

In Defense of Voting—Reinterpreting the Terms of the Voting Calculus with a View toward Election Law and Policy

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Democratic voting is desperately in need of defense. Contemporary institutions of mass electoral participation are undertheorized, and there is a critical disconnect between conceptions of voting in democratic theory and election laws and policies that implicate participatory values and interests. This dissertation fills some of these gaps between the theories and practices of modern democracy by examining the factors that motivate individual decisions to vote or abstain and the electoral institutions that structure and respond to such decisions. With a primary focus on elections in the United States, this work explores how normative conceptions of voting not only influence individual participation decisions, but also provide foundations for electoral rules and procedures that impact turnout levels, both in the aggregate and for distinct demographic groups. As an analytical framework, the rational choice calculus of voting is utilized to parse the varied motivations for turnout, with the four elements of the calculus providing the outline for the four main chapters of the dissertation. The voting calculus has often been interpreted in ways that minimize the value of voting and provide reasons that explain why individuals do not—and perhaps even should not—participate in elections. This dissertation critically examines those views, and it reinterprets the terms of the calculus in a manner that demonstrates how the act of voting can in fact be highly valued, which explains why individuals do—and indeed generally should—participate in democratic elections. The analysis proceeds by first redefining the expected probability of one vote having a causal effect on an election outcome (Chapter 1), then by reevaluating the normative significance of the instrumental benefits of voting (Chapter 2) and the various types of voting costs (Chapter 3), and finally by reconsidering the theoretical and practical implications of non-instrumental motivations for participation, especially the notion of a civic duty to vote (Chapter 4). Each chapter further derives policy, legal, and broader ethical implications associated with these new interpretations of the terms of the calculus and makes specific reform proposals designed to increase participation in American elections at federal, state, and local levels.

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