WHAT KIND OF VALUE DOES POLITICAL EQUALITY HAVE?

Jason Brennan

Robert J. and Elizabeth Flanagan Family Chair
Economics, Ethics, and Public Policy
McDonough School of Business
Georgetown University
The ETHICS of Voting

Compulsory Voting
For and Against

AGAINST DEMOCRACY

AGÉN AST
JASON BRENNAN
THREE KINDS OF VALUE
BAD GOVERNMENT IS OUR FAULT

• Not just corporations, special interest groups, corrupt, politicians, etc.

• What if the median voter would fail ECON 101?
WHAT ARE CITIZENS LIKE: THE VARIABLES

• How strongly they hold opinions
• How consistent their opinions are
• How much information they have
• How they process information
• How they respond to those with whom they agree
• How much they participate
HOBBITS
HOOLIGANS
VOTERS ARE

1. Nice, but
2. Ignorant, and
3. Irrational

• Voters measure up well in motivation

• But not in cognition
IGNORANCE

• Most Americans cannot identify any congressional candidates from their district

• Right before 2004 election, 70% of Americans did not know that Congress had added prescription drug benefit to Medicare a year earlier.

• Bush II v Gore

• Brexit
HOW KNOWLEDGE AFFECTS POLICY PREFERENCES

• Althaus: the “enlightened public” prefers:
  • Pro-trade, pro-immigration
  • More equality for homosexuals
  • Pro-choice
  • Tax increases to offset deficit
  • Significantly less punitive measures on crime
  • Less hawkish military policy
  • School reform
DOES DEMOCRACY EMPOWER INDIVIDUALS?
THE SYMBOLIC VALUE OF THE EQUAL RIGHT TO VOTE
• “The instinct of worship is still so strong upon us that, having nearly worn out our capacity for treating kings and such kind of persons as sacred, we are ready to invest a majority of our own selves with the same kind of reverence.”
THE RED SCARF STORY
INVIDIAOUS COMPARISONS
SUBJECTING SYMBOLISM TO COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS
DOES DEMOCRACY WORK BECAUSE IT DOESN’T WORK?
Political equality has significant *instrumental* value

- Democracies do a pretty decent job delivering just results, as judged by procedure-independent standards
- But perhaps an alternative political system might do better

- But democracy probably not an end in itself

- Symbolic arguments for democracy, and policy in general, are bad