Why It’s Rational to Vote

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Abstract: The paradox of nonvoting claims that, because one’s vote is not pivotal, it is not instrumentally rational to vote. The paradox assumes that voters care only about whether an issue wins or loses, not about vote margins. But it is conceptually mistaken in insisting that redundant votes have no causal influence on the outcome. Next, if a voter also cares about margins, then each vote is pivotal towards that end. The paradoxicalist now objects that such a vote is imperceptible in advancing the public good. Smallness of benefit does not mean absence of benefit, however, and we observe that generally humans contribute imperceptibly to low-cost, continuous public goods. Many voters say they are motivated by duty to contribute and desire to influence the outcome. Thus, it is possibly rational to vote. The same arguments apply against the claim that citizens are necessarily in a state of rational ignorance about politics.
Introduction. What a thrill it was for me at mid-life to head off from timbered Southwest Oregon to snow-swept University of Chicago, where I hoped to study political theory and critical rational-choice theory with Jon Elster. The rational-choice argument that voting is instrumentally irrational had earlier changed my mind about voting, but not my feelings. Like several of my fellow students, in a vain and supercilious gesture, I stopped voting. But come election time strong pangs of remorse about absention would pelt me, although I kept them to myself. Elster’s introduction to his widely-assigned anthology on rational choice (1986) noted that a major failure of the theory was that it failed to explain the fact of wide voter turnout. Reflecting on the blinkered arrogance of Marxism, psychoanalysis, and functionalism, I decided that theory was likely more at fault than fact.

My Democracy Defended (2003) rebutted a prominent antidemocratic school of rational choice theory, and in so doing assuaged the (Condorcet) paradox of voting. One critic, Saul Levmore, Dean of the University of Chicago Law School, observed that democracy is still suspect, because of the paradox of nonvoting (2005). I accepted the challenge and thought through the first version of this essay. A considerable time after I wrote and presented it, I discovered that Elster was ahead of me, explaining in a footnote at page 217 of Explaining Social Behavior (2007) that, “The paradox arises when the sole aim of the voters is to put a candidate into office or a proposal into effect. It need not arise when the aim is to contribute to the vitality of the democratic system or to give a ‘mandate’ to a candidate, since in these cases votes matter even if they are not pivotal.” Thus, I present this essay, in his honor.

The Paradox of Nonvoting. The paradox of nonvoting, the idea that a single vote has no effect on the outcome, seems to imply that the individual act of voting is instrumentally irrational, or is at best merely an expression of preference, and at that undisciplined by proper constraints. Here, I seek to challenge the view that the individual act of voting is necessarily irrational, to argue that voting is possibly rational, to
hypothesize that it is rational for many individuals in many circumstances, and to outline what we would observe of voting if the account of motivation I propose were to be largely correct. I acknowledge that voter motivations are heterogeneous, that voter turnout (a different question) is influenced by a wide variety of circumstances and effects, and that both require ongoing empirical investigations. This essay is a conceptual analysis of one aspect of the question.

The paradox of nonvoting was first stated by Downs (1957, 244-246), and is often formulated as follows. $B$ is the individual’s Benefit from a winning election outcome, $C$ is the Cost of the individual voting, and $p$ is the Probability that an individual’s vote is pivotal in causing the winning election outcome. An individual would vote then, when $pB - C > 0$. The probability of being pivotal, however, is minuscule, effectively zero; for any individual, the act of voting is all cost and almost no benefit, and hence no one should vote. But a large majority of democratic citizens across the world do vote. Riker and Ordeshook (1968) proposed that since citizens do vote that some other value motivated them, call it Duty. The revised formula reads: $pB - C + D > 0$.

Dowding (2005) deftly categorizes the bewildering array of responses to this problem. 1. Admit that rational choice theory cannot explain why people go to the polls, but hold that considerations of probability, benefit, and cost can explain at the margin why they vote the way they do. 2. Insist that the cost of voting, the $C$ term, is zero. 3. Make the $B$ term huge, benefit to all society rather than just to the narrow interests of the individual voter. 4. Suggest that people vastly overestimate the $p$ term (or, I would add, that scholars previously have badly underestimated $p$), or hold that pivotality is not the relevant consideration. 5. Say that people understand voting as a (nonconsequentialist) duty, or intrinsically value the mere expression of their preferences: $pB - C + D + E > 0$. (it is more general and more precise to term these, after Cox 1999, act-contingent utilities).
The expressive theory of voting (Brennan and Lomasky 1993) is probably the modally endorsed model these days. It holds that there is no causal connection between an individual’s vote and the associated electoral outcome; that expressive considerations disproportionately influence the ballot in comparison to the market; and that a divergence between individuals’ expressive preferences and their instrumental preferences can perversely distort the aggregate outcome. It appeals to some because it does not traffic in illusions about pivotality. It appeals to others because the “the veil of insignificance” (minuscule $p$) zeroes out self-interest and liberates the expressive, perhaps the ethical, voter (Goodin and Roberts 1975), her expressive preferences well informed by public deliberation over the common good. It appeals to yet others in suggesting that democratic choice is necessarily of inferior quality to market choice. However, as I shall detail below, voters say they intend to influence the outcome, and act as if they so intend. They have a decidedly instrumental attitude. A promising fix among the many available is the altruistic theory of voting (Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan, 2007). These authors report that the chance of pivotality, although tiny, has been underestimated, and is roughly of the order of $1/n$, where $n$ is the number of voters. They also assume that the voter is motivated to achieve benefit for both self and society. Label the number of citizens $N$, and one’s discounting of benefit to another individual $\alpha$ ($0 < \alpha < 1$), and a citizen will vote when $p(B_{self} + \alpha NB_{society}) - C > 0$. The term for benefit to self, $B_{self}$, is small compared to the term for benefit to society, $B_{society}$, and, when each is multiplied by the chance of pivotality, benefit to self goes to almost nothing, leaving benefit to society as the principal motivation for voting. If so, then, just as public deliberation may operate as a filter to exclude unjustifiable preferences, voting may operate as a filter to exclude self interest and include public interest as input to collective decisions.

The essay begins with an examination of evidence about the proposition that voters do value the public good. They do, at least as much as their self interest, and probably more so; thus, something resembling the altruistic model is appropriate. The
paradox literature, however, including the altruistic model, is premised on the applicability of the pivotality criterion. Pivotality assumes that voters value only winning, not the size of the minority or majority vote for one’s issue. Worse, pivotality leads to an unacceptable conclusion. If 51 vote for and 50 against an issue, then each of the voters is pivotal and causes the outcome. If 52 vote for and 49 against, then none of the voters on the winning side is pivotal, and none causes the outcome. Who caused the outcome, then? The analysis of overdetermined causation resolves this problem. Next, many voters value more than winning, they also value how much their side wins by. If so, then each voter is pivotal to the outcome. The paradoxicalist’s objection now becomes that each citizen’s vote is imperceptible. I argue that imperceptibility of harm or benefit does not mean absence of harm or benefit. Then, in an aside, I propose that voters may be motivated not only to advance the decision on a particular issue, but also to advance democratic accountability and stability.

People do value the public good, but are they willing to contribute to its advancement? Olson’s logic of collective action says that it is necessarily irrational for them to do so. This is a theoretical claim, not an empirical claim: the circumstances of the competitive market seem to require the inference that firms objectively possess the ranking of preferences that Olson imputes, a thick theory of rationality. Individual humans are not necessarily so constrained, and we must look empirically at their subjective preferences, a thin theory of rationality. There is nothing irrational about an individual choosing to contribute to a public good, and I report evidence that they regularly do so in low-cost public goods resembling voting. Then, I report evidence that voters are in fact often motivated by duty and by intention to influence the outcome, contrary to the predictions of the paradox of nonvoting. I argue that the two most coherent models of voter motivation are the pivotal-altruistic and the contributory, and suggest observations that would distinguish between the two. I also apply the contributory account against the view that voters are necessarily in a state of rational
ignorance Finally, I propose that expected utility theory applies properly when we understand that the voter’s choice is not between one alternative or another, but rather between contributing to the advancement of one alternative over another.

The argument can be almost entirely summarized with a simple example. Suppose, reasonably, that one likes playing basketball for the sake of winning, winning by the largest margin, and losing by the smallest margin. The paradox, however, insists that only winning counts, and thus it would be irrational to play on the team if one expects to lose or to win by more than one point.¹ Past responses to the paradox say: Who cares about the score? It’s just one’s duty to play, or one expresses oneself in play, or one is paid to play. Or, it’s stupid to play.²

**Do Voters Value the Public Good?** A person would be rationally motivated to vote if she believed that she is contributing to achievement of a great public good or avoidance of a great public bad (compare Barry 1970; Caplan 2001; Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan, 2007; Parfit 1994, 74-75). Advancing the public good happens to advance the private interests of many citizens as well. A person also may be rationally motivated to vote in order to avoid a calamitous private bad, such as public policies she believes would put her at risk of misery or death.

The initial success of the *homo economicus* approach in explaining market interactions, and the attractive simplicity of its models, helped inspire the analogy of consumer choice to voter choice. As a result, an important portion of the professional audience believes that citizens vote their self-interest. Therefore, I must establish that the

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¹ The altruistic-pivotal model of Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan (2007) more plausibly allows some uncertainty about whether one would win.

² An economist would “be embarrassed to be seen at the voting booth,” say freakonomists Dubner and Levitt (2005).
weight of evidence is to the contrary. In older studies, aggregate data showed that voters turned against incumbents when the economy was bad, apparently supporting the pocketbook model of voting. Kinder and Kiewiet (1981) were able to look at individual rather than aggregate data. Analysis of individual data showed little relationship between an individual’s personal economic grievances, the pocketbook variable, and her assessment of the nation’s economic health, the prosocial variable. Moreover, it showed that personal economic grievances had little or nothing to do with preferences for congressional or presidential candidates, but that assessment of national conditions is correlated with political preferences. Sears and Funk (1990) carried out some of their own studies and summarized the literature in an influential review. They say that in their work self-interest variables account for on average four percent of variation in regressions, a minor explanatory contribution. See Citrin and Green (1990), and Lewin (1991) for similar summaries.

With respect to the prosocial voting identified by Kinder and Kiewiet, Funk and Garcia-Monet (1997) investigated through analysis of the American National Election Survey the objection that self-interest could operate indirectly through perceptions of national economic conditions to influence political preferences. They find quite a modest contribution from an indirect effect, and that the total direct and indirect effect of self-interest is low. In further work, Funk (2000) finds a dual influence of self-interest and societal interest in public opinion. Chong, Citrin, and Conley (2001) find that prosocial priming weakens but does not eliminate self-interest when personal stakes are clear, and that people with low stakes in an issue respond strongly to prosocial priming. See also Brodsky and Thompson (1993) and Shabman and Stephenson (1994) for studies of one-issue local elections where it is shown that many citizens voted for a public good contrary to their objective material self-interest. From five observations about American voting behavior Jankowski (2002) infers that the best explanation is some altruism on the part of voters. In an analysis of the 1995 National Election Survey Pilot Study, Jankowski
(2007) finds that agreement with a statement that these days people are not kind enough to others is significantly related to voter turnout. Fowler (2006) shows that people who care for others are more likely to vote.

This is not the place to survey all voting surveys, but the American Citizen Participation Study asked an instructive series of questions about citizens’ motivations to vote. Prosocial motivation dominates: half the respondents said at least one particular problem motivated them to vote, and for 9% of them myself, family, or others were affected by the problem, for 46% all the community was affected, and for 45% all the nation was affected. Most intend to influence the outcome: 97% say the chance to make the community or nation a better place to live is somewhat or very important, 91% say the chance to influence public policy is somewhat or very important, 65% say that furtherance of party goals is somewhat or very important, 22% say that getting help from an official on a family problem is somewhat or very important. Most are morally motivated to vote: 96% say that my duty as a citizen is somewhat or very important, 86% that to do my share is somewhat or very important. Side payments for voting are not very important: 71% say so about obtaining recognition from people I respect, 88% about not wanting to say no to someone who asked. Finally, few vote because they find it exciting to do so.

**Table 1. Self-Reported Reasons to Vote**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons People Give Us for Voting</th>
<th>% Not Very Important</th>
<th>% Somewhat Important</th>
<th>% Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Instrumental</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance to Make Community or Nation a Better Place to Live</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance to Influence Public Policy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Party Goals</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Help from Official on Family Problem</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moral</strong></td>
<td></td>
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A standard objection is that when respondents express prosocial motivations they are merely seeking approval from researchers. Miller (2001) and coworkers establish in a series of experiments that their American subjects are captive to a social norm of self-interest, fearful of disapproval for revealing prosocial sentiments. Given this powerful norm, it is as likely that respondents conceal prosocial motivations in order to seek approval from researchers. The tiebreaker is that a variety of research strategies carried out by a variety of scholars over a long period of time converge on the judgment that voters are primarily prosocial in orientation.

One must be careful to disentangle public interest from self-interest in the study of voting over public decisions. For the liberal democrat, the public good just is the life, liberty, and the legitimate interests of individual citizens. Often a claim that some purportedly public interest outweighs private interests is mistaken. If a public good is a social dilemma, then choosing the pareto-superior option on the condition that others do so as well is both a public-interested and a self-interested action. Wanting a justifiably more fair distribution of some good that would happen to benefit its advocate, say health security, could be both public-interested and self-interested. The aggrieved taxpayer voting for a tax limitation measure is voting to relieve all similarly situated of the tax burden.

Rawls (2005, 19) ascribes two moral powers to the person, a capacity for a conception of the good, to pursue one’s rational advantage, and a capacity for a sense of
justice, to act from a public conception of justice which characterizes the fair terms of social cooperation. Whatever the formulation, I do not see how we can understand and explain politics without reference to both interest and morality. Public choice theory aptly criticized the view of welfare economics that humans are egoistic as economic actors but, *without explanation*, benevolent as political actors. At the same time, economic thought accepts wide heterogeneity in tastes, but denies heterogeneity in moral dispositions. Indeed, it assumes that genuine moral motivation is absent in humans.

Brennan and Hamlin (2000) thread the needle: assume that humans are strongly interested, but that moral motivation varies between individuals. This is closer to life. It preserves motivational neutrality yet allows for behavioral variation across institutions. Different institutional settings, through incentives, not exhortation, encourage or discourage one capacity or the other. Camerer and Fehr (2006) provide some striking illustrations of how institutional incentives could motivate other-regarding actors to mimic self-regarding actors, as in market exchange, or self-regarding actors to mimic other-regarding actors, as in resolution of a social dilemma.

It is fair to conclude that generally, in their votes, citizens value the public interest at least as much as they do their own private interest, and probably more so. If market transaction is primarily pocketbook, secondarily it is prosocial, sometimes intended as in buying fair-trade coffee or boycotting Hummers, sometimes unintended as in the good consequences of the price system. If casting a vote is primarily prosocial, secondarily it is sometimes pocketbook, especially when public and private interest are believed to point in the same direction.

*Is A Vote Irrational If it is Redundant?* The claim that voting is irrational often confounds two logically independent claims: redundancy and imperceptibility. The first claim, assumes, usually tacitly, that the voter cares only about whether her candidate or proposal wins or loses, and not at all about losing by the smallest margin or winning by a large margin. Say that the election is by simple majority rule between two candidates.
The voter’s utility over the outcome is a step function: zero value for any vote tally less than the bare majority, some positive value for winning by a bare majority, but no additional value for winning by more than a bare majority. Call this the *winning value* of voting. See Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Voting: Only Value Winning](image)

The first claim is that voting is irrational unless one’s vote is pivotal to the outcome. The chance of being pivotal in any mass election is next to nothing, indeed, given normal circumstances and uncertainties one couldn’t expect to be pivotal even in elections with only a few dozen voters.

Suppose that all that matters is pushing a Volkswagen out of a ditch, there are 11 people around, and it takes a minimum of 6 to push it out. If 5 people push, none is pivotal, each contributes to the effort, and the effort is unsuccessful. If 6 people push, each is pivotal, each is contributory, and the effort is successful. If 7 people push, *none is pivotal*, each is contributory, but *the effort is successful*. The pivotalist insists: when 7 push, none has a causal effect on the outcome. What caused the outcome, then? This is a problem of overdetermined causation.
The practice and theory of tort law was vexed by this problem, and, although controversies remain, came up with a solution applicable to causation generally, including overdetermined voting outcomes. Customarily, according to Wright (1985, 1775) tort law uses the “but-for” test of actual causation: an act is the cause of an injury if and only if, but for the act, the injury would not have occurred. The act is a necessary condition of the injury. The but-for test works well in the vast majority of cases, but breaks down when causation is overdetermined by preemption or duplication.

Preemptive causation: Peter shoots and kills Mary just as she was about to drink a cup of tea fatally poisoned by Paul. According to the but-for test, Peter’s shot was not a cause of Mary’s death: if Peter had not shot Mary she would have died anyway. Duplicative causation: Smoky and Blaze independently start separate fires, each fire is sufficient on its own to destroy Suzanne’s house, the two fires converge and together burn down her house. According to the but-for test, neither Smoky nor Blaze caused the destruction of Suzanne’s house: if Smoky had not started a fire Suzanne’s house would have burned anyway. As applied to voting, if there is anything more than a bare majority for a win, then none of the individual voters cause the win. This can’t be right.

Hart and Honoré (1959), refined by Wright (1985), devised the Necessary Element of a Sufficient Set (NESS) test of causation, which subsumes the but-for test for simple causation, but also gives better answers for cases of overdetermined causation:

The essence of the concept of causation under this philosophic account is that a particular condition was a cause of (condition contributing to) a specific consequence if and only if it was a necessary element of a set of antecedent actual conditions that was sufficient for the occurrence of the consequence. (Note that the phrase "a set" permits a plurality of sufficient sets.) (Wright 1985, 1790).
Did Smoky cause the destruction of Suzanne’s house? Yes, because his action was a necessary element of a set of antecedent actual conditions that was sufficient for the occurrence of the consequence. The same goes for Blaze.3

If five units of pollution are sufficient to cause harm, and each of seven producers produces one unit, then none of the seven are responsible under the but-for test, but all are responsible under the NESS test, according to Wright (1792). Next, suppose a producer generates five units of pollution, and a second two units. Under the but-for test, the second producer bears no responsibility for the pollution. Under the NESS test, the second producer’s two units are a necessary element of a sufficient set of actual antecedent conditions that include three of the five first producer’s units. Responsibility for harm should be attributed 5/7 to the first producer and 2/7 to the second.

Goldman (2002) was the first to apply ideas about overdetermined causation to the problem of voting, and a correct understanding of it prevents the absurd conclusion that duplicative voters are not responsible for the outcome. I cannot here do justice to Tuck’s (2008) sustained and valuable development of such ideas with respect to collective action in general. On the particular case of voting, however, we differ. He considers voting a collective action of determinate threshold, having only what I have called its winning value. If voting were to have only winning value, then the redundancy objection would recur once we considered opportunity costs, or so it seems to me. If one expects that her contribution to a pivotal public good is likely redundant, and expects that there is likely a net benefit to an alternative effort that would advance some continuous public good (or is pivotal to some other pivotal public or private action) then she should

3 The analysis of overdetermined causation is taken to a higher level by Pearl (2000).
choose the nonredundant action. Uncertainty about the threshold of pivotality changes the decision calculus somewhat, but the same objection would hold.

If pivotality were the applicable consideration, then two further problems arise. First, why stop at the immediate election? One would want to pivotally elect a M.C. who would be pivotal in the House, pivotally elect a Senator who would be pivotal in the Senate, and pivotally elect a President in one’s state and again in the Electoral College, all of whom together would be pivotal in enacting policy (adapted from Jankowski 2007). Minuscule $p$ to the fourth power would require an impossibly colossal $B$ to motivate voting. Second, anyone certainly expecting to be in the minority would abstain from casting a futile vote; but many such persons do vote. Hence, pivotality and the associated question of futile or redundant action are likely not widely relevant to democratic voting.

**Is A Vote Irrational If its Benefit is “Imperceptible”?** I think it’s safe to say that many voters also care about how much their issue wins or loses by. Call this the mandate value of voting (originated by Stigler 1972). In a majority-rule election, it is possible that a minority voter would be happy with a larger minority, and a majority voter happy with a larger majority, each for outcome-related reasons. Many people want to advance causes that they believe would make their community and country better, and do so in nonpolitical civic action, in electoral action, and in nonelectoral advocacy, each instrumental rather than merely expressive in purpose. For example, adherents of a minority cause, such as abolitionism in 1835, would value an increase in support by public opinion from one percent to five percent as progress towards their ultimate goal. Fowler and Smirnov (2007) remind us that politicians and voters might care about electoral and policy results over a sequence of elections rather than in just one. If so, then winners may shift to more preferred policies after a large margin of victory, because of less resistance by the opposition and less fear of the next election. Also, a large margin provides new information about the location of the median voter, which affects the positions offered by parties in the next election. They propose a dynamic calculus of
voting, in which turnout is driven not by pivotality, but by what I have called the mandate value. If policy-motivated parties change platforms in response to mandate, then there exists a nonnegative motivation to vote for all possible beliefs about the closeness of the election (a benefit which can be outweighed by the cost of voting). Castanheira (2003, 830) also deduces that, when mandate matters even though pivotality does not, instrumental rationality is compatible with large turnouts. Franklin (2004, 42) as well recognizes that a voter’s instrumental purpose may extend beyond the present election.

If Howard Dean, Chair of the DNC, cares only that the Democrat get the maximum number of votes and assigns no further value to winning the race, then his utility would be a strictly increasing function from 0 to 100% proportion of the total votes for the Democrat.4 Someone who values both the proportion of the vote for her issue and that the issue wins would probably have an S-shaped utility function. See Figure 3. Finally, a centrist of some sort might want the Democrat to win, and might value a little more the Democrat winning up to 55%, but otherwise would increasingly disvalue a landslide for the Democrat, because the winner would institute extreme policies or would act in an unaccountable fashion, and would at some point change her vote to the Republican.5

4 The marginal value of voting to the pure pivotalist voter would be zero throughout the range except for a sharp spike at the pivot point. The marginal value of voting to the pure mandate voter would be positive and constant throughout the range.

5 Termed “mandate balancing” by Fowler and Smirnov (2007), who offer evidence for its existence.
If there is a mandate value to voting then an individual’s contribution to the outcome is no longer the probability $p$ of being decisive, but her share, call it $q$, in advancing the mandate, roughly around $1/n$ where $n$ is the number of citizens voting the same way. Individuals would vote if $qB > C$. Thus if $B$ were small, as it almost always would be if the typical voter valued only his private interest and not the public interest, then the citizen would still not be motivated vote. I amend, or clarify, earlier accounts of mandate by appeal to the evidence that citizens value the public interest: $q(B_{\text{self}} +$
\(aNB_{society} - C > 0\). Doing one’s share in advancing a great public good is more likely to exceed the costs of voting, and, I suggest, is sufficient to motivate many to vote for instrumental purposes. Also, citizens certainly expecting to be in the minority or in a redundant supermajority in any isolated election are still motivated to vote by the prospect of advancing their cause in further elections and other contributory action.

The second claim is that it’s irrational for one person to contribute towards advancing a larger cause, whether it’s playing in a basketball game or fighting World War Two, because the contribution is imperceptible. The outcome of an election would not be noticeably different in the absence of his vote, therefore, it is irrational for him to bother. The argument originates with Olson (1971, 64), who claims that his egoistic logic of collective action would necessarily apply as well in large groups of prosocial cooperators, those who “in the absence of social pressure act in a selfless way,” whenever their potential contribution to a collective action is imperceptible. He says that such a contribution would always be irrational, and that a prosocial cooperator would always “allocate his philanthropy in order to have a perceptible effect on someone.” Although Olson is clear about why he thinks egoists in a small-group would respond to social incentives such as acceptance and status, he is not clear about why those who would act selflessly in the absence of social pressure would only be interested in making perceptible contributions.

Also, he is not clear about the difference between futility and imperceptibility. Olson likens the imperceptible contributor to a man who tries to hold back a flood with a pail, “more of a crank than a saint” (64). If an individual were to expect that no others would contribute to flood prevention, then his lone contribution would be of no marginal value, and hence would be futile: the cresting of the river above flood stage would do the same damage regardless of his action. In the voting case, a lone vote is of no marginal value, because only one person voting is far from sufficient to assure democratic accountability (see below). It depends on the type of collective good. To be the only one
to contribute to a blood-drive would probably make a difference to at least one recipient. If there were a local practice known to have worked in the past of many individuals taking their pails to the threatening river, then a noncontributor would be more of a cheat than a rationalist. If a citizen believes that enough other citizens vote, then it is possible that the combined winning and mandate benefits of the vote to her would exceed her cost of voting.

The imperceptibility reasoning is both ruinous and fallacious. If global warming were a threat to life on earth, and each of us reasoned that her own contribution to an effort to meliorate the threat is imperceptible and because of that no longer advisable, then we would all be doomed. Parfit (1994, 75-82) argues that there are imperceptible harms and benefits, and that it is mistaken to ignore imperceptible effects, and I do not know of reasons to reject his arguments. To illustrate, I’ll adapt a simple example from Glover (1975). There is an unarmed village of a hundred people, each about to dig into his own lunch of a hundred beans. One hundred bandits descend on the village and each bandit steals a lunch from one villager. This is wrong. The villagers go hungry. Then a philosopher among the bandits arrives at a new principle: do no perceptible harm. On the next raid, each bandit takes one bean from each villager. One bandit’s harm to any one villager is imperceptible. But the villagers still go as hungry as when they were perceptibly harmed by each bandit. The point applies as well within the realm of individual choice. Suppose Fatima wants to become a champion gymnast. Her friends correctly tell her that any one day of practice only imperceptibly advances her towards that goal, but incorrectly tell her that for that reason she should skip every practice.

Returning to the infuriating Volkswagen pushed out of the ditch, now suppose that there are 11 of us to push the car down the road 20 miles to the nearest mechanic. The more of us who push (taking turns, so as to preserve strength), the faster we get to the mechanic. The contribution of each is pivotal to the goal of getting there the soonest. Any one pusher’s contribution is minuscule compared to the total effort, but her absence would
lengthen the time it takes. Also, if all 11 take turns pushing, then their actions reveal that for each the benefit of doing so exceeds the cost.

A frequent objection is that, nevertheless, imperceptibility means that the benefit is insufficiently vivid to motivate voting. The objection ultimately appeals to irrational considerations, not to rational ones. Understand that the imperceptibility objection is not that the actor believes that the benefit of the contribution is less than its cost. After all, 88% of respondents (in scattered elections from 1952-2002) in the American National Election Study disagree with the statement that, “So many other people vote in the national elections that it doesn’t matter much to me whether I vote or not.” The imperceptibility objection is an observer’s judgment that an actor such as one of those respondents should believe that the benefit of his contribution is nothing. The observer mistakenly believes that if a mildly beneficial contribution is a small part of a large effort, then that makes the contribution of zero benefit. Perhaps the fallacy becomes more plain by a shift in context. Mao Tse-Tung (2007) said in 1955 that,

The United States cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stack of atom bombs. Even if the US atom bombs were so powerful that, when dropped on China, they would make a hole right through the earth, or even blow it up, that would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole, though it might be an event for the solar system.

Need it be said that blowing up the earth would rightly concern we humans, regardless of how small the earth is compared to the whole universe? Moreover, voting in an election is more vivid than many other public goods obtained from many small contributions. There are campaigns and mobilizations to solicit one’s vote, and the election outcome is rapid and definitive as compared, say, to taking a shorter shower tomorrow in order to help reduce global warming over the next two centuries. Most voters value the public
good, most say they vote in order to influence the outcome, and most do vote, consistent with revealing that $qB > C$.

I have argued that voting, whether nonpivotal or imperceptible, does have causal force on the outcome. Next, I shall argue that a voter can advance the public good of both democracy and a decision on some particular issue, that it can be rational for an individual to advance a public good, and that many voters say they are motivated by duty and wanting to influence the outcome.

_A Vote Contributes Both to Advancing Democracy and to the Decision on a Particular Issue._ There is another consideration, originally mentioned by Downs (1957), that one may vote as well in order to support democracy itself, and I think it quite a plausible motivation. Suppose I can vote in an election where there are two candidates, and that Downsian convergence or some other mechanism renders the candidates so close in their positions that I don’t care which one wins. Still I might want to vote in order to advance, albeit “imperceptibly,” the dynamic public goods of democratic accountability and democratic stability. I may plausibly believe that if turnout is low officials will think the populace to be apathetic, and would do bad things they wouldn’t do if turnout were high. I don’t want to be bothered much by the details of public policy, but I do want to sustain a liberal democratic polity. I may plausibly believe that keeping up high turnout and high democratic accountability deters my fellow citizens and our officials from the temptations of autocracy. If voting is largely corrupt, or if too few are voting to establish accountability, or if I have the flu on election day, or if it’s certain that almost everyone is voting, perhaps I would not vote. However, when I do vote for one candidate even when indifferent between them, it need not be an ineffectual cheer for democracy, it could be that I am doing my part to advance democratic accountability and stability. All voters contribute to these ends, whether they intend to or not, and perhaps the normal voter intends both to support democracy and to support or oppose a particular issue.
Many models of voting, formal and informal, consider only the voter’s believed net benefit (to himself, or better, to some or all of society) in choosing between the Moose Party and the Elk Party. Sometimes there is good reason to believe that the Moose Party is vastly better than the Elk Party, but a huge differential is less likely in an established democracy. For centrists in a two-party system the difference between the choices, even in terms of benefit to all, is suspiciously thin to motivate voting. I think there is something to this worry. A first-order value of voting as support for democracy could be more important sometimes than the second-order value of favoring one issue over another. See Figure 4.

This voter ranks contributing to democracy at 2 units of some measure and contributing to autocracy at 0 units. She is indifferent between contributing to the Democrat or the Republican, and will flip a coin to decide which to vote for. Her vote is motivated entirely by the first-order value of contributing to the support of democracy, and not at all by the second-order value of contributing to the showing of one of the
candidates. Suppose instead that she values the Republican candidate at 65 (on a scale from 0 to 101) and the Democratic candidate at 55. Then an observer might mistakenly infer that this citizen votes only because of her net benefit of 10 in voting to advance the Republican candidate, and not detect her stronger benefit of 65 altogether in advancing both the candidate and democracy itself.

One line of research claims to support the expressive theory of voting, but is also consistent with an instrumental theory which includes the value of advancing democratic accountability. Political survey research sometimes asks respondents to rate candidates or alternatves on a feeling thermometer scale. Guttman, Hilger, and Shachmurove (1994) define consumption (intrinsic) voters as those who vote for absolute benefit (for example, Republican: 65), and investment voters (instrumental) as those who vote for relative benefit (Republican - Democrat = 65 - 55 = 10). Their consumption variable is significant, and their investment variable is not. However, their analysis neglects that the supposed consumption voter (for example, one who rates Republican highest) could instead be an investment voter (with respect to the choice between democracy and autocracy.) Toka (2009) performed a similar analysis on national survey samples in 35 countries collected between 1996 and 2001. In 22 out of 35 countries the “expressive” consumption variable was positive and significant, and in 15 out of 35 countries the “instrumental” investment variable was positive and significant. The same objection applies.

A question on the American National Election Study is: “If a person doesn't care how an election comes out then that person shouldn't vote in it.” Those who

6 One kind of abstainer contributes, subjectively or objectively, to autocracy. Another kind of abstainer is alienated, and intends to contribute to the support of, say, a utopian alternative.
disagree with that statement are often classified as duty voters, and their decision to vote is then attributed to nonconsequentialist motivations. However, it is possible that a person who disagrees with the statement could be motivated by the good consequence of advancing democratic accountability and stability, in other words, motivated to influence the outcome. In the American National Election Study from 1964-2004, in response to the question, “How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think, a good deal, some or not much?” 51% said a good deal, and 36% said some. Counting this as a duty proxy is also dubious because one could believe that everyone has duties both to care about the community and to vote, but that contemptible people who don’t bother to care shouldn’t bother to vote. The “doesn’t care” question is used as a proxy for duty motivation because about half of respondents agree and half disagree, and the variation is more convenient for statistical analysis. Two other questions that arguably proxy duty, discussed below, would classify nine out of ten respondents as duty voters.

Voting for the sake of advancing democratic accountability is probably a continuous public good, and thus every vote cast for this purpose would be pivotal. Its value is probably represented by an S-curve. In the world we live in, having too much democratic accountability is unlikely, although it is a logical possibility. There would be no democratic accountability if one percent of the citizens voted. There is some threshold at which minimal accountability is established, and it depends on the importance of the issue. For a national office, say for concreteness that a ten percent vote is necessary for the least amount of democratic accountability. Each additional vote is valuable, but towards the beginning each additional vote is worth more, and towards the end each additional vote is worth less.

Is it Irrational for an Individual to Advance the Public Good? If the voter values the public good, and the voter believes that she could have causal force on the outcome, she would still be unwilling to contribute, according to Olson’s (1971) egoistic
logic of collective action. An important portion of the professional audience accepts Olson’s logic. Therefore, I must go into detail about why his egoistic logic is inapplicable.\textsuperscript{7} Pellikaan and van der Veen (2002) are especially apt. They study voluntary citizen response to three environmental dilemmas in the Netherlands, such as bringing household toxic waste to the recycling center, or economizing on home energy usage (each a continuous public good, not a step good). Such actions involve potential contributor’s dilemmas, in which a common good would necessarily be defeated by individually rational actions. Their structure is such that it is more costly in time and resources for an agent to contribute than not; but such that most would be better off if most did contribute, most would be worse off if most did not contribute; and each individual has a belief about how many others would contribute or not. An additional premise is required to convert the potential contributor’s dilemma into an actual one: citizens must believe it is better to avoid the cost of contribution, regardless of the contributions of others.

A potential contributor’s dilemma is an actual one for firms constrained by economic competition, according to Olson’s original example. The firm’s actions are determined by a \textit{thick} theory of rationality: competition constrains each narrowly to maximize its own profit, and those which don’t are extinguished. Suppose that member firms in a group would all be better off if each would lower production so as to increase prices. Each firm, however, maximizing its own profit, would be better off not to go along, and thus the group good goes unrealized. Firms on the competitive market cannot accomplish collective action, save for external coercion for large groups such as those

\textsuperscript{7}On the conceptual and empirical limitations of Olson’s logic more generally see, for example, Green and Shapiro (1994, 79-92), Gintis et al. (2005, passim and 339-378), and multiple references cited in Jones (2007).
found under perfect competition, or selective incentives that would otherwise motivate membership in small groups such as those found under oligopoly. Firms motivated by profit are not individual humans, however, and even less so are they democratic voters. The utility of the firm is determined by monetary benefit less monetary cost, an objective measure, but the utility of the individual is subjectively determined. In the absence of an explicit thick theory determining the order of their preferences, all that applies to voters is a thin theory of rationality: that they consistently order their preferences. Olson’s is the observer’s perspective on collective action: objectively determined ranking of agents’ preferences is assumed as a consequence of an otherwise accepted theory. The actor’s perspective on collective action empirically investigates the subjective preferences of actual individuals in contributor’s dilemmas.

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8 Olson’s predictions about the collective action of firms may not be empirically vindicated, see Hansen et al. (2005).
Pellikaan and van der Veen find that almost none of their respondents report Olsonian preferences with respect to the potential dilemmas. Contrary to the thick theory, and consistent with thin theory, there is a wide heterogeneity of rankings over the alternatives. The two most common rankings, 80 percent of the total for the chemical waste problem, indicate unconditional cooperation in contributing to the public good. See Figure 5. Surprisingly, not that many (5 percent for chemical waste) are conditional cooperators, willing to contribute only if others do so. The authors speculate that the high proportion of unconditional cooperation is due to the low cost of contribution: one expects others to contribute because of low cost, and one doesn’t bother to check up on others for the same reason. Respondents expected 65% of others to cooperate in chemical waste, 69% in energy saving, but only six percent for reducing air travel.

I had my graduate seminar students keep a diary of pivotal, contributory, and expressive actions over a week’s time. Not surprisingly, they frequently found themselves engaged in contributory action. It is a pervasive behavior, I submit. An ordinary person contributes, nonpivotaly or imperceptibly, to many collective efforts: the Girl Scouts, the church, the school dance, the soccer team, the trips festival, the antiwar rally, the litter bag in the car, the potluck dinner, the Republican presidential campaign, and so on. Frey and Meier (2004) study low-cost, anonymous, and voluntary contributions of Swiss students to two social funds for distressed students. Cost per student per semester is about seven dollars, and in 85,000, or 69%, of cases, students contributed to one or both funds. Notice that contribution cannot be construed as chance

9 Dutch citizens show high and unconditional cooperation on the potential dilemmas of chemical waste and energy saving. Another purported dilemma, reducing air travel for the sake of the atmosphere, encountered a much less generous response, even rejection, suggesting that respondents are not reporting “Sunday preferences.”
of pivotally bringing about a step good. Contribution declines little with repetition, suggesting that students understand the incentives at stake. About three-fourths say they don’t talk about the social funds with their friends, and three-fourths say that friends don’t know about their contribution, suggesting few social constraints. The Dutch citizens and the Swiss students make small contributions to large and continuous public goods. Voting is also a small contribution to a large and continuous public good, more vivid in outcome than the Dutch and Swiss cases.

Individual humans are self-interested, but many of them are not exclusively self-interested. A theory predicts that it would be irrational for a firm on the competitive market to contribute to a public good, but there is nothing irrational about an individual choosing to do so. Perhaps someone would object that nature makes individuals pure egoists, but even if biological egoism were true it would not necessarily imply psychological egoism (Sober 1994). Further, those who take nature as their guide must confront the fact that, whatever the evolutionary explanation, voting behavior is observed in some social animals (Conradt and Roper 2005). The most striking example is Manyaro buffalo cows who routinely vote, or, if you like, exhibit voting behavior, over the choice of the next communal grazing site (Prins 1996). If voting behavior, a definite cost to the organism, did not deliver some larger gene-level benefit, then presumably it would be selected out. It seems that nature worries neither about the paradox of voting nor about the paradox of nonvoting.  

10 Swarming honeybees choose the site of a new hive by a process resembling the single transferable vote, thereby violating Arrow’s independence of irrelevant alternatives condition. Almost all human subjects violate the independence condition in recent experiments (Davies et al. 2006).
And what of humans? In the democracies, voter turnout is stable and high, ranging per decade since the end of World War Two from 61 to 68 percent of the voting age population (IDEA 2006). Mean turnout among 22 established democracies from 1945-1999 is 84% of registered voters (Franklin 2004, 11). Among the established democracies, Switzerland at 57 percent and the U.S. at 56 percent of registered voters, are outliers. For each, this is probably due to weak responsiveness of the regime to voters’ preferences, in Switzerland because of multiparty cartelization of parliament and the executive, and in the U.S. because of separation of powers, less competitive elections, and extraordinary special-interest influence on policy (Franklin 2004, 91-118). Each is also an outlier in the frequency and nonconcurrency of elections (Franklin points out that before cartelization the Swiss enjoyed both high turnout and frequent elections). Lower turnout in the U.S., even worse in off-year, state, and local elections, and use of the winner-take-all voting rule, may bias the views of American academics on the irrationality of voting. It is possible that the majority of the world’s democratic citizens is deluded in deciding to cast a vote, but the existence of billions of anomalies suggests it is more likely that the conceptual understanding of the paradox of nonvoting is somehow mistaken.

Voters are Motivated by Duty and by Influence on Outcome. Table 1, illustrating results from the American Citizen Participation Study, shows that almost all survey respondents are motivated to vote by duty and by desire to influence the outcome. Summarizing the Study’s in-depth interviews with a subset of activists, Schlozman, Verba and Brady (1995) report that 93% mention civic gratifications (e.g., “my duty as a citizen”) as a reason for voting, 61 percent policy gratification (“to influence government policy”), 20 percent social benefits (be with people, meet people, gain respect), and 3 percent material benefits. Duty is the strongest motive, wanting to influence public policy the second strongest. Olsonian selective incentives are quite weak. In Opp’s (2001) multivariate analysis of German survey respondents, an interaction variable of
present discontent with German democracy and capacity to influence politics is the strongest, and the second strongest is agreement with the statement that, “In a democracy, it is the duty of every citizen to participate regularly in elections.” Accepting the paradox of nonvoting, Opp argues that citizens vote because they falsely believe their votes to be pivotal. Anyone who endorses the survey statement that one personally “could exert influence on politics” by engaging political activities is so mistaken, says Opp. Blais (2000, 62-70) finds that a substantial minority of voters is prone to overestimate chance of pivotality, but a clear majority is roughly accurate about their extremely remote chances to individually decide an election. Finkel and Muller’s (1998) collective interest model of political participation, based on German panel data, finds less support for Olsonian selective incentive variables, and more support for variables involving “individual’s dissatisfaction with the provision of collective goods, beliefs that group actions can be successful, and beliefs in the importance of their own participation” (37). Again, people are motivated to influence the outcome, and all of these scholars comment on the conflict between their empirical findings and the theoretical expectations associated with the paradox of nonvoting. Finally, that mass voters engage in strategic voting (Cox 1997) is also consistent with the view that they wish to influence the outcome.

Duty is often the strongest reported motivation to vote, when measured, but it is the least conceptualized and measured of the major turnout variables. Campbell et al. (1954, 194-199) first reported the overwhelming responses of subjects suggestive of a moral motivation to vote: seven-eighths disagreed with “It isn’t so important to vote when you know your party doesn’t have a chance to win,” and with “So many other people vote in the national elections that it doesn’t matter much to me whether I vote or not.” Blais (2000, 92-114) is correct to say, I believe, that voter duty should be defined as the belief that it is wrong not to vote in a democracy. He surmises that about half of the citizens in democracies have a strong sense of duty about voting. In his studies of
university students, Quebec referendum voters, and British Columbia voters, 84 to 99 percent affirm statements such as, “It is the duty of every citizen to vote,” “It is important to vote even if my party or candidate has no chance of winning,” and “In order to preserve democracy, it is essential to vote.”

The questions used to proxy duty are all compatible with instrumental purpose. Someone who disagrees with the statement that, “So many other people vote in the national elections that it doesn’t matter much to me whether I vote or not,” is likely instrumentally motivated to advance the public good by her single “imperceptible” vote. Someone who says she should vote even if her party has no chance of winning is likely instrumentally motivated to advance her causes over a series of elections and other participatory actions. Someone who says that it is essential to vote in order to preserve democracy is likely instrumentally motivated to advance democratic accountability and stability. Appeal to duty is not an escape from the pivotalist trap.

In the university student study about 50% said they would feel guilty about not voting, but less than a fifth that family or friends would think badly of them for doing so. In the Quebec and British Columbia studies around 70% said they would feel guilty for not voting, a bit less than half said they would expect (mostly mild) disapproval from family and friends, and in a multivariate regression adding the disapproval variable is not significant and the force of the duty variable remains unchanged. The strength of guilt and weakness of shame indicates that voting is primarily an internally endorsed moral norm and not an externally enforced social norm (Elster 2007, 104-105, 353-371; Finger et al., 2006). High-duty voters are motivated by duty, and low-duty voters are motivated by perceived benefits, probability of influence (expected closeness of election), and costs of voting associated with the issue at stake. With one partial exception, however, Blais’ benefit measures are based on questions about how the outcome affects the subject “personally,” clearly tapping private benefit rather than public benefit.
An action can be a duty for its own sake, for the sake of its consequences, or for both. Investigators baffled by the paradox believe that an individual vote almost never has instrumental purpose. Starting with Riker and Ordeshook (1968) they notice that many citizens refer to duty as a motivation for voting. They assume that citizens consider voting a duty only for its own sake, a nonconsequentialist duty, thus providing a resolution of the paradox by assigning an intrinsic value to the act of voting. But they supply no argument or evidence for this assumption. If the duty to vote were nonconsequentialist, then within a country there would be no variation in turnout between more important national elections and less important supranational or subnational elections. Yet even in high turnout countries there is much lower turnout in the less important elections. Given that so many voters say they want to influence the outcome, someone who says that she has a duty to vote likely means that she has the consequentialist duty to advance the public good, that is, she is instrumentally motivated.

Even a rational egoist, for example, could accept a consequentialist duty to consistently order her own ends: Fatima is constantly tempted to skip gymnasium practice, as each session approaches her inclination is not to go, but her personal rule is to ignore that inclination and dutifully pursue the all-things-considered end more important to her of becoming a champion gymnast. Now and then it could be slightly better overall to skip practice, but Fatima knows that temptation may mislead such calculations, and only skips practice for something obviously more important like taking care of her mother when she is ill or seeing a good friend who is only in town on one day. Fowler and Kam (2006) find that citizens with more patience, who demonstrate a low discount of
future value, are more likely to vote.\textsuperscript{11} Those who are able to overcome temptations in pursuit of their private interest also may be able to overcome temptations in pursuit of the public interest.

Blais (and Thalheimer) carried out in-depth interviews with 108 regular voters in Montreal, 85\% of whom considered it an important personal duty to vote in all elections. In the interviews, outcome was mentioned somewhat less frequently than duty, and never before mention of duty. The strong duty voters vote a bit less in municipal elections, more than do other regular voters, but do not vote more than others do in school elections: “the moral obligation to vote is believed to apply to apply to all elections in which the stakes are deemed to be relatively important...stakes...defined in terms of broad issues not narrow personal interest” (110). Two kinds of motivations underlie the sense of duty: “voting is something one should do because one believes in democracy” and “voting is something one should do because one cares about the community” (111).

Discussion. “Habit,” better call it “inertia” to avoid begging the question as to the nature of the mechanism, is an important independent force in the voting decision: a youth who votes in her initial three elections is likely to vote again in future elections, and one who does not vote in her first three is unlikely to vote in future elections (Franklin 2004, passim, 204-205). This factor is consistent with many theories of voter motivation. Perhaps it involves learning how to vote. Someone who has doesn’t have a driver’s license by age 21 is unlikely to drive at a later age, and someone who has a driver’s license by age 21 is likely to drive at later ages, not “habitually” for no purpose,

\textsuperscript{11} Patience is not correlated with duty in their study, but they proxy duty by disagreement with the question, “If a person doesn’t care how an election comes out then that person shouldn’t vote in it.”
but rather when she has reason to do so. Perhaps one also learns how to master voting as a duty.

How does the contributory theory compare to other prominent theories of voter motivation: the expressive, the pivotal-egoistic, and the pivotal-altruistic? For the expressive theory, a choice can be decomposed into its instrumental element, the value to the chooser of the outcome that would be achieved by the choice, and its expressive element, the value to the chooser of expressing a desire for that choice. Since a vote is either nonpivotal or imperceptible, the instrumental value of voting is nil, and all that remains is the expressive value. A citizen votes only in order to express her preference, not in order to have any influence on the outcome. For the contributory theory it is possible that the voter values at zero the act of expressing her contribution. What she values is her effective contribution to the effort. If she’s devoted to a cause, she may value writing two letters to the editor on global warming policy somewhat more than she does writing one, and that makes sense, even though neither action is pivotal or perceptible. Her letters are secondarily an expression of preference, valued or not, but primarily are intended to help bring about a change. Further, the acknowledged (Brennan and Lomasky 1993, 121-123) Achilles heel of the expressive account is that it cannot account for strategic voting or its consequence of restricting the effective number of parties in certain electoral systems (each shown by Cox 1997).12

It has been plain since Downs’ (1957) origination of it that the pivotal-egoistic account fails. Its failure is the very reason we discuss the paradox of nonvoting. Measures of probability, benefit, and cost might be significant at the margin, but that is consistent also with the altruistic-pivotal, contributory, and other accounts. To argue that marginal effects in voter turnout studies vindicate the pivotal egoistic model of voter motivation is like arguing that a taller man is more likely to bump his head on the moon

(Schwartz 1987, cited in Green and Shapiro 1994). The altruistic-pivotal account says that the problem lies in its assumption of egotism, and the contributory account says that the problem lies in its assumptions of egotism and pivotality.

The altruistic-pivotal account, according to its authors (Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan 2007), is consistent with these observations: people make small contributions to national political campaigns; turnout is higher, not lower, in larger elections; turnout is higher in close elections; people vote strategically; surveys show that voters are prosocially motivated. The contributory account is consistent with the same observations. What observations might distinguish between the two? First, the contributory account predicts that citizens who are certain that their side will lose in the particular election may vote in order to advance their cause rather than to attain victory in that election, and the pivotal-altruistic account predicts that they would not. The following few hints don’t settle the empirical question, which requires far stronger evidence. In the American National Election Study, as measured in select elections from 1952 to 1980, 90% of respondents disagreed with the statement that, “It isn't so important to vote when you know your party doesn't have any chance to win.” It was widely expected that the Liberal Party would win the 2000 Canadian federal election, and it had won the two previous elections in 1997 and 1993. Respondents who had not voted for the Liberals in 1997 were 10 percent less likely to state an intention to vote, and six percent were more likely to state an intention to vote if they believed that the candidate of

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13 It is better to distinguish more important and less important elections rather than larger and smaller ones: more people vote in U.S. federal elections than in state elections, but on average slightly fewer vote in Canadian federal elections than in provincial elections, probably because the Canadian provinces have more important powers than the American states.
their preferred party would win their district seat (Anderson et al. 2005, 166-168). Further, a measurement across 15 democracies found that in most countries political loser status did not affect voter’s confidence in their ability to influence the political process (168-170). In addition, electoral losers exhibit a heightened potential for protest behavior (45-46), consistent with the next point. Second, the contributory account predicts that citizens who think it somewhat likely they will be in the minority will be more likely to vote than citizens who think it somewhat likely they will be in the majority. Those minority voters also would be more motivated to engage in nonelectoral advocacy than majority voters. The pivotal-altruistic account would predict that the proportions would be the same. What the two models share in common – that voting is an instrumental act that aims for the public good – is more important for many purposes than is their difference.

**Conclusion.** If the interpretation of expected utility theory standard to the paradox of nonvoting stands, it generalizes to all cases where the individual chooses between contributing to one dynamic collective action over another. There are great contests in the world in which we live. To be dramatic, in the 1930s and 40s, liberalism fought fascism, after the war liberalism struggled with communism, in the 1990s democracy contended with autocracy. If expected utility theory counsels only quietism in response to such challenges, it cannot be an adequate model of practical reason. If this interpretation were a true model, then Clint Eastwood couldn’t have made his movies about the Battle of Iwo Jima. Any of the volunteer soldiers would have stayed home because each of their contributions would have been either nonpivotal or imperceptible. The interpretation grossly offends common intuitions.
Have we been misled by the analogy of voting choice to consumer choice? The standard consumer transaction is the pivotal choice of one alternative over another. A vote is not a choice of one alternative over another, however. It is a contribution to a decision to be made by some collective of individuals over one alternative or another (usually by prior arrangement binding on every individual that the collective decision becomes the collective choice). The paradox model assumes that contribution to a collective decision is identical to an individual choice, and then discovers that almost always it is not.

If a person votes (imperceptibly), say, in order to advance democracy, then what is the foregone alternative? It is abstention from voting, which by omission contributes (imperceptibly) to the advancement of autocracy. The person by her vote does not choose democracy over autocracy, rather she chooses to contribute to the advancement of one over another. If a person contributes to the tally of the Republican candidate, the foregone alternative is contribution to the Democratic candidate (assuming two candidates). There’s nothing irrational about this. I set aside 25 dollars for charity. I

14 Consumer choice need not be exclusively pivotal. Suppose I desire some tastefully processed caffeine, made out of beans grown and delivered under so-called fair trade conditions. My market choice pivotally brings about coffee down my gullet and a buzzing mind, but it is neither pivotal nor perceptible in bringing about fair trade and social justice.

15 “Collective decision: A process that identifies a pattern of future coordinated actions as the intended actions of the members of a collectivity, and creates corresponding intentions in enough members of the collectivity that in the ordinary course of events the pattern is realized” (Tideman 2006, 6).
could contribute it to the Red Cross or to UNICEF, say I choose UNICEF. My contribution is not pivotal to UNICEF’s survival. My contribution of 25 dollars is imperceptible compared to the hundreds of millions given by others. But it’s 25 dollars bigger than nothing! Expected utility theory applies properly when we understand that the choice is not between one alternative or another, but rather between contributing to the advancement of one alternative over another.
References


– END –