

Please Vote Responsibly

An argument for why we have an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves before voting

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The roots of America's political philosophy are set in the rich soil of representative-democratic government and feed off the nutrients of a strong spirit of civic and political participation, a democracy established and upheld for the people by the people, and a dual emphasis on national unity and individual liberty. Our founders believed that along with our inalienable rights came the responsibility to nourish these roots by striving to uphold the aforementioned values. What I will explore in this paper is the idea that along with our right to vote, we have the responsibility to inform ourselves before doing so.

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, once said, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be" (Jefferson 1816). Not long after, James Madison, the father of the U.S. Constitution, declared, "A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both" (Madison 1822). Unless this vital tissue of civic virtue and political participation manifests amongst the citizenry of a democracy, civic and political organs cannot fulfill their beneficial function. An apathetic or ignorant public atrophies these fundamental characteristics of America's classical Republican form of government. A government for the people cannot be properly run by the people if they are uninterested or uninformed. Bolstering our unity as a nation, while safeguarding our individual liberty, cannot be achieved in this uninformed state.

These cogent concerns about democracy are not new. The most formative of Western philosophers, namely Plato and Aristotle, were also skeptical of letting the *demos* rule. In Plato's estimation, democracy is the second worst form of government besides tyranny, for democracy simply devolves into tyranny of the mob (Plato 2004, Book 8). Rather than face oppression at the claws of a single-headed leviathan, a democracy submits the people to the oppression of a hydra.

The reason this hydra is more pernicious than the daunting leviathan, however, is because the hydra disguises itself as the will of the people, reigning over the minority population with a specious justification. Like Plato, Aristotle was also afraid of this monster and he “sought to avoid democracy, largely on the grounds of popular ignorance” (Hochschild 2010). Though many philosophers dating back to Plato’s era readily acknowledged the numerous merits of democracy, the apparent concern was that the masses were not always capable of properly deciding how the state should operate, and this cynicism has persisted into modernity. Winston Churchill (apocryphally) mused that “the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter” and that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others tried from time to time” (Langworth 2009). The principal concern seems to be that the temple of democracy is supported primarily by the pillars of citizens’ willingness to be politically and civically engaged. If these mainstays remain solidly buttressed by citizens upholding their responsibilities, then the fortress of self-governance will hold strong, as it has for centuries. However, absent these columns of personal responsibility, the edifice of democracy faces collapse. The regrettable fact is that it does not take a foreign enemy to destroy the stronghold from without; indeed, implosion could as easily lay it to ruin from within.

Is democracy doomed to death, condemned by its own internal failures? Are we, thus, in the early stages of America’s inexorable ruin? Was Plato’s skepticism justified? Is not the reason we find Churchill’s quotations witty because we all know, deep down, that they retain a kernel of truth? I do not hold as grim an outlook as this, but I do believe the future will prove far more tenuous if citizens of modern free states continue to fail in their responsibility to inform themselves before voting. But someone shall surely object, claiming that political ignorance has indeed existed within the populace at least since the genesis of democracy, yet democracy is now the most

prevalently-adopted form of government in the world today (Central Intelligence Agency 2016). Need there even be a claim for informing ourselves today? After all, America's government has survived despite these persistent pitfalls within democracy for nearly two-and-a-half centuries now.

I respond to this charge by citing the fact that, recently, we have witnessed a breakdown of our political institutions. Consider the recent political atmosphere: in 2013, the U. S. Government partially shutdown for the span of sixteen days due to Congress' inability to pass sufficient, minimal budgetary legislation (Weisman and Peters 2013); the 2016 presidential election saw two nominees of the Republican and Democratic Parties who faced some of the worst disapproval ratings in the history of modern politics to the ballot (Gallup 2017); we have voting citizens who are unsure of whether there is a difference between Obamacare and the Affordable Care Act (Dropp and Nyhan 2017). I do not think our institution of democracy is terminally ill, but I do think the claim that it is healthy enough to elect competent leaders and function properly is dubious at best.

Whether America's democratic institutions are currently facing unprecedented challenges is for political science circles to debate – and they are doing it as we speak. What still requires discussion is the fact that we now have a basis to make an ethical claim about voting because access to information is at an all-time high. The modern advent of television and the rapid rise of the internet can help us surmount many of the obstacles standing in the way of information. With ample inroads to information thanks to these technologies, I fully believe that all people are capable of sufficiently informing themselves if they are willing to put forth the required time and

effort. Failure to inform oneself is no longer ethically excusable; on the contrary, I claim it is now ethically culpable.¹

The aggregation of these pertinent considerations has led me to defend the following thesis: Given the fact that citizens living in a free and democratic state have the right to vote, this entails a civic responsibility to sufficiently inform themselves before voting or before engaging in other politically advocating action such as campaigning, fundraising, etc.; furthermore, negligent or intentional failure² to properly inform oneself prior to these actions of political advocacy is morally blameworthy. Stated briefly, we have an ethical (and civic) responsibility to inform ourselves before voting or engaging in other such actions of political advocacy.

Before prescribing a solution, a firm diagnosis must be ascertained in order to fully understand the ailment. To do this, I must first establish the premise that people are not properly informed in the United States and defend it against certain objections. Second, I shall address the main philosophical concern of this venture – even if political ignorance is an extant problem, what, if any, ethical responsibility do we have to inform ourselves before voting? – and argue that centuries of political philosophy insist that we *do* have a responsibility to sufficiently inform ourselves before we vote and failure to achieve this is ethically blameworthy. I shall then discuss the different ways we can fulfill this responsibility in the third section of this paper, and consider

¹ This is barring extenuating circumstances, such as socio-economic disadvantage or an unfamiliarity with American politics due to recent immigration to the country.

² “Negligent or intentional failure” – This is important because if you garner your information from highly partisan news sources, while claiming you were unaware of more balanced sources, you are negligently ignorant. If you choose to ignore pieces of research or news story that contradict your views, then you are intentionally ignorant. Both negligent and intentional failures to inform oneself are equally culpable.

I am also setting aside cases in which someone sufficiently informs herself, yet she casts her vote in a purely selfish or prejudiced way. In this scenario, I envision someone who, to the best of her ability, has researched the pertinent literature, considered different points of view, and yet still votes to end the welfare state because she is prejudiced against black people and believes the welfare state benefits black individuals more so than white individuals. We would have no reason to call this person uninformed, or to say that she has failed in her ethical responsibility to inform herself, but we might call her an *immoral voter*. Throughout this paper, I shall put immoral voters to the side, but this is not to imply that they are exculpated merely because they succeeded in informing themselves. Immoral voters are still subject to the same forms of blame I discuss in Section 5 of this paper.

some possible consequences, such as blame, individuals might face for failing to uphold this responsibility in the fourth section. I will conclude with some thoughts about how such an ethical prescription toward voting may also be applied to other actions of advocacy.

Section 1: Diagnosing Voter Ignorance

“Nothing strikes the student of public opinion and democracy more forcefully than the paucity of information most people possess about politics.” – Ferejohn, 1990

Political scientists essentially consider it an accepted fact that widespread political ignorance – *i.e.*, ignorance of pertinent political facts, politicians, policies, etc. – pervades American society. It is difficult to argue against the acceptance of this claim given the abundance of evidence supporting it. Studies conducted over past decades have exposed the prevalent existence of political ignorance within the American population.³ In 1999, for instance, people thought the U.S. government spent 18 percent of its budget on foreign aid and recommended that it should be reduced to 8 percent. In reality, the federal government spent less than one percent of the budget on foreign aid that year (Kull and Destler 1999). As of 2015, the federal government only allocated 1.31% of its budget to international affairs (National Priorities Project 2017). In a 2014 study, soon after Russia annexed Crimea, people were asked if they thought the U.S. should intervene militarily, and asked to identify Ukraine on a map. The farther off they were about the geographical location of Ukraine,

³ The reason I focus on the potential pitfalls of failing to properly inform oneself politically and not general ignorance is because one poses a more direct harm than the other in the way that it threatens our government institutions. Ignorance of science or literature, though undesirable, cannot, as quickly and directly, undermine our society’s democratic institutions for we are not asked to vote every year to decide who gets to become authors and scientists. (The one caveat here is that ignorance of science can be problematic when it impacts one’s political views, such as one’s beliefs about climate change. So, in so far as science overlaps with political policy, the voter must be sufficiently informed of science.) For this reason, I choose to focus on failing to inform oneself before voting in political elections.

the more likely they were to be in favor of military intervention. People were so uncertain of Ukraine's location that the median guess was wrong by eighteen hundred miles, roughly the stretch from St. Louis to Los Angeles (Kolbert 2017; Sloman and Fernbach 2017). Other research has revealed that a significant portion of Americans believed that Communists composed the Bill of Rights; 40 percent did not know the vice-president's name (Hochschild 2010); and, near the end of the Cold War, only 43 percent knew of the Strategic Defense Initiative. Subsequently, only 22 percent knew that it was a policy to use nuclear weapons to defend Western Europe should the USSR invade its borders (Graham 1988, 331–32). This served as one of the reasons for political scientist Stephen Bennett to declare that close to a third of Americans could be called “know-nothings,” because they were nearly completely ignorant of political information (Bennett 1988).

America's political ignorance is not limited to a lack of policy knowledge, but also extends to a widespread misunderstanding of our underlying political system. Twenty years ago, a majority of voters did not know who retains the power to declare war, the primary functions of each branch of government, or what organization oversees monetary policy (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 70–71). More recent research shows that such a dearth of knowledge has not improved: of the populace, only 42 percent could name the three branches of government while only 28 percent could name two or more of the five rights enumerated in the First Amendment (Somin 2010, 258). Another poll revealed that 35 percent of those surveyed believed that the famous Karl Marx quotation, ‘From each according to his ability to each according to his need,’ is in the Constitution, and, on top of that, another 34 percent admitted that they were unsure of whether the statement is in the Constitution (Somin 2010, 258). In their book, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs About How Government Should Work*, John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse found that 25 to 40 percent of people – depending on measurement variations – have a

severely inaccurate view of how the government is supposed to work (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). People like these have been labeled “politiphobes,” for they are not only ignorant of how the government functions, but are, in fact, fearful of how it currently operates (Rauch 2016).

The optimistic observer might attempt to argue that even if voters lack knowledge of policies and political institutions, perhaps they nonetheless possess sufficient knowledge of individual politicians to make informed decisions regarding whether to vote them into office. Evidence suggests this is not the case. In December of 1994, 57 percent of Americans had never heard of Newt Gingrich, the main politician behind the Republican recapture of Congress only one month prior (Somin 1998, 416–17). More recently, approximately 79 percent of citizens could not name either of their senators, and 56 percent could not name any of their district’s congressional candidates (Hardin 2006, 180). Even if voters did possess sufficient knowledge of each candidate, American citizens are especially poor at assigning political praise and blame. For example, voters are often biased against politicians who govern during an economic downturn, though this may not have necessarily been the politician’s fault (Caplan 2007, 30–48). The people moreover demonstrate an overall unawareness of job performance and policy outcomes. Recently, only 24 percent of Americans understood that, as of May 2009, the “cap and trade” environmental regulations implemented by the Obama administration actually addressed environmental issues; 46 percent believed it was either a “health-care reform” or a “regulatory reform for Wall-Street” (Somin 2010, 258). Another poll in 2003 showed that nearly 70 percent of Americans were unaware that the Bush administration passed a prescription-drug entitlement act (Somin 2010, 258).

If political ignorance is so egregiously widespread within the American electorate, what has shielded the democratic system, which depends on the people for the election of its leaders,

from falling into disarray? One line of reasoning gives much credit to the U. S. Constitution, arguing that it provides a structure that allows our government to avoid some of the troubles it would experience were it to be a direct, rather than representative, democracy. A more extended discussion of constitutionalism will be tabled at the moment, however, for one could make the argument that these safeguards did not function properly in the 2016 election and have truly been under extraordinary strain in the 21st century. Another argument, and one that has a good deal of traction within the political science community, is that voters can avail themselves of certain epistemological shortcuts which allow them to avoid the pitfalls of political ignorance come Election Day. This deserves consideration, because, should it prove to be true, then my assertion that we need an ethical claim regarding voter responsibility would be weakened.

Anthony Downs, an esteemed economist at the Brookings Institution, claims that people are actually rational to remain politically ignorant. As he labels it, they are “rationally ignorant,” because, economically speaking, the miniscule benefit of the infinitesimally small probability that one vote will make a difference in a sea of millions is massively outweighed by the relatively heavy cost of effectively informing oneself, especially given that people already live busy lives full of work, family obligations, and other more important civic activities (Downs 1957). While most Americans may be detached from political information, and justifiably so, there is a small proportion that remains engaged and can aid in informing others. I shall table the morality of such a “justified” disengagement and consider instead why some political scientists argue that rational ignorance is acceptable. Some maintain that the portion of citizens that remains involved and knowledgeable ultimately decides the results of the election. This purported phenomenon is called the “miracle of aggregation.” It is argued that ignorant voters consistently cancel each other, leading to a zero-sum gain and allowing sophisticated voters to decide the election (Converse

1990). However, I deny this claim, because contradictory evidence exists suggesting that voters who possess basic knowledge about policies and politics in general hold systematically different positions than those who lack this knowledge, even after controlling for demographic variables (Althaus 2003; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This suggests that uninformed voters are not, in fact, cancelling each other out, but rather, they are negating the votes of the informed voters. According to this evidence, when the uninformed voter goes to the polls, he typically votes for X, but when the informed voter goes to the polls, she typically votes for Y, thus the uninformed voter is virtually annulling the vote of the informed voter.

Some political scholars believe people can reduce the cost of informing themselves by relying on information cues from opinion leaders, such as political intellectuals and other such politicians, party leaders, members of the community actively involved in a party, etc. (Popkin 1994; Converse 1990; Neumann 1986). Yet, the question of how are we to trust the reliability of these opinion leaders still presents itself in this case. Journalists can be helpful, but a majority of Americans no longer derive their political information from reliable media publications anyway. Though American voters sought out political information from a variety of sources in 2016, the most relied-upon source was cable news networks (Gottfried et al. 2016). This shortcut of relying on opinion leaders, rather than reducing the demand for voters to inform themselves, actually produces an additional level of complexity as voters must now ascertain whether a particular opinion leader is reliable, fair, and well-informed.

Another proposed shortcut that can potentially decrease the cost of informing oneself is the voter's ability to rely on virtually free information from one's daily life (Popkin 1994). Essentially, voters deduce conclusions regarding policy proposals of a candidate from the evidence naturally available to them. Some might attribute praise or blame to a politician, policy, or party based on

the simple question, ‘has my life gotten better or worse since the last election?’ However, I believe this shortcut might foster some morally reprehensible outcomes. Relying solely on information from one’s daily life almost automatically biases the voter to prefer self-centered political goals and discriminate against those whom he or she does not encounter regularly. The individual who comes of age in rural Iowa, having never interacted with a member of a racial minority, will almost certainly devalue policies and politicians that prioritize a civil-rights focused agenda. In fact, data exists indicating that people who are acquainted with a member of the homosexual community are significantly more supportive of gay rights than those who do not know anyone who identifies as LGBTQ (Pew Research Center 2007a).⁴ We might sensibly assume, then, that similar trends exist for policies regarding other marginalized groups, such as the black or Hispanic communities. Relying on this shortcut as a source of information is thus all too likely to lead to short-sightedness (most likely in the form of narcissistic decision-making) and systemic discrimination.

I arrive at the conclusion that political ignorance is a pervasive issue in American society and that its deleterious effects have especially come to light in the 21st century. The proposed shortcuts meant to mitigate the negative consequences of voter ignorance are at best unreliably insufficient and at worst morally problematic. But how does this empirical evidence relate to the project before me? Earlier, I stated that we have an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves before voting or engaging in other such actions of political advocacy. I believe these heavily-supported statistical findings show that there is really no apparent solution – no silver bullet, if you will – to the present problem other than having an informed electorate. While there remain several institutions that may assist in the task of informing the people – *e.g.* family, public schooling,

⁴ Individuals with a close gay friend or family member supported equality of marriage by 55% compared to a support level of only 25% from those who had no close gay friends or family members (Pew Research Center 2007a).

media, etc.⁵ – the individual citizen is the ultimate agent, fundamentally responsible for informing herself. If society hopes to address the pressing issue of political ignorance, I proffer that it must be done through the *modus operandi* of an ethical claim. I therefore argue that individuals have an ethical responsibility to inform themselves before voting. Given the litany of evidence, many people are and have been failing to meet this responsibility. Thus, if my claim is correct, it will have very practical consequences for a very large proportion of society. Before I move too quickly, however, an important question must be answered: is my claim correct?

Section 2: Does a Right Entail a Responsibility?

The right to vote is an essential right for any citizen of a free state. In fact, Article 21 of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states, "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures" (United Nations 1948). Are we claiming too much when we say that this also entails a responsibility to inform oneself before taking part in these free voting procedures? Some may argue that the right to vote is exactly no more than that – a right. Thus, we are free to use, or not use, it as we see fit with the expectation that we will not encounter outside interference or external blame for that choice. We should begin, therefore, by considering some arguments against the claim that the right to vote entails any corresponding responsibilities, ethical or otherwise.

⁵ While it is important to discuss these factors, and family and public schooling will be briefly touched upon later, they deserve their own full work of consideration. Also, the media will not be discussed, but I recognize that this topic demands its own work regarding the moral considerations of informing the electorate.

A) The Opposition

The evidence from Section 1 might suggest that voters *do not* think they have an ethical responsibility to inform themselves before voting. Perhaps no such responsibility exists. Perhaps voting can correctly be considered a self-regarding act – *i.e.*, an act that bears no direct consequence or threat of consequence on others. After all, voting is generally *treated* like a private act. The voter secludes herself into an isolated booth and votes by secret ballot, then, once she casts her ballot, she cannot be compelled – either legally or morally – to reveal how she voted.

This rule of silence seems intuitive enough that one naysayer may claim that moral norms simply cannot apply to actions performed within the privacy of a voting booth. Perhaps the act of voting is similar – from the moral point of view – to actions that do not directly affect others and are performed in the privacy of one’s own home. Because many people regard actions like this as falling outside the sphere of moral concern, then perhaps we should also view acts of voting in the same way. Or perhaps the first naysayer believes how he votes is of no concern to others because it is protected under his right to freedom of conscience or freedom of expression.

A second naysayer by contrast, might concede that voting is not a completely self-regarding act, and even go so far as to agree that voters should inform themselves before voting. Voters *should* inform themselves before voting, he might say, in the same way a person *should* go to the gym in order to maintain good physical health. People may look down upon those who do not inform themselves, but we do not owe it to others to inform ourselves any more than we owe it to others to exercise. This use of “should” *prima facie* carries little to no moral repercussions from others, for no obligation is violated by not going to the gym or not informing oneself. This thin version of what one ought to do would lend minimal strength, if any, to my claim that we all have an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves before voting. If all we mean when we say that a voter *should* inform himself before voting is that it would be good if he did

so, but it is not an ethical failure if he does not, then such a claim would not be sufficient to support my argument that we in fact have an ethical *responsibility* to inform ourselves before voting.

As I have stated, I seek to establish that failing to inform oneself before voting does in fact violate an ethical responsibility to others. Let us consider an allegory. Imagine that I move onto a cul-de-sac with the two naysayers previously mentioned. To secure our safety, we build a gate at the entrance of our three-home neighborhood. To maintain vigilance, we agree to take turns manning the gate at night. If it should happen, on the nights when the two naysayers man the gate, that a thief sneaks into our neighborhood and robs me of something, what would their responses be? The first naysayer might say that protecting his home is a self-regarding act and thus he has no ethical responsibility to perform it for others. The second naysayer might claim that obviously he “should” have kept watch and that I am justified in looking down on him for this failure, but he did not violate any direct ethical responsibility to me by failing to do so. I believe it is clear that we would not accept these responses, because the residents of the neighborhood have been harmed and, thus, someone is to blame for not upholding his agreed-upon obligation to keep watch at night. This serves as an allegory for not informing oneself before voting, because not being vigilant – *i.e.*, not informing oneself – allows for harm to, at least potentially, befall a community of individuals who have agreed to uphold ethical responsibilities to one another.⁶

A rebuttal may be that voting is not like this at all. One person failing to inform herself does not directly lead to all being harmed. For example, what if one thousand, one hundred thousand, or even two hundred million⁷ houses populated this cul-de-sac (it is a very large cul-de-

⁶ I hold that this agreement of the community can be, and often is, implicitly endorsed by people who agree to live within the community.

⁷ Two hundred million is the number of people registered to vote in the U.S. (Goldmacher 2016).

sac), and each household takes turns by night manning the very large gate? The probability that someone would break in on your given night is so low that it may seem that you are not compelled to uphold your duty. Assume that you do not man the gate, and nothing bad happens. Is voting not more akin to this scenario? I do not inform myself because the probability that harm will result from my failure to uphold my responsibility is so low that I do not feel compelled to inform myself. As a matter of fact, in most cases, nothing bad *does* happens, and life goes on. Does this not show that we do not really have an obligation to inform ourselves?

I believe there are two main problems with this line of reasoning. First, we have an ethical responsibility not to be free-riders of the system, and second, we should not view ourselves as exceptions to the rule. Consider free-riding: not informing oneself before voting is the type of action that – like walking on the grass, not recycling, or not paying your taxes – will not cause substantial harm if only a single person does it, but will, in fact, cause great harm if everyone does it. This should be viewed as concerning and problematic, leading us to ask whether we are acting in a way that we believe acceptable if we were to license everyone to act this way. This segues into my second point: when we are thinking of acting in a way that would cause great harm if everyone did so, we should be compelled to ask whether we are somehow special and deserve to have privileges that are not granted to others. A person in a democracy who decides to free-ride in this way seems to regard herself as, in some attitudes, superior to her fellow citizens. For example, uninformed voting has been compared to air pollution. As with uninformed voting, it is not clear that one person failing to take action – *e.g.*, one person refusing to cut back on her greenhouse emissions – will substantially affect the overall level of air pollution. While this might be an apt argument for weakened incentive, it by no means suffices as a reason why the citizen's responsibility is lightened (Crain 2016). Examples such as this are certainly objectionable in a

society that is committed to norms of political equality. One free-rider will not bring the system down, but it is very problematic when people view themselves as an exception to the rule. If that view becomes prevalent enough, it can lead to harm for the whole community.

I contend that I have now sincerely considered the contention that the “right” to vote – perhaps like the right to freedom of conscience – is truly absolute, in the sense that it falls outside the sphere of moral assessment. However, I think following the path of reasoning of the naysayers leads to detrimental outcomes for society, both morally and politically. Thus, we are justified in making ethical claims about one’s responsibility to inform oneself before engaging in actions of political advocacy. To review my point, if my claim is correct, then it bears significant consequences for a large proportion of the voting population. To evaluate my argument, it is important to explore what prominent political philosophers, such as Baron de Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls,⁸ have said and try to synthesize a rough consensus from their arguments.

B) Establishing Ethical Responsibility

One of the central components of my assertion is that one’s voting decisions should take others – *e.g.*, other individuals within society and society as a whole – into account. This would mean casting aside solely selfish interests for the greater benefit of society. In some ways, I am echoing the assertion of Baron de Montesquieu when he argued for the vital need for citizens of a democracy to fulfill the virtue of prioritizing public interest ahead of personal preferences (Montesquieu 2011, 40–41). To the first naysayer, Montesquieu might say that they are mistaken

⁸ It should be noted that I simply look to provide a brief overview of the work of these philosophers that applies to my project and that I am fully aware that my summary will not be complete with the nuance and complexity that they deserve, but it will be sufficient for a tenable grasp of their views and how they pertain to voting. (Sidenote: if you want your children to become political philosophers, name them some form of John.)

and that the act of voting is not separate from the interests of others. In fact, virtuous voting behavior demands placing benefits of the public over benefits to the individual (Montesquieu 2011, 34).⁹ Voting a certain way simply because that is what I wanted to do or because that is what I believe will be best for me would not uphold this virtue. I must take others into account. The only way to sufficiently do this is through informing myself. (After all, how am I ever supposed to vote for what I think is best for our country when I am ignorant of the problems our country faces or the proposed solutions for these problems?) So, in failing to inform myself before voting, I might fail to uphold Montesquieu's virtuous voting behavior.

But the question remains, in not being virtuous by not informing myself, am I failing in an ethical responsibility to others? Again, the second naysayer might say: it is obvious that we *should* be virtuous, just like how I *should* go to the gym, but not doing so does not constitute a failure in upholding my ethical responsibility to others. To the second naysayer, Montesquieu might explain that his claim about placing public interests over personal interests and private preferences actually constitutes a perfect duty, because we "contract" a large debt to our nation when we are brought into the world (Montesquieu 2011, 41). I interpret this to be Montesquieu, either intentionally or unknowingly, sowing the seeds of contractualism within his theory. Our obligation to prioritize public interests over our own comes from our contract with our country. Whether we do indeed contract a debt to the society in which we are born through some tacit agreement at birth is a debate for another thesis, but it is plausible to derive a sense of contracted communal obligation from Montesquieu's claims. It is this sense of contracted communal obligation, like the obligation to man the gate of the cul-de-sac society, that manifests an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves

⁹ Quotation from *The Spirit of Laws*, page 34: "this virtue may be defined as the love of the laws and of our country [...] such love requires a constant preference of public to private interest."

before voting so as to cast a sufficiently knowledgeable vote that properly takes others into account.

To expand upon this contractualist avenue, one might ask, how strong is this notion that we derive our ethical responsibilities from the contracts we make with others in society? Is it strong enough to say that we have an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves before voting and that we can be held morally blameworthy for failing to do so? Take the following passage from John Locke:

Where-ever therefore any number of Men are so united into one Society, as to quit everyone his Executive Power of the Law of Nature, and to resign it to the publick, there and there only is a *Political or Civil Society*. And this is done where-ever any number of Men, in the state of Nature, enter into Society to make one People, one Body Politick under one Supreme Government. [...] for hereby he authorizes the Society, or which is all one, the Legislative thereof to make Laws for him as the publick good of the Society shall require; to the Execution whereof, his own assistance is due. (Locke 1988, 89)

Locke argues that the social contract submits the people to the legislative and executive authority of the state.¹⁰ We allow the state to make and enforce laws, thus conceding a small portion of our freedom in an attempt to best ensure societal harmony and safety. Whereas in the state of nature I could freely take goods from others without their consent, I sacrifice this freedom within the social contract; thus, I contract an obligation to others not to steal their goods in the same way that they now have a contracted obligation not to steal mine. According to Locke, many of our political obligations rise out of our acceptance of and submission to the social contract. I believe we can infer that our ethical responsibilities can also rise out of a similar sort of contract.

¹⁰ It should be noted that Locke is more hesitant than Montesquieu in prescribing ethical responsibilities to others, for he is more concerned with hypothesizing about the state of nature and the social contract so as to make descriptive claims regarding the people and government; he is not as concerned with normative claims, but even a brief understanding of his concepts can illuminate facets of contractualism.

The work of other political philosophers, however, leaves such an inference as unnecessary. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, like Locke, believed that humankind, hypothetically speaking, exits the state of nature when it agrees to an overarching social contract, which establishes the legitimacy of government. But unlike Locke, Rousseau argued that citizens of a society who agreed to a social contract *do* in fact have certain ethical responsibilities. By agreeing to this contract, he argued, we give rise to new moral obligations that we previously did not have in the state of nature (Rousseau 2002, 229). These obligations stem from a moral reciprocation that exists within our contracted state. This manifestation of the social contract inextricably comes with “reciprocated duties” (Friend 2017). The state is now committed to the good of the people, so the people should be equally committed to the good of the state. This is further supported by Rousseau’s belief that, within the social contract, “each member becomes an indivisible part of the whole” (Rousseau 2002, 164). He elaborates on this notion of increased moral responsibility, manifest through the transformation from man as a sole individual to man as part of the whole of society, in the following passage:

To transition from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting in his behavior justice for instinct, and by imbuing his actions with the moral quality they previously lacked. Only when the voice of duty prevails over physical impulse, and law prevails over appetite, does man, who until then was preoccupied only with himself, understand that he must act according to other principles, and must consult his reason before listening to his inclinations. (Rousseau 2002, 166)

This convention of humanity into the social contract is what brings into existence moral obligations and responsibilities to others, which should supplant the individual will as the guiding conscience of society. Rousseau asserts that when one goes to vote, she must use her vote to say “it is beneficial to the State,” instead of saying “It is beneficial to a certain man or a certain party” (Rousseau 2002, 228). When an individual seeks to reap the full benefits of the state without

fulfilling “his duties of a subject,” then “the perpetuation of such injustice would bring about the ruin of the body politic” (Rousseau 2002, 166). He presents a rather grim outlook toward the consequences of individuals failing in their ethical responsibilities to the state, and though these obligations might be highly demanding, he believes they are justified for they are what is agreed upon when individuals enter into the social contract.

The writing of J.S. Mill bolsters this notion of an ethical responsibility to society and to others within it.¹¹ In *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill outlines his beliefs regarding a citizen’s responsibilities to society in the context of voting, stating:

In any political election, [...] the voter is under an absolute moral obligation to consider the interest of the public, not his private advantage, and give his vote to the best of his judgment, exactly as he would be bound to do if he were the sole voter, and the election depended upon him alone. This being admitted, it is at least a *primâ facie* consequence, that the duty of voting, like any other public duty, should be performed under the eye and criticism of the public; every one of whom has not only an interest in its performance, but a good title to consider himself wronged if it is performed otherwise than honestly and carefully. (Mill 1862, 143)

Arguably, the most important point of this passage is presented first when Mill states, “the voter is under *an absolute moral obligation* to consider the interest of the public, not his private advantage, and give his vote to the best of his judgment” (my emphasis added). This further supports the argument that voters do have a responsibility to consider the interests of the public when they vote. I would add that voters are more likely to misunderstand the interests and needs of the public if they are uninformed. Thus, I argue that a necessary component of this “absolute moral obligation” may be informing oneself before voting. Mill next claims that the voter should

¹¹ Though a utilitarian and not a contractualist, Mill’s work on politics and society applies well to my argument. For example, though Mill does not believe society is founded on a contract from which we should derive social obligations (Mill 1989, 75), he continues to say, “every one who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit, and the fact of living in society renders it indispensable that each should be bound to observe a certain line of conduct towards the rest” (Mill 1989, 75). I present this to show that, though Mill’s intention is not to root his arguments in contractualism, it is not too far a stretch to say that his views may be compatible, if not complementary, to the type of contractualism with which I engage in this paper.

vote “exactly as he would be bound to do if he were the sole voter, and the election depended upon him alone.” This statement lends itself nicely to the cul-de-sac allegory I presented earlier. The individuals who watch the gate must perform their duty to the best of their ability because the safety of the neighborhood depends almost entirely on them. Mill is asserting that we have a moral responsibility to vote as if this is the case. This assertion also dismisses the ethical permissibility of free-riders. All of this is merely a setup for the crux of his claim. It is as if Mill is directly addressing our first naysayer – the one who claimed that voting is a completely self-regarding act and comes with no moral responsibility to others, for it is protected as an absolute right – when he states, “the duty of voting, like any other public duty, should be performed under the eye and criticism of the public; every one of whom has not only an interest in its performance, but a good title to consider himself wronged if it is performed otherwise than honestly and carefully.” Mill here dismisses the idea that voting is protected in a sanctuary of secrecy and/or insulated from moral blame, for it should be “performed under the eye and criticism of the public.” Mill throws the door wide open for an ethical claim about one’s responsibility to inform himself before voting in the second part of that quotation: “every one of whom has not only an interest in its performance, but a good title to consider himself wronged if it is performed otherwise than honestly and carefully.” If one fails to vote honestly and carefully, then others are legitimately *wronged*. Mill declares dishonest or non-careful voting an injustice against others. Here is where I add my own interpretation: it is not possible for me to vote honestly and carefully if I have failed to inform myself. If they fail to inform themselves, we may say that they are certainly not voting carefully, even if honestly. Thus, I think it is inherent to Mill’s claim that one must inform oneself before voting in order to avoid committing the injustice of wronging others.

The notion that others are morally wronged when one does not inform herself before voting, which I argue can be deduced from Mill's passage, brings with it the implication that we owe something to other members of our community. When we do not give what is owed – in this case, a careful, honest, informed vote – then we are wronging others. John Rawls delves us deeper into this consideration. In discussing what we owe to others within our society with our political action, he presents what he calls “public reason”: 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* (Wenar 2017 – emphasis in original). *Certain political activities* are enumerated by Rawls to mean mainly voting plus engaging in “political advocacy” in favor of political parties, politicians, or political organizations (Rawls 1993, 215). The *duty of civility* establishes that Rawls is making an ethical, not a legal claim, for he does not prescribe a legal punishment for failing in one's duty to uphold the ideals of public reason (Rawls 1993, 213). The *fundamental political issues* are what Rawls refers to as “constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice” (he employs this term several times throughout his chapter). Lastly, *public values* and *public standards* are reasons for supporting a certain political view given reasons that one “could reasonably expect that others might endorse” (Rawls 1993, 218). Usually, these public values and public standards can be reduced to appeals to liberty and/or equality of opportunity.

In this sense, public reason is the ideal framework within which citizens must find their basis for voting a certain way. Rawls also seems to be in agreement with the philosophers previously discussed because he believes that voting should be done with the reasonable political interests of others (“public reason”) in mind. He states,

On fundamental political questions the idea of public reason rejects common views of voting as a private and even personal matter. One view is that people may

properly vote their preferences and interests, social and economic, not to mention their dislikes and hatreds. [...] Another view, offhand quite different, is that people may vote what they see as right and true as their comprehensive convictions direct without taking into account public reasons. Yet both views are similar in that neither recognize the duty of civility and neither respects the limits of public reason in voting on matters of constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice. (Rawls 1993, 219)

An astute observer may ask whether this carries with it any ethical responsibilities. Yes, it does. According to Rawls, “public reason sees the office of citizen with its duty of civility as analogous to that of judge with its duty of deciding cases” (Rawls 1999b, 605). If you are not capable of justifying your voting, or other public political behavior, through the framework of public reason then you are failing in your duty of civility to which you have agreed within an overarching social contract. Furthermore, Rawls states, “From the point of view of public reason, citizens must vote for the ordering of political values they sincerely think the most reasonable. Otherwise they fail to exercise political power in ways that satisfy the criterion of reciprocity” (Rawls 1999b, 605). For example, if I am not able to appeal to public reasons in stating my reasoning for supporting a certain candidate, then I have failed, because I have just offered reasons that someone could not reasonably endorse (this will be revisited later). Thus, it seems likely that Rawls would be in full support of the claim that citizens must inform themselves before voting or engaging in other such actions of political advocacy.

This ambitious section admittedly covers a lot of philosophical ground relatively quickly. To ensure full understanding, allow me to reiterate the main points. Montesquieu claimed that we must sacrifice our personal preferences for public interests, because of the great debt we owe to society upon coming into the world. This view is consistent with my claim that we must inform ourselves before voting because in order to truly understand the interests of the public. Locke asserted that our political responsibilities rise out of our acceptance of and submission to the social contract. Though Locke is mainly concerned with descriptive claims, ethical responsibilities can

be inferred from his arguments. Rousseau declared that we ethically fail when we do not supplant our individual will with sincere considerations of what will be best for society to guide our voting. Recall that Rousseau asserts that when one goes to the voting booth, she must use her vote to say, “it is beneficial to the State,” instead of saying “It is beneficial to a certain man or a certain party” (Rousseau 2002, 228). Both Montesquieu and Rousseau deprioritize the individual compared to society. Once again, this opens the door to the claim that we must inform ourselves before voting to truly understand what will benefit and what will harm society. Mill then strengthens the claim that we have an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves when he says that those who do not vote “honestly and carefully” wrong others in society. I connect uninformed voting with honest and careful voting by asserting that it is not possible to vote honestly and carefully unless informed. Though Mill is a utilitarian, he bolsters my grounds for an ethical claim. The work of Rawls can then be seen as an attempt to establish a hypothetical framework for fulfilling this responsibility, as he emphasizes that our voting decisions must be justified by public reason, and a failure to justify it in this way is a failure in one’s “duty of civility.” From these philosophers, a rough consensus can be gathered to support my claim that we do have an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves before voting and engaging in other such actions of political advocacy. Let us assume that my skeptic generously concedes this point, and agrees that we have an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves before voting. He might nevertheless think that he has conceded very little, since there is much disagreement about what it takes for one to be “sufficiently and properly informed.” In fact, he might insist that this standard is so vague that it could easily be argued that a majority of current voters already can be said to meet it. This is a valid challenge, which I will now address.

Section 3: Proposals to Fulfill this Responsibility

If I have persuasively demonstrated that voters have a responsibility to sufficiently inform themselves before voting, then my next task is to clearly state what level of political knowledge renders a voter sufficiently informed. It is crucial to demarcate a goal of sufficient political knowledge for voters or else I could be condemning citizens to an endless task, as there is almost always more to be learned on any given political subject. Up to this point, an implicit precondition to my claim has been the fact that the burden of sufficiently informing oneself must not be too demanding so as to be out of reach for most citizens. The unattainability of sufficient knowledge may have been the case for a majority of people prior to the 21st century, but I now believe this goal is achievable and can no longer be dismissed as unrealistic. If I were to call for an eradication of political ignorance in the 1950s, it would require that, for example, rural farmers and inner-city public-housing residents to obtain political information pertaining to a wide range of politicians, policies, proposals, global and domestic problems, etc. It used to be much more challenging for individuals to learn about American, say, foreign policy behavior, or new immigration policies proposed in Congress. Also, it used to be the case that subscribing to reputable news sources, affording a television, or purchasing a personal computer was an unfeasible order for individuals of low socio-economic status.

My claim is especially relevant in the modern era, because, due to advancements in technology, the argument that informing oneself is too demanding is quickly becoming antiquated. Americans have more access to information than ever before – 64% of American adults now own a smartphone, nearly double the original number studied in 2011 (Smith 2015), and another 83%

of Americans have access to cable or satellite television, and (James 2015).¹² In 2015, up to 98% of Americans had access to basic internet services (Evans 2015), the highest number ever achieved in American history. These technological services and products equip citizens with the tools they need to effectively inform themselves before voting.

The disheartening reality, however, is that this exponential increase in access to information has achieved little in curing society of political ignorance. Despite these massive improvements in both educational achievement and access to high quality and immense quantities of information at a low price, levels of voter ignorance remain relatively stable (Bennett 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This suggestion is further bolstered by evidence from The Pew Research Center, which states,

Our political ignorance is as enduring as it is pervasive. When the Pew Research Center study compared the political knowledge of 1989 respondents with those from 2007 it found the advent of multiple 24-hour news channels, the C-SPAN channels, and hundreds of news sites on the Web had not moved the political ignorance dial in any appreciable way. (Pew Research Center 2007b)

Other concerning research shows that not only has the increased availability of news and information through multi-media sources accomplished very little in affecting the ‘political ignorance dial,’ it may in fact have brought about negative effects. One study found that increased access to political information has actually increased partisan polarization (Prior 2005). Given the unprecedented plethora of information available today, voters can more easily seek out and find sources of information that affirm their views and feel that they are sufficiently informing themselves while ignoring the sources of information that challenge their opinions. Voters “tend to overvalue any arguments that support their pre-existing views and undervalue or completely ignore countervailing evidence” (Somin 2014, 159). When faced with the decision to sincerely

¹² The only reason this number has decreased since 2010 is because of online streaming services such as Netflix and people choosing not to pay for such television-exclusive amenities.

consider alternative political positions or discover more information that confirms preexisting beliefs, the average person will choose the latter almost every time. In today's internet era, when an online search bar offers an instant portal into vast realms of information, negligence on behalf of the voter in informing herself is especially egregious. Rather than access the diverse information available online to attempt to inform themselves, voters tightly hold to an unhealthy proclivity to only seek out information that confirms their preexisting beliefs and opinions. As Somin puts it, "low political knowledge levels are primarily caused by lack of demand for information not lack of supply" (Somin 2013).

This is known in psychology as "confirmation bias"¹³ and it is a dangerously widespread mental phenomenon, in which people reject information that contradicts their beliefs and more readily accept information that supports their views. Psychologists believe this proclivity originated in the earliest humans, when there was not much to be gained from objectively considering the facts and much to be won through victory in arguments. This is attributed to our species' "hypersociability" (Mercier and Sperber 2011). This "hypersociability" is one of the reasons I believe this intuitive tendency to confirm our beliefs must be countered with an ethical claim about the way we inform ourselves. By incorporating ethically prescribed standards of informing ourselves into our social system of praise and blame, we can rely on humankind's sociability as a catalyst for changing behavior. I believe there is clear evidence that we need an ethical claim, for while increased access to information is necessary to successfully address political ignorance amongst the electorate, it is clearly not sufficient. The next question that

¹³ Confirmation bias is "the tendency people have to embrace information that supports their beliefs and reject information that contradicts them. Of the many forms of faulty thinking that have been identified, confirmation bias is among the best catalogued; it's the subject of entire textbooks' worth of experiments" (Kolbert 2017)

logically follows is, ‘what does it take to be sufficiently informed?’ and it is to answer this question that I now turn.

A) Four Prerequisites of Voter Knowledge

Fortunately, clearly defining a threshold of what it means to be “sufficiently informed” is a task at which political scientists and philosophers have toiled for some time. In 1960, a roster of political scientists from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center attempted to define such a threshold. In their formative work, *The American Voter*, Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, and Warren Miller offer three minimal knowledge prerequisites for a voter to be considered informed: 1) the voter must be aware of the existence of current political problems; 2) the voter must have a position on these problems; 3) the voter must possess knowledge of alternative positions on the given political problems (Campbell, Converse, and Miller 1980). This seems a reasonable starting point to cover the bases of sufficient information, but I believe a fourth prerequisite could be added, and this conception of a fourth criterion was first presented by Ilya Somin. He insists that, in order to possess sufficient knowledge, voters must have a reasonable understanding of how different policy proposals would affect the given political problem (Somin 1998, 415). Motivating the need for this fourth criterion, Somin cites a study in which a majority of voters preferred less government spending while simultaneously supporting increased government involvement in almost every federal policy area (L. L. M. Bennett and Bennett 1990, chaps. 2, 4). This hints that voters are unable to realize that policies proposing augmentation of government programs would most likely lead to increased government spending. Consider, for the sake of analogy, that you have asthma. One doctor is offering to treat your asthma with albuterol and another is going to prescribe monoxidine. You know a problem exists, you have a position on the problem, and you understand the alternative positions.

However, unless you understand how each of these medications will impact your asthma and your overall health, you are not sufficiently informed to make a decision at this point (Brennan 2011, 11). Thus, to be sufficiently informed, one must understand the potential effects of different policies. Stated in list form for clarity's sake, the four prerequisites are as follows:

- 1) Must be aware of the existence of current political problems.
- 2) Must have a position on these problems.
- 3) Must possess knowledge of alternative positions on the given political problems.
- 4) Must have a reasonable understanding of how different policy proposals would affect the given political problem.

I believe these four serve as an adequate list to evaluate a given voter's sufficiency or deficiency of political knowledge. While it is important to realize that family and education can play a significant role in helping one meet this standard – in fact, several theories have been posited, often placing the duty of providing information on a combination of family, public schooling, and the individual in varying degrees¹⁴ – full consideration of familial upbringing and education in helping to fulfill this ethical responsibility are topics that would require their own theses to sufficiently consider. Let me be clear that factors such as an underprivileged upbringing, should be taken into account when assessing the blameworthiness of an individual for failing to meet these standards, but these factors do not change the list of standards. Hence, I do not spend time contemplating those topics here.¹⁵

¹⁴ For a great source on properly educating individuals for life in a democratic society, see Giroux 2003, 384. For considering the proper role of parenting in a child's education, see Mill 1989, 105.

It is also important to note that John Rawls remarks, "democracy also recognizes that without widespread education in the basic aspects of constitutional democratic government for all citizens, and without a public informed about pressing problems, crucial political and social decisions simply cannot be made" (Rawls 1999b, 580).

¹⁵ Though I do discuss the relevance of these factors in regards to blameworthiness in a later section.

B) Evaluating Whether Someone is Sufficiently Informed

One question to consider is how do we sincerely *know* if someone has informed herself? In order to know if someone has successfully met the four prerequisites, it seems I would either need some type of mind-reading system or I would have to demand that others tell me their thought process and justifications for voting the way they did, perhaps immediately upon leaving the voting booth. We cannot read the minds of every voter to gauge their level of information to judge it sufficient or not, so we must expel that option from consideration. Can we demand they tell us how they voted? I argue that we will not need to demand they tell us. Rather, I am comfortable with relying on the fact that this topic will naturally and consistently arise in common conversation with others. It is within these conversations that our evaluation of whether someone is sufficiently informed can take place. In speaking with another individual, we can ascertain whether someone has informed himself before voting by judging *the reasons* he gives to justify his action of political advocacy.

Our evaluation can take place at this level – the level of personal conversation – and our evaluation should occur within the framework of public reason, as outlined by Rawls. He believed that deliberation and discussion between citizens allows them to revise and reconsider their reasons concerning political questions (Rawls 1999b, 580). The following passage essentially encapsulates his idea of public reason serving as a standard of discourse: “the ideal of public reason is that citizens are to conduct their fundamental discussions within the framework of what each regards as a political conception of justice” (Rawls 1993, 226). Conversing with one another plays a central role within the framework of public reason. When in discourse with another and when espousing one’s political conception of justice, it is especially important to understand that this conception must be “based on values that the others can reasonably be expected to endorse and

each is, in good faith, prepared to defend the conception so understood” (Rawls 1993, 226). He places a high importance on conversation with others because this is the point at which “public reason is crucial” (Rawls 1999b, 580). I believe that if one is able to uphold this ideal of public reason, in the sense that she is able to carry out political conversations within this framework and reasonably defend her views, then she shall naturally exhibit the knowledge necessary to meet the four prerequisites. If, in the course of the conversation, it becomes apparent that she is not able to reasonably defend her views, then it can safely be said that she does not fulfill the prerequisites. Rawls’ ideals of public reason offer a system of evaluation in this manner.¹⁶ At its most basic level, public reason asks that people provide reasons for their political action through a balance of public political values (Rawls 1993, 243). He explains that this requires each of us to be prepared to explain our political views and actions in ways that we may expect other people to reasonably endorse. This means that “We must have some test we are ready to say as to when this condition is met” (Rawls 1993, 226).¹⁷ I argue that if we are able to fulfill what Rawls demands, then we fulfill the four prerequisites. In order to successfully provide justifications that someone cannot reasonably reject for one’s views or political actions, one necessarily must have fulfilled the four prerequisites or else such an explanation would be rejected.¹⁸

Ultimately, Rawls’ demand that one provides reasons for their public political action is best summarized in his following quotation: “To check whether we are following public reason

¹⁶ It is important to note, however, that Rawls states, “We are concerned with reason, not simply with discourse. A way of reasoning, then, must incorporate the fundamental concepts and principles of reason, and include standards of correctness and criteria of justification” (Rawls 1993, 220). He later elaborates on this claim when he explains that one’s reasons must “appeal only to presently accepted general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial” (Rawls 1993, 224).

¹⁷ Full quotation: “This means that each of us must have, and be ready to explain, a criterion of what principles and guidelines we think other citizens (who are also free and equal) may reasonably be expected to endorse along with us. We must have some test we are ready to say as to when this condition is met” (Rawls 1993, 226).

¹⁸ It is also important to note that Rawls makes concessions for individuals in disadvantaged circumstances. He states that “the appropriate limits of public reason vary depending on historical and social conditions” (Rawls 1993, 251).

we might ask: how would our argument strike us presented in the form of a supreme court opinion? Reasonable? Outrageous?” (Rawls 1993, 254). This heuristic can be utilized as a tool for evaluating both one’s own reasons and the reasons of others. So not only should each individual ask him- or herself this question, but it can also be employed as a hypothetical method for evaluating others’ reasons as well. However, it is crucial to note that this does not license us to go around demanding that others give me their reasons behind a certain action of political advocacy and demand that their reasons be in the form of a Supreme Court decision. Instead, I could politely ask the discussant to elaborate upon her reasons for voting a certain way or agreeing with a certain policy, but only once these reasons are offered can I evaluate them.¹⁹ I should by no means pry them from others. Such an action would be morally objectionable. I am advocating for engaging with public reason in the context of daily political discourse.

I would also like to indicate that there are types of reasons we should reject. Ronald Dworkin gives examples of some of the reasons society might reject if offered as a justification. Dworkin speaks of these reasons in the context of “moral convictions,” but I believe they can be applied to some political beliefs as well. He asserts that we may reject someone’s beliefs when they are constituted by erroneous methods of thought, such as prejudice, mere emotional reaction, rationalization, or parroting (Dworkin 2007). For example:

- If I am against gay marriage because I believe homosexuals are morally inferior to heterosexuals, then I am basing my belief in prejudice.

¹⁹ It is important to note that I should not assume everyone will come to the same conclusions I do. Rawls readily confesses that, “We agree that citizens share in political power as free and equal, and that as reasonable and rational they have a duty of civility to appeal to public reason, yet we differ as to which principles are the most reasonable basis of public justification” (Rawls 1993, 226). Eventually, time will deem which view is the most reasonable (Rawls 1993, 227).

- If I say that I am against gay rights because seeing two homosexual men together makes me sick, then I am basing my beliefs in mere emotional reaction, which is unjustified.
- If I decide in advance of informing myself that homosexuality is wrong and then search for some ostensible facts to support my bias, such as ‘homosexual sex is physically debilitating to the human body, and should thus not be allowed,’ then I am attempting to rationalize my beliefs, but with spurious reasons.
- If I say that I am against gay rights because everyone knows they are wrong, then I am simply parroting an argument I have stolen from others, creating a cycle of unjustified reasoning.²⁰

These are all ways in which our beliefs can be deemed unjustified and therefore rejected. If any one of these reasons were offered in an attempt to justify an action of political advocacy, we could safely say that the person offering these reasons did not sufficiently inform herself. It is also important to note that this failure to inform oneself is still content neutral. I do not seek to evaluate the content of your beliefs; only your reasons for them. If you were to tell me homosexuality is acceptable and then employ prejudice, mere emotional appeal, rationalization, or parroting to justify this view, you would still fail in your ethical responsibility to inform yourself. To be clear, if I privately vote for anti-homosexual politicians based on prejudice, mere emotional appeal, rationalization, or parroting, then it may be that no one will ever discover this, but I am still blameworthy. Even if I never speak with anyone about my reasons for voting the way I did, I would still fail the hypothetical test, namely, I would not be able to give justifications that people

²⁰ One note to clarify parroting: sometimes it is acceptable if parroting a reputable source in a way that others would not reasonably reject. For example, if I believe in a policy because 50 economists have supported it, then this would be an acceptable form of parroting.

would not be able to reasonably reject. This is a question that is not necessarily tethered to the exchange of reasons in discourse. Like I said, should I never reveal to anyone the reasons behind my vote, I should still feel morally obligated to change my behavior, to go out and inform myself before the next election, so that I shall no longer fail in my ethical responsibility to others.²¹ How we may come to know whether someone has met this standard will certainly depend on whether we are in dialogue with this person, whether she is sincere in her articulation of her reasons, etc., but I believe we can conclude whether a person sufficiently informed herself in our common conversations with her.

It is now established what knowledge I consider required for a voter to be considered sufficiently informed – *i.e.*, the four prerequisites – and it has also been established how to evaluate whether someone has achieved the four prerequisites through Rawls’ system of public reason. This system allows us to evaluate the reasons someone gives for supporting a certain policy, politician, political party, etc. and determine whether someone has sufficiently informed herself in arriving at these reasons. The next logical question the demands our attention deals with failure to inform ourselves. If, with our system of evaluation, it is revealed that you have failed in your ethical responsibility to inform yourself before voting, then what occurs next? Can we deem that you are blameworthy? If so, how, if at all, does this blame actually manifest?

Section 4: Blameworthiness and Blame

To recapitulate, my task in this paper is to present a normative claim that includes a responsibility to sufficiently inform ourselves, a clearly defined threshold of what is considered sufficiently informed, and an account of what moral reactions are justified in response to those who fail to

²¹ I discuss why I believe this will be effective later.

meet this ethical responsibility. To revisit my thesis, I stated, ‘Given the fact that citizens living in a free and democratic state have the right to vote, this entails a civic responsibility to sufficiently inform themselves before voting or before engaging in other politically advocating action such as campaigning, fundraising, etc.; furthermore, negligent or intentional failure to properly inform oneself prior to these actions of political advocacy is morally blameworthy.’ I have attempted to definitively show that we do possess such an ethical and civic responsibility. I have also tried to establish a threshold for being sufficiently informed. My next task, then, is to consider what responses are appropriate toward those individuals who fail to sufficiently inform themselves.²² Put another way, the next question that must be answered is what consequences – moral, legal, or otherwise – should citizens face when they fail, without legitimate excuse, to fulfill the responsibility to inform themselves?

A) Jurisdiction for Blame

We must first establish the jurisdiction of blame. For this, there are three main possible jurisdictions under which one’s actions may fall: the individual, the people as a collective society, or the State. The individual has personal jurisdiction over actions that only affect the self (*i.e.*, self-regarding) and no others have the authority or the right to assign punishments to the individual for such actions. People as a collective society execute punishments in the form of moral disapprobation. The State exercises its authority over its jurisdiction chiefly through legal punishments. Let us consider the first option. The astute reader may remember that our naysayers believed voting fell within the jurisdiction of the self. The first naysayer believed voting to be an

²² As noted earlier, this is assuming that the individuals in question do not have a sufficient excuse or justification for failing to inform themselves. In some cases, it may be the case that the failure to uphold this responsibility is excused, and therefore the person would not be blameworthy. For such an example, see “Raymond” on page 40.

action that only directly affects the self. The second naysayer believed he does not fail in a moral obligation to anyone else when he fails to inform himself before voting. The astute reader may also remember that I concluded that both naysayers are wrong – we do, in fact, fail in an ethical responsibility we have to others when we fail to inform ourselves before voting. Consider Mill’s principle of liberty. He argues that the only justifiable reason society, either the people or the government, may interfere with the liberty of an individual is to prevent him/her from harming others (Mill 1989, 13). Society has jurisdiction over any action that definitely does or definitely might cause direct harm to others, but society may not interfere with actions that only directly affect the self and indirectly affect others (Mill 1989, 14–15). Voting is essentially an action that has direct consequences for others. In fact, we saw earlier that Mill claimed that the public can consider themselves “wronged” if voting is “performed otherwise than honestly and carefully.”²³ As political philosopher Jason Brennan states with the first sentence of his book, *The Ethics of Voting*, “When we vote, we can make government better or worse. In turn, our votes can make people’s lives better or worse” (Brennan 2011, 1).²⁴ Therefore, the way we vote leaps outside the jurisdiction of the self and falls within the jurisdiction of others, either society or the State.

Perhaps we can authorize the government to force people to inform themselves before voting. This appears to be an effective way to ensure that everyone is informed before entering the voting booth. The main problem, among many, is that I see it as an uncontroversial truth that the government has no authority to act against people regarding the way they vote. Not only would it add unnecessarily to the government’s power, which is something about which philosophers like

²³ Mill claims that when “there is a definite damage, or a definite risk of damage, either to an individual or the public, the case is taken out of the province of liberty” and placed within the jurisdiction of society (Mill 1989, 81).

²⁴ Jason Brennan also claims, “From a moral point of view, voting is not like ordering food off a menu. When you order salad at a restaurant, you alone bear the consequences of your decision. No one else gets stuck with a salad. If you make a bad choice, at least you are hurting only yourself. For the most part, you internalize all of the costs and benefits of your decision” (Brennan 2011, 2).

J.S. Mill were extremely wary (Mill 1989, 109), but such a method of enforcement would place an unwarranted limit on individuals' freedom. For instance, only a system of thought-police, or officers immediately demanding to know how and why you voted, would suffice in detecting individuals who have failed to inform themselves before voting.²⁵ The potential for problems within that scenario are almost limitless. Even non-obtrusive forms of detection, if we imagine such forms could possibly exist, might violate one's right to vote. I argue that the right to vote is similar to the freedom of speech – I may use my freedom of speech in morally objectionable ways, but that does not mean I should be stripped of it. I also do not escape moral assessment when exercising my freedom of speech. Consider the following examples: though shouting extremely mean-hearted insults at your fellow students on the street is not technically illegal, it is still morally reprehensible. It might lead us to make the moral claim that you should not do this and deserve blame if you do. It is perfectly legal for an extremely rich lady to never donate to charity, but we might be compelled to call upon the moral claim of beneficence and condemn such inaction. These all illustrate the moral claims that may crop up amidst the ethical plain between the twin peaks of the rights of the individual and the legal authority of a government. So, an individual has the legal right to vote without informing herself if she so chooses. Voting while uninformed should not a crime, but it should be morally reprehensible. This puts voting into a category of actions that are legal though morally unacceptable. Seeing that the government cannot, and should not, help us cure voter ignorance by outlawing uninformed voting, I move to consider what can society do in response to the uninformed voter. To answer this, we need an account of blame.

²⁵ Mill would base this on the principle of utility, for, to put it simply, authorizing the government to punish uninformed voters would cause more harm than good.

B) An Account of Blame

First let me establish that I believe those who fail to inform themselves before voting, without excuse or justification, are blameworthy. Therefore, such agents are legitimate targets, in principle, of blame on the part of other members of the moral community,²⁶ but this distinction needs teasing out. Essentially, in agreement with T. M. Scanlon, I argue that we may blame someone by modifying our behavior towards them.²⁷ I also argue – again, in agreement with Scanlon – that blameworthiness and blame are two separate areas of consideration. For instance, Scanlon reports,

Briefly put, my proposal is this: to claim that a person is blameworthy for an action is to claim that the action shows something about the agent's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her. To blame a person is to judge him or her to be blameworthy and to take your relationship with him or her to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate. (Scanlon 2008, 128–29)

This passage lies at the crux of his argument, and allows us to engage his theories without treading too deeply into the elaborate framework Scanlon establishes for his system of blame. So what would be some appropriate ways we might modify our behavior toward someone whom we blame? Earlier in his work, Scanlon mentions a theory of blame put forth by Peter Strawson, who claims that blame manifests through reactive attitudes, such as resentment and indignation (Strawson 1962). I believe this would be an acceptable form of blame toward someone whom you discovered had failed to inform herself before voting, though it might not be ideal or should even one's first response. While not identical, the system Scanlon presents is similar because it roots blame within

²⁶ It is important to note that the “we” in question is made up of a variety of different people who stand in different sorts of relations to the agent (and who may have different sorts of *standing* to engage in particular blaming behaviors). For example, Scanlon thinks that if you also have engaged in uninformed voting (without excuse or apology), then you do not have standing to blame others who do so. This is all to say that the *form* such justified blame may take might well differ from person to person, and that this introduces questions about the ethics of blame that are beyond the scope of this paper. But I am going to discuss some common forms such legitimate blame might take.

²⁷ I also believe that this blame might not even take the form of punishment. It might take the form of attempting to reason with the individual or assist them in attaining information. This will become clearer later.

the context of our human relationships. However, Scanlon asserts that blame may indeed go further than attitudes of resentment and indignation – namely, in three ways. First, he believes we may reconsider our relationship with this individual. For example, we may no longer see this person as a responsible citizen but rather as a free-loader on our democratic system. We might even consider it such an impairment of our relationship that we no longer wish to be friends with this person. Second, we may “revise our attitude” toward those whom we think are blameworthy. For instance, we may no longer trust their judgment, or seek out their advice before voting. I find it acceptable that we might even disdain or pity them for their failure. Third, we may complain to the individual and demand an explanation or justification for her failure to take her responsibilities seriously (Scanlon 2008, 129–30). I would add trying to reason with this individual or even attempting to help her as a way of modifying our behavior toward her. I believe all of these examples are appropriate ways to blame someone whom we have discovered has failed to inform herself before voting.

An advantage of this system of blame based on relationships is that it accommodates flexibility depending on the variable circumstances and dynamics of the relationship. It is important to understand that Scanlon argues a difference between *blameworthiness* and *blame*. Judgments of *blameworthiness* are impersonal judgments that can be made by anyone. Reactions of *blame* are essentially sensitive to the particular relations we have with those judged blameworthy. A person directly wronged by an action is likely to have very different attitudes toward the wrongdoer than a third-party stranger across the globe.²⁸ The person directly affected would blame the wrongdoer by revising her attitude toward him in a way the stranger would not.

²⁸ While this is true as a descriptive matter, Scanlon also thinks it is true as a normative matter: that is, people who are closer to the wrongdoer are *justified* in taking up certain attitudes or engaging in certain behaviors that might not be justified.

However, both the person directly affected and the stranger would most likely have the same judgment of *blameworthiness* toward the wrongdoer. For example, I might react differently if I found out my partner failed to inform herself before voting than I would if I found out a distant acquaintance failed to fulfill this responsibility.

Blame and blameworthiness can also adjust based on the situation in which the person might be. Scanlon argues that we may parse out wrongness from blameworthiness, because “The blameworthiness of an action depends, in ways that wrongness generally does not, on the reasons for which a person acted and the conditions under which he or she did so. So it can be appropriate to say such things as, ‘Yes, what she did was certainly wrong, but you shouldn’t blame her’” (Scanlon 2008, 124–25). Consider Raymond, a single-father who is raising his three daughters by working two jobs and only has access to the internet when he walks fifteen blocks to the public library and uses their servers. If Raymond fails to inform himself before voting, I would still say that he has wronged me by not upholding his ethical responsibility, but I would not say that he is blameworthy for this failure.²⁹ Thus, I would most likely not modify my behavior toward him based on an attitude of blameworthiness. Other such disadvantaged individuals, who find themselves in similar circumstances to Raymond, would most likely not be blameworthy in the way that the uninformed college professor or businesswoman might be, though they both commit the same wrong. While I may not adopt an attitude of resentment or indignation toward Raymond, I argue that it is still possible that I change my attitude toward him in a positive way. For example, I might try to assist him in whatever way I could so that he may be able to inform himself come

²⁹ Note, his behavior, in this case, does not seem to indicate that he has attitudes that impair his relations with his fellow citizens. Rather, his behavior reflects the fact that he is overworked and does not have the time to devote to his civic responsibilities.

Also remember from footnote 18: Rawls makes concessions for individuals in disadvantaged circumstances. He states that “the appropriate limits of public reason vary depending on historical and social conditions” (Rawls 1993, 251).

next election. So though I have revised my attitude toward him, this is not out of a declaration of blameworthiness and a following feeling of resentment or indignation.

Why do I believe this form of blame will be effective in bringing about a more informed electorate? I have heard it said that soldiers are more concerned with disappointing their comrades than about their allegiance to the abstract idea of the nation (Crain 2016). Perhaps voters feel something similarly when they are told they have let down their neighbors, friends, and family for not informing themselves before voting. Recall the point made earlier about humans' hypersocial nature (Mercier and Sperber 2011). It is worth reiterating that I believe this penchant to be social – this drive to be in unity with our neighbors – can galvanize change not achievable outside the social realm. This idea – which can be crudely described as peer pressure, but I shall call blame – has gained traction in several academic circles, such as psychology, journalism, and economics. Robert Cialdini, professor of psychology at Arizona State University argues that social norms promoted by peer pressure can lead to social behavior that is to the benefit of society (Cialdini 2006). Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Tina Rosenberg calls peer pressure the “social cure” for many of society's illnesses in her book *Join the Club: How Peer Pressure can Transform the World* (Rosenberg 2011). Stephen Levitt, economist at the University of Chicago and co-author of the *Freakonomics* book series says, “From an economic perspective, shame is a wonderful punishment because unlike imprisonment, it's free” (Dubner 2017). This is but a sampling of the evidence that blaming others, a form of pressure issued from peers to change the behavior of a certain individual or set of individuals, can actually have practical effects. This gives me faith that an ethical claim and the accompanying blame has the potential to influence society in a positive way and manifest real change.

One defect of this argument is that it will certainly fail to persuade, what I call, the *hyposocial* person to change his behavior. Call this *hyposocial* person Ebenezer. Ebenezer does not care what others think of him and he does not care that others blame him for failing to inform himself before voting. He takes their modified behaviors toward him in stride. What, if anything, could compel Ebenezer to change his voting behavior? I believe even people like Ebenezer have good reason to change their voting behavior because they may suffer the natural penalties – *i.e.*, the negative consequences that naturally occur – when they fail to inform themselves. This idea can be traced back to Mill, who claimed that people who commit harmful actions, whether only harmful to the self or harmful to others, generally suffer the natural penalties of these actions (Mill 1989, 77–78). For example, a person who is constantly mean-hearted and rude may suffer the natural penalty of other individuals avoiding her company (though not parading this avoidance), others cautioning people against her, others wishing not to be friends with her anymore, or others giving preference to non-rude people for a job (Mill 1989, 77–78). Or consider a drunk person that stays in her room all night and affects no others with her drinking, thus engaging in a completely self-regarding act. She may still suffer from the natural penalty of being hungover the next day. I argue that uninformed voting also comes with natural penalties.³⁰ Similarly to how the drunkard could suffer from a hangover, Ebenezer could suffer from a dysfunctional, harmful, or even tyrannical government. This should serve as intrinsic motivation to inform oneself before voting even without the impetus of blame from others.

³⁰ Unless they somehow get lucky and, in their uninformed state, accidentally vote for a good candidate or a good policy.

Conclusion

I embarked on this mission with the goal of demonstrating that our right to vote comes with an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves. This is an especially pertinent and crucial mission because our society suffers from the malady of staggering levels of voter ignorance with no cure in sight. This lack of an informed electorate has and will continue to negatively impact our American democracy. But what can we do about it?

There are those who say our right to vote is essentially a self-regarding act, not subject to any of the responsibilities that may accompany our obligations we have to others within society. Even if you tell someone that he *should* inform himself before voting, his reply might be that he should inform himself in the same way he *should* go to the gym and stay healthy. It is obvious that he should do this, but he is not failing in an ethical responsibility to anyone else if he does not stay healthy. Having combed through the work of Montesquieu, Locke, Rousseau, Mill, and Rawls, it became clear that we do in fact have an ethical responsibility to inform ourselves before voting and failing to do so wrongs others within our society.

However, my mission is not complete at this point in the path; asserting that we have the ethical responsibility to sufficiently inform ourselves before voting raises the question: what constitutes sufficient information? This is where I presented the four prerequisites of voter knowledge as a starting point in our task. These prerequisites are that we must be aware of the existence of current political problems; we must have a position on these problems; we must possess knowledge of alternative positions on the given political problems; and we must have a reasonable understanding of how different policy proposals would affect the given political problem.

But how can we tell if someone meets these four prerequisites. Here, I call upon the aid of Rawls and his discussion of public reason as I assert that we must be prepared for a hypothetical test of sorts – one that demands we give justifications for our voting decisions that no one could reasonably reject. If it becomes apparent – as it naturally will through everyday conversations with friends, family, and acquaintances – that individuals have failed to sufficiently inform themselves in this way before voting. Because voting without informing oneself is an other-regarding action, it falls into the jurisdiction of society, but it would be far too harsh and untenable to authorize the government to punish individuals for this failure. Thus, the burden of blaming goes to other individuals within society. If we discover someone has voted without informing himself, we can blame him, as Scanlon tells us, by modifying our behavior towards him. This is what we should do to convey to him that he has failed to fulfill his ethical responsibility and this is unacceptable.

Having now prescribed the ethical claim that we should inform ourselves before voting, provided a platform of knowledge prerequisites, and established a system of blame for failure to meet said prerequisites, my hope is that we can take steps toward reducing our society's voter ignorance and bring about the benefits of a better democratically elected government because of it. One consideration with which I would like to leave the reader is the idea that the arguments stated above may apply not only to actions of *political* advocacy, but may also apply to other such actions of *general* advocacy. Voting is an action of advocacy, for it explicitly endorses a certain politician, political party, or policy proposal. Other such actions of advocacy are similarly important in modern society. Donating our money, for example, is another action of advocacy. Donating to campaigns is similar to voting in essence, but what some might fail to consider is how donating to charities is similar as well. What must we know before being justified in donating to

a certain charity or organization? The same question should be asked for ‘voting with our feet’ or ‘voting with our dollar.’ When we decide to shop at certain stores or patronize particular businesses, can we be blameworthy for being intentionally or negligently unaware of their unsavory business practices? The same way we should evaluate our own and others’ voting, we might also want to evaluate our own and others’ actions of advocacy. Though I think these are important implications that can arise from my project, I believe an in-depth exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of my paper. Thus, I have confined my paper to arguing this point: our right to vote comes with the ethical responsibility to inform ourselves before doing so, and failure to inform oneself is a blameworthy action (or lack of action). Now stop reading this and go inform yourself about that political issue that one politician was talking about.

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