

## Chapter 6

# TYPICAL CONFLICTS OF DUTY AND PRUDENCE FACING VOTERS IN DEMOCRACIES

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The main results to be produced by this analysis consist in the problematisation of the oppositional couple common good/self-interest, which underlies mainstream theories of the ethics of voting, and in the creation of a more fine-grained, complex and nuanced map of the relation between a) *different kinds of duties and obligations* that may fall on electors, and b) *two different understandings of prudence*, as the rational pursuit of self-interest and as the virtue of responsible decision making.

It needs to be stressed that although the present analysis has in view the actual practice of voting, given its real-life conditions and circumstances in contemporary democracies, its purpose is *not* descriptive, nor does it consist in predicting voters' behaviour or voting intentions. The correlation between voters' decisions and behaviour and sociological, economic, psychological and political factors has been explored by an important literature produced by political scientists and sociologists.<sup>1</sup> However, the main goals of such a literature are predictive and explanatory, aimed as they are to understand what social determinants and processes prompt voters' decisions. The purpose of the present analysis, instead, consists in mapping the principles, duties and considerations that may *legitimately* drive voters' choices, in order to provide *normative guidance* and a *better ethical understanding* of their relations to each other and possible conflicts. The perspective adopted, in other words, is normative and reconstructive of salient *principled* considerations, rather than descriptive.

Mráz and Lever (2023a) aimed to compare the voter-centred perspective of REDEM with party-centred, politician-centred and pluralist-centred perspectives on voting, the main

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<sup>1</sup> For some useful reviews and collections summarising the existing body of literature on voting behaviour and the different approaches that have been developed since the seminal works by Berelson, Lazarsfeld et al. (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954), Campbell, Converse et al. (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960), and Nie and Verba (1976), see Arzheimer et al 2017, and Fisher et al. 2018.

contrast that constitutes the focus of the present report is the one with mainstream accounts of the ethics of voting, which focus essentially on the opposition common good/self-interest as the two main coordinates (one moral and the other non-moral) along which we are supposed to grasp, conceptualise and discuss the ethical dilemmas and conflicts that we face as voters in democratic elections.

This report was developed in close continuity with the surveys of the relevant existing literature and the conceptual and normative analyses provided in Fumagalli and Ottonelli (2023), Häggrot (2023), Mráz and Lever (2023a 2023b). It provides the fundamental coordinates for analysing model scenarios that can serve as illustrations of the ethical complexity of electoral choices.

## **2. APPROACH**

As mentioned, the purpose of this report does not consist in producing a predictive or explanatory model of voters' behaviour, but instead in providing a critical analysis and mapping of the conflicts between prudence and duties that voters may face when they need to decide how to cast their vote. It should also be reminded that the overarching purpose of the REDEM project, in analysing the ethical dilemmas of voting, does not consist in solving them or in offering electors ready-made prescriptions about what to do in specific cases. Rather, the purpose consists in providing a better understanding of the structure and relevance of such dilemmas, in order to better appreciate and acknowledge the complexity of the decisions involved, and to offer a framework of analysis to initiate a public conversation and elaborate educational materials on the ethics of voting.

The approach that we followed in drawing this report is a) conceptual and b) reconstructive. This means that a) in analysing the conflicts of prudence and duty we try to clarify the notions involved, to make their multiple meanings explicit, and in so doing also redraw the conceptual map around which the ethical conflicts involved in voting are usually represented; b) in analysing the conflicts of prudence and duty, we try to interpret through ethical lenses motives and rationales that often drive voters' behaviour and are reported by the empirical literature on voting. Thus, for example, we consider social identity, or self-interest, as possible factors that play a role in voting decisions, and we consider, in light of the existing debate on the ethics of democracy, whether, to what extent, and in which cases these factors can legitimately determine our vote. Through this reconstructive work, we build a typology of duties and other ethically valid motives for selecting among electoral alternatives. The conflicts between duties and prudence, and between different duties, can be analysed by reference to this typology.

In developing our analysis, we keep on the background two important conditioning elements that determine the context in which ethically relevant decisions about voting are made. The first element is the informational environment in which voters make their decisions, and their awareness of the related epistemic limitations, available shortcuts and enhancements (Bartels 1996; McDermott 1998; Baker, Ames, and Renno 2006; Alvarez, Hall, and Levin 2018). The second element is the different purposes that voting can serve (notably, depending on whether the vote is forward-looking or backward-looking), and the associated meanings. Both elements play an important role in the very description of the ethical dimensions of voting decisions. We incorporate the acknowledgment of these important

background elements in our analysis of prudence as a form of reasoning which is context-sensitive (see section 3.2). Another important background element of the ethical meaning and impact of voting decisions is constituted by the configuration of the electoral system and voting rules that voters face. This is a fundamental element because different electoral systems pose different ethical issues and make the tensions generated by conflicting duties play out in different ways.

This report is organised as follows. In the next section, we analyse two main meanings of “prudence” as a determinant of voting: prudence as self-interest, and prudence as the exercise of an ethics of responsibility. In section 4, we analyse the main duties that can be relevant in deciding how to vote. In Section 5, we map the possible conflicts between prudence in the two meanings considered and the duties justified in the previous section. In the sixth and final section, we consider three cases that illustrate possible conflicts between duties and prudence, and between different duties. The main purpose of these scenarios is to test the analytical framework that is built in the previous sections and to provide an illustration of its use in interpreting and clarifying some voting dilemmas.

### 3. PRUDENCE

#### 3.1 Prudence as Self-Interest

In the literature on the ethics of voting, the typical axis on which the ethical dimension of voters’ choices is theorised is the oppositional couple self-interest/common good (for a reconstruction of the debate, see Taylor 2019; Mráz and Lever 2023a). By “prudence”, following an established literature, we may mean to refer to the first term of this oppositional couple. Prudence, understood in this way, responds to the question “what would be good for me, what would be in my self-interest” (Dorsey 2021: 1). Each individual has interests and goals to care about, and prudence is the reasoning and sphere of action that pertains to the attainment of such personal goals. The realm of prudence is the realm of means-ends, instrumental rationality that is meant to produce the maximum advantage for the individual. Traditionally, prudence so understood is contrasted to morality. Prudence and morality do not necessarily pull to different directions, because there are cases in which one’s self-interest requires to do what is also the best course of action from the moral point of view. However, there are many instances in which they conflict, and in any event the motives behind the prudential action and the motives behind the moral action are different.

In the debate on the ethics of voting, this opposition between prudence and morality is reproduced through the opposition “voting according to one self-interest” vs “voting for the common good”, where voting for the common good is usually taken to be inspired by principled, other-regarding reasons, while voting for one’s self-interest is inspired by the prudential calculation of which option best further the interests of the voter. However, it may be noted that the language of “prudence”, unlike the language of “self-interest”, does not only refer to the outcome that is aimed at in voting (self-interest), but also to the *process*, that is the kind of rationality, that is employed in aiming at serving one’s self-interest. Prudence, in other words, connotes a way of means-ends reasoning (Bratman 1987; Wood 2015; Brunero 2020) which takes into account and balances different considerations that may guide us in pursuing our self-interest.

One important question to ask is how we should conceptualise self-interest. In much empirical literature on voting behaviour, self-interest is understood quite narrowly, as the short-term gain in terms of material and financial resources, also due to the fact that many studies on the topic focus on the level of approval of economic policies. Thus, for example, Sears et al. (1980: 671) define self-interest as those considerations that “bear directly on the material well-being of individuals’ private lives”; Young et al. (1987: 64) define it as the “degree to which a political issue impinges immediately and tangibly upon an individual’s private life”, and more recently Bali et al. describe selfish motives for voting as “earn income and acquire commodities”... “to enhance our physical welfare”(Bali et al. 2020: 2). However, how Lewin (1991) notes, this is self-interest defined in a narrow sense, as economic or material gain, while if broadly understood as the maximisation of one’s utility self-interest can amount to anything.

The problem of the precise connotation of self-interest is of the utmost relevance for the *explanatory* models of voters’ behaviour, since unless one precisely defines what self-interest is, explaining electoral choices and political behaviour in general by appealing to self-interest is useless. However, the issue of what counts as self-interest has also a *normative* import for the debate of what can be a legitimate motive for voting. Indeed, whether voting for one’s self-interest, as opposed to other motives, is legitimate or not might depend on what we mean by self-interest. This is also true if we understand self-interest as a non-moral motive, that is if we assume that it falls squarely within the realm of purely prudential rationality in the classical, Hobbesian, sense of the term. In fact, even according to this purely self-regarding, instrumental understanding of self-interest, we still need to ask what is the best course of action for the individual, what each one should pursue and what is the time frame of the interests to be pursued. Thus, for example, the idea that the self-interest of an individual can be simply identified with their short-term economic gains may be challenged by more sophisticated accounts of instrumental rationality and conceptions on the individual good (see for example Pettigrew 2019; Arvan 2020).

When it comes to voting in representative democracies, a fundamental conceptual distinction is the one between subjective and objective views of self-interest. According to objective views, self-interest can be identified independently of the judgment of the individual concerned, by looking at their position within society, their economic and social condition, and other features that connote them as socially situated. According to subjective views, self-interest is what the subject believes that their interest is, independently of external judgments or any “objective” fact about them.

This distinction is especially important once we take into account the informational basis of the vote. According to objectivist views of self-interest, it is possible for a person not to be aware of what their interest is, because of the lack of adequate knowledge. Thus, for example, certain workers may not be aware of the fact that their economic interests are opposed to those of their employers, because they falsely believe that being in the same trade makes them share the same goals and return from economic policies. According to the seminal work of Hannah Pitkin (1967), this view of interest also justifies the notion that representatives, if enlightened enough, can act as trustees for their electors, since the electors’ interests can be understood and discovered independently of the validation of the subjects involved. Other theories place on political vanguards (Gouldner 1974; Calhoun 1983; Carroll and Ratner 1994; Lukes 2011; Richard 2020), or the work of consciousness raising and political mobilisation

among peers (Fraser 1990; Babbitt, Alcott, and Potter 1993; Sarachild 2000; Cloud 2018), the epistemic burden of uncovering the true interests of the relevant groups.

On the subjective view of self-interest, the informational basis of the vote is still important because people can be wrong about what *promotes* their self-interest (for a criticism, see Smith 1989); however, voters cannot be wrong about what their fundamental interests *are*. Accordingly—as noted by Pitkin—the functions of representatives are more akin to those of delegates. This is because representatives cannot presume to know what the interests of their electors are, given the fact that they are subjective and can vary through time for reasons that can only be ascertained by paying attention to the authoritative judgments of the electors themselves. According to this view, moreover, interests can be conceived as detached from social identities and their definition can only be negotiated in the relation between representatives and those represented (Staehr Harder 2020).

It is important to stress that one of the main assumptions of the deliberative view of democracy (for a survey, see Häggrot 2023) is that people are not aware of their real preferences and interests before they come to discuss them in public. Some seminal works in the theory (Elster 1986; Manin 1987) seem to even suggest that people do not *have* fully formed (politically relevant) interests and preferences before they enter a deliberative process. This element further complicates the notion of “voting for one’s self-interest” as opposed to the common good, because in some versions of the deliberative theory of democracy, and at least for some decisions, the “enlightened self-interest” (Mill 2011) of voters that comes out of deliberation might come to coincide with what is good for everyone else.

### 3.2 Prudence as Responsible Decision-Making

There is a second sense of “prudence” that needs to be considered in analysing the conflicts between prudence and duty. This sense does not refer to the self-interest of the individual, but to a form of moral judgment. This distinctive form of moral judgment does not obey to deontological reasoning and is not strictly duty-based or principle-based, but still responds to a commitment to the good of the political community rather to selfish motives. Understood in this sense, prudence is the exercise of the “ethics of responsibility” in deciding in specific circumstances, and given the uncertainty of politics, which course of action is best all things considered. In Western political thought, this notion of political prudence as a virtue is contrasted to the one endorsed by a “realist” approach, which sees political prudence as a form of cunning or cleverness that consists in devising the right means for achieving one’s political ends (Coll 1991). Hariman and Beer (1998: 301) thus summarise the core ideas of this classical understanding of prudence: “the political actor must strive to achieve what is good both for the individual and for the community; doing so requires the capacity for adaptive response to contingent events; this amalgam of ends and means is developed through deliberation; and it culminates in character rather than technical knowledge”.

An important reference, in the history of political prudence as a virtue, is Aristotle. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle theorises prudence as an intellectual virtue, which concerns “deliberation”, that is the exercise of judgment on matters to be decided “where the consequences are unclear, and things are indefinite” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, book III, 1112b). In this sense, prudence, or “practical wisdom”, although it is an exercise of thought, is different from scientific knowledge, which concerns those things that could not be otherwise,

and on which we do not deliberate, because they are a matter of necessity and there is no action to be taken about them. Prudence is also to be distinguished from skill, because skills are employed in building and producing things (in other words, are a matter of technical expertise), while prudence is exercised in making decisions about how to act. Moreover, prudence is not to be conflated with mere cleverness; indeed, cleverness, that is the ability to devise the means for one's ends, applies to any end, while prudence is meant to achieve the "chief good" (1144b). In *Politics*, Aristotle specifies that prudence, in a polity, pertains to the rulers. The reason is that, as mentioned, prudence is a virtue exercised in action and decision making, and only rulers make decisions, while those who are subject to those decisions do not need to have prudence, but true belief (*Politics*, III, 1277b25-28).<sup>2</sup> According to Coll, the three main components of Aristotle's prudence are *deliberation*, *self-control* and *good sense*. Deliberation is the reasoning that weighs the various considerations about different lines of action; self-control is the capacity not to be swayed by one's passions and delusions; and, finally, good sense is the capacity to exercise sympathetic understanding and fairness towards others, by putting oneself in other's shoes (Coll 1991, 38).

In the same line of thought is also Aquinas' reflection on prudence. Also for Aquinas, prudence is a distinctively practical form of wisdom, which is exercised in making decisions and taking action. Pure judgment, therefore, is not prudence (Jones 314). In the *Summa* we can find a detailed analysis of all the virtues that make up the prudent character: Memory (that is, experience of past relevant circumstances); Understanding or Intelligence (that is the notion of the right universal principles); Docility (that is the disposition to be taught by those who are more experienced); Shrewdness (that is "disposition to acquire a right estimate by oneself"; Reason (that is, the capacity for good reasoning); Foresight ("the notion of something distant, to which that which occurs in the present has to be directed"); Circumspection (that is, the capacity to compare the means with the circumstances); Caution (that is, the capacity to foresee and avoid evil) (*Summa*, *Prima Secundae*, Question 49).<sup>3</sup>

J.P. Dobel has usefully tried to "operationalise" the classic lists of features of political prudence built by Aristotle and Aquinas by offering a tripartite account of the "dimensions of political achievement" associated with political prudence. The first two items of the list concern the capacities that must be cultivated by the prudent leader: (1) disciplined reason and openness to experience, and (2) foresight and attention to the long term. A second group of items includes the modalities of statecraft leaders should master: (3) deploying power; (4) timing and momentum, and (5) the proper relation of means and ends. Finally, the last two items concern the outcomes of prudent leadership: (6) durability and legitimacy of outcomes, and (7) consequences for community (Dobel 1998: 74).

Edmund Burke described political prudence as "the business of the politician", as opposed to the purely speculative inquiry on the proper ends of government that concerns the

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<sup>2</sup> Jagannatah explains that the "true belief" Aristotle mentions here is good judgment about the rulers' decisions. Those who are subject to the rule obey willingly because they see that the decisions are good and directed towards a good end. In this way, while not exercising prudence, they contribute to the good government of the polity (pp. 16)

<sup>3</sup> On the role of the Aquinas in shaping the notion of prudence, see Jones 2008. Jones offers a sophisticated history of prudence, in response to Gerver's Machiavellian account, by contrasting the teleological tradition of Aristotle and the Aquinas with the mechanistic tradition inaugurated by Marsilio da Padova, Hobbes and Machiavelli.

philosopher. The politician must “find out proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect” (Burke, cited in Canavan 1959, p. 62). The proper object of political prudence is the political good, which is *concrete*, that is relating to specific social and historical circumstances, *practicable*, as opposed as utopian and oblivious of the obstacles and evil consequences that can be encountered in pursuing good ends, *complex*, because it needs to take into account all the plurality of moral and factual considerations that bear on a given decision; and *imperfect*, because very often must accept that perfection is not attainable, and must strive instead for what is best given the circumstances (Canavan 1959).

Finally, we can read an account of political prudence into Weber’s famous essay on *Politics as Vocation*, in which he tries to vindicate the morality of politics as a “morality of responsibility” as opposed to a “morality of conviction”. Here Weber describes the three main qualities of the good politician, that is of the good “ruler”, if we want to keep the language used so far in relation to political prudence. The first is *passion*, by which Weber means the sincere devotion to a cause. Politics is not an activity done for its own sake, but must be guided by principles and ideals. The second quality, however, is the *sense of responsibility*, which warns against making crucial decisions without taking into account the specific circumstances and possible consequences of one’s actions. The sense of responsibility Weber advocates calls for the accurate consideration of the consequences of one’s actions, but cannot be mistaken for mere calculation or political cleverness. It accounts instead for a distinctive morality of politics, which is grounded on the acknowledgment of the responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions. This means that it is not enough to appeal to absolute moral principles, in justifying one’s actions, but one must consider their implications in the world as it is, with all its complexities and imperfections, including the fact that in politics we interact with other actors, with their own goals and ends, so that the result of our actions depends on what other people will do. The third quality of the good ruler, according to Weber, is a *sense of proportion*. Weber warns against the danger that politicians, enamoured of their own passion and ideals and their sense of empowerment, might leave their vanity unchecked and let their ambitions and overappreciation of their own power guide their decisions. The condemnation of this sense of unchecked empowerment lies behind Weber’s disapproval of *realpolitik* as a “whatever it takes” attitude only aimed at achieving one’s political goals (Cherniss 2016; Satkunanandan 2014).

With this brief review of some classical texts in mind, we can summarise the main traits of political prudence as responsible decision making that can serve our analysis of the ethical dilemmas faced by voters in a democratic regime:

1. Political prudence is a form of practical wisdom, which is exercised in making politically relevant decisions.
2. Although it is not a deontological form of reasoning, it is inspired by ideals and must be guided by a sense of what is right and of the “chief goals”.
3. Since it relates to the imperfect world of politics and to action in varying and specific circumstances, it needs to take into account the consequences, implications and conditions of one’s actions. These include in particular three circumstances, which we might call the “circumstances of political prudence”: a) our limited knowledge and difficulty at foreseeing the future; b) the interaction with other actors, whose goals and purposes may diverge from ours c) the possibility that in an imperfect and complex world

moral imperatives and ideals may pull in different directions and come into conflict with each other.

4. In the realm of politics, the preoccupation for the consequences of one's actions especially pertains to the implications in terms of its *efficacy*, that it its actual capacity to bring about its desired results, and in terms of the *legitimacy* and *stability* of the political order in which it takes place.

Since voting is the participation in a collective act of decision making and pertains to citizens as rulers and the domain of politics, this classical analysis of political prudence applies to the act of voting. In fact, although most classical analyses, including Weber's, were meant to refer specifically to political leaders and limited bodies of rulers, in a democratic regime the ultimate rulers are the members of the polity through the exercise of their voting powers. And there can be no doubt, in fact, that voting in democratic elections and other forms of consultation is the exercise of a politically relevant normative power (Ottonelli 2018; Ceva and Ottonelli 2021).

However, voting in democratic elections calls for a specific application of political prudence, given the distinctive mode of exercise of political power that is implied in such a collective and universal rule. Thus, it is important to call the attention on the distinctive way in which the traits of political prudence manifest themselves in the case of the democratic vote.

Notably, consider the "circumstances of political prudence" mentioned above, that is the circumstances that need to be taken into account in assessing the consequences, implications and conditions of one's actions in political decision making:

- a) our limited knowledge and difficulty in foreseeing the future. In the case of democratic voting, this typically relates to the problem of correctly assessing the candidates and programs among which we choose. When we vote, we choose among alternatives whose features and final consequences are to a certain extent undetermined and unknown. There may be better and worse heuristics for collecting the relevant information, but part of the exercise of our political prudence will consist in taking into account this ineliminable uncertainty and develop strategies for coping with it (Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1993; Bernhard and Freeder 2020; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian, and Trounstine 2020; Colombo and Steenbergen 2020).
- b) the interaction with other actors, whose goals and purposes may diverge from ours. In the case of democratic voting, this especially relates to the fact that one's vote is not a self-standing and isolated act of command, but contributes to democratic decision making along with millions of other votes. Therefore, one needs to assess the likely effects of one's vote by taking into account the possible configurations of the vote of all the other fellow electors. Here deliberation needs to be supported by a good capacity in foreseeing the trends and numbers of other people's votes, and in coordinating with other voters in the pursuit of common goals through the electoral process (Cox 1999; Crisp, Olivella and Potter 2012; Ottonelli 2020; Giavazzi 2021).
- c) the possibility that in an imperfect and complex world moral imperatives and ideals may pull in different directions and come into conflict with each other. This is a general truth about the circumstances of practical reasoning, but as we will see in more detail in Section 4 and 5, voters are subject to various normative requirements and duties, such as the



duty to further justice, or the duty to be loyal to one's party, or specific value commitments. It is often the case that none of the available electoral alternatives allows to fulfil all these requirements at the same time. When this happens, they need to assess the relative importance of the different normative constraints and imperatives that are relevant to the decision and establish which ones should prevail. It is important to stress that this is not a task that can be accomplished once for all and in the abstract, because the relative importance of the different duties depends on the specific circumstances to which they apply, and on the specific identity, commitments and position of the voter. This sensitivity to context is one of the main traits of political prudence.

Democratic voting also presents distinctive issues in terms of efficacy, legitimacy and stability. When we vote, we need to assess the *efficacy* of the different programs and candidates. This is because the choice between different electoral alternatives cannot be made by only looking at the values and programs as they are professed by the candidates, but needs to consider the capacity of those who propose them to carry them out efficiently. Thus, as voters we need to assess such elements as the character, past records, reliability and skills of candidates, the strength of parties and their effective ability to impose their platform, and the impact of our vote on the capacity of the institutional system in general to function properly, in the short and long term. For example, a drastic change in government at a critical juncture, such as an economic crisis or an especially violent phase of a worldwide pandemic, may curtail the government's capacity for action and guidance (for a recent discussion of prudent behaviour during the COVID crisis, see Giommoni and Loumeau 2020). In other circumstances, such as when the main hindrance to good administration is corruption, voting for a complete renewal of government can be the best strategy (Ageberg 2020).

Moreover, when we vote we need to assess the effects of our vote on the *stability* and *legitimacy* of the political system. By voting we can undermine stability in two ways. One is when the government is made unstable, especially in parliamentary regimes, by the lack of a clear majority or the occurrence of a hung parliament. The other is when a majority is voted into power that enacts rules and decisions that are profoundly divisive, because they are strongly opposed by a large portion of the population. This can happen even when the rules at stake are formally within the boundaries of constitutional mandates and they are just or reasonable by the standards of the majority. The enactment of a divisive political program can also lead to a deficit in the perceived legitimacy of institutions, with negative consequences on the functioning of the democratic system.

#### 4. DUTIES

In this section we try to unpack the notion that voters may have specific duties that they must fulfil in deciding how to vote. Listing the "duties" –in the plural form—that we may have as voters is important because it serves to problematise the idea that the "common good" is the only moral or principled motive in choosing how to vote that can be opposed to self-interest. In fact, there is a plurality of "moral" motives in voting, and a plurality of principles that may bear on a specific electoral choice. Moreover, looking at the plurality of normative requirements that fall on voters clarifies the need for the exercise of "political prudence" as a form of practical wisdom in balancing different duties or assessing their relative weight in specific circumstances. Finally, looking at these specific duties helps realise that the

boundary between self-interest and morality, in the ethics of voting, is much more blurred and complex than it may appear at first sight.

The following list of “duties” does not purport to be complete and exhaustive of all the principled reasons people can have for choosing an alternative over another, or for deciding to vote/abstain in a particular circumstance. The work of making this mapping more fine-tuned and complete is an ongoing task, which can only be pursued through a careful casuistic analysis of different electoral contexts and choices. However, we hope to provide here a first preliminary taxonomy that collects the most salient duties that bear on the decision on how to vote, and can play a role in explaining the moral complexity and difficulty of electoral choices.

This list of duties is compiled through an analytical work of extrapolation from the literature on the normative theory of democracy. The underlying rationale is the following: the duties that fall on voters must be based on sound justifications from within shared normative accounts of democratic government. A review of the normative theories of democracy (see Häggrot 2023) can uncover their explicit and implicit appeals to duties that members of the democratic polity have qua voters. For each of the duties that appear in the following list, we present the relevant grounds and references in the normative theory of democracy. Of course, different theories stress and foreground different duties. For example, the early wave of the theory of deliberative democracy would stress the duty to further the common good as a fundamental point of democratic practices and must be expected to highlight the same duty also at the moment of voting. By contrast, theories of democracy as the equal opportunity to advance one’s values and conceptions of the good would naturally foreground the duty to pursue one’s value commitments in voting. However, it is important to keep in mind that since here what interests us is not a definite hierarchy and lexicographic order of duties, but instead the recognition of their normative traction and the possibility that they can come into conflict with each other, we do not need to follow any specific account in prioritising a duty over another, but can simply list them and offer a rationale for them that can be shared and recognised independently of the specific stress that different theories put on different dimensions of democracy.

#### **4.1 Pursuing the Common Good**

The notion that in voting one must pursue the common good traces back to Rousseau’s classical theory of democracy and appears in many classical accounts of representative government, including James Madison’s and John Stuart Mill’s, and in various accounts of deliberative democracy (see Steiner 2012: 88-103). Mráz and Lever (2023b) stress that there is no uncontroversial notion of the common good. In fact, in most recent debates on the ethics of voting, appeals to the common good are often ambiguous about their object. They also discuss some of the most important conceptions of the common good, including those that attempt to reduce it to the aggregation of individual self-interested preferences, and underlines that there are theories that conceive the common good as the natural output of people’s voting according to their self-interest. However, for the analytical purpose of distinguishing between different motives and duties in deciding how to vote, it is useful consider here the duty to vote for the common good as distinct from the duty to vote for one’s self-interest, and refer to the classical notion of the common good as the good that all

members of the political community have in common. According to this classical notion, the common good is constituted by those goals that contribute equally and fairly to the interests of each and every citizen. When the interests of only some group are pursued at the expenses of someone else's interest, there is no common good.

In the context of democratic theory, the notion of common good is often associated to the idea of a general will (Rousseau 2002), which relates precisely to those interests that are shared equally by all members of the community (Runciman and Sen 1965). It is important to note, in this respect, that the common good thus understood is always relative to a specific community. The vote, in Rousseau's classical account, is supposed to reveal the general will of the community of those who participate in the vote, and the common good of their specific community, which is the object of its general will.

The notion that people should vote for the common good is a general assumption of much normative theory of democracy (Häggrot 2023; Mráz and Lever 2023a 2023b), and there is ample evidence that people do tend to vote according to their "sociotropic" motives, that is by looking at the indicators of the general welfare, prosperity and good of their community, and that this kind of motive is much more frequent than the selfish pursuit of one's self-interest (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Markus 1988; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Solodoch 2021).

The main reason for believing that people have the duty to vote for the common good lies in considerations about the legitimacy of democratic government. The underlying rationale, which is common to epistemic and procedural theories of democracy, is that if democratic voting must not be the exercise of an illegitimate and arbitrary power, it needs to take into consideration the interests and good of each and every citizen.

The notion that democratic processes can and must track the common good has also been the object of much controversy among democratic theorists (Young 1997; Sanders 1997). Notably, some have argued that the idea of democracy as the pursuit of the common good can serve to obliterate and hide deep conflicts of interests among different classes and groups within society (Bohman et al 2021), and may serve to silence voices that express unorthodox or misrecognised interests. While keeping all these preoccupations in mind, we acknowledge here that the common good, understood as a fair assessment and consideration of the interests of all members of the political community and the pursuit of those common lines of political action that equally advance the good of each one, is a fundamental duty we have in deciding how to vote.

## **4.2 Pursuing Justice**

As other studies (Häggrot 2023; Mráz and Lever 2023a) point out, the pursuit of the common good is not the only non-selfish rationale that we need to consider when voting. First of all, if we understand the common good as always relative to a specific constituency, it is important to realise that most voters are members of different constituencies, as participants in local, national, federal and regional elections (Lever 2017). To each of these levels presumably corresponds a different common good, and the mandates of the common good at one level can conflict with the mandates of the common good at a different level. However, things get even more complicated once we consider that we may have duties of justice towards subjects who are not members of our political community and therefore do not belong to the

constituency whose common good must be pursued through the vote. For example, we have duties of justice towards people living in other parts of the globe, with which we do not share any common political institutions; we can have duties of justice towards future generations, or non-human animals, and other subjects who do not belong to our same constituency (Lever 2017). In all these cases conflicts may arise between the duty to pursue the common good of the political community we belong to and the other duties of justice we have towards other subjects. It is important to stress that in some of these cases the mismatch between the constituency we belong to and the wider circle of those towards whom we have duties of justice implies that there are subjects that are wrongly excluded from the vote; in many others, though, this mismatch does not depend on any underlying defect in the architecture of political institutions, but on the more basic fact that common good and justice are two different goals, with justice covering our relations with a much wider group of subjects than the common good.

A fundamental reason for thinking that electors should try to pursue justice through the ballot is that political institutions are among the most powerful agents of change and regulation at the local, national and global level, and through the exercise of democratic voting rights we have the chance to participate in the steering of institutional action. If we have duties of justice at all, it seems natural to think that we should fulfil them through the most efficacious means we have to change the state of the world, and the exercise of our political rights is one. Therefore, there is a powerful argument to be built for the claim that in deciding how to vote we should consider what justice requires.

### **4.3 Value Commitments**

Along with duties of justice, people also have value commitments that their conscience mandates them to pursue. In some cases, such value commitments can be conceived as relevant dimensions of justice or the pursuit of the common good. Two obvious examples are the commitment to equality and the commitment to individual freedom. In many other cases, however, value commitments are instead related to people's worldviews and conceptions of the good. Among the most salient ones, we can list for example religious values (Bonotti 2017), or respect for the environment, or pacifism and non-violence. When value commitments can be subsumed under the idea of justice or the common good, it is natural to think that we have a duty to pursue them through the vote, as an implication of our duty to vote according to those broader goals. Nonetheless, a case can be built also for the existence of the duty to vote according to our value commitments when they are not directly related to justice or the common good. In normative political theory, the duty to vote according to one's values is discussed in the context of the theories of democratic legitimacy, as well as in the extensive literature on public reason. According to Rawlsian interpretations of public reason (Rawls 1993; Quong 2011), only those values that can be shared by all citizens can be part of public reason and constitute rightful motives for voting decisions. However, broader views of public reason, which allow citizens to advocate their value commitments in the political sphere even if they are not universally shared, acknowledge the importance of personal integrity and individuals' need to be loyal to their deepest convictions (Habermas 1995; 1998; Gaus 2009; Vallier 2011). Moreover, public reason and the very notion of the common good can be understood in progressive and dynamic terms, which means that some values that are not universally shared yet may become part of the common political culture and of the common good (as shared values) after they have been pressed in the political

sphere by committed citizens (Benhabib 2002; Baher 2008; Habermas 1995; 1996). Finally, Bonotti (2017) argues that parties may play an essential role in mediating between the core values of democratic public reason and the specific worldviews and religious affiliations of citizens. This interpretation of the role of parties, which sits firmly within the Rawlsian conception of public reasons, highlights the fact that even if we understand public reason as a common core of shared political values, in a liberal democracy electoral choices still concern different possible interpretations of such values, which are deeply influenced by a plural universe of personal value commitments and worldviews.

All this means that even if we assume a strong duty to vote for the common good as a fundamental pillar of the ethics of voting, there is still room for value commitments as specific and partly independent ethical grounds for making voting decisions. This is because value commitments may play a role as a) specifications and interpretations of the goals pursued by the common good b) goals that will be prospectively included in the common good according to a progressive conception of public reason c) tie-breakers in all those cases in which from the perspective of common good as defined by a shared core of political values there is no clear preference for an alternative over another.

#### **4.4 Loyalty to Social Groups**

Since the seminal study on the behaviour of the *American voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), social identity has been considered as a main determinant of people's decisions on how to vote. Later studies insist on social identification as an explanation for such a strong correlation (Dolan 1998; McDermott 2009; Besco 2019; Goodyear-Grant and Tolley 2019). Others relate identification with a social group with a higher propensity to turn out at elections (Uhlener 1989; Valenzuela and Michelson 2016). Social identification is also an important element in the explanation of voters' choices for candidates who instantiate forms of descriptive representation (Ansolabehere and Puy 2016). The most relevant explanations for these phenomena have been found in the self-interest of the voters, on the assumption that people identify with social groups who share the same interests (Morton 1991; Hardin 1995), and in the in-group social pressure (Suhay 2015), on the assumption that people seek approval from their peers. However, from the voter-centric perspective of REDEM, the relevant question to ask is whether people ever *have a duty* to vote according to their group identification, that is by choosing those electoral alternatives that will further the interests and claims of the groups they belong to. Mainstream theories that appeal to the common good as the only goal towards which people's vote should be directed seem to exclude that this is the case. Voting for candidates that further the interests of one's social group seems to amount to the kind of particularistic and self-interested voting that is exactly excluded if we should vote for the common good. However, even if one accepts the duty to further the common good as central in the ethics of voting, it is not clear that voting according to group identity is always ruled out. This is especially important if we consider voting for representative bodies. Voting for those parties and candidates that appeal to the common good as the main rationale of their platforms may fail to ensure an adequate representation within legislative chambers of the voice of disadvantaged minorities and groups, with the counterproductive consequence that the decisions made by those assemblies will be less likely to actually further the common good (Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1998; Young 2002).

Thus, we may think that electors in general have the duty to seek adequate representation of disadvantaged social groups by taking into consideration the need to elect the candidates that support their interests and claims in deciding how to vote. However, a significantly more compelling case can be made for a duty to vote according to social identity that falls on members of disadvantaged social groups. This duty is based on group solidarity in conditions of injustice. Members of disadvantaged social groups must be able to count on the solidarity of their fellows to bring about effective political action and fight oppression and disadvantage.

The special duty that falls on the members of disadvantaged minorities, therefore, can be justified on at least three grounds: 1) *epistemic*: members of those disadvantaged groups are best positioned to know which candidates and electoral alternatives represent their claims and interests; 2) *autonomy-based*: especially for those groups that have been kept at the margins of politics, the active involvement by all members in common causes is constitutive of self-affirmation and the vindication of the group's political prerogatives (Shelby 2002); 3) *expressive*: voting according to one's social identity serves to manifest the agency and political relevance of the minority one belongs to.

#### 4.5 Partisan Loyalty

Although parties are often described as facing a period of crisis and deep transformations, they are also usually acknowledged to play an essential role in the life of representative democracies. Parties play important epistemic, justificatory and motivational functions (White and Ypi 2010; Ebeling 2016; Bonotti 2011, 2017; Leydet 2015), by structuring the political agenda, channelling the politically relevant information and creating the conditions for political agency and cooperation in the pursuit of common programs. However, parties can play their essential functions only if they can count on a stable electorate and the genuine partisan commitment of their affiliates. This is because their role is precisely dependent on their capacity to be long-lasting political agents that can represent large portions of the electorate, so that extreme party and electoral volatility defeats the purpose for which parties are more needed. Therefore, there is an instrumental reason for believing that party affiliates have a duty of loyalty towards their party, which is to a certain extent independent of the specific platforms that the party adopts. This means that although of course we choose a party because we share its fundamental ideological orientation and the values and goals that it advocates, we have a reason to display our loyalty and support also when in some respects its policies and programs come to depart from what we believe it is the best course of action. This duty can be conceived as grounded on a more fundamental duty to contribute to the good functioning of democratic institutions, if we assume that they work best when there is widespread support for the party system. However, besides this instrumental ground for the moral commitment to support one's party, the duty to be loyal to the party to which one is affiliated can also be defended as a fundamental trait of the democratic ethos. As Nancy Rosenblum and Russel Muirhead have argued (Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014), there is an inherent democratic value in the attachment and loyalty some people display to their parties. Rosenblum contrasts the strong sense of political identity displayed by party loyalty to the "weightlessness" of the self-proclaimed "independents" (Rosenblum 2008: ch. 7). Her main point is that the latter fail to acknowledge and embrace the need to act in concert with others, which is the essence of democratic politics. The rejection of party loyalty amounts to the rejection of a commitment to pursue long-term lines of action in concert with

other like-minded fellow citizens. On a similar line of thought, Lea Ypi claims that “Partisanship... is a form of political friendship, a friendship required to sustain and enhance political commitment” (Ypi 2016: 602). Her analysis stresses two important aspects of party loyalty. The first is the notion that commitment to long-term plans of action is definitional of agency and authorship, and the specific form that such commitment takes in democratic politics is through the loyalty to a party. The second element is the notion of “political friendship”, that is the idea that loyalty to one’s party is a way to honour associative duties that have an inherent value from the democratic point of view.

Put briefly, although the literature on partisan identity and partisan voting often represents the loyalty and commitment to a party as a form of “attachment” that can often be explained by non-rational, social determinants (Gerber and Green 1998; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Dawes and Fowler 2009), from an ethical point of view a strong case can be made for a duty to be loyal to one’s partisan identity. From here, it is natural to conclude that one has a *pro tanto* duty to vote for the party to which they are affiliated. Therefore, the duty to vote according to partisan identity must be listed among the relevant ethical dimensions of voting.

#### **4.6 Distancing Oneself as Counterspeech**

Electoral choices can be motivated by the desire to express one’s stance about politically relevant matters, independently of the hope one may have to have an impact on the result of the vote. Through our vote we can express approval (“cheering”) or disapproval (“booing”) for political alternatives (Brennan and Lomasky 1993; Hamlin and Jennings 2019). Especially in the present climate of growing political polarisation, voting as a way to express a statement against political opponents has become more frequent and salient than the expression of approval for the favourite alternatives (Rivas and Rockey 2021). We can understand this form of expressive voting a way to publicly distance oneself from the alternatives that one opposes. Although in principle the choice to express one’s view through the vote may not be associated to any specific duty, it can be argued (see Fumagalli 2023) that in some particular instances, that is when some political platforms explicitly voice racist, illiberal and hateful ideologies, there is a duty to vote in a way that publicly expresses one’s distancing from them, even when there is no risk that those parties may win the elections. The duty to distance oneself from hateful and illiberal views through the vote, according to this view, derives from a more general duty of counterspeech and resistance against public discourses that are inimical to fundamental democratic and liberal values and manifest hateful and discriminatory attitudes against minorities.

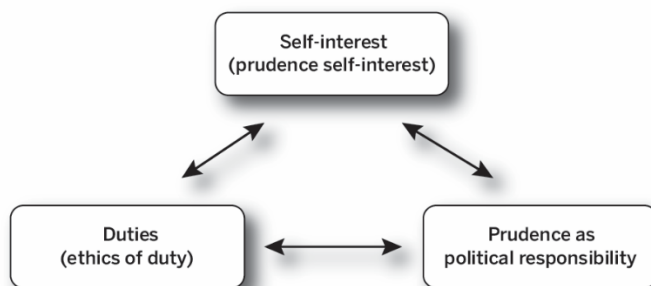
#### **4.7 Sincerity**

Finally, it may be suggested that people have a duty to vote sincerely. Classically, sincere voting is opposed to strategic voting. Strategic voting occurs when the voter casts “a vote for a party that is not her favorite one... to maximize her chances to affect the final electoral outcome” (Bol and Verthé 2019). If we follow this definition, in principle there may be forms of insincere voting that do not count as strategic, because they are not motivated by the hope to maximise one’s chances to affect the final outcome. Saunders (2020) considers for example certain forms of protest voting that are meant to challenge the system by choosing alternatives because that are unpopular among the establishment rather than because they

are genuinely preferred. There are various reasons for thinking that we have a duty to vote sincerely, such as the need for outcomes that correctly represent voter’s preferences, the duty to be loyal to one’s convictions or political identity, the duty non to “pollute” elections, the duty not to manipulate others, or a general duty to be honest (Saunders 2020), if one understands the vote as a speech act. Although there are many circumstances in which other considerations should prevail against a pro tanto duty to vote sincerely, it is arguable that such a duty exists. When people vote for strategic reasons they may feel not only regretful for being forced by the circumstances to discard their most preferred option, but also some ethical embarrassment for not being true to their own convictions.

## 5. A COMPLEX MAP OF POSSIBLE CONFLICTS

If we map the possible ingredients of the ethics of voting according to the above analysis, then we realise that the simple opposition self-interest/common good does not do justice to the complexity of the ethical conflicts and dilemmas that can emerge when people take part in democratic voting. A more elaborate and sophisticated scheme is the one presented in figure 1, with arrows representing oppositional relations between the various elements. Self-interest is opposed not only to the common good, but to a wider list of moral imperatives, comprising justice, value commitments, various forms of loyalty, sincerity, and the other duties considered in our analysis above. Moreover, self-interest is also opposed to political prudence, because political prudence is a moral motive that often pulls in a different direction than what serves the individual good if narrowly understood. But this does not make prudence and duties fall on the same side, because we can also experience conflicts between particular duties and prudence, like when for example the circumstances advise us not to vote for the candidates whose program would be most conducive to justice, because we realise that it would produce political instability, or it would be useless.



**Figure 1.** The tripartite map of the conflicts between duties and prudence

To this, we need to add at least three further complications.

First, as already mentioned, duties conflict among themselves. For instance, voting for the most just program and voting for the party to which one is affiliated may not coincide, or, to give a different example, one’s value commitments may pull in a different direction than what would express loyalty to one’s social group. This is the case, for instance, with voting for candidates that advocate sexual and reproductive freedom and are strongly supported by women’s associations, but this contrasts with the traditional religious values a female voter may adhere to.



Second, value commitments do not only potentially conflict with the common good, justice, party affiliation, and other duties, but can also conflict among themselves, once instantiated in the specific circumstances of electoral politics. Even if people were capable of a complete and perfectly ordered assessment of the relative weight of each of the values they are committed to, nothing would guarantee that this specific arrangement would be perfectly instantiated in the political offer that is available in democratic elections and voting. Often, people will have to choose between different parties and candidates each representing just some portions of their value commitments.

Finally, people belong to different social groups that may call for their political loyalty, so conflicts also arise between different group loyalties. Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; 2017; Hughes 2011; Severs, Celis, and Erzeel 2016; Montoya 2018; Gershon, Montoya, Bejarano, and Brown 2019) complicates the simple idea that members of minorities and disadvantaged groups have a pro tanto duty to vote for the advancement of the interests of the social groups they belong to.

Going back to the conflicts between prudence and duty, it is also important to stress that prudence as political responsibility is not only an ethical principle of action that can conflict with an ethics of strict obedience to duties, but can also be seen as the virtue or mode of practical reasoning that helps in devising the proper balance between the different duties and allegiances in case of conflict.

This is especially the case if we acknowledge that the weight of specific duties may vary depending on the specific circumstances and identity of the duty bearer. Thus, for example, the duty to vote according to one's membership in a disadvantaged social group can be much weightier in circumstances in which the group is under attack or has the opportunity to gain voice and political momentum. And the duty to show allegiance to one's party can be stronger for someone who has a long story of membership in the party than for someone who has only a mild sense of affiliation.

## **6. SCENARIOS**

The scenarios we provide in the following pages are meant to offer some simple illustrations of how the mapping of different senses of prudence and duties considered in the previous sections can be employed to analyse the ethically relevant dimensions of voting in specific circumstances.

### **6.1 Allegiance to a Group, the Common Good, and Strategic Reasoning**

Consider the following scenario. Maria is a woman of immigrant heritage who lives in a rural area of the country. She has a long history of engagement in feminist organisations and is a strong believer in the importance of women's rights. The two main candidates in a presidential election, T and J, are sponsored by the two major parties, respectively the Reds and the Greens. The Reds are a center-left party, which is mostly rooted in the big cities and represents the interests of progressive urban liberals. The candidate of the Reds, T, is a woman. She comes from an extremely powerful and wealthy family and has had a long career as a politician. In her program she endorses women's rights and minority rights. The Greens are a conservative party, which is mostly based in the rural areas of the country and advocates economic policies that protect jobs and communal life in those areas.

There are also other parties that participate in the competition, but it is very unlikely that any of them can gain enough votes to ever win the election. Among the candidates of the minor parties there is X, an African-American woman who runs for the Yellows, a left-wing party that strongly advocates minority rights and is supported by many of Maria's acquaintances that campaign with her for women's rights.

How should Maria vote? A first observation that needs to be made is that the choice Maria faces is difficult to summarize by referring to the simple dichotomy personal interest/common good. Certainly, as a resident of a rural part of the country Maria has economic interests that are distinct from those of big city residents. The security of her employment and her community's lifestyle would probably be better protected by the Greens' party program. But it would be hard to reduce all the other considerations involved to the simple dimension of the "common good." Neither of the two main candidates has a program that will presumably produce the common good. If one were to look at fairness and common interests all things considered, that is the main ingredients of the common good, probably the best candidate would be S, who runs for the small party of the Browns. But Maria also has a strong commitment to women's rights and this is the first time a real opportunity arises for a woman to become President of the country, because one of the two main candidates, T, is a woman. Unfortunately, Maria has reason to doubt that T is really sincere in advocating women's rights, and her past record in this respect has been under attack. Still, Maria might be conflicted if she believes that independently of the personal traits of the candidate, the election of a woman to the most powerful political position in the country will send an important signal and will be a significant achievement for the women's movement.

This hypothetical scenario is not far from real life circumstances that occurred in the recent past. Two important examples are the French presidential election of 2007, when Segolène Royale's campaign appealed to women's vote in support for the first woman who could aspire to become President, but failed to gain such support, especially among the less advantaged<sup>4</sup>, and Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign of 2008,<sup>5</sup> in which the gender card was supposed to play an important role, especially among women, but the personal story and background of the candidate hindered her electoral success among blue-collar and minority female voters. The fundamental point that was brought home in those occasions is that although gender might and should count in the electoral choices of female voters, it is not the only ethically relevant consideration. Gender intersects with other identities and with class, and there are other valid considerations that pull in different directions.

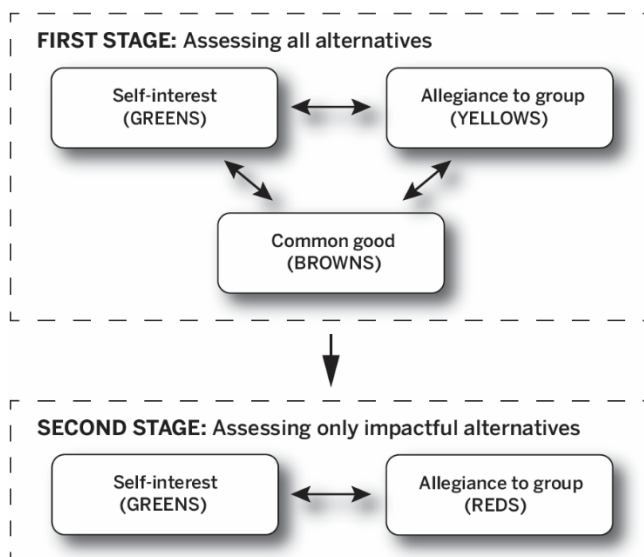
In the hypothetical case we just illustrated, the different element at stake could be schematised in the following way:

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-france-election-women-idUKL0720523320070507>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/25/white-women-husbands-voting>;  
<https://blog.oup.com/2016/11/women-vote-hillary-clinton/>;  
<https://www.npr.org/2016/04/11/473792646/is-it-ok-to-vote-for-clinton-because-she-s-a-woman-an-8-year-old-weighs-in>;  
<https://time.com/4566748/hillary-clinton-firewall-women/>

On the side of self-interest, Maria should definitely support the candidate of the Green party, because it's the one that explicitly supports the economy of rural communities, such as the one Maria belongs to.



**Figure 2.** A two-stage process in a case of conflict between self-interest, common good, and allegiance to a group

However, Maria has also duties to fulfil, which are extremely relevant in this circumstance: a) to further the common good, by voting for the candidate that she believes to pursue the best program; b) to vote according to her social identity, to further the interests of the disadvantaged groups she belongs to. These two duties, in this particular circumstance, are in tension, generating a “policy-identity dilemma” (Brøgger Albertsen 2021).

If Maria has no special affiliation to any of the parties that participate in the competition, in her case there is no duty of partisan loyalty, and if she believes that in the election at stake none of the candidates deserves to be voted against as an act of political distancing there is no corresponding duty to do so.

However, the other relevant dimensions of duty still pull to different directions, and they all conflict with what Maria’s self-interest would require. To this, we need to add a further complication, which is represented by the duty to vote sincerely. We said that it is a weak duty, which can be easily superseded by other considerations. But we can see how not voting for the most preferred candidate can still be painful. In the specific case at hand, if Maria chooses to vote according to her self-interest, she will vote for one of the two major candidates and no special strategic considerations will need to enter her reasoning. However, if she votes ethically, that is according to her duties, her preferred option would be to vote either for the candidate that best promotes the common good, that is the candidate of the Browns, or for the candidate that best represents her intersectional identity, that is the candidate of the Yellows. The choice between the two is difficult, because two different duties are at stake. However, neither candidate, unfortunately, has the slightest chance to

make it. Therefore, Maria has a strong reason not to vote for either of them, and choose instead strategically one of the two major candidates, to make her vote count. In this case, the commitment to the advancement of women in society may suggest her to vote for the candidate of the Greens. But even if Maria votes for her, this does not mean that she does not feel some discomfort at the idea that, to the extent that the vote is a declaration of preference, she is not revealing her true preference.

However, note that Maria's reasoning about strategic voting may be more complex than the two-step process just summarised. For example, Maria might first decide that in this particular election voting for a woman candidate is more important than voting for the common good or the interest of her local community to which her economic self-interest is associated, because it is the first time that a woman candidate actually has a chance of being elected as President, and that would be a path-breaking victory for women's movement. If that is the case, strategic considerations on the likelihood of the various candidates to be elected will be foregrounded at the start of her reasoning, because the preference given to a female candidate would depend on her actual chances to win the elections.

This is where the role of prudence as responsible decision making clearly emerges. The relative weigh of different duties, and the reasons for strategic voting, depend on a previous assessment of the circumstances and on the consideration of the efficacy of the different lines of action that the duties require. Voting for a woman candidate, for example, is a duty that can be more or less compelling depending on the quality of the woman candidate, her role as a representative of the claims of women's movement, and the significance of the elections in which the decision needs to be made. In this sense, the exercise of prudence conflicts with the recognition of any duty as absolute and infeasible, and at the same time helps voters in their difficult balancing of the different duties at stake.

## **6.2 Self-Interest and Distancing**

Mario must decide whether to vote at the coming elections. There are various parties among which he could choose, but none of them is appealing to him. Their programs fail to address those that Mario sees as the most pressing issues that affect the common good and justice. None of them will specifically advance Mario's interests and Mario can assume that his life will carry on unchanged no matter which party will win the elections. Mario does not belong to a minority and has no commitment to the political advocacy of any specific social group. He is not affiliated to any party and in the past elections his vote has fluctuated from one side to the other. On the other hand, if he decided to vote, on the day of the elections Mario would have to leave the resort where he is taking a short vacation to go back to his place of residence, and travelling back and forth would take good part of the day.

The only consideration that keeps Mario from deciding not to vote is that one of the competing parties, the National League, advocates extreme right-wing positions by adopting an openly racist and xenophobic language. Its program includes the commitment to create a highly inhospitable environment for the Roma population in the country, which is especially targeted by the racist propaganda of the party. It also constantly depicts immigrant minorities as culturally inferior and therefore incapable of integration. Let's assume, for the sake of the example, that the polls are showing that in these elections the National League will gain a larger electoral consensus than in the past, and that will be at least in part due to

its racist language and ideology. Moreover, such electoral consensus will be taken as a clear sign of popular support for that ideology and as a way to mainstream it.

The League's proposals, if enacted, would represent a breach of common good and of justice. However, it is extremely unlikely that the party will gain enough votes to decide the political agenda on these matters, and some of its proposals clearly violate fundamental constitutional provisions, which means that they would face the opposition of the constitutional court and for this reason would never become bills to be submitted to the vote of the parliament. Therefore, what is at stake in these elections is not the real danger of a breach of justice and the common good. Rather, it is the creation and expression of a popular consensus for racist and xenophobic ideologies that might one day become mainstream, but represents already in the present a serious threat to the civility of the democratic public sphere.

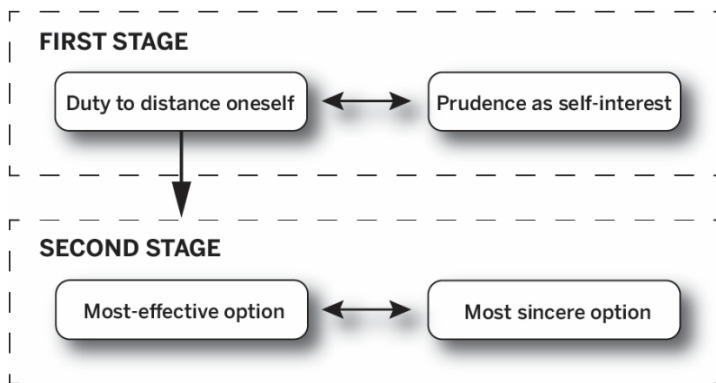
Thus, although none of the parties opposing the League has an appealing program, there might still be a good reason to vote for one of them as an act of "distancing" from the racist and xenophobic rhetoric of the extreme right-wing party.

In the case at hand, then, the most salient contrast is between prudence as self-interest and the duty to distance oneself from hateful parties. None of the parties has a program that especially advantages Mario's economic or personal interests, thus self-interest could not guide Mario in deciding *how* to vote; however, self-interest has a strong suggestion to make about *whether* to go to vote or not. Mario has a strong interest not to spend so many hours on a train just to cast his vote, and if he just considers his inconvenience against all the rest, the clear answer would be that he should not go. On the other hand, he knows that the more people will vote against the National League, the stronger the message will be voiced that there is strong opposition within the country to its xenophobic and racist rhetoric. The public act of "distancing" will be stronger and more visible, especially if disaffected and uninterested voters like him will show up at the voting booth and vote for the party or parties that most strongly oppose the National League. When we consider the expressive value of the vote in this particular circumstance, every vote counts and makes a difference.

It is important to note that also in this case prudence as responsible decision making has an important role to play. Mario needs to resort to this kind of prudential reasoning for judging if what is at stake is worth the effort, and this implies analysing and interpreting the political context in which the vote takes place, by assessing, for example, the relative force and impact of the National League's rhetoric and its effective capacity to mobilize large numbers of electors. By assumption, in the example considered what is at stake is not (at least immediately) justice or the common good, because there is no realistic chance that the party will come to control the political agenda. This is itself something that Mario needs to assess. But the real challenge consists in assessing the impact and possibility of the mainstreaming of hateful ideologies, its long-term consequences, whether the existing electoral options provide a way to channel and express a firm opposition to such ideologies, and, finally, which of the existing options will be best in this respect. Mario will need to consider, for example, if it would be better to vote for a larger and more visible party that openly condemns the League's rhetoric, even though by appealing to reasons that are not completely appropriate (for example, it counteracts the racist discourses against the Roma minority by arguing for its cultural homogeneity with the national mainstream culture) or if the vote should go to a minor party that more appropriately appeals to constitutional values and equal respect for

all minorities. Opting for the first solution might be much more efficient in terms of conveying the refusal of racism as a mainstream and widely supported position; however, it would imply a certain degree of “insincerity”, since it would not reflect the most preferred option to choose from the point of view of the substantive content of the position endorsed. In other words, this is an example of how distancing, as a form of expressive voting, can call for complex forms of strategic reasoning, which are essential to the exercise of prudence as responsible decision making.

Here the moral reasoning can be represented as a two-stage process, in which self-interest and the duty to distance oneself from racist ideologies are initially balanced against each other, and at a later stage strategic considerations decide how to cast the vote in order to best and most efficaciously express one’s distancing from racist ideology.



**Figure 3.** The two-stage decision process in a case of conflict between the duty to distance oneself from hateful party rhetoric and prudence as self-interest

### 6.3 Party Allegiance and the Common Good

Consider now a scenario in which Victoria needs to decide which party to vote for in the coming elections. Victoria has been a member of the Red party for her whole life. She has always had a strong sense of affiliation with and allegiance to the party, which is based on various reasons. The Red party is where she had her first political socialisation and she feels that she still shares many values and sense of common belonging with her fellow partisans. She believes that the party has represented a very important political and cultural resource for her country and is proud of its history. Above all, she believes that the party, throughout its history, has consistently sided with justice and the common good. This also extends to the recent past. The party has been in power in the past few years and Victoria thinks that it did a good job at ensuring social justice and a fair treatment of every social group in society while dealing with a deep financial crisis and the need to restructure many sectors of the national economy. However, the party has now officially taken a position that Victoria believes is completely wrong and detrimental to the common good. She believes that if the party wins the elections, it will enact the proposed measure, with disastrous consequences. On the other hand, if the party loses, it will not be in the position to enact that policy, and if it is clear

enough that the loss depends on the fact that the measure is unpopular, those who will be in power will have a strong reason not to include it in their political agenda.<sup>6</sup>

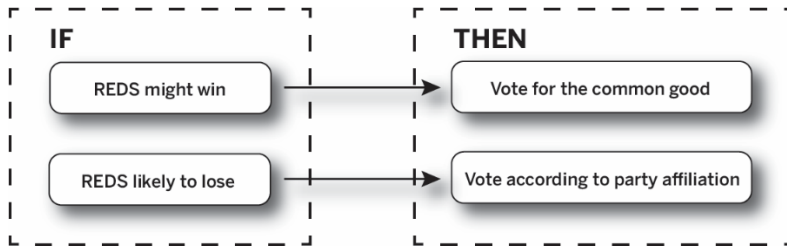
Assuming that in these elections Victoria has no specific battles to fight on behalf of a minority she belongs to, nor other special allegiances to be honoured, the dilemma Victoria faces is between allegiance to her party on one hand and the common good on the other. However, it is important to specify that here too there are further elements of complexity. Notably, the difficult decision Victoria needs to face can also be represented as based on a conflict between the prospective and retrospective functions of the vote in relation to the common good. This is because Victoria thinks that the Reds did a very good job at protecting the common good in the recent past, which would call for a reward to their good performance. On the other hand, she also knows that she cannot count on the party's pursuing the common good in the future, therefore prospectively she should not vote for them. This can be described as a "policy vs accountability" dilemma (Brøgger Albertsen 2021). Moreover, her reasoning might become more difficult in the case in which polls reveal that the Reds are most likely going to lose the elections. In this case, Victoria might be tempted to honour her allegiance to the Reds by voting for them, counting on the fact that they will not be able to enact the disastrous measure anyway. Prudence as responsible decision making might suggest that this is the best course of action, after all. For example, Victoria may think that if her party had to suffer a significant electoral shrinkage, this would excessively weaken it relatively to the other political forces and might undermine its chances of success and action in the future. Therefore, she may think that if there is a way to honour her duty of allegiance towards her party (by voting for it) without causing its disastrous agenda to take effect (counting on the unlikelihood that the party will win), she should take this opportunity.

In this scenario, the main conflict is between voting according to party affiliation and voting according to the common good. The especially interesting feature of this case is that what Victoria should eventually decide to do according to prudence as responsible decision making might be represented as conditional on the circumstances. Prudence can suggest going with party affiliation in the case in which Victoria can foresee that the Red party is not going to be able to pursue the agenda that she deems pernicious to the common good. In this case, prudence as responsible decision making would be opposed to the duty to vote for the option that best furthers the common good. However, if Victoria thinks that she can only prevent the Red party from enacting the disastrous policy by not voting it, prudence would suggest to pursue this course of action, and therefore its indications would conflict with the duty to vote according to party affiliation. Note that in this case Victoria might also consider refraining from voting altogether, if she thinks that not supporting her party would be enough to prevent it from enacting the disastrous policy, while sparing her the pain of voting for some other party after all those years of electoral loyalty to the Reds.

The structure of the reasoning could be represented in Figure 4.

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<sup>6</sup> In an internal REDEM report, Andreas Albertsen suggests that Labour's position on Brexit might have posed this kind of dilemma to lifelong affiliates in 2019 elections (<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2019/1030/As-UK-sets-poll-date-a-voter-s-dilemma-Vote-on-party-or-vote-on-Brexit>).



**Figure 4.** The conditional structure of reasoning in a case of conflict between party allegiance and the common good

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The above scenarios are meant to exemplify how the distinction and classification of different duties on one hand, and of different notions of prudence on the other, can help us to analyse and understand the ethical dilemmas that voters may face. Moreover, these scenarios can serve as an illustration of how the context can deeply affect the ethical reasoning about the best way to vote. In all the cases considered, we can reconstruct the ethical reasoning about how to vote as a complex form of balancing of different duties and self-interest, premised on the appreciation and assessment of the specific circumstances in which the vote takes place. Among these circumstances, we mentioned the consideration for the effectiveness and reliability of the candidates that are being selected, the expressive impact of one's vote and its consequences on the political system, the specific heuristics required to collect the relevant information, and preoccupations for the stability and legitimacy of the political system.

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