An Institutional Duty
to Vote: Applying Role Morality in Representative Democracy

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Abstract
Is voting a duty of democratic citizenship? This article advances a new argument for the existence of a duty to vote. It argues that every normative account of electoral representation requires universal turnout to function in line with its own internal normative logic. This generates a special obligation for citizens to vote in electoral representative contexts as a function of the role morality of democratic citizenship. Because voting uniquely authorizes office holding in representative democracies, and because universal turnout contributes powerfully to representation being fair, to be a good citizen of such democracies requires one to vote. Whereas previous arguments for a duty to vote have invoked basic moral principles like fairness or a Samaritan duty of rescue, this account is based on citizens occupying a vital functional role within electoral representative institutions. This institutional duty solves the “specificity problem” of justifying a duty to vote better than competing accounts and also immunizes the duty to objections that there is no duty to vote when there are only bad choices and that there is a no duty to vote but rather duty to vote well. By emphasizing the tight connection between institutions and individual conduct, the role morality approach used here supplies a less abstract and more realistic framework than much

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Is voting a duty of democratic citizenship? If you ask them, democratic citizens tend to think so. Ninety percent of Americans have agreed that voting has been a duty as far back as we have had polling, for more than half a century (Elliott 2017, 660–62). But what might be the basis of such a duty? There has been much recent discussion of this enduring question. Some scholars have shared the popular intuition that voting is a duty and have sought to develop arguments explaining it (Maring 2016; Maskivker 2019; Umbers 2020). Others have gone the other way, seeking to show that voting isn’t a duty, and even that some citizens have a duty not to vote (Brennan 2014; Freiman 2021; Volacu 2020).

In this article, I argue that there is an individual duty to vote grounded in the institutional role of voters in electoral representative democracies. I show that fair electoral representation on virtually any account requires universal and unbiased turnout to function in line with the institutional logic underlying representation. This logic generates a duty to vote via role morality because fulfilling the official function of a democratic citizen within representative institutions requires one to vote. I call the resulting duty an institutional duty to vote because it is directly based on the internal normative logic of representative institutions rather than any external moral duty.

This account seeks to bring the debate on the duty to vote closer to the constitutive realities of democratic politics, particularly the role of institutions in mediating individual actions and the collective nature of political responsibility, and to highlight the unique contribution of voting to functional representative democracies. We see this in the account’s original use of role morality to link individual duty and institutions (rather than moral duties) and its emphasis on the excellence of the political system rather than the individual (in contrast to virtue ethics). The institutional duty to vote also has the advantage that it can definitively answer the specificity problem, or why we must specifically vote rather than contribute to the public some other way. This approach supplies an enriched and more realistic framework for future
work in the ethics of democratic citizenship that allows us to keep institutions and individual ethics in focus simultaneously whereas previous moralist approaches have caused institutions to fade into the background, resulting in a more abstract and counterfactual debate.

The next section outlines recent attempts to establish a duty to vote. The following two sections expound the institutional duty to vote and its distinctive role morality approach. The rest of the article deals with objections and explains advantages of the institutional duty approach.

Recent Arguments for a Duty to Vote

There have been numerous recent contributions to the debate over the duty to vote. Here, I focus on three such accounts of why citizens have a duty to vote and leave aside for the moment views that deny there is such a duty. I aim to use these views to illustrate how the institutional duty to vote differs from these other accounts in not being derived from basic moral duties. It is rather an argument based on role morality and the good functioning of representative institutions.

Julia Maskivker argues that we all have a duty to vote that derives from the fundamental Samaritan duty of rescue. Just as we have a duty to save a drowning child when doing so won’t endanger anything of comparable importance, Maskivker (2019) argues that we also have a duty to vote because voting is a cheap and easy way to benefit millions of fellow citizens in often profound ways. This duty to vote falls into the Lockean category of “duties of time and place,” according to Maskivker (2019, 137–38). Duties of time and place are obligations that inhere to us by dint of our being present at a particular moment in time, in a particular circumstance. Maskivker offers the example of being present when a foreign visitor is mugged and so being obligated to provide the visitor with bus fare to get to their embassy. The obligation falls directly on me, Maskivker argues, because I happened to be in the right place at the right time to offer timely assistance to someone in dire need. This is the fundamental structure of the Samaritan duty to vote. Thus, she concludes, even if someone did a large task for charity the week before, they remain obligated to help in this case because of the unique time and place in which they find themselves.

Maskivker (2019, 137) argues that this logic extends to elections because, from the individual’s perspective, elections are placed in front of us as opportunities to authoritatively affect the conduct of government, rightly assuming that government has enormous power to influence people’s lives for better or worse. It is therefore our obligation to vote so as to contribute to that
influence being for the better. Elections put us in a position akin to the bystander at the mugging—the opportunity to affect a powerful force for good or ill in society is essentially dropped in our lap, and so we must help.

Maskivker’s argument has two important conditions. First, it is conditioned on the existence of democratic institutions in good working order, meaning ones in which the electoral inputs of citizens affect governments’ policies (Maskivker 2019, 132). It must be the case that voting would in fact affect the policies of government that serve as the analogy to the Samaritan’s rescue of the drowning child. “Democratic” institutions that do not respond to voters’ signals would cancel the duty because no rescue would be forthcoming via voting. The second condition is that citizens must be adequately informed, such that the duty is not strictly speaking to vote but rather to vote well. Here, Maskivker emphasizes the complexity and stakes of the voting task and the consequent necessity of being informed enough to complete it well. Voting is not enough for the Samaritan duty to vote; one must vote with the knowledge requisite to identify which of the available options effects the most complete “rescue” of our fellow citizens.

Umbers (2020) offers an argument for a duty to vote on the basis of a fundamental duty of fairness to others who would, if we did not vote, shoulder the burden of voting for us. Umbers’ argument is relatively simple: voting is costly but contributes to the public good of producing democratic governance (more on that in a moment). Those who vote, then, can be seen as shouldering the costs of producing this good, whereas those who don’t vote free ride on voters’ exertions unfairly. It is therefore obligatory for all to vote to avoid the unfairness implicit in nonuniversal turnout.

Of central importance for Umbers’s duty of fairness to vote is what exactly is produced by voters’ efforts. I just said those efforts produce democratic governance, but Umbers is more specific: “political participation of particular social groups produces governmental responsiveness to the legitimate interests of those groups” (original emphasis). It does this by cultivating “a disposition on the part of elected officials to protect and promote” those interests (Umbers 2020, 1309–10). It is essential to be specific in this way regarding what voting produces, because it is the unfairness of enjoying this good that drives the argument. If the good produced by voting was the emotional glow of having acted like a good citizen, there would be no basis for the argument since those who do not vote would not share that glow. It is only if the good is collectively enjoyed—nonexcludable, in the language of policy analysis—that not contributing to its provision could generate Umbers’s unfairness objection.
A third approach to justifying a duty to vote comes from Luke Maring. Maring charts a distinctive course of argument that applies virtue ethics to the ethics of voting. At the center of this approach is the figure of the excellent citizen, one who has all the virtues of good democratic citizenship. The two challenges this approach must meet are (1) explaining why the responsibilities of citizenship include voting and (2) explaining why one would want to be an excellent citizen in the first place.

Maring answers the first challenge in an unconventional way. Instead of appealing to the basic obligation citizens have to promote the common good and connecting the duty to vote to that obligation, he focuses on how excellent citizens respect “the practice of democracy” (Maring 2016, 253). Excellent citizens will respect the practice of democracy, he argues, and voting is part of what it means to respect democracy’s practice. Voting has this status because respect for democracy means respecting it as an ideal of popular rule. Excellent citizens should therefore “give popular rule a place of prominence” in their practical deliberations (Maring 2016, 254). He asserts that the ideal of popular rule, in turn, requires staying moderately informed and casting a ballot. Failing to vote, then, “can express the judgment that popular rule is unimportant” (Maring 2016, 254). Maring’s point is that excellent citizens respect democracy and failing to vote expresses indifference to it. Excellent citizens must therefore vote.

But why would one want to be an excellent citizen in the first place? There are, after all, numerous social roles we are called to fulfill in life—employee, parent, church member, etc. Why should the role of citizen command a share of our limited time and attention, particularly since we do not consent to it, as we do to at least some of these other social roles? Why, in particular, would it be our duty to fulfill this unchosen role? This is the second challenge of Maring’s virtue ethical approach.

Maring’s (2016) answer is that even a role imposed on us without our consent can generate binding expectations (a) when it is not too burdensome and (b) when performance of the role impacts the basic rights or fundamental well-being of others (pp. 247–48). It is the combination of not being too onerous and also being implicated in the fundamental rights or standing of others that makes fulfilling unchosen roles our duty. Not every role will meet these conditions, of course. Being the child of a parent who becomes debilitated could be thought to obligate the child to care for the parent, because the basic well-being of the parent is at stake, but the onerousness of full-time care responsibilities likely renders it supererogatory, especially when alternatives are available. Yet the role of democratic citizen probably does qualify since
the duty of voting is relatively easy and decisively impacts the rights and well-being of other citizens.

Note that although Maring attempts to distance his account from those that link the duty to vote to the general obligation to promote the common good, his account approaches that position insofar as our conduct impacts the fundamental well-being of others. The ultimate justification on his account hinges on the proposition that when we impact the fundamental well-being of others, we must strive to make that impact positive, or at least not detrimental. This obligation recreates indirectly what other accounts posit directly—that citizens have a prosocial duty to aid others. The distinctive addition of Maring’s argument is that this assistance flows through the social roles we occupy, such as citizen, rather than in an unstructured way.

Although each of these views provide unique accounts of why citizens have a duty to vote, all share one key feature. All three are ultimately based on an analogy to a fundamental moral duty. The basic reason we should vote is, respectively, because we are obligated to provide help in emergencies (Maskivker), we are obligated to treat others fairly (Umbers), and we must aid and not harm others in the performance of our social roles (Maring). These basic moral duties are what stand behind and justify the duty to vote. As we shall see in the next section, the institutional duty to vote is not structured in this way. It is instead based on the functional role of the citizen in a representative system and on the basic justifications we have to favor a representative democracy in the first place.

**Role Morality and the Duty to Vote**

The institutional duty to vote begins from a similar starting point as Maring—with the duties of the role of democratic citizen. Maring’s approach marks a major advance because it provides an alternative bridge between institutions and individuals—and their obligations—than what has come before. Theorists like Maskivker and Umbers use moral duties, like that of fairness or rescue, to link institutions to individuals’ obligations. Maring’s approach serves a similar purpose yet does so without invoking basic moral duties.

But whereas Maring moves decisively to virtue ethics and the notion of individual excellence, I turn to role morality and its associated functionalism. Role morality is an approach to ethics that focuses on the special obligations inhering in someone’s occupying a specific social or institutional role (Jeske 2019). So, parents have a host of obligations by dint of being parents that those who are not parents do not share. The same goes for doctors, lawyers,
etc. My concern here is with democratic citizenship as a role, or, as I shall characterize it, as an office (Sabl 2002).

In role morality, people occupy functional roles in social institutions, and those functional roles might be discharged in better or worse ways. Though we could discuss performing one’s role in terms of excellence, as Maring does, this is not the only way. We could alternately think of it in terms of functionality—does one complete the role in a way that comports with one’s functional contribution to the wider practice or organization? In this mode, we are less interested in the virtues one must have than we are with fulfilling one’s function well. The operative question in each case is different. In Maring’s approach, one asks: am I the best <role> that I could be? In role morality as I mean it, one asks: am I doing my part in the practice or organization? The difference recalls a common objection to virtue ethics, which is that it can be myopically egoistic by emphasizing one’s personal excellence. The approach I suggest makes the accomplishment of the cooperative venture the foremost concern instead of personal excellence.

When considered as an office, democratic citizenship highlights the functional role that citizens play in wider democratic institutions. Being a democratic citizen means that one is implicated in democratic decision procedures since democratic regimes by definition incorporate the input of ordinary citizens in authoritative ways. Here, by “implicated” I do not mean Beerbohm’s (2012) sense of complicity for state wrongdoing but rather that citizens are expected to take part in those procedures in some way at particular times. That participation in democratic procedures might take any number of forms—from voting in referenda, to electing representatives, to attending town meetings or other local participatory processes, to serving on randomly selected deliberative bodies like juries or citizen assemblies. The specific arrangement of democratic institutions determines the shape of the office of democratic citizen by including some institutions, excluding others, and concentrating power in some of those institutions rather than others.

Representative democracies characteristically center elections and so emphasize the electoral participation of citizens. What this means is that, in functional terms, representative democracy cannot subsist unless citizens

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1. Seeing citizenship as an office can be usefully contrasted with seeing it as a status (Cohen 2009). As a status, citizenship is associated with a bundle of rights and obligations as well as social standing. Conceiving it as an office by contrast emphasizes its functional role within democratic institutions.
participate in elections as voters. If no one turned out to vote, elections would fail because they would not select leaders, sabotaging representative democracy as a political regime. It is thus a functional necessity of the representative democratic form that citizens vote.

Now, this does not establish that all citizens must vote as a matter of duty. But in the absence of binding assurance mechanisms that there will be enough voters to select leaders, it does create a default expectation that citizens of representative democracies should be willing to vote. Doing so is a basic functional necessity of the office of citizen (qua elector or voter) per the institutional logic of the regime and the role the office plays in that regime. But the regime can still function in the sense that “it will select leaders rather than fail to do so” with even extremely low turnout—at the limit, a single voter is sufficient for elections to select leaders—so it is not established that all citizens are obligated to vote. I intend to press the stronger claim that all citizens have a duty to vote.

To establish the universal obligation, we must bring the notion of excellence back into the mix, albeit in a modified form. Where Maring was concerned with the excellence of the individual citizen, here I consider the excellence of the political system. We should ask the following questions, then, when considering the obligations of the office of citizen: What would it take for this form of democracy to function excellently? What is needed—in terms of institutions and input from citizens—for it to meet its highest ideals or be justified? Using the previous example, we might ask: Would an election where one voter selected the leaders be likely to realize an attractive representative democracy? Or should the aim of electoral institutions be higher than simply selecting leaders—something like fair representation? Democratic theory elaborates visions of democratic excellence by offering explanations of how democratic institutions ought to be structured and how they ought to function. Different democratic theories, whether explicitly or implicitly, all implicate the participatory inputs of citizens in one way or another since these inputs are necessarily a key ingredient in democratic institutions. I am exclusively concerned here with theories of representative democracy due to their hegemony among democratic regimes today.

Before turning to those theories, I must highlight two things: first, how role morality differentiates my approach from those of Maskivker and Umbers, and second, how approaching democratic citizenship as an office provides a theoretical framework for doing institutional design and political ethics. Both Maskivker and Umbers ground the duty to vote on general moral duties. Whereas obligations are special in role morality and derive from the
roles we play in social institutions and the relations these roles put us in with others, general obligations—or as they’re often called, natural duties—apply to all unconditionally (Jeske 2019). For Maskivker, it is the Samaritan duty of rescue; for Umbers, it is a duty of fairness. Both authors might insist that their accounts are in fact conditional—for instance, on standing in certain relations to others through the institutions of electoral democracy. For now, what matters is that any such conditionality is prefatory and secondary to their accounts. The institutional preconditions of their accounts fade into the background as individual responsibility through the lens of morality comes into focus as the paramount concern. For Maskivker, not voting is wrong since it is akin to letting an easily saved child drown; for Umbers, not voting is wrong because it unfairly free rides on the efforts of others. These judgments are what require explanation and justification in their accounts, and this is the primary task they pursue. In so doing, however, the institutional conditionality of their accounts is obscured and the responsibilities for generating a healthy democratic politics are excessively individualized. The institutional duty to vote, by contrast, keeps in the foreground the institutional context and the distributed, collective nature of citizen responsibility for democratic upkeep. It is because of how representation works institutionally and normatively that universal turnout is necessary, as I show in the next section.

Thinking of democratic citizenship as an office also provides a needed theoretical framework that unites institutional design and political ethics. The growing literature on the ethics of democratic citizenship has thus far yielded few general-purpose conceptual tools for addressing its unique problems. Many scholars borrow liberally from moral philosophy, as have previous attempts to ground a duty to vote. That approach brings the individual’s duty into focus while institutions are taken for granted or assumed and so fade into the background. Thinking of citizenship as an office provides a unique approach to the ethics of democratic citizenship that synthesizes individual-level duties with systemic norms and institutional functions, as I show in the next section. One’s duties as a democratic citizen follow from what is needed for one’s democracy to flourish in its institutional particularity. This approach keeps the analytical focus simultaneously on individual duty and the systemic functioning of democratic institutions because of their intimate connection. This helps the approach to avoid the kind of moralism that many realist critics have objected to in political theory (Hall and Sleat 2017) while also providing a clear framework for future theorizing about the ethics of democratic citizenship.
The Duty to Vote in Representative Institutions

The aim of this section is to explain why everyone needs to vote in a representative democracy. Why must turnout be universal? I show how normative theories of representative democracy rely, either explicitly or implicitly, on universal (and so unbiased) turnout. Because this institutional form of democracy depends on universal turnout for its normative attraction, it becomes a duty for those occupying the office of citizen within it to vote.

Showing why “representative democracy” requires universal turnout is likely to be challenging because there are many different theories of it. Representation has been a topic of intense interest among political theorists in the past few decades (Disch 2021; Dovi 2012; Rehfeld 2005; Sabl 2015; Urbinati and Warren 2008), and the proliferation of different theories of representation might seem to make it difficult to say anything interesting that applies to all or even most of them. Moderating this difficulty, however, are two factors. The first is a core feature of representative democracy that narrows the inquiry’s remit: the relationship between constituents and representatives. Representative democracies characteristically have constituents selecting representatives who have partial autonomy to make decisions and enact policy (Manin 1997, 203–204). This suggests that the nature of the relationship between constituents and representatives is likely to be key to the evaluation of this institutional form. We see this suggestion confirmed in Pitkin’s (1967) classic account of representation that centered two distinct models of this relationship as well as in Mansbridge’s (2003) influential typology of different kinds of representation, to say nothing of the nearly hegemonic treatment of representation as a principal-agent relationship within political science more broadly. These accounts all suggest that the relationship between representatives and those who select them is central for the normative attraction of representative democracy. Focusing on this relationship helps narrow our inquiry.

Also moderating the difficulty of establishing universal turnout as necessary for representative democracy is the focus on voting. We are concerned here exclusively with how voting (or not) shapes the relationship between constituents and representatives. We thus leave aside a vast set of questions regarding the conduct of representatives in office (e.g., Rehfeld 2009).

I propose to show how universal turnout shapes the relationship between constituents and representatives in ways that bring out the democratic excellence of representative democratic institutions, which I call fair representation for short. So, why does fair representation require universal turnout?
There are no attractive accounts of the relationship between constituents and elected representatives that do not ultimately require universal turnout. To support this claim, I turn to Mansbridge’s (2003) typology of different models of representation. Mansbridge seeks to highlight that there are different and mutually exclusive ways for elected representatives to relate to constituents. To use Pitkin’s categories, a representative cannot be both a delegate and a trustee because the expectations built into these models are too different; being a good delegate often means being a bad trustee and vice versa. Mansbridge posits three kinds of elected representatives—promissory, anticipatory, and gyroscopic—each of which is likewise mutually incompatible with the others.2 Despite these models of representation being mutually exclusive, I will show how they all rely on universal turnout to fulfill their own ideal of representation.

**Promissory Representation**

For two of Mansbridge’s categories of representation—promissory representation and anticipatory representation—the case is straightforward. Promissory representation works through candidates and representatives making promises about what they would do in office to advance the interests of constituents, and then constituents judging how well they did so in a subsequent election. As Mansbridge (2003) points out, promissory representation constitutes a classic principal-agent structure wherein constituents, as the principals, attempt to secure faithful service from their agents, the representatives, in performing promised actions (p. 516). The flow of information is of paramount importance to maintaining this relationship because principals must know what their agents are doing—how well they’re keeping their promises—to sanction or reward them accordingly.

The logic of promissory representation cannot function well if any group of citizens is systematically excluded from this process. Any group that does not participate in the making and evaluation of promises can expect to have their interests neglected or actively harmed, because their judgment about how well representatives kept their promises to their group will go

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2. I leave aside Mansbridge’s category of surrogate representation because it is nonelectoral and self-selected, including activists, randomly selected citizens, and nongovernmental organizations like Oxfam (Landemore 2020; Montanaro 2018). This article is concerned exclusively with how electoral representative institutions generate a duty to vote.
unregistered and conduct unsanctioned (or unrewarded). No one wants an agent of theirs to harm their interests, so this is contrary to the institutional logic of representative democracy on this account. If a representative promises broadly shared prosperity, for instance, but traditionally disadvantaged groups did not share in it and then also did not vote, promissory representation would fail because the promise could be broken but no sanction would be applied. The result over time would be that representatives would learn they can break their promises to these groups with impunity, undermining the premise of promissory representation.

**Anticipatory Representation**

The case of anticipatory representation is equally straightforward. In anticipatory representation, representatives seek to please future voters through anticipating voters’ reactions at the next election to what they do in office. Anticipatory representation creates an anxious situation for representatives since preferences may emerge or change between the initial election empowering the representative and the later one in anticipation of which they shape their behavior. To assuage this anxiety and optimally plan their public actions, anticipatory representatives have a strong incentive to engage in ongoing deliberation with constituents (Mansbridge 2003, 518). This is deliberation in the proper sense of a two-way exchange of information and argument since representatives both seek to “keep their finger on the pulse” of constituents’ opinions by polling and talking with them—thereby moving information from constituents to representatives—as well as offering constituents information and arguments to persuade them that the representative is doing a good job, moving information the other way (Urbinati 2006).

This process cannot proceed fairly or equally when any group is underrepresented. The reason is again simple. If any group removes itself from voting, anticipatory representatives will lack an institutional reason to care about them or their interests. When a group habitually neglects to vote in proportion to their numbers in society, anticipatory representatives come to understand that they can neglect the interests of this group—even sacrifice their interests or actively exploit them—without incurring electoral danger. This contradicts the institutional logic of anticipatory representation since some constituents’ views are not being anticipated.

We see then that for both promissory and anticipatory representation to work as they are supposed to, everyone must vote. It is only through the provision of the authoritative feedback constituted by voting that anticipatory representatives will be forced to care about constituents’ views and interests.
Universal turnout is thus necessary to get them to care equally about the interests of all. Likewise, promissory representation cannot work with biased feedback since some of the principals are not being heard, rendering agents’ fulfillment of promises uncertain and licensing the future breaking of promises to them with impunity. Representative democracy on both these accounts cannot function properly without the input of all citizens.

**Gyroscopic Representation**

Mansbridge’s third type of representation, gyroscopic representation, is more challenging because gyroscopic representatives are supposed to operate largely free from external influence, seeming to render universal input from voters needless. They are supposed to act the way constituents would want without any external feedback or interference, independently, “like gyroscopes, rotating on their own axes, maintaining a certain direction, pursuing certain built-in . . . goals” (Mansbridge 2003, 520). Their “built-in goals” and orientation are supposed to guide them, not external pressure.

The selection of gyroscopic representatives is guided by at least three categories of consideration: character, such as reputation for integrity; principle, like dedication to the common good; and descriptive characteristics, including race and class background. Once a representative is chosen, they are left to make decisions guided by these relatively fixed features of their personality. Mansbridge (2003) represents this model as severing the traditional ties of accountability between representative and constituent, rendering ongoing communication between them largely moot (p. 522). Representatives thereby come to have considerable discretion to act as their conscience dictates, apart from voters’ feedback. Yet this is not the whole story, because gyroscopic representatives still need initial selection and authorization.

Although Mansbridge emphasizes the independence of gyroscopic representatives, they still must be selected and empowered by constituents and this process requires universal turnout. Mansbridge (2003) posits that it has to be easy to remove gyroscopic representatives, presumably because they might otherwise abuse the wide discretion afforded them (p. 522). This is what elections do at their best—provide an opportunity to confirm or reject gyroscopic representatives and replace them if necessary. And it is here once again that we see the imperative for universal turnout. Even if the gyroscope spins on its own, it must be calibrated from time to time. This electoral calibration of the gyroscope must be done with the input of all citizens or else the representative selected may reflect commitments and descriptive characteristics that fail to accord with those truly desired by constituents. Uneven turnout would
select gyroscopic representatives who would not react the way all the constituents would prefer but would rather reflect the sensibilities of voters only and not those of nonvoters. Their autonomy from popular pressure would then make them imposed rulers over those who don’t help select them, not their chosen representatives, undermining gyroscopic representation normatively through biased selection.

In all these cases, universal turnout is necessary for fair representation. Promises might be systematically broken without it in promissory representation, anticipatory representation would focus exclusively on those who bestir themselves to vote and thus not anticipate the views or interests of others, and gyroscopic representatives would come to point somewhere other than the true north of their constituents’ wishes in their selection. Universal turnout is thus necessary to fulfill the internal normative logic of each of these accounts. If this is right, it implies that as turnout comes closer to being universal, the closer representative democracy comes to its own ideals. Representative democracy most closely approximates its ideals just to the extent that turnout is universal.

I have just outlined why the excellent functioning of representative democracy normally requires universal turnout. But this still leaves open the second question addressed by Maring—why would one want to do one’s part to help representative democracy function well? Why should I fulfill the expectations representative democracy places on me? Here, I pass the buck to justifications of representative democracy. I assume that there are strong arguments for representative democracy and that these provide us with reason to want it to persist. This in turn means we have reason to want to do our part to support it. The task of the present discussion has been to clarify how individual inputs of votes are linked to institutional functioning and so, by extension, to the ultimate justifications for representative democracy itself.

To be sure, this does not mean that representative democracy is the uniquely best way to structure democracy. There are good reasons to think it falls short in a variety of ways, and imaginative work is being done seeking alternatives (Guerrero 2014; Landemore 2020). But it does suggest universal turnout is necessary for the specific institutional form of representative democracy to be all it can normatively be, even if we might wish it to be more.

One may worry that my focus on Mansbridge neglects other accounts of representation for which this analysis may not hold, such that of Rehfeld (2009) who offers a more expansive eight-category typology of representation (p. 223). Yet the argument I offer here applies likewise to his account and beyond. Rehfeld adumbrates three dimensions along which to categorize representatives, the most important of which for us is whether the representative
is supposed to rely more on their own judgment or that of someone else, such as constituents. Elected representatives who rely on the judgment of someone else must anticipate the electorate’s judgment, triggering the mechanisms discussed previously. The other categories of representative who are supposed to rely on their own judgment, such as Burkean trustees or Madisonian lawmakers, nonetheless must be “calibrated” from time to time per the mechanism discussed previously in the case of gyroscopic representation. I suggest that all elected representatives are subject in one way or another to these logics of promising, anticipated response, or unbiased selection—all of which yield an institutional imperative for universal turnout.

Knowledge Problems and Representation

A problem of common knowledge also operates within all these accounts exacerbating the effects I described. When a group is underrepresented due to its members not voting, this gives rise to representatives coming to understand which groups they can ignore, exploit, or break promises to with impunity. Yet unequal nonvoting affects the expectations of more than just representatives. Over time, it becomes a matter of common knowledge of everyone in society, generating a shared understanding of which groups matter—and so must be catered to and protected—and which can be safely ignored, their views and interests discounted.

This cements society-wide habits of neglect for the interests of nonvoting, marginalized, and politically inattentive groups among everyone in society, not just representatives. These habits build self-reinforcing expectations that certain groups do not matter, affecting the entire panoply of ways that politics is shaped and affected, from how voters vote to which groups the media focuses on in political news, to how representatives think about their constituencies, to which interest groups and social movements form and whom they aim to serve. These expectations of who matter form even among nonvoting citizens themselves, blunting their motivation to contest this unequal status and furthering their disconnection from politics.

A natural result of this neglect is, moreover, the creation of systematic ignorance about what these groups’ interests and concerns actually are, rendering their substantive representation increasingly difficult or impossible.

3. Some of Rehfeld’s categories are not meant to apply to elected representatives at all because he is interested in developing a perfectly general theory of representation that will apply to all representatives, electoral or not, even non-democratic ones (Rehfeld 2006).
Another result is the degradation of the ability to even communicate effectively with them, as common channels of communication break down and a shared political language slips out of reach, stymying efforts to reintegrate them into the political system. This unfolding pattern gives rise to enduring and compounding failures of representation.

In sum, then, electoral representation cannot work if only some people vote. It deprives vital information from the representative system that is necessary for it to function well by its own internal institutional logic. Because of this institutional imperative, individual citizens living within representative institutions have a special obligation to vote as a function of occupying the role of voter or elector.

Initial Objections

An obvious objection to the previous argument is that universal turnout is unnecessary because turnout that is unbiased but not universal would work just as well. Yet this is an empty debater’s point. The only practical way to approximate unbiased turnout is by making it universal. Claudio López-Guerra has theorized an “enfranchisement lottery” where, _ex hypothesi_, unbiased turnout is secured by randomly choosing a portion of the citizenry to vote and either paying or compelling them to do so (Brennan 2014, 35–39; López-Guerra 2014, 41). Yet no such lottery has been tried or seriously suggested by any political actor while universal turnout secured by institutions like mandatory voting has a well-established history. Until there is a real prospect of an unbiased but nonuniversal electorate, we must see universal turnout as the only alternative on realist grounds.

The institutional duty argument has some overlap with the representativeness argument familiar from the debate over mandatory voting (Galston 2011; Hill 2014, 162–64; Lijphart 1997), but I add a distinctive element missing from earlier accounts and use it with a different purpose in mind. My concern is with the individual duty to vote, not mandatory voting. Though Umbers (2020) appeals to it indirectly (p. 1310), this is the first time the representativeness argument has been directly deployed to establish a duty to vote. Yet the most important innovation of the present account is the application of role morality. Whereas one might simply assert that we have a duty to vote to make representation work well, I fill the gap between the representativeness argument and the duty to vote with the notion that one’s duties are attached to one’s institutional roles. Being a voter or elector in a specifically electoral representative democracy is what generates the duty to vote on this
account, not any general moral duty or institutions as such. I thus provide an
explanatory framework linking individual duty to a normative institutional
account of the proper functioning of a particular democratic arrangement.

A natural objection to this argument is that there are surely other factors
besides turnout that affect whether representatives succeed in fulfilling the
promissory, anticipatory, gyroscopic, etc., models. Lax campaign finance reg-
ulation, voter suppression, election fraud, gerrymandering, etc., can all sabo-
tage fair representation, even in the presence of universal turnout. Moreover,
we might think along with Brookes Brown (2023) that, just as many factors
can harm democracy, many interventions might improve it. These two points
suggest that the emphasis I place on universal turnout might simply be orthog-
onal to the actual challenges of today’s democracies, and so we should think
more holistically about what democratic interventions we should prioritize.
Brown’s point also raises the specificity problem, which I discuss later. For
now, I want to address the general concern that universal turnout isn’t enough.

My claim is not that universal turnout is sufficient for fair representation,
but rather that it is ordinarily necessary for it, and this limits the argument’s
scope. I don’t deny that there are other concerns in contemporary democra-
cies nor even that these other concerns might sometimes be more pressing
than securing universal turnout. Yet, to be clear, what is at issue in cases like
extreme gerrymandering or election theft is the lack of democracy as such,
not fair representation. Fair electoral representation presupposes a system
where elections are competitive, and representatives can be changed through
them. When that’s not the case, the ideal recommends setting such a system
up—and having everyone vote within it, because only then do the mecha-
nisms generating the institutional duty to vote kick in. That is a distinct chal-
lenge that I do not address here. But there’s more to be said for the importance
of voting.

Voting authorizes the exercise of power in representative institutions. This
is true of no other activity—not lobbying, not volunteering, not even donat-
ing money to political campaigns. Moreover, in representative democracy
power is centralized within representative institutions. This makes voting
doubly unique because it is the only way to authoritatively empower some
actors over others within the most consequential political institutions in this
type of democracy. This means that universal turnout will exert a profound
gravity within the political system, a gravity that is easy to underestimate
when it is absent.

Consider that although candidates for office in unrestricted campaign
finance environments like the United States care deeply about securing
financial backing, money doesn’t put them into office—votes do. This is why candidates will return or refuse donations from disgraced or scandal-ridden individuals and organizations and why, although the better-funded candidate usually wins, sometimes electoral losers outspend their victorious opponents. The point here is not that money doesn’t matter in politics but that votes do too—and in fact matter more than money in determining who occupies office. So long as that’s true, universal turnout will ameliorate the problem of oligarchic domination. The effect will not be comprehensive, but it will be direct and powerful.4

This article is about voting and its unique contribution to democratic functioning. Voting is worth focusing on because no other activity authorizes representatives to occupy the public offices within which representative democracies concentrate power. My central contention is that universal turnout would introduce a gravitational force toward fair representation, not that there aren’t other forces affecting representation. I am suggesting that exerting this gravity via universal turnout would bend many features of existing democracies that are currently dysfunctional into their proper place and—to anticipate a point I’ll press below—any efforts to work around unequal turnout are going to be difficult and unreliable in comparison.

The Endogeneity of Representation and the Democratic Value of Spoiled Ballots

Some might argue that a duty to vote forces people to vote for parties or candidates who they do not like or that do not meaningfully differ from each other. Citizens with idiosyncratic political views might feel poorly represented by the existing political players due to a lack of ideological diversity, for example, and so might recognize no real reason to vote. The lack of diverse choices might lead them to feel that they cannot cast meaningful votes, and so that it would be perverse to require them to do so as a matter of either law or duty. But this ignores that the “supply” of political representation is not fixed. It is rather dynamic and at least in part endogenous to the perceived “demand.”

Groups who do not turn out deprive themselves of representation not just today but for all time because political entrepreneurs come to understand that even if they make those groups’ interests their own and organize a political

4. There is good evidence that structurally higher turnout is associated with more egalitarian policy outcomes (Carey and Horiuchi 2017; Chong and Olivera 2008; Fowler 2013).
group or party around them, it is highly unlikely that this group will provide them sufficient electoral support to make the effort worthwhile. This is because of the inertia that nonvoting has; just as voting is habitual (Coppock and Green 2016), so is nonvoting. Nonvoters do not become habitual voters overnight, and those who are disengaged or alienated from the political system will not jump into electoral politics due to a few good speeches or political advertisements (Bedolla and Michelson 2012). Ironically, it often takes electoral success to generate electoral success, because people want to know that the costs of their participation will not be wasted on sure losers. Such perceptions of viability drive the well-established phenomenon of strategic voting. This collective action problem helps prevent parties who aim to represent non-voting groups from reaping the electoral gains their positioning might seem to merit, depriving these groups of representation.

Requiring groups to vote that feel they have nothing to vote for is therefore neither pointless nor cruel. It is rather a necessary input to bootstrap representation for them by bringing their “demand” into the political “market.” Making this new demand available will call into being “supply” in the form of candidates and parties who seek to appeal to them, at least in the absence of barriers to political competition.

This goes even if dissatisfied voters submit only spoiled or blank ballots. Such misvotes can play an important role in democracy by supplying authoritative information about opportunities for new entrants into the arena of political competition. Spoiled or blank ballots clearly signal that those voters are dissatisfied with the choices put to them. This might be because they dislike the candidates or parties, perhaps because the issues they care about are not meaningfully contested. It could also be because they feel the system is so corrupt it does not deserve their vote, or that the entire system is otherwise illegitimate. These intentions are importantly different from each other, and each differs from the others in the degree or nature of dissatisfaction they constitute. But it is possible using the tools of public opinion research, such as polling and focus groups, to disentangle them and grasp the nature of such dissatisfaction. By providing an authoritative idea of the scale of the dissatisfaction with the existing candidates/parties, spoiled and blank ballots convey information that is enormously valuable to political entrepreneurs and parties. They learn that there might be electoral returns to appealing to this dissatisfaction.

It matters enormously that this information is made authoritative through votes. The difference is that entrepreneurs will not get an accurate measure of the size of the discontent without actual votes. Moreover, they will not see it as providing an electoral incentive for them unless they see it reflected
in election returns. When the dissatisfied stay home, everyone in politics, from established players to would-be entrepreneurs, learn that they can and—to be successful electorally—must ignore them. Providing authoritative information about the scale of discontent is thus important because it creates a powerful incentive to generate representation of underrepresented groups and interests.

Thus, the institutional duty to vote holds with stringency even when there seem to be reasons against voting that would weaken the duty to vote according to other accounts. As discussed next, Maskivker sees her Samaritan duty account weakened when the quality of electoral choices is poor. This accords with many conventional intuitions about why nonvoters fail to turn out. Yet this weakening of the duty ironically undermines the conditions that could lead to improved representation. The institutional account does not share this weakness since it focuses on the incentives and information generated by universal turnout.

**The Specificity Problem**

Establishing a duty to vote is surprisingly difficult due to what has come to be called the specificity problem. The problem is that although it is widely acknowledged that everyone has a duty to contribute to the common good, it is far from clear that such a duty would require us to specifically vote. In this section, I discuss Maskivker’s effort to solve the specificity problem and point out some conditions in which her argument does not go through. I then explain how an institutional duty to vote solves the problem more securely.

As discussed previously, Maskivker argues that there is a duty to vote that derives from the Samaritan duty of rescue. This raises the specificity problem in especially sharp form because the Samaritan duty to help others in dire need seems like an imperfect duty, one which has no specifically entitled counterparties who could morally demand its fulfillment, leaving the individual with considerable discretion in fulfilling it. The problem here is that citizens might be able to discharge their duty to care for others without voting because there are numerous other, often more efficacious ways to provide help to others. It is thus not obvious why it would impose a duty to vote.

Maskivker’s (2019) answer to this challenge is the duties of time and place discussed previously, yet that response leaves us with little to say about

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5. Umbers effectively admits that his account does not solve the specificity problem. In a footnote, he says that his fairness-based account implies that “individuals have duties to either vote or make some equivalent contribution to the political process” (Umbers 2020, 1309, original emphasis).
important cases (pp. 137–38). She argues that because opportunities to help others are often dropped in our laps, as in the case of elections, we have no moral discretion to refuse. But there are often cases where citizens lack a preexisting, intrinsic motivation to vote, especially when this is due to beliefs about the meaninglessness of a particular election or the uncongeniality of the general political environment. These probably include many instances where people believe that voting makes little or no difference because the options available are poor.

Maskivker indicates that these are problematic cases for her duty to vote because, depending on one’s considered political beliefs, one’s duty to vote might be entirely attenuated. For instance, when she considers whether expressing discontent within the political system ought to be obligatory, as through casting blank ballots, she wavers. She says casting a blank ballot is “a much more powerful tool for change than simply staying home,” but then equivocates on whether one is obligated “to express one’s discontent at the polls” by casting such a ballot (Maskivker 2019, 152, original emphasis). Maskivker ultimately provides no answer as to whether her Samaritan duty to vote would require expressing political discontent at the polls, as with a blank ballot.

Indeed, although she argues that one has a duty to vote for the lesser of two evils, she grants that “when all we are faced with are equal evils, the duty to vote loses its stringency” (Maskivker 2019, 152). Maskivker seems to grant that one’s duty to vote depends crucially on the quality of one’s current electoral choices—when one’s options are all equally rascals, she suggests, one has no duty to vote. It seems then that Maskivker’s account is most helpful in those cases where help is least needed, among those confident in the functioning of the political system, and weakest where it is needed most, in establishing a clear duty to vote among the politically marginalized.

The institutional duty to vote does not have this vulnerability and is in fact quite clear about the need to vote even in cases where Maskivker wavers, as among those who think all the options are equally bad. If the duty to vote is founded primarily on the functional imperatives of representation, then it is vital for everyone to vote because it is only then that an accurate picture emerges of the political landscape for candidates to survey and with which to plan representative schemes. In fact, it is likely among the least represented that this duty lies strongest, because it is they who are least well served in the status quo. As we’ve seen, by voting, they provide the authoritative

6. It might seem perverse to burden citizens who are already unusually burdened with life’s other obligations in this way, but there are numerous adjustments we could—and should—make to democratic ethics and institutions to accommodate them (Elliott 2023).
information that political actors need to organize representation for them, even when submitting blank or spoiled ballots.

Thus, one has a duty to vote on my account regardless of the contemporary situation because voting is needed to change bad situations. This provides a further contrast with Maskivker’s argument in that hers is premised upon the immediate circumstances of the present election, which is what generates its weakness in elections with bad options. Maskivker, then, provides only a partial answer to the specificity problem.7

The institutional duty to vote solves the specificity problem because fair representation in electoral institutions is most realistically and enduringly secured by universal turnout patterns to forge the appropriate relationship between representative and constituent. Voting is thus not defended as an instance of other forms of socially minded action, as with Maskivker. Rather, it is a particular, institutionally specific need of electoral representative democracy.

Brown (2023) has recently argued that there are numerous nonelectoral ways to foster a better and more fairly representative democratic politics, such as lobbying for groups that don’t vote, and so concludes that the specificity problem is more tenacious than might be supposed. But though it is of course conceivable that there are workarounds for an electorally unequal representative politics, these kludges are likely to be unreliable and implausible both morally and empirically compared to universal turnout. First, there is the information problem alluded to previously; voters acting as advocates for nonvoters may not understand the interests of nonvoters because they do not belong to the group. Even well-intentioned powerful groups will regularly fail to understand what marginalized people want and need because of garden-variety perceptual and perspectival limits. Second, there is a motivational problem because these scenarios require that powerful actors will ordinarily act selflessly, putting their own interests entirely aside and

7. Emilee Chapman offers another approach to answering the specificity problem. She argues that voting has a distinctive value linked to it realizing “approximately universal participation,” which we have strong democratic reasons to value, such as because it visibly instantiates political equality (Chapman 2019). Yet this argument seems to have the implication that if voting is made considerably more onerous—and so pushed marginalized citizens out of the electorate—the duty to vote would seem to slacken because the election would no longer generate approximately universal participation. It would surely be perverse if the duty to vote slackened with the strategic imposition of burdens on voting, yet that seems to be an implication of Chapman’s argument.
throwing the whole weight of their political activities behind marginalized groups to which they do not belong. Though non-egoistic behavior is hardly rare in politics, the kind of comprehensive altruism that would be necessary to displace universal turnout is plainly implausible not only as a matter of how human motivation works but is difficult to credit even as an ideal.

There’s a broader point of methodology here. Much political philosophy uses the philosophical tool of thought experiments that often posit implausible circumstances to test ideas to their destruction. But this mode of reasoning is mostly inappropriate to debates about how institutions function. So too is the familiar philosophical tool of sharply defined necessary and sufficient conditions. If one says in response to my argument that voting cannot be a duty if there are other ways to bring fair representation about, because the claim is that universal turnout is necessary for it, I will deny that is my claim. I say the ordinary functioning of these institutions is compromised when turnout is unequal, and so role morality within those institutions must include a duty to vote. I thus claim that universal turnout is ordinarily necessary and say nothing at all about its sufficiency. But that is quite far from the sharp logical distinction implied by necessary/sufficient conditions. It is instead an application of the sort of reasoning appropriate to institutions and institutional design, one focusing on tendencies and likelihoods. Demanding more exact specification violates Aristotle’s foundational methodological principle from the beginning of the Nicomachean Ethics: one must only seek the degree of precision to which a given topic lends itself—mathematics should not be satisfied with approximations, but the study of political ethics must necessarily be so. If the only proper method of discovering our political duties is to demonstrate with logical rigor the absolute necessity of certain activities, then our duties will only ever be a null set.

Rare or exceptional occurrences are mostly irrelevant when we are assessing the ordinary functioning of political institutions and what the duties attached to promoting that functioning are. The institutional duty to vote falls into this category. That we can articulate exotic conditions in which universal turnout is unnecessary for generating fair representation tells us nothing about how representative institutions normally function. There are therefore many specifications of the specificity problem that are fundamentally artificial. I emphasize that voting is unique in authorizing the occupation of powerful offices and contend that making the exercise of that power as fair and equitable as possible in representative democracies ordinarily means everyone must vote. Alternatives like relying on powerful people to altruistically prioritize marginalized people’s interests are fanciful and so cannot be a guide to the role morality of ordinary people within representative institutions.
There is a sense in which this approach solves the specificity problem too precisely since it leaves out direct democracy. Voting in referenda or initiatives is fundamentally different from voting for representatives because the mechanisms linking constituents and representatives are missing in the case of direct democracy. Yet this only limits the applicability of the argument. It establishes a duty to vote in elections for representatives but not necessarily for referenda or initiatives.

**A Duty to Vote or a Duty to Vote Well?**

Some discussions of the duty to vote emphasize that citizens are under an ethical duty not to vote, but rather to vote well, entailing epistemic preconditions of informedness. Volacu (2020) has argued that the justification of a duty to vote is parasitic upon a duty to vote well such that mandatory voting cannot be justified democratically since it only elicits votes, not informed votes. Saunders (2020) has argued that the duty to vote cannot be “detached” from a duty to vote well, such that the only plausible duty is the latter. In separate work (reaching very different conclusions), Maskivker and Brennan also endorse the idea that there is a duty to vote well (Brennan 2014; Maskivker 2019, 77–129).

The core idea is that every consideration tending to show how important it is for individuals to vote—such as the power of the political system to affect people’s lives for the better—also makes it important for citizens to use their votes well, meaning at minimum with some relevant information. When it matters very much whether someone votes, it matters even more that they do so in an informed way.

The idea of a duty to vote well might seem to block my argument for an institutional duty to vote. If citizens do not know enough to vote responsibly, or in line with good governance or justice, they ought not to vote, even if the representative system needs it. Critics would say that without information, citizens cannot effectively hold representatives accountable. Indeed, the main upshot of the duty to vote well is precisely that bad, uninformed inputs into representative systems will cause them to malfunction, and so citizens are under an obligation not to vote if they are uninformed. But, on my account, this misunderstands how the epistemological uncertainty faced by representatives combines with the mechanism driving most representative systems: anticipated response.

The key idea is epistemological; representatives do not have perfect information about what citizens know. They do not and cannot know when failures of representation on their part will become known and salient to a
decisive bloc of voters, as when highly visible events highlight them. Even if only a small minority of voters become aware of a representational failure, the shift of their votes may, in a competitive election, decisively undermine a representative’s continuance in power. This fog of uncertainty means that even if citizens are imperfectly informed, representatives cannot count on their ignorance. Representatives thus have a powerful incentive—grounded in their own durable ignorance—to act as if their constituents are reliably well informed and able to hold them accountable through electoral sanction.

Representation, then, does not actually require a perfectly informed electorate. The threat of electoral sanction works to a significant degree even when the sanction is uncertain, as it could be due to citizen ignorance. The fog of political ignorance works both ways. It is not only citizens who do not always know what representatives are doing; representatives do not know for sure what electorates will tolerate or how they will vote. By taking up the representative’s perspective, then, we see that the imperfect information of citizens is almost irrelevant, systemically speaking. The imperfect information representatives have about citizens’ vote intentions systematically improves the representation of citizens who often lack the information for effective accountability.

This means that the institutional duty to vote—in contrast with other accounts of the duty to vote—does not strictly need to be a duty to vote well. So long as a group’s members are in the electorate as active voters, the threat they pose to incumbents who disregard their views and interests exists and cannot be ignored. Even if the group’s vote choice is often misguided due to information deficits, their presence significantly raises the chances of their substantive representation if only because those deficits might erode due to a salient news story, effective persuasion campaign, or unforeseeable event. Representatives cannot rest easy in the presence of those they harm. Voting is therefore often enough to make representative democracy work, not necessarily voting well.

Conclusion

In this article, I made a case for voting as an institutional duty derived from one’s official role as a voter, rather than out of moral duty. Democratic citizens have a special obligation to vote when they live under electoral representative institutions because universal turnout is needed for such institutions to work properly. The duty emerges from the particular institutional arrangements in which citizens are enmeshed, bringing together institutions and individual duty in a way that reflects their intimate connection in the real world. I defended this duty from such worries as the pointlessness of voting and the
importance of voting well and showed how this approach solved the specific-
ity problem.

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