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DID MOST BRITS FAIL IN THEIR CIVIC DUTIES IN THE EU REFERENDUM?

Christina Easton

What sorts of reasons should citizens have in mind when they cast votes? Arguments from both sides of the EU referendum debate are used here to raise questions about what our motivations should be when voting. The article introduces John Rawls's requirement to give public reasons that are acceptable to all reasonable people.

Seventy-two per cent of eligible Brits turned out to vote in the EU referendum. In the sense that a good majority of Brits wanted to 'have their say', this is a success for democracy. Many see voting as a *civic duty*, that is, something that we are morally obliged to do as part of our role as citizens. But is simply casting a vote enough to have successfully performed one's civic duty? This article discusses one further condition that we might wish to add: that the vote cast must be based on the *right sort of reasons.* But what are the 'right sort' of reasons?

To help us decide, we'll look at some examples of different reasons that motivated Brits when casting votes in the referendum. All the examples in the table were reasons I personally heard before or after the referendum, although the names have been changed.

It goes without saying that the arguments in the table are controversial (some far more so than others). But for the purposes of this article, we're not interested in evaluating the success of these reasons taken as individual arguments for REMAIN or LEAVE. Rather, we are interested in evaluating whether the reasons offered are the right *type* of reason. Taking the statements above as reasons for why these people voted as they did, can we say that some of

doi:10.1017/S1477175616000300 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2017
Think 45, Vol. 16 (Spring 2017)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

	We should REMAIN because . . .	***We should LEAVE because*** . . .
A	*Stuart*: I want to be able to go on my gap year to France without having to worry about getting a work permit.	*Sylvia*: I won't be able to get more waitressing work if Eastern Europeans keep taking our jobs.
B	*Jenny*: As a Christian, I believe we should live out the Biblical command to 'love thy neighbour'. Voting REMAIN will help show that all people are welcome here.	*Izzy*: Continental Europe has a high divorce rate and too liberal attitudes towards sex and prostitution. Further integration with the EU could negatively influence British sexual mores.
C	*Gordon*: Remaining in the EU is better for the British economy. A strong economy means that everyone (including the worst off) has their basic needs met.	*Imaan*: UK money is being used to help Syrians abroad, when it could be used to fund NHS hospitals and benefit Brits instead.
D	*Chris*: If we are to cope with global issues that threaten humanity, such as climate change, then we need strong formal unions between different countries.	*Richie*: The EU promotes a capitalist economy that neglects the worst off across different countries. Leaving will promote community values that will benefit everyone, especially the worst off.

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these people performed their duty as citizens better than others?

Let's start by looking at the views of Stuart and Sylvia. If we take Stuart and Sylvia's arguments as they have been stated, and in isolation, these are purely *self-regarding* reasons. The motivation for their vote comes from considering only their *own* well-being. Stuart is worried about whether his gap year in France will be interfered with by a LEAVE outcome. For Stuart, this could be of enormous significance. However, his argument will not appeal to the majority of citizens, who have no special interest in Stuart's personal well-being. The same can be said for Sylvia's reason. Although we could develop her reason into a more general claim about the effect of immigrants on the UK job market, here we just have a claim about Sylvia's *own* prospects.

Reasons of the kind given by Stuart and Sylvia ('A-type' reasons) were common in everyday discussion surrounding the referendum, suggesting that many people view it as acceptable to vote based on self-regarding reasons. Indeed, this view might explain why many Brits view voting as a 'private matter'. Revealing what you voted would mean revealing your own personal preferences, and so respect for personal privacy may be seen to require that you keep your voting decision to yourself.

However, there are good reasons to question this view. Sometimes we have to cast aside our personal preferences because we act in a certain role. For example, if Smith is interviewing for a new member of staff and his daughter is one of the applicants, he must act in his role as 'objective recruiter' and put aside his paternal wish for her to succeed. Similarly, one might argue that when we vote, we act *in our role as citizens* and therefore should be voting on what is best for society as a whole, not on what is best for us individually. Since the act of voting is the quintessential act by the citizen of a democratic state, we might argue that good citizens will not vote according to A-type reasons.

That this is our (ideal) expectation of our fellow citizens is borne out through imagining a different referendum.

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Imagine that it is 2006, and the referendum this time is over a proposed law to ban smoking in public places such as pubs. Imagine that you are a smoker, with a particular aversion to the cold and wet. Would you vote against the proposed ban? Some of you may, but others would vote *for* the ban, on the basis of this being better for society as a whole. If the outcome of the referendum was that all the smokers voted against the proposed ban and all the non-smokers voted for the ban, we would surely think that something had gone wrong in the democratic system. We would hope to at least see a mixed bag of motivations, with some non-smokers opposing the ban out of concern for restrictions on liberty, and some smokers opposing the ban out of concern for the harms resulting from passive smoking.

The political philosopher John Rawls would hold a similar disdain for purely self-regarding voting. In his book *Political Liberalism*, Rawls argued that it is the duty of citizens to vote according to *public* reasons. This obligation to vote according to 'public reasons' could be interpreted in a number of different ways. It could be interpreted as a requirement to avoid A-type reasons. On this view, a 'public reason' would simply mean that it is for *the good of the public*.

The reasons provided by Jenny and Izzy (row B) fulfil the requirement of going beyond purely personal preferences. These individuals are thinking of others when they vote, and are voting according to what they believe will be the best outcome for everyone. Jenny believes that the UK should live out the Biblical command to 'love thy neighbour' by welcoming people to Britain. Izzy believes aspects of the ethic of Continental Europe to be immoral. She does not want British citizens to be influenced by this and commit wrongful acts, or be wronged, by the further spread of this ethic. In an important sense, Jenny and Izzy are better doing their duty as citizens than Stuart and Sylvia, for B-type reasons involve them thinking about others rather than just themselves.

However, there is a different sense of 'public reason' according to which B-type reasons fail to be public

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reasons. Jenny's concern to 'love her neighbour' stems from her Christian faith, a faith that is not shared by approximately half of the UK population. As it stands, Jenny's decision is not justifiable to many reasonable Brits who do not accept the authority of the Bible. Izzy's view is motivated by her belief that the liberal sexual ethic that she sees as distinctive of some European countries is morally wrong and harmful. Yet many other Brits view the liberal European sexual ethic as a part of moral progress, liberating people so that they are free to express and enjoy themselves. So, Izzy's vote will not be justifiable to many reasonable British citizens. In the sense that these justifications will not hold for some reasonable citizens, B-type reasons are not public reasons.

It is this second sense of 'public reason' that Rawls had in mind in *Political Liberalism*. Rawls argued that in deciding fundamental political matters, reasons must be 'public' in the sense of *not relying on controversial views that reasonable people disagree on*.[1] In pluralist societies such as ours, there is a great deal of disagreement over what constitutes 'the good life' or 'the right way to live'. This variety is a natural and inevitable outcome of the fact that in liberal societies, people are allowed to think freely about their beliefs. Since the fact of disagreement is a natural outcome of the good of freedom, it is a fact that should be welcomed rather than resisted. Welcoming this difference requires that when we act in ways that are purely political (as when voting), we should act in ways that are acceptable to all reasonable citizens. Rawls believed that citizens have a *moral duty of civility* which requires that they have public reasons supporting the principles and policies that they advocate and vote for.

The reasons in row C are public in the sense that Rawls requires, and so arguably Gordon and Imaan are better fulfilling their duties of civility than Stuart, Sylvia, Jenny or Izzy. Gordon and Imaan appeal to reasons that *all* reasonable Brits, regardless of religious and moral convictions, can accept. Having one's basic needs met is necessary

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175616000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

before you can get on with doing whatever you think is 'the good life', whether this be a life devoted to prayer, a life of high earning in the City, or a life devoted to family. All reasonable people should be concerned about having basic needs met, and so Gordon's argument should appeal to people with a wide range of religious and moral persuasions. In the same way, whether we are Conservative or Labour supporters, Muslims or atheists, hedonists or altruists, health is a concern for all of us, for a minimal level of health is required to pursue our own conceptions of the good.

At this point, you might be wondering why it should matter whether others find our reasons appealing. If we were evaluating the reasons as *arguments to convince others*, then whether our arguments have wide appeal obviously matters. But here we are concerned with motivations for voting in an anonymous vote – so why should we care about what others think of our reasons? And surely we should be voting according to what we see as 'the whole truth', rather than attempting to bracket out our deepest convictions so that our reasons are acceptable to others?

This is the common view, but Rawls does have his reasons for departing from it. In a democracy, political power may be the power of the public, but it is still a *coercive* power, placing restrictions on the free actions of individual citizens of the state. Since political decisions will restrict people's freedom by constraining what they can and cannot do, these decisions should be made on the basis of reasons that all citizens can agree with. If power is to be legitimate (roughly, 'legitimate power' is power that is morally justified, and that places obligations on the subjects of that power), then it must be justified by reference to public reasons. Rawls calls this the 'liberal principle of legitimacy'. Voting is (one) way we exercise our power in democracy and we should vote on the basis of public reasons (in the second sense of 'public'). The outcome and consequences of the EU referendum hold for *all* citizens, regardless of how they voted, and so arguably our reasons when

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voting should have been those that we can justify to all reasonable citizens.

I will leave it to you to think about whether this Rawlsian case is convincing. You might question whether there is anything substantial that can be agreed upon by reasonable citizens. For example, if Gordon were to expand on what he meant by 'basic needs', it might turn out that not all reasonable people agree with him. You might also wonder what counts as 'reasonable', who decides this, and whether we should be concerned that those categorized as 'unreasonable' have their freedom restricted in ways that they cannot accept. But even if we do not accept the Rawlsian case wholesale, there seems to be an important insight in the idea that in a society marked by disagreement, we owe it out of respect for our fellow citizens to try to justify our actions in terms that they can agree on. Otherwise, it simply becomes a matter of those whose values happen to be in a majority winning the day, to the detriment of those holding minority values. Since the tables could easily turn so that we are in the minority, we should want voting to be based on reasons that are independent of controversial values.

Rawls would probably be satisfied that citizens have fulfilled their 'duty of civility' by voting on the basis of C-type reasons in the referendum. But it might be possible to go even further in our 'public reasoning' in deciding how to vote. We could perhaps widen our sphere of concern even further, by thinking of ourselves as *global citizens*. On this view, we should not just think of whether our reasons would appeal to other (reasonable) British citizens, but also to (reasonable) citizens *globally*. By appealing to climate change and global poverty, both Chris and Richie give reasons that would appeal to individuals outside the UK. These are issues that affect everyone's basic interests and do so independently of where people stand on 'the good life'. Perhaps making our voting decision on the basis of D-type reasons would best fulfil our duty as *world* citizens.

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To return to the title of this article – did most Brits fail in their civic duties in their referendum vote? In my experience, the most frequently encountered reasons were A-type. These reasons were not public *in any sense*, let alone based in a concern for what is best for humanity worldwide (where 'what is best' is conceived of without referring to controversial views of the good life). I hope that this was not your experience. Perhaps you remain unconvinced that votes need to be public in any sense at all – but personally, I'm left thinking that most of us may have let each other down.

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Note

[1] Rawls officially restricts his argument to 'constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice', but he does also say that 'it is usually highly desirable to settle political questions by invoking the values of public reason'. So even if Rawls didn't count the referendum as a 'constitutional essential', he would probably still think that we should have voted according to public reasons.

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