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Further Thoughts on “Epistemic Barriers to Rational Voting:” A Response to Faruk Aksoy

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I would like to thank Faruk Aksoy (2020) for his thoughtful, clear-sighted and generous engagement with my paper “Epistemic Barriers to Rational Voting: The Case of European Parliament Elections” (2020). In this short piece, I want to respond to the criticisms Aksoy raises. As will become clear, I agree with nearly everything Aksoy says. What I say below thus only serves the purpose of clarification and further reflection.

So far as I can see, Aksoy raises three different issues:

First, he suggests that I construct rational behaviour too narrowly, and that this leads me to overlook that it may well be rational to engage in several different, complementary forms of political activity at the same time. Rational behaviour in politics is not a zero-sum game.

Second, Aksoy argues that the discussion of the first two voting scenarios that I outline in the paper (which he thinks are essentially the same) would benefit from a more extensive discussion of strategic voting. This is because, according to Aksoy, strategic voting requires processing more information than other forms of voting.

Third, Aksoy presses me to say more about the proposal of transnationalising European Parliament elections, asking in particular how political actors can be incentivised to cooperate more in transnational party groups.

I will discuss the three points in turn.

Constructing Rational Behaviour Too Narrowly

I begin with the first objection, which starts from my claim that it is rational to vote unless the expected utility of any other action is higher than the expected utility of being part of the efficacious set (for an extensive discussion of the “efficacious set”-account of rational voting, see pages 296-299 in my paper). The example used in the paper to illustrate this is as follows:

[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).

This, Aksoy says, construes rational political behaviour too narrowly. His argument is as follows:

[S]uppose 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 (13).

I think this is correct. Rational behaviour is not a zero-sum game, in the sense that it is only rational to take *one* action of all those available. However, it was never my intention to portray rational behaviour in this overly narrow way, though I now see—thanks to Aksoy—that I should have made this clearer. What I intended to say was rather that, having calculated expected utilities, citizens, who ordinarily have limited time and other resources, may also perceive trade-offs between different available actions, and to the degree that they do so, they may rationally choose only to perform the *one* action to which they ascribe the highest expected utility.

Now, of course, my example of the individual who decides to join her local party branch in order to contribute to restoring the party's original ideological profile is a bit misleading, for here a much more demanding and time-consuming action is chosen over a much less time-consuming one (i.e. voting). I can see that this can give rise to the suspicion that I have an implausibly narrow understanding of rational behaviour that leaves no room for rationally performing multiple complementary actions. But again, this is not the case. So, I really think there is no disagreement between Aksoy and me; I have simply not been clear enough.

A separate question is whether more direct acknowledgement of the fact that it can be rational to engage in several political practices at the same time would change anything of import in the argument that I have pursued in the paper. My sense is that it would not. For nothing in the argument depends on whether or not citizens decide to join a party, canvass and fundraise in parallel, on the basis of their own judgment about those actions' expected utility. The only thing that matters is that they may sometimes judge that the expected utility of voting is so low that they decide *against* voting and, potentially, *for* doing something else that they expect to be more rewarding. As I hopefully correctly understand, though, this is nothing Aksoy takes issue with.

The First Two Voting Scenarios and Strategic Voting

The next objection Aksoy puts forward concerns the first two voting scenarios I sketch in the paper. In scenario one, the “voter wants her vote to be in the efficacious set that causes an electoral victory of her preferred transnational party group (e.g. the EPP, S&D, ALDE, etc.)” (301). In scenario two, the “voter wants her vote to be in the efficacious set that causes her preferred transnational party group to be the second, third, etc.-strongest group in the European Parliament” (302). Aksoy makes two separate points. First, he suggests that the two scenarios are essentially the same and could be “merged.” Second, he recommends saying more about strategic voting in EP elections in connection with the two scenarios in order to broaden the scope of the argument.

These are again really good points. As far as the first observation goes, it is true that the two scenarios are alike, and I also acknowledge that when I say that the epistemic burdens falling on the voter in scenario two are “equally heavy” (302) as in scenario one. The main—and admittedly not especially interesting—reason for generating two separate scenarios was that I wanted to enhance clarity and show that there is no difference between wanting one’s European party group to win, on the one hand, and wanting it to come in second, third, etc. place, on the other hand, at least as far as the epistemic burden is concerned.

Be that as it may, Aksoy’s second argument about the need to expand on strategic voting is quite challenging. He suggests that I should have paid more attention to strategic voting because “the calculation for strategic voting is subjected to the epistemic barriers, maybe, more than any other type of voting” (13). I think I agree with this statement, but perhaps not for the reasons Aksoy puts forward. To explain this, let me first try to unpack Aksoy’s argument a bit more.

First of all, we might say that the main difference between “normal” voting and strategic voting is that, while the former involves voting for one’s preferred party, the latter is essentially about voting for a party one *does not* prefer but wants to win/gain votes in order to perform a particular function (e.g. implement or block a particular law that one deems especially important). Next, Aksoy suggests that the load of information that must be processed by the voter in strategic voting is “maybe” higher than in normal voting because voters have to estimate “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” (13).

Now, it might well be that I misunderstand this point, but I am not exactly sure why Aksoy thinks that this is unique to strategic voting. Perhaps what Aksoy has in mind is that strategic voting gets more epistemically demanding when a voter seek to contribute to *very specific results*, such as that the party she strategically votes for gains a specific percentage of votes (e.g. to clear a certain threshold that must be cleared in order for the party to be able to do what the voter wants it to do). But while I agree that I should have spent more time discussing such cases, it seems to me that I could equally aim at *very specific results* in normal voting, where I vote for my preferred party. Whenever that is the case, then there is no relevant difference between strategic voting and normal voting as far as voters’ epistemic burdens are concerned.

One argument for why strategic voting is more epistemically demanding than normal voting could be that, when I vote for a non-preferred party in order for that party to perform a particular function that I deem important, I need to make some judgments about the likely behaviour of an *agent that I may not know well*. Because the party I vote for is not the party I prefer politically and thus likely know best, I might possess less information about the party on the basis of which I can make an informed guess about the probability that it will act in the way I want it to act. This is bound to influence judgments about the *expected utility* of strategic voting.

To illustrate, imagine a voter V that cares passionately about issue X and believes that party P, a party that V would normally not vote for, may be most suited to get issue X on the agenda. Accordingly, V considers casting a strategic vote for P. In addition to all the other aforementioned calculations about expected vote shares, then, it would seem that V would have to gather information relating to P's likelihood to actually promote X in order to get a sense of whether it is worth voting strategically for P in the first place. For example, what is P's record of delivering on election pledges? Does the current party leadership have reasons to budge on key issues? And so on. Again, because P is not V's preferred party, V might ultimately know very little about P's past and so needs to invest more "epistemic energies" than when voting for the party she prefers.

In sum, I agree with Aksoy that strategic voting can be more epistemically demanding than normal voting, and I would like to thank him for pressing me on this point. But it might be that strategic voting is epistemically demanding for different reasons than those Aksoy suggests. I would be more than curious to hear what he thinks about this.

Trans-Nationalising European Parliament Elections

Finally, reflecting on my concluding proposal to properly trans-nationalise European Parliament elections, Aksoy encourages me to expand on the issue of "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?" (14).

I agree with Aksoy that a lot more can (and should) be said about this, and it is mainly due to space constraints that the ideas laid out in the final section of the paper are so rough and general. While I am unable to offer any good solution to the problem that most national parties are reluctant to engage in genuinely transnational elections, I think the biggest issue to think about is what it might mean to say that "we" could encourage parties to reform European Parliament elections along transnational lines. Who is this "we" we are talking about?

On the face of it, it seems it would have to be a democratic "we." It would no doubt be democratically suspect to mandate the trans-nationalisation of European Parliament elections in a top-down fashion (imagine that some institution, for example the European

Commission, unilaterally changes the electoral rules, banning national parties from running independently of their EP party group and introducing transnational lists). Taking such fundamental constitutional decisions in isolation from citizens and their elected representatives is bound to trigger resistance, and not only by those who anyways reject European Integration. The European People's Party's decisive rejection of the proposal of introducing transnational party lists is a powerful reminder of the fact that even pro-Integration forces can oppose the trans-nationalisation of European elections (Wolkenstein 2018).

What sort of democratic “we” might be capable of transforming the design of European Parliament elections in a more bottom-up fashion is difficult to see at the current moment. Much depends on the availability of political will and the effectiveness of mobilisation for the cause, which depends to a large degree on the parties themselves (Wolkenstein 2020). Equally important appears a shift in frame of reference in how the media covers EU-level politics: the more it is made clear in media reporting what EU-level parties do, and that it is them one actually empowers when casting a vote in European Parliament elections, the more plausibility will the idea of trans-nationalised elections gain.

Admittedly, it does not seem likely that political parties themselves, let alone the media, will take decisive steps towards cultivating a transnational European electoral sphere. And so long as the status quo is retained, epistemic barriers to rational voting will remain exceedingly high in European Parliament elections. Because of that, it might also be rational not to vote, if the argument I advanced in the paper is accepted.

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