis-a-vis others, which is what

may be happening in modern democracies given the structural variables that affect the flow of political information in society.

To conclude this section, I suggest that we should follow Talisse (2004) and distinguish between “agent ignorance” and “belief ignorance” when reflecting on the fate of democracy. “Agent ignorance” is given by cognitive failures that result from faulty thinking processes strictly independent from the existence of full and accurate information. “Belief ignorance”, by contrast, is attributable to misinformation despite the presence of cognitive competence. Thus, belief ignorance is, in theory, more easily alterable. We need to focus on the quality and flow of information in society to change it. To be as strong as its proponents want it to be, the objection against epistemic democracy must conclusively show that public ignorance is due to agent ignorance-- not belief ignorance. Belief ignorance may be currently accentuated by a host of structural and conditional factors, and so, it may be eased or eliminated, conceivably.<sup>14</sup>

The question that must be explored now is whether there are any ethical reasons why people *should* vote minimally well. In other words, what are the grounds for thinking of good voting as a moral duty instead of just a liberty or a right that we may exercise if we want? Next section explores that question more in depth.

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<sup>14</sup> The structural factors that influence the flow of information such as media frames, the complexity of electoral laws, elite dominance, and others also explain, in my mind, why Caplan’s theory of rational irrationality (Caplan 2008) is empirically unfeasible. Pace Bennett and Friedman (2008: 211 cited in Gunn 2015: 283), Caplan’s thesis that voters rationally choose to be irrational (besides being logically dubious because it entails that people knowingly hold false beliefs) is empirically weak because it ignores that people lack the information they need to form irrational biases. Structural factors are good candidates for explaining why people do not know: information to which they could have access is not so easily accessible due to the complexity of political structures. However, manipulation of information by the media and elites could explain why people come to acquire irrational beliefs. What it cannot explain—because it is absurd to do so—is why individuals would acquire a belief that they know to be irrational. The rational choice suggestion that their vote would be negligible does not fly as an explanation. For the latter to make sense, we would also have to assume that the voter gets some type of psychological reward from consciously holding irrational biases regardless of her capacity to influence the election. This seems, on its face, a rather implausible picture of human motivation in a mentally healthy individual

## **Voting well as a duty**

In recent years, the libertarian argument against a duty to vote has gained much traction. The libertarian argues that we *only* have a duty to refrain from voting badly in order to avoid “polluting the polls” but we don’t have a positive duty to act by voting well (Brennan 2009, 2011). Voting badly, the argument goes, may bring about harmful results in the shape of weak leaders, unfair policies, and bad governance more generally.<sup>15</sup> In this section, I argue that we are also obligated to vote minimally well to “*clean* the polls” when doing so is not unreasonably costly from an individual standpoint; and when the benefits are well worth it for all. This defense of a positive duty to vote—as opposed to a negative duty to refrain from voting if one is not to vote well-- is not linked to views of democracy that exalt the intrinsic benefits of participation for the agent (such as self-realization or moral virtue to name a few) or her supposed duty to continually place the public good above her private goals (since the duty to vote well does not override all other duties or moral considerations that also guide action).

The normative literature is familiar with the argument that a failure to act can be as harmful, and as wrongful, as an injurious act properly speaking. Paradigmatic defenders of individual freedom and negative rights have countenanced this idea. For example, in the process of explaining his celebrated “harm principle,” John Stuart Mill writes in *On Liberty* that “a person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in

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<sup>15</sup> Brennan’s case for equating bad voting with pollution is that bad voters can bring about foolish, ineffective, or immoral policies. Thanks to them, we can be “stuck with lower quality governance than we otherwise would have” (Brennan 2011: 10).



either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury” (Mill 2008: 15).<sup>16</sup> Joel Feinberg, in his magnificent work on the limits of the criminal law, argues that legal penalties should be attached to the failure to provide aid when doing so is only trivially costly to the individual. He argues this on the basis of a conceptual equivalence between “actively harming someone” and “failing to prevent harm” (Feinberg 1984: Chapter Four). The emblematic example in the literature on harm and a duty to provide aid is the case of the drowning child (Parfit 2011; Feinberg 1992; Singer 1997). The example tells of a child who is drowning in a pond and is spotted by a passerby—the only person in the vicinity able to help and able to swim—who is wearing new-brand shoes. The cost of not jumping into the water is the child’s death whereas the cost of jumping is the ruining of the new shoes. The rationale behind the equivalence between actively harming and omitting to aid rests on the fact that the interests frustrated by both phenomena are equally fundamental (the child loses his life when he’s not taken out of the water in the same way as he would if pushed under the water by an evil hand). Importantly, the fact that the individual does not start (physically) the causal chain that will create a harm (i.e., by pushing the kid to the into the water) does not make him causally unrelated to the result. His failure to act when he stumbles upon the struggling infant is one (sufficient but not necessary) causal factor that explains the latter’s death. All else equal, if the passerby throws a lifesaver, or jumps into the water, the kid survives, if he doesn’t, the kid dies. We can accept that the (positive) duty to save others from considerable physical harm does not have the same scope as the

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that Mill thought some omissions to be worthy of legal punishment should only reinforce the idea that other omissions may be at least deserving of moral criticism. Mill, it must be said, argues that punishing individuals for omissions may not be the most expedient solution at all times: “the attempt to exercise control could produce other evils, greater than those which it would prevent.” (p. 16). This bodes well with the idea that not voting must not necessarily be punishable by law.

(negative) duty to refrain from killing others.<sup>17</sup> However, when the cost of saving others in grave danger is not unreasonably high—and when it is quite low in comparison with the risk the endangered party is suffering—the positive duty seems to be equally stringent (Feinberg 1984: 170).

Thus, actively harming someone is *not* always morally different from failing to avert harm. But this equivalence would seem to hold most clearly in cases in which fundamental interests such as the preservation of life and limb are involved, and circumstances in which the passerby's contribution is decisive for the final outcome, *ceteris paribus*. How is failing to vote (well) similar in any way to this scenario? It doesn't seem to be for two reasons: Firstly, when people fail to vote well no fundamental interest such as the preservation of life and limb seems to be at stake. Bad governance certainly does not kill anyone. Or does it? Secondly, the individual voter does not determine the fate of governance in society by voting because her vote will in all likelihood make no significant impact on the election. It will get lost in an ocean of votes.

Bad governance is a question of degree, for sure, but the worse it is and the longer it lasts, the more it can produce results that are gravely harmful and permanent. Bad governance may mean that children are denied opportunities for healthy growth and for a good education. It can also mean that the elderly will be denied opportunities to end their lives with dignity and in financial security. Bad governance can also ensue in wrong-headed and expensive wars that cost lives and deplete valuable resources. These harms can contravene important interests that all individuals can be thought to want to further.

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<sup>17</sup> Importantly, this line of argument rejects the idea that each of us is charged with the duty of doing the maximal amount of harm-preventing we possibly can. For example, "each of us has a duty to call the fire department whenever we discover a fire. Beyond that, we have no positive duty to fight the flames." (Feinberg 1984: 170).

What about the impact factor? When I refrain from voting well, I do not produce any noticeable harm. Since my individual vote will be lost in a sea of votes, it doesn't really matter whether it is good or bad. Either way, it is insignificant for the final outcome of the election. Jason Brennan, who presents a libertarian argument for a duty to refrain from voting badly, recognizes the conundrum. He adumbrates the criticism that if our individual vote is inconsequential, then, the harm that results from it when we vote badly also must be. However, he argues that we have a non-consequentialist duty to refrain from voting badly. It is morally wrong to participate in wrongful activities -- *to dirty our hands*--irrespective of the potential impact of our single actions (Brennan 2011: 71-75). According to Brennan's position, we have a duty to refrain from participating in collectively harmful activities however inconsequential our individual contribution because we have a duty to "keep our hands clean." In other words, the fact that our individual contribution is insignificant does not condone our immoral individual actions. Our actions are immoral if they are consistent with an immoral larger goal. We should not participate in immoral activities, however futile individually. This reasoning grounds the duty not to vote badly in considerations related to the avoidance of harm.

Reversely, I argue, we should be able to see that the fact that our individual actions are insignificant for the final outcome does not eliminate their "moral goodness" (if they are good). Hence, a duty to engage in those actions is not unthinkable—all else equal (that is, if the personal costs of complying with the duty are not unreasonable). Brennan's duty to refrain from actively harming others is undeniably sound and appealing. However, I think it does not capture the heart of the issue of voting. Indeed, we can think about the ethics of the ballot in a different way, based on the three arguments that I have presented

in this paper: These arguments are that: 1) Voting well is not unreasonably burdensome all things considered; 2) when many people vote well, that produces epistemic virtues in a democracy, which means qualitatively better results for the common good; and 3) sometimes, inaction can amount to not preventing harm when doing so is not costly; and it is therefore as morally reproachable as actively doing harm. This last instance violates a duty of justice to preserve and promote good governance in society. Failing to prevent the deterioration of good governance in society, when doing something would not be unduly costly for us, is *ipso facto* a way of undermining justice in society and goes, therefore, against the core of the duty of justice that Rawls specifies as one of the non-burdensome obligations that we all have as members of society.

In the case of voting, by not voting minimally well (and by not voting at all) we collectively fail to prevent a harm because, by our omission, we let the quality of governance be less satisfactory than it otherwise would be: We deprive democracy of the epistemic properties that tend to lead to more just and responsive institutions and social arrangements. Our apathy may even cause the quality of democratic institutions to linger below acceptable levels of responsiveness and justness. To the extent that voters can plausibly meet the “better-than-random” requisite for epistemically beneficial decision-making, and assuming the existence of background procedural fairness i.e., (equal political rights) episodic participation at the polls betters the situation for all in the same way that planting trees improves the quality of the air that everybody breathes. Importantly, good collective voting prevents the quality of governance from plunging in its quality in the same way that collective tree planting prevents pollution from increasing in degree—all else equal. Actions pursuant to preventing or minimizing harm are therefore called for and

fully compatible with a duty not to undermine justice as well as to promote it such as the one Rawls suggests. This remains so even if those individual actions are not powerful by *themselves*. They are powerful collectively, therefore morally mandated, if not unduly costly for the person.

### **What is special about voting?**

Good voting is not the only way to exert an impact on the quality of governance. Political rallying, circulating a petition, donating money to public causes, and educating others about civic virtues and responsibilities are just a few examples of how we can contribute to shaping our social and political life by influencing state actors and political outcomes. Do we also have a moral duty to engage in each and all of those activities? I say no, under circumstances we can imagine, but this does not mean that the duty to vote takes priority over all other duties the individual may have. My arguments for a moral duty to vote well do not encompass a more demanding duty to be politically engaged all the time or even some of the time. Furthermore, episodic voting does not have to require constant or even frequent political participation, although it does require attention to issues of concern and party platforms as elections draw closer. But what's distinctive about voting that renders it a duty, then? This paper claimed that the aggregation of judgments through elections results in epistemic advantages that tend to move democracy towards better results if conditions of background fairness and minimal information are in place. This tendency entails the idea that the more people that vote well, the less that we, as a society, contribute to slowing or reverting the trajectory of good governance.<sup>18</sup> The epistemic

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<sup>18</sup> This logic of the superiority of numbers is evinced in Aristotle's claims in the *Politics*: "If, as I said before, the good man has a right to rule because he is better, still two good men are better than one: this is the old

functions of aggregation are *par excellence* realized through an aggregative mechanism such as voting. Additionally, the distinctive function of the suffrage, as opposed to other forms of political participation and societal contribution, is that—*collectively*-- it constitutes the most direct causal factor for political change, that is, for influencing the common good—under circumstances of good institutional responsiveness.

The collective vote—the final result of elections-- constitutes the most direct mechanism for renewing or withdrawing the electorate’s trust in the governing coalitions and the public officials being evaluated, who can be held accountable for the direction of public policy and the quality of governance.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that the role of citizens should be circumscribed to putting in place or removing ruling elites through the vote. I profess no Schumpeterian sympathies. My observation is factual only. Under conditions of normal institutional responsiveness, elections are the most distinctively binding (on public officials) mechanism designed to affect government because it is only via elections that governments are *formally* installed and removed from power. Under the logic of electoral, representative democracy, it is elections (the collective vote) that constitute the only mechanism to formally institute and authorize governments to govern. Other non- electoral ways of participation such as marches, protests, letters to senators and the like may surely affect governments (they may even contribute to their fall from grace and their

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saying. Two going together, and the prayer of Agamemnon, would that I had ten such counselors! *Politics*, p. 79: book 3, chap. 16, 1287b12-15. The quotations are from the *Iliad*, X 224 and II 372, respectively. The quote is taken from Waldron (1995: 581). Even though Aristotle adheres to some form of moral elitism (i.e., some are better than others), the government that is led by more “better individuals” is better than the government that is led by fewer of those. In the same vein—but leaving Aristotle’s elitism behind, I argue that, if we can vote (minimally) well, the society in which the more of us do so is better than the society in which fewer of us do. This is due to the epistemic benefits of aggregation but also in terms of democratic legitimacy.

<sup>19</sup> In the case of referenda-like measures, the collective vote constitutes an even more direct way to influence policy.

unpopularity), but they do not by themselves give governments the formal authorization to represent the electorate and act on its behalf. They neither (save for situations of extreme crises) signify the end of a government's mandate by letting the country know that formal support for it was not sufficient at the polls to continue governing. Thus, because elections are distinctive mechanisms of political participation in that they *formally* elect, authorize, and terminate the tenure of governments, the duty to contribute to this task of legitimization via our (good) vote should be seen as special in its own right. And this is so because governments are massively powerful giants that have the means to affect justice via their administrative capabilities. They can determine if we go to war, how much we pay in taxes, the duration of welfare benefits, whether public education and healthcare services will be generously funded, and millions of other decisions that affect the lives of citizens daily and significantly. So, we care about elections as distinctive forms of political participation because of their unique capacity to legitimize governments, which, in turn, have a unique capacity to affect justice (for better or worse, although the point if voting well is that it should be for the better). In circumstances of low or in-existent institutional responsiveness, fraudulent elections, or dangerous conditions for voters, my arguments for the moral obligatoriness of voting well break down. In fact, those circumstances themselves may make forms of non-electoral participation such as protests and marches morally obligatory, although whether this is so will depend on how costly for the individual those actions turn out to be in each case. However, the gist of my argument for the morality of voting under "normal" circumstances is that, if it is true that we are bound by a general duty of justice to support and encourage good governance in society, and if it is true that governments are unparalleled in their capacity to affect justice because of their massive administrative and

coercive capabilities, then, we have obligatory reasons to vote well so that good governments are eventually chosen and justice prevails over injustice. These obligatory reasons remain obligatory insofar as the personal costs of voting are not unduly costly, as the formulation of a general duty to support and promote justice remarks. No such duty can demand from the agent that other important duties and moral considerations always take the back seat. However, voting is valuable because, even if individually ineffectual, it is part of a larger collective effort that will have good epistemic results, which will translate into better conditions for the common good, all else equal. By acting, rather than refraining from doing so, we make a contribution to the reduction of harm because we prevent the deterioration of democracy by electing governments that work for the common good.

In this sense, I distance myself from civic Republicans such as Hanna Arendt, who take the solitary nature of modern voting as unsatisfying. She says: “The booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has room for only one.” (Arendt 1972: 232 cited in Berger 2011:145). This conception of the vote derives from Arendt’s belief that true political action “corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert [...] it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (Ibid: 143). What Arendt misses in her dismissal of voting as a worthy form of political participation is that acting in concert *is* part and parcel of elections. The morality of voting lies on the fact that by acting when all others are also acting, we achieve the result that we are intent on accomplishing. Voting must be seen as a collective endeavor if it is to mean anything at all for democracy. But the individual vote that is part of that collective effort must be a good-enough vote for results to be desirable-- not just *any* vote. If this good-enough epistemic criterion is not too burdensome to meet (or would



not be too burdensome to meet in the absence of structural limitations to voter competence) then, we should see voting as one of the most valuable forms of political participation that society offers us, and we should not waste it.

Finally, I want to briefly propose that our duty to participate may be justified in the framework of a duty to break the link between injustice and individual responsibility. If our collective inaction and passivity may contribute to the perpetuation of unjust conditions-- because unjust governments remain in place or keep being chosen -- doing something to break that causal link may be called for by reasons of integrity even if our individual (tiny) action will not have a big impact in instrumental terms. I understand integrity in this context as the moral value of not being a causal ingredient to a state of affairs that we have good (objective) reasons to reject. Bad governance constitutes such a state of affairs because living under a government that does not work for the common good is worthless from the perspective of justice (an objective reason). Generally, I think that it is a good idea to be aware of our causal role (however shared) in perpetuating injustice.<sup>20</sup> If we can easily (i.e., at no grave cost to ourselves) be part of the collective effort that can assuage injustice, however small that part is, we ought to opt to do so-- even if we have a legal right not to care. Voting well can help us in that task.

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<sup>20</sup> For an argument of this sort, see Beerbohm (2011). Beerbohm, however does not argue that we bear moral responsibility for not voting. His case is centered on the claim that we bear responsibility for doing things we actually have little freedom to avoid such as supporting the state via taxes and by respecting its laws. If our state commits injustices, his main argument is, we then bear some responsibility for those injustices because we contribute to the state's support by putting money in its coffers and by not challenging its laws. My arguments on responsibility are different here. Firstly, we do have the freedom not to vote (in countries where voting is not legally mandated). Secondly, our contribution to injustice by not voting well is therefore more reprehensible than our contribution to injustice by doing things that we would be punished legally for not doing.

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