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Difficulties with Economic Models of Voter Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The probability that an individual's voting in a Presidential election will determine the outcome being negligible, it is argued that participation is irrational if predicated on principles that are either egocentric or act-prospective. Voter participation, if rational, must rely on some overarching principle that is (a) Sociotropic, (b) Axionomic, (c) Collective-distributive, and (d) Neutrofactual. A distinctively ethical component must be involved, such that all purely "economic," "cost-benefit" models postulating selfish voter rationality are incoherent. The notion of "helping" to elect one's candidate is criticized and rejected unless formulated in a special way. An important pragmatic consequence of the analysis is that the idea (relied on by the two major parties) of "wasting one's vote" on a third party candidate is shown to be invalid or of more limited application than generally assumed. If a sizeable minority (e.g., college students) were educated to reject that argument, politics might be profoundly affected.

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Difficulties with Economic Models of Voter Behavior*

It is generally agreed among political theorists that the phenomena of collective action present paradoxes concerning rational choice, some of which have been given rigorous mathematical formulation. It is much less widely and clearly recognized that participation of an individual voter in a large scale exercise of mass electoral representative democracy, such as an American's voting in a Presidential election, cannot be made "rational" upon wholly egocentric act-prospective principles. This paper, which adumbrates a fuller presentation that I am unable to complete presently, calls attention to one aspect of these two points about voting behavior which has not received nearly the attention it deserves, and in some writings on the political process is not even mentioned. Thesis: If a citizen's bothering to participate in a Presidential election is to be considered "rational" (in some suitably broad sense) we must invoke some sort of over-arching ethical principle; and the character of this over-arching ethical principle, which I shall not attempt to specify precisely, will be such as to justify casting one's vote for a minor third party despite one's empirical expectation that the third party candidate has a negligible chance of winning.

I am of course aware that we can formulate "economic theories of democracy" which do not postulate egocentricity¹. However, despite general statements that any utility will do for their purposes, the text of these works presents us uniformly with examples where the content of the utilities (and the author's language) is in terms of the voter's personal (or familial) gains or

*A more dramatic and informal presentation of this paper's argument in the form of a dialogue between a Standard Old Party ("S.O.P.") voter and a supporter of the Flat Earth Vegetarians ("F.E.V.") may be found in my [article] "The selfish voter paradox and the thrown-away vote argument," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 71, No. 1, March 1977.

I wish to thank Dean Carl A. Auerbach (Law), Professor David Cooperman (Sociology) and Professor Rolf Sartorius (Philosophy) for their critical comments.

¹James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1971). The present paper was drafted over three years ago, and I am aware of the spate of articles meanwhile (1972-1976) devoted to aspects of the "voter calculus" problem. I have not discussed or even cited these recent contributions because, despite their merits and general relevance, they do not bear appreciably on the distinctively ethical core of my argument. If I am right that no egocentric act-prospective rationale for voter participation will do, then elaborations or amendments of Buchanan and Tullock or Downs will not fix things up. Nor will further manipulations of the formalism. Thus, to take one example, FereJohn and Fiorina's paper on "maximin regret" (*APSR* 1974, 68, 525-536) is an interesting and ingenious variation on the received model; but I think the reader will agree that it leaves my philosophical criticism quite untouched.

losses, mostly of a property type. Downs², on the other hand, explicitly postulates voter egocentricity, writing, “We assume that every individual, though rational, is also selfish” (p. 27), reiterated in varying language elsewhere, and almost all of his book’s development is thus premised. Note, however, some brief and mysterious qualifications on this assumption at pages 37, 46, 261-2. In any event, it is pretty clear upon reflection that formal models of electoral behavior based closely upon economic modes of thought will invariably be defective as idealizations of the empirical situation. The infinitesimal impact a buyer or seller has upon the supply and price of hamburger is psychologically irrelevant because the individual economic agent does not buy the hamburger in order to exert this infinitesimal economic impact, but because he wants the hamburger more than he wants something else that he could buy with his 50¢ instead. Economic participation does not presuppose non-egocentric non-act prospective ethics. Political participation does.

I begin with an empirical premise that I should be surprised to find disputed, to wit, that whether I, Individual Citizen Paul E. Meehl, do or do not bother to cast my vote in a Presidential election is, to use the old language, “morally certain” not to determine [read: determine] the electoral outcome. Precise estimates of this tiny probability are impossible, but by examining the incidence of “critical” or “swing states” in national elections, and analyzing in several ways the distribution of votes within my state (Minnesota) about a theoretical cutting point of precise equality in popular vote between the two major parties, one can set a safe upper bound on the probability of my individual ballot determining who gets to be President at not greater than 10^{-6} . (My rough calculations would suggest perhaps $p = 10^{-8}$ would be closer to the truth, but I shall leave detailed presentation of such numerical estimates for a subsequent publication. Riker and Ordeshook³ estimate this minuscule probability as around 10^{-8}). It is also worth mentioning here that on some ways of computing this probability, it does not differ much from the probability of my death in an automobile accident driving the average distance a Minneapolis driver does to the polling place and back, so that on purely egocentric principles—even if I were sure that a win by the “wrong candidate” would be absolutely certain to bring about my death in the next four years in a thermonuclear holocaust—it would still not be clearly rational for me to bother voting. Assuming the reader will accept $p = 10^{-5}$ as a plausible upper bound on the probability of my

²Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

vote determining the outcome, and assuming further that he will accept the complement of this probability, $q = (1 - 10^{-5}) = .99999$ as a “moral certainty” (Bernoulli’s value was .9999)⁴, I shall simplify language hereafter by speaking of my vote as “making no difference.” Buffon, relying on a curious intuitive argument about the actuarial frequency of a 54-year old man’s dying on the next day, chose a p -value one order of magnitude larger than this ($p \leq 10^{-4}$) as being negligible or pragmatically zero⁵ (thus, the same as Bernoulli’s value).

It is not to my advantage to bother voting. Given the premise that I am completely egocentric in my thinking and acting about matters political, it would be most rational of me to stay home and read the funny papers. The opportunity cost of voting alone would, I suggest, suffice without considering any other probabilities and disutilities (such as a fatal car accident on the way to the polls) to keep me at home watching the TV, reading a novel, making love, playing chess, writing a paper on political theory, or whatever.

If, assuming rationality, and conceding that I do not maximize my expected utilities or minimize my maximum risks (or whatever decision rule one may rationally adopt in the circumstances) by the simple expedient of staying home and reading the funnies (or watching the election returns!), how can the model postulated for Meehl’s electoral mind be made coherent? It cannot be, without modifying the postulates that he is completely egocentric and act-prospective in matters political. But if we must introduce some non-egocentric non-act-prospective ethical features into his mentation to get him to vote at all, then we lose the usual postulate that the content of his voting, once he gets into the polling booth, will nevertheless be completely selfish and a rational means to this selfish end. This is the paradox.

The commonest effort at extrication which I have met in conversation with educated persons is to say “Well, but I am helping my candidate win by casting my single ballot,” or words to that effect. That this reaction is not confined to laymen in moral or political theory is attested by the fact that so sophisticated a theoretician as Downs employs that very “helping” locution⁶. But this quick and easy resolution will not do without some unpacking. “Helping” can be translated in different ways. On one of these translations, it is simply false empirically that I am “helping”

³William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, “A theory of the calculus of voting,” *The American Political Science Review*, 62 (1968), 25-42 at p. 25.

⁴Ian Hacking, “Jacques Bernoulli’s *Art of Conjecturing*,” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 22 (1971), 209-229 at p. 219.

⁵D. A. Gillies, *An Objective Theory of Probability* (London: Methuen, 1973) at p. 165.

elect my candidate. On another translation, it is in a certain sense true that I am “helping” elect my candidate, but the sense required for it to be true turns out to be a sense which makes the “helping” rationally pointless on egocentric premises. Consider the difference between my voting in a Presidential election and my pulling as hard as I can in a tug of war. Suppose that in a tug of war the two teams of, say, 6 men each are very evenly matched in terms of the state of nature known to Omniscient Jones but not known to us. Then it may be literally correct to assert the counterfactual, “Had I not pulled, and nevertheless remained on the team, the other team would have won the tug of war.” I set aside the difficult problem of analyzing counterfactuals, presupposing (what I believe all philosophers admit) that some account of them has to be provided in order to permit statements we cannot avoid making in the language of pure science, technology, political action, law courts, and common life. In the tug of war situation, if we wish to avoid any reference to the real state of nature (unknown to us), we can still give a reconstruction of “helping” one’s team, although it gets pretty complicated to unpack rigorously. It seems, roughly, to amount to a statement about probabilities and ignorance rather like the following: “I do not know, and I cannot find out for sure, whether or not the other team would have won if only 5 of the men on my team had been pulling, due to my defection. I do, however, know generally that in such contests, when they are carefully arranged to be pretty evenly matched (as this one was), it usually remains in doubt for quite a while which side is going to win, one getting the ascendancy and then the other; and that rather small differences in weight, strength, will, and teammanship are generally agreed to make the outcome difference. These inter-team systematic differences—the ‘winning edge’ differences—are, in general, considerably smaller in magnitude than the difference produced by 1/6 of the team failing to do any work at all. Therefore, repeating that I cannot be certain about the state of nature and hence cannot assert a certain counterfactual, nevertheless it is possible, non-negligibly probable, and in fact nearly certain that had I not actively participated in the pulling, my team would have lost.”

Now it is quite clear this meaning of the phrase “helping my side” does not apply literally to the Presidential election case. As we saw above in considering the voting statistics, it is quasi-certainly false for me to say, “Having cast my vote for Senator Claghorn for President, I assert that had I not cast my vote, Senator Claghorn would have lost; but since I have cast it in his favor, he will win.” The state of nature makes that statement, or any statement of approximately

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 39.

equivalent content, quasi-certainly false, whether expressed as an ontological counterfactual or as an epistemic remark about the state of my information at the moment of voting. I think it obvious upon reflection that my individual participation in a Presidential election has as its proper analogy not my helping pull the rope as 1/6 of a 6 man tug of war team, but rather my buying a hamburger among the ten million purchased today in this country, or my being an individual gas molecule “helping” to move the piston in a cylinder. If we were to anthropomorphize a single gas molecule that prefers the piston to move rather than to stand still, in what sense could a rational egocentric hydrogen molecule describe its miniscule influence as “helping” the other molecules to displace the piston? To infer from the fact that the net force exerted on the piston is “attributable to all of the single molecular impacts,” that a rational egocentric single hydrogen molecule would be well advised to “do its bit,” would be to commit the fallacy we learned in undergraduate logic to label division, because the relationship of “all the molecules have an influence collectively” to the effect of what one molecule does is, quite obviously, not such as to permit a syllogism based upon dictum de omne et nullo. What is correctly said about “what all the molecules do to the piston’s motion” is said (to use the logician’s jargon) collectively and not distributively. But only a distributive usage would rationally justify an egocentric act-prospective molecule in bothering to “help push the piston.”

In a sense, the whole idea of my individual vote “helping” can be made to look pretty silly by reflecting on the fact that vote counts always contain some irreducible minimum of error and that my vote is a small fraction of the expectable error count in my state. I do not wish to rely much upon this point, however, because it might be replied that if we assume all the other factors to be determined, as in Sir R. A. Fisher’s famous example of the tea tasting experiment, including all of the factors that are presently determined to produce the unknown distribution of errors in the election returns, those errors may (perhaps) be rationally treated as we would treat the set of actual valid votes cast by other participants. On this view, my decisional situation as a possible influencer remains the same whether certain tallies are due to counting error or actually due to other voters’ decisions as reflected in the counts.

The obvious way to resolve the paradox is to abandon an act-prospective means–end basis of political conduct in favor of a rule-conforming basis; but this will not suffice unless the rule to which one feels obliged to conform is non-egocentric. So far as I can discern, there is no substantial difference between what might be called “egocentric rule-utilitarianism” and “selfish

prudence”; and if there is any difference I cannot see that it has a bearing on the rationality of voting. An egocentric rule-utilitarian would be one who reasons that since it is not possible to anticipate with certainty the egocentric payoff from each individual contemplated action a, one is well advised to follow a “policy,” in all situations classifiable on some basis as Type S, of performing actions characterizable in some manner as belonging to action-class A, the evidence being persuasive that “in the long run” actions of the A-class in situations of the S-class will maximize one’s egocentric expectancy, minimize maximum egocentric loss, or whatever. But applying this egocentric rule-utilitarian principle, which I will henceforth simply call “prudence” (the modifier ‘egocentric’ being understood) presents a serious difficulty, given the further postulate of rationality. The difficulty does not hinge upon the rationality being “perfect.” I do not suggest that egocentricity with rationality entails act-utilitarian decision making. There is no reason why a person might not impose upon his conduct a “maxim” devoid of altruism, since such maxims can be rationally defended in many life areas on empirical grounds such as the incompleteness of our information and the fallibility of our judgment. “For example, it is always a matter of duty that a dealer should not overcharge an inexperienced purchaser, and wherever there is much commerce a prudent tradesman does not overcharge, but keeps a fixed price for everyone, so that a child buys of him as well as any other. Men are thus honestly served; but this is not enough to make us believe that the tradesman has so acted from duty and from principles of honesty: his own advantage required it....”⁷.

There is a well known principle that whenever we possess information showing that a proper subset of cases can be accurately identified by their possession of certain properties, for which the empirical probability of some outcome differs markedly from that of the entire set of cases, it is prudent to make our decisions on the basis of the subset probability number. Thus if one began by considering a very broad reference class defined, roughly, by “this is a situation in which I have an opportunity to cast a vote,” ranging from a situation where I vote as one member of a 5-man faculty committee on some matter affecting my vital interests, to the case considered in this paper when I have an opportunity to vote as a citizen for the Republican slate of Minnesota presidential electors, it would obviously be irrational of me to ignore the patent fact that the probability of my determining the outcome in voting-occasions of the first sort is sizable,

⁷Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Transl. T. K. Abbott) *The Harvard Classics* ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1910) Vol. 32, p. 327.

whereas the probability of my determining the outcome in the second subset of voting opportunities is empirically negligible. So in Kant’s example of the prudent storekeeper, despite his overall prudent maxim “Make honest change, even for children, since this is the best business policy,” it might be rational to amend this by a special maxim covering an anticipated subset of cases, such as “For small purchases of articles in which retail prices are generally known to vary considerably, and given that this is Mississippi, then when the purchaser appears clearly to be a timid and stupid black child under age 7 who has emerged from an automobile with a Georgia license plate, overcharge him a few cents.” Similarly, I may operate as a businessman on the prudent maxim “Insure valuable property against catastrophic loss by fire.” But if I have concluded a contract for sale of the property with title to pass a week hence, and the grace period for my next premium payment expires in 5 days, it would probably be rational for me not to pay it. Note that this decision does not require the act-utilitarian reasoning that I am on this particular occasion able to foresee with certainty what will happen during the two days between the expiration of the policy and the passage of title. My overall prudent maxim concerning fire-protection could quite appropriately have been qualified throughout my business career by some such modification as “...except when the time-period at risk is extremely small (e.g., 2 days).” While Reichenbach’s rule⁸ to choose the narrowest reference class for which we possess stable relative frequencies has, in that unqualified form of the statement, come in for some technical criticism⁹ it is not, I believe, disputed that when there does exist a subclass that is clearly identifiable and for which the sample size is clearly large enough to determine a highly stable probability (or, as in the Mississippi storekeeper instance, a highly safe upper bound on its value) it may be rational to act “differently” when confronted with a case clearly belonging to that subclass. I conclude that a prudent maxim, “Cast your vote in situations where the outcome of the group voting behavior affects your interest” would not, given complete eccentricity, make it rational to go to the polls in a Presidential election.

My psychologist colleague Dr. David T. Lykken (personal communication) urges upon me, from his introspections as a voter, that this whole analysis is fruitless because people just do get a certain satisfaction out of casting their vote whether or not it is rational of them to do so. “It gives me a good feeling to vote against that scoundrel Nixon, and that’s all I need to get me to

⁸Hans Reichenbach, *Experience and Prediction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938) at pp. 316-317.

the polls.” I have such experiences myself as a voter, but I must insist that insofar as I permit myself the indulgence of such a feeling my behavior fails to satisfy the rational egocentric voter model. Suppose that I am really infuriated with Senator Claghorn. Perhaps I experience a sense of “damaging him” or “throwing him out” when I vote for his opponent. Leaving aside whether being angry with somebody is in itself inherently irrational, as would be argued by Spinoza or our contemporary social critic Dr. Albert Ellis, is it rational for me to take pleasure in hurting or helping somebody when what befalls this individual as a result of my individual action a on this occasion does not, in fact, determine the outcome? Suppose that Senator Claghorn fails to become President of the United States by a close vote in which Minnesota’s Electoral College contribution would have made the difference had the Minnesota popular vote gone the other way. We are assuming that Meehl’s individual tally does not “make it” go the other way. In the newspapers, candidate Claghorn and his supporters read that his opponent’s plurality in Minnesota was 176,324. Had I stayed home to read the funnies instead of voting, this plurality would have read 176,323. Does anybody believe that the unit change in this last digit has the tiniest painful impact on Claghorn’s hedonic state, or upon the vigor or weakness, wisdom or folly, with which the winner pursues his policies as President? The plain fact is that any such “good feeling” that Lykken or Meehl experience in voting against Claghorn—absent a rationally based moral imperative concerning the duties of citizenship—is about as senseless as throwing darts at a photograph of Hitler, or Kierkegaard’s father shaking his fist at heaven. I simply don’t hurt Claghorn or help my candidate, by my vote, except in the “helping” sense which we liquidated above as being a fallacy of division. For all I know, many persons in fact respond as do Lykken and Meehl in this respect. But to the extent that they do, they fail—grossly, not slightly—to satisfy the familiar formal stipulations of a rational egocentric model. I think there is no escape from it: When you bother going to the polls to vote in a Presidential election, you may be egocentric-and-irrational, or you may be sociotropic-and-rational; but both egocentric and rational you cannot possibly be.

It may be objected that a sociotropic rule (or rule-derivation), while sufficient to make the individual’s voting rational, is not necessary; that is, a “weaker” condition would perhaps be adequate. In particular, one advancing this criticism would have in mind that certain minimum duties may be felt as binding and the rule prescribing them obeyed by an ethically perceptive and

⁹Hacking, p. 40.

consistent individual, despite a total absence of positive benevolent impulses toward the parties affected by his rule obedience. The extreme case, of course, is Kant's view that an act partakes of moral value only to the extent that I do it from a recognition that it is my duty, and not because I am moved by spontaneous impulses to give people pleasure or out of parental or conjugal love and the like. Nothing hinges upon the usage of words, and I have no objection to the critic's listing, if he prefers, a third condition referring to obligations with some other terminology than mine. I choose the word 'sociotropic' with this in mind, intending to distinguish it from the stronger 'altruism,' (which I take to involve putting somebody else's desires or interests ahead of one's own) or even the somewhat weaker 'benevolence' (which I take to mean willing somebody else's good although not necessarily putting his good ahead of one's own, *ceteris paribus*), and will expand my definition as follows: A rule has a sociotropic content (or a sociotropic derivation) if it takes into account other persons' subjective desires, objective interests, or entitlements. I do not want to give any one of these three preference over the others or stipulate any decision rule concerning their dominance relations, which I believe to be irrelevant in this context, although of great intrinsic interest. And I want to include entitlements to cover those moral occasions in which I may not be serving your subjective desires (e.g., you have forgotten that I owe you \$10.00 or you are in a diabetic coma) nor serving your objective interests against your desires (e.g., as in *parens patriae* contexts such as civil commitment of the mentally ill or consumer protection statutes) but I nevertheless recognize that you are entitled to something such as the payment of a debt and, at least *prima facie*, I am obliged to repay it—although there might sometimes be countervailing considerations arising from your desires or interests or both. A sociotropic rule content or rule derivation gives some weight to the desires, interests and entitlements of other persons than the individual whose obligations under the rule are being considered. But if someone should complain that entitlements are sufficiently different from desires and interests so that it is confusing to cover all three with the same word, I have no objection to naming entitlements separately; since what I propose to argue can be easily re-argued, *mutatis mutandis*, under two such other-oriented rubrics rather than one.

Given the limitations of our meta-ethical approach, imposed by the intent to avoid a choice among the several possible kinds of ethico-political principles or rules that might be adequate to provide a rational defense for voting, perhaps the closest we can come to tightening up the line

of argument into even quasi-deductive shape is by way of negation, I suggest we can show that adopting the contradictories of any of a series of meta-properties of ethico-political justifications would make voting irrational for an individual. It is presumably too much to expect that one can make affirmatively a meta-ethical argument of the strong form “The only postulate from which it would be possible to derive....” There is no good reason to suppose that any such generic argument about the exhaustive possibilities of postulates sufficient for the generation of a particular theorem would be formulable in ethical and political argument, any more than this could be done for scientific discourse, where we take it for granted that in principle (although not in anybody’s empirical scientific practice) an infinite number of “theories” can “explain” any finite set of observational facts. This is not the place, even if I had the competence, to enter into a meta-ethical discussion about the generic constraints upon an “adequate” axiological structure. I hope the reader will find the following line of argument by way of negation persuasive if not rigorously compelling. I confess that I myself find the reasoning inexorable, but I do not wish to claim that.

Given that a rule or principle (or a derivation of a rule or principle) that would suffice rationally to get me to the polling booth in a presidential election must be axiomatic and sociotropic, what further can be said? It seems reasonably clear that two additional constraints can be imposed upon an ethical-to-political derivation having voting behavior as its obligatory outcome, to wit, the rule or rule-derivation must be collective and (allowably) counterfactual. The reason that such a rule or rule-derivation must be collective is that the aimed-for sociotropic outcomes—whether they be economic goods, education, liberties, legal protection, health, or anything else concerning the desires, interests and entitlements of other members of my social group—are achieved in the national political election process as a consequence of collective (“statistical”) action and do not depend upon the truth of statements about “everybody” or “each individual political participant.” In a way this is a further specification of the axiomatic requirement in the political area, but it does no harm to state it explicitly for present purposes as a separate requirement on the rule or rule-derivation. That is, any means–end statement of the form, “Everybody who believes as I do....” or “All registered voters must....” or “Each person with an opinion about matters political must....” as a condition for a certain electoral result and the ensuing sociotropic political consequences (or probability increments thereof) is literally false. So any such means-to-ends principle or rule-derivation must first be stated not

distributively but collectively, in terms of a statistical requirement that “A sufficiently large number of persons must . . .,” recognizing that what is “sufficiently large” is not something one can determine with exactitude. In arguing to the obligation of an individual to cast his vote, we cannot have recourse to any means–end (cause–effect) generalization which says that everybody must or each individual must, or even the weaker statement that all persons holding such and such views must, if the purposed satisfaction (or tendency to satisfaction) of other persons’ desires, interests, or entitlements are to be achieved—all such distributive statements being simply false empirically. What is required is a statement about what happens, or has an appreciably greater probability of happening, to many other persons’ desires, interest and entitlements if something collective is done electorally, that is, if some unspecifically sufficient number of persons participate and, further, participate by voting in such and such a direction. Next, we presumably have to do something analogous to what statisticians and logicians do in applying the statistics of a collective to an individual case by a usage of language such as what Reichenbach called a “posit”; i.e., we say that collectively voters must behave in such and such a way in sufficient numbers, and then we “posit” the appropriateness of individual voter Jones bothering to vote and voting in such and such a way when he gets there. This is what I mean by saying that the rule or rule-derivation has to be collective.

But even that does not quite suffice to characterize what is required, because if I posit obligations on the basis of the statement that is axiomatic–sociotropic–collective, it is still not possible for me to bring it about that the collective satisfies the conditions by my individually doing so. That is, not only is it literally incorrect to say that my individual voting is a means to the end of electing Senator Claghorn and defeating Governor Fisbee for President; it would also be literally incorrect to say that the collective result, that is, a sufficient number of persons bothering to vote (and doing so in such and such a direction) so as to bring about the purposed outcome (with the resulting satisfaction, or increased probability of satisfaction, of other persons’ desires, interests or entitlements) can be brought about by my bothering to vote individually. I do not determine the election by my vote, but also I do not determine the collective result of the election, nor do I appreciably raise the probability of such and such a collective determination. Putting it negatively, no statement about my voting in relationship to the axiomatic sociotropic collective principle can be truly stated conditionally, unless the condition is made counterfactual, or at least admissibly counterfactual. We cannot say: “I should

vote, because if I do not vote then not enough people will vote so as to bring about....” Unfortunately there is no good terminology for a conditional which is possibly contrary-to-fact but need not be, and I shall here introduce reluctantly one further neologism, namely, ‘neutrofactual,’ meaning a conditional which may or may not be contrary to fact but whose truth does not depend upon whether the antecedent is realized. And I argue that in order to get from some empirical claim about the consequences of some collective voting behavior to a principle or rule that will guide the individual, the argument must be neutrofactual in character, that is, it must be possibly contrary to fact although not necessarily so. So we argue that I ought to vote because if enough people collectively voted (which they may or may not do, and which I cannot determine them to do, or even appreciably increase the probability of their doing collectively in sufficient numbers by my participating) and if in that sufficiently large number who do vote the way I am contemplating voting against Senator Claghorn and in favor of Governor Fisbee for president (which I cannot determine them to do or appreciably influence..., etc.) then such and such consequences would, so far as I can read the evidence and arguments, be made more probable as to the degree of satisfaction of certain others’ desires, interests and entitlements.

With this I conclude the argument. I think to have shown, or at least made highly plausible, that a meta-ethical consideration of the kind of ethical justification for political participation that would be sufficient to get a rational individual into the polling booth in a presidential election cannot be act prospective because the probability of his participation determining the outcome is essentially zero; that it cannot be egocentric because an axiomatic egocentric principle (that is, a maxim of prudence) would lead him to decide to stay home during his entire life span because the means–end probabilities are still negligible when added together; that the rule or rule-derivation cannot be distributive or universal in form because where political participation is concerned the necessary and sufficient conditions for a certain electoral result are collective rather than distributive; and that it cannot be conditional except in a form that permits it to be contrary to fact. The net result of these meta-ethical arguments is, therefore, that the ethical derivation of an obligation to vote or of it being at least better to vote than to abstain in some suitably broad class of electoral circumstances (these conditions we need not discuss here) would be a rule or rule-derivation that is axiomatic, sociotropic, collective, and neutrofactual in form and content.

But if the source of my obligation to bother voting is thus axiomatic, sociotropic, collective, and neutrofactual in form and content, then it would seem to follow rather directly that I am, if not obliged, at least entitled rationally to cast my vote for the candidate and party of my choice irrespective of what subjective or objective probability is attachable to their electoral success. That is, the only persuasive reason for my bothering to vote at all, since my individual ballot has negligible impact, is some kind of reasoning that says, putting the above four conditions loosely, “I ought to vote because if enough people were to vote then such and such would be the result,” and it would seem rather clear that this reasoning entitles me to say “And, given that I ought to vote on the above reasoning, I ought to vote for the Flat Earth Vegetarian candidate, since if a sufficient number of people were to vote for the Flat Earth Vegetarian candidate, he would win.” Just as it is no answer to the first generic statement of my obligation to vote to point out that my voting doesn’t determine how many other people will do so or for whom they will vote, so it would seem to be no answer to my proposal to vote for the Flat Earth Vegetarian candidate on the grounds that enough people won’t vote for him to elect him.

I conclude that in order to get a rational citizen to the polls in a Presidential election, a theoretical model must impute some sort of axiomatic, sociotropic, collective, and neutrofactual ethico-political principle. It does not seem important to decide here precisely what this principle would look like, i.e., whether it is some sort of Kantian or neo-Kantian Categorical Imperative, some sort of humanist, Marxist, nationalist, or biological ethic, some form of rule-utilitarianism, or even some form of the widely discredited (I do not say refuted) Prichardian ethical intuitionism. Whichever of these it might be, it will have to involve some notion of a rule-guided obligation not derivable from purely egocentric act-prospective premises. That is, it will have a kind of “Kantian” flavor in the sense that (without subscribing to Kant’s formulation of the Categorical Imperative) it somehow carries the message that “I ought to behave on the basis of a generalizable rule, whether my individual action in accordance with the rule stands any chance of benefiting me or not.” It will also have to express somehow that I have an obligation to be concerned with others’ interests as well as my own, although we do not require that it be altruistic in the sense that others’ interests are given greater weight than my own. The point is that if only my own interests or the interests of my immediate family are taken into account it will not be possible for me to get myself to the polling booth on rational grounds.

Can you throw away your vote?

In the thirty odd years since I reached voting age, I estimate that when I or anyone in my hearing has contemplated voting for some other candidate than either of those put forward by the two major political parties, on at least 90% of such occasions—I am inclined to think it almost 100% but I haven't kept a written record—such a contemplated third party vote was vigorously attacked by someone favoring one of the two major parties on the grounds that “Well, of course, if you do that you'd simply be throwing away your vote, since (e.g., Mr. Norman Thomas) doesn't stand a chance to win.” I propose in this section to examine that objection to a minor party vote in the light of the position reached in the discussion supra. Anticipating briefly, I hope to make it highly plausible, while not pretending to a rigorous, hammer blow, “for certain” deductive argument, that any coherent principle of political participation which is sufficiently “strong” in respect of (a) axiomatic form and (b) non-egocentric content to be capable of rendering rational my individual participation in a Presidential election, will be sufficiently strong in those two respects as to justify my casting that vote for the candidate of my preference on the merits, regardless of how I perceive his chances of winning. That is, I shall argue that you can't get me into the voting booth rationally at all if I am thinking only about myself (i.e., egocentric rather than sociotropic premise) or if I am thinking only act-prospectively (in terms of what difference will depend upon whether I do or do not bother to vote). Both a non-act-prospective “rule” (axiomatic principle) and a non-egocentric (at least minimally sociotropic) content will be needed to get me, if I am rational, into the polling booth; and when we get these two requirements together, how I vote once in the polling booth can depend rationally upon my preference as to parties or candidates apart from their electoral prospects. Whatever its detailed statement may be, and there might be a good deal of variation possible in this for the purposes at hand, we want an ethical principle applying to political life which would be rationally capable of getting me into the polling booth given the near certainty that my action makes no significant difference in the outcome. Such a principle will, I urge, have to be a principle that makes some kind of reference to “what it would be desirable for people generally to do,” although it need not necessarily state which people or exactly how many. I am unable to construct a rational basis for bothering to vote that does not somewhere contain at least that amount of “Kantian” or “axiomatic” characteristics. I invite the reader to try if he thinks he can come up with one. We have to rely upon a principle that makes some sort of explicit or implicit reference to what it

would be a good thing if everybody (or as many people as possible, or the majority, or a large number, or however you state it) were to do; or, putting it negatively, what would be the undesirable social consequences for us collectively if too many people did so and so (e.g., stayed home to read the funnies instead of voting). Reliance upon such a principle gives me the entitlement to vote for a third party candidate if I am convinced on the merits that he and his platform and his party are the best ones—regardless of whether I think other voters are likely to share my opinion and act rationally upon it.

My law school colleague Dean Carl A. Auerbach points out to me, on reading the penultimate draft of this paper, that persons politically identified with one of the two major parties sometimes use the locution “...throw away your vote...” not as a general designation of all circumstances where one votes for a low-probability candidate, but instead confine this “thrown away” language to the special situation where one can be highly confident that the great majority of minor-party voters in a particular election will be drawn from (or, putting it affirmatively, would alternatively be drawn into) one of the two major parties rather than the other one. If it can be further assumed that the race between the two major party candidates is going to be very close, so close that a movement of potential third party voters into one of the two major party supporters would probably make the determining difference, then the notion of “wasting one’s vote” on the third party candidate takes on a stronger meaning. Suppose, for example, that we are waging an unpopular war against Communist Eskimos in Greenland, and the Flat Earth Vegetarian candidate Pastor Sedlitz proposes immediate unilateral withdrawal, which I as a pacifist voter would strongly prefer. But suppose that the Republican candidate is inclined to drop the Big Bomb on Greenland, whereas the Democrat wants us to get out, but only under some carefully negotiated and secured conditions. The pollsters indicate that the vote between Republican Claghorn and Democrat Fisbee is very close, so close that a preponderance of pacifist votes for Fisbee would probably lead to his winning; whereas if all the pacifists were to defect to Sedlitz—who we know cannot win—then Claghorn would win and turn Greenland into a radioactive desert. Hence a pacifist “throws away his vote” if he votes for Sedlitz instead of Fisbee. One who employs this more restrictive meaning of “throwing away your vote” does not rely solely upon the negligible probability of the Flat Earth Vegetarian candidate’s winning. He goes on to point out that if most of those who, on the merits, would be inclined to support Sedlitz in the particular forthcoming election, were to do so instead of supporting the lesser of

the two evils between Claghorn and Fisbee, then the worse of the two evils, to wit, Claghorn, would win.

This seems to generate a possible exception to my general line of reasoning in this paper, but I am not sure about it at present. Since the individual voter's contribution even in that instance is still infinitesimal, and the arguments advanced supra (and in the *APSR* 1977 paper¹⁰) still hold, as qualified by the assumed special close race circumstances, I believe that we still have to postulate the acceptance of some overall ethico-political premise which has the four required properties axiomatic, sociotropic, collective, and neutrofactual. The complication introduced by specifying Auerbach's condition is, as I see it, mainly one of how we characterize the collective reference class indicatively (as contrasted with counterfactual-subjunctively) in formulating our axiomatic premise. Suppose one says, "If everybody voted as I am contemplating voting, it would be a good thing (so far as the Greenland war is concerned)." Or, what amounts to the same thing but spells it out a bit more, one may say, "If everyone were to think as I do, and (relying upon an axiomatic justification) were to vote accordingly, it would be a good thing (so far as the Greenland war is concerned). It would seem that either of these two ways of stating the counterfactual legitimates my going ahead with the intention of voting for F.E.V. candidate Pastor Sedlitz, following the general line of ethical reasoning defended herein. That is, my expectation that most people won't proceed to do what I am individually about to do need not deter me. But suppose, in the light of the special political circumstances of a very close race between the atomic incinerator candidate and the negotiated slow withdrawal candidate, I may prefer to formulate the neutrofactual (note, here we dare not say counterfactual) statement differently. Although it is known with near certainty that the strong pacifist candidate Sedlitz cannot win, it is not known with near certainty or even high probability which of the two major candidates will win. It is also known with near certainty that none of those who, like me, are currently contemplating voting for Pastor Sedlitz, would vote for Republican Claghorn if they went over to one of the two major parties; all such persons would, if they moved from the minor party candidate to one of the two major candidates, vote for the Democrat Fisbee. On these empirical premises I therefore state the neutrofactual: If, among those who feel as I do about the Greenland war, all (or most, or some sufficiently large number) were to vote for the Democrat

¹⁰ [Meehl, P. E. (1977). "The selfish voter paradox and the thrown-away vote argument," *American Political Science Review*, 71, 11-30.]

Fisbee rather than for the Flat Earth Vegetarian Sedlitz, Fisbee would win over Claghorn. And given the terrible importance of not incinerating the Eskimos, that is what persons who feel as I do should do under these special circumstances.” The difference between the formulations lies in the reference class taken as a basis. If we talk about what would happen if most people were to agree with our views, we get a different result ethically from what we get talking about what would happen if, among all who already do agree with our views, many (or most, or some sufficiently large number) were to vote as we are contemplating voting rather than voting as Auerbach would advocate voting under such circumstances. I find this reasoning rather persuasive although not hammer blow coercive, but a detailed analysis of the ground upon which one chooses the reference class for the condition contrary to fact in formulating an axiomatic ethical principle (especially in the political domain) would take me into another paper the size of this one. I shall therefore content myself with saying that an Auerbach Case may yield an exception to the general position I take herein. Assuming we can predict a sufficiently close race between the two major contenders, plus a negligible probability for the third party candidate’s winning, combined with a high probability statement about which of the two major party contenders would receive votes by defectors from the third party support, what ethico-political neutrofactual statement is appropriate? How one slices up the subpopulation of would be third party supporters; how one decides with whom they can be appropriately conjoined for purposes of formulating an ethically applicable neutrofactual; and how one assigns priorities to the forthcoming election’s outcome versus longer term “teaching a lesson to the major parties,” seem to me extraordinarily difficult issues which, while they are probably more acute in the domain of political participation ethics, are not confined thereto.¹¹

Summary and Conclusion

I have aimed in this paper to present, expound, and defend two distinct but closely related theses. First, I argue that the currently fashionable “economic models” of political participation, insofar as they are applied to the individual anonymous voter casting his ballot in a presidential election (or other large scale electoral process) are radically defective. They postulate a theory of

¹¹See, for example, Rolf E. Sartorius, *Individual Conduct and Social Norms* (Encino, California: Dickinson Publishing Company, Inc., 1975) pp. 11-18; David Lyons, *Forms and Limits of Utilitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) Chapters II-III and passim.

voter rationality that is fundamentally incoherent, since an empirically significant act-prospective means–end relation between such individual participation and the collective political outcome simply does not exist. For this reason, all such theories must be unsound, predicated as they are upon an analogy to individual economic behavior which is invalid as an account of voter motivation, insofar as it would be rational in a direct means–end act-prospective sense. It should be clear that my criticism of these economic theories of democracy does not rely in the least upon the I complaint that they are “idealizations” or “approximations,” or that “political man is not totally rational,” considerations which I have not raised at any point in the argument, and which I would reject as I would similar complaints against any scientific theory about any empirical domain. My point is not a nitpicking one about the imperfection of a theoretical idealization. It is a much more basic point, involving a radical qualitative defect in what purport to be “rational reconstructions” of voter behavior.

Secondly, I think to have shown that one important consequence of my destructive analysis of conventional doctrine is a complete liquidation of the ubiquitous objection to voting for a third party candidate on the ground that to do so is to “waste your vote.”

I have tried to show that any over-arching ethico-political principle adequate to render my bothering to vote a rational act must be axiomatic, sociotropic, collective, and neutrofactual in its form and content. If any of these four meta-properties is lacking in a justificatory principle for individual voter participation, the principle will fail. But if all four are present, my voting for a minor-party “sure loser” candidate stands justified.

I have explored the ethical underpinning of an individual voter’s bothering to go to the polls in a large scale election in what may seem excessive detail and repetitious, but I believe this thorough an exploration to be justified for two reasons. First, what is apparently coming to be the received doctrine (among the younger generation of political scientists) of voter participation simply ought not to be accepted as a conceptually powerful idealization in political science theory; nor should the considerable logical and mathematical expertise required to use its formalism be developed by young scholars, when its foundations are fundamentally insecure. Secondly—more importantly in my view as a psychologist lacking the political scientist’s union card—it would be difficult to exaggerate the practical impact of a widespread acceptance (e.g., among the growing number of disaffected young voters) of an ethical view of political participation which would effectively “defuse” the standard appeal of the S.O.P. politicians (and

politically active citizenry) which has traditionally channeled such reluctant voters, relying on the fallacious “wasted ballot” argument, into a resigned support of one of the two major parties.

The dominant tradition among the younger generation of political scientists is quantitative-empirical, using the word ‘empirical’ here in a somewhat more restrictive sense than is philosophically correct, but in harmony with conventional usage among social scientists. I do not fault this emphasis, or the distinguishable (but similarly “scientifically” motivated) emphasis on theoretical models of rational voter behavior found in the writings herein challenged. I should be distressed if the present paper, by virtue of its heavy emphasis upon philosophical considerations in value theory of a distinctively ethical nature, were taken to advocate an abandonment of either mathematical models of rational decision making under uncertainty or the statistical study of electoral behavior data. Neither my own scholarly profession as a psychologist, nor my methodological leanings, would lead me in any such obscurantist direction. In discussing the general thesis here taken and in circulating preliminary drafts of the manuscript, I have run into the objection that the questions I am putting are “old fashioned philosophical questions” belonging to the now abandoned tradition of documentary “armchair” political science, and therefore are no longer interesting or appropriate on the contemporary scientific scene. I cannot admit this objection. Rational reconstructions of voter behavior seem to me related to the statistical empirical facts in somewhat the same way that a mathematical formalism relates to experimental physics or descriptive astronomy. Or, closer to home, they relate in the way that Chomsky-like theories of grammatical competence, that is, of a physical system embodying the potential for obeying grammatical rules, relates to human speech as an empirical phenomenon of behavior. In the exact sciences we take it for granted that one way, although not the only way, we criticize a theoretical conception is by directing attention to “internal” flaws. A theoretical structure in physics or chemistry may be coherent, and nevertheless falsified by empirical data; but it cannot be well corroborated by empirical data if it is incoherent. Consistency is a necessary but not sufficient condition for truth, as we learn in a beginning logic class. If a model of voter behavior predicated upon rationality and egocentricity is incoherent, in the sense that the postulates of the model would not, contrary to its express intended purposes, “make rational” the voter’s behavior, this is a very serious weakness and one which the users of such a model have the burden of rebutting, before the critic has to concern himself with empirical facts that might be capable of refuting or corroborating it. A political scientist whose model of voter behavior

does not say anything at all about rationality of decision making under uncertain conditions, a model which is formulated in straightforward behaviorise with no concepts of rules or utilities or reasonable action or subjective probabilities and the like, is in a different ballpark and would not presumably be touched by the “philosophical” questions I have pressed in this paper.

That a sound argument for bothering to vote at all, for anyone, in a large scale election must ultimately rely upon distinctively ethical and “quasi-Kantian” premises I believe to be quite clear. The ontological and epistemological status of ethical propositions themselves I have not herein considered.