

Adam Harris

“Why We Should Vote: Voting Abstention and African-Americans”

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## ABSTRACT

Jason Brennan's advocacy of voting abstention does not apply to the African-American experience. Brennan posits that citizens have a duty to abstain from voting when the only possible vote is a bad vote. On his account, voting badly is voting "without sufficient reason" for harmful or unjust policies. I agree herein, that there are parts of Brennan's argument that are plausible; however, they are not consistent when the history of African-Americans is taken into account. I contend contra Brennan that one may only vote badly when one elects to abstain from voting. Further, I trace the intellectual history of a phenomenon which I call voter maturation in the thought of John Rawls and suggest how it may be used effectively in the black community.

### I. Introduction

"People who don't vote have no line of credit with people who are elected and thus pose no threat to those who act against our interests." This statement by Activist Marian Wright Edelman in the *LA Watts Times* suggests that when one does not vote the government is no longer responsible to her nor is she an immediate issue for the powers that be.<sup>1</sup> Do African Americans have a special obligation to vote or contingent duty not to abstain from voting?<sup>2</sup> What influences us to mature or develop? Is participation in an activity enough to actually develop said activity well? These questions are at the heart of this paper.

Citizens in most western democracies have the political right to vote, and while this right does not obligate a citizen to vote, several scholars have suggested that if one does vote she should vote well.<sup>3</sup> There has been an ongoing argument as to what constitutes

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1 That is to say she does not pose a threat to the government because of her *supposed* lack of interest in civic activity.

2 Indeed much of what follows can and should apply to all minorities in the United States and in other democratic nations; however, as a conscious contribution to Africana and African-American political thought I will focus solely on the African-American experience.

3 Brennan, Jason. "Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87,

“voting well,” where voting well is to vote “with sufficient reason.”

Jason Brennan argues that not only does one have the duty not to vote badly but also has a duty to abstain from voting when the only possible vote is a bad vote. Voting badly, by Brennan's definition, is voting for harmful or unjust policies or candidates “without sufficient reason”.<sup>4</sup> Brennan notes that the clause “without sufficient reason” is significant in that it allows that one may vote for a policy she is not negligent about. She may vote for this policy based on the fact that it is not harmful for her, but for the group, or is an example of the case of voting for the lesser of two evils. He further states three of the most common forms of bad voting are voting from immoral beliefs, ignorance, or epistemic irrationality.<sup>5</sup>

The notion that one should abstain from voting, or any productive activity for that matter, is troubling for several reasons and many thinkers have touched on it either directly or indirectly.<sup>6</sup> I will focus on three reasons why this is problematic: 1) it suggests that the majority will always make the best decision for the minority who abstain from voting; 2) that a contemporary losing vote by a minority collective will have no effect on future policy or candidates; and that 3) suffering a bad vote in the present will not be beneficial to ones civic development.

Further I contend that Brennan's argument allows for exceptions to his rules due to hidden implications within his qualifiers. I am particularly referring to his idea that a bad vote violates the superior duty not to engage in collectively harmful activities. Brennan's failure to define what constitutes “epistemic irrationality” and “immoral beliefs” leads me to reject these

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no. 4 (2009): 535-549.

4 Ibid., 537

5 Ibid., 538

6 This is largely in reference to John Rawls' assertions on voting and Aristotle's theory of golden mean. Both of which I will touch on at length in my discussion. This also refers to discussions by Toni Morrison, June Jones, and activist Marian Wright Edelman in regards to voting and the African-American experience.

notions on the basis of their residual subjectivity.

In support of Brennan's argument, Nathan Hanna suggests that there are certain conditions in which if one votes, she can only vote badly.<sup>7</sup> I argue, however, that in the African-American experience, due to the history of being disenfranchised and subsequently blocked from voting, the idea that voting is a harmful activity ignores lived experience. I contend that, in the African-American situation at least, a vote submitted is better than a vote abstained from, for several reasons.

An outline of this argument is:

- 1) One has an obligation not to engage in collectively harmful activities if refraining from such activities does not impose significant personal costs.
- 2) In the African-American community voting badly is to engage in a collectively harmful activity.
- 3) Abstention from voting in the African-American community is to engage in a collectively harmful activity while imposing significant personal harm.
- 4) Therefore, in the African-American community voting badly is a more practical option than abstention from voting. (2,3)

In addition to the above mentioned argument and my explanation of the exceptions to Brennan's position, I will introduce the phenomenon I call *voter maturation* – the idea that one becomes better at the activity of voting by participation in the voting process. I will trace the development of this phenomenon in the thought of one of its exponents (although I acknowledge that it was rather unknowingly) John Rawls.<sup>8</sup> Further, I will note the implications

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<sup>7</sup> Hanna, Nathan. "An Argument for Voting Abstention" *Public Affairs Quarterly* 23 (2009): 279-286.

<sup>8</sup> For this intellectual history I will rely heavily on two of Rawls' works. See: Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. and Rawls, J., & Kelly, E. (2001). *Justice as*

of this theory and how it manifests in the thought of notable African-Americans. In what follows, I will make my arguments in a more exhaustive manner and consider several possible objections.

## **II. Bad Votes and Blacks**

The notion of a bad vote amongst the African-American community is not one that is easily dismissed. The argument is not that it is not possible for an African-American to vote badly (indeed, that would be all but absurd) but it is to say that if the only epistemic choices are to vote for something or someone you do not know or to abstain from voting, the worse vote is to elect not to vote. The basis for this assumption is historically founded.

Despite the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment, many factors of discrimination served to bar blacks from voting up until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Factors such as felony disenfranchisement continue to be a significant hindrance to black enfranchisement and serve as a reminder to the community that it should preserve and increase its political power.<sup>9</sup> (This I argue, like Edelman, cannot be done through abstention). Many scholars have seen this political power as significant to a continued sense of black identity and community.<sup>10</sup> Having said this, the level of struggle required in obtaining the right to vote should be taken into consideration when formulating a *code* for African-American voting. I am not, however, arguing that there is an obligation to history in the black community as there are certainly cases where one may

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*fairness: a restatement*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

9 Brief information of this topic was gathered from both: Chandler Foster, Vera. "'Boswellianism': A Technique in the Restriction of Negro Voting." *Phylon* 10, no. 1 (1949): 26-37. [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) (accessed October 19, 2010). and JBHE Foundation. "Disenfranchisement Removes 1.4 Million Black Men from the Voting Rolls." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 22 (1998): 61-62.

10 For more on this see: Chike Jeffers, "The Black Gift: Cultural Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Africana Philosophy" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 2010). Also see: Shelby, Tommie. *We who are dark: the philosophical foundations of Black solidarity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

not accept this history as essential to the modern black experience. Relative views on racial essentialism notwithstanding, I will simply argue that voting history is a significant part of the modern black experience in America.

Though premise 1 of my outlined argument – that one has an obligation not to engage in collectively harmful activities if refraining from such activities does not impose significant personal costs – is not a consensus, as there is some debate on what exactly constitutes significant personal costs in general, I will assume it. I will, however, explicate on what constitutes significant personal cost in the African-American experience. The most common forms of political personal costs are much in relation to the collective: 1) loss of an already diminishing voice in the socio-political sphere; and 2) further ignorance to socio-political issues.<sup>11</sup>

In mentioning the loss of an already diminishing voice, I mean to that that there has been a steady decline in activism among most African-Americans in regards to socio-political awareness since the Civil Rights era. A decline in radical fervor and institutional racism has left the majority of African-Americans with not many options for a significant public voice.<sup>12</sup> One such voice that does remain is the vote. A singular epistemic decision not to vote made by a singular African-American would not prove to be detrimental in the grand scheme; in fact it would calculate to less than a half of a half of a percent. Therefore, in this instance, it is not the singular that we are concerned with but the effect multiple individuals will have on the entire group.

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11 It is not my aim to argue for personal costs outside of the political sphere which might include, for example, death. This is an obvious personal cost in which one should certainly vote at any cost. Though, in a case where the persons vote against his own death is so wildly important that it would cause the mass genocide of his group it would be important that he vote in the best interest of the group. That is also to say that one has the superior duty to the collective which I will accept, conditionally.

12 In an effort not to downplay the role of social media in modern mobilization – as was witnessed in the recent Egyptian revolution – I will say that a strong majority of African-Americans do not employ such a powerful voice as social media in a way that would be most beneficial to gaining and sustaining political power.

The individual cannot positively effect change except in certain circumstances and by exerting extreme effort. The entire city may dump their trash in the local river except for me. If I devote every moment of my time to cleaning the river, by any means necessary, I could therefore effect positive change. In the system of voting, however, this sort of effort is not a guaranteed success. One may spend ninety hours a week going door-to door, making phone calls and encouraging people to get out and vote for policies that she sees as “good”<sup>13</sup>, but it will not ensure that person will vote. The only way voting can effect change is through the collective effort, regardless of the personal satisfaction in civic duty it may very well provide the individual.

### **III. Voter Maturation and Rawls**

Aristotle's theory of golden mean posits that as one practices something (such as, for example, courageousness) one actually develops said trait or virtue and each time that action is chosen and practiced it becomes easier to practice the virtue rightly.<sup>14</sup> I believe that this theory can be applied to voting, as well. According to the teleology mentioned, the end goal (or, voting well) is reason to partake in its beginning task (voting in general). The process I have just described is what I term, simply, *voter maturation*. The idea is, that as one votes she will want to, and will, become more informed on the policies that she votes on. I will assume that no one wants to remain ignorant to issues of importance that they partake in. That said, voter abstention does not allow for the most optimal development of socio-political awareness or voter maturation.

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13 This takes into account the idea that the persons one aims to encourage to vote may not perceive what is a good candidate or policy the same as the person who is encouraging them.

14 For a brief overview of this theory see: Wildman, Wesley. "Aristotle." *people.bu.edu*. [http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/wphil/lectures/wphil\\_theme03.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/wphil/lectures/wphil_theme03.htm) (accessed December 28, 2010).

Voter maturation can be defined as the growth a voter experiences from voting and becoming more socially aware. As a result of this newfound social awareness, the voter will in turn “vote better”.<sup>15</sup> Though it's idealistic to assume that all voters will have this sort of epiphany, it should be said that a strong majority can. I have also encountered arguments that *all* voter maturation is idealistic, drawing on the example of the 2008 election and a strong percentage of those who voted for now President Barack Obama being ignorant to his stance on policies and instead of voting again in the November 2010 mid-term elections decided to abstain from voting. To this I argue that voter maturation has, in fact, already occurred. In fact a strong majority of those ignorant to Obama's policies were first-time or infrequent voters, making their act of voting, in the 2008 election, part of the maturation process. Though they may not have voted in the off-year election, that is not to say that they will not vote in the 2012 presidential elections which they may deem more important. Which is indeed a step toward regularity in voting for that person.

Further, their votes, though uninformed to an extent, may not necessarily be subject to complete dismissal as a bad vote. Under Brennan's stipulation that a vote is considered bad when it is cast “without sufficient reason” these votes may be deemed good. Though there will undoubtedly be rebuttal to this note, many people may view race as a logical reason for voting for a candidate. Imagine being Elijah Muhammed and you were presented with a ballot that included a white man and a black man. It suffices to say that you would choose the latter and not the former based on your beliefs. On the reverse side, imagine being David Duke and presented with the same ballot, how would you vote? Though the idea of voting based solely on racial bias seems absurd to many, it is part of certain Americans basis of reasoning.

Having explained my conception of voter maturation I would like to explore a bit of the intellectual history of it. In his *Theory of Justice* John Rawls noted that “voting leads to a

<sup>15</sup> That is simply to say will vote less badly.



larger conception of society and to the development of... intellectual and moral faculties.”<sup>16</sup> At first glance this may seem problematic when viewed alongside his doctrine of public reason which may best be summarized in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “Citizens engaged in ***certain political activities*** have a ***duty of civility*** to be able to justify their decisions on ***fundamental political issues*** by reference only to public values and public standards. Though all the words italicized are significant according to Rawls, I will focus on certain political activities and fundamental political issues. Rawls' specifies his “certain political activities” as when one exercises powers of public office and in the event of voting. Voting, according to Rawls is a “fundamental political issue.”

Rawls further states that, “Citizens must be able...to present to one another publicly acceptable reasons for their political views”<sup>17</sup>. At once, this proposition seems to mesh very well with Jason Brennan's idea that one should abstain from voting when they are voting “without sufficient reason” because she wouldn't be able to justify her vote in a publicly acceptable manner. This is a section, however, that when combined with his other ideas requires more thought.

When viewing Rawls' initial assertion (i.e. that voting leads to a larger conception of society) alongside these ideas, there are seemingly disparate views of what he believes the responsible citizen ought to do. When partnered with voter maturation, however, Rawls' differing views are unified. In order to heed public reason when voting, one must understand: 1) what they see as best for the collective and 2) how to go about achieving that end. If we accept Rawls' idea that “voting leads to a larger conception of society,” and that it enhances ones “intellectual and moral faculties,” then it is necessary for one to suffer the earlier votes which might not be in the best interest of the public. For example, if a majority voted for Hitler

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16 Rawls, *Theory* p. 234

17 Rawls, *Justice as fairness* p. 91

as the next Head of State, and he did not intimidate voters, it is sufficient to say that when the next term of elections was on hand the strong majority of voters would vote with public reason (that is to say *against* Hitler). In this instance the voter has matured by identifying what is best for the collective (nearly anything but Hitler) and the vote necessary to achieve that goal. In the event of a public policy the logic flows much in the same way. If one votes against a health-care public option and to deregulate the private industry causing a mass increase in medical expenses, including their own; when such legislation comes up again it can plausibly be assumed that they will vote for the public option. As a voter votes, and reflects on the outcomes of said votes for the public and themselves, they will likely vote for the better alternative in the future. In so saying, the voter will experience the voter maturation that I and Rawls suggests will occur and will be better suited to vote within his doctrine of public reason.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In this paper I have explored several aspects of voting abstention and how it relates to the African-American experience. I have explained my idea that blacks who abstain from voting harm the group and also, with the idea of voter maturation, how something that may moderately slow the progression of the group, temporarily, will help the group in the future. Arguing against Brennan's narrow notions of duty to abstain from voting, I have shown that until there is a proper conception of what it truly means to vote badly, as an African-American, any vote that may lead to voter maturation should be deemed as better than electing to abstain from voting.