

THE EXPRESSIVE DUTY NOT TO VOTE

Many (if not most) democratic theorists believe that there is a duty to vote. Some argue in particular for an *expressive* duty to vote—a duty to vote as a means of what Stanley Benn calls “moral self-expression.” I argue on the contrary that most democratic citizens have several expressive reasons *not* to vote, and that they—or we—therefore have a *pro tanto* expressive duty not to vote.

I begin by discussing three main expressive reasons democratic citizens may have not to vote. First, not voting can express citizens’ refusal to be complicit with the unjust states to which they are subject. Most (if not all) democratic states enforce countless unjust laws and policies—in addition to committing untold *illegal* injustices. Since democratic elections are administered by the very same states which commit these injustices, and since the injustices these states commit are often systemic rather than party- or politician-specific, not voting uniquely expresses citizens’ refusal to be complicit with them.

Second, not voting can express citizens’ refusal to be complicit with false legitimations of democracy. Emilee Booth Chapman argues that higher voter turnout can increase democratic legitimacy by “mak[ing] the ... formal political equality of all citizens *manifest*.” But this formal political equality belies (and indeed obscures) deeply entrenched inequalities of *de facto* political power among democratic citizens. Hence, by not voting, citizens can express their refusal to be complicit with false legitimations of democracy which overstate citizens’ *de facto* political equality.

Third, paradoxically, not voting can express citizens’ opposition to excessive expressivism in democratic political cultures, which are often characterized by an overemphasis on largely symbolic actions like voting at the expense of other actions which may be less praised but more impactful. By not voting, democratic citizens can express their opposition to the prevailing inclination to focus on appearance over substance.

The upshot of these expressive reasons not to vote, I suggest, is that democratic citizens have a *pro tanto* expressive duty not to vote. To be sure, this duty can presumably be overridden under some circumstances—for instance, circumstances under which expressing opposition to a particular electoral candidate may be more important than expressing opposition to an unjust democratic state itself. Nevertheless, I argue, many democratic citizens still have all-things-considered expressive reason not to vote.