

## Replies to My Critics

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### 1. A Summary of *The Ethics of Voting*<sup>1</sup>

Voting is a moral issue. Voters choose for everyone, not just themselves. Political decisions have high stakes, determining matters of poverty and prosperity, war and peace, injustice and justice. Political decisions are imposed upon innocent people—people who do not consent to the outcome of the election—through violence and threats of violence.

However, individual votes make almost no difference. You are more likely to win the Powerball lottery than cast a vote that changes the outcome of a congressional election. Don't fool yourself that you'll "change the mandate" either; political scientists say that "mandates" don't exist and are just a folk fiction.<sup>2</sup>

So, we're left with a puzzle. How *we* vote is clearly a big deal, morally speaking. Yet, how any one of us votes does not seem to matter at all. What, then, are our obligations, if any, with regard to voting?

In the U.S. and many other democracies, most people accept what I call the "folk theory of voting ethics." The folk theory holds:

- (1) *Prima facie*, each of us has a moral obligation to vote.
- (2) Civic virtue can only be exercised through political and quasi-political activities, such as voting, running for office, working for campaigns, community organizing, military service, or certain kinds of volunteer work.
- (3) Almost any sincere vote is morally acceptable, regardless of how much one knows, how much thought one puts into the decision, or whether one votes selfishly or altruistically.
- (4) It is inherently wrong to buy, trade, or sell votes.

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Hans Noel, "Ten Things Political Scientists Know that You Don't," *The Forum* 8 (2010), pp. 1-19.

Not everybody accepts (1)-(4), but many people do. In fact, for many people living in modern democracies, (1)-(4) have the status of sacred doctrine.

*The Ethics of Voting* attacks this folk theory. I try to show that the best arguments for (1)-(4) fail. Against the folk theory, I argue for the following conclusions:

(1\*) In general, there is no moral obligation to vote. (A duty to vote can arise in unusual circumstances, but most people will never have a duty to vote.)

(2\*) Civic virtue can be exercised through private, non-political activities, such as making art, running or working for for-profit businesses, or pursuing scientific knowledge.

(3\*) While you have no duty to vote, you have a duty to abstain rather than vote badly. You must vote well or not vote at all. It is wrong to vote badly. To vote well, one must vote for what one *justifiably* believes will promote the “common good,” by which I mean the right ends of government. Note that this is consistent with strategic voting, if one justifiably believes that strategic voting will promote the right ends of government.

(4\*) It is not inherently wrong to buy, trade, or sell votes. If it is permissible for you to vote a particular way for free, then it’s permissible for you to vote that way for money.

(5) In light of the social-scientific literature on voter knowledge and behavior, the overwhelming majority of voters are bad voters who violate the moral duty described in (3\*). Most voters deserve to be condemned, not praised, for voting.

Note that in this book, I do not argue that politically incompetent citizens should not have the right to vote.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I argue that most people have a duty not to exercise their legal right to vote. I don’t have space to argue here for each of these conclusions, but I will provide a brief synopsis of the arguments I give in the book.

Why is there no duty to vote? I canvass all of the best arguments I can find or construct in favor of a duty to vote and show that they fail. Some arguments in favor of a duty to vote would work only if individual votes make a big difference, but it’s easy to show they do not. Other arguments are grounded in the idea that we should have civic virtue or should try to pay a

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<sup>3</sup> For an argument to that conclusion, see Jason Brennan, “The Right to a Competent Electorate,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (2011), pp. 700-24.

“debt to society.” However, I show that even if we should exercise civic virtue or should pay such a debt, there are countless ways of doing so. We can exercise civic virtue or pay debts to society through private, non-political activity. Not only is voting nothing special, participating in politics is nothing special.

Why doesn't civic virtue require political engagement? Almost everyone defines civic virtue as the disposition and ability to promote the common good over purely private ends. This leaves open the question: *How* can one promote the common good? I then show that private, non-political activity is just as good a way of promoting the common good (as my intellectual opponents understand the common good) as public, political activity. If you want to make society or others better off, running a for-profit business is just as good as or better than voting or participating in politics.

Why shouldn't we vote badly? I argue that when a decision-making body imposes (through violence and threats of violence) high-stakes decisions (i.e., decisions that can rob people of life, liberty, or property, or significantly alter life prospects) upon innocent people, it owes them competence. I argue that individual voters have obligations not to participate in certain kinds of harmful or illicit risk-imposing collective activities. For an intuitive example of this, consider the following case. Imagine that you see ten sharpshooters simultaneously about to shoot an innocent child. No matter what you do, the child will die. Is it permissible for you to join in and fire the eleventh shot? Almost everyone intuitively responds that no, you must not participate, even though your shot makes no difference. It turns out that this intuition can be vindicated by most major moral theories, and if so, it can be used to explain why we shouldn't vote badly, even though individual votes make no difference.

Why is it sometimes permissible to buy, trade, or sell votes? The best arguments against buying, trading, and selling votes all have serious defects. Since there's no good case in favor of thinking that vote-buying and -selling are inherently wrong, we should conclude that these activities are not wrong.

Why think that most voters should not vote? My theory of voting ethics says that it's permissible to vote only if you vote for what you justifiably believe will promote the right ends of government. The social-scientific literature shows that most voters do not meet even low standards of epistemic justification, and so they are bad voters on my theory.

Before moving on, I'll briefly elaborate on what I take to be good and bad voting. I argue that voters must not only believe that they are voting in ways that promote the right ends of government, but that this belief must be *epistemically justified*. For a person to be epistemically justified in believing X, she must:

- (a) have sufficiently strong evidence that X;
- (b) not have strong evidence that not-X;

- (c) have strong grounds to think that she is not missing important evidence regarding X; and
- (d) evaluate the evidence by using reliable, rational thought processes.

Philosophers spend a lot of time debating the exact nature of epistemic justification and discussing the details of (a)-(d). None of their debates really matters for my theory, though. The important and uncontroversial point is that beliefs based on ignorance, wishful thinking, irrationality, absurd moral views, or cognitive bias are *unjustified*.

I think that voters owe the governed *competence* and *good faith*. As an analogy, think of a jury deciding a capital murder case. In this case, the jury has the power to deprive a defendant of life, liberty, and property, and has the power severely to modify the defendant's life prospects. The defendant does not consent to the outcome of the decision. The decision is imposed involuntarily, through violence and threats of violence.

What would it take for the jury competently to decide the case? They should form their beliefs about whether the defendant is guilty or not in a scientific way. This means that they must pay attention to the facts rather than ignore them. They must form their opinions rationally, in light of the evidence. They must take into account contrary evidence and also be aware of when needed evidence is missing. They must understand which side has the burden of proof and decide accordingly, and so on.

We all have a pretty good understanding of what it would take for a jury to decide a case in a rational, justified way. In *The Ethics of Voting*, I argue that individual voters must act like good jurors (even though their individual votes don't make a difference) or must otherwise abstain. Jurors have a *duty of care* or a *fiduciary duty* with regard to the defendant. They owe it to the defendant to make a competent, rational decision. I argue that voters owe the same kind of decision to those affected by electoral outcomes. Some examples of bad voters include:

- (e) Ignorant voters: voters who are unaware of the relevant facts.
- (f) Irrational voters: voters who have access to the relevant facts, but who process that information in a biased or irrational way.
- (g) Immoral voters: voters who vote on the basis of deplorable moral views, views that they cannot justifiably believe.

Note that my theory of voting ethics does *not* say that good voters must have *correct* beliefs about politics. Having the correct beliefs about the rights ends of government is neither necessary nor sufficient to be a good voter, just as having correct beliefs about guilt is neither necessary nor sufficient to be a good juror.

Why is being correct not sufficient? For the sake of argument, suppose that minimal-state libertarianism is true. Even if it's true, that doesn't mean that all minimal-state libertarians are justified in voting in ways that promote minimal-state libertarianism. After all, many minimal-state libertarians hold their beliefs irrationally. For instance, many minimal-state libertarians hold their beliefs because they were convinced by Ayn Rand's arguments. However, I think that Rand's arguments are of very poor philosophical quality and have been refuted.<sup>4</sup> Even if her conclusions are correct, she has not given us good grounds to believe her conclusions. Libertarians who accept libertarianism on the basis of Rand's arguments get the right answer (we are supposing) for the wrong reason and hence are not justified. As an analogy, imagine that a person accidentally gets the correct answer to a math problem, after making a series of mathematical errors. This person has the right answer, but is not *justified* in believing that answer.

Why is being correct not necessary? It's possible to be justified in believing something that is false. This happens all the time in science. Sometimes, the evidence overwhelmingly favors a particular view, but that view turns out to be false. Consider again the example of a good jury. Suppose that the evidence overwhelmingly favors believing that the defendant is guilty, even though the defendant is not, in fact, guilty. In that case, when the jury finds the defendant guilty, it doesn't do anything blameworthy, even though by hypothesis it gets the wrong answer. Similarly, I argue that voters are permitted to vote for what is in fact a bad policy, provided they are *justified* in believing that it is the right policy to vote for.

All of this is meant to clarify what my theory of voting ethics holds. I have not actually argued here for any of my conclusions.

## 2. Reply to Randall Holcombe

Holcombe characterizes me as arguing that there is such a thing as the common good, but I don't tell you what it is, and voters must discover what the common good is and then vote for it.<sup>5</sup> Actually, I'm not committed to either of those points. Unfortunately, Holcombe misunderstands my thesis, and so this renders irrelevant most of his criticisms.

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert Nozick, "On the Randian Argument," in Robert Nozick, *Socratic Puzzles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Michael Huemer, "Critique of the Objectivist Ethics," accessed online at: <http://home.sprynet.com/~owl/rand5.htm>; Michael Huemer, "Why I Am Not an Objectivist," accessed online at: <http://home.sprynet.com/~owl/rand.htm>. For a response to Nozick that defends Rand, see Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, "Nozick on the Randian Argument," *Personalist* 59 (1978), pp. 184-205.

<sup>5</sup> Randall G. Holcombe, "Do Voters Have a Duty to Promote the Common Good? A Comment on Brennan's *The Ethics of Voting*," *Reason Papers* 35, no. 1 (July 2013), pp. 17-25.

This misunderstanding is partly my fault. I sometimes write, “Voters must vote for what they justifiedly believe promotes the common good, or must otherwise abstain.” I explain in the book, however, that when talking about good and bad voting, by “the common good” I mean the same thing as “the right ends of government.” In earlier portions of the book, I argue against some civic republicans who hold a more substantive theory of the common good, and this seems to have tripped up Holcombe. In retrospect, I could have been clearer. Here is a clarification of my position:

- By default, you should not vote.
- In order for it to be morally permissible for you to vote, you need to pass a certain “test.” (Note that this test is a *necessary*, not a *sufficient*, condition.)
- The test is this: When you vote, you must be justified in believing: “Given how others are voting and given how strategic voting works, this policy or person for which I vote promotes the right ends of government.”

My theory maintains that a voter must be *justified* in believing that she is voting for something that promotes the rights ends of government; otherwise, she must abstain from voting.

As I show in the last chapter of my book, in light of the social science on voter knowledge, rationality, and behavior, almost every voter fails this “test.” Let’s reflect on just what that means for my argument. Even if it turns out that I, the author, have *no idea* what government really ought to do or even whether it should exist at all, even if it turns out that I have no clue what the rights ends of government are, I can show that most voters are bad voters.

Holcombe complains that I don’t give a theory of the right ends of government. He’s right—I don’t. But I don’t do so, because I don’t need to—it’s *irrelevant* to the thesis of the book. I argue that voters owe the government competent decision-making, and voters count as competent if they justifiedly believe something like: “This policy or candidate I vote for is the best way to promote the common good,” or “This policy or candidate I vote for is the best way to promote the rights ends of government.” I am defending a theory of voter competence, which doesn’t require me also to give a theory of justice. Similarly, in order to articulate a theory of what makes a physician or a physicist competent, I don’t need at the same time to explain the entire truth about medicine or physics.

Again, I’m not arguing that voters must vote for the *correct* ends of government. I am arguing that they must be *justified* in believing that they are voting for the correct ends of government. Similarly, for a doctor to act with proper care or to act competently, this doesn’t require that she always

administer the correct medicine. Instead, a good doctor must be justified in believing that she is administering the correct medicine. A good juror does not need to get the correct answer about guilt. Instead, she must be justified in thinking that she has the correct answer, and so on. That's how competence works.

Holcombe might object that there is no such thing as the "right ends of government," because all governments are unjustified. Perhaps he's right. But even if he were right, so what? My theory doesn't require there to be any right ends of government. I'm not arguing that voters must vote for what are in fact the right ends of government. Instead, I am arguing that voters owe the governed competent decision-making. For them to decide competently, they must be epistemically justified in thinking that whatever they want to impose on the governed is what they should impose. That's how competence works in general. Suppose that a physicist has overwhelming evidence that theory T is true. However, suppose that theory T is in fact false. The physicist acts competently by believing in T, teaching T in classes, etc., even though T is false.

This issue raises an interesting question: Is it possible for a person to have *justified* but *false* beliefs about the right ends of government? It would be surprising if that were not possible. After all, it's possible for a scientist to have justified but false beliefs about physics. It's possible for a physician to have justified but false beliefs about medicine. It's possible for an economist to have justified but false beliefs about economics, and so on. Presumably, then, a person could have justified but false beliefs about what governments should do.

Holcombe might insist that it's impossible for a statist to be justified in advocating statism, that is, it's impossible for a person to be justified in believing that states should exist and should do something rather than nothing. However, and I say this as an anarchist myself—that's really implausible. After all, the case for anarchism is rather tenuous and rests upon a lot of empirical speculation.

Holcombe makes a clear mistake when he writes:

Caplan says that such "irrationality" is rational, and justified in the mind of the voter by the fact that one vote will not alter the aggregate outcome of an election, and Brennan says that voters must be justified in believing that they are casting their votes to further the common good. Combining these arguments, irrational votes are justified (certainly, in the eyes of the irrational voters), and often are cast in opposition to the common good.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

Holcombe does not appear to be familiar here with the concept of epistemic justification. Saying that “irrational votes are [epistemically] justified” is like saying “squares are not square.”

Bryan Caplan argues that many voters hold their beliefs about economics irrationally. If so, then it follows trivially that they are not justified in their beliefs about economics, and so my theory trivially implies that when these voters vote on economic issues, they are unjustified. The fact that they *believe* themselves to be good voters doesn’t make any difference. All that matters is whether they are in fact justified in their beliefs, and by hypothesis they are not. Nikolai Wenzel makes a similar mistake. He says, “Paul Krugman won a Nobel Prize in Economics well after he had abandoned sound economics in favor of populist quackery,” but that Krugman presumably counts as an expert.<sup>7</sup> But if, as Wenzel says, Krugman is a quack, then trivially he lacks epistemic justification for the views about which he is a quack.

Holcombe’s minor quibble about fairness is also mistaken. In the section he cites, I am arguing against people who advocate democracy not because they think it has fair *outcomes*, but because they believe it is a *fair procedure*. What those people mean by “fair procedure” is exactly what Holcombe means by “unbiased.” Holcombe says, “Outcomes that are unbiased are not necessarily fair.”<sup>8</sup> Yes, exactly. Fair procedures need not result in substantively fair outcomes, but the people whom I criticize in the passage Holcombe quotes are only interested in fair or unbiased procedures.

### 3. Reply to Ezequiel Spector

Spector correctly notes<sup>9</sup> that one of my arguments against bad voting involves what I call the “Clean Hands Principle”:

One has a moral duty not to participate in a *collectively harmful activity*, provided there is no high morally significant cost to abstaining from participating.

A collectively harmful activity is a group activity that harms people, but in which individual inputs do not make much or any difference. For example, air pollution through the release of car exhaust fumes is a collectively harmful activity. Stupid, irrational, ignorant, or immoral voting can be other such activities.

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<sup>7</sup> Nikolai G. Wenzel, “Civic Virtue without Politics: Reflections on Jason Brennan’s *The Ethics of Voting*,” *Reason Papers* 35, no. 1 (July 2013), p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Holcombe, “Do Voters Have a Duty to Promote the Common Good?” p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ezequiel Spector, “Review of Jason Brennan’s *The Ethics of Voting*,” *Reason Papers* 35, no. 1 (July 2013), pp. 30-32.

Spector intends to show that this principle could be used to justify an obligation to vote, at least if one is a competent voter. His argument is:

- (h) For some political experts, voting well is easy and imposes no high and morally significant costs.
- (i) If those people do not vote, they participate in the collectively harmful activity of “abstention by political experts.”
- (j) One has a moral duty not to participate in a collectively harmful activity, provided there is no high morally significant cost to abstaining.
- (k) Therefore, some political experts have a duty to vote well.

Spector and I dispute whether premise (i) is true.

Spector anticipates a possible objection to (i): Abstention isn’t an action or an activity; it is the *absence* of a certain kind of action. However, he points out, there is such a thing as wrongful omissions. For instance, it would be wrong for me not to feed my young son. It would be wrong for me not to grade my students’ papers. If I see a toddler drowning in a pool as I’m walking, it would be wrong not to reach down and save him.

Spector is right that we are sometimes blameworthy for omissions. But note that we are blameworthy only when there is a *pre-existing* moral obligation. If I omit to feed my son and he starves, I am blameworthy *because* I have a pre-existing duty to feed him. If I omit to feed the children who live at some randomly selected household in the U.S. and they starve, I am not blameworthy, because I have no pre-existing duty to feed them. Whether premise (i) in Spector’s argument is true depends upon whether abstention is a permissible or wrongful omission, which in turn depends on whether there is a duty to vote. Spector’s argument doesn’t *prove* that there is a duty to vote. Rather, it works *only if* there is a pre-existing duty to vote.

Spector says:

Now, someone could claim that refraining from voting is never morally wrong because not voting is a *kind* of omission which is always morally permissible. This kind of omission is more similar to not nourishing poor African children than to not nourishing one’s young son. Nevertheless, Brennan does not explain why not voting is a *kind* of omission which is always morally permissible.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

Actually, I do explain why. Chapter Two (“Civic Virtue without Politics”) of *The Ethics of Voting* explains why abstention is *usually* the kind of omission that is morally permissible.

The best arguments for a duty to vote usually rely on ideas about reciprocity, benevolence, or civic virtue. Some try to argue that we each owe society a debt, and that we should repay that debt by voting. Others argue that we should try to help others, and so we should vote. Yet others argue that we have a duty to promote the common good, and so we should vote.

As a specific example, consider this argument, which I call the *Civic Virtue Argument*:

- (l) Each person should exercise civic virtue.
- (m) In order to exercise civic virtue, one must vote.
- (n) Therefore, one must vote.

In Chapter Two of *The Ethics of Voting*, I try to show that premise (m) is false. I’ll summarize briefly my counter-argument that civic virtue does not require voting:

- (o) Civic virtue is the disposition and ability to promote the common good. (Note that I get this definition of “civic virtue” from the people who advance the civic virtue argument, the people against whom I’m arguing.)
- (p) One can promote the common good without voting, and, in fact, without participating in politics at all. Voting well is at best merely one of many ways to promote the common good, and it’s not an especially good way of doing so. (Note again that in making this counter-argument, I use the definition of “the common good” that the people I’m criticizing accept.)
- (q) Therefore, it’s not the case that in order to exercise civic virtue, one must vote.

You may not like premise (o), but that doesn’t matter. The people who advance the Civic Virtue Argument accept (o), and so I grant them (o) for the sake of the argument. The important point is whether premise (p) is true, and I spend Chapter Two defending it.

I have similar counter-arguments against other arguments in favor of a duty to vote. I thus conclude at the end of Chapter Two:

Many arguments for voting rely upon the idea of “doing one’s part,” but they fail to recognize just how many different ways there are to do one’s part. In general, arguments for a duty to vote are based on

underlying duties of beneficence, fairness, or reciprocity, but these underlying duties can be discharged in ways other than by voting.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps my arguments for this conclusion are terrible. However, Spector is not here criticizing my arguments. He hasn't claimed to have discovered any holes in them; rather, his complaint is that I do "not explain why not voting is a *kind* of omission which is [usually] permissible." I am just pointing out here that I devote an entire chapter to this question, and as far as I can tell, Spector does not realize that Chapter Two was meant to address this very question.

#### 4. Reply to Nikolai Wenzel

Wenzel has a number of substantive criticisms. I'll reply to some of them here.

##### *a. Intentions and virtue*

I claim that in order for a person to have civic virtue, she must be sufficiently motivated to promote the common good. If a person promotes the common good but doesn't care about it, then she doesn't have civic virtue. Wenzel thinks that this claim is implausible. Don't we just care about outcomes?

Well, sure, we care about outcomes. But when we're discussing what virtues are, intentions and motives matter. Imagine that the only reasons I feed my kids and treat them well are (1) so that my partner will have sex with me and (2) so that I avoid going to jail for child neglect. In that case, I *behave* well, but you wouldn't say that I have good parental virtues. Or suppose that I save a child from drowning, but the *only* reason I do so is to get a reward. Again, I behave well, but you wouldn't say that I have the virtue of benevolence. Or suppose that I refrain from murdering the rest of you, but the only reason I do so is to avoid punishment. Again, I behave well, but I don't have the virtue of justice.

Wenzel writes, "It is not clear to me why civic virtue is a positive duty, as opposed to a negative duty of respecting the rights of others."<sup>12</sup> Actually, I don't argue that we have any duty to have civic virtue. I give a theory of civic virtue in order to undermine other people's arguments for a duty to vote. I want to show that a concern for civic virtue does not lead to the conclusion that we have a duty to vote. As far as my book goes, however, I am agnostic as to whether civic virtue really is a virtue. Similarly, I give a theory of "paying a debt to society" in order to show that *if there were* such debts, we could pay them without participating in politics. I do this in order to undermine others' arguments for a duty to vote, and I remain agnostic as to whether there is such a thing as a debt to society.

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<sup>11</sup> Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting*, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> Wenzel, "Civic Virtue without Politics," p. 38.

***b. Fortuitous voting***

Suppose that in the coming election, the best choice is X. Suppose that Sally is completely crazy and forms her beliefs about politics in a deeply irrational way. However, suppose that as a matter of luck, she ends up picking X and votes accordingly. Sally is what I call a fortuitous voter. She votes for the right candidate or policy, but is unjustified in her beliefs about politics. It's just good luck that she gets the correct answer. In the book, I argue that fortuitous voting is wrong, even though, by hypothesis, fortuitous voters end up voting for the best candidate or policy.

Wenzel finds this puzzling. He says, “[I]f *ex hypothesi*, [fortuitous voting] always provides good outcomes, then I see nothing wrong with it.”<sup>13</sup> Shouldn't we want more and more of it? Well, sure, in some sense, fortuitous voting makes things better. By hypothesis, it has good consequences, and so if people always and everywhere voted fortuitously, that would, by hypothesis, make the world a better place.

Imagine that you have asthma and go to your physician for treatment. Now imagine that your physician decides to treat your asthma as follows. She pulls out a book listing all major medications and randomly picks a medicine from the book. Fortuitously, she picks albuterol—the medicine you in fact need—rather than some other random medicine that treats heart disease or kidney problems. She then prescribes you albuterol. Now, by hypothesis, things have worked out well for you—you in fact got the medicine you needed. At the same time, though, the doctor pretty clearly violated her fiduciary duty or duty of care with regard to you. She decided in an incompetent way. She exposed you to undue risk. It just happens to have worked out this time.

The doctor acted badly. Voters who act like the doctor in this thought experiment also act badly. Of course, there's a difference between voters and doctors. Individual voters make little difference, while individual medical decisions do make a difference. In the book I explain why this difference doesn't matter, and none of the commentators here takes issue with this part of my argument.

***c. On the value of democracy***

Most readers revere democracy, and thus see my book as an attack on a sacred ideal. It's somewhat amusing, then, that when libertarian economists read it, they see it as taking democracy too seriously. Let me clarify my position on this issue. I do not think that democracy is good in itself. I do not revere democracy or have any special fondness for it. In fact, I am currently writing a book that argues against democracy.

In *The Ethics of Voting*, I do not discuss what the best form of government is or who should have the right to vote. Instead, I limit my focus

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

to the ethical questions we face in contemporary democracies. My question is: Given that we live in democracies with the kinds of powers these democracies actually have, and given that we in fact have the legal right to vote, what, if anything, should we do about voting? Whether democracy should exist in the first place is a worthy question, but it's a question for a different book.

### 5. Reply to Bryan Caplan

Caplan asks two questions,<sup>14</sup> to which I'll respond briefly. His first question is: Should libertarians be more inclined or less inclined to vote? Overall, I would argue that libertarians should be less inclined to vote. First, it's a mistake to think that voting is a duty, so any libertarian who votes out of a sense of duty makes a mistake. Second, even though libertarianism is correct, that doesn't mean that most libertarians are justified in advocating libertarianism. In general, I think that for any political view P, most people who believe P do so for bad reasons. That applies to libertarianism, too. There are powerful objections to libertarians, and many libertarians cannot defeat these objections. Also, many libertarians ground their views on terrible moral theories, such as Rand's.

Caplan might reasonably respond by asking whether the *smart* libertarians should feel more inclined to vote. I'd say that they have no duty to do so. That said, if they can organize a political faction that has a real chance at making a change, that would be morally praiseworthy. Of course, it's not the only praiseworthy thing they could do.

Caplan's second question is: How would I respond to the libertarian who thinks that voting is wrong *per se*? Some, like George Smith,<sup>15</sup> argue that government is inherently evil, and so, by voting, we are participating in that evil. We are imposing our will upon other people through illicit means. Smith thinks that we should instead engage in "organized non-voting" as a kind of protest movement.

I'm fairly sympathetic to anarchism, and so I'm fairly sympathetic to Smith's argument. Let's assume for the sake of argument that anarchism is true and statism is false. Let's assume that all states or governments are illegitimate. Does that mean we should never vote? I'm not convinced, though I don't have space here to do justice to Smith's argument or to construct a full response to it.

As an empirical matter, I think that we are more or less stuck with interventionist governments for the long term. Protest movements will have only a limited effect. Given that we're stuck with government, it seems

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<sup>14</sup> Bryan Caplan, "Thoughts on Jason Brennan's *The Ethics of Voting*," *Reason Papers* 35, no. 1 (July 2013), p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., George H. Smith, "In Defense of Rational Anarchism," accessed online at: <http://folk.uio.no/thomas/po/rational-anarchism.html>.

praiseworthy to me to help make governments better rather than worse. By analogy, I think that the faculty meetings we have at my university are useless and we should dispense with them altogether. However, suppose that's a pipe dream. Suppose that we're stuck having faculty meetings. If so, then trying to make the faculty meetings *less bad* seems praiseworthy, not wrong.

Imagine that Bob starts the International Hayek Party. Imagine that the International Hayek Party succeeds in transforming at least one Western country into a classical liberal polity of the sort Friedrich Hayek advocates. Would Smith or any other anarchist complain that Bob would act wrongly by participating in and perpetrating the great evil of the state? That seems implausible, even if states are unjust. It would be more plausible to say that Bob would be a hero who makes some part of the world much more just. We'd have a complaint against Bob only if he were simultaneously to *prevent* things from getting even *more* just.<sup>16</sup> Taking a step in the right direction is a good thing.

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<sup>16</sup> I thank my four critics for taking the time to read and comment on *The Ethics of Voting*. I learned a lot from their reactions.

