Voting, Rationality and Reputation

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Why do people vote? This paper presents a solution to the voting paradox in rational choice theory, based on the interaction between two concepts: externalities (James Coleman) and reputation (Einar Overbye). Elaborating on the idea that voting is an investment in one's reputation, I will argue that there are two concepts of reputation: reputation-of-power and reputation-of-trust. The solution to the voting paradox can be found in the reputation-game between social actors holding these two different forms of reputation. During an electoral campaign, powerful opinion leaders can employ their reputation-of-power (power to impose sanctions) in order to get mere voters to vote in a certain way. The aim of the powerful opinion leaders is not to influence the outcome of the election but simply to acquire or maintain their reputation, while mere voters have an interest to vote as told in order to appear trustworthy (reputation-of-trust) to powerful opinion leaders. The act of voting is an unintended consequence of this power game.

Why do people vote? Notwithstanding its near-hegemonic status in contemporary Anglo-American political science, rational choice theory seems incapable of answering this apparently simple question. The fact that rational choice theory, for all its sophistication and popularity, struggles to deal with this basic puzzle has proved to be a major cause of concern and embarrassment, which has been fully exploited by its critics. Lars Udehn (1996) does not miss this golden opportunity to suggest that rational choice models are 'useless' in explanations of mass voting, while Donald Green and Ian Shapiro (1994) argue that failure to explain the act of going to the polls is an indication of the many pathologies that inflict rational choice theory, in fact its inability to answer such basic question suggests that the favourable appraisal rational choice theory has received within political science is both premature and over-inflated.

The paradox of voting was paradoxically not discovered by foes of the economic approach to politics. Instead it was Anthony Downs (1957, p. 265), widely recognized as the founding father of modern rational choice theory, who revealed it. In *An Economic Theory of Democracy* Downs writes:

> Heretofore we have assumed that voting is a costless act, but this assumption is self-contradictory because every act takes time. In fact, time is the principal cost of voting: time to register, to discover what parties are running, to deliberate, to go to the polls, and to mark the ballot. Since time is a scarce resource, voting is inherently costly.

> This fact alters our previous conclusion that everyone votes if he has any party preference at all. When there are costs to voting, they may outweigh the returns thereof; hence rational abstention becomes possible even for citizens who want a particular party to win. In fact, since the returns are often minuscule, even low voting costs may cause many partisan citizens to abstain.

To rephrase the paradox, the costs of voting are tangible, and the rewards of voting to the individual voter – based on the likelihood that his or her single vote will in fact swing the results of an election one way or the other – are infinitesimally minute, practically zero, therefore why should a rational person bother with voting?

The aim of this article is to defend rational choice theory against these accusations of 'uselessness', 'premature accolade' and perhaps even 'over-inflated ego'. In what follows, I will put forward a possible solution to the voting paradox, in the hope of convincing some sceptics why in the last analysis, and against all odds, it may be rational to vote after all. In formulating my own solution, I will not recapitulate on the many astute attempts by rational choice theorists to find a solution to this paradox, as there are already an abundance of excellent overviews of the literature on this issue, and I could not improve on what is already available to the reader.[1] Instead I will briefly summarize two recent attempts to solve the paradox, by James Coleman (1990) and Einar Overbye (1995), which I found most persuasive and which have inspired me to pursue my own solution.

Coleman and the Emergence of the Norm to Vote

Coleman attempts to solve the paradox of voting by suggesting that it may be rational for a norm to vote to emerge. According to this norm, actors transfer to one another rights of control over the act of voting, including the right to exercise approval for voting and disapproval for not voting. The key to this solution lies in the theory of externalities. Actions that have external consequences for actors who have no control over them are called externalities. These can be of two kinds: positive externalities (when an action benefits others) and negative externalities (when an action is harmful to others). Assuming that each social actor has a positive interest in the outcome of an election and a negative interest in the act of voting itself, and that the interest in the election outcome is greater than the interest against voting, the paradox of voting is solved when social actors realize that a norm to vote is generally beneficial, even though this norm gives others the right to impose sanctions, such as expressing disapproval of one's failure to vote.

Coleman's solution is extremely simple and, partly for that reason, attractive. Yet there are at least two problematic knots with this solution that need to be untangled. The first problem, which Coleman acknowledges, is that this norm will emerge only in social environments where most people agree on the desired outcome of the election. In other social environments where this is not the case, actors will be exposed to positive *and* negative sanctions. The risk is that if I receive positive sanctions by those who agree with me, and negative sanctions by those who disagree with me, the net result of this cross-pressure is that I am most likely to abstain from voting *tout court*. The second problem with Coleman's solution is that, as a rational voter, I have no incentive to influence the voting decisions of other voters, since I would have to incur the costs of providing positive or negative sanctions, and the probability that the person I am trying to influence will determine the outcome of the election is bound to be infinitesimally small, close to zero. In other words, we cannot simply presuppose that the costs to the provider of sanctions are even less than the expected benefits gained from influencing the vote of another individual.

I believe that Coleman's solution to the voting paradox can be strengthened, and its two existing problems solved, by introducing one fundamental variable in the equation: reputation. Directing our attention to the act of voting as an investment in reputation is Overbye's important contribution to the literature on the voting paradox. The solution I will put forward stems from the interaction between the theory of games with asymmetric information (centred on the concept of reputation) and the theory of positive and negative externalities (centred on the concept of emerging norms).

Overbye and the Reputation to Vote

It cannot be denied that on a strict cost-benefit analysis, voting is irrational. Yet the act of voting may not be irrational if this act is undertaken not with the intent of influencing the outcome of the election, but as a necessary prerequisite for attaining other goals. In other words, voting is part of a game other than the election of a ruler. Overbye's solution is of this nature. He tells us that voting can be viewed as a signal, used by the voter to show that he/she is concerned with bringing about the perceived 'common good'. To the extent that the reputation of being a decent citizen is a marketable commodity that is in anyone's self-interest to secure, and that one augments one's reputation of being a good citizen by taking part in elections, Overbye concludes that it is rational to vote.

One of the most appealing features of Overbye's explanation is that it helps to explain the divergence in turnout in different social environments. The fact that the voter is concerned about his/her reputation not only helps to explain why voter turnout is lower among citizens living in social environments in which it may hurt a person's reputation to vote,[2] but it also reminds us that people are bound to be influenced by the social milieu in which they operate.[3] As Overbye (1995, p. 384) suggests:

> If the motive behind voting is to enhance and/or uphold one's reputation as a sensible and trustworthy person, one would not expect voters to present their voting behaviour as motivated from narrow self-interest. Rather, one should expect people to vote in the name of the 'common interest'. But the common interest of whom? That depends on whom the voter (the agent) perceives as his main principals. It is not necessarily the common interest of his 'country' (or the world), but rather the common interest of those people whom the individual expects to get in contact with and/or to do exchanges with now and in the future.

For each rational voter, the common interest is defined in terms of the actor's present and probable future interactants, and it is towards these that the actor is likely to signal a commitment.

By pointing our attention to the concept of reputation, Overbye has made a valuable contribution to the debate on the voting paradox. Having said that, his solution still has some road to travel before one can claim that the paradox of voting has been solved. Michael Laver (1997) points out a major shortcoming in Overbye's explanation of voting as building one's social reputation, namely, it is not clear why voting in an election should be taken as an important signal of one's

sense of civic responsibility in other areas of social life. Do people really put so much emphasis on whether others have voted or not? Is voting what really makes us decent citizens? Another potential complication with Overbye's solution is the following. If my interest in voting is purely instrumental, namely as a way of building up my reputation, I will be the first to question the motivation behind other voters. Similarly, other voters may question the sincerity of my exuberant civic duty, indeed they may grow suspicious of my reasons for taking elections too seriously. Once people start suspecting that the only reason why I am voting is to enhance my reputation, the strategy of wanting to be seen as an active voter could backfire and turn into a liability rather than a virtue.[4] These critical observations do not necessarily force us to reject Overbye's model, but it is a strong reminder that there is more work to be done before we can claim that the voting paradox has been successfully resolved.

Before suggesting my solution to the voting paradox, I want to briefly mention one way (there may be others) in which Overbye's reputation-argument could be strengthened and further formalized with the help of game theory. Overbye's theory of voting, based on concern for one's reputation, could be analysed through the lenses of George Tsebelis' idea of nested games. Tsebelis (1990, p. 7, emphasis in original) reminds us that if an actor's choices appear to be sub-optimal, it is not necessarily because the actor's behaviour is irrational or mistaken. Instead we ought to question the observer's perspective: 'the observer focuses attention on only one game, but the actor is involved in a whole network of games – what I call *nested games*'. Tsebelis identifies two kinds of nested games, namely games in multiple arenas and games of institutional design. In the former, which is of particular interest to us, an actor may be involved simultaneously in games in several different arenas, although the observer focuses on only one arena (the principal arena). One of the major advantages of thinking in terms of games in multiple arenas is that it takes into account contextual factors. The situation in other arenas influences the payoffs of the actor in the principal arena, leading to the choice of different strategies. Applying Tsebelis' model to Overbye's solution, one could argue that the act of voting is only one arena in a context of multiple arenas. Thus the game of appointing a ruler (the game of elections) is nested within a larger, everyday life 'game' of maintaining a trustworthy reputation within one's community. It follows that what appears to the observer as irrational or mistaken behaviour (why bother with voting when one vote does not make a difference?) is rational when contextual factors, like concern for one's reputation in other areas, are taken into account.

I will return to Tsebelis' idea of nested games later in my argument. But first, I want to show how a broader conception of reputation can provide an invaluable link between Overbye's reputation-solution and Coleman's externalities-solution. I believe it is in the overlap between Overbye's and Coleman's theories that we should look for a possible solution to the voting paradox.

Two Concepts of Reputation

Applying the concept of reputation to electoral behaviour is particularly fruitful since elections are dynamic games, where repetition enables people to develop complex strategies. Overbye rightly argues that reputations have an instrumental

value, and voting may be seen as enhancing such reputation, yet he fails to use the idea of reputation to its full capacity. Overbye considers reputation exclusively as the *outcome* of the voting process, or in other words as the potential reward that allures people to take part in the voting process. This is in fact only half the story. Apart from being the reward for voting, reputation can also be seen as one of the *inputs* during an electoral campaign, which is relied upon to get others to vote.

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to define the concept of reputation with more precision. Strictly speaking, one's reputation is simply the record of one's performance in the past.[5] This definition is a useful starting point, but it does not get us very far. Saying that Anthony has 'a' reputation does not tell us anything about him unless we also know 'what' reputation Anthony has; the question 'what is reputation?' must be followed by the question 'reputation of what?'. The growing game theoretic literature on reputation attempts to answer the latter question by focusing on issues of co-operation and trust. Thus for example Elinor Ostrom (1998, p. 12, emphasis in original) reminds us that 'When many individuals use reciprocity, there is an incentive to acquire a *reputation* for keeping promises and performing actions with short-term costs but long-term net benefits'.[6] I suggest we call this the reputation-of-trust argument.

Reputation-of-trust constitutes the starting point of Overbye's analysis. According to Overbye, it is rational to invest in one's good reputation, to have others say or believe good things about our character, because it facilitates our future dealings with those around us. A good reputation is therefore a defining characteristic of our personality, bestowed to us from others, which we value for prudential reason. As Overbye (1998, p. 281) points out: 'by incurring the costs of lost opportunities to cheat in previous interactions, an individual gradually acquires a reputation for being trustworthy. He builds a 'trust-capital' which is of value to him in upcoming interactions, since it increases the likelihood that other individuals will be willing to take the risk of dealing with him'.[7]

This account of reputation is certainly legitimate, even enlightening, but ultimately limited. First of all, there is more to the concept of reputation-of-trust than what Overbye discusses in his article. Overbye considers how showing a concern for the 'common interest' can enhance one's reputation as a sensible and trustworthy person within a community. Yet one's reputation-of-trust may have nothing to do with promoting the 'common interest'. Instead, a person may simply be interested in appearing trustworthy to selected individuals within the community, in the hope of securing advantages from them in the future. Whether or not these selected individuals do in fact promote the 'common interest' is irrelevant. I will expand on this interpretation of reputation-of-trust later on in my argument.

Secondly, apart from reputation-of-trust, I want to suggest that there is another way of answering the 'reputation of what?' question, namely: reputation-of-power. Following Thomas Hobbes, we may want to say that reputation is a form of power, and as such it can be used instrumentally to accumulate even more power. In Part I, Chapter 10 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes (1994, p. 50) famously defined power as follows: 'The power of a man is his present means to obtain some future apparent good'. He then goes on to specify the meaning of instrumental power: 'instrumental are those powers which … are means to and instruments to acquire more,

as riches, reputation, friends, and the secret working of God, which men call good luck'. On the relationship between reputation and power, Hobbes (1994, p. 51) says:

> Reputation of power is power, because it draweth with it the adherence of those that need protection.
>
> So is reputation of love of a man's country (called popularity) for the same reason.
>
> Also, what quality soever maketh a man beloved or feared of many, or the reputation of such quality, is power, because it is a means to have the assistance and service of many. Good success is power, because it maketh reputation of wisdom or good fortune, which makes men either fear him or rely on him.

What we learn from Hobbes is that one can use reputation to gain even more reputation, and reputation is desirable exactly because it is a form of power.

A word about power. Power is a dispositional concept, which refers to an ability or capacity. Because potentialities cannot be reduced to actualities, it is a mistake to confuse the existence of a disposition to be powerful with its exercise (the exercise fallacy) or its vehicle (the vehicle fallacy).[8] Furthermore it is necessary to distinguish between outcome power and social power. Outcome power (power *to*) is the ability to bring about or help bring about outcomes, while social power (power *over*) is the ability to deliberately change the incentive structure of another actor to bring about or help to bring about outcomes. Political power is, first and foremost, social power, and the best way to study social power is in terms of bargaining theory.[9]

I want to suggest that the Hobbesian understanding of reputation as a form of instrumental power is pivotal to an adequate understanding of voting behaviour, where actors are engaged in strategic interactions with one another and information is asymmetrically distributed.[10] Thanks to Overbye we have seen how voters can use the election in order to be seen as good citizens, and therefore increase their reputation of trust. But apart from this, reputation plays another key role in the psychology of the rational voter, namely, powerful opinion leaders may use their reputation-of-power to change the incentive structure of other voters in an effort to convince them to vote in a certain way. The bargaining relationship between voters, based on their respective reputations, is perhaps the key to understanding why it may be rational to vote. The central intuition of this solution to the voting paradox is that one may use one's reputation, or social standing, as a positive social capital in order to influence the vote of others – and in the process get them to vote.

Reputation-of-Power

The concept of reputation is central to the solution of the voting paradox. Overbye argues that people have a vested interest in acquiring or maintaining a reputation as a trustworthy person, and the act of voting, being a signal of their concern for the common interest, makes them appear trustworthy. I have called this the reputation-of-trust argument. Overbye's solution has the merit of zooming into a

game of asymmetric information, which enables him to construct a bridge between rational choice and 'interactionist' (even ethical) interpretations of political behaviour. In devising his solution Overbye does not address the added complication of interaction between rational actors standing in different positions in the ladder of social hierarchy. I believe that relaxing this assumption of social equality is greatly beneficial to a solution to the voting paradox grounded on the concept of reputation. In a community where social hierarchies exist, there are two types of reputations at work, reputation-of-power and reputation-of-trust. Let's assume that there are two types of social actors in a community, the 'principal' (a powerful opinion leader) and the 'agent' (a mere voter). The principal and the agent are concerned about different types of reputation, where reputation-of-power applies to the principal and reputation-of-trust to the agent. Furthermore the type of reputation the agent is concerned with must be analysed in relation to the principal. It is the reputation-of-power by powerful opinion leaders that triggers mere voters to develop a reputation-of-trust.

A hypothetical example will make this relationship clearer. Let's assume that for a certain election there are 10 potential voters, Anthony, Beth, Chloe, Doris … Judy. Because of his social status, Anthony is a powerful opinion leader and therefore stands in a stronger bargaining position with respect to the other nine voters. Although the other nine voters do not have perfect information regarding Anthony's power, we can assume that they believe his threats to be credible; as a general rule a situation of asymmetric information will benefit the agent in a stronger bargaining position, since those under him are unlikely to test his powers.[11] If Anthony wants, say, the Right Wing Party to win the election, then he will start using his reputation-of-power to get Beth, Chloe, Doris … Judy to vote for the Right Wing candidate – and in the process, as an unintended but necessary consequence, solve the paradox of voting. The reasons why Anthony may want the Right Wing Party to win the election can be varied: the representative candidate of this party may have offered Anthony some reward if she wins the electoral race; Anthony may fear that his well-being (including reputation) is under threat if the Left Wing Party wins the election; Anthony may have emotional reasons to prefer the Right Wing Party to the Left Wing Party; etc. In the last analysis, Anthony's reason for wanting a certain party to win an election is irrelevant. What is important is that Anthony will use his reputation-of-power in order to get others to vote as he indicates. By telling people what to do (in this case, how to vote) Anthony is reinforcing his reputation-of-power within his community.

Likewise, the other mere voters (Beth, Chloe, Doris … Judy) will have to calculate the likelihood that Anthony will use his greater power to either punish them if they don't vote for the Right Wing Party or reward them if they do: Beth may fear that Anthony will diminish her well-being unless she votes for the Right Wing candidate; Chloe may fear that Anthony will use physical or psychological violence against her unless she votes for the Right Wing candidate (Chloe is Anthony's wife); Doris will want to foster her own reputation as a trustworthy person in the eyes of Anthony by doing what he suggests, hoping to cash in on Anthony's power; etc. Once again, the reasons for voting for a particular party may vary, but the point is that, *ceteris paribus*, if mere voters are asked to vote in a certain way by a more powerful opinion leader, it will be rational for them to do as they are told,

due to the potential rewards that come with voting and/or the potential punishments of not voting.[12]

What are the advantages of using the reputation-of-power and reputation-of-trust arguments as a solution to the voting paradox? We know that an opinion leader is concerned with his reputation-of-power. The reason for this is not because the more people he convinces to vote as he indicates, the more rational the act of voting becomes for him, since his vote now carries more weight than that of the average voter. After all, having the power to influence, say, ten votes, hardly makes the act of voting more rational, since the likelihood that ten votes will in fact swing the result of an election are still too small to justify voting on rational grounds (the 2000 US presidential election notwithstanding). The key to the reputation-of-power argument lies elsewhere. When considering electoral behaviour, we are looking at what Tsebelis (1990) calls a nested game, that is, a whole network of games, where an agent operates in a context of multiple arenas. In this multidimensional milieu, appointing a ruler (the political arena where the game of elections is played) is nested within the larger context of maintaining personal relations within one's community (the social arena where the game of everyday life is played). Therefore what makes voting rational for an opinion leader has more to do with the concern for maintaining or enhancing his reputation-of-power than the ability to influence the outcome of the election. Similarly, the electoral behaviour of mere voters can be explained in terms of their concern for reputation, although this time it's not reputation-of-power but reputation-of-trust. If a mere voter decides to vote, it is not because she wants to influence the outcome of the election, but because she is concerned to maintain her reputation-of-trust. Such reputation is not gained by acting as a good citizen, as Overbye claims, but by appearing as trustworthy to the opinion leaders in her community.

Illustrations

The reputation-game[13] being played by powerful opinion leaders (reputation-of-power) and mere voters (reputation-of-trust) is reflected in a number of illustrations from around the world. Take for example the following authoritative account of political life in Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s. In her influential autobiography, 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú (1985, p. 157) tells the story of how illiterate Mayan-Indian peasants like herself working in *fincas* (plantations) for subsistence wages were forced to vote for right-wing General Kjell in the general elections of 1974, who had the support of the army and of the rich and powerful landowners: 'The landowners on the South coast forced many of the peasants to vote for Kjell. The overseers made them. They said anyone who didn't vote would be thrown out of work'. Menchú adds 'no one wanted to vote. But behind the promises were threats, they said that if we didn't vote, our villages would be repressed. The people were forced to vote'.

Another illustration, less extreme than Menchú's account of politics in Guatemala, comes from Italy. In Banfield's 1958 seminal study of a village in southern Italy, the interactions between Montegrano's three social classes (peasants, artisans/merchants, upper classes) are explained in terms of the patron-client relationship,

where the upper classes will reinforce their privileged position at every oppor-
tunity. For example, Banfield reports that when a gentleman of Montegrano buys
fruits and vegetables in the local street market, he hands it 'wordlessly' to the
nearest peasant, who carries it to his home, although no payment for the service
occurs. Banfield (1958, pp. 76–7) explains this instance of consensual exploitation
as follows: 'the peasant wants to be polite and amiable (*civile*) and he knows that a
time will come when the gentleman can give or withhold a favour or an injury'.
What Balfield calls 'wanting to be polite and amiable' I have called in this paper a
concern for one's reputation-of-trust.

A similar phenomenon can be witnessed during elections in Montegrano. Banfield
(1958, p. 29) quotes the disparaging but revealing comments of a lower class
Montegranese on the ex-Mayor of the town: 'he ended up by commanding with
the haughtiness of a marshal of the army, just as if he were commanding his
soldiers … Those he liked he would raise to the stars and those he did not like he
would crush … he gave the impression that we were living in the era of the feudal
lords. As for the people, what they think depends upon who they are. If they
receive favours, they are followers'. Although Banfield was writing in the 1950s,
not a great deal has changed in Italy in the last 50 years. During the heights of
political corruption in the 1980s, politicians and politicos built their careers on their
ability to secure political patronage within the party. Any aspiring politician had to
prove their worth to the party in terms of gold and votes. A point often overlooked
by the literature on political corruption is that the currency of corruption is not
only money but also votes. In the 1980s many political careers in Italy were made
almost exclusively on the basis of one's ability to deliver 'packets of votes' to
designated politicians. This was the case for example of Mario Chiesa in Milan.
As director of an old people's institution Chiesa was able to raise for the Socialist
Party many millions of dollars through kickbacks and other illegal commissions
of contracts, furthermore he also set up a political network that allowed him to
control approximately 7000 votes.[14]

The illustrations of Guatemala and Italy are extreme, of course, but the logic
behind these illustrations is similar to what one would expect to find even in less
extreme circumstances. The point of these illustrations is only to show that every
community has powerful opinion leaders, and powerful opinion leaders have an
interest in maintaining their reputation-of-power. In the case of Guatemala and
Italy, these powerful opinion leaders were operating in a context that allowed
them to abuse their position of power shamelessly and openly. In less extreme
contexts one would expect powerful opinion leaders to operate in more discrete
ways, but the fundamental logic remains the same. The fact that in the USA or
England, for example, one would not expect to find the sort of abuses of power one
finds in Guatemala and Italy, does not falsify the hypothesis that powerful opinion
leaders and reputation-games exist in every political community. The only differ-
ence is that since power can take different forms, there are many different types of
powerful opinion leaders. Apart from fascistic landowners and corrupt politicians,
powerful opinion leaders can be found amongst religious leaders, patriarchal males
in traditional families, intellectuals, or role models. These less extreme types of
powerful opinion leaders can be found in any political community, and during
election times they will have an incentive to enhance their reputation-of-power

by telling other less powerful members of the community, who happen to find themselves under their jurisdiction of power, how to vote.

That powerful opinion leaders will attempt to persuade others to vote in a certain way helps to explain a curious but revealing phenomenon that (to the best of my knowledge) occurs before every election virtually anywhere in the world; namely, that in the run up to an election many individuals transform themselves, almost overnight, into political experts. Thus we find that politics is openly discussed within families at dinnertime, with friends in social circles, and (at least in Mediterranean climates) even with complete strangers in bars, markets and other public places. According to the solution being put forward in these pages, it is not only rational to vote, but it is rational to take a public stand, to be vociferous about one's political leanings, and to engage in what can be defined as private political campaigns. The powerful opinion leader sees the election as an opportunity to promote his standing within the community.

Reputation-of-Power and Coleman's Solution

One important advantage of the reputation-of-power argument is that it can provide an answer to the problems plaguing Coleman's solution to the voting paradox. I pointed out earlier that there are two major problems with Coleman's solution. First, that the norm to vote will emerge only in social environments where most people agree on the desired outcome of the election. In other social environments the problem of cross-pressure may lead some voters to abstain. But if we endorse the reputation-of-power argument, abstention resulting from cross-pressure should be less common and therefore less problematic. Let's assume that there are two powerful but antagonistic opinion leaders, Black and Red, and they both apply pressure on weaker voter Beth. Black wants Beth to vote for the Right-wing party, and Red for the Left-wing Party. What should Beth do? The most rational decision would be for Beth to opt for one of the two opinion leaders and go public on her intention to vote for his party, in the hope of establishing a beneficial rapport with that specific powerful opinion leader. Beth's behaviour can be explained as follows. Let's assume that Beth decides to vote for the Right-wing Party. The advantage of publicly siding with the opinion leader Black is twofold. First, Black will protect Beth from the threat of negative sanctions from Red. As Hobbes said, reputation-of-power is power, because it draws with it the adherence of those that need protection – in this case, Beth may need protection from opinion leader Red. Secondly, it is a first step towards establishing a relationship-of-trust and cooperation between Beth and Black, which hopefully will benefit both agents. Since mere voters have an interest in maintaining or increasing their reputation-of-trust *vis-à-vis* a more powerful opinion leader, it follows that it is still rational for a mere voter to appear to be voting for someone even if she is under cross-pressure from opposing camps.

There is a second problem with Coleman's solution. It may be objected that no one wants to invest resources providing positive and/or negative sanctions in order to influence the voting behaviour of other people. This complication applies to Coleman's norm-abiding actors, who are expected to impose sanctions on those who fail to vote, and it may possibly also apply to the powerful opinion leaders

in the reputation-of-power solution advanced in this paper. In fact, the costs of sanctioning provide a bigger headache for Coleman's emergence of norm solution than for my reputation-game solution.

There is a major difference between the two solutions. In Coleman's solution the benefits resulting from the election are defined in terms of the public good (the result of the election), indeed it is this public good that ultimately justifies the emergence of a norm of voting. According to the reputation-game solution, the actors who endure the costs of sanctioning others are the powerful opinion leaders, and the benefits they hope to gain from the election are only in part provided by the public good (the electoral result). More importantly, private goods such as acquiring or maintaining a reputation-of-power are the principal potential benefits of an election to a powerful opinion leader.

The prospect of private benefits may justify incurring the costs of providing positive and/or negative sanctions. Following the logic of the chain-store paradox in game theory,[15] in the reputation-game solution it is rational to appear 'tough' and incur high short-term losses for the sake of acquiring or maintaining a reputation for toughness which will deliver long-term gains. To the powerful opinion leader, providing positive and negative sanctions to mere voters is a cost in the short run, but a potential benefit in the long run. The benefit is not so much tied to the results of the election, but to the reputation-of-power being established or maintained. In other words, the costs in providing sanctions to others can be seen as an investment in one's reputation. The periodical event of an election is an opportunity for powerful opinion leaders to reinforce their position of power, or simply to remind others who is the opinion leader in their community.

It is also worth pointing out that like any business-person the powerful opinion leader will want to invest resources where the probability of making a profit is highest. Powerful opinion leaders will not dish out sanctions indiscriminately. To threaten someone who I expect to vote for the opposition (and furthermore to lie to me about it) is more likely to increase my reputation as a buffoon, rather than my reputation-of-power. Thus powerful opinion leaders will target their sanctions by offering rewards and punishments not just to any mere voter, but only to those who are likely to be persuaded. Powerful opinion leaders can also take certain steps to protect themselves from mere voters who will try to cheat the system by saying 'Yes' to all those who put pressure on them. The simplest way is for powerful opinion leaders to exclude all mere voters who appear to be milking more than one cow from future rewards.[16]

Another way to increase the probability that the investment in one's reputation-of-power will pay dividends is by asking the voter who has been chosen for sanctions/rewards for a signal of goodwill or trust. For example, powerful opinion leader Black can ask mere voter Beth to take a public stand in favour of the Right-wing party. This can take different forms, from participating in the electoral campaign, to joining rallies, to agreeing to put a party sticker on her window. Being forced to make a public stand for the party favoured by the powerful opinion leader has at least one side advantage for Beth, namely, other opinion leaders will lose interest in her, and retract all future negative sanctions.

Three Counter-arguments

There are, of course, at least three possible counter-arguments to my solution to the voting paradox. First, it could be argued that my solution falls outside the pale of rational choice theory. If it is rational to go public about one's political leanings during an election campaign, as I indicated, it may be argued that there is a symbolic element to my account of rationality, and that symbolic rationality is different from instrumental rationality. The symbolic dimension of rationality has recently been revived by Robert Nozick (1993, p. 137, emphasis in original), who argues that instrumental rationality (causally expected utility) is not the whole of our rationality, since apart from what is caused or produced, we also care about symbolic meaning: 'evidential and symbolic factors have functioned with *very* significant social consequences in human history (recall again the literature on the role played in the development of capitalism by the Calvinist view of *sign* of election)'.[17] As a response to this argument in general, and to Nozick in particular, I would argue that symbolic and instrumental rationality are not necessarily mutually exclusive, since one can use symbolism for instrumental reasons. Voting is a perfect example of this. Thus while it is true that there is a certain symbolism in my account of voting, it is important to remember that such symbolism is not an end-in-itself, instead it is ultimately to be valued for its potentially beneficial consequences.

Secondly, it may be objected that while *some* people play an active and explicit role during an election campaign, *most* of the people do not, furthermore only a minority of people have the reputation or public standing to engage in what I referred to earlier as a private political campaign. Therefore rational choice theory still fails to explain the vast majority of cases where individuals, with no reputation, engage in the 'irrational' act of voting. This objection can be refuted by denying the validity of the claim that the vast majority of people have no reputation. While it is true that only some people have a reputation-of-power, the vast majority of people are concerned about their reputation-of-trust. The solution to the voting paradox being put forward in this article starts from the assumption that different social actors are concerned with different faces of reputation. Those with sufficient reputation-of-power will want to enhance their reputation (and social standing) by engaging in private political campaigns aimed at convincing less powerful members of the community to vote in a certain way. The less powerful members of the community in turn will try to enhance their reputation-of-trust by entering their names in the 'good book' of powerful opinion leaders. Another way of expressing this idea is to stress that there are two types of reputation at stake, reputation-of-power and reputation-of-trust, and that these two conceptions of reputation reinforce one another. Thus for example Anthony enhances his reputation (of power) by using his greater bargaining position to convince Beth, Chloe and Doris to vote in a certain way,[18] and Beth, Chloe and Doris in turn will gain in reputation (of trust) by following the indications of Anthony.

Finally, it could be argued that the secret ballot rule poses a problem for powerful opinion leaders. Under pressure from opposing powerful opinion leaders Black and Red, mere voter Beth can vote for one of the two parties, and (if asked) tell Black that she voted for the Right-wing Party, and tell Red that she voted for the

Left-wing party, in the hope of maintaining good relations (and therefore enhance her reputation) *vis-à-vis* both Black *and* Red. This objection can be refuted on the grounds that this scenario is unlikely to materialize, being a very dangerous strategy that can too easily backfire. We have already seen that as a rule of thumb, it is not in the interest of powerful opinion leaders to apply sanctions on voters judged likely to vote for the opposition, as this would constitute a lost investment by the opinion leader. In other words, Beth's strategy of doubling her rewards by trying to please two competing opinion leaders may leave her with no rewards from either Black or Red. Furthermore, as pointed out already, powerful opinion leaders will ask Beth for a symbolic gesture of good will, which will send out a clear message to competing opinion leaders to keep away.[19] The voting paradox is about *why* people vote, not *how*. The fact that under a democratic political system powerful opinion leaders are not in a position to know for sure who mere voters voted for is not a problem for the reputation-game solution. As long as we can explain why people have a rational incentive to go out and vote, we have a solution to the voting paradox.

Conclusion

The knock-out punch used by virtually all critics of rational choice is that this theory is apparently unable to explain what is perhaps the most basic political event in any democracy: the fact that on election day many millions of individuals go out to vote.

In this paper, I have suggested a way in which rational choice theorists may respond to this accusation. I have argued that if rational choice theory is pushed to give one answer to the question 'why vote?', then the concept of reputation is perhaps the key to a possible solution. Elaborating on Overbye's idea that voting is an investment in one's reputation-of-trust, I have argued that reputation is also a form of power, which can be used to create more power. This conception of reputation, which I have termed reputation-of-power, complements Overbye's idea of reputation-of-trust. This enriched conception of reputation in turn complements Coleman's solution to the voting paradox, to the extent that reputation can be used instrumentally by certain powerful individuals to convince others to vote.[20]

I believe the solution to the voting paradox being put forward here adds a new dimension to the literature. In his most recent attempt to come to terms with the question 'When is it rational to vote?', John Aldrich (1997, p. 390) compares the validity of two opposing approaches: the 'investment' and the 'expressive' models. He concludes that the turnout decision is not an investment decision, but what he calls 'an act of consumption': 'the obvious tack is to view the voting question as something other than an act of investment in this particular election at this particular time. Here, I argued that turnout should be considered a decision, a perfectly rational decision, to express one's preference'.

It seems to me that setting up the puzzle in terms of a dichotomy between investment and expression is both misleading and limiting. Of course Aldrich is right to reject the investment model if 'investments' are defined narrowly as resources employed to secure the outcome of an election. Yet there is another way to understand the turnout decision as an investment decision; namely, as an investment in

one's reputation. For the powerful opinion leader it is an investment in his/her reputation-of-power, while for the mere voter it is an investment in his/her reputation-of-trust.

In the last analysis, the result of the election is not what voting is about. We are facing what Tsebelis calls a nested game, therefore the solution to the voting paradox should not be sought within the logic of electoral politics. The reason why people vote is not primarily because they want to influence the outcome of the election, but because they are caught in a web of power relations, where reputation is the all-important factor. Those who have a reputation-of-power use it by providing negative and positive sanctions on those who are less powerful, who in turn have an incentive to comply for the sake of acquiring a reputation-of-trust and therefore maintaining good relations with the more powerful members of their community.

If we relax Coleman's assumption that each social actor has a positive interest in the outcome of an election, the solution to the voting paradox becomes visible. The norm of voting, to use Coleman's terminology, emerges as the unintended consequence of the reputation-game between voters, or to be more precise as the unintended consequence of a reputation-game between powerful opinion leaders and mere voters.

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Notes

1 For an overview of the literature, see Mueller (1989, chap. 18); Laver (1997, chap. 5); Aldrich (1997).

2 In fact, in some contexts it may even enhance someone's reputation not to vote: 'if the common view among one's (perceived) principals is that 'all politicians are crooks' voting may well jeopardize a person's reputation' (Overbye, 1995, p. 377).

3 On this point, see Uhlaner (1989).

4 Laver (1997) raises a similar perplexity. He questions whether doing a clearly irrational act, such as voting, would be seen as a positive indication of one's worth. What I am suggesting is not that voting is irrational, but that it is rational for the wrong reasons, namely to make us look better than we really are.

5 Campbell (1995, chap. 4).

6 See also Campbell (1995); Hargreaves-Heap and Varoufakis (1995, chap. 6); Kreps (1990, chap. 4).

7 This quote is taken from a revised and amended version of the article which first appeared in the *European Journal of Political Research* in 1995.

8 See Morriss (1987, Part I).

9 On the distinction between outcome and social power, see Dowding (1991, 1996). On the bargaining approach to political power, see Harsanyi (1976).

10 See Dowding *et al.* (1995).

11 One's reputation-of-power ultimately depends on the credibility of one's reputation, as for example in the case of a Mafioso: 'a reputation for credible protection and protection itself overlap to a

considerable extent. The more robust the reputation of a Mafioso, the lower the need to have recourse to its underlying resources, such as violence or intelligence gathering', Gambetta (1994, p. 356). See also Kreps (1990).

12 For an illuminating analysis of how asking can motivate people into action, see Varese and Yaish (2000).

13 I am borrowing this term from Gambetta (1994). See also Tsebelis (1990).

14 'I was not kept on as head of an agency like the Trivulzio [the old people's home] simply because I knew the details of the job or because I was a good health administrator, but also because I was to some extent a power that controlled a certain number of votes in Milan. To acquire this power, which, concretely, meant no less than 7000 votes, I [created and maintained] a political organization that would make possible the collection of preference votes throughout the territory of Milan', M. Chiesa 'Confessioni che Cambiano la Storia', *L'Espresso*, 28 June 1992, p. 18, quoted in Della Porta (1993, p. 104). See also Bufacchi and Burgess (2001).

15 For a brief account of the chain-store paradox in game theory, see Ordeshook (1992, pp. 247–9).

16 In *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* Banfield (1958, pp. 101 and 103) interviewed a peasant, named Prato, on his voting behaviour. Prato said that before elections all the parties send people around asking voters to vote for their party. Prato said 'Yes' to all who asked for his vote, but then he voted for the party that had given him the most. Banfield comments that since the parties could not trust him to vote as he promised, none of the parties offered to buy his vote.

17 Nozick's distinction between instrumental and symbolic rationality seems to echo Scanlon's distinction between the instrumental and symbolic value of choices; see Scanlon (1988).

18 As Hobbes (1994, p. 50) reminds us 'For the nature of [instrumental] power is in this point like to fame, increasing as it proceeds'.

19 There is also a third strategy that powerful opinion leaders can implement to overcome the problems posed by the secret ballot: instil fear of an uncanny nature. One of the most blatant and outrageous inventions by political parties to win the battle of cross-pressure was witnessed in Italy in the 1948 elections. In a country deeply divided by social and ideological cleavages, the Christian Democrats came out with an ingenious electoral slogan: careful how you vote, because God can see you. This was a shameless attempt to instil a grain of uncertainty in the minds of Catholics with an ideological sympathy for the communist alternative. To reinforce this message, on 14 July 1949 the Holy Office issued a decree prescribing excommunication on all 'the faithful who profess communist, materialist and anti-Christian doctrines and all those who defend or propagate them' … See Allum (1973, pp. 58–61).

20 In the revised version of his original article, Overbye (1998, p. 291) suggests that his solution can be regarded as a supplement, or alternative, to Coleman's attempt to explain voting in terms of a social norm.

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