Chapter Two: The Ethics of Rational Choice and the Instrumental Benefits of Voting

"To vote or not to vote is all the same."
–John-Paul Sartre (1977, 209)

"Perhaps some degree of suffering is ineradicable from human life, perhaps the choice before man is always a choice of evils…"
–George Orwell (2000 [1944], 244)

1) INTRODUCTION

What good is voting? More formally, what are the individual-level expected benefits of participating in elections for democratic representation? This is a complex question fraught with both empirical and normative difficulties. From an empirical perspective, there is enormous potential variation in the perceived (*ex ante*) utility of voting. In any given election, some individuals might attach momentous value to the outcome and expect a potentially high benefit from participating, while others could believe the outcome matters little or not at all, leaving them with no instrumental motivation for participating. The nature of the electoral office at stake is another possible source of variation, as an individual who anticipates a potential benefit from the outcome of a high-profile contest might see little or no value to voting in a race further down the ballot. More broadly, the perceived utility of voting may also be related to the institutional context of democratic representation, including factors such as electoral system design, the structure of party competition, and ballot access rules. Furthermore, prevailing political conditions and even general cultural trends can influence how the value of voting is perceived, in general or in any specific election. So it is difficult even

to clarify exactly what it means to empirically inquire into the prospective benefits of electoral participation.

The difficulties are only compounded in seeking a conceptual grasp on the benefits of voting from the perspective of normative democratic theory. There is fundamental disagreement and even confusion about the value of participating in the mass elections of modern democracies. What is truly at stake in these formalized mechanisms for choosing political representatives? Do elections in fact embody forces of momentous weight involving the coercive power of the state and the management of potentially violent social conflict (e.g. Adams 2009)? Or are elections in fact more often a form of political theatre characterized by illusion and misdirection, with the ballot serving as a weak and effectively worthless gesture toward the ideal of popular sovereignty, working to conceal the true governing power that resides beyond democratic control (e.g. Crouch 2004)?[1] Particularly given the political consequences of rising economic inequality in the United States, some democratic critics have come to see elections in this country as "essentially a sideshow with policy manufactured elsewhere" (Erikson 2015, 24). Regardless of which of these characterizations comes closer to the truth, this inquiry points toward a more basic question in analyzing the benefits of participating in elections: What are the normative foundations for ascriptions of value in the act of voting?

Modern democracies provide many different avenues for political participation, and assessments of the efficacy of voting relative to other means of engagement can affect evaluations of voting's benefits. Participatory theorists, who might be expected to lend support to the potentially widespread act of voting, may instead exhibit skepticism

[1] See also Fenster's (2005, 374) description of Murray Edelman's view that "politics doesn't matter, since the state, captured by a small set of interests, persuades its citizens of its value through the management and exploitation of legitimating symbols."

about the value of mere participation in elections without a broader base of democratic engagement (e.g. Pateman 1970). Similarly, deliberative theorists may tend to view electoral choices as insufficiently reasoned and thus inadequate as a basis for legitimate democratic decision-making (e.g. Fishkin 2009). On the other hand, some democratic theorists emphasize how choices of political representation may in fact have hugely important practical consequences (e.g. Beerbohm 2012). At the minimum, elections can be seen as non-violent means of resolving the struggle for political power (Schumpeter 2003 [1942]), which implies that the outcomes of these competitions for authority and leadership may carry significant potential for benefit or harm. More expansively, the idea exemplified by the common political refrain that "elections matter" reflects a belief that there are important public policy implications associated with participation in elections (e.g. Hill and Leighley 1992). The potential utility—or disutility—that may be brought about through voting could thus be quite high, not only at the individual level, but also for groups, societies, and possibly even the entire planet. From this perspective, it becomes clear that profound moral issues may be implicated in voting decisions. Normative political theorists may therefore choose to emphasize how voters should exercise due care and caution in their decision-making given the gravity of the potential consequences of electoral outcomes (e.g. Brennan 2011a). The perceived benefits of voting are thus intimately entwined with ideals of popular sovereignty and conceptions of democratic ethics, and with issues relating to how these ideals and ethics are implemented in practice.

To aid in addressing these challenges, this work focuses on contemporary American elections. This designates a context of majoritarian institutions and primarily two-party politics, regulated under particular legal-administrative regimes, having a distinctive—though heterogeneous—political culture, and a federal constitutional design

with significant decentralization of governing authority. The limitation to American elections obviously still leaves room for enormous variation in the perceived benefits of voting, but this provides at least some boundaries to the inquiry. The remaining complexity is addressed by employing the framework of the rational choice calculus of voter turnout ($pB - C + D$) to model the individual decision to vote or abstain in a particular election. This allows for conceptually isolating the expected instrumental utility of voting (B) from other factors that may influence turnout decisions, and it thereby provides a foundation for classifying various attitudes toward the value of voting and assessing the primary motivations for participation or abstention.

The issues raised by this exploration of the benefits of voting are vital to both democratic theory and practice. To be clear, this approach does not directly address fundamental disagreements about democratic meaning, although it does formulate an analysis and argument that may be more relevant under certain theoretical approaches, as discussed below. More broadly, this work interrogates some of the prevailing ideas and assumptions about the instrumental value of voting, and it suggests a new interpretive focus that may yield important insights into how and why individuals decide to vote or abstain. This approach will be shown to have practical significance not only for turnout decisions, but also for vote choice, as well as potentially broad policy implications for the institutional structure of elections. Distinguishing and clarifying the expected instrumental benefits of voting is thus a crucial part of assessing the general motivations behind voter turnout. Furthermore, by paving the way for studying expressive (or otherwise non-instrumental) benefits, as well as the costs of electoral participation, this work forms a key portion of a more expansive critical evaluation of the theory and practice of electoral democracy in the United States and elsewhere.

Section 2 introduces and explicates the B term of the turnout calculus and reviews some of the main ways it has been construed in the normative and empirical literature on voting. Section 3 outlines the new interpretative focus for the instrumental value of voting through a classification and analysis of three primary attitudinal motivations behind B-related abstention: indifference, alienation, and ambivalence. True instrumental indifference is most commonly associated with lack of information about the options on the ballot. The motivations behind alienation are more complex, and this section first distinguishes between expressive alienation and its instrumental consequences in creating functional indifference, which leads to discussion of both the rationality and the ethics of voting for lesser evils, and the possibility of a moral obligation to participate even under conditions of extreme alienation. This section continues by exploring the problems of ambivalence in the face of conflicting political ideals or motivations, focusing on the ethical dilemmas that arise when elections pose particularly hard choices, whether between perceived goods, perceived evils, or between instrumental motivations to vote and expressive reasons to abstain. Section 4 then discusses some implications for election law and policy in addressing the attitudes that lead to B-based abstention, while Section 5 summarizes and concludes with some thoughts on the potential value of voting even in an admittedly imperfect political system.

2) Assessing the Instrumental Benefits of Voting

In the rational choice calculus of voter turnout, B represents the utility that a potential voter may expect to gain if the individual's preferred candidate should win the election. In their canonical work formalizing the turnout calculus, William Riker and Peter Ordeshook explain how the multiplication of p by B—but not by C or D—reflects a

logical distinction between expected utility (or disutility) that is dependent on the result of the election, and any expected utility that may subsist in the act of voting independent of the outcome (Riker and Ordeshook 1968, 27). This is the foundation for conceptually isolating the instrumental benefits of voting—represented by B—from what are typically termed expressive benefits—represented by D, as well as from the costs of voting, represented by C.[2]

Anthony Downs initially formulated the benefits of voting as the "expected party differential," defined as the prospective voter's expectation of difference in utility between the candidates in a two-party system (Downs 1957a, 39). Downs' detailed explanation of how to compute this differential drifts into complexities, but his fundamental point is a simple one: In determining the benefits of voting, a rational decision involves two discrete utility calculations, as prospective voters must separately predict the benefits they expect to derive from each party in order to assess the difference. The turnout decision is thus modeled not simply as an assessment of expected utility from one's preferred party prevailing in the election; rather, the decision also requires assessing one's utility should the other party win. Calculating the benefits of voting thus always involves a comparison of (at least) two options, and B in fact represents an expectation regarding relative rather than absolute utility. The implications of this are explored further below, but for now, an arithmetic consequence of this notion is as follows: Note that since the value of B results from a subtraction of two utilities, the result will be positive even when the two utilities are negative (i.e., disutilities). In other words, even if a prospective voter happens to deeply detest each of the candidates in a

[2] Riker and Ordeshook note that in theory there may also be instrumental costs, or costs that are dependent on the outcome, which should therefore also be multiplied by p. As an example they point to the possibility that an employee may expect to suffer increased reprisal from an employer as a result of a closer election outcome (27). They opt to ignore these types of costs due to their presumed idiosyncrasy, but in any event such costs could be conceived as negative utility in B.

two-person race, there could still be an instrumental benefit to voting if the aversion toward one candidate is significantly less than the other.

For several possible reasons, there appears to have been much less attention in the voting literature to B than to the other elements of the calculus. The most prominent reason is presumably the alleged discounting effect of p, which represents the probability that an individual vote is expected to causally influence the election outcome. The value of p is conventionally interpreted as so vanishingly small that multiplying it by B effectively reduces pB to zero regardless of how important the result of an election might be to an individual. This is the basis of the so-called paradox of voter turnout, which underlies the commonly held belief that voting in a large election with the goal of affecting the outcome is never rational, since the instrumental benefits of participation are always essentially nil (e.g. Owen and Grofman 1984; Aldrich 1997, 378). Yet another reason for the lack of attention to B may be that its assessment is highly subjective, with no clear way to objectively determine what its value is, much less what it should be.[3] Furthermore, questions of how political parties or elected officials are viewed as providing varying benefits—whether in the form of private or public goods—raise contentious normative problems, in addition to being difficult to measure empirically. For these and perhaps other reasons, as Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler (2014, 123) state, "Discussions of benefits as integral to the decision to vote are few."

When a value for B is required for an analysis using the voting calculus, studies in both decision and game theory may normalize the benefit of voting to provide a utility of 1, with losing providing 0 utility (Aldrich 1993, 247-248; Palfrey and Rosenthal 1985,

[3] Contrast this with p and C, both of which are at least amenable to objective evaluation, although in practice of course there may be wide variation in how they are subjectively perceived. Valuation of the D term is presumably also highly subjective, but it has received greater attention since expressive benefits are said to provide the only rational motivation for voting given the presumed miniscule value of p.

63-65). This methodological assumption, while technically useful, obviously does little to exemplify the differing strengths of preferences for candidates as actually experienced by voters. A similar problem arises with empirical specifications like that of André Blais, who uses survey responses on the perceived importance of election outcomes to estimate a value for *B* within a fixed scale (Blais 2000, 73-77; see also Blais et al. 2000, 185-186). This modeling of *B* is useful in showing how relative differences in the perceptions of voting's benefits may affect the turnout decision, but it provides a very limited range for assessing perceptions of the substantive benefits of having one's preferred candidate prevail in a specific election.

Geoffrey Brennan and James Buchanan (1984) provide a more illustrative evaluation of *B* by allowing it to range as a monetary sum. In an equally divided electorate of 100 million voters, they show that given the miniscule value of *p*, *B* would have to be valued at more than 12 thousand dollars for voting to be instrumentally rational, even with only minimal voting costs of 1 dollar. Moreover, as the election becomes even slightly less than perfectly competitive, the value of *B* required to balance out even 1 dollar in costs quickly becomes astronomical (Brennan and Buchanan 1984, 190). For an average congressional district, similar calculations show that even in a race deemed "too close to call," the value of *B* would need to be over 1 million dollars for the calculus to yield a positive result, which is said to provide conclusive evidence that participating is never instrumentally rational (Lomasky and Brennan 2000, 66-67).

However, it remains difficult to draw reliable conclusions about actual *B*-based decision-making based on these types calculations. Perhaps average voters might actually value having their preferred representative in office at 1 million dollars or even much

higher?[4] This question reflects the deeper normative difficulty involved in interpreting *B*, having to do with how people perceive the role of government and its value to them in a broader sense, in addition to judgments about the particular political system in place at the moment. From a perspective of normative democratic theory, the instrumental benefits of voting are often assumed to be quite low. Going back at least to Robert Michels (2001 [1911]), many political theorists have expressed skepticism regarding the benefits of voting under conditions of mass representative democracy. Even theorists of participatory democracy, like Carole Pateman (1970), who as indicated might be expected to lend support to the practice of participating in elections, have instead often seemed to belittle the value of voting. Communitarian theorists, who likewise might conceivably value electoral participation as a collectively shared public ritual, and even perhaps as a responsibility of democratic citizenship, have instead also seemed generally skeptical of the value of voting. Robert Bellah, for example, appears to advocate an attitude of instrumental indifference, stating that American political contests exhibit a "very tame polarity, because the opponents agree so deeply on most of the terms of the problem" (Bellah 1995, 51).

The recent civic engagement literature has likewise tended to deemphasize voting as a valuable form of democratic participation moving forward into the new political environment (see e.g. Boyte 2005; Zukin et al. 2006; Deneen 2008). Furthermore, some democratic theorists seem to harbor a normative bias against representative forms of democracy, which may be seen as distancing citizens from the possibility of genuine self-government and popular sovereignty. For example, Benjamin Barber appears to justify an

[4] One might think to look at campaign contributions to provide some context on willingness to pay to elect a favored candidate, but contributions provide (or are at least perceived as providing) only a marginal increase in the probability of a candidate's winning, so they might vastly understate the perceived value of *B*. A better proxy might perhaps be willingness to pay for the opportunity of casting a decisive vote.

attitude of alienation from electoral politics, arguing that voting is ineffective when citizens must rely on elected representatives in place of enjoying direct participation in government (Barber 1984, 171). Similarly, proponents of a deliberative conception of democracy, like James Fishkin (2009), also seem to devalue voting in their appeals for more thoughtful discussion of political issues than electoral representation generally provides (see Mackie 2011; Pennington 2010). Given an apparent deficiency of reasoned reflection and debate in electoral politics, these theorists view voting decisions as conveying at best vague and ambivalent preferences—or at worst highly irrational and potentially prejudiced dispositions.

In the empirical literature on the calculus, when the perceived benefits of voting are evaluated they have generally been found to have a significant effect on the turnout decision (Filer and Kenny 1980; Katosh and Traugott 1982; Blais 2000, 43, 143; Leighley and Nagler 2014, 134). Nevertheless, the value of *B* has often been assumed to be small and insignificant relative to the other terms of the calculus. For example, John Aldrich is frequently cited for the view that the instrumental benefits of voting are minimal (Aldrich 1993; 1997). Benjamin Highton likewise states that "there is little doubt that for nearly everyone, voting is a low-benefit activity" (Highton 2004, 507). Predictions of candidate convergence based on the median voter theorem (Hotelling 1929; Black 1948), in addition to broad complaints about the lack of political diversity in a two-party system—sometimes called "Tweedledee and Tweedeldum" politics—may also contribute to estimations of a relatively low value for *B* in the context of American elections. Aldrich thus states, "If there is little difference between the two candidates," the *B*-term will be relatively small" (Aldrich 1997, 386), further writing that "it is not at all clear that people perceive much difference about who wins most elections" (Aldrich 1993, 263). Moreover, these observations about a low value of *B* are generally made with

regard to U.S. federal elections; in state or local elections, where the political stakes may be perceived to be much smaller, the value of B might be even lower (Percival et al. 2007; Blais 2000, 43).[5]

Additionally, the conventional empirical finding in the voting literature is that higher turnout levels in major U.S. elections would generally not yield significant differences in either electoral or policy outcomes (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Bennett and Resnick 1992; Gant and Lyons 1993; Nagel and McNulty 1996; Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Sides et al. 2008). This could perhaps be taken to imply that the prospective instrumental benefits of participating in these contests would be minimal for an individual deciding whether to vote or abstain. However, several other studies question the conventional wisdom that turnout doesn't really matter, instead finding evidence that higher levels of participation—particularly by lower socioeconomic demographics—would in fact alter political outcomes (Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill et al. 1995; Fellowes and Rowe 2004; Martinez and Gil 2005; Leighley and Nagler 2014). Relatedly, the question of whether elected officials are generally responsive to public preferences may also be relevant to assessing the benefits of voting. Many studies of this issue have documented at least moderate policy responsiveness to the political opinions and vote choices of American citizens (Monroe 1979; Monroe 1998; Stimson et al. 1995; Martin 2003; Canes-Wrone 2015). At the same time, however, such responsiveness is generally shown to be biased against the preferences of nonvoters and lower socio-

[5] On the other hand, one might think that the perceived benefits of voting might be higher in subnational elections, since state and local governments could be seen as having more direct effects on a prospective voter's social and economic conditions (see Wood 2002, 228; Anzia 2014, 235 n. 3). Note that when state or local elections are held concurrently with federal elections, voting in down-ballot races is effectively costless, and participation may therefore be instrumentally rational even with low levels of expected benefits (see *infra* footnotes 30-31 and accompanying text).

economic demographic groups (Schumaker and Getter 1977; Griffin and Newman 2005; Gilens 2005; Bartels 2009; Gilens and Page 2014).

Another important issue in interpreting the value of B is whether to characterize the prospective benefits of voting as purely self-interested, or whether broader motivations to affect general social welfare should also be considered. By raising the possibility of social or altruistic benefits, several scholars have suggested a high value of B as a potential solution to the apparent paradox of voter turnout. Riker and Ordeshook in fact opened the way for such a B-term solution, suggesting, "It is likely that B is much higher for many people than anyone has heretofore supposed" (Riker and Ordeshook 1968, 39). Howard Margolis (1982) appears to have been the first to offer a detailed analysis of how introducing altruism or group-interest to the rational choice model could resolve the turnout paradox. In his model, individuals have separate utility functions for self-interest and group-interest, and they may therefore act rationally by devoting a share of their resources to altruistic goals (Margolis 1982, 38-39). Margolis concedes that in terms of self-interested utility the instrumental benefits of voting might not amount to more than a few thousand dollars, but he suggests that "the *social* value of a presidential election outcome is easily estimated in the billions."[6] He thus explains that even given a p valued at just 1 in 100 million, a B of 1 billion dollars would make voting rational with costs under 10 dollars (88-89).

This approach raises some thorny issues concerning the meaning and motivations of rational behavior, echoing debates about the validity of transferring the common economic assumption of self-interest into the political arena (see Udehn 1996). Perhaps this explains why the B-term solution of Margolis seems for some time to have received

[6] Margolis supports this conclusion with the fact that one billion dollars represents only a small fraction of the federal budget, over which the President has at least some discretion (Margolis 1982, 89).

scant attention in the voting literature. More recent work, however, has revived this approach. Like Margolis, Richard Jankowski proposes introducing a separate *B* to represent the expected utility from altruistic concerns with benefiting others, similarly demonstrating how it can be instrumentally rational to vote if one believes that one's preferred candidate will provide one billion dollars in collective or group benefits (Jankowski 2002, 64). Likewise, Aaron Edlin, Andrew Gelman, and Noah Kaplan utilize a social benefit model to show how voting in a relatively close election can be rational given the assumption that one's preferred candidate will provide a benefit of only ten dollars per citizen (Edlin et al. 2008, 297; but see Brennan 2011a, 19-20). Concluding that participating in large elections is rational only "to the extent that voters are *not selfish*," Edlin et al. also point out that the empirical literature on voting motivations is consistent with a social benefit explanation, given the strong evidence for "sociotropic" considerations in vote choices (Edlin et al. 2008, 304-305).[7] James Fowler adds experimental evidence for the proposition that altruistic concern for the well being of others is a primary motivation in turnout decisions (Fowler 2006).

Furthermore, from a normative perspective, David Estlund forcefully argues that voting should always be motivated by sociotropic concerns, indicating that "to the extent that voters…address only their own interests, the method of social choice is less than fully democratic" (Estlund 1990, 423). It may thus be quite reasonable to view the potential benefits of voting as exceedingly high. Simply put, individuals can have reasons to care deeply about electoral outcomes, and they may accordingly place a very high value on *B* in the calculus. As indicated, this perspective tends to highlight the profound

[7] Paul Meehl introduced the term "sociotropic" to designate the attitude of "taking some account…of other persons' interests or…the collective's interest (Meehl 1977, 14)." Although evidence of sociotropic considerations in vote choices does not necessarily prove a lack of selfish motivations (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981, 132), it is today accepted even by the most economically-oriented theorists that voters are typically motivated to a significant degree, if not entirely, by collective concerns (see e.g. Caplan 2007, 19).

ethical issues that are involved in democratic elections, which legitimize the coercive power of the state and its legal monopoly on violence. An election may in fact be seen as "a form of ritualized, non-violent combat" (Adams 2009, 120), with the act of voting itself characterized as part of a coercive process in which democratic citizens engage in what is essentially "an exercise of *power* over one another" (Beerbohm 2012, 51). This approach lends support to a normative theory of democracy wherein citizens may incur moral liability for the outcomes that result from their decisions in the electoral arena. Political theorists may thus emphasize the potential for citizens to impose enormous costs and benefits on others through their electoral decisions (see e.g. Caplan 2007), thereby placing great responsibility on voters to make "good" choices (Brennan 2011a), however these may be defined.

As should be clear from this discussion, the perceived benefits of voting are subject to wide variation among a citizenry with diverse ideas about democratic norms, and faced with varying types of electoral choices. It might thus seem difficult to generalize at all about the perceived benefits of voting. However, in place of simply assuming that B is generally very high or very low, as much of the previous work in this area seems to do, the value of B may instead be allowed its natural variation in hopes of deriving a theory that can account for these discrepancies. Focusing in more closely on the Downsian differential and its effects on the individual turnout decision in a specific election will help suggest a useful typology of potential reasons for B-based decisions to participate or abstain from voting.

3) *B*-BASED TURNOUT DECISIONS: INDIFFERENCE, ALIENATION, AND AMBIVALENCE

The social benefit resolutions of the turnout paradox, as described above, rationalize participation by relying on the possibility of a high enough *B* to outweigh even an infinitesimally small *p*. However, if *p* were actually a much larger fraction, perhaps even approaching or equaling one in a highly competitive election, an extremely high value for *B* would not be needed to make a decision to participate seem rational.[8] Nonetheless, even assuming that *p* were equal to one, it would obviously still not be instrumentally rational to participate in a given election where *B* is perceived to be zero. There are at least three potential attitudes that could give reason for the perceived benefits voting to be perceived as so negligible that turning out to vote seems useless even in a very close election: a) indifference, b) alienation, and c) ambivalence.

a) Indifference

As indicated, *B* will be very small where electoral choices are perceived to be so similar to each other that any expected utility difference between them seems negligible or nonexistent. Thus, Downs' application of the median voter theorem in a spatial model is generally depicted as implying a convergence of ideological platforms that would be expected to yield a very minimal or zero value for *B* (see Grofman 2004, 25). Similarly, game-theoretic equilibrium analysis predicts strategic convergence of candidates to an identical position, resulting in universal abstention (e.g. Ledyard 1984, 18). Melvin Hinich and Peter Ordeshook were perhaps the first to formally define a decision to

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[8] As argued in Chapter 1, *p* may be interpreted as equal to 1 whenever a predicted electoral outcome is too close to call, and it should generally have a non-negligible value as long as an election is somewhat competitive. See also Riker and Ordeshook (1968, 39), suggesting that individuals may greatly overestimate the value of *p*. Blais empirically confirms the propensity to overestimate *p*, particularly in close elections, and he suggests that individuals may not actually multiply *p* and *B*, but may instead consider them separately and simply add them together (Blais 2000, 138).

abstain based on an insignificant utility differential between candidates or parties as abstention due to *indifference* (Hinich and Ordeshook 1971, 75; see also Brody and Page 1973, 2). In the simplest spatial model, indifference would be represented as in Figure 2.1, with the prospective voter's ideal position represented by X, and the positions of the candidates in a two-person race represented by A and B:

Figure 2.1: Indifference due to Candidate Convergence

In practice, however, predictions of convergence have not generally borne out (Grofman 2004). This is particularly evident in the strongly polarized environment of contemporary U.S. politics (see Hetherington 2001; Pildes 2011). More commonly perhaps, indifference-based abstention may arise from lack of information about the choices on the ballot, which prevents a prospective voter from evaluating the utility differential between candidates. Thus, John Matsusaka demonstrates how having less information about electoral choices, and therefore being less certain about how to evaluate the candidates or parties, leads to a lower evaluation of *B* and a decreased likelihood of voting (Matsusaka 1995).[9] Indifference resulting from insufficient information is indeed normatively and empirically important, but it does not entail any direct engagement with perceived benefits through evaluation of a utility differential. Instead, the value of *B* may be seen as equal to zero simply because the prospective voter,

[9] Matsusaka notes that in practice *more* information could actually make one less certain of one's prior beliefs, also leading to a lower value of *B* (Matsusaka 1995, 112; see also Tollison and Willett 1973). Information costs and their implications are discussed extensively in Chapter 3's analysis of the *C* term of the calculus.

lacking any relevant information with the regard to the electoral decision, has no basis for assessing the options (or the individual's own position in relation to them), and no instrumental reason for voting, as depicted in Figure 2.2.

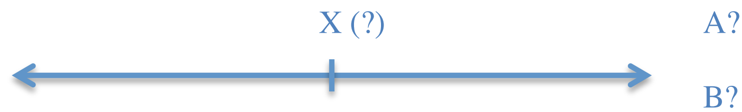

Figure 2.2: Indifference due to Lack of Information

b) Alienation

A perhaps more complex source of *B*-based turnout decisions arises with *alienation*, which may be simply understood as having a negative attitude toward all options presented on the ballot. Hinich and Ordeshook thus define alienation in terms of perceptions of negative utility, stating: "A citizen's probability of voting is inversely related to the loss he [or she] associates with his [or her] most preferred candidate" (Hinich and Ordeshook 1971, 75). However, as Richard Brody and Benjamin Page explain, abstaining due to this type of alienation is not necessarily instrumentally rational, since there would still be a positive utility difference between candidates even if the associated utilities are both negative (Brody and Page 1973, 3). Unless candidate positions are perceived as convergent, one candidate will always be closer to the voter's ideal point, and there could thus be a strictly instrumental motivation for participating even under conditions of alienation. Brody and Page thus write, "Given a difference between two disliked candidates, abstention could lead to the victory of the greater over the lesser evil; knowing this, the rational citizen should vote" (Brody and Page 1973, 3). In fact, alienation-based abstention associated with a decision to withhold a vote for a "lesser evil" appears to be more of an expressive rather than an instrumental motivation, and it is consequently better modeled in *D* rather than in *B* (see Brennan and Hamlin

1998, 155). In reality, a prospective voter may sometimes have to choose between instrumental and expressive motivations, which could pose a particularly hard choice, as explored further below.

More persuasively perhaps, alienation-based abstention for instrumental reasons can be depicted as the situation where a prospective voter perceives both candidates in a two-person race to be so distant from the ideal position that it yields what is in effect an attitude of indifference.[10] As depicted in Figure 2.3, alienation is thus instrumentally relevant only when it results in *functional* indifference between the candidates:

Figure 2.3: Functional Indifference due to Alienation

The negative effects of alienation on the turnout decision, beyond being consistent with common sense expectations, have been empirically demonstrated as well (Zipp 1985, Plane and Gershtenson 2004, Leighley and Nagler 2014; Adams et al. 2006).[11] From a normative perspective, alienation is extremely important, representing perhaps the most common *B*-based motivation for non-voting. E. E. Schattschneider's seminal work, *The Semisovereign People*, examines abstention from this exact perspective, explaining how the primary locus of conflict in modern democratic politics takes place around "the

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[10] This seems generally consistent with an assumption of decreasing intensity of preferences, such that expected utility decreases more quickly moving further away from an individual's ideal point (see e.g. Valasek 2012, 347).

[11] These studies distinguish between turnout effects associated with indifference—measured as the perceived distance between the two candidates, and effects associated with alienation—measured as the distance between the individual's ideal position and the position of the closer candidate. They do not appear to distinguish expressively-based alienation from alienation that is instrumentally relevant because it leads to functional indifference, as suggested by the analysis here. These two types of alienation may in fact be difficult or impossible to distinguish in practice, but in theory they should be seen as separate potential motivations for abstention. Some implications of expressive alienation, modeled as negative utility in the *D* term, are discussed below. See Callander and Wilson for a formal model of specifically expressive alienation, demonstrating how it decreases turnout, increases polarization, and also "has a dramatic impact on the behavior of strategic candidates and policy outcomes" (Callander and Wilson 2007, 1047-1048).

kinds of things that make the vote valuable" (Schattschneider 1960, 102). Accordingly, in place of indifference resulting from an apparent convergence of parties or candidates, it more commonly results from efforts to induce alienation among certain individuals and groups, as candidates and parties aim to dissuade these potential voters from participating by attempting "to make the vote meaningless" for these citizens (103). Schattschneider thus concludes, "Abstention reflects the suppression of the options and alternatives that reflect the needs of the nonparticipants" (105), which he refers to as the *displacement* of political conflict.

Schattschneider's displacement theory holds that the perceived benefits of voting are structured by the organization of partisan alignments along certain ideological cleavages, which regulate the nature and scope of political conflict and thus determine the value of participating in an election. An instrumentally rational decision to vote implies a finding of significant difference in utility between the ballot options, with lines of political cleavage raising issues that resonate with the individual's desires and preferences. Conversely, a decision to abstain is explained by the boundaries of political conflict being drawn far enough away from the individual's core concerns that the outcome is perceived as irrelevant. Abstention, according to Schattschneider, is thus not best understood through observations of the qualities and characteristics of the nonvoting public on the "demand side," but is rather better explained by the "supply side" manipulation of the benefits of voting by those with power to set the terms of political debate. This represents a unique perspective on abstention that has important consequences for normative democratic theory. In place of focusing on demographic characteristics that distinguish voters from non-voters (e.g. Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), or focusing on how electoral rules and regulations may increase voting costs in a way that discourages broader participation (e.g. Piven and Cloward 1988), abstention

under this approach is seen as a logical response to limitations being imposed on the context and scope of political conflict.[12] Rather than reflecting some motivational or informational deficiency on the part of non-voters, abstention can instead be seen as "the outcome of a reasoned, thoughtful political position" that results from the lack of a perceived benefit to participating (Zipp 1985, 59; see also Plane and Gershtenson 2004, 88).

However, the main point of emphasis from the perspective of the calculus is that this type of B-based abstention is only instrumentally rational when alienation leads to functional indifference regarding the electoral outcome. As indicated, if two candidates are positioned far away from the individual's ideal point, with both predicted to provide negative utility, there is still an instrumental benefit to voting for the perceived lesser evil if that candidate is seen as providing somewhat less negative utility than the other. In fact, voting against a lesser evil should not necessarily be viewed as theoretically problematic, as situations of being forced to choose between evils are arguably quite common, and at least from an instrumentally rational perspective there would seem to be nothing wrong with having to make such a choice. As implied by Brody and Page, a decision to abstain under such circumstances could actually be seen as decidedly *irrational* from the perspective that it might "lead to the victory" of the greater evil. In the absence of functional indifference, voting for of a lesser evil could in fact conceivably take the form of a *moral obligation*. If one accepts the sociotropic interpretation of B in the voting calculus, and one believes that an election could be close enough for the value of p to be near or equal to one (meaning one's vote is virtually certain to affect the

[12] This is not meant to imply that demographic variables aren't good predictors of turnout, which they of course continue to be (Smets and van Ham 2013), or that demographic biases in turnout are not normatively important, which they will be as long as socioeconomic inequality continues to influence turnout and political responsiveness (APSA 2004; Gilens 2005; Solt 2010). Furthermore, the effects of institutionally determined voting costs are also important, as discussed in Chapter 3.

outcome), then it seems a short step to derive a moral obligation to do what is within one's power to prevent the greater evil from taking hold.[13]

This perspective on the ethics of electoral participation is well suited to Eric Beerbohm's conception of democracy as a "system of shared liability" (Beerbohm 2012, 29). According to Beerbohm, "No matter how vanishingly small our individual contribution…we still are answerable to individuals who face the terms that we play some role in setting." This approach to democratic ethics underlies an instrumental motivation for voting even under conditions of alienation, as Beerbohm asserts, "We can share in the job of governance while finding the ensuing laws to be odious and even alienating to our basic convictions" (29). Maintaining a sociotropic perspective on the benefits of voting, Beerbohm thus outlines the basis for a moral obligation to cast one's vote in opposition to a perceived greater evil: "To be a citizen is to be put into a moral relation with millions of other individuals…. Failing to play a contributory role in defeating political injustice, under certain conditions,[14] makes [citizens] accomplices to the state's wrongdoing" (63). Clearly, this is an ethics of voting that places great responsibility on democratic citizens.

It is worthwhile to contrast this instrumentally derived duty to vote that emerges from the interpretation and assessment of *B* with another perspective on democratic ethics

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[13] This of course assumes that the costs of voting are not prohibitively high, and it also assumes the absence of any competing moral duty to abstain for expressive reasons, as discussed below.

[14] Beerbohm qualifies his argument for moral complicity in democratic outcomes by indicating that individuals who have no opportunity to achieve meaningful representation due to circumstances of socioeconomic and political inequality may have no ethical duty to participate, asserting: "If some of the poorest citizens have no observable power over their representatives…we cannot insist that they have a strong reason to vote" (Beerbohm 2012, 77). This qualification, however, does not preclude the possibility of an instrumentally derived duty to vote against a perceived greater evil even among highly marginalized and alienated citizens. In fact, Beerbohm describes his theory of shared liability as resting in part on expressive, rather than instrumental, motivations: "The very idea of complicity…relies on a conception of action as having partly expressive or symbolic value that is morally distinct from its production value" (75). He furthermore admits there "may be other arguments" for marginalized citizens to participate (77).

that derives a moral duty to *abstain* based on valuation of the benefits of voting. Jason Brennan argues that "citizens have an obligation not to vote badly. They should abstain rather than pollute democracy with bad votes" (Brennan 2011a, 68). More specifically, Brennan holds that individuals have a duty to refrain from what he terms "unexcused harmful voting," which "occurs when people vote, without sufficient reason, for harmful policies or candidates likely to produce harmful policies" (69). Like Beerbohm, Brennan maintains a sociotropic perspective on voting's benefits, yet he reaches the exact opposite conclusion on the likely direction of any moral obligation, stating, "Voters should justifiedly believe that the policies or candidates they support would promote the common good. Otherwise they should abstain from voting" (91). In effect, Brennan argues that individuals who are not well informed about politics and policy lack the requisite "epistemic and moral credentials" (101) for electoral participation, and they are therefore likely to create social disutility through their votes, given that their decisions are largely motivated by ignorance and bias (see also Caplan 2007).

This is of course a very different approach to interpreting the benefits of voting. Beerbohm's potential duty to participate is based on a subjective individual assessment of the value of B, consistent with the framework of the calculus, while Brennan's approach seems to hold voters to a more objective standard of utility assessment. Yet the two perspectives are not necessarily wholly inconsistent. Like Beerbohm, Brennan's approach to electoral ethics also places a great deal of individual responsibility on democratic citizens, though it arguably demands too much—and may even be conceptually incoherent—in requiring voters to abstain when they somehow know that their vote is likely to yield more social benefit than harm.[15] Moreover, while it is presumably true that

[15] Brennan admits that it could seem trivial (or "self-effacing") to require that individuals cast their votes in a manner justified in promoting the common good, since people generally seem implicitly to believe that their choices are in fact justified in this manner. However, he argues that individuals will sometimes

abstention would be rational for individuals who believed their votes were likely to result in social harm, in formal terms of the calculus this would imply a preference for voting in favor of a candidate expected to provide less utility, which of course does not seem very reasonable (barring a strategic motivation). In effect, Brennan appears to argue that prospective voters who know they lack the requisite qualifications to vote in favor of the common good should always value B at zero, adopting a stance of functional indifference due to their inability to make the right decision. This is a complex normative claim that may or may not be defensible, but from the subjective perspective of individuals who do in fact perceive a utility differential, and thus are not functionally indifferent, and who additionally believe they *are* qualified to make a justified decision, even Brennan might be forced to admit the possibility of a moral obligation to participate.[16] What is clear is that Brennan believes the potential value of voting to be extremely high, given his position that "harmful voting" may result in great collective disutility. The potential duty to vote discussed here thus rests on foundations similar to those Brennan employs in

intentionally do things they know are wrong, and that the effects of such "vices" may be minimized through a process of self-realization (Brennan 2011a, 90-91). For an argument against the notion that individuals knowingly make wrong voting decisions (engaging in "willful perversity"), see Bennett and Friedman (2008, 206-212); Friedman (2013a). Also see the response to Brennan's abstention argument by González-Ricoy (2012).

[16] It is of course possible to dispute Brennan's normative claim, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3. In fact, Brennan would likely argue against a duty to vote even under these circumstances, if only because he believes the value of p is always negligible. He devotes nearly an entire chapter of his book, *The Ethics of Voting*, to arguing that individual votes in a large election can never have instrumental value or causal efficacy (Brennan 2011a, 17-34). Yet he subsequently spends several pages arguing for an ethical duty to refrain from "harmful voting" notwithstanding the fact that "a bad vote has vanishingly small disutility" (71-76). Whether his position on the negligibility of individual votes is consistent with the assertion of an instrumentally based duty to abstain is perhaps an open question, as Brennan himself seems to admit (12). It is, however, interesting to note his admission that in some cases an individual could be justified in voting for a lesser evil, as he illustrates: "We can imagine scenarios under which voting for the equivalent of Mussolini is the *best alternative* as compared to abstaining from voting or voting for the equivalent of Hitler" (76, emphasis added). The question to him is whether voting for the lesser evil should be described not just as the best alternative, but as a moral obligation under such circumstances.

arguing for a duty to abstain, namely, the expected instrumental utility associated with electoral participation.

c) Ambivalence

Besides alienation and indifference, another motive for *B*-based turnout decisions is *ambivalence*, which can be defined as "endorsement of competing considerations relevant to evaluating an attitude object" (Lavine 2001, 915). Much of the growing political science research dealing with this psychological condition builds on the work of John Zaller and Stanley Feldman, who suggest that in place of having what one might call "true attitudes," individuals are often internally conflicted regarding particular issues or choices, causing them to exhibit apparently contradictory opinions in their responses to political survey questions (Zaller and Feldman 1992, 609-610). In the basic spatial model of vote-choice, this type of ambivalence could be characterized by the individual's preferred position falling at a point equidistant—but relatively close[17]—to the two candidates, as in Figure 2.4, which illustrates the basic situation where the prospective voter's preferences might pull equally in opposite directions.

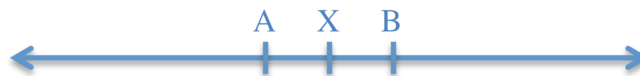

Figure 2.4: Basic Ambivalence

One could also conceive of ambivalence arising out of a more dynamic situation that incorporates the possibility of changes in the individual's preferred position and/or the perceived positioning of the candidates. This might occur, for example, as a result of information being acquired and deliberation taking place as an election campaign

[17] Note that if the individual's ideal point falls between two candidates whose positions are perceived as both quite distant, it could result in (expressive) alienation, as well as functional (instrumental) indifference if the candidates' positions seem effectively equidistant.

progresses over time. A prospective voter might thus go back and forth between preferring different candidates over time, possibly resulting in an overall attitude of ambivalence, as depicted in Figure 2.5.

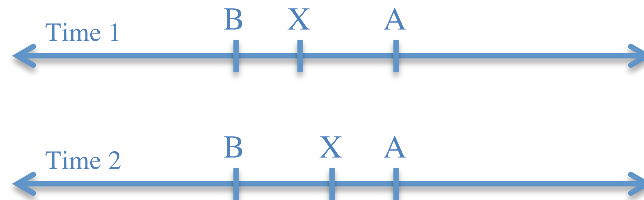

Figure 2.5: Ambivalence over Time

Ambivalence could further arise when moving from a simple one-dimensional model to a more complex but somewhat more realistic model where prospective voters can have potentially conflicting preferences over several different ideological or value-based dimensions (see Carmines and D'Amico 2014, 8). For example, one candidate might be preferred on grounds of character or leadership qualities, while another candidate could be preferred on specific public policy issues (Buttice and Stone 2012). A prospective voter who might in fact hold "true attitudes" on two or more different dimensions could thus be pulled in opposite directions by these cross-cutting preferences, again resulting in a state of ambivalence, as shown in Figure 2.6.

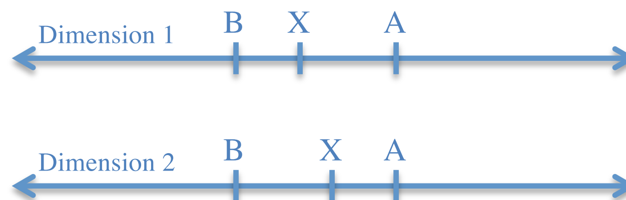

Figure 2.6: Ambivalence over Different Dimensions

One might initially assume that ambivalence of any type should lead to abstention, since the ambivalent individual appears to have no rational basis for deciding how to vote. In terms of the turnout calculus, ambivalence could be said to create an obstacle in specifying the B term, which might lead an individual to value it at zero, resulting in a decision to abstain (assuming that $D < C$). This would imply that ambivalence, like alienation, causes what is in effect just another form of indifference. However, as with alienation, there may be reasons to think that a decision to abstain under conditions of ambivalence may not be the normatively best choice, or even necessarily the most rational one. Ambivalence is fundamentally different from indifference in that ambivalent individuals do have preferences that carry affective valence, even if their preferences fail to result in fixed and well-formed attitudes. Ambivalent individuals also presumably have acquired substantial information about the electoral choices. However, their preferences seem to conflict, and these individuals may thus understandably have a very difficult time reconciling them in order to reach a final decision. As indicated, ambivalent individuals do attach value and meaning to the election outcome, and the positions of the candidates are presumably close enough to their own positions to avoid an attitude of alienation. Such individuals should indeed be expected to have trouble deciding how to vote, given the complexity of the electoral choice from their perspective, but they should not necessarily be expected to abstain from voting.

In fact, empirical evidence does not support abstention arising as a direct result of ambivalence. Diana Mutz examines the effects of exposure to "cross-cutting networks" of opposing political ideas, which she theorizes could lead to an attitude of ambivalence by activating a psychological process of "*intrapersonal* conflict" (Mutz 2002, 840). Mutz finds that such exposure does actually reduce political participation, including the

propensity to vote, but she indicates that these effects result not from internalized ambivalence, but rather from an externally oriented desire to avoid the risk of social conflict that comes with political disagreement.[18] Even more to the point, Sung-jin Yoo disaggregates the turnout effects of ambivalence and indifference, finding that ambivalent individuals—those who display conflicting attitudes rather than lacking attitudes altogether—are in fact no less likely to vote than committed partisans (Yoo 2010). Discussing the Downsian differential, Yoo points out that the instrumental benefit of voting could be calculated at zero for at least two possible reasons: 1) because an individual has zero expectation of utility from either candidate—perhaps due to lack of information that results in indifference, or 2) because the non-zero expected utilities for each candidate happen to balance out evenly, which leads to ambivalence. Ambivalent individuals should therefore not be compared to those who are indifferent, for as Yoo states, "It is plainly wrong to treat those with equal feelings about parties and candidates the same as those without any feelings" (173). Yoo even concludes, "The high turnout of ambivalent citizens makes this group critical for deciding the electoral outcome (174)."

Ambivalent individuals can in fact be seen to epitomize the politically critical group of "persuadable" voters, who in a competitive election come to be the "swing" vote. These voters may actually make up a substantial percentage of the expected electorate, as high as 25 percent at the earlier stages of a U.S. presidential campaign (Jacobson 2014, 41-42). Targeting ambivalent voters can therefore be crucial to

[18] Mutz initially hypothesizes that if cross-cutting exposure reduces participation as a direct result of social pressure, and not internal ambivalence, then negative effects should only be observed with forms of political participation that are publicly observable, to the exclusion of voting which takes place in private (at least with respect to vote choice). When she finds, to the contrary, that cross-cutting exposure also significantly reduces the propensity to vote, she suggests that the act of voting may also involve "social accountability" (Mutz 2002, 849; see also Pattie and Johnston 2009, 283). Note that the fact that Mutz's exposure effects are attributed to social pressure and not ambivalence implies that these effects are modeled not in terms of instrumental utility in B, but rather as non-instrumental (dis-)utility in D.

campaign strategists, as the vote choices of these individuals are effectively pivotal to the outcome in an electorate that appears otherwise evenly divided. Swing voters have actually been found to have increased influence on policy outcomes (Griffin and Newman 2013), so notwithstanding a differential value that would formally appear equal to zero, ambivalent individuals might conceivably value B even higher than partisan voters with well-defined preferences. Moreover, from a normative perspective, there may be good reasons for valuing ambivalence and encouraging this attitude in the approach to vote choices. Mutz alludes to the idea that ambivalence is associated with an approach that reflects more "balanced judgment" and the recognition of complexity in political issues (Mutz 2002, 840). More broadly, Howard Lavine, Christopher Johnston, and Marco Steenbergen advocate for moderating the tendency toward unreasoned partisanship with a more principled attitude of ambivalence, which they state "provides fertile ground for learning and open-mindedness and…a willingness to assume the cognitive burden of deliberative political thought" (Lavine et al. 2012, xiv). Ambivalence could thus be particularly valuable to deliberative theorists, who are inclined to view decisions based purely on partisan attachments as lacking in full democratic legitimacy (e.g. Fishkin 2009; Landemore 2013a).

A recent paper by Scott McClurg and Phillip Garee nicely ties together empirical and normative insights into ambivalence. McClurg and Garee discuss how ambivalence implies a degree of cognitive complexity in being able to accommodate intensely held but conflicting attitudes, and they find that intense ambivalence predicts turnout separately from, and at least as strongly as polarized partisanship (McClurg and Garee 2015, 12). As opposed to the chronically indifferent who have no interest at all in election outcomes, the ambivalent are more likely to have invested in acquiring information and to have deliberated about the decision, leading them to perceive both positive and negative

attributes of the choices. Despite their apparent difficulty in reaching a decision, these ambivalent participants nevertheless perceive the decision as extremely important. While their expected utilities from the candidates may appear to balance out more or less evenly, they should not be assumed to value *B* at zero, and they will not necessarily be "frozen by indecision" and abstain (13). McClurg and Garee in fact suggest that "ambivalence is its own form of political engagement," concluding that the difficulty these voters experience in reaching a decision shows how they are the ones who "must do the heavy lifting in democratic politics" (14).

However, this begs the question of *how* ambivalent individuals decide how to vote, which McClurg and Garee do not directly address, and it takes for granted the deeper normative question of what it even *means* to make a decision under conditions of ambivalence. Do ambivalent voters simply choose randomly? In that case they might be seen at best as unnecessary to democratic outcomes, or at worst as "polluting the polls" (Brennan 2009a) by voting in an insufficiently reasoned manner and likely relying on irrational biases (e.g. Caplan 2007). On the other hand, there may be good reasons for valuing the participation of more independently-minded swing voters who shun reflexive partisanship and who acquire and use political information in ways presumed to lead to more deliberatively informed democratic outcomes. How then should we understand what goes on in the minds of ambivalent voters when they make their choice? This is a complex and important question that cannot be completely addressed here in the detail it deserves, but some suggestive directions for a response are suggested by Ruth Chang's work discussing the philosophical implications of *hard choices*. Chang provides a normative framework for understanding what it means to make difficult but important decisions under conditions of intense uncertainty, and her approach thus helps clarify the

broader meaning and implications of ambivalence as it relates to the instrumental benefits of voting.

Chang's earlier work adds conceptual clarity to the fundamental difference between ambivalence and indifference, as she distinguishes between the types of hard choices that are "at the root of moral dilemmas" and more generic situations where the available alternatives seem to offer more or less equal utility (Chang 2002, 659). She illustrates as follows: In comparing any two alternatives—X and Y—one might think there are only three possible relations: X is better than Y, Y is better than X, or X and Y are equally good (or bad). However, Chang argues that there is in fact a fourth possible relation between the alternatives; namely, X and Y may be "*on a par*," and she contends that hard choices presenting moral dilemmas may be instances of "*parity*, not ignorance, incomparability, or indeterminacy in comparison" (661-662, emphases added). According to Chang, "[T]he possibility of parity shows the basic assumption of standard decision and rational choice theory to be mistaken: preferring X to Y, preferring Y to X, and being indifferent between them do not span the conceptual space of choice attitudes one can have toward alternatives" (666). Without explicitly mentioning ambivalence, Chang's conception of parity among alternatives, and the "perplexity" it engenders (682), closely mirrors the attitude of ambivalent voters who may perceive that the value of *B* is substantial, but their conflicting preferences create difficulty in making a decision. Accordingly, she indicates that situations of parity often result in "superhard" ethical problems with significant real-world consequences, which are not the types of choices that could reasonably be decided by some "arbitrary stipulation" like flipping a coin (685). Nevertheless, decision-making in these cases is still "within the reach of practical reason," according to Chang, although "it remains to be seen how justified choice is

possible between items that are on a par" (666). This is a matter she takes up in subsequent work.

As an example of the type of hard choice that could present a situation of parity, Chang considers someone struggling with a major life-altering choice between two alternate career paths. The essence of the problem inheres in the fact that abstention is not an option, and yet it still seems impossible to reason one's way to a definitive decision: "Sometimes the reasons in a choice situation fail to determine what one should do…. Still, one must make a choice" (Chang 2009b, 248). In this situation one's reasons for making a decision appear to have *run out*, as Chang explains: "Reasons run out when they fail to deliver a univocal answer to the question, 'What should I do?'" (249). Again, she indicates that picking randomly doesn't seem right for a decision as important as a career choice, and neither she says does "plumping" a decision, which would involve choosing not randomly but for no specific reason at all (250). When one's reasons have run out, continuation of rational deliberation—as conventionally understood—is unlikely to help in reaching a decision, but Chang indicates that "further 'deliberation' of a different kind can lead to a rationally determined choice" (253). She explains that deliberating over a hard decision is actually a two-stage process: At the first stage, deliberation involves evaluating the "given" normative reasons for or against a choice, which is the conventionally understood process of rational decision-making. However, when given reasons have run out because they appear to be a par, a second stage of rational deliberation emerges, one that involves creating "voluntarist" reasons for choosing through "an act of will" (256-257). Chang's novel claim is that "willing a consideration to be a reason is part of the process of making oneself into a distinctive normative agent, that is, creating one's own 'rational identity'" (259).

This is a somewhat mysterious and potentially profound assertion that cannot be fully explored here, but the essential idea is as follows: For Chang, creating one's rational identity implies deliberation over one's "normatively ideal self—a loosely unified way of understanding the reasons that justify doing what [one has] most reason to do" (261). She admits that it might initially seem paradoxical to allow rational actors to voluntaristically create their own reasons for choosing one alternative over another, for "if being rational is responding appropriately to our reasons, it is not clear how *we* can get enough distance from our reasons to be able to make ourselves into one kind of distinctive rational agent rather than another" (260). To resolve this problem, the ethical decision theory she proposes is one of "hierarchical voluntarism," in which given reasons are always evaluated first, and only when these reasons have run out do voluntarist reasons come into play. If given reasons are insufficient for choosing either alternative—because they seem to be on a par—then "you can create for yourself a voluntarist reason that may then give you all things considered most reason to choose one alternative over the other" (265). Chang refers to this as allowing for a "*space of rational freedom,*" which denotes how individuals can (rationally) create their own voluntarist reasons for choices that seem to fall beyond the normative reach of given reasons.[19]

Chang further asserts that this ethical approach may also apply to resolving difficult problems in social choice, suggesting that "many—and the most interesting—social conflicts of the simple form have parity as their structure" (Chang 2009a, 154).[20]

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[19] Chang's novel approach requires—and deserves—a close reading for full appreciation of its insight into the nature and meaning of rational decision-making. She writes, "We are authors not only of our actual lives but also of our ideal rational lives—of the best that we can be, rationally speaking. The governing of our ideal rational selves is arguably the central—and most exalted—exercise of rational agency" (Chang 2009b, 262); and furthermore, "This crafting of our distinctive rational identities is, in a way, what life is all about" (267).

[20] The "simple form of practical conflict," according to Chang, involves a choice between two alternatives where "all things considered, neither [alternative] is better than the other" (Chang 2009a, 140).

Hence, societies might also be able to collectively create their rational identities through a voluntaristic reasoning process that seeks to answer the question: "What kind of society should we be?" (156). Chang indicates that elections will generally be ineffective for responding to this question, though she does not specify exactly how else such a process could take place.[21] The implications of applying her normative framework at the societal level are indeed provocative,[22] but returning to the individual-level decision of the calculus, Chang's normative framework provides a crucial insight into how ambivalent voters should decide—and what it means for them to decide—when they perceive the alternatives to present a situation of parity. The decision of how to cast one's vote is perhaps not as much a major life-altering decision as a career choice, but it could certainly be perceived as extremely important and not appropriate for randomly picking or plumping—nor for abstaining, particularly assuming an altruistic interpretation of *B* in a highly salient, competitive election. When reasons for choosing one alternative over another appear to have run out, Chang's theory counsels ambivalent voters to deliberate over a voluntaristic vote choice in the knowledge that they thereby act in a way that contributes to forming their rational identities with regard to politics.[23]

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[21] According to Chang, "[M]ajority voting, which permits self-defeating cycles, is an inappropriate means to self-governance" (Chang 2009a, 156-157). As with individual-level choice, she suggests that creating a rational identity at the societal level involves deliberation, and she thus broadly associates this process with theories of deliberative democracy (157).

[22] Chang explains how hierarchical voluntarism could apply at the societal level as well, suggesting that "in so far as we want to achieve certain values, we should deal with political conflict in a way that is reasonable in light of those values, and in so far as we want to do what's rational given the [parity] structure of the conflict itself, then we should…self-govern." Political decision-making would accordingly involve "two distinct and autonomous normative domains" (158). Interestingly, this perhaps resembles a distinction between constitutional level decision-making, where choices are based on (at least purportedly) given reasons, and the societal space of rational freedom in regular democratic politics, where voluntaristic social choice may take place.

[23] Chang's theory also provides a cogent response to Jeffrey Friedman's expansive attack on voluntaristic ethics in liberal theory, and particularly his argument that voluntarism in essence implies an ethically incoherent "right to do wrong" (Friedman 2013a, 39). Friedman describes a conventional logic of choice which presumes that "normative distinctions can be made among actions, such that one choice emerges as 'better' than the others" (46). Regarding choice in a situation of apparent "equipoise," he writes,

This extended discussion of the question of vote choice under conditions of ambivalence has led away from the original discussion of the decision to vote or abstain.[24] Returning to the turnout calculus, the key point here is that ambivalence may also arise with respect to the decision of whether to vote or abstain in a situation where instrumental and expressive motivations are in conflict. Chang's ethical approach might thus help resolve this critical—and presumably fairly common—dilemma, which is associated with an ambivalence that might arise under conditions of alienation. As discussed previously, an individual who perceives even a very small instrumental difference between two "bad" candidates (providing a net positive value for *B*) might strictly speaking still have sufficient motivation to cast a ballot in favor of the "lesser

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"Inaction…is the only other alternative—apart from mechanical determination—to normative determination…. An agent stuck in this familiar position would be like the legendary Buridan's Ass, which starved because it was unable to choose among what seemed to it identical bales of hay" (68). Friedman thus denies not only the possibility of a rationally determined choice under conditions of parity, but even the possibility of free will under such conditions, stating that free choice "cannot take place in the absence of a *perceived* advantage for one option over the others…. If one *could* choose without ranked antecedent perceptions of the good, one's 'choices' would (by the principle of sufficient reason) have to be determined by mechanical causes, not free will" (68-69). Chang's approach to voluntaristic choice is clearly in strong tension with Friedman's logic, and she specifically excludes the possibility of a "right to do wrong" through her hierarchical normative approach that allows for voluntaristic choice only after given reasons have run out (see Chang 2009b, 269).

[24] Before leaving vote choice completely, one more insight that emerges from Chang's approach relates to the normative understanding of the choices of committed partisans. These individuals obviously have no trouble perceiving a differential value of *B* and making their choice, but as indicated previously, their decisions are often assumed to be normatively deficient for lacking foundations in a sufficiently deliberative reasoning process (e.g. Landemore 2013a). However, Chang's hierarchical framework also helps explain how personal *commitments* can be seen as voluntaristically rational "exercises of our *normative powers*, the power to confer reason-giving force on something through an act of will" (Chang 2013, 75). Extending her theory of commitment to political partisanship raises complex issues, particularly since her approach allows voluntaristic choice only after given reasons have run out, which may or may not apply to the formation of political commitments. It may be interesting to note how Chang indicates that commitments can arise without a conscious decision, and that they "need not be compelled by reasons," although they "give rise to special reasons we might not otherwise have" (79-80). More generally, Chang's description of the basic features of a commitment seems to reflect how many political partisans would describe their attachment to party. Nevertheless, her hierarchical ethic would seem to require at least a loosening of partisan ties to the extent that voluntaristic commitments should never override given reasons. This perhaps resembles the attitude of "ambivalent partisanship" advocated by Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen (2012). For further normative defense of partisan commitment see Rosenblum (2008); also see Mutz (2013); Ypi (2016).

evil." However, there might also be an expressive motivation to abstain (a negative value in D) since both candidates are positioned relatively far away from the individual's ideal point—the definition of alienation. This could lead to ambivalence given that a choice must be made between the instrumental motivation to participate and the expressive motivation to abstain. For this type of hard choice, Chang's hierarchical approach arguably requires that instrumental (given) reasons take precedence over expressive (voluntaristic) motivations, and the individual should therefore vote rather than abstain. This conclusion can be seen as making good ethical sense, especially assuming an interpretation of high social benefits in B (and a high value for p), for it essentially holds simply that one should not give precedence to one's own expressive motivations over other people's instrumental utility. This ties back to the earlier argument regarding how instrumental motivations could give rise to a moral obligation to vote even under conditions of alienation.

To conclude, the foregoing has shown that while the Downsian differential may be useful for modeling indifference and (instrumentally-based) alienation, it is not necessarily coherent for cases of ambivalence, where ascribing a value to B through subtraction of expected utilities leads to a dubious prediction of abstention. The conventional manner of modeling the instrumental benefits of voting in order to assess the motivations for turnout can thus sometimes lose its meaning, as reflected in Chang's critical approach, which asserts that—at least for some cases—"it is unclear how the rationality of preferences could be adequately modeled by standard utility functions" (Chang 2002, 666).[25] Nonetheless, while comparison of alternatives may be more

[25] Chang continues, "Thus the approach to rational choice favored by mainstream social scientists will, at the very least, require reexamination" (Chang 2002, 666). Chang's approach perhaps suggests that in some cases the assessment of instrumental benefits from alternatives on the ballot may be *additive*, rather than subtractive, since these benefits do not necessarily cancel out—yielding no motivation to vote—when they

complex than initially contemplated by Downs, expectations of instrumental benefits in voting do still have crucial implications for turnout choices and for practical voting ethics. An instrumentally rational assessment of benefits is in fact often directly relevant to the decision to vote or abstain, and this realist perspective helps underscore the ethical implications of choices between perceived political evils, as well as providing the beginnings of a case for a moral obligation to vote under some circumstances. Furthermore, conceptions of instrumental benefits are also important when they must be weighed against their expressive counterparts, where the argument has been made—based on Chang's innovative approach—that instrumental benefits should always take precedence. A comprehensive approach to the interpretation of *B* should also take into account its potentially deep existential implications for personal, political, and rational identity. In sum, perceptions of the instrumental benefits of voting are crucial to the turnout decision in some very complex and significant ways, and they deserve greater attention than they have received thus far. Furthermore, a focus on the value of *B* in the calculus has important policy implications, as it points out specific directions for electoral reforms that aim to increase the perceived benefits of voting in order to boost voter turnout.

4) Election Law and Policy Implications

As demonstrated, instrumental benefits are critical to the motivations for voting, so finding ways to enhance perceptions of these benefits seems to present an obvious pathway for efforts to raise turnout.[26] To the point, as Matthew Streb writes in his wide-

appear more or less equal, but may instead result in the intense ambivalence associated with a need to make a difficult yet important decision.

[26] Certainly not everyone agrees that increasing turnout is an important public policy objective, but for present purposes the goal of broadening electoral participation will be assumed. The fundamental question

ranging book on U.S. elections, "[I]f the goal is expanding the electorate…, the best way to do so is to convince people why they should vote, not simply make it easier for them to do so." Streb accordingly emphasizes the importance of finding "ways to increase the benefits citizens see in voting." He concludes, however, "How this can be done is difficult to say" (Streb 2011, 29). As noted, this indeed is a complex problem given that individuals can hold such widely varying opinions on whether participation seems instrumentally valuable or not in any particular election. Nonetheless, it is possible to broadly outline some of the ways in which election law and policy can be used to address the key attitudes that lead to abstention based on comparative assessments of the candidates or parties. The primary focus here is thus on avenues of reform that aim to reduce indifference and alienation as likely causes of *B*-based abstention, and on possible means of facilitating ambivalence to the extent that it is framed as an attitude that makes a decision to participate more likely.

The problem of indifference receives a great deal of attention in the voting literature, as it relates directly to the highly contentious topic of political knowledgeability. As indicated earlier, lack of information about the options on the ballot—or more precisely about the differences between them—is a more likely source of indifference than an informed perception that candidate positions are substantially equivalent. This should be especially evident in the current "hyperpolarized" (Pildes 2011) political environment in the U.S., where any convergence of party platforms toward the position of a median voter seems particularly absent, and so the bulk of genuine indifference is presumably traceable to information deficiencies. Richard Pildes in fact indicates that a potentially positive consequence of polarization—and the clear

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of whether higher turnout is normatively desirable is considered Chapter 3, with particularly reference to the informational costs of casting a minimally competent vote.

lack of convergence between the two main political parties today—is that it should make it easier for voters to use party affiliation to distinguish between candidates and thereby cast a more informed vote (329).[27] Electoral reforms to address indifference might therefore focus on the use of party cues or related heuristics to provide more information to prospective voters about the options on the ballot (Elmendorf and Schleicher 2013; Boudreau et al. 2015).[28]

In federal or major state elections, where party labels generally appear alongside candidates on the ballot, abstention due to genuine indifference should arguably not be that widespread.[29] The larger problem of such information-based indifference arises in elections conducted on a formally nonpartisan basis, which include some down-ballot state races and most local elections (see e.g. Schaffner and Streb 2002; Hajnal and Trounstine 2007, 88). Acquiring information about candidates in the absence of party cues is much more costly, particularly given greatly reduced media coverage and campaign spending in these lower profile contests. Providing a party cue on the ballot

[27] Pildes identifies this approach as harkening back to earlier electoral theories of "responsible party government" (Pildes 2011, 329, citing Schattschneider (1942) and Raney (1954)). However, he also notes a major downside to polarization in that it makes effective governing through coalitional compromise much more difficult (Pildes 2011, 331). Along these lines, polarization may also contribute to alienation and functional indifference in individuals who identify as moderates but perceive both candidates as positioned far away from their ideal point (see *supra* n. 17).

[28] There is a forceful debate over whether cues and heuristics can facilitate more informed decision-making and increase the overall competency of the electorate (e.g. Popkin 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998), or whether these types of informational shortcuts are unable to compensate for fundamental deficiencies in political knowledge (e.g. Somin 1998; Hardin 2004). The working assumption for present purposes is that party cues can at least provide some useful information to counteract instrumental indifference, and that voters are in general "capable of providing useful feedback when armed with clear party labels" (Elmendorf and Schleicher 2013, 383). The basis for such an assumption is a matter for Chapter 3.

[29] This is not to suggest that instrumental indifference due to lack of information never leads to abstention in the presence of party labels. To the contrary, individuals without a coherent conception of the ideological positioning of the parties, or of their own ideal point, might still abstain as a result of genuine indifference in some federal or statewide elections with party labels. For example, Wattenberg et al. (2000) find that voters in presidential elections who "roll-off" in concurrently held House races are likely to do so as a result of lack of information. They find that up to 6 percent of presidential voters abstained in House races in California in the 1990s (239), while in one election in Los Angeles County almost 50 percent of voters rolled off to some extent (247).

reduces information costs while providing increased opportunity to perceive benefits associated with the outcome, so it could be doubly likely to motivate a decision to participate. Focusing on the perceived value of B in the calculus is thus particularly useful for models of turnout in "second-order" elections, which can be seen as attracting lower levels of participation due to their perceived lower political stakes, as indicated previously (Percival et al. 2007; Blais 2000, 43).[30]

Turnout in local elections is in fact exceptionally low, and the composition of the electorates at these lower levels of government is far more likely to be demographically biased by unequal participation among different socioeconomic groups (Hajnal and Trounstine 2005). There are many factors that influence the low levels of turnout in these races, including most prominently their "off-cycle"—separate from federal elections—scheduling, which requires greater benefits to offset the added costs as compared to when they are scheduled "on-cycle" (Anzia 2014; Wood 2002, 228).[31] However, low turnout in these elections can be partially attributed to the absence of party labels (Schaffner et al. 2001; Schaffner and Streb 2002; Garlick 2015). Allowing for partisan elections at lower levels of government, or at least providing some sort of ballot notations that function as "party-label substitutes" (Elmendorf and Schleicher 2013, 417), could boost turnout by reducing indifference-based abstention that results from lack of information.[32] As

[30] See *supra* n. 5 and accompanying text. As suggested, one might also think that the perceived benefits of voting should be greatest in local elections, given an assumption that "local government is closest to the people and has the most direct and obvious impact on citizens' lives" (Wood 2002, 210; see also Anzia 2014, 235 n. 3). However, under the altruistic/social benefit view it perhaps makes more sense for B to be perceived as higher in larger elections that affect greater numbers of people.

[31] Chapter 3's focus on voting costs argues that state and local elections should generally be scheduled concurrently with federal races in order to reduce overall substantive (though not informational) costs of participation. A complementary argument implied here for on-cycle scheduling is that lower overall benefits are then required to motivate individuals to turn out, although of course this does not mean they will participate in all races (see Aldrich 1993, 261).

[32] Extending national party brands to subnational levels can be problematic, and there might be good reasons for keeping some second-order elections nonpartisan. Elmendorf and Schleicher (2013, 412-416) discuss in detail how election law reforms can address some of the problems with the use of party labels at

Christopher Elmendorf and David Schleicher explain, laws that dictate how candidates appear on the ballot can be crucial in determining the informational costs of voting; correspondingly, it is also worth recognizing how these laws can have significant effects on perceptions of voting's benefits.

While genuine indifference based on lack of information is likely to be common in second-order elections and down-ballot races, the functional indifference that may arise as a result of alienation is presumably a more widespread cause of abstention even in first-order elections. As discussed previously, alienation can make any instrumental differences between options on the ballot seem negligible or meaningless, and generally unworthy of any participatory response. This type of indifference is probably not associated with any informational deficiency. Alienated abstainers in American elections, for example, may have more than enough information to distinguish between candidates of the two major parties, yet they perceive both candidates to be positioned so far away from their own ideal point that any differences are discounted as inconsequential. Since B seems effectively equal to zero, it would not be instrumentally rational to participate even if voting were completely costless (C=0). Alternatively, alienated individuals may have strong expressive reasons for not participating in particular elections, perhaps based on normative ideals of democratic theory that they find contravened by the existing political structure. As a result, any small but positive value in B is likely to be outweighed by a significantly greater negative value in D. These individuals may arrive at conclusions of functional indifference and/or expressive disdain through many different routes, but they share a common belief that the broader political structure surrounding the election makes the choice presented on the ballot essentially meaningless, and voting is thus completely

local levels. Streb maintains that a partisan affiliation should be indicated in all races on the ballot, although he argues for elimination of elections for many lower-level political offices (Streb 2011, 80).

useless—or at least highly ineffective—as a means of democratic participation. This belief, if widespread enough, arguably presents a much greater policy problem than indifference due to lack of information, as it potentially challenges core democratic legitimacy. How might this deeper problem be addressed within a reform framework focused on perceptions of the benefits of voting?

One way would be to focus on the "supply side" of alienation by looking for institutional reforms to counteract what Schattschneider refers to as the displacement of political conflict. Such reforms would aim generally at redrawing lines of political cleavage in a more inclusive manner by framing electoral choices in a way that incorporates the concerns of greater numbers of citizens. A far-reaching approach to addressing alienation this way could include systemic reforms to replace majoritarian/winner-take-all institutions with more "consensual" forms of constitutional design—such as proportional representation in elections, and perhaps even a parliamentary executive or other institutional reforms to facilitate political coalitions and increase the viability of smaller parties (see Lijphart 2012). However, such a drastic approach seems highly impractical for the United States, as institutional reforms this extreme are presumably unlikely to occur—at least in the near term—given the deep entrenchment of majoritarian democratic norms in this country. A movement toward ranked choice (or "instant-runoff") voting, in which a majority winner is determined by having voters rank-order preferences for ballot options, is perhaps somewhat more realistic. These electoral systems could potentially reduce alienation-based abstention by encouraging candidates to run outside the two main parties and by allowing individuals to

cast votes for these candidates without "wasting" their vote or perhaps increasing the likelihood that a lesser preferred candidate could win (see Streb 2011, 155-156).[33]

While these types of electoral system reforms might help reduce functional indifference as a cause of alienation, they likely would fail to address more expressive reasons for abstaining, such as perceptions of pervasive corruption and fundamental unfairness in the political system. Robert Post explains how "electoral integrity" requires a general sense of "public trust that elections select officials who are responsive to public opinion," because all democratic participation seems effectively meaningless under conditions of political inequality with politicians seen as responsive only to wealthy individuals and interests (Post 2014, 60). Post thus advocates for basic changes in campaign finance law from a perspective of constitutional interpretation that aims at increasing the perceived benefits of voting by counteracting alienation from politics and instilling a greater sense of trust in American democracy.[34] This is perhaps a salutary goal, but again it appears somewhat impractical—at least in the short term given current Supreme Court jurisprudence. Furthermore, eliminating corruption and unfairness—or the appearance thereof—to the satisfaction of alienated citizens is perhaps an impossible undertaking. Are there any prospects for addressing alienation-based abstention within the current system as it stands?

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[33] Streb also advocates relaxation of ballot access laws to make it easier for outside candidates to gain access to the ballot (Streb 2011, 185). The practice of including "none of the above" as a ballot option—as in the state of Nevada and a few countries around the world—could provide another outlet for expressive alienation (see Damore et al. 2012). However, adding this option fails to address functional indifference, as it doesn't affect the instrumental benefits of voting, and choosing this option is in fact formally equal to abstention. More importantly, this reform fails to target the deeper policy problems posed by alienation.

[34] Dennis Thompson's broad conception of upholding "free choice" in elections can also be seen to aim at improving perceptions of the benefits of voting and addressing sources of functional and expressive alienation. Thompson endorses sweeping reforms to campaign finance as well as electoral system and ballot rule changes (Thompson 2002, 65-122).

As Streb suggests, more attention can be paid to the policy problem of finding ways "to convince people why they should vote" (Streb 2011, 29). Hence, difficult as it might seem, it may be important to focus also on the "demand side" of political alienation. What type of motivations could possibly influence the turnout decisions of highly disaffected citizens in the absence of institutional reform? The answer suggested by the turnout calculus calls attention to the fact that any difference in negative expected utilities yields a positive value in B, and even if that differential seems extremely small, it may in fact amount to a major effect on the welfare of vast numbers of people.[35] This argument thus emphasizes the exactingly rational logic of choosing a lesser evil when faced with a decision in which all viable options seem bad. As discussed, even when candidates from the two major parties both seem downright detestable, it may nevertheless be instrumentally *irrational* to abstain in a competitive election where not voting could conceivably contribute to a perceived greater evil taking hold. This argument highlights how democratic politics in practice often requires making the best of bad conditions and remaining realistically pragmatic, even coldly calculating when necessary.[36] More broadly, this principle reflects how everyday life often forces individuals to make choices they would rather not make, and it indeed takes serious intellectual and emotional rigor to face up to these difficult decisions in a rational manner aimed at furthering one's life goals.

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[35] Admittedly, there is not much that can be done to convince a deeply alienated but narrowly self-interested individual who does not allow for a sociotropic interpretation of B. In any event, such a *homo economicus* would probably hold strictly by pivotal theory and believe that an individual vote can never affect the outcome of a large election (i.e., p is always infinitesimal), which moots the entire discussion of instrumental benefits.

[36] Thompson indicates that being forced to choose among evils amounts to an abridgment of the democratic value of free choice in elections (Thompson 2002, 70). Nevertheless, the fact remains that political choices must often be made under less than ideal conditions. Incidentally, the importance of lesser evil voting can perhaps be seen in the prevalence of negative campaigning, which basically expresses the sentiment: "You may not like me, but don't let this other candidate win, she/he is much worse!"

Beyond cold rationality, however, the further implication of this argument is that there may sometimes be a *moral obligation* to vote even under conditions of extreme alienation; moreover, by failing to participate an individual may incur moral culpability in the event that the greater evil prevails. As discussed, this involves extending the sociotropic interpretation of *B* to derive a responsibility-based approach to turnout and vote choice, as suggested by Beerbohm's conception of democracy as a system of shared liability. This approach recognizes how the perceived value of voting can be enormously high, and that there may be potentially onerous responsibilities associated with democratic elections. This does not imply that individuals should vote when they are truly indifferent, either through lack of information or through alienation, for any vote choice under such conditions would certainly not seem very rational.[37] Nevertheless, the argument here draws attention to the need to distinguish between forms of instrumental indifference and expressive alienation, and it emphasizes the very hard choice that may be posed when instrumental and expressive motivations conflict. If Chang's normative argument is correct, then instrumental motivations for voting (positive value in *B*) should generally prevail, while expressive motivations for abstaining (negative value in *D*) must sometimes go unheeded. In other words, as a responsible democratic citizen—and more broadly as a mature adult—one must occasionally "hold one's nose" and do what seems right for the greater good.

Finally, the implications of this approach for attitudes of ambivalence are not directly associated with efforts to make partisans act more independently and be more deliberatively ambivalent with their vote choices. While promoting more reasoned

[37] There might even be a duty to abstain under conditions of true indifference, as discussed in Chapter 4 regarding the limits of a civic duty to vote. As discussed, however, indifference must be distinguished from ambivalence, under which it may in fact be possible to make a voluntaristically rational choice, as Chang asserts. Whether there should ever be a duty to vote (voluntaristically) under conditions of ambivalence regarding vote choice is a more complex question beyond the current scope.

judgment among committed partisans may be commendable, these are obviously not the types of individuals likely to abstain from voting. Instead, the emphasis here should be on trying to convince those who are alienated to be more ambivalent about their motivations for abstaining. This requires drawing attention to the distinction between instrumental and expressive value in voting, which is in fact a basic lesson of the turnout calculus. By distinguishing conceptually between these two kinds of expected utility, the framework of the calculus sets the stage for a normative argument that may require subordinating one's personal expressive inclinations, based on a recognition of the potentially far-reaching societal effects of even small instrumental differences between major candidates on the ballot. At the very least, such an argument would advise alienated individuals to be more ambivalent when choosing between these conflicting motivations, with the suggestion that such conflict could create a hard choice that might present a situation of parity between the alternatives. In such case, one might make a voluntarist decision about one's rational identity with respect to politics: One can define oneself as someone who places the instrumental welfare of others in front of personal values and ideals about politics and democracy, or as someone who insists on expressing those principles by abstaining from voting notwithstanding the potential harm to others.[38]

Admittedly, this approach may require alienated individuals to reconsider some of their basic ideas about purpose and meaning in democratic politics. One might say it requires a willingness to relinquish certain democratic dreams and devotions, while instead taking a less "romanticized" view of the role of elections in the democratic process (Pildes 2014), and perhaps abandoning some aspects of democratic "faith"

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[38] This formulation of the decision is admittedly biased in favor of Chang's theory, which requires giving precedence to instrumental reasons, but it is not meant to imply that the choice between instrumental and expressive motivations should be an easy decision to make. See Hafer an Ran (2016) for a discussion of the construction of civic identity and its relation to the motivations for political participation.

(Deneen 2005). In general, this approach suggests the need for a more minimalist and less "radical" democratic theory (Gardner 2003), which entails an embrace of mass representative democratic forms even if they appear to fall short of deliberative epistemic ideals (Chambers 2009).[39] This requires a realism that acknowledges how democracy in practice often generates very difficult decisions in the form of "tragic" choices or tradeoffs (Gardner 1996, 451; Pildes 2014, 850). Perhaps most importantly for present purposes, this approach grounds an appreciation of voting as a fundamentally valuable form of democratic participation notwithstanding any of its alleged deliberative deficiencies (see Mackie 2011). The aim is thus to coax even highly alienated individuals into admitting that the policy choices made by different elected officials from different political parties really can and do affect the day-to-day lives of great numbers of ordinary people, for better or for worse. The basic argument is simply that elections matter.

In sum, exploring the instrumental benefits of voting through the framework of the rational choice calculus points toward several reforms aimed at increasing turnout through electoral system design and ballot structure, but perhaps the more novel aspects of this analysis have to do with the ethics of abstention and the possibility of a moral duty to participate.[40] Although the suggestions here for conceptualizing alienation and ambivalence do not amount to concrete proposals for reform, they do offer a well-reasoned normative framework around which to formulate electoral policy. This is essential, because sound democratic practices demand sound democratic theory. Even where there is profound disagreement as to theoretical foundations, as there is bound to

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[39] Chapter 3 explores the requirements and implications of a more participatory approach in democratic theory as it relates to conceptions of voting competence and their links to election law and policy.

[40] This analysis of the instrumental benefits of voting is also critical for building a theoretical foundation to justify a legal regime of compulsory voting (see Hill 2014, 177). The broad question of whether voting should be structured as voluntary or compulsory is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

be in this area, these disputes call out for more principled public debate, for the alternative is to allow elections to stay subject to the vagaries of partisan manipulation. Indeed, many important policy problems—particularly in the area of voting and elections—cannot be solved through empirical analysis alone, as they require some affirmation of basic theoretical principles. The normative ideals of democratic politics are part and parcel of election law and policy, and they are worthy of more focused attention in legal and political science scholarship.

5) CONCLUSION

Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes in *The Social Contract*, "As soon as any man says of the State, *What does it matter to me?* The State may be given up for lost." (Rousseau 1920 [1762], 83). The perceived benefits of participating in democratic elections are certainly a critical part of individual judgments about whether and how the state matters, and the formation of such judgments is an important topic of study. This chapter has outlined a general approach to the difficult problem of conceptualizing the instrumental benefits of voting by utilizing the rational choice calculus of turnout to frame an inquiry into the expected utility differential from a comparison of ballot options. Distinguishing and clarifying three typical attitudes that tend to influence the perceived value of B in the calculus—indifference, alienation, and ambivalence—has helped to identify directions for law and policy to address perceptions of benefits with the purpose of preventing abstention and increasing voter turnout.

The first point has been that in contemporary American elections, true instrumental indifference—a zero value for B based on a perception of no actual difference between the two main candidates/parties—is most likely to emerge from lack

of information. This condition essentially precludes any engagement with the turnout calculus, or the electoral process at all for that matter. Policy reforms have therefore been suggested to reduce indifference by providing informational cues on the ballot, particularly through party labels in second-order elections where basic information seems most lacking. Alienation, by contrast, is generally not related to lack of information, and there may be potentially good reasons for alienated individuals to decide to abstain. Modeled spatially as the perception of great distance between the individual's ideal point and the points of both candidates/parties, alienation often results in what has been termed functional indifference, where any observed distinction between the candidates/parties is interpreted as effectively meaningless. Looking to the "supply side" of alienation, reforms have been suggested to improve perceptions of meaningful electoral choice, but they generally involve fairly radical changes to the electoral system or to constitutional design and interpretation. From a practical perspective, attention must turn to the "demand side" of alienation, with efforts to promote a conceptual distinction between functionally indifferent alienation, which is instrumentally relevant, and the expressive elements of alienation, which by definition are not. This leads to a discussion of the ethics of voting for lesser evils, and the possibility of a moral obligation to participate even under conditions of alienation, given a high enough potential for collective utility or disutility associated with an election outcome.

Finally, with regard to ambivalence, the rational choice model of B in the calculus has been shown to have limits as an explanation of voter turnout. In particular, the Downsian differential does not account for the possibility of conflicting assessments of expected benefits that pull in opposite directions with regard to vote choice, but which do not necessarily result in any hesitation regarding the turnout decision. In fact, notwithstanding the apparent difficulty that ambivalent individuals may have in deciding

how to vote, they are in fact likely to be highly informed and engaged with electoral politics, and their decision *to* vote will seldom be in doubt. An inquiry into the question of how vote choice can be resolved under conditions of ambivalence led into a discussion of the rationality and the ethics of facing up to hard choices. The emerging theory of voluntaristic decision-making touches on deep and complex issues of personal and political identity, with broad implications for the ambivalence that may result from the clash of instrumental motivations to vote with expressive motivations to abstain. In general, ambivalence has been portrayed in a more positive light than indifference or alienation, as it not only suggests a more reasoned and deliberative attitude toward a particular decision, but promoting ambivalence may also be particularly useful in attempts to persuade alienated individuals to reconsider a decision to abstain.

A primary focus of this approach has dealt with the ethics of interpreting *B* under democratic norms of shared liability, with the aim of motivating participation based on a suggestion of moral culpability that may derive from a responsibility to prevent bad (or worse) outcomes. Yet it is also worth emphasizing how this evaluation of instrumental benefits also implies opportunities for doing real collective good and conceivably earning a share of civic pride and deserved praise for contributing to a positive democratic result (see Beerbohm 2012, 282; see also MacMullen 2014, 78). Admittedly, such opportunities might not seem too common, and many of the most alienated individuals will likely never perceive anything but negative utility associated with election outcomes, at least under the current U.S. electoral institutions and political system. As indicated, the approach advocated here does imply some fundamental normative assumptions relating to the limitations of democratic elections, and it may often require a certain stoic realism and lowering of expectations for political processes and outcomes. This is not a particularly novel perspective, however, nor does it necessarily ask too much of citizens, as it reflects

an approach that many democratic theorists would likely endorse. As Elizabeth Theiss-Morse and John Hibbing (2005, 227) write, "Good citizens need to learn that democracy is messy, inefficient, and conflict-ridden." They therefore conclude, "The route to enhancing meaningful civic life is not badgering people to become engaged because politics is fun and easy; it is asking people to become engaged because politics is dreary and difficult" (245).

More generally, this approach draws on a minimalist line of theory that traces back to Schumpeter and finds more recent expression in works like Bernard Crick's *Defence of Politics* (1993), which frames the electoral process as simply a venue for fairly facilitating the peaceful conciliation of social groups with fundamentally conflicting interests or beliefs. This is diametrically opposed to the view that elections can be modeled as ideal decision-making processes designed to meet certain epistemic criteria, which as discussed in Chapter 3, is a view that seems doomed to yield skepticism and cynicism regarding the potential value of voting. The view here thus advocates for a general reassessment of attitudes of indifference, alienation, or ambivalence before any decision to abstain from voting based on a judgment of insufficient instrumental benefits. Crick writes of this eloquently in a passage that touches on all these attitudes:

> "Many people…think that they are not interested in politics, and even act as if they are not; but they are probably few compared to the many who think that politics is muddled, contradictory, self-defeatingly recurrent, unprogressive, unpatriotic, inefficient, mere compromise, or a sham or conspiracy by which political parties seek to preserve some particular and peculiar social systems against the challenge of the inevitable future, etc." (Crick 1993, 16).

Yet Crick nevertheless insists, "We can do much worse than honour 'mere' politics" (33).

Likewise, we can arguably do much worse than to honor “mere” voting, and to pursue law and policy reforms in that spirit. This work thus forms a key part of an overall defense of voting as an exceptionally valuable—and perhaps quintessential—form of political participation. Other ways of participating in politics may well be important and useful, but electoral participation will always occupy a place of primacy in democratic theory and practice, which necessitates attention to the perceived value of voting. This clearer understanding of instrumental benefits within the framework of the calculus has paved the way for studying the costs of voting, as well as crucially important perceptions of non-instrumental, or expressive benefits, and the wide-ranging problems of law and policy relating to the effects of electoral institutions on voter turnout. By drawing attention to these important issues, this work can hopefully make a valuable contribution to the ongoing critical evaluation of the theory and practice of electoral democracy in the United States and elsewhere.