

A Moral Exploration into the 'Lesser of Two Evils' Voting Strategy

Part 1: If a person, informed to the best of his or her ability, believes one candidate would be better for the country than any others, then that person has a moral obligation to vote for him or her. If a person is uninformed and/or has no preference over which candidate gets elected, then he or she is not morally obligated to vote for any candidate.

Firstly, I would like to define what purpose a vote has and what one should think when he or she votes. A vote is a representation of something that the voter believes would make his or her community a better place, and it is probable to believe that every individual is morally required to try and make their community a better place, so long as doing so would not bring about self-harm in any way. Someone may just be concerned about his or her self-interests, but most believe that if one's fulfillment of his or her gains would create more negative welfare for the people of the surrounding community, he or she should not fulfill that interest. Imagine a man who wants to make tons of money, and could easily do so if he stopped paying his workers and forced them to work for him instead. This example is practically slavery, which is something that most if not all think is wrong. In the case of voting, imagine that this same man could vote to get rid of taxes entirely so he did not have to lose money to them. Suppose this vote would cause many people harm because it would defund necessary programs across the country. It is still not controversial to say that this man should not vote for this measure because it would create a large amount of negative welfare for his community. Therefore, one's preference for a candidate should be primarily based on the fact that he or she will be best for the entire community, and secondarily based on the candidate's likeliness to further the personal gain of the voter.

Since voting does not usually harm the voter, it is reasonable to say that everyone is morally required to vote in what they think could achieve this group goal of making the

community as good a place as it can be. In some cases, a person cannot vote because they work for an employer who would fire them if they missed time to go to the polls. Or a person may not feel safe voting for unpopular views in a violent area, even if these views would be best for the community as a whole. In these scenarios there would be no moral obligation that would say these people should put themselves in danger just to better their communities and abstaining from voting would not be immoral; the immorality would lie in the forces that exclude these people from the voting process and practically use legal loopholes to make it impossible for these people to satisfy their moral obligations. If someone was obligated to feed his or her dog, but buying dog food was made impossible for this person by others, it would be wrong to say that this person is doing something morally wrong, and more reasonable to find moral infringement in the actions of those who are making this obligation unfulfillable.

The duty to one's peers and community has been called the "good samaritan obligation," one that I believe to mean people should help in any way they can without putting themselves in danger. This is the belief that people who just saw someone fall should help that person rather than just ignore him or her, for example. For those who try to use consequence-based views to claim that there is no obligation to vote because an individual vote does not really matter and rarely affects the actual results, therefore having no consequence, I present the following scenario. If a doctor saw someone having a seizure and knew that there would be nothing she could do to save the person, many would agree it would still be wrong for her to just ignore the scene and go on with her day. By this logic, even if someone's vote will make no difference, it would still be wrong to abstain from voting, which can make the country a better place, simply because the individual vote does not make any difference.

Another point on this argument is that the popular vote is, in most cases, not the deciding factor of the election, as the electoral college directly elects the president. Therefore, the same argument that says not to vote because individual votes do not often make a difference should also advocate for the fact that nobody should vote ever because none of the votes of people outside of the electoral college actually count. I would think most would find this argument improbable and indefensible. Voting can be seen as a way for someone to help out society, as voting for a law or candidate allows a person to weigh in on a decision that will affect many in either a positive or negative way. In some sense, the obligation to vote is a more expansive version of the good samaritan obligation.

With regards to special obligations, voting does fall under the category of a special obligation for citizens of the country holding the election (and not anyone else) who also satisfy the guidelines I have laid out to make someone morally required to vote. If one is not a citizen, then all would agree they should have no part in voting in that country, but being a citizen alone does not make one especially obliged. In addition to being a citizen, a person would also have to form an opinion on the candidates and be a certain baseline level of informed to be obligated to vote.

I am being purposely vague with the term 'baseline level' because I believe there are many factors that need to be considered in each case to determine whether or not voters are truly informed enough to have their votes be a valid attempt at making their community a better place. One factor is the availability of information one has and the ability to take advantage of it. Someone who works two jobs and has a family of six is not going to have the same amount of time to read articles about a candidate's policies as a sixty-year-old retired person. Similarly, someone who does not subscribe to a newspaper may miss information that others have, or

someone who does not watch T.V. However, it would be surprising for me to assert that everyone should use all of their available resources to be eligible for my argument because very few people read about every nuance of a candidate's campaign as that would take an extraordinary amount of time. That's why I would maintain that as long as someone can back up his or her views and choices with some sort of reasonable thought process, they should be considered 'informed.'

If someone has no opinion or simply does not know what could better his or her community, it would be unreasonable to require him or her to vote for something just for the sake of voting. To avoid this scenario, my argument requires two things of voters: preference and some degree of knowledge about the topics in which they are voting (which was previously discussed). Concerning the former, one simply needs to have the slightest bias towards one candidate to make it morally required for him or her to vote. By having this bias, one could reasonably argue that this person has a thought on how to better the community, and as previously reasoned, this person should be voting as a part of the good samaritan obligation to help his or her fellow peers, as there is no self-harm involved in the process.

In a group-based argument, one may say that one should be voting for their desired candidate because withholding this vote would put them in a bad group, one that is making the community a worse place. They would be doing this by allowing a bad candidate contrary to their beliefs to win, rather than actively voting against him or her. I agree with this argument so long as the choice is between voting for someone and not voting at all, as I would maintain that abstaining from voting when one believes that there is a vote that could make the world better would put said person in this bad group of people who do not adhere to the good samaritan obligation. However, some argue that voting for a third-party candidate that has no realistic

chance of winning is practically the same as voting for no one, which I do not agree with. Some argue that voting for this candidate, even if he or she is the one whose policies align with a person's beliefs the best, is wrong because it puts said person as a part of the group that could be letting the bad candidate win. But the people who do vote for this candidate are not violating the good samaritan obligation, and still perpetuating the views that they believe will make their community a better place. This person would not be a part of the group that is letting a bad candidate win because he or she is not voting for said candidate. Some may argue that this is a waste of a vote, but I would assert that a vote for this third candidate would have beneficial effects on the community in the years to come (as it shows disdain with the current candidates and system and may force change if enough people do it). The voter may believe that these long term benefits are really what is needed to make the community a better place, and not just a vote for a less bad candidate, and would therefore still be satisfying their voting obligation correctly. When this third candidate does not exist, then, even if voting for one candidate is just voting for the lesser of two evils, a person would still be morally required to vote for whomever he or she believed would be better (or less bad).

Most expressive arguments argue that one's main purpose in voting should be to express his or her views by voting for the candidate that best aligns with them. My view is in line with these arguments so long as someone's views consider others, basically meaning that someone values the community in the formulation of their views and morals. Consider someone who does not value the community and decides to purchase the land of a neighborhood and use it to build a warehouse, displacing everyone who lives there. Imagine some similarly priced land just thirty miles away, where no one currently lives, but since this person does not value the community he/she decides to buy the land of the neighborhood because it is not as far a drive. Most would

argue that even though this person is not doing anything legally wrong, it is still morally questionable at the very least. Many would say that the person should buy the land farther away, even if it is a further drive and could be more inconvenient. This example would prompt people to argue against the expressive argument that would say since this person's views do not take the community into effect, he or she should not buy the land further away. That is why the expressive argument only works if one is expressing views that also have the larger community in mind, not just the individual. If one was just thinking about their expression and not how it would affect the rest of the world, they would be expressing views that could make the community a worse place, and assisting in this would agreeably be wrong.

A respect-based argument may disagree with the fact that I allow people to escape the moral obligation to voting if they do not have an opinion on the candidates or if they are not informed, arguing that out of respect for the country and those who have fought for the rights to vote, one should form an informed opinion and utilize the right to vote. While this argument does seem sound, it is not quite an objection to my argument. I am arguing about the conditions present for one to be morally obligated to vote, while this argument is about the moral obligation one has to meet these conditions. While this is an interesting argument, all I will offer on it is the fact that it is one's choice to become informed and form an opinion on an election. If someone chooses to do so, then he or she has a moral obligation to vote, as my argument maintains. If he or she chooses not to become informed or form an opinion, then I would maintain that this person has no moral obligation to vote and should not vote because they would be doing so without the proper considerations needed to make their vote one that would truly help the country; in other words, this uninformed or unopinionated person (because someone could still be informed and have no preference for one candidate over the others) could vote for something

harmful due to the lack of knowledge or lack of investment in his or her vote. Ultimately, respect-based arguments would say that someone is morally required to become knowledgeable so he or she can form an opinion, and I do not necessarily disagree with this, but it is an argument for the moral obligations one has to meet the requirements I have deemed necessary for one to be obligated to vote, and not on the requirements themselves, which is with what my thesis is concerned.

Part 2: Some may argue that if an informed person believes one candidate would be better for the country than any others, but that candidate has policies that go against some of said person's moral views, he or she does not have a moral obligation to vote for said candidate. Imagine an election in which Candidate A is homophobic and Candidate B not. Johnny is a gay man deciding who he should vote for, if anyone. He reads the policies of Candidate A and realizes that he agrees with all but the plan to overturn the legalization of gay marriage, while he agrees with none of the policies put forth by Candidate B, who would not overturn the Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage. In this scenario, let's imagine that it is quite likely that Candidate A would be able to make gay marriage illegal again upon election. Johnny thinks that Candidate B is a much worse candidate for the country and that the policies of Candidate A would fix many of the country's problems. Johnny does not like Candidate A's stance on gay marriage, and Candidate A often makes very homophobic comments that Johnny finds extremely offensive and ignorant. Because the only candidate that Johnny would vote for has such a strong stance against gay marriage, he does not vote in the election. It seems unreasonable for anyone to believe that morality should force Johnny to vote for a candidate that targets him and would try to infringe on his rights, and that is exactly what my thesis would suggest. Even though Johnny is well

informed and has an opinion that coincides with what is best for the country, many would argue that he should not be forced into voting for a candidate that will make his life any worse. The fact that there are scenarios where my view would require a gay person to vote for a homophobic candidate or a black person to vote for a racist one seems surprising, but I still maintain this view and will explain why it is one that can still make sense in these cases.

Part 3: This counterexample is one that deals with the issue of choosing between an expressive argument philosophy about voting versus one that considers expected utility. An expressive argument would say that Johnny should not have to vote because no candidate represents his views and only ones that infringe on things he values. The expected utility, however, would say that Johnny should vote for Candidate A because more people are expected to benefit from this than being hurt (as most of the policies are good and will affect most in a positive way versus the bad policy, of which there is only one). Since my argument seems to follow the views of expressive arguments, it would be surprising that my view would insist that someone vote even though it goes against some of their opinions. However, voting is not about the individual but about the welfare of a country and all those who live in it. It's about compromise and thinking of solutions that will help the most people while not infringing on the rights of any. That is what voting should express because the expression of a self-centered view would be wrong if it made the country a worse place. In this case, certain rights would be infringed upon if Johnny were to vote for Candidate A. As previously discussed, expression of one's views is important, but not at the cost of harming a lot of others. So while a vote for Candidate B would ensure that gay people are unharmed, it would be bad for the rest of the country in many ways. Also previously discussed, by not voting Johnny would, in essence, be allowing a bad candidate to win, and since

he has an informed opinion on which candidate would be better for the country as a whole, he is especially obligated to vote for this candidate, in this case, Candidate A. There is little to no self-harm present because Johnny can still do everything he would normally do including having any relationship he wanted, he just would not be able to make it legal. I am not trying to minimize the right for two gay people to be married and I do think it is an important one, but it is not intrinsically harmful, and it is rather the subtext of a homophobic society that is the real issue with making it illegal. Consider a similarly themed example in which someone must decide which sports team to root for in the championship. If Team 1 won the championship, they would bring an amazing amount of revenue to their city, allowing life to become better for the majority of those who lived in it. But the members of Team 1 would tear down a local children's park to create a new stadium, and kids throughout the city would have nowhere to play. Team 2, on the other hand, would use the revenue gained from winning the championship for fruitless things that would not better the lives of anyone in their city. Assume that by rooting for a team, a person makes it slightly more likely for that team to win. Most would say that people should root for Team 1 since they will be doing much more good than harm. It would also be reasonable to say that by not rooting for either team, one would not be preventing any bad situation, so it makes sense to at least have a choice in which bad situation will arise. If a child was rooting in this scenario (and for this example let's say that this child has the maturity of an adult to consider this choice as extensively as an adult would), many would agree that he or she should still root for Team 1, as the tearing down of a local park would not be an ideal situation, but an acceptable price for the betterment of the entire community. Rooting for Team 2 would keep the park, but at the cost of many possibilities for progress in other areas for the community, and most would find it reasonable that this would not be a logical vote based on the negative expected utility of one

park versus an entire community. This is all to say that a vote considering a community should still be made even if it makes life more inconvenient for the voter. I would feel ignorant likening the illegalization of gay marriage to one playground closing, but in the context of the country as a whole, even though Candidate A would infringe on the right to marriage for one group, many others would suffer in the case of Candidate B, so in both cases, someone is suffering something, and by not voting Johnny has no say in which he thinks is worse. If Johnny truly believed that Candidate B would cause less suffering to everyone, then he should vote for that candidate, but it would seem unreasonable for him to place the marriage rights of some above the general welfare of many others.

Works Cited

Julia Maskivker. "Yes, you do have an obligation to vote for the lesser of two evils. Here's why."