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POLITICAL LIBERTY: WHO NEEDS IT?

By Jason Brennan

I. Introduction

Contemporary philosophers, including many deliberative democrats, Rawlsian "high liberals," civic republicans, and civic humanists have recently tended to endorse progressively stronger views about the value of the political liberties—the rights to run for office and vote. They tend to hold that citizens' lives will be stunted, and their status as human beings will be diminished, unless they have equal rights to vote and run for office. It has become more common to hold that these political liberties are of special importance, even more important and valuable than the civil or economic liberties.[1]

In this essay, I challenge part of this trend. I argue that for most people the political liberties are of little value for the purposes of achieving the good life, securing their social status, promoting their preferred political outcomes, participating in the process of social construction, acting autonomously, achieving enlightenment and bettering themselves, and expressing themselves.

The claim that the political liberties are not very valuable is easily confused with other claims. Note the distinction between the following two questions:

1. Are an individual's political liberties typically valuable to that individual?
2. Are the political liberties valuable in the aggregate?

Questions 1 and 2 ask different things. Question 2 might have a positive answer even if question 1 has a negative answer. After all, suppose that democracy with universal suffrage produces the best expected consequences of any form of government. If so, then it would be valuable in the aggregate that citizens have the rights to vote and run for office. However, it might still be true that each individual's political liberties are of little value to her. Consider, in parallel, that each of us is free to pursue advances in physics. Most of us are not clever enough to make much use of these scientific liberties, but we benefit from living in a social system where everyone has them. The scientific liberties are, thus, of little value

[1] Consider, for instance, that most people believe that political speech demands stronger protection than commercial speech.

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to the typical person who holds them, even though they are valuable in the aggregate. So it might be with the political liberties. This essay concerns question 1, but not question 2.

Note also the distinction between these two questions:

1. Are an individual's political liberties typically valuable to that individual?
3. Does the typical individual value her political liberties?

Question 3 asks whether citizens subjectively value their political liberties. That is a psychological, not a philosophical, question. We could answer it with surveys. However, question 1 is philosophical. To ask whether the political liberties are valuable is to ask whether they *ought to be* valued, not whether people actually value them. Again, this essay concerns question 1.

Note finally the distinction between these two questions:

1. Are an individual's political liberties typically valuable to that individual?
4. Are all adult citizens entitled to the political liberties as a matter of justice?

In this essay, I am not asking question 4, which concerns whether citizens are entitled to the political liberties. The answer to question 4 might be positive even if the answer to question 1 is negative. A person might be entitled to a liberty even if it is not valuable to her. After all, in general, whether someone is entitled to something is not decided by whether it is valuable to her. For instance, it would be disrespectful for someone to steal the unwanted junk out of my basement, even if that person knows I do not want the junk. There is no straightforward relationship between answers to question 1 and question 4. I take no stand here on what political liberties citizens are entitled to. I am not discussing whether anyone should be deprived of political liberty, but am instead asking how bad the deprivation would be. So, one way of framing this essay is as follows. Suppose we strip some random person of her political liberties. How bad for her is this? This question divides into two further questions. First, how *valuable* are the liberties we have taken away? Second, how *unjust* is it to take away these liberties? This essay concerns the first question, but not the second.

In this essay, I confine my use of the term "political liberties" to the rights to vote and to run for public office. Some philosophers also include under the term the rights of political speech, assembly, and to form political parties, but for the sake of this essay, I am classifying these as civil liberties, as instances of free speech and free association. I intend this to be a stipulation, not a point of conceptual analysis. I

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want to argue that the rights to run for office and vote are not particularly valuable, but I am neutral here as to whether the rights of political speech, assembly, and to form political parties and special interest groups are valuable. The reason I am interested in the rights to vote and run for office is that these rights—unlike the civil or economic liberties—are rights to exercise (or attempt to acquire) power over others. My right of free speech gives me power over myself; my right to vote gives me some power over everyone.

Philosophers and others have argued that the political liberties are needed or at least useful to:

A. lead a full, flourishing, good human life;
B. have one's social status and the social bases of self-respect secured;
C. make the government responsive to one's interests and generate preferred political outcomes;
D. participate in the process of social construction so that one can feel at home in the social world;
E. live autonomously as a member of society;
F. achieve education and enlightenment and take a broad view of the world and of others' interests;
G. express oneself and one's attitudes about the political process and current states of affairs.

My strategy for this essay is to examine and challenge each of these reasons in favor of thinking that the political liberties are valuable. I know of no general proof of the nonvalue or minimal value of the political liberties. However, if I can show that considerations A through G fail to show that the political liberties are valuable, this provides strong evidence that they are not. Thus, in effect, my argument is this:

1. Reasons A–G fail to show that the political liberties are generally valuable.
2. There is probably no further reason, H, to think they are.
3. Therefore, the political liberties are not generally valuable.

I will examine each claim (A–G) in turn.

Before turning to reasons A–G, consider one argument for why the political liberties might be valuable. Let us call it *the Justice Argument*:

1. Justice requires democracy.
2. Democracy requires that everyone have an equal right to vote and run for office.
3. For each individual, it is valuable to live in a just society.
4. Therefore, the political liberties are valuable.

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This argument claims that each individual has grounds for valuing her individual political liberties, because if even she alone lacked those liberties, this would be sufficient to make her society unjust. In the Justice Argument, the political liberties are not instrumentally or intrinsically valuable, but have constitutive value because they form part of something intrinsically valuable.[2] In this essay, I am putting aside questions of whether democracy is just, and looking only at arguments that do not rely upon premise 1 of the Justice Argument. If premise 1 turns out to be true, then I admit that some version of the Justice Argument would succeed, and thus my thesis would have to be modified: the political liberties are not very valuable for most people except for the purposes of realizing justice. Note, however, that many people argue for premise 1 of the Justice Argument on the basis of some of the arguments I consider and rebut below.[3]

II. The Civic Humanist Argument

Aristotle suggested that holding and exercising the political liberties are essential for living a full, happy, virtuous human life. He articulated a version of the *Civic Humanist Argument*:

1. Virtue, flourishing, eudaimonia, and achieving the good life are valuable to each person.
2. Holding and exercising the political liberties are constitutive of virtue, flourishing, eudaimonia, and achieving the good life.
3. If X is constitutive of virtue, flourishing, eudaimonia, and the good life, then X is highly valuable.
4. Therefore, the political liberties are highly valuable to each person.

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in and debate over this argument.

The debate focuses on premise 2. I do not want to repeat this debate here, nor will I add to it. Without here examining all the possible arguments for or against premise 2, I will summarize what seems to be its main problem: premise 2 overgeneralizes. The political liberties are constitutive of the good life for some people, but not all or even most people.

[2] Something is intrinsically valuable when it is valuable as an end in itself. Something is instrumentally valuable when it is valuable for the purpose of achieving some *other* end. Something is constitutively valuable when it is valuable as a *component* or piece of something valuable. So, for instance, if I have the final end of having an excellent philosophy career, then publishing papers is constitutively valuable to me as a component of that career. In section II, I examine an argument that holds that the political liberties have constitutive value because they are a component of the good life.

[3] For example, John Rawls defends premise 1 of the Justice Argument on the basis of what I call the Status Argument in section III.

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Suppose Bob is a politician. He was always on student council or was class president as a youth. He ran for town alderman at a young age, then worked his way up to state senator, and now dreams of being governor.

I would not deny that the political liberties are valuable to Bob. When I say that the political liberties are not of much value, I speak in general terms. Bob is an exception to a general trend. He needs the political liberties to realize his conception of the good life. The political liberties play a central role in Bob's life—they help define who Bob is.

However, most of us are not like Bob. Some people have a passion for democratic participation, but most do not. To some degree, the value of different liberties varies from person to person. For some people, the political liberties are necessary for them to lead good lives. For many others, the political liberties are irrelevant to lives they have reason to lead. The political liberties rightly play only a minor or perhaps no role in many people's lives.

Suppose Amy has always dreamt of owning her own business. After working an entry-level job as a pet groomer, she saves enough money to open her own business—"Amy's Pup-in-the Tub." John Tomasi asks, "What does it mean to Amy to walk in her shop each morning, or to drive by it late at night?"[4] For Amy, exercising the economic or commercial liberties is constitutive of the good life. The political liberties might rightly play no significant role in her life at all. To suggest that she leads a stunted life unless she gets herself to the forum seems not only inaccurate, but offensive.

Different people have different capacities, abilities, dispositions, and desires. What makes for a good life for any given person depends upon these four factors (among others), and so the good life varies from person to person. For instance, given who I am and given what the contemplative life is like, the contemplative life is valuable to me. Yet, that does not make it the highest form of life for everybody.[5] Similarly, a liberty or right might be valuable to one person but not another.[6] The right to worship in the church of one's choice is worthless to me (a strong atheist with little chance of becoming religious), but that right is crucial to a committed

[4] This paraphrases John Tomasi, *Free Market Fairness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2012), chap. 4. Tomasi is referring to a real person and a pet-grooming business in Warren, Rhode Island.

[5] I sometimes worry that political philosophy suffers from parochialism, because it is written by political philosophers and thus reflects their peculiar concerns and interests. Plato suggested that philosophers should be kings, and Aristotle suggested that philosophizing was the highest form of life. They might be right, but we have to be suspicious, given that they are philosophers. Contemporary deliberative democrats often suggest that societies would be better if everyone acted like amateur political scientists and philosophers. They might be right, but we have to be suspicious when we hear this from political scientists and philosophers.

[6] When I say that the value of a given kind of liberty can vary from person to person, I do not mean to suggest that the value of liberty to a person is purely subjective, i.e., just a matter of that person's opinion.

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Christian. The right to write political books is valuable to me, but not to my handyman neighbor.

III. Status and Respect

One prominent, popular argument holds that if a person lacks the political liberties, this tends to undermine her self-respect and the respect others hold for her. The political liberties are thus valuable as means to achieving respect. Let us call this the *Status Argument*:

1. Social respect and self-respect are valuable.
2. Without the political liberties, citizens cannot (or are unlikely to) have social respect and self-respect.
3. Therefore, the political liberties are valuable.

John Rawls, among others, makes a version of this argument.[7]

Regarding the terms used in premise 1: A person has *social respect* when others view her in a favorable light, regarding her as valuable and of sufficiently high fundamental moral standing. A person has *self-respect* when she views herself in a favorable light, regarding herself as valuable and of sufficiently high fundamental moral standing.[8]

Premise 1 seems largely unobjectionable, so the success or failure of this argument depends on premise 2. In this section, I challenge this second premise. While I will not exactly refute this argument—and I take it to be the strongest argument on behalf of the personal value of the political liberties—I will still, in some sense, undermine it.

Premise 2 claims that citizens need the political liberties in order to have social respect and self-respect. One might be tempted to read premise 2 as stating something tautological: A person who lacks the political liberties by definition has a lower status than someone who holds them. They are things others may do that she may not. This is true, but it is true in the same sense that a person who lacks a driver's, medical, hairdressing, or plumbing license has lower status than those who hold those licenses. All things equal, having a hairdressing license gives someone a higher legal status. Yet, no one thinks that lacking a hairdressing license

[7] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 234; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 318–19; John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 131; Samuel Freeman, *Rawls* (New York: Routledge), 76. For an especially acute response to Rawls, see Steven Wall, "Rawls and the Status of Political Liberty," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87 (2006): 245–70, at pp. 257–61.

[8] Different versions of the Status Argument could take different stances on what counts as "sufficiently high fundamental moral standing." For example, on Rawls's account, for citizens to have the right kind of status, they need to have a full range of liberal rights, their rights must be equal to others, and some of these rights (in particular, the political liberties) must have their fair value guaranteed. However, someone propounding the Status Argument could hold a less demanding view of what counts as sufficiently high standing.

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(and thus lacking the liberty to practice hairdressing) lowers one's fundamental moral status, or removes the social bases for social respect and self-respect. For the Status Argument to succeed, it needs to interpret premise 2 in a robust way, as showing that lacking the political liberties is a great threat to one's fundamental moral status, in a way that lacking the hairdressing liberties is not.[9]

John Rawls holds that when some citizens lack the political liberties, this thereby encourages everyone to see those citizens as inferior. As Steven Wall (who rejects the Status Argument) summarizes Rawls's argument, "The . . . argument begins with the plausible thought that political institutions established in a society bear importantly on the social component of self-respect. Some institutional arrangements do better than others in encouraging citizens to view one another as moral equals. . . . The public expression of . . . the fair value of political liberty is an affirmation of the equal status of all citizens."[10]

As a matter of fact, we human beings do tend to associate political power with a kind of majesty. We do tend to think that people's fundamental moral standing in some way depends upon their political standing, and vice versa. Nation-states are like clubs, and we tend to treat the rights to vote and run for office as signifying full membership in the national club. People who lack these rights are junior members at best. When people lack the political liberties, we look down upon them. They might feel humiliated by their lesser status. It seems true, therefore, that the social bases of self-respect and social respect depend upon political power. But this is only contingently true—it is an artifact of how we happen to think. We do not need to think that way. And we should not think that way, or so I will argue.

Imagine that in our culture, or in the human race in general, we tended to associate being given a red scarf by one's government as a mark of membership and status. You are not fully in your national club until you get your scarf.

Now, suppose the government gives red scarves to everyone, except homosexuals. Homosexuals would rightly be upset—they would rightly claim that the government's refusal to grant them red scarves shows that homosexuals are considered second-class, inferior people. The government's behavior would tend to induce people (including homosexuals themselves) to regard homosexuals as having low status and being less valuable. Homosexuals and their sympathetic allies would have reason to take to the streets and demand that homosexuals be granted scarves. Given how everyone thinks about red scarves, it in some sense becomes crucial to have one.

[9] Even libertarians, who regard such licensing as intrinsically unjust, stop short of saying that licenses threaten people's fundamental moral status.

[10] Wall, "Rawls and the Status of Political Liberty," 257–8.

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However, at the same time, we can say, "There is no good reason to attach status and standing to red scarf ownership. Human dignity does not actually depend upon scarves. It is just a silly, contingent psychological or cultural fact that people think this way. And they should not think this way." The red scarves are not *really* valuable. They are valuable only as a result of a social construction, and a *bad* one at that.[11]

We can say the same thing about the political liberties and about associating moral standing with political power. (The political liberties are, after all, rights to political power.) There is no intrinsic or essential connection between status and political power. It is a contingent, psychological or cultural fact that people tend to associate human dignity with political power. But we should not think that way. I am not just saying that we have no good reason to think this way. I want to go further: I think it is a vile, contemptible fact about human beings that we associate dignity with political power.

In the United States, new parents sometimes say, "Who knows? Maybe my child will be president!" Implicit in such daydreams is the assumption that holding political power—and holding the most political power—is the most prestigious thing one can do.

Imagine a world otherwise like ours, in which people lack these kinds of attitudes. Instead of viewing the president as majestic, or the office of presidency as deserving reverence, in the alternative world people just think of the president as the chief public goods administrator. Instead of thinking of the rights to vote and run for office as possessing a lesser kind of majesty, and as signifying membership in the national club, they think of them as licenses akin to hairdressing or plumbing licenses. Imagine that people do not associate national status with international political power, and do not associate personal status with power.

This would be a better world than ours. We tie esteem to political power. But we should not; political power has a terrible track record.[12] Just think of the abuses and injustices entire nations, kings, emperors, presidents, senators, district attorneys, police officers, and average voters have gotten away with throughout history, all because we attach standing, reverence, and status to political power, and we defer before such

[11] If it turned out that these attitudes toward scarves resulted not from an arbitrary social practice, but from deep features in our evolved psychology, this argument would still stand. Our psychological tendencies would be lamentable, and scarves would be valuable only in light of these lamentable tendencies.

[12] On this point, blogger Will Wilkinson has an excellent post from shortly after the 2008 U. S. presidential election. Wilkinson says that given that we tend to think of the presidency as "the highest peak, the top of the human heap," and given our history of oppressing blacks, the fact that a black man won the presidency is momentous. At the same time, it would be better if we stopped thinking of the presidency as a majestic office and instead thought of it as the "chief executive of the national public goods administrative agency." Wilkinson continues, "I hope never to see again streets thronging with people chanting the glorious leader's name." See Will Wilkinson, "One Night of Romance," *The Fly Bottle,* http://www.willwilkinson.net/flybottle/2008/11/05/one-night-of-romance/.

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majestic standing. Moreover, one reason why kings, presidents, and district attorneys commit such abuses in the first place is that they associate status with power. For example, King Henry VIII's wars had no chance of increasing his (or most of his subjects') personal wealth or comfort. He committed these atrocities in large part because he wanted the prestige and status that attach to increased political power. Most people revere power, more than they would admit to themselves. The romance of power and authority partly explains why people have so often been willing to collaborate with government-sponsored injustices.

The tendency to tie status to political power has other bad effects. Because people tend to use political power—and the right to vote in particular—as a way of signifying who is a full member of the national club and who is inferior, political power has tended to be distributed for bad reasons. For example, many countries have denied voting rights to women and ethnic minorities in order to signify the lesser status of members of these groups. If people had divorced standing from power, perhaps they would not have denied others their political liberties on such bad grounds. Also, many countries now give all adult citizens equal voting rights in order to signify equal status. Perhaps unrestricted universal suffrage is just. Perhaps not—perhaps political liberties should be distributed on the basis of competence, or some other basis, rather than merely on birth, citizenship, or permanent residency. However, we can barely entertain the question of whether there are better alternatives because people associate power with status. Associating power with status, therefore, potentially nullifies improvements we could make in the quality of government.

Given our contingent attitudes, the political liberties confer status. We use these rights to signify who is in our club and whom we hold in high regard. We treat the political liberties as if there were red scarves from the thought experiment above. But we should stop using these rights to signify status. We should not regard political power as a sign of worth. It would be a better world if people did not attach such significance to political power.

Since we are doing normative theory in this paper, we need not take contingent psychological or cultural facts about human beings as given. One hundred years ago, it was a contingent psychological or cultural fact that people associated being male and white with moral standing, and so it was contingently valuable to be male and white. But a political philosopher could still say that being male and white are not fundamentally valuable. They are valuable only as a result of a social construction (a construction that is perhaps rooted in our evolutionary past), and a *bad* one at that. Similarly, it is a contingent psychological or cultural fact that people associate political power (even the small amount conferred by the political liberties) with status. But a political philosopher can still say that political power is not fundamentally valuable. Political power is valuable only as a result of a social construction, and a *bad* one at that.

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In some sense, my objections to the Status Argument leave its second premise intact. Political power is indeed conducive to obtaining valuable status. On the other hand, if my objections are sound, this also undermines the spirit of that argument. The political liberties are valuable as a means to securing one's status only in light of a disvaluable pattern of behavior.

IV. Political Outcomes

In this section, I examine an argument that claims that the political liberties are valuable, because each individual's exercise of political liberty has significant value in terms of its impact on the quality of government. Let us call this the *Outcomes Argument*:

1. The government will not be responsive to your interests unless you have the right to vote and to run for office.
2. It is valuable to have the government be responsive to your interests.
3. Therefore, it is valuable to have the right to vote and run for office.

At least among laypeople, the Outcomes Argument is a common justification of the claim that the political liberties are valuable. Prima facie, it is the most obvious argument on behalf of the political liberties. The Outcomes Argument casts the political liberties as means to help ensure good behavior from government. Politicians want my vote. To get it, candidates compete in offering me the best package. Also, since I can run for office, politicians do not just need my vote. They need to behave well enough that I will not run against them.

This argument fails in part because individual votes in fact have vanishingly small instrumental value. The Outcomes Argument overstates the value of an individual's political liberties in terms of their ability to make government responsive to her interests.

If we want to know how valuable a vote is, it depends not only on how high stakes the election is, but also on whether the individual vote will make any difference. The right to vote is itself an opportunity to cast votes, and so the instrumental value of the right to vote is in part dependent on the instrumental value of the votes a citizen can cast.

In a large-scale election, such as the U.S. presidential election or congressional elections, the probability that an individual vote will decide the outcome of the election is vanishingly small.[13] Individuals are much

[13] One might argue that individual votes matter, even if they do not tip the balance, because if a candidate obtains a large majority, she will be seen as "having a mandate" and this gives her greater ability to pass legislation. However, this simply relocates the problem. The person making this argument needs to find some way to measure how much individual votes contribute to creating a mandate. The logic is in many respects the same as before. For any individual voter, the likelihood that her vote makes a difference in pushing her candidate from simply winning to being seen as having a mandate is vanishingly small. Even if

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more likely to win the Powerball lottery multiple times in a row than to cast a vote that changes the outcome of a presidential or congressional election.[14]

The expected utility of an individual vote is tiny even in high stakes elections. Let me illustrate with an example. Suppose there are two presidential candidates, A and B. Candidate A has credibly promised to pay you $10 billion if she wins, while B will do nothing for you. (To be clear: A will pay you $10 billion if she wins, period, regardless of whether you vote at all or regardless of whether you vote for her.) So, it is worth $10 billion to you to have A win. Suppose also that A has only a slight lead in the polls—50.5 percent of voters favor her. Suppose the number of voters in the coming election is expected to be the same as in the 2004 presidential election.

On these assumptions, is it worthwhile for you to vote for A? If you vote for A, you very slightly increase the probability of her winning. Multiplying this increase in the chance of her winning by the value of her winning ($10 billion), yields the expected utility to you of your vote for A. Once we do the calculations, we find that the expected utility is low: even though A beating B is worth $10 billion to you, your vote for A is worth only $\$1.45 \times 10^{-2,651}$, 2,649 orders of magnitude below a penny.[15]

Politicians rarely read the academic literature on the decisiveness of individual votes, but they generally are aware that individual votes do not count for much. A politician thus has little reason to cater to me. He needs votes, but he does not need *my* vote, and he knows it. My having the liberty to vote does little to ensure that politicians or the government will respond to my interests.

Similar remarks apply to the right to run for political office. The probability that a random American, if she tried, could secure a significant public office is low. In part, this is because there are few seats to go around. There are over 1.7 million Americans for every seat in Congress. Even smaller, less important offices (such as town aldermen) tend at best to have ratios of 1 seat for every 2,000 citizens. If offices were distributed randomly at any given time, these would be bad odds. Of course, offices are not randomly distributed—rich, attractive, well-connected citizens have much better odds than others. I might decide to run for office, but politicians are not cowering at the possibility, and it is not keeping them in line.

there is a continuum between merely winning and having a mandate, the marginal impact of an individual vote is vanishingly small.

[14] Steven E. Landsburg, "Don't Vote. It Makes More Sense to Play the Lottery," *Slate* (September 29, 2004): http://www.slate.com/id/2107240/.

[15] This calculation uses the formulae from Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky, *Democracy and Decision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56–57, 119; and Loren Lomasky and Geoffrey Brennan, "Is There a Duty to Vote?" *Social Philosophy and Policy* 17 (2000): 62–82, at p. 65. See also Jason Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), chap. 1.

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A weaker version of the Outcomes Argument might claim that the political liberties are necessary not to help me get preferred political outcomes, but to prevent me from being dominated by others. The worry is that unequal political liberties expose citizens to domination, and we can protect citizens from domination only by imbuing them each with strong political liberties.

There is a grain of truth to this argument. If we deprive all Snuvs of the right to vote and run for office, then this will help facilitate others in exploiting, dominating, and oppressing the Snuvs. However, this does not show that it is valuable for any individual Snuv to possess the political liberties. Instead, it shows that it is valuable to each Snuv that *enough* Snuvs possess the political liberties. An individual Snuv should be nearly indifferent between situations A and B:

A. All Snuvs *except her* have the political liberties.
B. All Snuvs have the political liberties.

If A is not enough to stop the individual Snuv from being dominated, then neither is B.[16]

In the end, it is just not true that I need the political liberties to prevent others from dominating and exploiting me. What prevents me from being dominated is *other* citizens' restraint. If they decide to act badly, my rights to vote or run for office cannot stop them. The moral majority stops the unjust minority, the courts stop them, or they stop themselves. Yet if tomorrow my country decides to dominate me, my political liberties provide me no more protection than a bucket provides against a flood.[17]

V. Shaping the Social World

Thomas Christiano argues that the political liberties can serve each person's fundamental interest "in making the world a home for [herself]."[18] One is "at home in the world" when "one is able to make sense of the world one lives in and have a sense of how one fits in with it and is connected with it."[19] People have an interest in seeing the world correspond to their view of what's right and good. And, to some degree, they want the world to be a product of their own making. They do not just

[16] One might try to argue that having the right to vote is, by the very definition of domination, a necessary condition for being nondominated. However, this seems to render domination so defined of no obvious value.

[17] One might try to argue that a citizen is dominated if and only if she lacks the vote. On this view, for a person to have a right to vote, automatically means she is not dominated, regardless of what her country does to her. This seems too implausible to merit further discussion.

[18] Thomas Christiano, "Debate: Estlund on Democratic Authority," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17 (2009): 228–40, at p. 238.

[19] Thomas Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 65.

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want the world to *conform* to their judgments (perhaps by coincidence), but to *be responsive* to their judgments.

Reasoning like this often leads to versions of what I will call the *Social Construction Argument*:

1. (In general, with some exceptions,) each person has a fundamental interest in living in a world in which she can feel at home.
2. In order to serve this interest, each person needs her world to be adequately responsive to her judgments, and she needs to take an adequate part in the process of social construction.
3. In order to make the world adequately responsive to her judgments and to take an adequate part in the process of social construction, each person needs to possess the political liberties and be able to exercise them with others as equals.
4. Therefore, each person needs to possess the political liberties and be able to exercise them with others as equals.[20]

I do not mean to suggest that the Social Construction Argument is equivalent to Christiano's own argument on behalf of democracy or of the value of the political liberties.[21] (It is a strand of his argument, but his argument has other strands as well, including strands of other arguments I consider below.) Instead, I present the Social Construction Argument here because it captures one reason both philosophers and laypeople tend to think that the political liberties are valuable.

Premise 3 claims that I need the political liberties in order to take part in the process of social construction and to make the world adequately responsive to my interests. The Social Construction Argument is meant to be distinct from the Outcomes Argument. We should not interpret it as claiming that an individual's right to vote is instrumentally valuable because it has a significant expected utility in terms of its propensity to produce favored political outcomes. As we saw above, this claim is false.

Thus, a more plausible interpretation of premise 3 of the Social Construction Argument might say that when I have the right to vote and run for office, I thereby acquire the power to *help cause* the government to be responsive to my interests. I cannot cause the government to be respon-

[20] See Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality*, 61–63, 101, 115, 154, and passim.

[21] Christiano's argument is more complicated. In a nutshell, he holds that justice requires that everyone be treated as an equal and have her interests advanced equally by society. Everyone has three fundamental interests, including an interest in being at home in the world. In order for people to be sure that their interests are being advanced equally, justice must not merely be done, but must be seen to be done. And in light of the various cognitive biases, self-serving biases, and cognitive weaknesses we all have, the only way for justice to be seen to be done is if everyone is given equal political power. This is an argument for why democracy is justified, but it also contains subarguments that purport to show that for each individual, her political liberties are valuable to her. My discussion here of the Social Construction and Status Arguments makes trouble for Christiano.

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sive all by myself, but by acting in concert with others, I can still be *part of the cause* of the government being responsive to my interests. If my favored political outcomes occur, I can say to myself, "I helped make that happen."[22] This might make me more at home in the world.

One problem with this claim, though, is that it relies upon controversial views about causation. Suppose that ten of us throw rocks at a window, and our ten rocks simultaneously hit and break the window. Did I cause the window to break? Did you? Did the ten of us collectively cause it to break, while none of us as individuals caused it to break? Metaphysicians continue to debate these questions.[23] The answers are not clear. We do not want the question of whether the political liberties are valuable to depend on a difficult debate in the metaphysics of causation.[24]

There is another plausible interpretation of premise 3, which relies upon less controversial metaphysics. Premise 3 can be interpreted as claiming that by having the right to vote and run for office, I can thereby *participate* in producing preferred outcomes. This interpretation makes a weaker metaphysical claim—even if I do not cause the window to break, or a candidate to be elected, at least I participate in the collective activities of breaking the window or electing the candidate.[25]

Like the Civic Humanist Argument, the Social Construction Argument might explain why some citizens could find their political liberties valuable. A person might *enjoy* voting, or *enjoy* taking part in democratic processes. If one enjoys these enough, then even once opportunity costs are taken into account, it can be worthwhile to vote or run for office. If so, then having the political liberties can be valuable. On this view, to vote is much like deciding to "do the wave" at a sports game. The wave will happen with or without one's own participation, but it can be enjoyable to participate.

However, this does not yet show that the political liberties are particularly valuable. A person need not vote, or have the right to vote or run for public office, in order to help cause or participate in producing an electoral outcome.[26] Voting is not the only, or even the most effective

[22] Richard Tuck, *Free Riding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 30–98, makes a sophisticated argument on behalf of this claim.

[23] For a good overview of these issues, see Jonathan Schaffer, "The Metaphysics of Causation," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-metaphysics/.

[24] For a defense of the claim that all participants and even eligible nonparticipants are causally responsible for electoral outcomes, see Alvin Goldman, "Why Citizens Should Vote: A Causal Responsibility Approach," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 2 (1999): 201–17.

[25] In Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting,* chaps. 3–5, and Jason Brennan, "Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 4 (2009): 535–49, I argue that certain citizens should not vote because they would be participating in collectively harmful or needlessly risky activities. My argument does not require the stronger claim that voters can be said to cause outcomes.

[26] In Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting,* chap. 2, I argue that a person can help to produce good political outcomes even if she does not participate in politics.

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means of helping to cause or participate in the production of preferred political outcomes. One can donate money to a campaign, volunteer, write letters or books, tweet on Twitter, blog, make posters, go door to door, and so on. One can try to change people's general political beliefs by changing school curricula. All of these activities can be more interesting, engaging, and rewarding ways of participating in the political process than voting or running for office, and they do not require the political liberties. So, even if a person had a fetish for helping to cause or participate in the production of political outcomes, the political liberties might not be particularly valuable for that person. To infer that if someone wants to participate in producing political outcomes, then the political liberties must be valuable to her, is sort of like inferring that if someone likes fast food, she thereby likes Taco Bell.

In fact, if someone wants to participate in the process of social construction, she need not participate in politics at all.[27] In a liberal society, nearly all citizens participate in the process of social construction, of creating and maintaining a society together, but not all do it through politics. Consider artists, entrepreneurs, small-business owners, venture capitalists, teachers, physicians, intellectuals, stock traders, stay-at-home parents, working parents, chefs, janitors, grocery clerks, and others. Each of these kinds of people in one way or another contributes to creating, shaping, and maintaining a worthwhile society. Through their different kinds of work, these individuals engage in the process of social construction. They help make the social world what it is. If you are an Apple employee, you can look for white earbuds in a crowd to see evidence of how you helped to shape the world. One's right to work helps one engage in the process of social construction at least as well as one's right to vote. By sacking groceries, fixing cars, or teaching high school courses, a citizen helps to influence the character of her society, at least as much as she does through voting. In our roles as consumers and producers—even if we are very poor—we still have much more power to shape our shared social world than we do as voters or as potential political candidates.

If someone wants to participate in the process of social construction, therefore, in order to help her feel at home in the world, the political liberties are dispensable. There are other, much better outlets for participation.

Not only are other outlets better, but unless a person has a strong taste for exercising the political liberties, then exercising the political liberties is not even a very good way to engage in the process of social construction. To infer that if someone wants to participate in the process of social construction, then the political liberties must be valuable to her, is sort of like inferring that if automobiles are valuable, then the Ford Edsel is valuable.

[27] Here I summarize an argument made in Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting*, chap. 2.

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Politics provides a weak outlet for social construction in part because there are no niches. Democratic political decisions apply to all equally, and if one dislikes the outcomes, there is usually no escape. In trying to explain why the political liberties are valuable, Christiano (and Walzer, whom he cites[28]) use the metaphor of "being at home." The political liberties are supposed to help us feel at home. But this is misleading. Our homes are niches. Most of us are at home in our homes because we may unilaterally shape our homes to reflect our preferences. Our homes are governed by principles we endorse. We do not have to deliberate in public and justify our furniture arrangements to others in society. Many of us can shape our work environments to a significant extent as well, at the very least by choosing where we work. And even if we do not feel completely at home in society, we can at least usually find niches within society where we do feel at home. But in politics, there are no real niches. I find the formulaic women's movies on the Lifetime Channel bland and vapid, so I watch something else. I find marijuana criminalization and farm subsidies stupid and unjust, but there is no niche to accommodate me (or it is prohibitively expensive for me to relocate to that niche).

Politics provides a weak outlet for social construction in part because individual citizens are nearly powerless. They have so little power that they are faced with a choice: A) conform to the majority's position, and thus "help to produce favored outcomes," or B) go against the majority's position, in which case the voter has at best helped to signal dissent from the majority's position. (I discuss the expressive power of the political liberties below.) In light of this powerlessness, it is difficult to take seriously the claim that engaging in politics is a valuable way of participating in social construction.

If you vote with the majority, then you participate in producing the electoral outcome. But the empowerment offered by voting is a sham. Consider this metaphor: Suppose you are swimming at the beach. A large wave heads your way. You can choose to stand your ground, or you can swim with it, but you cannot push it back. If you decide to ride with the wave, you might be said to participate in the wave, and you might even *help cause* some of that water to reach the shore. But to think of any of this as sharing control is self-delusional.[29] If you feel at home in the water, it is because you accommodated yourself to the water, not because the water accommodated itself to you.

Also, even if we grant that voters for the winning candidate count as helping to cause that candidate's election, voters for losing candidates do

[28] Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality,* 61. Christiano cites Michael Walzer, "Interpretation and Social Criticism," *Tanner Lectures on Human Values VIII* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 14.

[29] Someone might object to this metaphor by saying that in a democracy, we the people are the ocean. Each of us is an equally efficacious water molecule. Perhaps. But waves go through this ocean, and each molecule is powerless against the waves.

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not even get this benefit. For losers, the right to vote is at best an opportunity to help cause a favored candidate to win in the future. Persistent minorities—people whose favored candidate or position loses year after year—lack even this opportunity. To get a chance to help cause a candidate to win, you need to accommodate yourself to what other voters favor. In the United States, individual voters can choose to ride the Democrat or Republican wave. If they dislike both parties, they cannot do much to change what is in the ocean.

The Social Construction Argument claims that people need to feel at home in the world. To achieve this, they need the world to be responsive to their interests and they need to take part in the process of social construction. The argument then claims that the right to vote and run for office are instrumental to meeting these needs. In response, I have argued that the political liberties are not particularly good instruments for meeting these needs, and that these needs are better met through other means. The Social Construction Argument represents the political liberties as tickets to the social construction game, but the political liberties are only tickets for the nosebleed seats.

VI. Autonomy

Another argument, closely related to the Social Construction Argument, is the *Autonomy Argument*:

1. It is valuable for each person to be autonomous and self-directed, and to live by rules of her own making.
2. In order for each person living in a shared political environment to be autonomous and self-directed, and to live by rules of her own making, she needs to possess the political liberties and make use of them.
3. Therefore, each person living in a shared political environment needs to possess the political liberties and make use of them.[30]

This argument maintains that the political liberties are instrumental to, or perhaps even constitutive of, maintaining one's autonomy. If autonomy is valuable, then so are the political liberties. This argument suffers from some of the same flaws as the Social Construction Argument, but it has other distinct problems as well.

[30] Versions of this argument can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings,* ed. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Carol Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economics, and Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 45–85. Gould argues that democracy is necessary for the good of autonomous self-government, and then argues that citizens are entitled to democracy.

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If the Autonomy Argument is intended to show that a person needs the political liberties in order to be autonomous and self-directed over her own mind, it is clearly unsound. A person who lacks these rights might still be a self-controlled, self-legislating person, just as a person who has them might be slavish and blindly deferential.

If there is a connection between voting and autonomy, it must be something like this: By voting, a person is in part the author of the laws. If she abstains, then she has no partial authorship over the laws, and thus the laws are in some way imposed upon her.

According to this argument, voting confers autonomy on you only if your side wins. However, even then the political liberties do not confer any significant autonomy. The Autonomy Argument appears to overstate the degree of autonomy that the rights to vote and run for office confer.

I have made quite a few autonomous decisions in my life. I have made autonomous decisions over petty things: what to wear each day, what to eat, what color toothbrush to have, what to watch on television. I have made autonomous decisions over important things: what to write about for my dissertation, where to go to college and graduate school, which job offers I would accept. I have made autonomous decisions over momentous things: whom to marry, whether to have a child, what to choose for a career.

Suppose these choices had been subject to democratic decision-making. We would regard that as taking the choice away from me and giving it to the democratic body. Even if I had an equal vote in this body, it would be a severe loss of autonomy. Even if the democratic body did not just vote, but actively deliberated over the best choices (and listened to me give my reasons), having it make the decisions would mean a severe loss of personal autonomy for me.

It is not just that I have more autonomy when I make decisions alone as opposed to when a democratic assembly (of which I am a member) makes the decisions. Rather, when a democratic assembly (of which I am a member) makes the decisions, I do not have much autonomy at all.

Robert Nozick illustrates this point with a story called the "Tale of the Slave." Nozick describes the changing conditions under which a slave lives, and asks his readers to point out when the slave stops being a slave. Here is how the story goes. Let us say you are the slave. At first, you live under a cruel master, who beats you arbitrarily. Then the master posts a set of rules and only punishes you when you violate the rules. The master then starts allocating resources among all of his slaves on kindly grounds, considering their needs, merit, and so on. The master then decides to allow the slaves to spend four days doing whatever they please and only requires them to work three days on his manor. The master then decides to allow the slaves to live in the city or wherever else they like, provided they send the master three-sevenths of their income. The master also continues to regulate many of their activities and can call them back to the

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manor for defense. The master decides to allow his ten thousand slaves—other than you—to make decisions among themselves about how to regulate their behavior and how much of their income they must send the master. You are bound by their decision, but cannot vote or deliberate.

When the master dies, he leaves all of his slaves, including you, to each other as a collective body, except for you. That is, his ten thousand other slaves collectively own everyone, including you, but you own no one. The other ten thousand slaves decide to allow you to advise them about what rules they should pass. These rules govern both their behavior and yours. Eventually, as a reward for your service, they allow you to vote whenever they are evenly divided—five thousand to five thousand—over what to do. You cast a ballot in an envelope, which they agree to open whenever they are split. Finally, since they have never been evenly split, they just include your vote with theirs all the time.

At the end of the story, many readers think that the slave never stopped being a slave. This is disturbing because by the end of the story, the situation very much resembles modern democracy. One thing we should learn from Nozick's story is that being a member of a rule-making body, especially a large one, does not give one much control. Each slave in the tale of the slave can legitimately claim that *everyone else makes all the decisions* and that *the decisions the body makes would have occurred without her input*. Even when democratic outcomes result from the equal input of all, there can be a feeling of an utter lack of power. Our voices and votes are lost.

In parallel: I went to Mardi Gras one year. At night, the streets were so congested that I could lift my feet and be carried along by the crowd. It took serious effort to move against the current. Everyone in the crowd had the same predicament. We were all equals. Our individual movements equally decided the collective movement of the crowd. Yet, we were each powerless.[31]

One further point about autonomy: We cannot control or have a say over everything that happens in our lives, so we have to choose where we make a stand, where we think it is important to be authentic. Politics is one place to make a stand, but it is not the only or obviously best place.

Consider an analogy. Chris was a punk-rock kid who rode the bus with me in ninth grade. One day Chris complained about my manner of dress: "You wear the Gap just like everyone else. You don't try to be original or true to yourself." Chris, in contrast, had chosen to conform to the punk-rock subculture. I responded with something like this, "I don't care that much about how I dress. So, I go along with how others dress. It's not that important to me, and how they do it is good enough." (In contrast, it was very important to Chris to dress a certain way.) In this case, it is implau-

[31] Perhaps people who lived their whole lives this way would develop false consciousness and begin to regard the situation as empowering and free.

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sible to say that I was inauthentic or lacked self-control because I deferred to the crowd on how to dress. Sometimes this deference is a way of being authentic, or as authentic as it is reasonable to be, because deferring prevents one from wasting time on unimportant things.

There is no obvious reason why politics cannot be like that. A self-controlled, authentic, autonomous individual might defer to others on politics because she recognizes that others will produce good enough outcomes, and within that range of likely outcomes, the outcomes just are not that important to her. Or, she might defer because she accepts that she cannot take control over everything, and she finds more important places to make her stand.

In summary, the Autonomy Argument fails for many of the same reasons the Outcomes and Social Construction Arguments failed. To succeed, the Autonomy Argument would need citizens to have much more power than they in fact have. And one can develop autonomy and have satisfactory levels of self-control regardless of whether one possesses the political liberties.

VII. Education and Enlightenment

If someone wishes to show that the political liberties are valuable, she will need to produce an argument compatible with the point that individual citizens have vanishingly little power over the political process. One such argument, the *Education Argument,* seems promising:

1. Civic and political activity requires citizens to take a broad view of others' interests, and to search for ways to promote the common good. This requires long-term thinking, and engagement with moral, philosophical, and social scientific issues.
2. If civic and political activity requires long-term thinking, and engagement with moral, philosophical, and social scientific issues, then civic and political activity serve a valuable educative function.
3. The political liberties are needed to engage in civic and political activity.
4. Therefore, the political liberties serve a valuable educative function.

Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill advanced versions of the Education Argument.[32] Many contemporary political theorists, such as Richard Dagger, have advanced this argument as well.[33] The Education Argument holds that the political liberties are valuable because exercising these liberties tends to be enlightening.

[32] See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 243–4 and John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays "On Liberty," "Representative Government," and "The Subjection of Women,"* ed. Richard Wollheim (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 196–7.

[33] Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 102–4.

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On the one hand, if premise 1 is interpreted as a *descriptive* claim, it is plainly false. You can vote or run for office despite being narrow-minded, ignorant, and unenlightened. On the other hand, if premise 1 is interpreted as a *normative* claim, then this argument does not show that exercising the political liberties in fact tends to educate and enlighten citizens. At best, it would only show that the political liberties *could* do so if citizens exercise their liberties in the right way. Premise 1 is best replaced with this alternative:

> 1*: Citizens who make use of their political liberties will tend to take a broad view of others' interests, to search for ways to promote the common good, to engage in long-term thinking, and to engage with moral, philosophical, and scientific issues.

Still, even with Premise 1*, this new argument is problematic.

Premise 3 is false. To engage in civic and political activities, one does not need to have the right to vote or run for office. One can debate politics with others, organize campaigns, donate to causes, write letters, and so on, even if one lacks the political liberties. Instead, if citizens are enlightened, this results from deliberating, reading, debating, watching others deliberate, seeking evidence, and the like. Citizens can get all of these benefits without voting or running for office, and without having the right to vote or run for office.

Also, even if it were true that exercising the political liberties tends to enlighten citizens, that would not show that the political liberties are uniquely or particularly valuable means to achieving enlightenment. There are other activities that tend to be enlightening. And perhaps these other activities do a superior job in enlightening citizens. In fact, even if participating in politics tends to educate and enlighten citizens, it is not as if what enlightens them are voting and running for office.

The Education Argument, therefore, needs to be supplemented with the premise that citizens will tend not to deliberate, read, debate, etc., unless they have the political liberties. This is an empirical claim. Perhaps it is true, but anyone asserting it requires supporting empirical evidence. (To my knowledge, no one has any such evidence.)

Let us take a closer look at Premise 1*. Does engaging in politics really tend to educate and enlighten citizens? On the contrary, politics teaches enlightenment in much the same way that fraternity parties teach temperance. While politics provides an opportunity for enlightenment, it is more likely to stultify than enlighten.

People tend to be on some of their worst epistemic behavior when participating in politics. They display high levels of epistemic irrationality when discussing or participating in politics. In part, this is because our brains were designed more for winning arguments and forming coalitions than seeking truth. As psychologist Jonathan Haidt says,

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> . . . reasoning was not designed to pursue the truth. Reasoning was designed by evolution to help us win arguments. That's why [Mercier and Sperber] call [their theory of why reasoning developed] The Argumentative Theory of Reasoning. So, as they put it . . . "The evidence reviewed here shows not only that reasoning falls quite short of reliably delivering rational beliefs and rational decisions. It may even be, in a variety of cases, detrimental to rationality. Reasoning can lead to poor outcomes, not because humans are bad at it, but because they systematically strive for arguments that justify their beliefs or their actions. This explains the confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and reason-based choice, among other things."[34]

Confirmation bias is the thesis that we tend to pay strong attention to and accept evidence in favor of beliefs we already hold, and tend to ignore, reject, or be bored by evidence against beliefs we hold. Motivated reasoning is the thesis that we have preferences over beliefs and that we tend to believe what we prefer to be true. For example, I might prefer to think I am smart, I might prefer to think Democrats are good and Republicans are evil, or I might prefer to think God created the earth six thousand years ago. Motivated reasoning occurs when the brain tries to arrive at beliefs that maximize good feelings and minimize bad feelings. "Reason-based choice" refers to the phenomenon of people confabulating or inventing reasons for their decisions when they in fact had no basis for decision.

Exercising the political liberties could be a way of making people more rational, self-directed, and deliberative, if only human beings were not the way they are. Actual human beings are wired not to seek truth and justice but to seek consensus. They are shackled by social pressure. They are overly deferential to authority. They cower before uniform opinion. They are swayed not so much by reason but by a desire to belong, by emotional appeal, and by sex appeal. We evolved as social primates who depended on tight in-group cooperative behavior. Unfortunately, this leaves us with a deep bent toward tribalism and conformity. Too much and too frequent democracy threatens to rob many of us of our autonomy and rationality.[35] Politics threatens to unenlighten at least as much as it promises to enlighten us.

Economist Bryan Caplan notes that average citizens have systematically different beliefs about basic economics than trained economists. (Note that laypeople tend to hold their economic views just as strongly, in fact, more strongly, than economists.) Even once we correct for possible demographic biases (since economists tend to be male, white, and upper-

[34] Jonathan Haidt, "The New Science of Morality," *Edge,* http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/morality10/morality.haidt.html. Haidt is summarizing research (which he endorses) by Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber.

[35] See David Schmidtz and Jason Brennan, *A Brief History of Liberty* (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 208–33, for empirical support of these claims.

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middle class), economists and laypeople still disagree about textbook economics.[36] According to Caplan, compared to economists, laypeople exhibit four basic biases: an antiforeign bias, an antimarket bias, a pessimistic bias, and a make-work bias. That is, laypeople underestimate the value of trading with foreigners, underestimate the efficacy of markets, underestimate how good the future will be and overestimate how good the past was, and underestimate the value of labor-saving inventions and schemes. Now, since the available evidence strongly favors textbook economics, Caplan contends that average citizens most likely have systematically false beliefs about the economy and how it functions.[37]

Caplan claims that people are rationally irrational about politics. Rational irrationality is the thesis that it can be *instrumentally* rational to be *epistemically* irrational. That is, in the sphere of politics, it is not in most people's interest to collect and assess evidence properly, but instead to indulge in whatever beliefs they find flattering or emotionally appealing. If, despite the honking horns, you believe the street you are crossing is clear, you die. But if, despite overwhelming evidence that free trade is good and protectionism is bad, you believe protectionism is good and vote accordingly, nothing happens. So, if advocating trade restrictions helps to serve one's interests—such as feeling patriotic, forming in-groups and out-groups, sublimating racist attitudes, pretending to have solidarity with union workers or the poor—then a person will tend to endorse trade restrictions. For any given voter, the expected cost of maintaining her epistemic rationality in the sphere of politics is greater than the expected benefit.

The existence of rational irrationality is supported by many independent psychological studies. (Many studies on motivated reasoning are also studies in rational irrationality.) For an illustration, I will here recount one of psychologist Drew Westen's experiments on motivated reasoning.[38] Westen's subjects were loyal Republicans and Democrats. Subjects were shown a statement by a celebrity, followed by information potentially making the celebrity seem hypocritical. Then, subjects were presented with an "exculpatory statement." (A test run had a quote by Walter Cronkite saying he would never do TV work again after retiring, followed by footage showing he did work again after retiring, followed by an explanation saying it was a special favor.) In the experiment, the celeb-

[36] By issuing surveys which ask citizens both about their demographics and about their opinions on economics, we can determine using regressions how demographic factors correlate with economic beliefs.

[37] See Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[38] Drew Westen, Pavel S. Blagov, Keith Harenski, Clint Kilts, and Stephan Hamann, "The Neural Basis of Motivated Reasoning: An fMRI Study of Emotional Constraints on Political Judgment in the U.S. Presidential Election of 2004," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 18 (2007): 1947–58; Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: How We Make Up Our Minds without Using Our Heads* (New York: Perseus Books, 2008).

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rities were identifiable as Republicans or Democrats. Democrat subjects strongly agreed that the famous Republicans contradicted themselves but only weakly agreed that the Democrats contradicted themselves. Republican subjects likewise readily accepted exculpatory statements from their favored party, but not the other party. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) showed that subjects' pleasure centers were activated when condemning members of the other party, and activated again when subjects denied evidence against members of their own party.

Political scientist Diana Mutz's research provides evidence that politics tends to be stultifying or, at least, that the people who tend to make the most use of their political liberties tend also to be unenlightened. Following Mutz, let us define a "deliberative citizen" as a citizen who has frequent crosscutting political discussion, who can intelligently articulate arguments both on behalf of her own views and on behalf of contrary views, and who has high levels of objective political knowledge. Let us define a "participatory citizen" as a citizen who engages heavily with politics by voting, running for office, participating in political campaigns, joining causes, engaging in activism, and the like. Mutz's work shows that deliberation and participation do not come together. Deliberative citizens do not participate much, and participatory citizens do not deliberate much. The people who are most active in politics tend to be (in my words, not Mutz's) cartoon ideologues.[39] The people who are most careful in formulating their own political views and who spend the most time considering contrary views tend not to participate in politics.

Mutz's research indicates that active, participatory citizens tend not to engage in much deliberation and tend not to have much crosscutting political discussion.[40] Instead, they seek out and interact only with others with whom they already agree. When asked why other people hold contrary points of view, participatory citizens tend to respond that others must be stupid or corrupt. Participatory citizens are often unable to give charitable explanations of why people might hold contrary views. (This is worrisome, I would add, because people who tend to demonize all contrary views tend to be unjustified in their own views.) In contrast, citizens who exhibit high degrees of the deliberative virtues are able to give charitable accounts of contrary viewpoints.

In summary, the Education Argument seems unsound. If the Education Argument simply asserts that politics *can* serve an educational function,

[39] See Diana Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 128.

[40] Ibid., 30. The more people join voluntary associations, the less they engage in crosscutting discussions. What demographic factors best predict that one will engage in crosscutting political discussion? Apparently, being nonwhite, poor, and uneducated. The reason for this is that white, rich, educated people have more control over the kinds of interactions they have with others. People generally do not enjoy having crosscutting political discussions. They enjoy agreement. So those with the most control over their lives choose not to engage in crosscutting discussions. See ibid., 27, 31, and 46–47.

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well, sure, it *can*. A lot of things—joining a street gang, taking heroin, dropping out of high school—*can* serve an educational function and help one achieve enlightenment. But if the Education Argument wants to assert that politics is *likely* to serve this function, our evidence points against this. An *Inverse* Education Argument seems more sound: the political liberties are bad because exercising them tends to be stultifying. However, this might be too strong. Some of the work mentioned above supports this claim, but some of it just shows that politically engaged citizens tend not to be enlightened. Whether that is because politics makes them less enlightened or because enlightened people choose not to engage in politics is not clear. In either case, though, the evidence on behalf of Premise 1* is weak, and so the Education Argument fails.

VIII. Self-Expression

Another argument holds that the political liberties are important means of self-expression. Let us call this the *Expression Argument:*

1. Generally, it is valuable to each citizen for that citizen to be able to express her opinions about what her country is doing, what values should be promoted, what changes should be made, and so on.
2. The political liberties are valuable means for a citizen to express her opinion on these matters.
3. Therefore, generally, the political liberties are valuable to each citizen.

The Expression Argument suffers from many of the same flaws as the other arguments we have considered. First, exercising the political liberties is not a very good way to express oneself, and second, there are much better alternatives.[41]

The political liberties are ineffective ways to communicate our attitudes to others. A vote is not an expressive instrument. It is like a piano with only four keys and which breaks after playing one note. (We might add that the strings tend to be out-of-tune and rusty.) Suppose that in the last election, I voted for a certain candidate, regarding him as the lesser of two warmongering, paternalistic, exploitative, plutocratic evils. Suppose a colleague voted for that same candidate, regarding him as a truly positive

[41] I am not here challenging the expressive theory of voting. The expressive theory of voting is a *descriptive* theory, which claims that many citizens vote in order to express attitudes. The expressive theory claims (roughly) that citizens know that their votes will not change the outcome of an election, and so they vote to express solidarity with certain causes. One person votes Democrat to express solidarity with the poor, while another votes Republican to express concern for personal responsibility. See Geoffrey Brennan and James Buchanan, "Voter Choice," *American Behavioral Scientist* 28, no. 2 (1984): 185–201; Brennan and Lomasky, "Is There a Duty to Vote?"; Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin, *Democratic Devices and Desires* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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change he could believe in. Suppose someone else voted for that same candidate because he wanted to fit in with his friends. Suppose a fourth person cynically voted for that candidate because he wanted to hasten his country's demise. What did any of our votes express to others? Just by knowing for whom someone voted, you cannot infer what someone meant to express.

Or, suppose I run for office. What does that communicate? I might claim that I want to change the world for the better, but every politician says that. Regardless of my communicative intentions, running for office tends to communicate that I am power- and status hungry.

Exercising the political liberties is ineffective, then, if we want to communicate with others. Still, sometimes we just want to express our attitudes to ourselves, rather than to others. In private, I might tear up photos of a recent ex-girlfriend. Here, the point is to express finality to myself, and to perform a closing ritual to help me move on. No doubt people can use their votes this way. The cynical voter can express his cynicism to himself by voting for the worst candidate. So, while the political liberties have little value in expressing our attitudes to others, they have some value in expressing our attitudes to ourselves.

Still, we have many other better outlets for self-expression. Even if someone wants to communicate his political attitudes to himself, he can usually best do so without exercising the political liberties. For example, the cynical citizen could donate money to the worst candidate, write a poem, or build and burn an effigy. And if someone wants to communicate with others, then writing letters, joining online forums, creating websites, making YouTube videos, and the like, are much more effective means of communicating than voting or running for office.

IX. Conclusion

I have examined a number of arguments in favor of the view that the political liberties generally are of high value to the people who hold them. These arguments have been found wanting. Unless there is some further argument in favor of the political liberties, we can conclude that they probably are not of much value to most people who hold them. The civil and economic liberties are likely to be more valuable to most people than their political liberties.

Again, I am not saying that people *do* value their political liberties less than these other liberties, nor am I claiming that they in fact regard their political liberties as having little value. On the contrary, I suspect most people think their political liberties are quite valuable. Instead, in saying that the political liberties are not of much value, I am saying that they do not deserve to be valued highly.

However, I am arguing for only a general trend. Some people, given their needs, ends, abilities, and circumstances, will have grounds to value

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their political liberties highly. Since I am arguing for a general trend, to rebut my thesis, it will not be enough to show the political liberties are sometimes of high value to some people, but instead that they are generally of high value to most people.

Again, all of this leaves open whether the political liberties are valuable in the aggregate, or whether anyone is entitled to the political liberties. It might be that democracy is good and just, even if individuals do not usually have grounds for holding that their political liberties are valuable. I take no stands on these issues here.

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