Democratic Voting and The Mixed-Motivation Problem

Jonathan Wolff

Why do we value democracy? Broadly, answers to this question fall into two camps: those that suppose democracy's value lies in the values it embodies or, at least, symbolizes (notably freedom and equality); and those that contend that democracy is valuable for what it is able to achieve. My purpose here is to bring out some difficulties for the second camp.

1. What do we do when we vote? A standard assumption is that voters express their interests or personal preferences. Voters act as if they are answering the question: 'which outcome would suit you best?' Indeed this is often taken to be one of the arguments in favour of democracy, for otherwise how would rulers know the interests of the people? (For the purpose of this discussion I will not distinguish interests and preferences: to do so would add further complications to a story which, as we will see, is complex enough.) But it has also been argued that voters can, should, or at least sometimes do, express their opinion of where the common good lies. They can also vote, then, as if they are answering the question 'which outcome is preferable on moral grounds?' Thus Mill claimed that

[The citizen's] vote is not a thing in which he has an option; it has no more to do with his personal wishes than the verdict of a juryman. It is strictly a matter of duty; he is bound to give it according to his best and most conscientious opinion of the public good. ([4], p. 299)

Again, the idea that voters are attempting to answer a moral question can also be used as an argument for democracy: provided each member of the electorate has a better than even chance of holding the correct opinion, democratic voting in any large electorate is very likely to lead to the correct result. (See Barry [1].)

One possible objection is that there is no such thing as the common or public good. But presumably there must be a common good at least in the minimal sense of where the majority of interests lie (ignoring ties). If we
assume this minimal concept of the common good, then voting for the common good comes to voting on one’s estimation of where the majority interest lies. Thus even on this minimal account we can distinguish voting in one’s interests and voting on one’s idea of the common good.

So we have identified two possible motivations voters may have for voting the way they do. (I ignore any questions about what motivates them to vote at all.) In practice, it seems, in any real-life election, some voters will vote in their own interests, whereas others will vote to bring about the common good, even if this conflicts with their own interests or personal advantage. This fact enormously complicates the theory of democracy. For it can easily be demonstrated that, if part of the electorate vote in pursuit of their own interests, and part for common good, then it is possible to arrive at a majority decision which is neither in the majority interest, nor believed by the majority to be for the common good. This can be seen in the following example:

(1) Suppose voters are choosing between A and B.

(2) A is in the interests of 40% and B is in the interests of the remaining 60%.

(3) Suppose among the electorate 80% believe B to be for the common good, while 20% believe this of A. Suppose also, that such belief is independent of interests: i.e. the A-believers and B-believers are spread evenly through the electorate.

(4) Suppose, finally, that those for whom A is in their interests (the A-interest people) vote according to interest, while the B-interest people vote according to their ideas of the common good.

It follows from these assumptions that 52% of people will vote for A, even though it is in the minority interest, and believed by just 20% of the population to be in the common good. (52% is arrived at as follows: sum all the A-interest people [40% of the population] and 20% of the B-interest [20% of 60 = 12% of the population].)

Obviously the particular details of this example are very unlikely to be realized in practice. However the key assumption is that morally motivated individuals can make a mistake about what morality requires. Whenever this assumption is satisfied then the perverse result noted above becomes possible, if not actual. And the assumption surely, is not implausible. One only has to think of non-smokers who vote to permit smoking in public places on civil libertarian grounds. Such people certainly vote against their own interests, and, arguably, have a mistaken belief about where the ‘public good’ lies. In fact, thinking about such real-life cases shows that I have over-simplified the problem. On this issue many people will vote according to their own interests. But other people will vote according to
their ideas of the common good, on the minimal account of the common good given above — their opinion of the majority of interests — whereas others still will vote on a more substantive moral conception: civil libertarianism or anti-passive-smoking, even if this conflicts with believed majority preference. Consequently when one comes to count the ballot papers, all one can safely conclude is that a majority of people have cast their vote one way rather than another. Nothing more.

2. What is the significance of this point? Most obviously, without further assumptions, we cannot rely on any assurances that democratic decision-making reveals either the majority interest or the common good (whether minimal or substantive). For the theorist of democracy it therefore becomes necessary to distinguish the two or three voting motivations, and decide which one the 'ideal' electorate ought to have (as we saw Mill do).¹

However, once an assumption has been made about the ideal motivations of the voters, democratic theory seems even further divorced from democratic practice than ever it was. It is a surprising fact about our political culture that there is no official view about what voters should be doing. Should we vote according to preference (like shoppers) or according to duty (like jurors)? And unlike the issue of morality of tactical voting there is no public discussion about the basis on which people should vote. (This contrast is odd in another way. How can we debate the morality of tactical voting unless we know the basis on which we should cast our vote in the first place?) Political parties simply appeal to whatever type of reason they believe most likely to sway the voter. Changing this seems fraught with difficulties. How can it ever be ensured that members of the electorate will vote only out of the selected motivation? It may even be that voters are never even fully aware of what they are doing. Defenders of democracy, then, for the time being at least, would do well to downplay its supposed instrumental advantages.²

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¹ For useful further discussion of these sorts of issues see Elster [2], Harrison [3], Rawls ([5], pp. 219–20), and Waldron [6].

² I have received very helpful comments from Richard Bellamy, Chris Bertram, Andrew Chitty, Elaine Collins, Virginia Cox, Tim Crane, Mike Martin and Mike Saward.
References


The Gingerbread Game

MARTIN HOLLIS

Hansel and Gretl were reminiscing about the gingerbread cottage and their ordeal in the wood. ‘I shall never forget the moment when we were wondering whether to eat some of the little gingerbread tiles on the walls,’ Hansel remarked, ‘and the door opened and the witch stepped out.’

‘She seemed so kind,’ said Gretl, recalling the witch’s offer: “Of course you may, my dears, and here is how you shall go about it. Each of you is to name a whole number between 0 and 100. Hansel’s must be odd and Gretl’s even. No conferring. Whoever chooses the lower number can eat twice that number of gingerbread tiles. Whoever chooses the higher number can eat the lower number. (So, if your choices are 57 and 30, Hansel will get 30 tiles and Gretl will get 60.) After that, come inside and I have more surprises in store for you.” It sounded marvellous.’

‘At least until we worked out which number it was rational to choose,’ Hansel reflected. ‘You ended up with only four tiles and I with a mere two.’

‘That was because we had just had lessons in Game Theory and assumed that this was a (non-cooperative) game between two rational utility maximizers. I knew that you would not choose 99 because 97 was as good in all other cases and better if I were to choose 98. That made 98 inferior to 96 for me, since 96 was as good in all other cases and better if you were to choose 97. Since you would have realized this, I then inferred that you would reject 97 as inferior to 95; and I therefore deemed 96 inferior to 94. And I carried on reasoning like this by backward induction, rejecting each remaining highest number in turn, until I was left with 2.’

‘That’s right,’ said Hansel. ‘I worked all that out too and found myself