

# Psychological dimensions in voter choice

Geoffrey Brennan

Received: 21 July 2008 / Accepted: 29 July 2008 / Published online: 14 August 2008  
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2008

**Keywords** Voting · ‘Expressive behaviour’

## 1 Introduction

For many public choice theorists, and for many of its critics, public choice theory just *is* *homo economicus* in politics. Dennis Mueller, for example, makes *homo economicus* (*HE* henceforth) the defining feature of public choice theory in all three of the versions of his impressive series of survey books (Mueller 1979, 1989, 2003). As he puts it:

*“The basic behavioural postulate of public choice, as for economics, is that man is an egoistic, rational, utility-maximiser.”* (Mueller 2003; p. 1)

Interestingly, these words have remained completely unchanged across the three versions, despite the huge changes in the scope and coverage of each successive iteration.

Taking Mueller’s claim at face value, one might attack the “behavioral” aspects of the public choice enterprise on two different fronts:

1. One might accept that political and economic behaviour are essentially identical—but dispute that, in either institutional setting, *homo economicus* is an appropriate model. This is, for example, the view taken by Kelman (1988) in an attack on public choice theory that is distinguished for its amazing blend of ferocity and elegance. Kelman’s basic claim is that, while the broad assumption of behavioural symmetry is unexceptionable,

---

G. Brennan (✉)  
Economics, RSSS, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia  
e-mail: [Geoffrey.Brennan@anu.edu.au](mailto:Geoffrey.Brennan@anu.edu.au)

G. Brennan  
Political Science, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA

G. Brennan  
Philosophy, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA

public choice theory simply exports to politics a behavioural model that has been totally discredited in the study of markets—much in the same way as an ailing regime might embark on some imperialistic military adventure to shore up support at home!

If one were to take this line and reject the *HE* model across the board, one might reject either the ‘egoism’ or the rationality aspect—or both. The former is the strategy taken, say, in the essays in Jane Mansbridge’s (1990) edited book. Alternatively, one might broadly accept the egoism aspect, but question the rationality. That is, I take it, more or less the agenda of one strand of “behavioural economics” [of which “behavioural politics” is a natural cousin.]

2. Alternatively, one might dispute the claim that economic and political behaviour are similar. That is, one might claim that there is something about the choice setting in politics, as compared with that in markets, which undermines any behavioural symmetry presumption. In this way, one could retain the assumption of *HE* in markets, but resist its importation into politics. As public choice scholars themselves have often remarked, this line is implicit in the traditional economist’s position on policy questions. Policy-takers (those who respond to the incentives embodied in the policy proposals) are assumed to act in an essentially self-interested fashion, following the *HE* model; but policy-makers are taken to select those policies in the light of the “public interest” or on the basis of other normative criteria (such as ‘distributive justice’ or ‘horizontal and vertical equity’). Critique of this kind of behavioural asymmetry was a primary source of energy for much early public choice scholarship—and indeed the attack on the implied “benevolent despot” model of political processes (in both its benevolence and its despot aspects) was, for many of the original protagonists, public choice’s defining feature. In this sense, a commitment to behavioural symmetry has long been a deep one for many public choice scholars. Behavioural symmetry and scepticism about political processes went hand in hand; and so, for those primarily concerned with the normative implications of public choice scholarship, behavioural symmetry came to have something of a flagship status.

Historically, the commitment to *HE* in political analysis among public choice scholars has been based as much on methodological presumption as on detailed empirical investigation. Because the agents who participate in democratic political processes are the same agents who participate in markets, any behavioural asymmetry would seem, on its face, to commit the analyst to assuming an implausible schizophrenia in human agents. As James Buchanan puts it: “*The burden of proof should rest with those who suggest wholly different models of man apply in political and economic realms of behaviour*” (Buchanan 1999; p. 49). This location of the burden of proof is, in Buchanan’s view, a matter of presumptive “logical consistency”. And perhaps also “ideo-logical consistency”, since the benevolent despot alternative seems to establish a presumption in favour of government intervention in any case where markets operate less than perfectly! Such intervention would, on the “benevolent despot” model, simply serve to hand decision-making over from ordinary mortals to the “good guys”.

Now, the methodological presumption in favour of behavioural symmetry is, I think, unexceptionable as far as it goes. Anyone who asserts a ‘two-hats’ thesis about market and political behaviour ought to feel an obligation to *argue* for it—not just state it. On the other hand, as Mueller also remarks, “. . . *this Jekyll-and-Hyde view of man’s nature has a long and distinguished ancestry.*” (Mueller 2003), p. 322. And this is a relevant observation in the current context, because one might think that historians of political thought would be inclined to regard that ancestry with particular respect.

In any event, here I want to argue *against* behavioural symmetry and more or less in favour of a kind of two-hats thesis, though I firmly reject the Jekyll/Hyde metaphor.

My point of departure is to underline what I regard as a crucial ambiguity in all that has been said so far. Mueller talks initially of *HE* as a *behavioural* postulate. But he later refers to the Jekyll-and-Hyde model as one of “*man’s nature*”. And in a similar mode, Buchanan talks of “wholly different *models of man*”. But there is a serious confusion here. No economist really believes that there is a one-to-one relationship between a chosen “model of man” and a “behavioural postulate”. And the distinction involved is not just playing with words. Any “model of man” is a model of agent *motivations*—not of agent *behaviour*! For economists, the distinction between behaviour and motivation is both absolutely fundamental and entirely familiar. Specifically, economists believe that the *same basic motivational structure* (whether formulated in terms of a utility function or in some other way) is consistent with a *potentially wide range of behaviours*, depending on the conditions under which choice is exercised. In particular, if relative prices between different objects of preference change, then behaviour will also change *without any alteration in the basic motivational structure*. Indeed, this fact, replicated in apparently endless variety, makes up a large part of what passes for economic analysis.

To put the point a different way, all relative price logic depends on there being a distinction between the “basic model of man” and the behaviour to which that model gives rise. This point is, as I say, simple, obvious and familiar. And its implications for the issue of institutional symmetry ought to be no less simple and obvious—namely, that methodological commitments to using the same basic “model of man” across alternative institutional forms do not logically commit one to using the same *behavioural* assumptions. It is just a conceptual mistake to think so.

What this argument suggests is that we must be crystal clear about the level at which the general ‘principle of institutional symmetry’ is to be interpreted. If we interpret that principle at the behavioural level, then observation of different behaviour in markets and politics will, to be sure, require us to offer an explanation for why that behavioural difference arises—but we should not suppose that in doing so we will necessarily be committed to offering “wholly different models of man”!

I have remarked that a central piece of the economic approach is concerned with endless replication of the simple logic of relative price change.<sup>1</sup> Within this ‘endless replication’, two particular general cases are worth emphasis.

- First, relative price logic can be applied at different levels of abstraction—so, not just in relation to apples and oranges at the farmer’s market, but also in relation to more abstract things (like choices between higher income on the one hand and ethical principle on the other; or between different dispositions; or between different modes of calculation in the arena of action). At the most abstract level, the logic might well be applied to different ‘motivational considerations’ in human behaviour. None of these applications would necessarily violate the stipulation that the “same model of man” should remain in play throughout.
- Second, relative price logic can be applied in tracking the changes in relative incentives<sup>2</sup> involved in a shift *from one institutional setting to another*. For the economist—or the rational choice theorist, more generally—this kind of tracking is what comparative institutional analysis mostly consists in.

<sup>1</sup>One aspect of what Buchanan (1969) usefully labels the “logic of choice” to distinguish it from the “science of choice”.

<sup>2</sup>Incentives are just prices offered for alternative actions.

Accordingly, the question of *homo economicus* versus *homo politicus*, interpreted purely behaviourally, is to be seen by the public choice theorist as first and foremost an issue in relative price logic. If we have reason to think that individuals will act in essentially the same way in market and political settings, this is because there are no relevant price or incentive changes at stake in the movement between those settings. Or more precisely, it is to claim that any such price/incentive changes are of sufficiently second-order magnitude that analysis can safely ignore them.

This latter claim is one I deny. The reasons for my views have been set out at some length before (in Brennan and Lomasky 1993 and Brennan and Hamlin 1998, 2000, in particular).<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I want to repeat the skeleton of the basic argument, emphasising which elements involve psychological (motivational) assumptions and which involve simple relative price logic. This will occupy Sect. 2. I will then attempt to confront and respond to various lines of criticism that have surfaced since the “expressive voting” account first appeared. This will occupy me in Sect. 3. In Sect. 4, I want to consider one line of argument, developed by Caplan (2007), which is similar to my own but differs in relation to the ascription of rationality. Actually, the issue of whether, and to what extent, political behaviour is “irrational” is a tricky matter, because there are several different understandings of rationality abroad in the literature and we need to be clear as to which understanding we have in mind. My aim in Sect. 4 will be to clarify the senses in which voters are ‘irrational’ and ‘rational’. Section 5 will offer a brief conclusion.

## 2 The argument re-stated: psychology and relative price logic in action

Begin with a conceptual experiment. Suppose, just for the purposes of argument, that individuals weigh two sets of considerations in any action—irrespective of whether that action is at the ballot box or in the marketplace or in some third arena. One set of such considerations is ‘instrumental’. This set depends on the net benefits the individual receives from getting one outcome rather than another because of her vote (her action, more generally). If she is predominantly selfish,<sup>4</sup> these instrumental benefits will consist mainly in her own income and the public goods that she values (the value of defence and education and public health and so on that she<sup>5</sup> consumes). If she is altruistic across a broad canvas, the benefits may include getting the political outcomes she thinks promote the interests of all those she cares about, as well as herself. Or she might just want to get the leader she prefers—or perhaps achieve a better outcome for its own sake. All these reasons are instrumental in the sense that what is at stake is the increase in the probability of a specific outcome that is secured by that individual’s vote. Her voting is entirely concerned with the improved electoral outcome that her vote brings about (however exactly the “improvement” is to be understood). If that outcome were to emerge without her voting, she would derive the same instrumental benefit.

The other set of considerations that are assumed to be in play in voting (and other action) are ‘intrinsic’. This set *depends* on her voting: if she does not vote, she cannot get the intrinsic benefits. Suppose that she believes in the “democratic process” and thinks that this belief requires her to participate in the process by voting. If she fails to vote, she will

<sup>3</sup>An earlier statement can be found in Brennan and Buchanan (1984) and indeed in a quite early Buchanan paper (Buchanan 1954).

<sup>4</sup>Or if such altruism as she has is essentially “local”, so that it is better pursued by her private giving activity than through the nation-wide polity.

<sup>5</sup>And those few she cares about.

have failed in her democratic duty and sustain a utility loss thereby. Or perhaps she benefits by voting in a particular way—perhaps, expressing her beliefs, or her judgements about the moral superiority of one or other candidate, or her loyalty to a particular party, or her ideological or moral identity, or her finding one candidate rather than another attractive in some more aesthetic sense. All these possibilities have the feature that they involve benefits that attach to her voting in the relevant way *in and of itself*.

If we were to assume that both considerations were present in electoral contexts, this would clearly be a “**psychological** assumption”: it would be a claim about the content of voters’ preferences. I shall suggest evidence to support that claim later but at this point I want to just accept it as an assumption for the purposes of argument.

It should be clear that the relative price between intrinsic and instrumental benefits differs between the marketplace and the ballot box. Imagine, again by hypothesis, a choice between the same options, X and Y, occurring first in the market and then in the ballot box. In the market, if you “choose” X, you will get X. In the ballot box, if you “choose” to *vote* for X, you may or may not get X: the outcome will depend on what other voters do. If a majority votes for X you will get X. If a majority votes for Y you will get Y. And these are brute facts that are independent of how you choose to vote. The only case where your voting for X will bring about your getting X is where there is an exact tie among all other voters.<sup>6</sup> This feature of individual inconsequentiality is totally familiar to public choice scholars: it is, for example, the argument that underlies Downs’s “rational ignorance” argument, which is a core piece of the public choice corpus. It is also the observation that underlies anxieties about turnout among *HE* voters. But here we are using the same facts for a slightly different purpose—to trace out the relative price logic as it influences the weights accorded to intrinsic and instrumental considerations in different settings.

In the market, instrumental and intrinsic benefits trade at 1:1. A dollar’s worth of instrumental benefit is worth a dollar’s worth of intrinsic benefit. At the ballot box by contrast, though a dollar’s worth of intrinsic benefit remains a dollar, a dollar’s worth of instrumental benefit shrinks to one dollar *times the probability of being decisive* (the probability, that is, of an exact tie among all other voters). Opinions vary as to how that probability is best calculated—but no-one disputes the claim that in national democratic elections it is a very small number. In a US Presidential election, the probability is at most one in ten thousand, even on the very most optimistic estimates—and almost certainly very much smaller. For the purposes of the exercise here, suppose we go with the maximal estimate. Then, the relative price of instrumental to intrinsic benefits alters as we move from market to ballot box by a factor of 1:10,000. Intrinsic considerations are 10,000 times more important at the ballot box than in the marketplace!<sup>7</sup>

The immediately foregoing argument I take to be a simple exercise in **relative price logic**—though the magnitude of the relative price change is worth underlining. We typically deal in economics with price changes of perhaps 10%—or perhaps in extreme cases twofold or threefold. Price changes of a factor of 10,000 are of a quite different order. It would not be surprising if a price change of that order generated what most people would think of as

<sup>6</sup>Michael Gillespie suggests, in comments on an earlier version, that there is a resemblance here between voting and investing in the stock market, in the sense that the outcome that obtains depends on what others do. But there are lots of dis-analogies as well. You can only benefit or lose from stock market outcomes if you enter the market: you have to live with the consequences of political outcomes whether you vote or not and however you vote.

<sup>7</sup>Of course, voting is itself a low-cost activity in most contexts. But this fact does not bear on the relative price of expressive to instrumental pay-offs; it only bears on the price of voting as opposed to other activities.

a *qualitative* change—sufficient to make the ballot-box just a different ball-game from the marketplace.

In any event, this simple logic allows the possibility that political behaviour and market behaviour will be very different without any retreat from the logic of rational agency. Indeed, we can say something stronger. That logic leads us to *expect* that political and market behaviour will be different—except in one rather special case, namely where intrinsic (net) benefits and instrumental (net) benefits are highly correlated. In other words, the claim that the rational actor approach offers a first-round presumption that market and political behaviour will be the same—that the “onus of proof” lies with those who dispute behavioural symmetry—turns out to depend on what I regard as a very strong empirical claim about the relation between instrumental and intrinsic net benefits. And I think that this observation is sufficient to reverse the onus of proof.<sup>8</sup> I think that those who claim *behavioural* symmetry owe us an argument as to why they think instrumental and intrinsic considerations do almost always point in the same directions!

In any event, wherever the onus of proof is taken to lie, I think we can agree that we are committed to a debate about **psychological** matters. The central questions are these: what *are* the ‘intrinsic considerations’ that I have tossed into the preference function? And what is their likely relation to instrumental considerations?

In the formulation of these issues in earlier work, intrinsic considerations were referred to as “expressive”. The basic facts we sought to foreground in appealing to this term are that individuals have views on lots of matters, and like to express those views in appropriate contexts—dinner parties; letters to editors of newspapers; papers to learned journals; and so on. This is all ‘expressive’ activity: it reveals the values and attitudes to which the expression refers. In the earlier work, various examples of expressive activity were invoked as analogies to the voting case: cheering at a football match; sending a get-well card; gesturing at a fellow-driver who has violated conventions of road use. If you are a rational agent, you cheer at a football match to express support for your team, without any conviction that your individual support will be sufficient to bring about your team’s success. You send a get-well card to your ailing aunt without thinking that doing so will engineer an amazing recovery. You gesture at a rude driver to express your contempt for his rudeness—without necessarily expecting that doing so will induce in him a new-found respect for road-use protocols. These examples are designed just to make the point that it is part of our constitution as humans both to *have* attitudes/values/beliefs—and to desire to express them. We are, so I claim, evaluative and expressive creatures, as well as ‘active’ ones.

Of course, one also expresses one’s attitudes and values and beliefs in environments where there *are* consequences. When we choose a job or a location or a car or a particular house, we also express our attitudes and values and beliefs. But in these cases, instrumental aspects obtrude. What is relevant is not just the perceived abstract “value” of the job, but also how well it pays; not just whether the house is in a leafy and sequestered neighbourhood but also how much it costs; and so on. In short, aspects other than the object’s ‘expressive’ features are relevant. It matters not just what the car you buy “says” to you and others, but dull prosaic issues like how reliably the machine gets you from A to B come into play.

<sup>8</sup>This is, in a way, a ‘framing’ issue. Where one takes the onus of proof to lie will often settle matters of contention—so if the relative price logic can actually shift the onus of proof, it has already done a lot of work! I think the relative price logic does indeed serve to do this ‘onus-shifting’—but I do not pretend that this is any small matter. This is why the Buchanan claim about the burden of proof, earlier cited, is so powerful—but note that it too is a claim about logical consistency, which the expressive voting argument is, I think, sufficient to unsettle!

Sometimes when you buy clothes you do so with an eye to making what we call a “fashion statement”. This need not be a predominant motive in relation to all the clothes you buy, of course, but it tends to be more ‘expressive’ in nature than considerations like warmth and comfort and cost.

When choice is not decisive—when the expression of preference is detached from the outcome in the way characteristic of voter choice—the ‘expression of preference’ provides the opportunity for you, as voter, to “make a statement” relatively cheaply. That statement may be as much about you yourself as about the option voted for—but, whether or not that is the case, it seems unlikely that the statement will invariably focus on the same features of the option as would be focused on if you were unilaterally choosing the option.

Two implications of this line of reasoning are worth emphasis. First, what is available to be expressed depends on the options before the voter. These options are, of course, endogenous. They arise out of the same electoral process as that in which the expression occurs. So if the foregoing reasoning is right, we can predict that competing candidates will take up positions that they believe reflect expressive demands. To appeal to the football analogy, candidates will present themselves in terms that voters are more likely to cheer for! And less likely to boo and hiss at!

Accordingly, parties will choose candidates that are charming, good-looking, well-spoken, with the appearance of being reliable and trustworthy. Candidates will choose rhetoric that they believe will resonate with what voters themselves (or a core constituency of them) would like to say—or would like to have articulated, perhaps with more clarity and rhetorical flourish than the voters themselves could muster. In this picture, candidates’ personal characteristics and their rhetoric are not epiphenomenal or derivative. Within the *HE* picture of the voting process, the only thing that matters to voters is the policy package that alternative candidates deliver—and more specifically what effects on that voter’s aggregate income (including public goods consumed) that package is believed to have. Candidates are more or less like stockbrokers. If (other) candidate characteristics matter at all, they do so derivatively—say, because voters have to assess whether candidates are likely to keep their policy promises or what policies they might deliver over an uncertain future. In the “expressive” picture, by contrast, candidates’ personal characteristics and the rhetoric they use have an independent role: voters may well vote for a candidate because they like her or find her appealing in some other way. And in doing so, they would be behaving in a manner that is entirely consistent with the requirements of individual rationality.<sup>9</sup>

As far as the policy dimension itself is concerned, candidates will equally offer policies that they think voters will be prone to cheer for—ones that are amenable to persuasive rhetorical promotion, policies that instantiate prevailing values—something like “truth, justice and the American way” as Superman remarks to Lois Lane in *Superman I*. Sometimes, those values will be things that are worth promoting—justice and truth, perhaps. Sometimes, the values may be xenophobic or implicitly racist (in a manner that reference to the “American way” could be taken to suggest). Sometimes, to be sure, the policies may make appeal to the *interests* of particular voters or salient voting groups. In this latter case, the expressive elements and the instrumental will track one another fairly closely—but this case is certainly not required by revealed preference logic. Public choice economists are perhaps prone to emphasise these latter cases and use them as evidence for the *HE* view. But one

<sup>9</sup>Michael Gillespie, in earlier comments, makes the point that the activities that fall under the rubric of “expressive” is a pretty wide and heterogeneous set. I agree. I see no reason why expressive preferences should not be every bit as broad in scope as conventional preferences.



doesn't need to deny that the *HE* model will *sometimes* be consistent with voting behaviour in order to make two other points:

First, that any account of *rational* voting behaviour that effectively assumes that voters act as if decisive has simply got the logic of the ballot box wrong; and

Second, that expressive considerations and instrumental ones can come apart in lots of (other) cases, including ones of considerable normative significance (emotionally charged cases like going to war, or being tough on crime, or in attitudes to abortion, or to 'sexual preference').

In concluding this statement of the argument, it might clarify the issues to emphasise that there is a set of claims I have *not* made here.

- I have *not* argued that it is impossible to offer a plausible explanation of why people actually vote based on instrumental considerations. As it happens, I do think that most of the explanations given are pretty implausible: in my view, the fact that up to 100 million citizens vote in a US presidential election is a challenge for any instrumental theory of voting. But to make that view compelling would require further argument.
- I have *not* argued that expressive voting, in leading people to vote their attitudes and values rather than their (individual) interests, necessarily leads to electoral outcomes that are normatively inferior. On balance I suspect the opposite. But again this is a different argument. The way in which 'moral' considerations bear in the expressive account presented here is descriptive rather than evaluative: I think moral considerations and moral language play a much larger role in politics than they do in markets, and this is so because politics is a predominantly expressive arena. People routinely cheer for the good and boo the bad: hence, on the expressive view, the "good" and the "bad" will be categories that will make their appearance routinely in the conduct of electoral contests.<sup>10</sup> But any normative assessment of the likely outcomes of this process is a separate and somewhat independent task.
- I have *not* argued that individuals rationally calculate the probability of being decisive, and the related expected return to them of voting their interests, in deciding how they will vote. The argument is intended as an application of rational choice logic rather than a psychological description of voter deliberation. The psychology enters at a different point—in describing the sorts of considerations that are relevant to decision-making; not in describing the processes by which decisions are actually made.<sup>11</sup> In fact, I suspect that many voters grossly over-estimate the probability of being decisive—partly because they think that voting is a "good thing" and ought to be encouraged, and that acknowledging the inconsequential nature of the vote (even to themselves) might discourage turnout<sup>12</sup> (their own). But even if the probability of being decisive were significantly over-estimated by many voters, few of them could plausibly believe that their votes were indeed quite likely to be decisive. If they did, this would hardly be grounds on which to resurrect any account of "fully rational" voting behaviour!<sup>13</sup> Even getting the probabilities wrong by an

<sup>10</sup>It is argued by some philosophers that it is constitutive of the "good" that it induces an inclination to cheer (and likewise for badness and booing).

<sup>11</sup>The distinction between explanation-by-motivation and the descriptive psychology of decision making is made nicely by Pettit (1990).

<sup>12</sup>There is some evidence that individuals construe the world so as to make it rational for them to do what they think is morally appropriate. See Scholz and Pinney (1995).

<sup>13</sup>A rational actor cannot, presumably, hold wildly and demonstrably false beliefs.



order of magnitude remains consistent with a very significant discounting of instrumental considerations.

### 3 Three challenges

What arguments—empirical and otherwise—might stand as a challenge to the ‘expressive’ account? I want here to state, and attempt to respond to, several of those that critics seem to have thought tolerably persuasive.

#### 3.1 Thrown-away votes

Suppose a voter V ranks the three candidates—A, B and C—in order of desirability. Candidate A comes closer to expressing V’s political views and values than B does, and *a fortiori* than C does. But V believes that A has no chance of getting elected. So V votes instead for B, in order (as V might put it) to ensure that her vote “counts”: to vote for A is just to “throw away” her vote.

It is clear enough that this attitude is common enough. And it certainly seems on its face to betray a kind of instrumental thinking: V’s thought seems to be that her vote is “more likely to count” if she votes for B. And “counting” here looks as if it is coterminous with “being decisive”: it looks as if V is making a rough calculation of the difference in the expected returns associated with a vote for A and a vote for B and choosing the one with the higher expected value.

If this phenomenon is real, does it refute the expressive account of voting? I do not think so. It seems to me that there is a quite plausible interpretation of V’s actions that is entirely “expressive” in character and here I want to lay it out briefly, for what it is worth. There are two slightly different versions. Both exploit the notion that voters regard voting as a serious business—voters think their vote is significant, though not in an instrumental sense. Note that in expressing one’s political views at the ballot-box, there is a fairly limited vocabulary: the voter has to choose the action that best reveals her position. Think of choosing a get-well card for your aged aunt. There is one card that you really like—it is amusing and appropriately contemptuous of death. It shows a cherubic-faced doctor kicking the grim reaper in the backside, with the epithet: “Wait your turn, friend!” You find it amusing. But you don’t think it will appeal so much to your aunt. Better for her an alternative card that is rose-covered with a sentimental verse. So you choose the latter. In this way, you use the available resources to register your good wishes in the way that seems to you most likely to convey effectively the message you want to convey. To have chosen your own private favourite would have been self-indulgent, even flippant—and that is not something you want to express.

Voting is a little like<sup>14</sup> the limited card rack: you don’t have many options and you want to express yourself as appropriately as possible within the available range. For V to choose A might well strike her as somewhat irresponsible, not because she thinks her vote might otherwise make a difference to the outcome, but rather because the “real issue” at the election is the choice between B and C and that is the issue on which she feels she is called to express her views.

<sup>14</sup>It is of course unlike the card case in that there is no aunt’s tastes to influence the decision. The point is that there is a limited choice of expressive possibilities—and that some speak more adequately to the setting than others.

An alternative story along similar lines might go this way. Your most favoured option is A—but your least favoured is C. You would like to boo C as well as cheer for A. But cheering for A is a less good way of booing C than is cheering for B, because B is the salient rival. So you may decide to vote for B.<sup>15</sup>

In short, it seems to me that the expressive account is not bereft of explanations of “thrown-away vote” reasoning: appeal to instrumental considerations is not necessary. And just as well, because any such appeal has as I have indicated major logical problems of its own.

### 3.2 Split-ticket voting

Another phenomenon that critics have seen as problematic for the expressive account is that of split-ticket voting. Apparently some non-negligible proportion of voters vote for one party in Presidential races and another party in Congress, apparently on the belief that having the same party dominating Congress and the White House is inimical to a proper separation of powers. Voting in this way, so the critics argue, betrays an instrumental calculus. Voters must think that voting in this way is more likely to bring about the desired outcome—otherwise why would they do it?

But suppose you were a voter who believed that the best outcome is, say, a Republican Congress and a Democrat Presidency. And suppose you voted accordingly. Is it obvious that such a vote must be instrumentally motivated? If you believe in the split-ticket, how else would you express that belief than by splitting your vote?

I suspect that there is a confusion involved here about what the expressive account says. One thing it does *not* say is that outcomes are irrelevant! There is no suggestion that, when the individual’s expressive and instrumental reasons diverge, he will vote for outcomes that he does not want—any more than the cheerer cheers for a team he doesn’t wish to win. The point is rather that the kinds of considerations that weigh in choosing what to vote for—which surely include properties of the possible outcomes—are affected by the fact that the voter is not decisive. The issue is not whether the properties of the outcomes matter, but rather which properties? If the voter thinks he *will* be decisive, and is in such contexts predominantly selfish in the *HE* manner, he is unlikely to “waste his vote” defending the separation of powers: he is more likely to select outcomes in the light of his material interests.

In this sense, I fail to see how split-ticket voting offers any support to the *HE* account of voting at all—quite the contrary, I would have thought.

### 3.3 “We-thinking”

A common response to any discussion of political participation among ordinary citizens is the “folk-Kantian” response: “But what if everyone did that?” Public choice scholars are inclined to be dismissive of such responses, partly because if this kind of thought translated into action for most individuals then free-riding in the provision of public goods would largely disappear—and with it the standard rationale for collective action in the first place. However, it may be that the response merits more attention—precisely because it is so common, especially among those who do themselves vote.

<sup>15</sup>It seems reasonable to conjecture on this basis that people will “throw-away their votes” more in proportional representation contexts with many candidates than in mainly two-party settings: it is mainly in the latter context that voting for X becomes a means of booing Y.

One possible line of reasoning that ordinary citizens might entertain is that their voting (responsibly) actually *causes* others to vote (responsibly) as well. I do not think that this response is worth taking seriously as a *rational* response: it does not seem plausible that Z's voting for A will literally cause others to vote for A, except for a very small number of Z's (and A's). Nor would it be especially good news for demographiles if lots of voters did think they had this 'causal' effect. If a large proportion of voters hold wildly erroneous beliefs about the effects of individual action, it does not look especially encouraging for democracy.

However, one would not have to hold the view that one's vote *causes* others to vote in the same way, to be subject to a norm that requires one to "do one's bit" in the furtherance of collective projects. That something like this norm can be in play in collective action contexts is, I take it, unexceptionable. Moreover the existence of such a norm might give one a meta-reason to act as the norm requires. If the norm itself is sustained by people's obeying it, my obeying it makes a (tiny) contribution to that end. If the cost of obeying the norm is small (as it generally is in the voting case) then this consideration might play a role in encouraging norm observance.

Suppose, for the purposes of the argument, that the collective end which the norm requires you to "do your bit" to promote is well understood—something like promoting aggregate well-being, say. Then the norm would require that each calculate what action from each would be required to produce the ideal collective outcome and then act accordingly. The thought is that this norm would challenge the expressive account because it makes consequences central to the actions of each: each acts *as if* her contribution were an intrinsic part of the aggregate—even though her contribution is actually inconsequential.

I confess I do not see this possibility as a serious challenge to the arguments I have been making. Imagine a voter who votes to *express* her utilitarian principles.<sup>16</sup> She will vote in precisely the same way as the person driven by the norm in question. It is just a mistake to think that expressive voting, in being "non-instrumentally motivated", treats the electoral consequences of different options as irrelevant. When I send a get-well card, I express a view about a state of the world—my aunt's recovery. When I cheer at a football match, I express a view about who wins. To say that I do not think that I am causally efficacious is not to say anything at all about the content of my attitudes—and certainly not that those attitudes are outcome-indifferent! It *is* though to say something about the likely relevance of a very particular set of attitudes—those involving my own well-being. Specifically, it is to say that those latter attitudes have no special status in what I choose to express: they lack the special status they have in contexts where my expressed attitudes will be effectuated, because then I will have to consider (more than otherwise) what the consequences will be for me.

The implications of formulating voting in terms of a norm for collective action are in my view rather different. That formulation raises three kinds of questions: first, what exactly *is* the collective project in question that becomes the object of the norm? Second, what exactly is "one's bit"? And third, what is the response to non-compliance by others? Let me say a little about each of these aspects in turn.

If I am to act in accordance with what is required to bring about some collective project, the collective project in question needs to be clear. In the voting case, is it democracy itself? Is it the public interest? Is it a particular version of what is in the public interest? Is it a more partisan interest—that of my party or faction or religious group or industry or social class? All of these seem to be possible, and probably all are at play in some degree in any actual

<sup>16</sup>If she were to act as utilitarianism requires, she almost certainly would not vote at all. She votes in a utilitarian manner for expressive reasons!

application of such a norm. But if that is so, then it is not clear how the practise can actually *be* a norm. According to the standard definition, norms involve a common action—and the action can hardly be ‘common’ in the relevant sense if lots of participants think that others are aiming to achieve something that they are not. For example, I as a class voter assume that others of my class are voting on a class basis: but I have no way of knowing that they are not actually voting to promote good outcomes for their industry or their ethnic group or their gender. The problem with “group action” in politics is that what the ‘group’ is, remains undefined; and unless there is consensus on that matter, it is difficult to see how the practise can be a norm *for* the group.

Standard public choice analysis seems to make one very particular assumption in this connection—namely, that the group will always be a minimal majority group. The logic seems to be that, given that individual action is defined by reference to group interest, the best group for you to join will be one that accords with your private interest best. But this is to treat the groups as instrumentally constructed—and that I think is a mistake. There is nothing in the norm account to suggest that the groups that form will be based on the aggregate interests of members, even though the groups that do form may well so act (if their members obey the norm). ‘Minimal majority groups’ seem to have no special salience.

So much for the definition of the collective project. What of doing one’s bit? In the electoral case, “doing one’s bit” seems clear enough: it is voting for the relevant outcome. But actually, more is involved because it will often not be self-evident which outcome *is* the relevant one. This is the force of the rational ignorance anxiety—that “doing one’s bit” involves informing oneself as to which policies advance the collective project to which the group is attached. Just how much should I invest in information-gathering? What investment in information acquisition, if undertaken by everyone, would be ‘optimal’ for the group? And can I take it that others will interpret the norm to include optimal information acquisition in this way?

Thirdly, and more generally, how does “one’s bit” respond to the failure of others to do theirs? It is often supposed that norms are undermined by non-compliance—at least below a certain threshold. Norms borrow etymologically from “normal”, as well as from “normative”. On the standard view, unless a critical mass of one’s fellow group-members complies with the norm, you won’t comply either. But insofar as the norm requires that one vote a particular way, it is difficult to see how under the secret ballot one could know whether one’s fellows had complied. One can perhaps observe that group-members actually vote—though in large-scale elections with geographically spread voters even this may not be possible. And without such monitoring, it is difficult to see how the ‘norm’ formulation could meet the standard stipulations.

To summarise, in the standard treatment, norms have a particular structure. Norms require specific action by all members of a relevant group and they are supposed to depend on a belief that most other members do comply. But in the electoral case, the identity of the group in question is under-determined, and compliance by other members cannot be observed. For this reason, I do not think the formulation of voting behaviour as norm-driven is very convincing. And I do not see what that formulation adds. I do not deny that many voters think of their votes as “helping a cause” in some loose sense. But I think it more accurate to say that they are “expressing support” for that cause than that they are helping it to win. My suspicion is that those voters would consider themselves to have “helped their cause” when they vote in the relevant way, whether they proved electorally successful or not (though of course they would want it to *be* successful). Moreover, critical questions about what “causes” voters adopt, do not seem to be illuminated by formulating the issue in terms of norms of collective action. Frankly, I do not see what the “norm formulation” adds, even if it were plausible in other respects.

#### 4 Rationality?

In a series of papers and in a recent book-length treatment, Caplan (2007) has made arguments similar to those developed in the expressive account, under the rubric of “rational irrationality”. On one understanding of ‘rationality’, this is a description that has some attractions—but I also wonder whether it might not be misleading, and so I want to make a few remarks about the connection between rationality (in various understandings) and the expressive voting account. I do so in part because Caplan’s discussion sometimes gives the impression that voting behaviour is all over the place, inhospitable to systematic analysis—that it is febrile, wildly fluctuating, unreasoning and unreasonable. And I certainly do not see this as an implication of my account.

Economists (and rational choice social theorists more generally) have no monopoly on the term rationality. Among philosophers, the term “rational” is often taken to mean simply “guided by reasons”—without any reference to “preferences” or their structure. For economists, by contrast, rationality is typically understood in terms of stipulations about the properties of agents’ preferences—completeness, transitivity and convexity being the standard requirements. Ultimately, this latter conception of rationality is supposed to derive from Hume—where the crucial feature is the relation between desire and action, given beliefs. On the accepted Humean view, an agent is rational if she acts in the way that she believes will secure maximal desire-satisfaction.

It is therefore worth emphasising that the economists’ structural restrictions on preferences do not ensure rationality in the Humean sense. Imagine, for example, that A and B have preferences that exhibit the required structural properties but that A acts according to B’s preferences and B acts according to A’s. By hypothesis, the structural properties will obtain; and the aggregate choice outcomes will be the same as if each acted according to the preferences that were her own. But the outcome that each actor obtains for herself will not maximise *her own* preference satisfaction.

I offer this example because the logic of expressive voting suggests something a little like it. Nothing in the expressive argument suggests that ‘expressive preferences’ will not have the same basic properties as conventional market preferences. Expressive preferences can be transitive, complete, convex—all within the relevant expressive domain. And there is no obvious reason why expressive preferences will not be every bit as stable as their market counterparts.<sup>17</sup> But of course it is true that expressive preferences do not correspond to the agent’s *true* preferences, as economists would understand them. “True preferences” in the economists’ sense involve instrumental and expressive considerations counting equally—dollar for dollar. So it is perfectly possible for voters to vote (according to expressive considerations) for outcomes that none of them would choose if they were to be decisive. My vote is not connected to my preference satisfaction in the manner required for individual rationality: I vote for the option that gives me the highest expressive benefit (more or less), not for the one that gives me the highest aggregate of expressive and instrumental benefit.

To be sure, the issue of ‘rational ignorance’ applies in all cases. However, it may well be that voters are rather better informed—at least about the expressive dimension of options—than the rational ignorance literature might lead one to believe. Information about broad aggregate political policies and their likely outcomes occupies a large part of the news media and this presumably reflects the fact that many reader/viewers find such information of intrinsic interest. Caplan makes much of the rational ignorance argument: even smart vot-

<sup>17</sup>We know, for example, that at least half (and in the past rather more) of the voters in any election have voted for the same party in every election.

ers, he implies, will hold all kinds of ridiculous views—which they will have absolutely no incentive to correct. And the picture of the electoral process he offers is correspondingly heavy on chaos, and light on order. But I think that picture is overdrawn and doesn't do justice to the expressive preference account.

There is, for example, no reason to suppose that expressive preferences will not be attentive to 'reasons'. Indeed they seem likely to be more responsive to *moral* reasons than their market analogues—just because moral considerations tend to have greater expressive clout. Let me put the point slightly differently. When we economists refer to market processes as having "invisible hand" characteristics, what we mean is that the normatively relevant properties of markets emerge indirectly—as a result of features of the institutional setting rather than the motives of agents. Appeals to the goodness or badness of aggregate outcomes are supposed not to have much effect on agents' motivations in the arena of market action. But such appeals can, and almost certainly do, motivate in the political arena where individual interests are asymptotically irrelevant.

Of course, the moral reasons in play might be mistaken—but in appropriately competitive electoral settings, there is good reason to think that they won't pass uncontested (whether mistaken or otherwise). To persevere with the language of "invisible hands", electoral political process, whether a "hand" or a "foot",<sup>18</sup> is "visible": it engages moral categories explicitly, and those moral categories are likely to have genuine behavioural bite.

The normative assessment of market and political processes cannot, therefore, be conducted entirely on *a priori* institutional grounds. Put another way, if *homo economicus* and *homo politicus* differ—as the expressive account of voting says they are likely to—then comparison of market and electoral politics has to make a direct normative comparison of expressive and market *preferences*. This kind of exercise is not likely to be a comfortable one for economists: we prefer to compare outcomes, taking preferences as given. We like to settle such questions by a direct appeal to consumer sovereignty. But consumer sovereignty and voter sovereignty are not the same; and it seems like an evasion of the normative issues to assert the superiority of the former on *a priori* grounds.

Let me be clear here. I do not think that *homo politicus* is necessarily a more moral character than *homo economicus*. Voters can express their enmity towards others, their mistrust of foreigners, their ancient antipathies, as well as their benevolence. I do not think that, to appeal to Mueller's Jekyll/Hyde analogy, *HP* corresponds to Jekyll and *HE* to Hyde. I do however think that there is a substantive normative issue here. And it is one that cannot be resolved without essentially independent ethical judgement (judgement, that is, that is independent of agents' preferences in both markets and politics!).

## 5 Summary

In this paper, I have advanced what I regard as the "truly rational" account of voting behaviour. This account depends essentially on the application of relative price logic in the comparative institutional context. For that logic to get purchase, certain (I think, minimal) psychological assumptions are required. These assumptions are: that people have views about matters over which they exercise negligible control; and that they have a desire to express those views. Of course, they also have a desire for their own material flourishing. This latter

<sup>18</sup>A "backhand" might be better terminology than "foot". I certainly do not have in mind the phenomenon of "voting with one's feet" which, in my typology, is not really voting at all (since the agent is decisive over where she locates).

desire predictably plays a larger role in market settings where the individual's choices are consequential; the former play a larger role in the electoral setting where the individual's choices are not consequential. When I say “larger” here, I mean relative to markets.<sup>19</sup> and I mean LARGER by a factor of many thousands!

This means that *homo economicus* and *homo politicus* are likely to be rather different animals—behaviourally speaking. This difference is, I think, something that the rational choice method properly applied would predict. To deny it requires what seem to me to be very strong psychological claims about expressive and instrumental preferences—namely that they are very highly correlated. No one, to my knowledge, has provided any direct evidence on this matter. Certainly, the fact that we can find occasional instances (areas of policy say) where they *do* appear to be highly correlated does not, of course, establish the case one way or the other!

Equally, to assert a difference in market and political *behaviour* does not commit one to a “wholly different model of man”. On the contrary, it is this same model of man—the rational responder to incentive changes—that drives the whole analysis. I am totally committed to the logic of rationality. But I believe that much of public choice has got the “behavioural implications” of that logic just plain wrong! Voters and consumers are the same, rational persons: but the considerations that drive them in the marketplace where their choices are decisive are not the same considerations that drive them in the ballot-box. In that sense, rational choice logic predicts that *homo economicus* and *homo politicus* will exhibit different behaviours, in the sense that the kinds of considerations that weigh with them are likely to be rather different.

**Acknowledgements** I am grateful to Michael Gillespie and Mike Munger for helpful comments—but of course bear all responsibility for the views expressed.

## References

- Brennan, G., & Buchanan, J. (1984). Voter choice and the evaluation of political alternatives: A critique of public choice. *American Behavioural Scientist*, 28(2), 185–201.
- Brennan, G., & Hamlin, A. (1998). Expressive voting and electoral equilibrium. *Public Choice*, 95, 149–175.
- Brennan, G., & Hamlin, A. (2000). *Democratic devices and desires*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brennan, G., & Lomasky, L. (1993). *Democracy and decision*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Buchanan, J. (1954). Individual choice in voting and the market. *Journal of Political Economy*, 63, 334–43.
- Buchanan, J. (1969). Is economics the science of choice? In J. Buchanan (Ed.), *The collected works* (Vol. 12), Indianapolis: Liberty Fund. Chap. 2.
- Buchanan, J. (1999). The logical foundations of constitutional liberty. In J. Buchanan, (Ed.), *The collected works*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Caplan, B. (2007). *The myth of the rational voter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kelman, M. (1988). On democracy-bashing. *Virginia Law Review*, 74(2), 179–273.
- Mansbridge, J. (Ed.) (1990). *Beyond self-interest*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Mueller, D. (1979). *Public choice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mueller, D. (1989). *Public choice II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mueller, D. (2003). *Public choice III*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pettit, P. (1990). Virtus normativa: A rational choice perspective. *Ethics*, 100, 725–755.
- Scholz, J., & Pinney, N. (1995). Duty, fear and tax compliance. *American Journal of Political Science*, 39, 490–512.

<sup>19</sup>In other words, I do not deny that expressive considerations play a role in markets—just a much, much smaller role than they do in politics.



Copyright of Public Choice is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.