

Chapter 8

HOW INEQUALITY INFLUENCES THE ETHICAL CONFLICTS FACING VOTERS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of REDEM project was to promote research on the ethical conflicts facing voters in democratic societies. Ethical conflicts apply to the voter no less than to other agents making decisions that potentially implicate others. Voters must decide what to vote for (or against) and whether they should vote at all. These decisions are largely structured by the incentives and persuasions of the individual voter. But the decisions that voters make are neither just behavioural responses to incentives, habits, or manifestations of political convictions. Voter decisions are also reflections of ethical judgments that depend on perceptions and deliberations of relevant values and principles.

However, the values and principles at stake are ambiguous and prone to conflict. The consequent uncertainties can be understood and analysed only by taking the perspective of the voter. Insights into the ethics of voting in democratic societies must consequently be based on a more serious appreciation of the perspective of the individual voter. The guiding idea of REDEM is that an exploration of the ethical dimensions of voter decisions is instrumental to understanding the roots of voter abstention, the rise of populist political movements and dissatisfaction with democratic institutions and policies.

The ethical judgments prompted by voting are dependent on the structure of incentives imposed by electoral institutions. Other chapters in this book document how electoral system structure the ethical dilemmas that voters are facing and how these dilemmas play out in different types of elections. Some of the chapters have also surveyed how normative models of democracy, representation and accountability inform thinking on the ethics of voting.

However, the perspective of the voter and the relevant ethical concerns is affected also by her social and economic position relative to others. Our world is a world of privilege in the sense that resources and skills are unevenly distributed. Some people benefit from extant social privilege whereas others are disadvantaged in multiple respects. Social privilege

consequently shapes the ethical conflicts of the voter and is of direct relevance to the voter-centred perspective promoted by REDEM. The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview and synthesis of research on the connections between social privilege and the ethical conflicts that play out in voter decisions.

1.1 Inequality and Voting

Increasing social and economic within-country inequality in the West is well documented. The trend towards growing disparities in wealth and income began in the 1980's and is accelerated by, among else, the deregulation of markets, the globalization of the world economy, and technological "shocks" that asymmetrically benefits different social strata (Hung, 2021; Piketty and Saez, 2014; Boix, 2010)¹. Consistent increase of social and economic inequality negatively impacts societies in several respects. Ever widening social and economic gaps between citizens reduce long-term economic growth, undermine social trust while also bolstering crime and providing fertile ground for social unrest (Klasen et al., 2018).

In light of these facts, it is barely surprising that the extent of social and economic inequality is affecting the emergence, stability and performance of democracy. In countries ruled by authoritarian regimes and characterized by rampant inequality, the democratization process is arguably slowed or halted (Savoia et al., 2010; Boix, 2003) though the evidence to support this conclusion is debated. The macro-level relationship between economic inequality and democratization is confounded by evidence that some inequalities (in land ownership) represent more important barriers to democratization than other inequalities (Ziblatt, 2008). Also, while inequality reduces the power-resources available to the poor, it also intensifies demand for democracy. The alternative hypothesis then is that inequality does not decelerate the process of democratization though it serves to destabilize democracy once established. Inequality undermines the stability of democracy as a consequence of sharpened distributive conflicts but offers few guarantees for authoritarian rulers (Przeworski, 2008; Houle, 2009, 2018).

However, in the context of voting ethics, social and economic inequality is primarily relevant as a determinant of voting. Disparities in political participation between the rich and the poor are well known and increasingly present (APSA, 2004). How access to social and economic resources translate into political voice are well documented. A long tradition of scholarly work supplies voluminous evidence that voting turnout is strongly related to the abilities and motivations of the voter, including civic skills and networks of recruitment, that are in turn strongly associated with socioeconomic status and specifically with educational levels (Verba et al., 1995)².

As social and economic inequality is a determinant of socioeconomic status - indeed, inequality is often measured in terms of socioeconomic status - we should expect that citizens with less income and wealth are also less likely to participate in political life by means of the vote. Indeed, income equality is found to reduce both overall levels of electoral

¹ Between-country inequality has decreased in the same time-period (Hung, 2021; Klasen et al., 2018).

² Recent research emphasizes the causal effect of the "precursors of education" that includes family context, personality and early socialization (Plutzer, 2017).

participation and to make participation skewed to the disadvantage of voters with lower income (Solt, 2010).

The causal impact of socioeconomic factors on the extent of voter participation is more complex than sometimes believed, however. Though economic “hardship” has a strong negative effect on electoral participation it does not necessarily follow that inequality as such reduces the rate of electoral participation (Wilford, 2020). Moreover, there are many factors that contribute to determine the level of voter turnout in elections, including the perceived saliency of elections (Franklin, 2004) and the organizational infrastructure of elections - distance to polling stations, their opening hours, pre-registration laws, the day of the election, and so on (Brady and McNulty, 2011; Burden et al., 2014; Highton, 1997). The result is that social and economic inequality is a complex determinant of voting that is conditioned by a host of other intervening variables (Jensen and Jespersen, 2017; Stockemer and Scruggs, 2012).

Nevertheless, there is strong evidence to support the conclusion that social and economic circumstances affect not only access to voting but also opportunities in voting “well”. This is significant if accepted that turning out to vote may in the end be less important to the realization of the democratic ideal than the opportunity to vote - including the ability to vote in a way that is effective given your interests and persuasions (Saunders, 2012). But effective opportunities in voting requires sufficient and adequate access to the means for voting well. Here, again, the distribution of social, cognitive and economic resources tends to distort the electoral playing field. Lack of resources and skills raise the costs for obtaining and processing relevant political information (Weßels, 2018). Hence, voters are confronting the ethical conflicts of voting on equal footing. In the making of difficult choices about whether to vote and what to vote for, some voters are more privileged than others.

2. THE EXTENT OF PRIVILEGE IN VOTING

How does privilege apply to the act of voting? The notion of “privilege” is evaluative loaded but can for analytical purposes be used as a descriptive category. Employed in the descriptive sense, a “privilege” is not by definition either just or unjust. How privilege is evaluated can be determined only on the basis of normative theory. In descriptive terms, a privilege refers either to entitlements, advantages or benefits, or combinations thereof, that are enjoyed by some and not by others (McKinnon and Sennet, 2017). Consequently, voting may be a privilege in terms of either entitlements, advantages or benefits.

Entitlements are rights - liberties, claims, powers or immunities - and constitute privileges to the extent that they are not enjoyed by all. Voting is an entitlement-privilege that confers the power to participate in the determination of legal relationships and that is associated with a claim on others to secure the means for the exercise of that power (Waldron, 1999; 2000). Voting rights in democracies are entitlement-privileges in the obvious sense that they are not extended to all: the members of the electorate have entitlement-privileges relative to non-members of the electorate.

On the one hand, the entitlement-privilege of voting is a potentially problematic in contemporary democracies. Some categories of citizens are often denied the vote, including children, people with mental disabilities and prisoners (Beckman, 2009). The exclusion from

the vote of resident non-citizens is also a source of privilege among the resident members of contemporary democracies.

On the other hand, the point that voting rights are entitlement-privileges is trivial given that democracy is the exclusive right of the members of a group to collectively determine the rules and decisions that apply to them. Few deny that some group is relevant and that democratic voting is therefore necessarily exclusive (Weale, 2007). How to define and justify the “relevant group” is controversial and is the focus of studies on the democratic boundary-problem.

This chapter is not concerned with voting as an entitlement-privilege however. The focus here is on the extent to which some voters are privileged in terms of advantages in accessing the vote and in exercising the vote well. Advantages are opportunities that helps secure benefits. Assuming that access to voting and voting well are benefits, and that some voters are advantaged in access to voting and voting well, it follows that some voters enjoy advantage-privileges that other voters do not. Privileges in terms of advantages in voting do not derive from the entitlement-privilege of the right to vote but are due to background social and economic privileges. Due to social and economic inequalities, voters have unequal access to skills and social networks that in turn affect both access to voting and the ability to vote well. The result is that some voters are privileged with respect to advantages in access to voting and that some voters are privileged with respect to the ability to vote well. Often, these privileges tend to befall the same groups of voters.

But voting is not just a benefit in itself. Indeed, voting is often taken as primarily of instrumental importance. The vote is valuable because and to the extent that it helps secure benefits in outcomes³. Voting confers privileges in “entitlement-advantages” to the extent that all voters are equally advantaged in securing benefits compared to non-voters. The right to vote is a source of benefit-privilege for all enfranchised if they are more likely to benefit from public decisions compared to the non-enfranchised.

That voting is a source of benefit is evinced by shifts in public policy that follow extensions of the vote to new groups. These effects are well documented in case of the extension of the right to vote to the male working class that took place in many western countries in the early 20th century (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000; Boix, 2001) as well as in later extensions of the vote to women (e.g. Bertocchi, 2011). Similar albeit smaller effects are observed in recent studies on the effects of extending the vote to non-citizens in local elections (Vernby, 2013; Iturbe-Ormaetxe et al., 2021).

However, to the extent that voting is an unevenly distributed benefit, we should conclude that the vote can be a source of benefit-privilege. The benefits of voting do not distribute equally due to the existence of advantage privileges in voting and due to other features of the political system. The right to vote produces benefit-privileges to the extent that the interests of some voters are more adequately protected or promoted than the interests of other voters. Elections are of course intended to benefit some before others - that is the point

³ Though some argue that the value of voting is either mainly instrumental (Arneson, 2003) or mainly non-instrumental (Saffon and Urbinati, 2013), others insist that the value of the vote is best understood in both non-instrumental and instrumental terms (Christiano, 2008; Weale, 2007; Beitz, 1989). For an overview, see Beckman (2021).

of resolving political conflict by majority decisions. But voting is a source of potentially problematic benefit-privileges if there is a tendency for some voters to gain consistently and independently of electoral outcomes.

Although the measurement of benefit-privilege is challenging, a growing stream of research takes use of proxies based on the “congruence” between the preferences of voters and either the preferences of elected representatives or the policies adopted (also termed responsiveness). A group of voters is privileged in terms of benefits to the extent that congruence is higher compared to other groups. The influential study of Gilens (2012) argued that “responsiveness” in US politics is tilted towards the most affluent citizens. Similar findings are reported from studies of European democracies (Elsässer et al., 2018).

The debate is ongoing on how to interpret these results and if they are indeed robust.

One obvious explanation of benefit privilege is that it is a reflection of background advantage-privilege that determine access to voting. Advantage in access to the vote inflates voter participation as well as opportunities to vote well. Indeed, the possibility that the benefits of voting are unevenly distributed among the members of the electorate is the major reason for being concerned with the extent of advantage-privilege among voters.

On the other hand, benefit-privilege that consists in some voters routinely benefitting more from political outcomes than other voters does not appear fully reducible to advantage-privileges. According to Gilens (2012) and others, affluent voters tend to benefit from policy outcomes even after controlling for disparities in the rate of participation. There is in other words an enduring positive bias towards affluent voters among elected representatives than cannot be accounted for by the fact that less affluent voters tend to participate less in elections.

This result has been vastly influential but also extensively debated. Some studies offer evidence that affluent voters are disproportionately privileged in terms of outcomes in some election systems (e.g. UK) but not in others (e.g. in Denmark and Sweden) (Giger et al., 2012). Others point out that the evidence is highly sensitive to model specification (Elkjær and Klitgaard, 2021). The more radical objection is that even if true that less affluent voters are less represented in elected assemblies than other voters, it does not follow that affluent voters are better represented. Instead, representation measured as “congruence” is tilted in favour of the group of voters that encompass both middle and high-income earners (Branham et al., 2017; Ura and Ellis, 2008). This may on the other hand be unsurprising given that majority decisions tend to augment responsiveness to the preferences of the median-voter (Wlezien and Soroka, 2011).

3. PRIVILEGE AND THE ETHICAL ASYMMETRY OF VOTING: SCENARIOS AND DILEMMAS

In this section we construct and discuss a number of hypothetical scenarios, with the aim of illuminating various ethical dilemmas which voters are faced with in the electoral process⁴.

⁴ The practice of drawing on hypothetical scenarios, or thought experiments, in order to either uncover inherent value conflicts, or to put our normative principles to the test by studying how well the implications of these principles fit with widely shared intuitions, has become fairly common in contemporary analytical political theory (see Brownlee and Stemplowska, 2017 for an overview).

Without going into the technical details of what constitutes an ethical dilemma, we are interested in the following type of situations: a person has to make a choice between several alternatives; there are reasonably good *pro tanto* moral reasons in favour of at least two of these alternatives; an all things considered moral judgement is not (at least immediately) clear. In line with the previous sections, we once again highlight that our present concern is with asymmetric privileges between citizens with different group-level features, such as economic status, gender, age etc. These features are present at the group-level and we make no generalizations regarding the beliefs, preferences, or choices made by individuals belonging to various groups. Rather, our scenarios will mainly seek to draw out *pro tanto* reasons to choose in certain ways in an electoral context, which only arise in the case of some potential voters, but not others, depending on their specifically (under)privileged circumstances.

Of course, these specifically privilege-based *pro tanto* reasons feed into a larger set of moral reasons, which generally appear in electoral decision-making. For example: one commonly held argument for the existence of a moral duty to vote is that abstaining amounts to a form of free-riding behaviour on the public good of democracy, and is unfair to other citizens who do pay the costs of turning out to vote (Lijphart, 1997; Engelen, 2007). On this view, the moral reason to vote applies in a similar manner to all citizens, as anyone who doesn't turn up to vote is just as much of a free-rider as anyone else, regardless of their level of advantage. As we will see however, other reasons are only applicable depending on how socially or economically privileged citizens are and it may even be the case that this status gives rise to conflicting reasons as well (e.g. by having one reason for doing X and another one against doing X or by having one reason for doing X and another one for doing Y).

Ethical dilemmas may arise at several decision-making stages during the electoral process. The most prominent ones are the choice of whether to vote and the choice of how to cast your vote, and we will examine both in turn. Other choices, such as whether to inform yourself about the alternatives on offer or whether you should "sell" your vote will also be discussed in the context of the two stages mentioned above.

3.1 Ethical Dilemmas Concerning Electoral Participation

3.1.1 Alienation

Consider the following scenario:

Alienation. Andrew works in a textile factory, making the minimum wage. His monthly income is significantly below a living wage and he is burdened with constantly increasing debt as a result. Due to the high rate of unemployment, it is unlikely that he could move to a better job in the near future. General elections are coming up next weekend. Plurality voting is employed, which frequently yields a two-party system comprising of parties A and B. Neither party campaigns on a platform of substantive economic reform.

Much of the literature on the positive effects of compulsory voting builds on the fact that turnout in voluntary voting systems tends to be lower and skewed in favour of those who are already privileged from an economic and educational point of view (see Lijphart, 1997; Hill, 2002; Keaney and Rogers, 2006; Birch, 2009; also Mráz and Lever, 2023a). More simply

put, those who have less income and are less educated tend to vote in lower percentages than their more privileged counterparts. Surely, this might be in large part due to factors unrelated to any ethical conflict particularly salient in the case of the former, such as that poorer individuals have less time to dedicate to political matters, that wealthy people tend to have jobs that increase their political engagement etc. (Leighley and Nagler, 2014). However, some of the pro tanto moral reasons for voting which the more economically privileged have may not apply to the less economically privileged.

Alienation is consistent with the theoretical predictions resulting (under certain assumptions) from the well-known median voter theorem (Downs, 1957), according to which competitors in two-party systems ideologically converge in an attempt to capture the median voter. To the extent that the preferences of the median voter do not favor substantive economic reform, parties have no incentives to engage in policies pursuing it. Moreover, the economic status-quo is also maintained in practice through the disproportionate political influence exercised by economic elites, who benefit from economic injustice (Gilens, 2012; Page et al., 2019)

In assessing *Alienation*, the first thing we might notice is that the electoral result is unlikely to foreseeably improve Andrew's material position. Barring any expressive benefits he would derive from voting, he therefore lacks prudential reasons to attend the polls. Note, however, that this does not say much about the range of pro tanto moral reasons for and against voting. Some of these reasons, such as the fairness considerations highlighted above or the democratic reasons for a duty to vote offered by Emilee Chapman (2019) may apply universally. Furthermore, some of these reasons may be specific to the general socio-economic circumstances, i.e., widespread injustice, but not to Andrew in particular. For example, some authors (e.g. Maskivker, 2018) argue that we have a Samaritan duty to vote, provided that our vote is cast for justice-based reasons. If the alternatives are not distinguishable from the point of view of justice, these moral reasons no longer obtain. Hanna (2009) goes further, arguing that we actually have a duty to abstain from voting if the political system is profoundly unjust. Again, these reasons apply to both Andrew and a hypothetical Brian, who is privileged under the status-quo.

Some pro tanto moral reasons to vote are, however, not tailored to general circumstances but to the more specific circumstances of the voter in question, and this is where the voter-centric perspective developed in the project (see in particular Mráz and Lever, 2023b) becomes essential. On one view, compulsory voting is defended because it motivates citizens to discharge a duty that is owed to citizens belonging to the same social group. Lachlan Umbers (2020) forcefully defends this view, appealing to the idea that voting discharges a duty of fairness not to any abstract concept such as democracy or good governance, but to members of one's social group. The public good pursued through voting is, therefore, "governmental responsiveness to the legitimate interests of particular social groups" (Umbers, 2020, pp. 1309-1310). But in *Alienation*, governmental responsiveness to the interests of the poor as poor is not attainable through voting (though other interests of the poor might be represented). Therefore, the pro tanto moral reason which Andrew would have otherwise had to attend the polls does not obtain. Note that this does not mean that the ethical dilemma facing Andrew has disappeared, since there may be other pro tanto moral reasons to vote. Rather, it means that the ethical considerations which Andrew must reflect

upon in order to make a choice in this situation are different from those facing more privileged citizens.

What about Brian? First, Umbers' own account is unclear about what counts as a legitimate interest, but presumably legitimate interests are not only those based on justice considerations. If this is correct, Brian does have a *pro tanto* reason for voting. However, since both parties would further the interests of the privileged, Brian would - technically speaking - not be alienated from voting, but rather be indifferent between the two alternatives. But on some views (Sheehy, 2002), indifference gives us a *pro tanto* moral reason to abstain since it unfairly distorts the resulting outcomes, with its accompanying costs and benefits for those who are not indifferent. So, while in the case of the less economically privileged, such as Andrew, an otherwise strong *pro tanto* moral reason for voting no longer obtains, in the case of the more economically privileged, such as Brian, the ethical dilemma of voting is reinforced at both ends.

Even though *Alienation* has been phrased in the context of economic circumstances, it can be varied to address other sources of privilege as well, e.g., racial, gender, religious etc. Moreover, individuals who belong to multiple underprivileged groups, and especially if these groups form persistent minorities (see Mráz and Lever, 2023b), have all the less *pro tanto* reasons to turn out and vote when compared to more those belonging to more privileged groups.

3.1.2 Political scientist

Let us now move on to a second scenario:

Political scientist. Cathy is a political scientist, specializing in public policy. She has a broad range of knowledge when it comes to current political affairs, party programs and an advanced understanding of economics.

The idea that voting rights should track education or knowledge has long-standing roots in political philosophy (for a famous proponent see Mill, 1991), and even some contemporary adherents (Brennan, 2016). Even while rejecting this idea due to other reasons grounding the allocation of voting rights, some believe that those who are more educated simply vote better than the less educated and, consequently that at least in some cases the latter have a moral duty to abstain. But this view seems to implausibly gloss over several important facts. For one, those who are less educated have many interests and priorities which simply differ from those of the better educated. For another, while education *may* generally help us to better understand political processes, there are other sources of "bad" voting as well, such as holding repugnant moral beliefs which are not necessarily lessened by having a better education (Brennan, 2009). All other things being equal, however, *informed* voting does appear to be a better exercise of the vote than *uninformed* voting, even though this differentiation does not strictly track the differentiation between the less educated and the more educated (see Häggrot, 2023 for a more in-depth discussion).

Political scientist offers an extreme example: Cathy is, by stipulation, about as informed as any citizens can be when facing the decision of whether to vote. Contrast her with Diana, who has very little knowledge of both the platforms espoused by the parties running in the elections and is unfamiliar with political processes in general. This may be due to the fact that she is simply uninterested in politics, or because the unjust circumstances prevailing in

their society have made it difficult for her to become better informed (due to lack of access to education or quality information; lack of free time due to economic problems etc.). In any case, Cathy's role as a political scientist constitutes a privilege in regard to political information, since being politically informed is quite literally part of her job. By contrast, Diana is unprivileged in this regard.

The structure of Cathy and Diana's ethical dilemmas when it comes to attending the polls are differently shaped by their informational constraints, if epistemic considerations are ethically relevant (Maskivker, 2016). Cathy has a *pro tanto* moral reason which is exceptionally strong to participate in the elections. The strength of this reason matters: for example, a typically informed voter might be morally exempt from attending the polls if this is exceptionally costly for her – for instance, if she has to take an unpaid day off from work. But because Cathy is such a valuable voter, her participation might be so important so as to morally bind her to the choice of attending even if she would have to have pay significant costs.

On the other hand, if epistemic considerations are relevant, there is a *pro tanto* reason for Diana to abstain from voting. As Luke Maring (2016, p. 255) puts it, “if you choose not to vote because you are unable to vote wisely (perhaps the election concerns issues permanently beyond your ken), you manifest epistemic humility, not disrespect”. So in both cases, the specific informational privilege characterizing Cathy and Diana's circumstances shapes the ethical dilemmas they can face when deciding whether to vote: Cathy has a *pro tanto* reason to vote, which weighs heavier than normal against any prudential (and even altruistic) reasons not to vote, while Diana has a *pro tanto* reason to abstain, which does not obtain in the case of more privileged citizens and can override some *pro tanto* reasons to vote.

Of course, Cathy and Diana are somewhat extreme examples, and most people will come somewhere in between from an epistemic point of view. But the scenario can be varied to any case, since it is concerned with the strength of reasons we have to vote or to abstain.

3.1.3 Caregiver

The ethical dilemma facing Cathy partly results from the significant costs she would have to incur if voting. An even more challenging dilemma therefore arises if these costs are morally salient. The following scenario illustrates such a problem:

Caregiver. Emma is a single mother working as a full-time care assistant. Her shift is due on Election Day. After finishing work, she has to pick up her young children from school, prepare dinner for them, and do housework. She knows, based on past experience, that the voting queue at her assigned polling station is particularly long and it would probably take her a couple of hours of waiting in order to vote.

The fact that people turn up to the polls in mass elections is baffling for some models of rational behaviour, particularly the classical instrumentalist-egotistical account put forward by rational choice theorists (Downs, 1957). Expressive or altruistic models (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Andreoni, 1990) seek to explain this turnout puzzle, while not necessarily departing from the idea that people engage (even if not explicitly) in a rational calculation, weighing the benefits and costs of voting before making their choices of whether to attend. One of the reasons why healthy democracies experience high turnout rates even under

voluntary voting is that electoral participation is relatively costless, so that even if we derive a small amount of benefits from the process attending, it is still rational.

However, while we take low participation costs to be the standard democratic norm, they can disproportionately increase for some citizens. This can be deliberate, for instance, because of an intention by election organizers to suppress the vote of particular groups which are usually socio-economically underprivileged to begin with. This phenomenon is indeed well-documented in US elections (Marshall Manheim and Porter 2019). But disproportionate costs for electoral participation can also follow from the negligence of election organizers, for instance, when they fail to take into account the wide range of physical and sensorial disabilities which voters may experience and which may prevent them from attending. Or they can follow from social norms and practices. For instance, an illiterate person who could be assisted in exercising her vote, might prefer not to attend the polls in order not to expose herself to the stigma of other people present at the polling station. All of these are examples where citizens have strong prudential reasons not to vote, due to the (sometimes unreasonably) high costs associated with this act.

Caregiver also builds on the idea that voting involves high costs, not because the act is in itself difficult, but rather because of high opportunity costs associated with the act of voting. Moreover, since these are moral costs, it can be said that Emma has a strong moral reason against voting, as there are weighty duties that she has to discharge in relation to other people and these conflict with her taking part in the elections. Of course, these types of costs do not apply across-the-board. Some social roles can be less privileged than others when it comes to the freedom of scheduling one's program close to one's preferences. But the distribution of social roles is not spread evenly. Rather, groups that are already underprivileged in a variety of ways often take on social roles that puts them in a disadvantaged position when it comes to the moral costs of voting as well. For example, it is well-known that care work is disproportionately performed by women rather than men (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). Also, because of the natural impact of ageing on health it is likely that senior citizens will be heavily involved in the caretaking of spouses at some point.

Finally, as with the previous cases, *Caregiver* is deliberately constructed so as to give a more extreme instance of a widely encountered scenario: we are often faced with having to decide whether to vote, while that time could be spent fulfilling other duties associated with our social roles. These opportunity costs of voting can be more or less morally weighty and can therefore give us stronger or weaker pro tanto reasons to abstain, but they do shape one horn of the ethical dilemma facing us when thinking about whether to vote.

3.1.4 Referendum

The final scenario in this section is tailored to one particular form of elections, i.e. referendums (see Ceva and Stojanović, 2023):

Referendum. Fred is a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Next week a referendum is taking place on whether to approve a constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage. Public opinion heavily favours the amendment. But in order for the referendum to be valid, a threshold of 30% out of all eligible voters must cast their ballots. The main LGBTQ+ organizations have expressed their opposition to the referendum and call for a strategic boycott of the elections.

This scenario is based on a real-life ethical dilemma facing Romanian LGBTQ+ citizens in the autumn of 2018, when a constitutional referendum took place along the lines of the one outlined in the example: there was a 30% threshold required for validation; a wide majority of Romanian citizens saw the amendment favourably; and both the most representative LGBTQ+ community organizations as well as prominent figures within the community have publicly expressed support for the boycott, as a strategy for invalidation. Indeed, while the voting was split approximately 93% - 7% in favour of approval, turnout was only around 21% and the referendum was ultimately invalidated⁵. However, this came as a surprise to many, since there was a widespread belief that the support of church organizations and the main political parties for the referendum, combined with the fact that most Romanians favoured the amendment, would have led to an easy clearing of the threshold.

Referendum raises an ethical dilemma for Fred. On the one hand, there are standard pro tanto reasons to vote, such as those appealing to the value of democracy or fairness and which were already discussed above. Moreover, voting against the proposal would represent a public expression of opposition which would have symbolic value both for Fred and for the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, considering that the referendum was seen as likely to be validated, Fred might think that it would be better for everyone opposed to the proposal to vote in order to dispel the notion that the overwhelming majority of citizens are against same-sex marriages, a notion which would be enforced if something like 90% or more of the votes were cast in favor of the amendment. On the other hand, boycotting the referendum seems to be the best choice from a strategic point of view. Furthermore, Fred's particular position as a member of the LGBTQ+ community may give rise to duties which are not exhausted by justice consideration (these duties would be binding for all citizens, not only to LGBTQ+ persons), such as a duty of solidarity with the community by following the generally agreed upon stance of abstaining.

The case of *Referendum* is therefore interesting because it manages to draw out several pro tanto reasons both for and against voting which apply in the case of individuals who are generally underprivileged, since they face discrimination and prejudice due to their sexual orientation in communities where citizens often hold conservative social views.

3.2 Ethical Dilemmas Concerning the Exercise of the Vote

3.2.1 Vote Selling

We begin the section with the following scenario:

Vote selling. Gary is currently unemployed, as a consequence of the recent closing of the company he used to work at. His household was below the poverty threshold even when he had a job, but is in a worse situation right now, and he cannot afford to pay his bills or adequately feed his children. Helen is the representative of party A's local branch. She promises Gary that if he votes for A (and proves this) in the elections held tomorrow, she will pay him a sum of money large enough for him to buy food for his entire family for a week.

⁵ A similar referendum was held in Slovakia in 2015, with a 50% turnout threshold required for validation. Both the for/against split and the turnout percentage closely resembled the Romania case.

Vote buying and selling is illegal in every democratic polity, and with good reasons. However, some contemporary philosophers have argued that the practice might be ethically defensible in some circumstances, if the consequence of the transaction is that you vote for a “better” alternative (Brennan, 2011). Even stronger, Chris Freiman (2014) has argued that it is ethically defensible in most circumstances and should be legalized. This position in particular has been met with a range of objections, more forcefully advanced by James Stacey Taylor (see Taylor, 2019 for a synthesis), which basically boils down to the idea that such transactions are unfair because of the fact that the privileged (rich) and the underprivileged (poor) enter them from unjust circumstances. Volacu (2019, p. 773) reconstructs the argument as follows:

- (1) Legalizing voting markets allow individuals to buy and sell votes;
- (2) Poorer members of the electorate are more likely to sell their votes than richer members;
- (3) Due to the collective action dilemma generated, it is rational for poorer members of the electorate to sell their votes even to a buyer that would enact policies detrimental to them, provided that the price exceeds the costs associated with voting;
- (4) Richer citizens/parties are more likely to buy votes than poorer citizens/parties;
- (5) Richer parties are likely to enact policies that favor richer voters and would be detrimental to poorer voters;
- (6) Furthering the disadvantage of the already disadvantaged groups in a society is unjust;

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∴ Voting markets should not be legalized.

While the argument is framed within the policy context of legalizing vote selling, it relevantly speaks to the ethics of voting, more narrowly understood, as well. After all, even if vote selling is illegal there are frequent attempts to bribe the electorate, especially in less consolidated democracies (Birch, 2020). So in *Vote selling*, Gary has to decide whether to accept the money and vote for A even if this is illegal, or reject the offer and either abstain, vote for another candidate, or vote for A but without taking Helen’s money. Many people might be inclined to reject the idea that *Vote selling* raises an ethical dilemma out of hand: vote buying, they might say, is always wrong and we always have decisive reasons to refuse to engage in it. But there are at least two considerations which may relevantly bear on this problem. First, if our main objection to vote selling is that it is always wrong to vote because you wish to economically benefit from the act, then voting because of certain election promises – such as that the minimum wage would go up if you vote for a candidate – is also ethically problematic (Rieber, 2001). Second, vote selling may be performed for altruistic, rather than self-interested reasons, and Gary’s motivation in *Vote selling* is in large part altruistic, as it would benefit his family.

Nonetheless, while Gary’s extremely underprivileged economic circumstances give him a pro tanto reason to sell his vote, there is also a pro tanto reason against vote selling which is also

specific to his lack of economic privilege. Namely, the collective action dilemma highlighted in the argument above only applies to poorer individuals, such as Gary. If Helen were to belong to the richer segment of citizens, selling her vote would not be ethically concerning *under that argument*, because policy-making would still disproportionately (and unjustly) track the preferences of the rich. Thus, the ethical dilemma facing Gary is one that is strictly connected to his socio-economic status and is all the more difficult as it is this status that gives him both a *pro tanto* reason in favor and one against vote selling. Of course, the above analysis is applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, also to other strategies available to political machines in clientelistic electoral politics, such as abstention buying where voters are rewarded for not voting (Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, and Nichter, 2014).

3.2.2 Mayoral Candidate

Let's look at another scenario:

Mayoral candidate. Irene has decided that she will vote in the upcoming mayoral elections. Polls suggest that there will be a very a close race between two candidates: John and Karen. John is the current mayor and has a pretty good track record in Irene's view, while also campaigning on infrastructure measures that would somewhat improve the lives of Karen and her neighbours if passed. Karen has not held any political offices thus far. Irene agrees with much of her policy platform, but believes that it would not improve the neighbourhood too much. If elected, Karen would be the first female mayor of the city.

Mráz and Lever (2023a) discuss the problem of descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967) in the context of the voter-centric perspective on voting. That chapter emphasizes three reasons why descriptive representation could be important and may give plausible *pro tanto* reasons for voting in a certain way especially for citizens belonging to underprivileged groups: (1) representatives may be seen as instrumentally better at representing the group-specific interests of the voter, (2) voters may want to contribute to a public perception of members of their own disadvantaged group as able to rule, and (3) there are systemic effects of increasing descriptive representation that voters may care about, such as a better quality of deliberation or political engagement.

Mayoral candidate draws on the value of descriptive representation to set up an ethical dilemma often experienced in real life. For instance, many progressive feminist women may have perceived this dilemma when deciding to vote for Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders in the primaries for the 2016 US Presidential elections, as exemplified by the debate between Suzanna Danuta Walters (2015) and Liza Featherstone (2015) in the Nation. Irene is faced with a similar dilemma. If descriptive representation matters, this gives her a serious *pro tanto* reason to vote for Karen. Note that this reason is much stronger in the case of groups that have traditionally been underprivileged in regard to political representation, such as women, ethnic minorities, young adults, and others, since the second and third consideration outlined in the previous paragraph exclusively applies to them and not to groups that have already been adequately or overrepresented⁶. On the other hand, there can be many other

⁶ Of course, the extent of under-representation of women and other groups in contemporary parliaments is an empirical question. As it turns out, there is evidence to suggest that Western parliaments now better represent the preferences of women than the preferences of men (Dingler et al., 2019).

pro tanto reasons for voting against the respective candidate, including reasons given by the commitments which drive the value of descriptive representation. For instance, in the Hillary Clinton - Bernie Sanders primary many held the view that Sanders was the better choice on feminist grounds (Weber, 2016; Weaver, 2016). So, the problem of descriptive representation is challenging to address since it can give rise to an ethical dilemma where there previously was none, by giving a good pro tanto reason to vote for a candidate, even though the respective candidate might not be the most preferred ideological/policy-based option of the voter.

3.2.3 Green energy

Let's look at a third scenario:

Green energy. Larry is an 80-year old retired citizen, with no children or grandchildren. He has no major savings, but has an average pension which keeps him considerably above the poverty threshold. There are several parties running in the upcoming parliamentary elections, and none of them are likely to substantially improve the quality of Larry's life. The Green Party, however, proposes significant environmental reforms which aim at a quick transition to green energy. While these reforms are projected to be economically robust in the long run, they are likely to lead to increasing energy costs in the next few years for all citizens.

A substantial part of the work being done in the REDEM project has rightfully approached one of the central ethical aspects of voting, namely what types of moral considerations should we have in mind when we vote (see Ceva and Stojanović, 2023, Häggrot, 2023; Lever and Mráz, 2023b). Is self-interested voting morally permissible? Should we always vote for the common good? Is it permissible to vote for considerations of justice even when this is not necessarily to the common good of voters? Etc. These are ethical questions which bear on the electoral choice of any voter, regardless of her privileged or unprivileged status. However, this status can play an important role in shaping some of the normative conflicts which arise when duties of loyalty towards one's group suggest one alternative and loyalty towards society as a whole or the desire to vote in accordance with some salient value suggests another one.

Green energy illustrates such a conflict. To be sure, when it comes to the question of whether old age is a source of privilege responses can be mixed. On the one hand, since senior citizens usually live on savings or pensions (especially in countries where opportunities for substantial economic gain were unavailable throughout much of their adulthood, e.g., post-communist ones) they are socio-economically underprivileged and this is further compounded by other factors such as declining health, anxiety, stigmatization etc. On the other one, and more relevantly for our example, senior citizens turn out to the polls at considerably higher rates than young citizens and this is to some extent due to structural opportunity costs and not exclusively to voluntary choice starting from an identical playing field (Poama and Volacu, 2021). This in turn makes politicians more attentive to the preferences of senior citizens, a trend which is likely to grow as the age of the median voter continuously increases (van Parijs, 1998). In *Green energy*, Larry has a clear pro tanto intergenerational justice-based reason to vote in favour of the Green Party. However, his status as a senior citizen gives him a conflicting pro tanto reason to vote for any of the other parties. This is not necessarily because he himself will be heavily burdened by price

increases, but his friends and fellow senior citizens may indeed experience a lower quality of life, without being able to enjoy the long term benefits of cleaner energy.

The scenario can be varied to groups that can be more clearly described as (under)privileged. For example, a rich person has an excellent pro tanto reason based on justice to vote for a party that promises to redistribute more wealth to the poor, but she has a different (albeit, probably not equal in moral weight) pro tanto reason based on solidarity with her own socio-economic group to vote for one that promises more tax cuts to the rich. A more difficult case, however, is that of an LGBTQ+ activist who has a very strong pro tanto reason to vote for the party that would be most supportive of the LGBTQ+ community. However, it's not at all impossible for that party to fail in other justice-relevant dimensions, such as the economic one. The LGBTQ+ activist would then be faced with a serious ethical dilemma: to prioritize questions of economic justice, which perhaps weigh heavier in her own moral assessments, or to prioritize other forms of social justice that are intimately tied to her own identity and to the identity of her close friends and colleagues, especially if the community coalesces in a society which holds prejudiced attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people.

3.2.4 Guardian

A final scenario:

Guardian. Neal has an intellectual disability due to which he is placed under guardianship. According to the current electoral law, adult citizens placed under guardianship are automatically disenfranchised. Neal is capable of forming political beliefs, though lacking political knowledge of current affairs, and would vote for party E, which would be best for the environment. Mary is Neal's guardian. She believes that the disenfranchisement of Neal is unjust. Her own political preferences favour party L, which is focused on privatization, deregulation, and less overall state interventionism in the market.

The disenfranchisement of people with severe intellectual disabilities is exceedingly common in contemporary democracies (Beckman, 2014; Brugha et al., 2016), alongside the practice of disenfranchising adolescents, convicted felons, and residents who are not citizens of a community (see Beckman, 2009 and Lopez-Guerra, 2014 for comprehensive views; also see Mráz and Lever, 2023a). In all cases, it's possible that at least some of these individuals have fully formed political preferences developed autonomously and have a clear stake in the electoral process. Since we take some form of political equality (see Beitz, 1990; Wilson, 2019) to be a central value of democracy, we might find at least some of these disenfranchisement practices to be unjust. But even if we do not, or at least in the case of those which we find to be acceptable, we must acknowledge that there are some moral costs (even if outweighed) involved in disenfranchising which have in part to do with the fact that the interests of disenfranchised groups are not as well represented as the interests of enfranchised groups. Some policy solutions have been proposed, such as proxy voting by parents in the case of children (van Parijs, 1998; Schrag, 2004; Olsson, 2008) or by guardians or professional assistants in the case of persons with intellectual disabilities (Nussbaum,

2009; Khorasane and Carter, 2021). None of these proposals are, however, implemented in contemporary democracies⁷, a fact which raises important ethical concerns.

Guardian describes a situation where these considerations directly bear on the electoral choice of Mary. Note that this case raises an ethical dilemma, but not for the individual belonging to the underprivileged group itself. There are arguably no groups that are more underprivileged from an electoral point of view than those who are disenfranchised, particularly when they can engage in political reflection just as well as enfranchised citizens. In this case, Neal is underprivileged since he is excluded from the electoral process, but Mary is the one faced with an ethical dilemma. This is because while her own preferences, which we can assume reflect some relevant moral considerations as well, point in one direction, she has a pro tanto reason to give some non-trivial weight in her moral calculation to the preferences of Neal as well. Since Neal's political preferences cannot be directly expressed through his own vote, the most likely way in which his interest can be reflected at least somewhat in the electoral process is if Mary pays attention to them in her own decision-making. But this pro tanto reason is, surely, not universally applicable but rather contingent on the particular social role which Mary occupies, as a caretaker for someone who is himself unable to vote and is therefore underprivileged in one fundamental political sense.

3.3 Final Discussion

Finally, and as a more general note to this section, it is important to emphasize that institutional design also plays a significant role in how these (and other) ethical dilemmas are shaped. For example, proportional representation systems (see Mráz and Lever, 2023a) tend to generate multi-party systems, which is conducive to both more ideological divergence and a more diverse range of interests accounted for by competitors than plurality and two-party systems. This, in turn, could give stronger pro tanto moral reasons to attend the polls for less privileged citizens in the case of *Alienation*. In both *Political Scientist* and *Caregiver* the pro tanto reasons against voting could be at least in part mitigated by allowing for convenience voting mechanisms such voting by mail or e-voting. In *Referendum*, a compulsory voting system would add another layer of moral complexity to the already existing dilemma, since there would then be a normatively-binding political obligation to vote. In *Mayoral candidate* introducing gender quotas would alleviate the problems inherent to a lack of descriptive representation of underprivileged groups. And in *Guardian* the ethical dilemma partly results from the way in which voting rights are granted and can be mitigated by either a more inclusive approach or by an electoral design allowing for proxy voting.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Inequality is an important determinant of voting that structure voter participation, the ability to vote well and the benefits gained from electoral participation. Inequality is in other words a source of privilege that translates into voter privileges in several dimensions. As shown in this chapter, varieties in voter privileges also determine and influence the ethical dilemmas and conflicts of the voter. Inequalities in economic resources, unequal access to

⁷ Though proxy voting by parents was briefly implemented in Tunisia and Morocco in the interwar period (van Parijs, 1998, p. 309).

information and asymmetries of interests between the majority population and ascriptive minorities, are structuring the unavoidable ethical challenges that are associated with the decision whether to vote and the decision how to vote.

A wealth of studies in the social sciences has highlighted how structural and institutional factors impact on electoral participation and its consequences for political representation. As this report testifies, the background factors that affect electoral behaviour and political representation are also significant in terms of electoral ethics. Voting (or not) is a choice that implies a choice between ethical values and principles that are often in tension. The aim of this report has been to substantiate the claim that the ethical complexities facing the voter are often determined by the privileges and inequalities in our societies.

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