



<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Rational Voting in European Parliament Elections: A Critical Reply to Wolkenstein

Faruk Aksoy, Sabancı University, afaruk@sabanciuniv.edu

Aksoy, Faruk. 2020. "Rational Voting in European Parliament Elections: A Critical Reply to Wolkenstein." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (4): 10-15.
<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4WO>.

This essay is a critical reply to Professor Wolkenstein's recent article (2020) "Epistemic Barriers to Rational Voting: The Case of European Parliament Elections." Professor Wolkenstein offers a theoretical account by answering the question of whether voting in European Parliament elections, which is the only election for a supranational parliament on the world, can be rational.

By analyzing three scenarios in which voters have different reasons to vote, the article argues that even though casting a rational vote is possible in EP elections, voters face more epistemic and motivational barriers to be able to vote rationally in comparison to national elections. Concomitantly, the article suggests that the existence and increasing level of the salience of transnational party groups might help people to cast a rational vote in EP elections by alleviating the epistemic and motivational burdens on the voters' shoulders. In the following paragraphs, I will present a brief review of the article alongside a critical assessment of it by providing comments and suggestions.

Barriers on Rational Voting in European Parliament Elections

As Professor Wolkenstein briefly reviews, the rationality of voting is one of the linchpins of not only the literature on voting behavior in particular but also literature on comparative politics in general. Following the Downs's conception (1957), the central puzzle in the literature is why people vote; even though, the impact of their individual vote on the election results is nearly zero. If this question sounds, people might not have a rational reason to vote in elections in terms of changing the results of elections. In this regard, scholars have diverted their attention to possible reasons to vote other than changing the results of elections. For instance, people might cast a vote in the election since they perceive voting as a civic duty (Blais and Galais 2016), or they might have a desire to express their political opinions (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Nevertheless, the literature also contains alternative arguments to defend that affecting the results of elections might be a rational reason for showing up at the ballot box in election day.

One of these arguments is applied by Professor Wolkenstein to explain the rationality in EP elections. He applies Goldman's (1999) and Tucker's (2008) arguments of "causally efficacious set of votes," to explain the rational voting. The argument suggests that casting a vote is rational if the voter predicts that her vote will be a part of the set of votes, which will cause the party or candidate that she prefers to prevail in elections. By framing the rational voting in this way, the nominal probability of rational voting increases; because, a rational voter considers the probability of being a part of a causally efficacious set instead of being a pivotal voter individually when they calculate the expected utility of voting in an election. Thus, the probability of changing the outcome of the election by being in a causally efficacious set is far higher than changing the election's outcome individually, which makes voting a more rational practice.

Hence, the article positions itself in the literature on rational voting by applying the causally efficacious set argument to EP elections, which has *sui generis* features in comparison to national elections. Before proceeding to the core arguments of the article, it might be

mushrooming to start with the article's definition for the rational vote. Professor Wolkenstein suggests that voting is rational if individuals (roughly correctly) judge the likelihood of being part of efficacious set high, and if the expected utility of voting being part of the efficacious set is not lower than that of any alternative activity" (295). In other words, he states that if a voter calculates her vote's probability to be in an efficacious set to decide to vote and gain greater expected utility from voting in comparison to the expected utility of any other activity, then her vote can be defined as rational.

Following the definition of the rational vote, the central task of the paper is to show the rational voting in EP elections is possible, even though settings of EP elections make casting a rational vote harder for the voters. In other words, the focus of the article is the impediments to cast a rational vote in EP elections in comparison to national elections. In this regard, Professor Wolkenstein argues that EP elections pose extra barriers for rational voting by making the calculation for the probability of being in a causally efficacious set more complex and decreasing the level of the expected utility of voters from casting a vote. For analytical clarity, the article conceptualizes these impediments for rational voting under two groups, namely epistemic and motivational barriers. Epistemic barriers are those which make the calculations for the probability of being a part of causally efficacious set heavier and more complex. Concomitantly, motivational barriers are those which decrease the expected utility of voting in comparison to the expected utility of alternative actions.

To embody why and in what ways the institutional settings of EP elections make the epistemic and motivational barriers heavier for voters, the paper discusses three scenarios that represent the possible rational reasons of a voter to turnout in the EP elections. In each scenario, the article presents in what ways and to what extent the epistemic and motivational barriers make the task of voters' calculations, which are required to fulfill their scenario-induced reason, harder. Also, these scenarios also vary not only the reason to vote but also the voting options of voters, namely national political parties and transnational party groups. In this regard, a voter's rational reasons to vote for transitional party groups are discussed in the first two scenarios.

The first scenario assumes that a voter wants to be in an efficacious set which causes her most preferred transnational party group to win the election, whereas the second scenario assumes that the voters' aim is to be in the efficacious set which ensures the best outcome for her most preferred transnational party group. Professor Wolkenstein also states that the second scenario can explain the instances of strategic voting "by replacing the transnational party groups to strategically chosen party group" (302). Lastly, the third scenario assumes that the voter's aim is to be in the efficacious set, which maximizes the number of seats that her most preferred national party in the European Parliament.

In the first two scenarios, the issue which makes casting a rational vote difficult epistemically stems from the fact that voters need to process too much information to estimate their vote's probability to be in the efficacious set. Voters need to know the expected vote shares of transnational party groups in each country firstly, and additionally, they need to know how the votes will be transferred to the seats in the European Parliament. In the third scenario, the paper argues that impediments on the calculation of additional seat threshold increase the epistemic barrier, varying the number of the seat that allotted to the voters' country. Additionally, as a motivational barrier, under certain circumstances, helping their

national party to increase a small number of seats might not motivate people to cast a vote in EP elections.

After diagnosing the barriers and the institutional settings that heighten these barriers, Professor Wolkenstein offers a solution that might overcome these impediments on rational voting. The article proposes that increasing the activity and salience of transnational party groups in EP elections decreases the epistemic and motivational barriers on rational voting by decreasing the complexity of information, alongside make reaching the information easier for the voters in EP elections. Voters might learn and process the information about the expected vote shares of transnational party groups easier than the expected vote share of parties in 28 European countries during the decision-making process for voting. Meanwhile, the article suggests that transnational party groups might decrease motivational barriers as well. Since the importance of national party platforms alleviate the uncertainty about to what extent the national party will be effective in the European Parliament will be eliminated.

A Critical Assessment

Professor Wolkenstein's article offers an important theoretical insight for rational voting in EP elections. Since the literature on EP elections has been widely built upon whether EP elections are second-order or not (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Hobolt and Spoon 2012; de Vries and Hobolt 2016), scholarly works on the theoretical discussion about rational voting in EP elections has been low in volume. Beyond this, Professor Wolkenstein's article contributes to literature since the contemporary literature on voting behavior has been dominated by empirical research, which sometimes neglects or narrows the scope of the discussion on why people vote. Therefore, this paper is a valuable piece to widen our perspective on voting behavior, as classical literature of comparative politics did.

In addition to its contribution to the literature on rational voting, another strength of the article is to use scenarios as a tool to discuss the impact of the institutional settings on rational voting. The effect of institutions can be better analyzed and understood by taking how they interact into account. For this purpose, using scenarios can help us to detect the combined effects of institutions, as Professor Wolkenstein's article successfully proves. Also, I think the article's arguments on the epistemic barriers are mushrooming to understand the effect of institutions on voting behavior in terms of people's reason to vote. Overall, Professor Wolkenstein's article excellently handles the subject matter.

Nevertheless, I may raise several issues and suggestions about some details of the paper. The first issue that I want to raise is about a part of the definition of rational voting. Just to remind, rational voting is defined as "voting is rational if individuals (roughly correctly) judge the likelihood of being part of efficacious set high, and if the expected utility of voting being part of the efficacious set is not lower than that of any alternative activity" (295).

The second part of the definition argues that it is rational to vote unless any other action's expected utility is higher than the expected utility of being part of the efficacious set. The question that pops out here is what might be "any other action." In fact, Professor Wolkenstein provides an example to clarify this issue:

... a voter may in-principle want a particular party to win a particular election (she thinks this party is the best of all available ones), and also judge that her vote could be in the causally efficacious set, but still rationally decide not to vote because she is fundamentally unconvinced that the party's front runner is capable of effecting the positive change she would like to see (for instance because she thinks that the front runner has diluted the party's ideological profile and ratcheted down political ambitions). Instead of voting, she then decides to join her local party branch in order to contribute to restoring the party's original ideological profile – an action she (rightly or wrongly) considers to have a higher expected utility than voting (298).

In sum, the example suggests that a voter might prefer to join the local party branch instead of voting since she does not like the profile of the front-runner, and under these circumstances, her absence in voting is rational. Even though the example sounds well by itself, there might be several counterexamples that might disagree with the overall argument. For instance, suppose that a voter is satisfied by the profile of the front-runner of the party, and to contribute the electoral process, she wants to join the party organization and actively participate in the campaigning process. Additionally, let's assume that the expected utility of this voter to join the party organization is higher than her expected utility to vote for the front-runner in the party. Under these circumstances, if she votes for the front runner, is her vote rational or not? I think the central issue here is defining rational behavior in a binary manner, or in other words, zero-sum in nature. Alternative ways of political participation might sometimes reinforce each other, and it might be rational to engage in multiple of these alternative behaviors at the same time. Therefore, I found comparing the expected utilities of political participation to determine which option is more rational a little bit problematic.

The second issue that I want to discuss is the construction of scenarios. The first two scenarios seem similar to me in terms of the epistemic barriers that they burden on the voters' shoulders. A single scenario which suggests that voter want to be in the causally efficacious set that causes the best outcome for her most preferred transnational party group would be enough to discuss the epistemic barriers to vote for transnational party groups. In fact, the second scenario, more or less, involves the first scenario. Alongside merging these two scenarios, a particular discussion on the strategic voting in EP elections with a single scenario would widen the scope of the theoretical argument. To decide on voting strategically requires gathering complex information to estimate, such as the expected rank of the most preferred party, the difference between the expected vote share of the most preferred party and leading parties, and the expected vote share difference between the front-runner and runner-up. Therefore, the calculation for strategic voting is subjected to the epistemic barriers, maybe, more than any other type of voting.

Furthermore, in the last scenario, I have a little bit confused about how calculating “the additional vote threshold” is different in EP elections in comparison to the national elections in terms of the level of epistemic barriers. In fact, as Professor Wolkenstein rightly asserts, estimation of being in the causally efficacious set mostly depends on the district magnitude in terms of additionally seat threshold. This relationship does not differ between national and EP elections. Since parties compete to win the seats which are reserved for each country in EP elections, there is no clear difference in estimating the additional seat threshold

between two types of elections. Therefore, I think this argument would be clearer in terms of in what ways calculating additional seat threshold is harder in EP elections in comparison to national elections.

The last thing that I want to touch upon is the suggestion of increasing the activity and salience of the transnational party groups more to lighten the epistemic and motivational burden on the shoulder of the voters in EP elections. I think the arguments and theoretical explanations for why and in what ways transnational party groups diminish the epistemic and motivational barriers are clear and convincing in general. Nonetheless, I would prefer several suggestions for the institutional innovations which incentivize the political actors to rely more on transnational party groups. In what ways can we encourage the political actor (mainly individual politicians and political parties) to cooperate more in transnational party groups? Examples might be to change the electoral system for EP elections or distribution of the district magnitude within countries. These institutional changes might incentivize the national political parties to cooperate in transnational party groups more. Additionally, some changes in the procedures and internal rules of the European Parliament might operate in a similar manner. Of course, all these suggestions might be out of the scope of the paper and can be a part of a future project which suggests more detailed institutional innovations.

Conclusion

Rational voting has been an inevitable part of the discussion on voting behavior. Alongside its theoretical importance to understand people's motivation to vote, people's capabilities and opportunities for rational voting occupy a critical place to ensure the democratic mechanisms sustainably work. Voters' decision to vote as a result of processing a sufficient level of information about the impact of their vote on the election results, and in turn on the politics, has upmost importance for vertical accountability, which is the essence of democratic governance. Arguably, establishing and sustaining such a mechanism is not an easy inquiry for any society. The European Union has applied this regime type at the supranational level, which makes the task of any actor or institution in the polity heavier. In this regard, Professor Wolkenstein's article sheds light on this difficult task and shows why and to what extent rational voting is a more cumbersome task for voters. Also, he proposes a solution to dilute the barriers to rational voting in EP elections. As I discussed earlier, even though some details in the article could be clearer and I would prefer some of the arguments in a different structure, it is a valuable piece that attempts to fulfill an important gap in the literature. As future work, rational voting in EP elections might be discussed without constraining the scope of the reasons for the results of EP elections and more specific suggestions for institutional innovations.

References

- Blais, André and Carol Galais. 2016. "Measuring the Civic Duty to Vote: A Proposal." *Electoral Studies* 41: 60-69.
- de Vries, Catherine E. and Sara B. Hobolt. 2016. "EU Issue Voting in National and European Parliamentary Elections." In *(Un)intended Consequences of EU Parliamentary*

- Elections*, edited by Wouter van der Brug and Claes H. de Vreese, 101-124. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Goldman, Alvin. I. 1999. "Why Citizens Should Vote: A Causal Responsibility Approach." *Social Philosophy & Policy* 16 (2): 201-217.
- Hobolt, Sara B. and Jae-Jae Spoon. 2012. "Motivating the European Voter: Parties, Issues and Campaigns in European Parliament Elections." *European Journal of Political Research* 51 (6): 701-727.
- Reif, Karlheinz and Hermann Schmitt. 1980. "Nine Second-order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results." *European Journal of Political Research* 8: 3-44.
- Riker, William H. and Peter C. Ordeshook. 1968. "A Theory of the Calculus of Voting." *American Political Science Review* 62 (1): 25-42.
- Tuck, Richard. 2008. *Free Riding*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Wolkenstein, Fabio. 2020. "Epistemic Barriers to Rational Voting: The Case of European Parliament Elections." *Social Epistemology* 34 (3): 294-308.