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Letter: Regarding voting for charity's sake

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Letter: Regarding Voting for Charity's Sake
Dear Editors:

Edlin et al.’s reason to “vote for charity’s sake” was a valiant attempt to justify, for the hard-nosed logical economist, why to vote on election day. As any public choice theorist knows, the individual benefit to voting (as measured by one’s probable effect on the election outcome) is too small compared to the individual costs (as measured in effort and time spent); so why vote, unless for charity’s sake?

The answer as to why we vote, however, may be simpler than trying to come up with a hypothetical charity value. It is likely more instinctual, in the same way that people in a Public Goods game will punish cheaters, at significant personal cost to themselves, just because their emotions and their instinct guides them to. Revenge, as modeled in these games, makes no sense. The individual costs are always greater than any individual benefits; however, great numbers of people still do it. Why? One theory is that individuals will punish cheaters because it sets a precedent and a warning that will deter future actors who may consider cheating in the next round. Punishing cheaters at significant personal cost may, therefore, be rational in a dynamic social equilibrium, if not necessarily from a static, individualized perspective. It is this instinct that may be driving voting behavior as well.

We humans know instinctively—if not logically—having grown up as social
animals, that some actions cause minor immediate personal losses, but are worth it for a dynamic social existence. Neoclassical models are wonderful at helping us to understand individual level decision-making when the only benefits and costs that matter are to a static, inward-looking individual. Our models have a much harder time (currently) at deciphering actions that involve dynamic social benefit and cost considerations.

The answers to questions like Why vote? and Why punish cheaters? likely don’t lie in a contrived method to force social considerations into individual benefit and cost calculations, as was valiantly attempted in Edlin et al. (who among us is truly aware that our vote might have a hypothetical charity value of $50,000?). The answers likely lie in dynamic social organizing instincts that are as yet still poorly understood. We don’t know exactly why we vote, but we will one day, as economic research broadens into new and burgeoning fields. And I’m confident the answer will be a rational one from a more dynamic perspective, because can 130 million voters really have been acting “irrationally” this past November 4th?

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REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING