

## Debate: Why Does the Excellent Citizen Vote?\*

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IN large nation-states, the effect of a single vote is negligible. Jason Brennan asks us to imagine that a particular candidate's victory is worth \$33 billion to the common good (suppose she is a civic-minded, financial wizard), that there are 122,293,322 voters (as in the 2004 U.S. presidential election), and that the probability of any given voter supporting our financial wizard is 50.5%. With the stakes artificially raised, one might expect that individual votes are impactful. But the expected value to the common good of one's vote for the financial wizard is a mere  $\$4.77 \times 10^{-2650}$ .<sup>1</sup> We might wonder whether expected financial return is the best way to measure the value of casting a ballot. But however those wonderings turn out, Brennan's example illustrates that an individual vote is a drop in the ocean. How, then, could there be a moral duty to vote?

The literature on voting is young, but arguments have begun to form three camps. The first defends a moral duty to vote in a roughly consequentialist fashion: a citizen's duty to vote derives from her duty to *promote the good*. These arguments are not promising. Not only is one's vote a drop in the ocean, whatever the good turns out to be, it is probably better served by other actions. We can likely do more good by using whatever resources we devote to educating ourselves and voting to instead serve in a soup kitchen, donate to Oxfam, or clean up a neighborhood park.<sup>2</sup>

The second camp advances two arguments with a Kantian flavor. The first notes that it would be disastrous if no one voted, and argues that it is permissible to act only in ways that can be *universalized*. This is not a promising strategy either. It would be disastrous if everybody quit farming, but there is no general duty to take up agriculture.<sup>3</sup> According to the second argument, failing to vote violates standards of *fairness*. If they vote well, diligent voters help provide the public good of effective governance. The problem with non-voters is that they

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<sup>1</sup>Brennan 2012, pp. 18–20.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Tuck argues that votes are more impactful than I've suggested (Tuck 2008). But there are strong criticisms of Tuck's argument: Brennan and Sayre-McCord, forthcoming; Brennan 2012, pp. 28–34.

<sup>3</sup>Brennan and Lomasky 2000, pp. 75–9.

free ride upon the efforts of the diligent. Now, the fairness argument might establish that citizens should help provide the public good of effective governance. But it fails to explain why one's efforts towards that end have to take the form of voting. One could do research on social problems, educate voters, or even drive good voters to the polls. There is much more to say about these Kantian arguments. But much of it has been said already, and both are fraught with difficulty.

A third camp defends voting as a component of *excellent citizenship* in a democracy. I will briefly explain why traditional accounts of excellent citizenship struggle to support a duty to vote. Next, I will propose a better third-camp argument.

### I. THE PROBLEM IN THE THIRD CAMP

Third-camp arguments see "citizen" as a role in the social practice of democracy. (For brevity, I will use "citizen" to mean "citizen in a democracy.") Roles are constituted by distinctive sets of rights and responsibilities; these rights and responsibilities, in turn, define what it means to fill a role excellently. In basketball, for example, a point guard's responsibilities traditionally include facilitating the offense; point guards who fail at that task do not excel in their role. A third-camp argument proceeds by making the responsibilities of a citizen explicit and then trying to show that they include voting. Notice: third-camp arguments build upon normative standards *internal* to citizenship, but we do not have a moral duty to excel in every role we occupy. Third-campers thus have to answer the *external* question of why we are morally required to be excellent citizens in the first place.

But the internal task—connecting excellent citizenship to voting—has proven surprisingly difficult. A strong (but not unanimous) consensus holds that a citizen's chief responsibility is to promote the common good through active political participation.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, many seem to move from that claim to the claim that excellent citizenship requires voting in particular.<sup>5</sup> As Brennan points out, this move is suspicious: even if the excellent citizen promotes the common good through political participation, why would she do something whose impact on the common good is negligible? If she is going to participate, shouldn't she participate in a more impactful way?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Burt 1990, p. 24; Dagger 1997, p. 14; Galston 2007, p. 630; Crittendon 2007; Brennan and Hamlin 1995; Brennan 2012, pp. 45–6.

<sup>5</sup>After establishing a connection between civic virtue and political participation, Richard Dagger, for example, moves immediately to a discussion of compulsory voting—as though it is obvious that participation should consist in filling out a ballot (Dagger 1997, pp. 132–53).

<sup>6</sup>Strictly speaking, Brennan's criticism actually cuts even more deeply. He challenges third-campers not only to justify voting, but also to justify their emphasis on political participation. Why shouldn't promoting the common good through private enterprise be sufficient? I lack the space to adequately address Brennan's more radical challenge. But if my arguments are sound, they show that excellent citizenship often requires at least one act of political participation: voting.

So long as third-camp arguments assume that a citizen's chief responsibility is to promote the common good, Brennan's objection will be formidable. The sheer size of modern nation-states virtually guarantees that one's vote will not tangibly impact the common good. Even in my small hometown, the odds that my individual vote changes anything are negligibly small. If they are going to ground a duty to vote, third-campers should characterize the responsibilities of citizenship differently.

Of course, a third-camp argument cannot simply assume that an obligation to vote numbers among a citizen's responsibilities. To avoid begging questions, my argument will detour through the concept of respect: I will augment traditional accounts of excellent citizenship by arguing that, in addition to promoting the common good, citizens have a responsibility to avoid disrespecting the practice of democracy. In the right circumstances, I will further contend, failing to vote does precisely that.

- (1) Citizens in a healthy democracy have a pro tanto moral duty to fill their role excellently.
  - (2) Excellent citizenship requires that one avoid disrespecting democracy.
  - (3) In the right circumstances, failing to vote disrespects democracy.
- Therefore,
- (4) In the right circumstances, citizens in a healthy democracy have a pro tanto moral duty to vote.<sup>7</sup>

My aim in this short article is not to rigorously defend (1); it is to answer Brennan's challenge by defending (2) and (3). Nonetheless, (1) is both controversial and necessary for the conclusion. A short defense will show that (1) is at least plausible, and will helpfully clarify my position on the relationship between morality and the normativity inherent in social roles.

The pressure to deny (1) comes mainly from voluntarist quarters: most of us are cast into the role of "citizen" without (but not necessarily against) our consent. How, one might ask, can normative standards internal to a role apply to us without our consent? We do not have moral duties to excel in *every* role we are cast into. Sometimes, a lack of consent is precisely why. But the thought that we *never* have a moral duty to excel in roles we have not consented to seems equally mistaken. As a graduate student, I was made "advisor to the undergraduate philosophy club" without my consent—no one wanted the job and I was appointed. Nonetheless, it is plausible that I had a moral duty to fill that role excellently. The role was not particularly demanding, and slacking in it would have denied club members fairly important benefits—philosophy is valuable, and the students cared deeply about it. My tentative proposal is that when cast into a role such that (a) the role is not overly demanding, and (b) performance in that

<sup>7</sup>I will both cash out the "right circumstances" and explain why the duty to vote requires a healthy democracy in section 3.

role is connected to other people's basic rights or to important aspects of their well-being, the default presumption is that one has a pro tanto moral duty to fill it excellently.

This principle is modest: it makes a claim only about roles that satisfy (a) and (b), and claims only that such roles are presumptively morally binding. Being a son or daughter, for example, can be demanding, so some other principle will have to explain why children have the obligations they seemingly do. Furthermore, the presumption that one must fill a role excellently is overridable. If one's life simply has no room for another role, being cast into a role that satisfies (a) and (b) probably doesn't generate any role-based moral obligations. If the forces that cast one into a role that satisfies (a) and (b) acted with the intention of harming one, the relevant role may not have any normative purchase. Whether one has a duty to excel in a role seems like a particularistic matter—details of context are likely to make a normative difference, and in ways we cannot helpfully spell out beforehand. Again, my tentative view is that we presumptively have a pro tanto moral duty to excellently fill roles that satisfy (a) and (b).

Modesty notwithstanding, this principle applies to the role of "citizen." For most of us, citizenship is not overly demanding, and performance in it is connected to the basic rights and well-being of others. A citizen who performs badly in her role can, if enough of her peers follow suit, contribute to substantial collective harms. A bad advisor can ruin a philosophy club; bad citizens can (collectively) destroy social services, ruin educational systems, and even facilitate unjust wars. Even Brennan, who points out that individual votes are a drop in the ocean, holds that performance qua citizen is connected to other people's basic rights and well-being: he argues that our duty to avoid collective harms entails that it is immoral to vote badly.<sup>8</sup>

These anti-voluntarist arguments are not a rigorous defense of (1). But in addition to clarifying the relationship between morality and the normativity inherent in roles, they render (1) sufficiently plausible that this article's main task—defending (2) and (3)—is a valuable contribution to the literature on voting. It is finally time to begin that task: what does it mean to disrespect democracy? More generally, what does it mean to disrespect a practice?

## II. RECOGNITION RESPECT AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

On the evening of March 16, 2003, the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Utah Jazz played a basketball game. It was a good night to be a Cavalier: with 5 seconds left to play, Cleveland led by an insurmountable 25 points. Ricky Davis, a Cavalier at the time, was one rebound shy of a triple double—the elusive and prestigious accomplishment of tallying double digits in three statistical categories (typically points, rebounds, and assists). But with a mere 5 seconds left in the game, Davis

<sup>8</sup>Brennan 2012, pp. 68–92.

was not going to get the rebound he needed. Unsatisfied with his good night and his team's imminent victory, Davis shot the ball *at the wrong basket*, deliberately missing, and then collecting the ball.

According to NBA rules, it is illegal to shoot at the wrong basket. Davis's last-ditch attempt to score a triple double was therefore doomed at the outset. But the overwhelming reaction was that Davis's attempt was not merely irrational, it was *wrong*. The announcers derided his attempt as cheap; his opponents, and the opposing coach, were furious; and Davis's own team punished him with a substantial fine. The character of Davis's wrong is obviously indexed to his role as "basketball player"—after the game, when he was no longer actively filling that role, he would be free to shoot at, and to deliberately miss, whatever basket he chose. But while Davis's wrong is tied to his role, it is not a straightforward criticism of his performance. His ill-fated shot was not akin to making a bad pass or to using poor shooting mechanics. Rather, the overwhelming reaction was that Davis's actions reflected a character that is blameworthy for basketball players. I want to take this overwhelming consensus as a datum and try to explain it. How does shooting at the wrong basket to reach a statistical milestone indicate blameworthy character?

The answer is not obvious. Davis did not, after all, harm anyone. We harm others by making them worse off than they would have been if we had not acted at all. Davis's teammates had an interest in winning, but he did not jeopardize that. He waited until the final seconds—when his team led by an insurmountable 25 points—before trying to pad his own stats. One might think that Davis harmed his teammates by preventing them from improving their stats. But that idea doesn't hold water. When the outcome of a game is well and truly decided, it is customary to "dribble out the clock"—players from both teams mill around while the ball-handler waits for the last few seconds to expire. Davis was expected to dribble out the clock, and against that baseline, his teammates were not made worse off. Neither did Davis appreciably harm his opponents. They were going to lose anyway, and the difference between losing to a team that has grabbed  $x$  rebounds or  $x+1$  rebounds is negligible.

It might seem that I'm overlooking an obvious harm: Davis's attempted triple double humiliated his opponents. Though it needs to be explicated and refined, I think this idea is correct. But it is an idea better captured by the idiom of *respect* than *harm*. Disrespect, in fact, is the concept that DeShawn Stevenson, an opposing player, used to describe Davis's actions: "There's too many people who have done too much for this sport to act like that . . . I think it was disrespect to the game and disrespect to me."<sup>9</sup> There are two ideas in Stevenson's comment. First, that Davis disrespected the practice of basketball itself, and, second, that Davis disrespected his opponents. I am interested in the more puzzling idea. What does it mean to disrespect a practice?

<sup>9</sup>DeShawn Stevenson cited in Aldridge 2003.

Stephen Darwall distinguishes between *appraisal respect* and *recognition respect*. Appraisal respect is respect for skillful performance.<sup>10</sup> Recognition respect, by contrast, is respect for a thing's status or position. It is

a disposition to weigh appropriately in one's deliberations some feature of the thing in question and to act accordingly. The law, someone's feelings, and social institutions with their positions and roles are examples of things which can be the appropriate object of this sort of respect. [Recognition] respect consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of its object in deliberating about what to do.<sup>11</sup>

Recognition respect is the relevant species here: it can take practices as its object and it is essentially practical, manifesting itself in "appropriate consideration of some feature . . . in deliberating about what to do." But to see why recognition respect is the key to understanding the wrongness of Davis's shot, we need to make concrete the abstract notion of respect for basketball. How, exactly, do players respect the practice of basketball?

One natural answer is that players respect their practice by *following the rules*. But on closer inspection, rule-following is neither necessary nor sufficient for showing respect. It is not necessary: the codified rules prohibit grabbing an opponent's arms and award free throws as a penalty; but, particularly in the playoffs, it is customary for players to foul rather than giving up easy points, thereby forcing their opponents to "earn it from the line." Neither is rule-following sufficient: Wilt Chamberlain once scored one hundred points in a game, but his team had to play bad, albeit legal, basketball to make that happen. They encouraged Chamberlain to take all the team's shots and abandoned basic offensive principles like ball movement. While scoring one hundred points is a feat, critics argued that Chamberlain should not have been proud—by prioritizing his own success, he was disrespecting the game.

If lawfulness isn't the key to respect, what is? The answer, I think, is contained in the criticism of Chamberlain's 100-point game: basketball is above all a *team* sport. The point is not that individual achievements are unimportant; it is that individual achievements should be seen as a means to team success, not as ends in themselves. So, more formally, players show recognition respect for the practice of basketball by sublimating individual achievement to the good of their team. It is, then, easy to see how Davis's attempted triple double disrespects the practice: by shooting at the wrong basket, he pursued individual accolades without the barest pretext of acting for the good of his team. He saw individual achievement as an end in itself. And that, for a basketball player, is evidence of a blameworthy character.

Consider another example, this time from a more familiar practice. Imagine that a philosopher and a political pundit in the mold of Rush Limbaugh each

<sup>10</sup>Darwall 1997, pp. 38–9.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

accept a small fortune from a private foundation to defend, in their professional capacities, what they recognize as an unjust status quo. Each persuades the same number of equally influential people and thereby causes an equivalent amount of harm. Both characters do wrong, but the philosopher can be criticized on grounds that the pundit cannot: sophistry is what pundits do; the philosopher, by contrast, is failing *qua* philosopher. What explains the difference?

The answer is that whereas sophists persuade with rhetoric, Socrates's constant mission is to prove that we barely understand love, piety, justice, and the like. This mission is tied to an important good: shaking loose of misconceptions is a prerequisite for seeking truth. These roots help explain why it is so distasteful for philosophers to turn mercenary for private interests. By turning mercenary, the philosopher fails to give the pursuit of truth the place it deserves in her practical deliberations. She shows a blameworthy character by disrespecting the practice of philosophy.

To sum up: Many social practices are founded upon *abstract ideals*. This is a normative claim. Ideals are foundational in the sense that they help to determine what counts as excellent participation. That players should always act for the sake of their team is a foundational ideal of basketball; the pursuit of truth is foundational for philosophy. *Recognition respect* is the vehicle by which abstract ideals get normative traction upon action. We disrespect our practice by failing to give its foundational ideals appropriate consideration in our practical deliberations. If Davis had seen individual achievements as a way to serve his team rather than as ends in themselves, he would not have shot at the wrong basket. If the philosopher had appropriately considered the pursuit of truth, she would not have turned mercenary.

None of this entails that disrespecting a practice is always a *moral* wrong. Davis's disrespect is a basketball-wrong—regarding individual achievements as ends in themselves is both common and unproblematic in sprinting, boxing, or any other individualistic pursuit. Similarly, though the harm she causes is a moral wrong, the mercenary philosopher's disrespect is, in itself, a philosophy-wrong. It is morally wrong for a participant to disrespect her practice, on my view, only if she has a moral duty to excel in her role. Premise (1) of my argument, recall, holds that citizens in a healthy democracy have a *pro tanto* moral duty to fill their role excellently. If that is false, a citizen's disrespect of democracy will not constitute a moral wrong.

### III. A DEFENSE OF VOTING

Here, once again, is my main argument.

- (1) Citizens in a healthy democracy have a *pro tanto* moral duty to fill their role excellently.
- (2) Excellent citizenship requires that one avoid disrespecting democracy.

- (3) In the right circumstances, failing to vote disrespects democracy.  
Therefore,
- (4) In the right circumstances, citizens in a healthy democracy have a pro tanto moral duty to vote.

This article's main task is to answer Brennan's objection by defending (2) and (3). With the idea of respect for practices in hand, we can begin.

#### A. PREMISE (2)

There are two dimensions of excellent citizenship—dimensions that loosely correlate to Darwall's distinction between appraisal respect (respect for skillful performance) and recognition respect. How do citizens earn appraisal respect? What does it mean to be skilled as a citizen? Traditional theories of excellent citizenship have already given us the answer. We saw, in section 2, that theorists traditionally identify promoting the common good through active political participation as a citizen's chief responsibility. Skillfully playing the "game" of politics, so to speak, is part of what makes citizens excellent.

But while skillful performance matters for excellence, the examples of Davis and the mercenary philosopher suggest that it is not the whole story. Even counting his ill-fated shot, Davis played well—he nearly tallied a triple-double, after all. Appraisal respect recognizes quality performance, and Davis warranted it. Similarly, the mercenary philosopher's defense of injustice might be creative or involve brilliant technical innovations. When someone scores lots of points, produces creative arguments of admirable rigor, or promotes the common good by passing landmark legislation, she is skillful.

However, when asked if Davis is an excellent basketball player, or if the mercenary philosopher excels as a philosopher, there is a strong impulse to hedge. One might say of Davis, "He's talented, *but* basketball players shouldn't be so selfish." Similarly, one might say of the mercenary philosopher, "She's smart, *but* philosophers shouldn't let private interests dictate their conclusions." Both of these characters have impeccable technical skills, but something seems amiss in their *attitudes*. One might be tempted to cash out Davis's failure in non-basketball terms—perhaps he is an excellent player but not such a great human being (or moral agent, or . . . ).<sup>12</sup> However, while Davis's actions might indicate some kind of failure as a moral agent, it would be a mistake to deny that his ill-fated shot is a basketball-wrong. Just as philosophy's founding ideals are necessary to understand why mercenary philosophers fail in a way that pundits do not, the team-oriented nature of basketball is necessary for understanding why players should not pursue individual achievement as an end in itself. In individualistic pursuits such as sprinting or boxing, once again, it is both

<sup>12</sup>I owe this point to an anonymous referee.



common and unproblematic to make individual achievement one's overriding professional aim. Similarly, and perhaps this more familiar case is clearer, when we say "... *but* philosophers should not let private interests dictate their conclusions," we are commenting upon the mercenary philosopher in her capacity as a philosopher. She has excellent technical skills, but nonetheless fails to excel in her role.

Thus, our judgments about the excellence of Davis and the mercenary philosopher are divided—"He's talented, *but* . . ." and "She's smart, *but* . . . ." These characters succeed along one dimension of excellence, but fail along another; their technical skills warrant appraisal respect, but they themselves fail to show recognition respect. Excellence in a role is two-fold.

$S$  is an excellent participant in practice  $P$  to the extent that  $S$  meets two conditions:

- (a)  $S$  is skilled (according to  $P$ 's standards), and
- (b)  $S$  avoids disrespecting  $P$ .

It would be satisfying to lexically order (a) and (b), or to assign them precise and consistent weights. But evaluative concepts are often not so tidy, particularly not when a thing's quality depends upon more than one property. Originality and rigor both factor into the quality of a philosophy paper; counterexamples abound the moment one prioritizes rigor over originality or vice versa. Fortunately, my defense of voting requires only the modest claim that both (a) and (b) matter.

Now, if we apply this account to the role of "citizen," we augment traditional conceptions of excellent citizenship in a plausible way. Traditional accounts emphasize technical skills—deliberation, coalition-building, persuasive speech, and the like—employed in service of the common good. All this falls under (a). But an excellent citizen will also avoid disrespecting democracy. She will not perform the democratic equivalent of Davis's ill-fated shot. We thus arrive at premise (2): excellent citizenship requires that one avoid disrespecting democracy.

## B. PREMISE (3)

Why does failing to vote in the right circumstances constitute disrespect for democracy? I will answer in two steps: the first connects non-voting to disrespect for democracy; the second explains why that connection holds only in the right circumstances.

To begin the first step, note that *popular rule* is one of democracy's foundational ideals. This, fortunately, is not a controversial stand on democracy's nature. There are two main schools of thought about democracy's value: instrumentalism and proceduralism. According to instrumentalism, popular rule is important because it is an effective way to achieve good outcomes. Richard Arneson, for example, endorses democracy only because it secures what he

regards as just outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Mill argues that democracy promotes citizens' autonomy by giving them a chance to participate in government.<sup>14</sup> Christopher Wellman notes that democracies, on average, protect human rights and promote economic prosperity better than competing forms of governance.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas instrumentalists value democracy for its substantive outcomes, proceduralists hold that democratic processes are valuable in themselves. One kind of proceduralist sees democracy's value as primarily epistemic; a second kind, as primarily moral. Fabienne Peter, arguably the leading epistemic theorist, holds that popular rule is a prerequisite for the sort of public deliberation that is necessary to constitute (epistemically) justified legislation.<sup>16</sup> Those who see democracy's intrinsic value as primarily moral often argue that popular rule—the practice of leaving decision-making in citizens' hands—recognizes citizens' moral equality. By giving each citizen the same power to govern, popular rule recognizes all citizens as moral equals.<sup>17</sup> This is not the place for a lengthy comparison of instrumentalism and proceduralism. The important point is that all theories of democracy—whether they emphasize substantive outcomes or intrinsically valuable procedures—embrace the ideal of popular rule. Whatever the true theory of democracy turns out to be, it is committed to popular rule.

So in order to avoid disrespecting democracy, the excellent citizen will give popular rule a place of prominence in her practical deliberations. She will see popular rule as an ideal that is *for her*, as having a legitimate claim to being reflected in her behavior. And this suggests that failing to vote (in the right circumstances) constitutes disrespect for democracy. Compare: It would have been easy for Davis to give team play appropriate consideration—he had but to dribble out the clock instead of shooting at the wrong basket. By failing to take that simple step, Davis disrespected basketball. To respect the pursuit of truth, the mercenary philosopher had but to refrain from writing sophisticated defenses of injustice. By failing to take that simple step, she disrespects philosophy. If a simple step will bring our behavior in line with the foundational ideals of our practice, failing to take it will often constitute disrespect. To respect popular rule, a citizen has but to stay moderately informed and cast a ballot. So when it is easy to stay informed and cast a ballot, failing to do so can express the judgment that popular rule is unimportant. In the right circumstances, failing to vote is the democratic equivalent of Davis's ill-fated shot.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Arneson 2004.

<sup>14</sup>Mill 1991.

<sup>15</sup>Wellman 2011, pp. 96–7.

<sup>16</sup>Peter 2009.

<sup>17</sup>Singer 1973; Waldron 1999.

<sup>18</sup>One might object that this argument does not distinguish between positive and negative actions. Davis and the mercenary philosopher should *refrain* from doing something; the voter has to *do* a particular thing. I am skeptical about the distinction between positive and negative actions. But even if that skepticism is misplaced, the objection fails because I require that voting be easy. When an action is easy, it is implausible that it is not obligatory because it is positive.

Now, the plausibility of this claim—that in the right circumstances, failing to vote constitutes disrespect—depends in part upon how we cash out the “the right circumstances.” The paragraph above alludes to one necessary characteristic: voting must be easy. If the polls have highly limited hours, or if one must navigate a labyrinthine bureaucracy to exercise one’s suffrage, failing to vote might not express disrespect. Further, it makes no difference whether voting is difficult because the system makes it so, or because one’s life is particularly complicated. The single parent who works three jobs and literally cannot find time to visit the polls is not disrespectful. “Parent” is a more important role than “citizen,” and her life simply does not have room for both.

A moment’s reflection reveals many other situations in which failing to vote does not constitute disrespect. Imagine: you are headed to the polls when a car crashes on the road in front of you; you stop to provide needed aid and miss the chance to vote. Or again: on Election Day, your partner gets fired from his dream job; instead of voting, you spend the day helping him navigate the emotional fallout. You manifest no disrespect in these cases because the tasks you perform are important, they cannot wait, and you don’t do them as a means to avoid voting.

There are other kinds of examples too. Suppose you are about to emigrate, and choose not to vote because you think political power rightfully belongs to those who are staying.<sup>19</sup> Your non-voting is motivated precisely by respect for popular rule—you are leaving the relevant *demos*, and therefore believe that you should not cast a ballot. Or, to take one last kind of case, if you choose not to vote because you are unable to vote wisely (perhaps the election concerns issues permanently beyond your ken), you manifest epistemic humility, not disrespect.<sup>20</sup>

So, in the “right circumstances,” voting is easy, a more pressing emergency does not crop up, one is staying in the relevant *demos*, and one has warranted beliefs about the best way to vote. There are, in all likelihood, indefinitely many other cases in which failing to vote is not disrespectful. It would (obviously) not be productive to list them all. What matters is that in the right circumstances, failing to vote signals that one does not give popular rule sufficient consideration in one’s deliberations, and that we can for the most part recognize when the circumstances aren’t right. So we arrive, finally, at premise (3): in the right circumstances, failing to vote disrespects democracy.

There is one last caveat: why does the duty to vote depend upon living in a healthy democracy? The answer is that we do not show disregard for popular rule by failing to participate in political systems that pay the ideal mere lip service.

<sup>19</sup>I owe this example to an anonymous referee.

<sup>20</sup>For many issues, however, an in-depth understanding is unnecessary. We needn’t understand the intricate details of global warming; it is sufficient that every legitimate earth scientist not funded by an energy company has for the last twenty years said that global warming has artificial causes. We needn’t be experts on farm-subsidies; every reputable economist disagrees with them. We needn’t be experts in military strategy; torture is a flagrant violation of human rights.

Egypt's former "president" Mubarak was a dictator—he rigged elections, sacrificed the common good to advance his private interests, and used the police to torture and tyrannize dissenting factions. The *appearance* of democracy, however, was crucial to Mubarak's rule. By making a show of functional democracy, Mubarak encouraged reformers to direct their efforts through the very legislative channels he controlled. And, even more significantly, the democratic façade enabled western powers to give Mubarak's regime the financial support it needed without appearing to fund a dictator.

Mubarak used popular rule as a smoke screen to cover up tyranny—democracy's arch-opponent on the political spectrum. So it is hard to see how failing to vote in Mubarak's Egypt disrespects democracy. I am *tempted* by a stronger claim: there is something wrong with voting in a system that uses democratic ideals as a cover for injustice. There is a sense in which voters help to facilitate the charade. However, while I am tempted by the strong claim, I am more certain that failing to vote in sufficiently corrupt regimes does not disrespect democracy. Many (arguably most) actual democracies are too corrupt for my argument to apply.

Caveats in premises lead to caveats in the conclusion: citizens of a *healthy* democracy have a pro tanto moral duty to vote, and only in the *right* circumstances. Some theorists write about the duty to vote in loftier, less qualified terms. My argument cannot give them what they want, but I think it gives us all it is plausible to expect. We should not, though, confuse a qualified duty with a weak one. If it is morally important to excel in the role of citizen—which it arguably is—it is morally important that we avoid disrespecting democracy.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A defense of voting grounded in the concept of excellent citizenship may succeed where consequentialist and Kantian arguments have failed. Whereas consequentialist arguments struggle to explain the value of causally ineffective actions, actions with little causal upshot can express disrespect, and thus count against one's excellence in a role. Whereas Kantian arguments struggle to explain why the job of the voter should be universalized, or why non-voters who find other ways to promote the common good are free riders, my argument can rely upon the rich set of norms that attends the role of "citizen."

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