Citizenship and morality*

Jonathan Baron

Abstract

I discuss two problems in making democracy work: the failure of citizens to recognize that their participation is more beneficial for others, the wider the circle of others they consider; and the failure to think about policy choices in a way that is actively open-minded. Teaching people to avoid these problems might improve the functioning of democratic government.

It is apparent to anyone who follows the news that the idea of democracy is not on a smooth path to universal success in bringing about the benefits of good government [1]. The economic successes of some authoritarian countries (such as China) have led some to think that democracy is unnecessary, when, in fact, these are probably isolated lucky cases, contradicting the general result (e.g., [2]). Many countries seem unable to switch from authoritarian to democratic system, and this problem is often attributed in part to the necessity of cultural support for democratic institutions. Even long-standing and stable democracies seem unable to make democracy work as well as it should, as a result of such problems as polarization and paralysis. These dysfunctions affect not only the nations themselves but also the world, present and future, as evidenced by the world's failure to deal adequately with the interacting problems of climate change, migration, population growth, pollution, and conservation of resources needed for food and water security.

Democracy depends on citizenship. If citizens choose in ways that lead to these dysfunctions, then, in a simple sense, the citizens are less moral than they could be. They cause harm. Psychologists since the time of John Dewey have been interested in the relationship between citizenship and democratic functions. World War II led to research on authoritarianism, dogmatism, and other traits that could have led to political support for the Nazis, a research tradition that social psychologists still pursue (e.g., [3]).

Here I discuss a different tradition, growing out of the field of judgments and decisions [4], which has identified both pessimistic and optimistic features of how people think about their roles as citizens. I assume that the most moral option for a citizen, e.g., in voting, is the one that does the most good for all people, now and in the future, according to the beliefs of that citizen. This

*In press *Current Opinion in Psychology*, doi 10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.03.010.

model thus specifies what you ought to do, as a citizen, given your own beliefs. (I discuss the question of "good beliefs" later.) If you believe that more must be done to reduce global warming, then, other things being equal, you should vote for (and otherwise advocate) candidates or propositions that are more likely to do this.

A major type of bias, with respect to this model, is parochialism, a bias toward an in-group, such as a nation, which is sufficiently extreme so as to favor policies that could harm outsiders more than they help insiders, so that the net effect is negative. This conflict does not arise very often; policies that benefit your nation usually have beneficial side effects for outsiders. But the conflict arises when cooperative efforts of several nations are required. Perhaps the most extreme form of this bias (or perhaps a related bias) is acting on the basis of perceived self-interest alone, as if the in-group consisted of one person.

Of interest is citizens' understanding of the following key point: political participation is cost-ineffective in advancing self-interest or the parochial interest of a small group, but is cost-effective in advancing the common good. The small influence that each citizen has over policy outcomes renders political participation nearly useless as a way of advancing self-interest [5]. But this small influence is more than compensated by the large number of people potentially affected by these outcomes, if the citizen has sufficient concern for these others [6] [7]. In terms of self-interest the expected benefit of a vote is roughly proportional to $1/N$, where N is the number of voters. But in a utilitarian calculation, which assumes some altruism, the benefit of voting must be multiplied by N, assuming that only voters are affected by the outcome. This multiplication cancels the dilution caused by increases in N voters. And the total benefit can be orders of magnitude larger if we consider effects on those who do not vote, such as children, foreigners, and future people [8]. The larger the circle we consider, the more the small effect of a vote is magnified, and, therefore, the more worthwhile it is to use our vote (or other forms of participation) to advance our concerns for the good of others. Thus, faced with a conflict between self-interest voting and voting for the general good, the self-interest option is generally inferior to not voting at all, but, with sufficient altruistic concern for people now and in the future, the general-good option can be worthwhile. The same argument applies, less strongly, to the choice of voting parochially vs. for all of humanity.

Recent papers (in order of completion: [9] [10] [11]) described two main results. One was that people not only showed parochialism in hypothetical voting decisions but also believed that this was their moral duty. We showed this, among other ways, in a study of Jewish and Palestinian students in Israel. The second result grew out of an incidental observation. Many subjects thought that their moral duty was to vote for their individual self-interest, even when this conflicted with the interests of their nation, or the world.

Baron argued that both parochialism and self-interest voting are supported by a naïve theory of democracy, which is that it is a means of self-defense, either through defense of an in-group or of oneself. This is a misunderstanding, because individual democratic participation is an inefficient way to achieve this goal, as just discussed. Those who follow this naïve theory can subvert their

own goals for advancing the general good, and, by supporting policies that do not advance the general good, they can subvert the goals of others.

A second point is this: because government can coerce people to cooperate (behave in ways that benefit everyone rather than the self alone), the cost of supporting government in doing this, by voting, is much smaller than the cost of cooperating voluntarily. The cost of government coercion is also low because the threat of punishment is effective in inducing cooperation. Even if the punishment is costly, it is rarely needed. Because of the efficiency of coercion, people often vote to give government the power to make them and others do what they would not do on their own. Voters sometimes rationally vote for tax increases but almost never donate money to the government. If citizens around the world understood these arguments, they would still disagree on what constitutes the common good, but surely some of the current malfunctions of democracy could be mitigated.

Hauser, Rand et al. [8] used economic game experiments to investigate "Cooperating with the future." An important result is that people are more willing to pay costs to benefit future generations when they vote than when they make individual decisions. This point is implicit in the argument just summarized, and it is also found empirically elsewhere (e.g., [12]). Despite the fact that some people pursue self-interest through voting, others use their vote for the long-term common good, an optimistic result.

The idea that government is a design to provide for the common good by solving social dilemmas (or providing public goods) is not widely understood; some people seem to think that government sanctions are rarely justified, or that government is a tool to be used for competition between parochial groups. Yet, in my own research, I have found many people who do think in terms of what is best for all. The idea that people can "think big" when they engage in political action is not pie-in-the-sky idealism. Many people already think this way, often at a world level ([9] [11] [13] [14] [15] [16]; and see [17] and [18] for discussions of the benefits and limitations of "world citizenship").

Of course, if all citizens used political action to advance the general good, they would not always agree on how to do that, so political conflict would remain, but it could be a different kind of conflict than what exists now.

Still, much of the disagreement is the result of people acting on the basis of beliefs that are not only incorrect — at least one side must be incorrect in many disagreements — but also poorly formed. Take, for example, the beliefs of many who participated in the Nazi holocaust [19]. Although they were repulsed by what they did, they felt compelled to do it because Germany was alone in fighting a worldwide Bolshevik/Jewish conspiracy. Current examples of people doing horrible things that they think are for the greater good are not hard to find.

Such beliefs may be exacerbated by a failure of "actively open-minded thinking" (AOT), a set of dispositions that oppose "myside bias", the tendency to think in ways that support current beliefs rather than subject them to appropriate questioning [20] [21] [22] [23] [24] [25]. A general finding is that people who believe that they should think in a self-critical way tend to do so (e.g., [26]).

An abbreviated scale of beliefs about whether AOT is good thinking has been successful in predicting successful forecasts [27], sufficient search behavior in a perceptual task [28], and utilitarian moral judgment [29]. I found it surprising that many people got low scores on this scale. I thought that endorsement of open-mindedness would be seen as socially desirable. Some insight about one source of the low scores came from the work of Jared Piazza ([30] [31] [32]), who found that consequentialist and utilitarian judgments were negatively correlated not only with political conservatism and religiosity but, especially, with a belief in "divine command theory," the claim that people are incapable of understanding or questioning God's moral pronouncements and should not try to do so. Baron et al. [29] found that a measure of belief in this theory was strongly negatively correlated with the self-report AOT scale and with utilitarian moral judgment. More generally, these results suggest that AOT as a trait is strongly influenced by culture. Some cultures (or sub-cultures) teach, from childhood up, that excessive thinking, curiosity, and questioning are wrong and should be discouraged.

The argument for AOT is simple. Errors of judgment, and poor decisions, are common. Especially when judgments of different people conflict, as in beliefs about religion or public policy, at least one of the parties must be incorrect. How can we protect ourselves against such errors? The answer, the essence of AOT, was provided by J. S. Mill (e.g., [33] chapter 2, paragraph 7): "The whole strength and value, then, of human judgment, depending on the one property, that it can be set right when it is wrong, reliance can be placed on it only when the means of setting it right are kept constantly at hand."

AOT answers the question of how we can protect ourselves against dangerously false beliefs, like those of the Nazis. It is not a guarantee, but it is all we can do to protect ourselves against radical action based on false doctrines. Failure to question false doctrine can thus be seen as a moral failure, for it leads to behavior that hurts others. This conclusion does not imply that poor thinking deserves punishment. Rather, support for AOT must come from cultural change, starting with schools. Schools that teach ideology and discourage questioning, all too common throughout the world, should be replaced.

If the basic ideas here are correct, then they suggest educational approaches for improving the function of democracies around the world: both instruction in the analysis of why democracy works and in the importance of AOT for avoiding error. (Even political campaigns can sometimes promote AOT [34].) Many of the world's problems can be traced to the difficulty of getting democratic procedures to yield outcomes that are desirable even for the voters of a single nation.

1 References

[1] Diamond, L. (2015). Facing up to the democratic recession. *Journal of Democracy, 26*(1), 141–155.

[2] Sen, A. (1981). *Poverty and famines: An essay on entitlement and*

deprivation. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[3] Jost, J. T., & Krochik, M. (2014). Ideological Differences in Epistemic Motivation: Implications for Attitude Structure, Depth of Information Processing, Susceptibility to Persuasion, and Stereotyping. Advances in Motivation Science, (Vol. 1, pp. 181231).

[4] Baron, J. (2012) The point of normative models in judgment and decision making (comment). Frontiers in Cognitive Science. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2012.00577

[5] Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.

[6] Edlin, A., Gelman, A., & Kaplan, N. (2007). Voting as a rational choice: Why and how people vote to improve the well-being of others. *Rationality and Society, 19*, 293–314.

[7] Edlin, A., Gelman, A., & Kaplan, N. (2008). Vote for charity's sake. *The Economists' Voice, 5*, (6), article 6.

** [8] Hauser, O. P., Rand, D. G., Peysakhovich, A. & Nowak, M. A. (2014). Cooperating with the future. *Nature, 511*, 220–223. doi:10.1038/nature13530

[9] Baron, J. (2012). Parochialism as a result of cognitive biases. In R. Goodman, D. Jinks, & A. K. Woods (Eds.), *Understanding social action, promoting human rights*, pp. 203–243. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

** [10] Baron, J., Ritov, I., & Greene, J. D. (2013). The duty to support nationalistic policies. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 26*, 128–138.

Many people think that they have a moral duty to support policies that help their group (nation or ethnic group) even when these policies do harm on the whole. They also think that they would act consistently with their duty, despite the harm. One study found these results in Israel, comparing Jews and Palestinian Arabs.

[11] Baron, J. (2012). The "culture of honor" in citizens' concepts of their duty as voters. *Rationality and Society, 24*, 37–72.

[12] Eichenberger, R., & Oberholzer-Gee, F. (1998). Rational moralists: The role of fairness in democratic economic politics. *Public Choice, 94*, 191–210.

[13] Buchan, N. R., Brewer, M., Grimalda, G., Wilson, R., Fatas, E., & Foddy, M. (2011). Global social identity and global cooperation. *Psychological Science, 22*, 821–828.

[14] Buchan, N. R., Grimalda, G., Wilson, R., Brewer, M., Fatas, E., & Foddy, M. (2009). Globalization and human cooperation. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106*, 4138–4142.

[15] Markowitz, E. M. (2012). Is climate change an ethical issue? Examining young adults' beliefs about climate and morality. *Climatic Change, 114*, 479–495.

[16] Türken, S., & Rudmin, F. W. (2013). On psychological effects of globalization: Development of a scale of global identity. *Psychology and Society, 5*(2), 63–89.

[17] Eichenberger, R., & Frey, B. S. (2002). Democratic governance in a globalized world. *Kyklos, 55*, 265–287.

[18] Altinay, H. (2011). *Global civics: Responsibilities and rights in an interdependent world.* Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

[19] Pauer-Studer, H., & Velleman, J. D. (2011). Distortions of normativity. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice, 14*, 329–356.

[20] Baron, J. (1995). Myside bias in thinking about abortion. *Thinking and Reasoning, 1*, 221–235.

[21] Baron, J. (2008). *Thinking and deciding* (4th ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

[22] Baron, J. (2009). Belief overkill in political judgments. (Special issue on Psychological Approaches to Argumentation and Reasoning, edited by L. Rips). *Informal Logic, 29*, 368–378.

[23] Stanovich, K. E., & West, R. F. (1998). Individual differences in rational thought. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 127*, 161–188.

[24] Perkins, D., Tishman, S., Ritchhart, R., Donis, K., & Andrade, A. (2000). Intelligence in the wild: A dispositional view of intellectual traits. *Educational Psychology Review, 12*(3), 269–293.

[25] Kuhn, D. (1991). *The skills of argument.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

** [26] Toplak, M. E., West, R. F., & Stanovich, K. E. (2014). Rational thinking and cognitive sophistication: Development, cognitive abilities, and thinking dispositions. *Developmental Psychology, 50*(4), 1037–1048.

Actively open-minded thinking is correlated with reduced biases in several tasks used in the literature on judgment and decision making. This article cites earlier literature showing the same thing.

[27] Mellers, B., Stone, E., Atanasov, P., Rohrbaugh, N., Metz, S. E., Ungar, L., Bishop, M. M., Horowitz, M., Merkle, E., & Tetlock, P. (2015). The psychology of intelligence analysis: Drivers of prediction accuracy in world politics. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xap0

[28] Haran, U., Ritov, I., & Mellers, B. A. (2013). The role of actively open-minded thinking in information acquisition, accuracy, and calibration. *Judgment and Decision Making, 8*, 188–201.

** [29] Baron, J., Scott, S., Fincher, K., & Metz, S. E. (in press). Why does the Cognitive Reflection Test (sometimes) predict utilitarian moral judgment (and other things)? *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, special issue on Modeling and Aiding Intuitions in Organizational Decision Making, edited by J. Marewski & U. Hoffrage. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2014.09.003

Utilitarian moral judgment and beliefs are correlated with actively open-minded thinking and with belief in divine-command theory.

[30] Piazza, J. (2012). "If you love me keep my commandments": Religiosity increases preference for rule-based moral arguments. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 22*, 285–302.

[31] Piazza, J., & Landy, J. F. (2013). "Lean not on your own understanding": Belief that morality is founded on divine authority and non-utilitarian moral judgments. *Judgment and Decision Making, 8*, 639–661

[32] Piazza, J., & Sousa, P. (2014). Religiosity, political orientation, and consequentialist moral thinking. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 5*(3), 334–342.

[33] Mill, J. S. (1859). *On liberty.* London: J. W. Parker & Son.

[34] Kam, C. D. (2006). Political campaigns and open-minded thinking. *The Journal of Politics, 68*(4), 931–945.