

CAN VOTING MAKE YOU INTELLECTUALLY VICIOUS?

ABSTRACT

Is democracy epistemically valuable? Most work considers this question in terms of voting outcomes – whether democracy results in *good policies*. But we can also ask the question in terms of the characters that citizens cultivate – whether democracies develop the *intellectual virtues*. Some have suggested that democracy can be valuable in precisely this way, that it provides citizens with the opportunity to improve their intellectual characters. Nevertheless, such proposals are in need of further development and defense, both in specifying which intellectual virtues democracy helps cultivate and the ways in which these virtues are formed. For as this paper will argue, once we focus on a particular virtue like intellectual responsibility, it seems that democracy is a school of vice rather than virtue.

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1 INTRODUCTION

2 In what ways is democracy epistemically valuable? Democratic procedures are
 3 often thought to be valuable due to the sorts of outcomes they select. Much of
 4 the work on the epistemic benefits of democracy focuses on the extent to which
 5 these procedures – like voting and public deliberation – enable democracies to
 6 *track the truth*.

7
 8 The emphasis on the truth-tracking capability of democracy is so widespread
 9 that it is now accepted as the standard epistemic defense of democracy. As
 10 Goodin (2003: 91) summarizes, “For epistemic democrats, the aim of democ-
 11 racy is to ‘track the truth.’” Hannon (2020: 591) takes it that “on the standard
 12 interpretation of epistemic democracy, the aim of democracy is to track the
 13 truth,” and Peter (2008: 33) says that “By the standard account I shall denote
 14 any characterization of epistemic democracy which centers on the truth-tracking
 15 potential of democratic decision-making processes.”¹

16
 17 Despite this contemporary focus on truth, democracy can be epistemically valu-
 18 able in other ways as well. Hannon (2020) has argued that democratic deliber-
 19 ation can *create empathetic understanding*, which can play a role in countering
 20 affective polarization.² Democratic voting rights can also *remedy epistemic in-*
 21 *justice*, giving equal voice to all voters regardless of race, gender, sexuality. For
 22 reasons along these lines, Medina (2013: 4) thinks the “ongoing struggle toward
 23 democracy is the resistance against epistemic injustices,” while Kim (2022: 173)
 24 thinks that “epistemic fairness is one of the founding principles of the demo-
 25 cratic institution of voting.”

26
 27 Another potential epistemic benefit that democracies might provide is growth
 28 in the *intellectual virtues*. Why think that these are epistemically valuable?
 29 These virtues are beneficial because of the ways they underwrite democracy’s
 30 other epistemic benefits. Consider, for instance, the truth-tracking potential of
 31 democracy. As citizens become more informed, Hannon (2022) has highlighted
 32 that they also become more partisan, better able to cherry-pick the data to fit
 33 their preferred conclusions. To track the truth, citizens need not only be knowl-
 34 edgeable, but they must possess the intellectual virtues that will prevent them
 35 from engaging in such motivated reasoning.

36
 37 Or consider democratic deliberation. There is no guarantee that dialogue with
 38 one’s political opponents goes well, and Tanesini (2021) and Baehr (2019) argue
 39 that the intellectual virtues are necessary for such exchanges to be beneficial.

¹For discussions of the link between democratic procedures and truth, see Estlund (2007), Goodin and Spiekermann (2018), Landemore (2012), List and Goodin (2001), Muller (2018), and Peter (2016).

²Others who have emphasized the political value of empathetic understanding include Goodin (2000, 2003), Medina (2013), Morrell (2010), and Stanley (2015), and for further potential connections between empathy and polarization, see Read (2021) and (2023) and Sodoma and Sharp (2023).

Otherwise, such conversations will be of little use for developing empathetic understanding.

The epistemic value of the intellectual virtues, however, extends beyond their instrumental benefits. Many think that the intellectual virtues are *intrinsically* good for citizens, constitutive of their very flourishing.³ So there are at least two routes to the epistemic value of the intellectual virtues.

For these reasons, it would be a big boost to democracy’s epistemic case if it helped its citizens cultivate the intellectual virtues. But is it true? Does democracy help citizens develop their intellectual characters?

Some have suggested that it does. According to Rawls (1971: 234, 1999: 205–206), for instance, democratic participation leads to the development of each citizen’s “intellectual and moral faculties.” While Rawls does not explore this possibility in much detail, Farrelly takes up the case, mounting a defense of democracy by claiming that it is conducive to cultivating the intellectual virtues. On Farrelly’s view (2012: 16), “the culture of democracy is one that helps perpetuate and cultivate the habits of mind necessary for intellectual virtue.” This is because democracy allows all citizens the chance to actively participate in the political process – inquiring, discussing, and deciding which policies and politicians are best for their communities. This active process, according to Farrelly (2018: 845), “helps humans develop and refine the intellectual virtues necessary to flourish.”

Nevertheless, there is much more work to be done. While Farrelly makes the case for a general link between democracy and the intellectual virtues, he only offers a broad outline of how the two might be related. To fill in this basic sketch, and to discover whether these observations can ultimately give way to a fruitful research project, more will need to be said both about (1) *which intellectual virtues* democracy is equipped to cultivate as well as (2) *the democratic mechanisms* that produce them. If there are ways that political institutions can be more effective in targeting and forming the intellectual virtues in their citizens, then democracies stand to benefit by considering what conditions are best for virtue development.

In order to further this more general project, this paper will explore the extent to which democracy cultivates the virtue of *intellectual responsibility*. In particular, I will argue that once we are focused on this particular virtue, it is no longer clear that democracy unambiguously cultivates the intellectual virtues. For as I will argue, it seems that democracy encourages intellectual negligence and carelessness rather than intellectual responsibility.

³While this view has a distinguished history, running through much of the ancients and the medievals, it has also been explored by a number of contemporary authors, including King (2021), Pritchard (2022), Roberts and Wood (2007), and Zagzebski (1996).

Here is how we will proceed. In Section 1, I develop a novel account of intellectual responsibility, contrasting it with the corresponding vices of intellectual negligence and carelessness.⁴ On my view, being intellectually responsible is necessarily linked with satisfying one's epistemic obligations, whether those be obligations to form beliefs, conduct inquiries, or direct one's attention in particular ways.⁵ I outline how a person's environment can be hospitable or hostile to the habituation of intellectual responsibility, either by encouraging or discouraging the satisfaction of one's epistemic obligations.

I then apply this account to the democratic context in Section 2. Democracy is most centrally rule by the people, with this rule commonly exercised through the practice of voting. This voting then provides a mechanism by which democracies can directly habituate virtues (or vices) in their citizens.

In order to evaluate whether voting cultivates intellectual responsibility, we will first need an account of the intellectual obligations of voters. Here, I will argue for a justified belief or knowledge norm on voting, one that requires citizens to either know or have sufficient reason to believe that their chosen politician or policy will promote the common good at least as well as competitors. This obligation is both intellectual, requiring a disciplined exercise of one's cognitive faculties, and applies to voters, making it an obligation that bears on the virtue of intellectual responsibility *as a* democratic citizen.

I will then argue in Section 3 that contemporary democratic nations are not conducive to forming intellectual responsibility. More precisely, I will argue that such societies are hostile environments for intellectual responsibility, providing strong incentives for voters to be negligent or careless when it comes to

⁴While there is a lot of talk of responsibility in epistemology, much of it is concerned with how we can be responsible for our beliefs rather than the virtue of intellectual responsibility. Here, the literature on doxastic responsibility is quite voluminous – see, for example, Alston (1988); Audi (2001); Hieronymi (2008); Kearl (2023); Levy (2007); McHugh (2013); Osborne (2020); Peels (2013), (2014), and (2016); Steup (2000); and Weatherson (2008) – but this discussion typically proceeds without reference to the intellectual virtues. Even Code (1987) and Montmarquet (1992) and (1993), who explicitly consider the role that the virtues play in making one's beliefs intellectually or epistemically responsible, do not consider intellectual responsibility as a stand alone virtue. And while the label *virtue responsibilist* has come to indicate those who think of virtue epistemology in terms of overall traits possessed by epistemic agents – see Baehr (2006) and Fleisher (2017) – there are no extended treatments amongst such responsibilists of the virtue of intellectual responsibility itself.

⁵The view that our epistemic obligations can require us to inquire or direct our attention in particular ways, just as they can require us to proportion our beliefs to the evidence, has recently been gaining traction within the literature on inquiry. Those who favor epistemic norms on inquiry generally include Friedman (2020), Hall and Johnson (1998), McWilliams (2023), Singer and Aronowitz (2021), and Woodard and Flores (2023). Worsnip (2019) argues that these epistemic obligation extend to the political domain, making the case that we are obligated to read news sources from across the political spectrum. When it comes to thinking about intellectual responsibility in particular, Peels (2017: 99-100) makes the case that we have epistemic obligations to act in ways that prevent us from forming beliefs that are “objectively or subjectively bad”, while Henke (2024) argues that we can have epistemic obligations to discipline our attention in specific ways.

satisfying their epistemic obligations. The high cost of political information and reasoning, and the minuscule benefit of voting well, create an environment that discourages fulfilling either a justified belief or knowledge norm. Democracies don't cultivate intellectual responsibility in their citizens – rather, in order for democracies to function well, voters must come to the ballot box with this virtue already firmly formed.

Finally, Section 4 will consider some objections. First of all, I will consider an ought implies can worry, that it might not be possible for most voters to satisfy the justified belief or knowledge norm. Secondly, I will address the thought that we have no positive epistemic duties whatsoever, a view that would prevent voters from having positive epistemic obligations. And third, I will consider the concern that it is possible to become intellectually responsible by not voting at all. In response to all of these concerns, I will show how the core argument remains unscathed – democratic participation is not a hospitable route to intellectual responsibility.

A quick note before we begin. While many philosophers have discussed whether voting is a civic duty,⁶ whether voting is practically rational,⁷ or whether voting is an essential component of civic virtue,⁸ I will instead be discussing a separate, yet closely related question. This paper will consider how, if someone does vote, their voting behavior shapes their intellectual character. As we will see, this question is related to whether voting is rational and whether we have a duty to do so, but it is also importantly distinct, considering not whether such behavior is rational or morally required but how it has the potential to form our character along the way.

1 THE VIRTUE OF INTELLECTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

A man is dead. The defendant is the victim's own son, and if he is found guilty, he could receive the death penalty. Judge Cynthia Nance sends the jury to deliberate saying, "I don't envy your job – you're faced with a grave responsibility, gentlemen." (*12 Angry Men*, 1997)

Despite the serious nature of their work, everyone wants to reach a verdict quickly. The deliberation has no air-conditioning. Juror 7 has tickets to a baseball game. And many of them see it as an open and shut case - the son is guilty. One juror even quips, "If we honestly think the kid's guilty, suppose we finish in 5 minutes, so what?"

But there is one hold out. Juror 8 reveals that he is not convinced the defendant is guilty, not beyond a reasonable doubt anyways, much to the disbelief of his

⁶See Brennan (2011,) Brennan and Lomasky (1993) and (2001), Elliott (2023), Freiman (2020: Ch. 3), Maring (2016), and Maskivker (2019).

⁷See Barnett (2020), Brennan (2016), Caplan (2007), and Downs (1957).

⁸See Brennan (2011: Ch. 2) and Dagger (1997).

150 fellow jurors. Many of them are outraged – of course he is guilty! How could
151 he call such an obvious fact into question?

152
153 Nevertheless, over the course of several hours, Juror 8 walks back through the
154 evidence, persuading more to take his side. First 3, then 6, then eventually all
155 12 jurors agree that the boy is not guilty, deciding on a verdict of acquittal.

156
157 Fortunately for the defendant, Juror 8 was able to convince everyone, all 12
158 angry men, to forgo their desire for a quick verdict. Rather than handling
159 the evidence in a way that was careless or negligent, he convinced them to be
160 intellectually responsible.

161 1.1 RESPONSIBILITY AND OBLIGATION

162 But what *is* intellectual responsibility? As I will argue, the intellectually virtu-
163 ous are those who reliably fulfill their intellectual obligations.

164
165 Those who are intellectually responsible do a wide range of things. Consider
166 the following examples:

- 167 • **Doctor** – stays up to date on recent medical research and clinical best
168 practices
- 169 • **Scientist** – follows best practices when conducting their experiments and
170 publishing their results
- 171 • **Umpire** – keeps a close watch on the elements of the game that they
172 officiate

173 Along with Juror 8 in *12 Angry Men*, our **Doctor**, **Scientist**, and **Umpire**
174 are all intellectually responsible. But there are myriad ways that our **Doctor**,
175 **Scientist**, and **Umpire** embody this virtue. The **Doctor** is obligated to form
176 their *beliefs* about how to treat their patients in a particular way. The **Scientist**
177 is responsible for carrying out a certain kind of *inquiry*. And the **Umpire** is
178 required to pay close attention to how they direct their *perceptual experiences*.
179 How can we tie all of these to the same virtue?

180
181 Let's start with the commonplace observation that virtues give rise to partic-
182 ular dispositions. It is typically thought that dispositions come with stimulus
183 conditions and manifestations. Take, for example, an honest person. When
184 someone asks them a question, their honesty manifests in them reliably telling
185 the truth. And when the honest person makes a promise, their honesty prevents
186 them from making promises they can't keep.

187
188 Like the moral virtues, the intellectual virtues also give rise to certain dis-
189 positions. According to Baehr (2011: Ch. 8 and 9), open-mindedness is the
190 disposition to take other viewpoints seriously, while intellectual courage is the

disposition to persist in a belief or inquiry despite threats to one's well-being. Here again, we can identify characteristic stimulus conditions and manifestations. When confronted with other perspectives, the open-minded take those views seriously. And when they encounter threats, the intellectually courageous hold fast to their epistemic path.

What about intellectual responsibility? To what sort of dispositions does it give rise? It is commonplace to simply refer to someone's obligations as their responsibilities, testifying to a close connection between the two. Williams (2008: 459) observes that we "sometimes use 'responsibility' as a synonym for obligation," suggesting that responsibility is related to "fulfilling one's responsibilities." This then, the idea that the intellectually responsible are disposed to fulfill their intellectual obligations, can allow us to identify a similarity between our **Doctor**, **Scientist**, and **Umpire**.

When we look to accounts of responsible beliefs, inquiries, and experiences, there is convergence on an appeal to our intellectual or epistemic obligations. Responsible beliefs are those that satisfy a person's obligations. Peels (2016: 104), for example, maintains that "doxastic responsibility should be understood in terms of intellectual obligations", and Ye (2020: 5448) that "a person is responsible in holding a belief when he does what he is obligated to do." The same is true for responsible inquiry. As Cassam (2016: 166) puts the point, a "responsible inquiry is one that is guided by the evidence and recognizes the obligations that come with being an inquirer." And let's not forget responsibly formed perceptual experiences. Henke (2024) defends the view that "S's experience E is responsibly formed with respect to subject matter p just in case S does what is epistemically obligatory for S." Beliefs, inquiries, and perceptual experiences are responsible when they fulfill our intellectual obligations.

Of course, responsible beliefs, inquiries, and experiences are not themselves virtues. For one thing, they are not character traits, and thus not the sort of thing that can be virtues in the first place. And furthermore, just as someone can tell the truth even though they are not an honest person overall, one can have a responsible belief or conduct a responsible inquiry without having the virtue of intellectual responsibility. These are, instead, just typical manifestations of the virtue that we are interested in.

For someone to have the character trait of intellectual responsibility, they must consistently and reliably satisfy their intellectual obligations:

Responsibility and Obligation – A subject S is intellectually responsible only if S reliably recognizes their intellectual obligations and fulfills them at least in part due to this recognition

On my view, consistently fulfilling one's epistemic obligations is a *necessary condition* for being intellectually responsible. That is, one cannot be intellectually responsible if they don't reliably satisfy their intellectual obligations.

Furthermore, they must satisfy their intellectual obligations, not by accident, but *because* they recognize what those obligations are.

There is likely more to intellectual responsibility than merely fulfilling one's obligations. As Williams (2008) argues, responsible people display a particular conscientiousness in how they complete their duties. So even though someone has satisfied all of their obligations, they could further embody the virtue of responsibility by double-checking whether their most important tasks have been accomplished.

These further elements of the virtue are brought out by its associated vices. Take, for example, two ways of being irresponsible – being *careless* or *negligent*. Both of these vices can make someone intellectually irresponsible. As Cassam (2016: 165) notes, “[b]eing careless or negligent diminishes the effectiveness of our inquiries and also opens us up to the charge of acting irresponsibly.” While both of these vices undermine intellectual responsibility, they do so in ways that go beyond a mere failure to perform one's duties. Those who are careless might be aware of what their duties are, and they might even make an attempt to fulfill them, but they are not sufficiently attentive and conscientious when doing so. On the other hand, the negligent ignore or disregard their duties entirely, also failing to fulfill their obligations, but for reasons that differ from those who are simply careless.

So while intellectual responsibility is at least a matter of fulfilling one's intellectual obligations, it is also more than that, as how conscientiously someone attends to those obligations can also play a role in how responsible they are. Nevertheless, even though intellectual responsibility involves more than simply satisfying one's intellectual obligations, those obligations set a lower bound on what is required of the responsible person.

1.2 CULTIVATING INTELLECTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Like all virtues, intellectual responsibility can be acquired through practice and habituation. Porter (2015: 222) observes that practice and habituation is the standard approach to intellectual virtue formation, and Zagzebski (1996: 150) thinks that the intellectual virtues start with imitating virtuous persons. For this reason, intellectual virtues are frequently called “habits of mind” – with Garcia and King (2015: 206) comparing intellectual virtues to the “habits of a well-functioning mind” – further reinforcing the picture of the intellectual virtues as acquired through habit formation.

Because of this need for practice and habituation, the environment that a person inhabits plays a role in whether or not they acquire particular virtues. Let's call environments that encourage virtue formation *hospitable* and those that do not *hostile*. If parents encourage honest behavior in their children and provide correction when they lie or deceive, then this creates a home that is conducive

to forming the virtue of honesty. On the other hand, if a challenging, fully online humanities class is run without any detection of assistance from artificial intelligence, this creates a situation that is conducive to becoming dishonest.

How do hospitable and hostile environments differ? There are multiple ways of thinking about this question. Take, for example, those who think there can be a conflict between what is virtuous and what is practically rational. In this framework, we can describe hospitable environments as those that make virtuous behavior rational by raising the cost of vice, creating conditions that encourage virtuous habit formation over time. Dishonesty can be practically rational when it helps someone get what they want with little or no cost. Parents who punish dishonesty reverse that calculation, making honesty the best choice from a self-interested perspective. Then over time, as honesty is practiced consistently, a habit or virtue of honesty can begin to emerge.

Hostile environments are those in which it is irrational to do what is virtuous because the cost of vice is so low. Take, for example, our online humanities class. For students that just want to get the class credit but have little interest in the material, the most cost-effective way to get that credit is by using AI to do the bulk of the work. This habit, practiced over the length of the semester, will start to habituate them in vice rather than virtue.

But not everyone thinks of virtue and practical rationality as opposed to one another. Some theorists think that virtue is always practically rational because it is constitutive of a person's flourishing, contributing to their overall good. This way of thinking can make virtue rational in both hospitable and hostile environments, in both a well-run home and a fully online humanities class.

On this way of thinking, hospitable and hostile environments differ not in terms of what is rational but in terms of the reasons they present. Hospitable environments attempt to unite differing sorts of reasons around a single course of action. The household that punishes dishonesty can give both the child who wants to avoid punishment and the child that wants to be a good person strong reason to be honest.

Hostile environments offer reasons that point in different directions. For those students who want to learn about the subject or develop their intellectual faculties, they have strong reason to complete course readings and assignments without the help of artificial intelligence. But those who want to achieve a decent score with as little effort as possible have reason to complete the majority of their work using AI. While the latter group might be practically irrational to not prioritize their greater flourishing, the reasons to avoid dishonesty are not as strong as in hospitable environments.

Both of these approaches track with Aristotle's position in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, that effective virtue formation is backed up by the force of

law. To create a hospitable environment, lawmakers must “urge people towards virtue and exhort them to aim at the fine”. This will be enough for him who wants to live a virtuous life, since he attends “to reason because his life aims at the fine”. But for those who are not motivated by virtue, lawmakers must impose “corrective treatments and penalties on anyone who disobeys” [1180a6-11]. These penalties raise the cost of vice by either (i) removing the conflict between virtue and rationality or (ii) uniting all of one’s self-interested reasons around the virtuous course of action.

This does not mean, of course, that we can’t ever expect someone to act virtuously in hostile environments. In fact, the reason that habituation in ordinary contexts is so important is precisely because we want people to be able to be honest or courageous when it is costly. Nevertheless, because of these significant costs, hospitable environments are far better for *training* ourselves in virtue, habituating honesty and courage so that they are then instinctual in hostile environments.

2 DEMOCRACY AND INTELLECTUAL OBLIGATION

We started this paper wondering what, if anything, makes democracy epistemically valuable. We then narrowed our focus to intellectual responsibility – does democratic participation make citizens intellectually responsible? Before we can answer that question, there are two further issues that need clarification – the potential mechanisms by which democracies can habituate the virtues and the intellectual obligations of voters.

2.1 DEMOCRATIC MECHANISMS

If a democratic society succeeds in cultivating intellectual responsibility but does so due to elements of its culture that are not essential for democracy, then this might not qualify as democracy itself promoting the virtue. Here, I will first make the case that widespread voting provides a mechanism that is both essential to democracy and one that can habituate citizens into a certain kind of character.

We established in Section 1.2 that the virtues are formed by practice and habituation. Thus, if democracy is going to cultivate any sort of intellectual virtues, it must be because it is connected to mechanisms by which citizens can engage in such habit-formation.

So what is essential for democracy? Held (2006: 1) summarizes democracy as “a form of government in which, in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule” going on to say that this requires “some form of political equality among the people.” These two elements – rule by the people and political equality – are then typically cashed out in terms of voting. Estlund (2008: 66) summarizes democracy as “the authorization of laws collectively by

the people who are subject to them”, saying this is “inseparable from voting”. Christiano and Bajaj (2024) think democracy refers to “method of collective decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the decision-making process”, an equality that is compatible with “different electoral systems, for example first-past-the-post voting and proportional representation.” And Schumpeter’s (2010: 284-285) minimalist democracy includes that “people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them” through “free competition among would-be leaders for the vote of the electorate.” Each of these accounts of democracy reserves a special place for voting, whether that be voting on the laws themselves or for the political representatives that choose those laws. If this is correct, then democracy could promote the intellectual virtues through the voting process. Regularly heading to the polls can habituate citizens to certain kinds of behavior, whether for good or for ill. And this includes behavior with an intellectual component. Voters might, for example, take their votes seriously and become informed on the candidates running for office. Or they might be careless and cast their vote for the last face they saw on a billboard. The former behavior, repeated with enough frequency, will habituate someone in the virtue of intellectual responsibility, while the latter forms someone in the vice of intellectual negligence or carelessness. Or at least that will be true if citizens have particular intellectual obligations when they vote, an issue to which we now turn.

2.2 THE INTELLECTUALLY RESPONSIBLE VOTER

What would it look like for voters to be intellectually responsible? According to **Responsibility and Obligation**, they would at least need to reliably satisfy their intellectual obligations. To start answering this question, then, we need to know what intellectual obligations voters have.

As Feldman (2000: 676) argues, one source of our obligations are the particular roles that we occupy.⁹ Parents have duties to their children, representatives have obligations to their constituents, and CEOs have responsibilities to their stakeholders. And, of course, we can also have duties qua the role we fill as voters. As Giavazzi (2024: 148) puts the point, voters participate in a civic practice that “obligates them to act in an epistemically responsible fashion.”

Let’s begin to think about the intellectual obligations of voters by considering *uninformed* voting. Suppose that Ray knows little to nothing about the current election and suspends judgment about which candidate is best. Nevertheless, he heads to the polls to vote. There is obviously something wrong with this approach, something intellectually irresponsible. In order to be an intellectually

⁹Others who emphasize that roles can contribute to determining our obligations, intellectual and otherwise, include Henke (2024), Medina (2013: 147), Peels (2017: 81-82, 100-101), Williams (2008), and Ye (2020: 5448).

responsible voter, he needs to gather more information.¹⁰

How much information does a voter need to fulfill their epistemic obligations? We might follow Brennan (2009, 2011) in thinking that voters must gather enough information to have a *justified belief*:

Justified Belief Norm – Citizens ought not: vote for politician or policy p unless they have a justified belief that p will promote the common good at least as well as the competitor politicians or policies.

There are a few things to notice. To begin with, the norm is wide-scope, forbidding a certain kind of combination – a vote for p and lacking a justified belief that p will promote the common good. If one lacks the required kind of belief, they can avoid running afoul of the **Justified Belief Norm** by not voting. I am not here arguing for a general obligation to vote, but only a particular epistemic obligation for those who do. Brennan’s (2009: 536, 2011: 68) view is similar – he argues for a duty conditional on one voting. Uninformed voters ought to abstain, and those who vote should only do so if they are well-informed.

Secondly, the norm requires that voters be in a particular doxastic state. The **Justified Belief Norm** is meant to capture the minimal epistemic position one must occupy in casting a responsible vote. Belief alone is too weak. If Ray believes that one candidate is better than another even though he lacks evidence either way, simply believing that one candidate is better does not make him intellectually responsible. He must go out and gather information to find out that this is the case.

Along with establishing that voters must have a justified belief, we must also specify the content of that belief. In order to fulfill the **Justified Belief Norm**, voters ought to consider their choice in terms of the common good. This is distinct from voting for the candidate or cause that best promotes a voter’s self-interest. While in many cases self-interest and national interests can align, when they depart citizens ought to vote for what they believe supports the common good.

¹⁰While this might not seem surprising – that voters have an intellectual obligation to gather information – it does push against a common view on epistemic normativity. For many epistemologists, epistemic normativity is limited to the connection between our evidence and our doxastic states. So long as we believe what our evidence supports, then we are not liable to criticism from an epistemic point of view. And Ray does exactly this – he doesn’t have any evidence that one candidate is better than another, so he suspends judgment about which candidate is best. Yet despite this, Ray still fails to be intellectually responsible, suggesting that our epistemic obligations can not only require us to proportion our beliefs to our evidence, but in certain cases they can also require us to actively gather evidence as well. This sort of view has been gaining steam in the literature on inquiry, with authors such as Friedman (2020), Hall and Johnson (1998), McWilliams (2023), Peels (2017), Singer and Aronowitz (2021), and Woodard and Flores (2023) all supporting epistemic norms on inquiry. For more on how this argument is impacted if we lack certain kinds of epistemic obligations, see Section 4.

Why should voters be prepared to sacrifice their self-interest in favor of the common good? If citizens vote chiefly in terms of self-interest, this increases the chances that the laws and policies chosen will be unjust, not just because those laws will favor the majority group, but because it would promote a picture of political action that simply trades off one group's interests for that of another. As Brennan (2011: 119) puts the point, a "vote for self-interest at the expense of the common good is to vote in favor of subjugating others." And for similar reasons, Julia Maskivker (2019: Ch. 3) argues that voting in terms of the common good displays the kind of impartiality appropriate to political life.

Finally, voters must be justified in believing that their chosen politician or policy promotes the common good *at least as well as competitors*. If one candidate comes out on top, then the **Justified Belief Norm** can only be satisfied by voting for them. Brennan and Freiman (2023: 61) think along similar lines, holding that someone should vote "only if they are justified in believing they are voting for the higher-utility candidate", while Maskivker (2019: 80) agrees that voting "requires sufficient information about facts necessary to assess the superiority of one electoral option over others."

This also makes the **Justified Belief Norm** consistent with voters choosing a candidate or policy that they believe does not make their nation or community better off overall. This is because, as Brennan (2009: 537, 2011: 76) points out, some candidates might be best thought of as the "lesser of two (or more) evils". Perhaps the election of either candidate will make the country worse off. In such cases, citizens can cast intellectually responsible votes by choosing the candidate that they think will do the least damage.

While the **Justified Belief Norm** has much to say in its favor, there might be reason to think that it is not strong enough. Some might prefer, not a norm concerning justified belief, but one that requires *knowledge*:

Knowledge Norm – Citizens ought not: vote for politician or policy p unless they know that p will promote the common good at least as well as the competitor politicians or policies.

The **Knowledge Norm** has much in common with the **Justified Belief Norm** – the only difference is that the voter must be in a better epistemic position. Instead of merely having sufficient reason to believe that their favored politician or policy will promote the common good, they must know that it will do so.

Why prefer the knowledge formulation? According to Giavazzi (2023: 112), votes are acts of political advocacy that are evaluated on the same basis as assertions. By voting citizens are "stating or affirming what they take to be the course of political action that should be followed or enacted by the polity." And if a vote is akin to asserting that we should take a particular course of action, then the norm of assertion will apply to votes just like it applies to assertions.

The first thing to point out is that Giavazzi's account provides further support for thinking that the **Justified Belief Norm** is better than a mere belief norm. Very few think that belief alone is the appropriate norm for assertion, and even those that do like Bach (2008) strengthen their account by appealing to a knowledge norm for belief itself. So it seems that the norm for voting must be stronger than mere belief.

But Giavazzi's account might also motivate the move to the **Knowledge Norm**. Many adhere to a knowledge norm of assertion, requiring that one assert that p only if they know that p . If this is correct, and Giavazzi is right to think that votes are evaluated on the same basis as assertions, then voters ought to know that their choice will promote the common good.

Is there a reason to think the **Knowledge Norm** is *too* strong? In making the case for a justified belief norm for political deliberation, Peter (2021: 399-401) points out that much of what we must use to make political decisions is not yet known or well understood. Many of the scientific and economic theories that contribute to political decision-making are provisional and/or incomplete, meaning that even if we have good reasons to favor one policy over another, we may not yet know that a particular policy is best.

As a case in point, Peter argues that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic many decisions about masks, quarantines, and vaccines had to be made on the basis of preliminary but not fully substantiated conclusions. If knowledge was the norm for voting, then all such votes would be normative failures, revealing that it is not feasible to require voters to always know that their preferred choice most contributes to the common good. Here, Brennan (2009: 537, 2011: 69) seems to agree, acknowledging that "one might vote for a harmful policy but not be negligent in doing so." Voters need not know what effects their votes will be for the better – they only need to be justified in believing that they will.

We see a similar back and forth with the norm of assertion. Many have thought that there are assertions that are appropriate even though they are not known, opting for something like a justified or reasonable belief norm of assertion. And while we do not need to rehearse all the arguments that have been given for and against the knowledge norm of assertion here, it is important to note that defenders of the knowledge norm have ready responses for the sort of worry that Peter raises, preserving the **Knowledge Norm** as a viable candidate.

First of all, as Williamson (1996: 508-512; 2000: 255-260) points out, there is a difference between satisfying a norm and reasonably believing that one has satisfied the norm. It could be that those who vote for what ultimately ends up being a harmful policy, while they did not satisfy the **Knowledge Norm**, are not blameworthy for doing so. If they carefully considered the question and found strong evidence in favor of their preferred policy, then it might have been appropriate for them to believe that they knew even though they did not. This

would explain Brennan’s (2009: 537, 2011: 69) sense that someone can vote for a harmful policy without being negligent in doing so.

And with Peter’s COVID-19 example, while a full understanding of the disease might not have been possible, there was enough evidence available for voters to reasonably believe that they satisfied the **Knowledge Norm**. It quickly became clear that COVID-19 was an airborne respiratory infection, and commonsense attempts to combat it included wearing masks and avoiding crowded indoor spaces. On this basis, voters could still make recommendations about what political actions we should take, even thinking that they had satisfied the **Knowledge Norm**.

In what follows, I will remain open to the possibility that either the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm** is the correct epistemic norm for casting a ballot. My argument can proceed while also acknowledging that both are viable candidates.

3 DOES DEMOCRACY BUILD INTELLECTUAL RESPONSIBILITY?

We are now in a position to ask whether democracy, and the mechanism of voting in particular, forms citizens in intellectual responsibility. Here, the key question will be whether democratic voting is better thought of as a hospitable or hostile environment for the virtue. I will defend the view that, at least in the very large and extraordinarily complex democracies most of us inhabit, voting is a hostile environment for virtue formation. Gathering political information and removing our political biases takes a fair amount of time and effort, and these costs are not outweighed by the personal benefits of voting well.

3.1 IGNORANCE AND IRRATIONALITY

Imagine a democratic village of 250 people. Most issues are up for a vote – how water will be distributed for drinking, bathing, and farming; who will serve as a lookout after dark; and how rules will be enforced. All of these questions are fairly simple, making it possible to satisfy the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm** just by experiencing day-to-day life in the village and giving a little bit of thought to the competing proposals. It will likely be clear how to distribute water optimally and who will make the best lookout without any advanced knowledge.

Contrast this with the average democratic nation-state. Such nations are very large, with millions of citizens, and it would take a fair amount of effort both to understand the policy proposals of the candidates that are up for election along with the likely results of those policy proposals.

This results in a political environment where most voters display a shocking amount of political ignorance. In the United States, it has consistently been

found that less than half of voters know the three branches of government or who controls the Senate and the House. Many even struggle to name their own representatives. The 2022 Cooperative Election Study of a representative sample of 60,000 Americans found that a third of voters cannot identify their U.S. Senator and House representative.¹¹ Knowledge of state-level representatives is far worse. A 2018 study discovered that only 28% knew their state representative, while just 19% knew their state senator.¹² These findings are hardly a one-off result. As Somin (2006: 256) observes, “nearly all public-opinion scholars agree on the existence of deep and widespread political ignorance.” Political ignorance is a deep and enduring feature of the modern political landscape.¹³

And not only are many voters politically ignorant, but they are also typically epistemically irrational when it comes to politics as well. Political beliefs make up part of a voter’s social identity. Voters often process information, not to find the truth, but to protect this partisan identity, making them vulnerable to politically motivated reasoning.¹⁴ Increased intelligence and information do not appear to alleviate such tendencies. As citizens become more informed, Hannon (2022) has highlighted that they also become more partisan and biased.¹⁵ Not only is the typical voter ignorant of basic political facts, but they are often epistemically irrational as well.

3.2 THE RATIONALITY OF BAD VOTING

Such widespread ignorance and irrationality make it clear that most voters are not living up to the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm**. This in and of itself is suggestive. If democracy actually cultivates intellectual responsibility, then we would expect more citizens to already possess the virtue.

Nevertheless, it does not fully settle the issue. It could be that democracies provide citizens with ample reason to vote well, and in that sense are hospitable environments for virtue formation, but voters still shirk their duties nonetheless. We all do things that it would be better for us not to do, all things considered. For this reason, we need to examine the incentive structure that democracies provide to their citizens in order to conclude whether they are hostile or hospitable to good voting.

Why are voters politically ignorant and irrational? Many seek to explain these phenomena by arguing that such behavior is practically rational. Let’s start with *rational ignorance*. Downs (1957: 246) was one of the first to explore

¹¹See Schaffner et al. (2022).

¹²See Bachner and Ginsberg (2020).

¹³For further support of the existence of widespread political ignorance, see Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954); Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960); Converse (1964); Carpini and Keeter (1996); Page and Shapiro (1992); and Somin (2016).

¹⁴See, for example, Kahan (2016), Kahan et al. (2011), Kahan et al. (2017), Lord et al. (1979), Redlawsk (2002), and van Bavel and Pereira (2018).

¹⁵See also Kahan (2013) and Taber and Lodge (2006).

whether in voting it is “individually irrational to be well-informed.” We can think of the problem like this. If someone is buying a house or a new car, it is worth doing their homework, since researching their options has a good chance of substantially benefiting them in the long run. But given how unlikely it is that any vote swings the race, combined with how little any particular outcome will benefit them individually, there is not a strong incentive for them to learn about politics. It is rational for them to do something else, practically anything else, over becoming politically informed.

A similar story applies to epistemic irrationality. When deciding which car to buy or which job to take, bias can be very costly. Getting things wrong will have pronounced harmful personal consequences. But this is not typically the case with voting – getting things wrong will likely have little, if any, negative impact. Caplan (2007: Ch. 5) exploits this fact to argue that we often display *rational irrationality* when it comes to politics – we are practically rational but epistemically irrational when thinking about political issues. There are powerful incentives to remain biased about politics, holding beliefs that are personally comforting or that help us fit in rather than get at the truth of the matter. And because there are no equally good benefits to getting things right, there is strong reason to remain epistemically irrational when making political choices.

Theorists often appeal to models of expected utility to fill in these basic sketches. Where B is the benefit of a voter’s preferred candidate, p the probability of casting the decisive vote, and OC the voter’s opportunity cost, we can figure the expected utility of voting as follows:¹⁶

$$EU = Bp - OC$$

Let’s call those that think that EU is negative *pessimists*. The route to this position is easy to understand. The probability p of casting the deciding vote in a large elections is vanishingly small, with the rosier projections sitting at 1 in 10 million (Gelman et al., 1998 and Gelman et al., 2012) for close national elections in the United States. Couple this with the fact that the potential benefit B to the individual voter is typically not very great. Even if their preferred policy or candidate is chosen, this might have little to no impact on their day-to-day life. Once we factor in OC – the costs of information gathering, removing bias, and travel to the polling location – all of this leads Brennan (2016) to conclude that the “expected costs exceed the expected benefits by many orders of magnitude.”¹⁷

And while there are comparatively few *optimists*, some have attempted to make the case that the numbers are not so dire – in certain cases it could be worth it to cast a vote. Barnett (2020) is perhaps the best representative of this posi-

¹⁶See Brennan (2025) and Brennan and Freiman (2023).

¹⁷Other pessimists include Brennan (2011), Brennan and Sayre-McCord (2016), Freiman (2020), Guerrero (2010), and Maring (2016).

tion.¹⁸ On his view, in elections where (i) the better candidate provides at least twice as much average social benefit as the individual cost of voting and (ii) the chance of casting the decisive vote is greater than 1 divided by the number of voters, Barnett argues that the expected value of voting is positive. In such scenarios, it would be rational to cast a well-informed vote.

This case, however, comes with a number of important caveats. Notice, first of all, that what matters is *average social benefit* – the mean benefit per person. If we are thinking purely in terms of self-interest, the case becomes much more difficult to make. Barnett agrees that “if you were wholly self-interested, voting would hardly ever be rational” (2020: 425). This is significant. If Barnett is right, then political ignorance and irrationality may well be practically rational for those who are thinking primarily about benefits to themselves rather than the potential benefits to society as a whole. And as we will see, this will then cast doubt on whether democracy is likely to cultivate intellectual responsibility.

Secondly, while Barnett discusses the possible benefits of electing one’s preferred candidate, he spends no time describing the costs of gathering information or removing our political biases. Even if it is instrumentally rational to vote once one has the necessary information and is thinking clearly, this does not mean that it is worth it to put in this work in the first place. As Lane (2025: 4) rightly points out, the “social benefit of electing the candidate one votes for is twice that of the cost of voting *only if* one in fact votes for the better candidate.” But reaching the correct verdict can be very difficult, leading Brennan and Freiman (2023: Sec. 4) and Gibbons (2023: 61) to argue that the search costs of identifying the better candidate can be quite high. So even if Barnett can show that voting well is rational once one already has enough information and epistemic rationality to pick the best candidate, this fails to account for the cost of becoming informed in the first place.

How much might those costs come to? In order to be in a position to satisfy the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm**, voters at least need to be aware of each politicians’ platform, what the likely outcomes of those positions would be, and which of those outcomes is better. Brennan and Freiman (2023: Sec. 4) break down the necessary education as follows. The average voter would need to follow some political news, take courses in economics and value theory, and work to counteract their political bias and irrationality. They estimate that this will take at least 100 hours, with most voters requiring many more.

Such education substantially drives up the opportunity cost of voting in our expected utility equation. Once we take into account the work hours given up to prepare to vote well, this requires that the individual benefits of voting come to multiple thousands of dollars in order to incentivize becoming politically rational and well-informed. This confirms that for most ignorance and irrationality is

¹⁸For other optimists, see Edlin et al. (2007), MacAskill (2015: 86), and Tuck (2008).

the better option from a self-interested perspective.

3.3 DEMOCRACY AND INTELLECTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

What does all of this mean for intellectual responsibility? Let's first consider an environment that is hospitable to forming intellectual responsibility, like the typical classroom. Students are given assignments that create particular epistemic obligations. Maybe they are required to inquire in a certain way, performing an experiment or reading the textbook. Or maybe they ought to direct their attention in specific ways, journaling about their experiences or listening to a musical score. Students who satisfy these obligations are rewarded, whether that is through praise, high marks, or passage to the next grade. The rewards and punishments help students to reliably fulfill their intellectual obligations, habituating them in the virtue along the way.

Like this classroom, contemporary democracies certainly provide opportunities for citizens to exercise intellectual responsibility. If the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm** is correct, then the act of voting comes with substantial epistemic obligations, responsibilities that voters can satisfy each and every time they cast a ballot, habituating them to reliably satisfying their intellectual obligations. In this sense, Rawls and Farrelly are correct, that democratic participation provides citizens occasions to develop their intellectual character.

However, just because democratic voting provides an opportunity to *exercise* intellectual responsibility doesn't mean that it is a good opportunity for most to *cultivate* the virtue. Rather, it seems that contemporary voting most often creates a hostile environment for forming intellectual responsibility.

Let's return to our online humanities class. For students who are interested primarily in academic credit, cheating using AI presents a very low cost way of achieving their goal, whereas appropriate studying and engagement with the material will take far more time and energy. This then makes academic honesty very costly and dishonesty extremely cheap, creating a hostile environment for being formed as an honest person.

Similarly, the cost of information gathering and good thinking, combined with the comparatively low payoff of voting, create a hostile environment for cultivating intellectual responsibility. Pessimists are united in thinking that the expected utility of voting is negative. And even optimists like Barnett can only make their case by (1) appealing to overall societal benefits that go well beyond the individual and (2) not fully considering the search costs of selecting the right candidate.

Concession (1) alone should already reveal that contemporary voting does not incentivize becoming politically informed and fair-minded. The AI cheater is only taking their own interests into account, rather than the ways that their

knowledge might serve others, when they decide in favor of academic dishonesty. But once we add concession (2) as well, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that voting is very costly, confirming that democratic voting is a hostile environment for cultivating intellectual responsibility.

What does democratic voting likely habituate? The relevant vices that we have considered are intellectual negligence and carelessness, and these appear to be common amongst prospective voters. As we can see through the data on political ignorance and irrationality, many voters don't even seriously attempt to satisfy the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm**. And while some at least make an effort to become informed voters, they do so in a way that does not carefully attend to their intellectual responsibilities, as partisan voters are among the most biased.

Ironically, emphasizing a mere duty to vote only makes the situation worse. Many voting campaigns urge citizens simply to get to the polls, to cast a ballot no matter what. Far fewer encourage voters to become well-informed about elections, and perhaps none recommend staying home if you are unable to do so. This then pushes many to vote no matter how ignorant or irrational they might be, making democracies even more hostile to virtue formation. If there is little incentive to become informed, but there is further reason to cast a ballot, signaling to others that you are a cooperative member of society, then this creates an environment that pushes even more towards vice.

And this is the case regardless of how we ultimately understand hostile environments. Hostile environments could be those which make it instrumentally irrational to satisfy one's intellectual obligations. This seems to be the way that pessimists typically describe the voting context, as one of rational ignorance and irrationality. Nevertheless, if we side with those who think that doing what is virtuous is always practically rational, environments can be hostile by giving them substantial reasons to act against their own flourishing. On either account, voting in large, complex nation-states will introduce such difficulties.

4 OBJECTIONS

The argument is now complete. Even though many have suggested that democracy creates a suitable environment for cultivating the intellectual virtues, we have seen that this is not the case for voting and intellectual responsibility. What objections might be made to our case?

4.1 OUGHT IMPLIES CAN

One assumption that has been made throughout is that, despite the costs of satisfying the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm**, these are norms with which the typical voter can comply. This follows from the familiar

ought implies can principle – if one of these norms is truly an epistemic obligation of voters, then it must be that they can in principle meet the requirement.

There are multiple lines of argument, however, that suggest these norms are beyond reach. It is a common view, for example, that in cases of expert disagreement the best that a non-specialist can do is suspend judgment. This would make an outright belief about such issues unjustified. In these scenarios, Lane (2025: 13) argues that “[e]xpert disagreement prevents us from formulating the justified beliefs we need to vote well, and there is nothing we can do about it.”

And there are many other factors that make justified electoral beliefs hard to come by. Leaning on the difficulties of political prediction, partisan bias, and normative uncertainty, Brennan and Freiman (2023: 61) conclude that it is “exceedingly difficult to form justified beliefs about the utility difference between two candidates.” If these arguments are right, then in many realistic scenarios it is impossible for the average voter to have a justified belief or knowledge about the best politician or policy.

What should we say about this challenge? Not everyone agrees that casting an informed ballot is unduly demanding. Maskivker (2019: 79), for example, thinks that the need “to vote with care is not too demanding just because we know that many individuals are unable or unwilling to discharge it.” But surprisingly, even if we accept that this criticisms applies to all or most contemporary voters, this would not undermine the core argument of this paper.

As we saw in the introduction, it is a common thought that democracy can help citizens cultivate the intellectual virtues. When we considered intellectual responsibility in particular though, there were reasons to think that this wasn’t the case – contemporary voting is not a hospitable environment for forming intellectual responsibility. A lack of epistemic obligations doesn’t reverse this verdict. If typical democratic citizens don’t actually have any epistemic duties related to voting, then voting is still not a helpful mechanism for cultivating intellectual responsibility because there are no epistemic obligations that they can reliably satisfy in the first place.

The only significant change occurs when we consider vice. When there are no epistemic obligations, then voting is also not a context where citizens can become more intellectually *irresponsible* either. If we were to assume that voters do have epistemic obligations, then not only can they become more intellectually responsible by doing what is required of them, their intellectual characters can also suffer when they fail to do so. When such obligations are eliminated though, voting would not become a hospitable environment, but it could cease to be a hostile one. While this might remove some of the negative bite from the overall argument, it does not vindicate the thought that democratic participation is a school of intellectual virtue.

825 4.2 NO POSITIVE EPISTEMIC OBLIGATIONS

826 Some have argued that we have no positive epistemic obligations at all – that
827 there are no beliefs whatsoever that we are required to adopt. Nelson (2010:
828 83) takes this view when he says that “we have negative epistemic duties, but
829 no positive epistemic duties. There are things that we ought not to believe, but
830 there is nothing that we ought to believe, on purely epistemic grounds.”¹⁹ This
831 goes further than the ought implies can worry that we just examined. While
832 this allows that there may be negative epistemic duties for voters – things that
833 they can’t believe – it rules out the possibility of positive epistemic obligations
834 altogether.

835
836 This is, of course, very counterintuitive. It is strange to think there are no epis-
837 temic duties that Ray violates when he casts his uninformed vote. One way to
838 countenance this concern is to argue that the **Justified Belief Norm** and the
839 **Knowledge Norm** are not themselves *positive* norms. After all, there is noth-
840 ing that either norm requires someone to believe. They simply forbid a certain
841 combination – voting for a particular policy or politician without knowing or
842 justifiedly believing that they will promote the common good.

843
844 Another way to respond is by observing that the **Justified Belief Norm** and
845 the **Knowledge Norm** are not *purely epistemic* norms. These are norms that
846 concern both what voters should believe and what they should do. What Ray
847 has done wrong, we might think, is a product of both epistemic normativity
848 and norms of some other sort. In his critique of positive epistemic duties, Nel-
849 son (2010: 88) allows for just this sort of possibility, arguing that any apparent
850 positive epistemic duties actually “derive from epistemic rationality *plus* some
851 other source of normativity, such as morality or instrumental rationality.” It
852 could be that what explains Ray’s wrong comes from another normative source.

853
854 But like with the last objection, even if we accept that voters are not bound by
855 the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm**, this does not threaten
856 the central argument of this paper. If voters have no positive epistemic duties,
857 then voting does not allow them to cultivate intellectual responsibility. In order
858 to do so, they have to have epistemic obligations that they can reliably sat-
859 isfy. So like before, democracy fails to be a hospitable environment for forming
860 intellectual responsibility.

861 4.3 DOING NOTHING

862 Can citizens become intellectually responsible by doing nothing? As we have
863 discussed, the **Justified Belief Norm** and the **Knowledge Norm** are wide-
864 scope norms, forbidding the combination of ignorance and voting. Justified

¹⁹Others who express sympathy for the view that we have no positive epistemic duties include Littlejohn (2012: 46–48), Sutton (2007: 19), and Wrenn (2007). For responses arguing that we do have such duties, see Ichikawa (2022), McGrath (2025), Simion (2024), and Stapleford (2013).

belief, or knowledge, is only required of those who actually vote. This leaves open the possibility that ignorant or incompetent voters could satisfy the norms by not voting, cultivating intellectual responsibility by default.

Maybe this is a problem with our voting norms. After all, it does seem counterintuitive to think that someone could be intellectually responsible by doing nothing. Thus, the most natural move might be to reformulate the **Justified Belief Norm** or the **Knowledge Norm** so that they can't be satisfied by not voting.

There are multiple reasons, however, why I think this would be the wrong tact. First of all, there are cases where what is intellectually responsible *is* to do nothing at all. If the scientist doesn't have the data to support their hypothesis, then they shouldn't publish their paper. Likewise, if the umpire cannot tell whether there was a foul, they shouldn't call one. Intellectual responsibility can recommend inaction. Secondly, I don't think that this is unusual amongst the virtues. Charity can recommend not speaking an unkind word, and temperance can advise not having another drink. So it should come as no surprise that there are times that we can be intellectually responsible precisely by refraining from particular actions.

Rather, I think that we can clear up this issue by revisiting **Responsibility and Obligation**:

Responsibility and Obligation – A subject S is intellectually responsible only if S reliably recognizes their intellectual obligations and fulfills them at least in part due to this recognition

This formulation not only says what the intellectually responsible do but also *why* they do it. They don't fulfill their epistemic obligations by accident.

This should call to mind the familiar distinction between acting from virtue or merely in accord with it. To truly be intellectually virtuous, it is necessary that someone act *from* that virtue, satisfying their epistemic duties in part due to their recognition of them. This means that no one can become intellectually responsible by doing nothing, strictly speaking. Instead, when a citizen refrains from voting, they must do so because they (1) recognize their epistemic obligations and (2) decide that this is the best way they can satisfy them.

But perhaps most importantly, this is not what advocates of democracy have in mind when they tout its epistemic value. Those who think that democracies help citizens build the intellectual virtues likely think that it is *active participation* – exercising the right to vote, participating in public forums, or serving as a representative – that plays the key role in forming these character traits. They would be quite surprised to find out that it is the citizen who abstains, rather than the one who participates, who does better by way of cultivating their intellectual character.

910 CONCLUSION

911 Many accounts of the epistemic value of democracy are focused on outcomes,
 912 whether or not democratic deliberation and voting are truth-tracking. Due to
 913 the challenges mentioned in this paper – including rampant voter ignorance and
 914 a lack of strong incentives to become informed – some have argued that voting
 915 outcomes are very poor guides to the truth. Others, though, have made the
 916 case that even with poor inputs, democratic decision procedures can still be
 917 epistemically beneficial, whether that is because of something like the miracle
 918 of aggregation or the sourcing of diverse solutions to political problems.

919
 920 In this paper, I have turned to consider another potential source of epistemic
 921 value – the ways that democracy forms the intellectual characters of citizens.
 922 While some have suggested that democracy can help citizens cultivate the intel-
 923 lectual virtues, this claim has not been examined with sufficient scrutiny with
 924 regard to either (1) *which intellectual virtues* democracy is equipped to culti-
 925 vate or (2) *the democratic mechanisms* that produce them. I have made the
 926 case that, at least when it comes to intellectual responsibility, this claim seems
 927 unlikely. Rather, when we consider the virtue of intellectual responsibility and
 928 voting procedures, modern democracies seem more likely to push citizens to-
 929 wards intellectual negligence and carelessness than towards virtue.

930
 931 This also provides grounds for an epistemic critique of views that hold that,
 932 even with bad inputs, democratic voting outcomes can still track the truth.
 933 While this might provide a reason to favor democracy, the fact that obtain-
 934 ing these bad inputs is likely habituating citizens in intellectual vice gives us
 935 some epistemic reason to reject contemporary voting practices. In this way,
 936 arguments about intellectual virtue can potentially come apart from arguments
 937 about truth-tracking: it may be that the miracle of aggregation saves truth-
 938 tracking, but only at the expense of intellectual vice.

939
 940 But this, of course, is not the last word on whether democracy can form intellec-
 941 tually virtuous citizens. It may be that voting is likely to form other intellectual
 942 virtues such as open-mindedness or intellectual humility. And it could be that
 943 once we turn to other potential democratic mechanisms like public debate and
 944 deliberation, we find that these are more hospitable both to intellectual respon-
 945 sibility as well as a host of other intellectual virtues. Only by investigating
 946 these further questions will we know whether intellectual virtue offers an overall
 947 argument for, or against, democratic participation.

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