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**EXPRESSIVE POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR:  
FOUNDATIONS, SCOPE AND IMPLICATIONS**

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# **Expressive Political Behaviour: Foundations, Scope and Implications\***

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## **Abstract**

A growing literature has focussed attention on ‘expressive’ rather than ‘instrumental’ behaviour in political settings - particularly voting. A common criticism of the expressive idea is that its myriad possibilities make it rather *ad hoc* and lacking in both predictive and normative bite. We agree that no single clear definition of expressive behaviour has emerged to date, and no detailed foundations of specific expressive motivations have been provided, so that there are rather few specific implications drawn from the analysis of expressive behaviour. In response, we provide a foundational discussion and definition of expressive behaviour that accounts for a range of factors. We also discuss the content of expressive choice distinguishing between moral, social and emotional cases, and relate this more general account to the specific theories of expressive choice in the literature. Finally, we discuss the normative and institutional implications of expressive behaviour.

**Keywords:** expressive behaviour; identity; moral choice; populism; institutional design

**JEL codes:** D70; D72

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## 1. Introduction

There has been a growing level of attention paid to the distinction between ‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’ choice in the political economy literature, and specifically in that part of the literature devoted to voting behaviour. The idea of ‘expressive voting’, captures the idea that voting may be motivated by concerns other than a concern for the eventual outcome of the election; concerns that are more directly and immediately linked to the act of voting, or of voting for a particular candidate or option, itself. A now-standard line of argument in support of the idea of expressive voting in large scale elections begins with the observation that for ordinary members of the large collective, their individual vote is extremely unlikely to determine the electoral outcomes. Any ‘instrumental’ calculus that focuses on the overall expected utility associated with the outcome of the election, and admits that voting is at least somewhat costly, is therefore very likely to show that voting is irrational. By emphasising aspects of the act of voting, or of voting for a particular candidate or option, that do not depend on the overall outcome of the election, we are able to portray voting as individually rational; and such aspects have been labelled as being ‘expressive’.<sup>1</sup>

The basic idea here is clear enough: voting may ‘express’ some aspect of the voter’s beliefs or personality regardless of any impact that the vote has on the outcome of the election, and such ‘expression’ may be valuable to the individual and so provide sufficient motivation to vote. But this basic idea needs considerable further development. For the idea of expressive choice to do more than provide a critique of the standard instrumental model, it must identify a systematic basis for expressive choice and so be able to predict behavior that is systematically different than would arise under instrumental choice. In other words, the theory must move beyond the mere idea of expressive choice, and focus on the content of the relevant expression and its behavioural and normative implications.

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<sup>1</sup> An alternative response to the difficulty of the expected utility maximising model is suggested by Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974). If the rationality of voters is understood in terms of the minimax regret formulation, rather than the expected utility maximisation formulation, it is shown that voting is ‘rational’ even if the utility gain from the preferred candidate winning is only modestly greater than the utility cost of voting: so that a member of the electorate who is rational in the minimax regret sense will vote in many cases where the simple expected utility maximizing member of the electorate would abstain. We do not pursue alternative specifications of instrumental rationality here.

Much of the literature to date has focussed attention on the basic contrast between expressive and instrumental behaviour in political settings - particularly voting.<sup>2</sup> But in doing so, it has exhibited highly variable approaches to the content of expressive behaviour. Responding to this variety of interpretation, a common criticism of the expressive idea is that its myriad possibilities make it rather *ad hoc* and lacking in specific predictive and normative bite.

We agree that, to date, no single, clear definition of the content of expressive behaviour has emerged,<sup>3</sup> and no detailed foundational discussion of expressive motivations has been provided, so that there are rather few specific implications - either positive or normative - that can be drawn from the analysis of expressive behaviour. In response, we provide a more detailed definitional account of expressive behaviour and, with this definition in place, we discuss the foundational content of expressive choice distinguishing between moral, social and emotional cases, relating these general cases to the specific theories of expressive choice in the literature. We also discuss the normative implications of the various theories.

This paper is intended, in part, to survey the literature on expressive choice, so as to develop further analysis of the range of expressive ideas in play. However, the paper is distinct from a number of recent papers that set out to survey the literature on voting turnout/participation and which include reference to the expressive idea as one of several approaches to this topic.<sup>4</sup> We focus on expressive motivations and behaviour across a range of application (not just voting), but even when limited to the area of voting, our focus differs from that in the turnout/participation literature; the primary concern in that literature is on explaining *why* individuals vote rather than *how* they vote. By focussing on the content of expressive choice, rather than the logic of expressive choice, we will focus on *how* individuals vote.

While the paper has a survey aspect, it is intended to be much more than that. The focus of the next section is on providing a more precise and useful definition of expressive

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<sup>2</sup> The act of voting has been the main focus of work on expressive behaviour with some links to other types of expressive behaviour present in everyday life. For empirical analyses of the correlation between general expressive behaviour and voting, see Copeland and Laband (2002), Laband et al (2008) and (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Nor any systematic discussion of the relationship among the various approaches to expressive content.

<sup>4</sup> See Dhillon and Peralta (2002), Feddersen (2004), Dowding (2005), and Geys (2006).

choice – one that is capable of applying in a variety of settings. Dowding (2005) concludes that the main reason why non-instrumental explanations for voting find little favour with some political scientists and political economists is not so much that they find it tautological or lacking in predictive power, but that the critics have a ‘desire for deeper reasons’.<sup>5</sup> An important aspect of the following assessment of the various theories of expressive action is whether they do more than simply state the possibility of an expressive motivation. That is, can they provide the required ‘deeper reasons’ that would underpin any particular expressive motivation? And, indeed, would any such ‘deeper reasons’ satisfy a reasonable definition of what is required for a choice to be expressive?

In section 3 we will survey the various theories of expressive choice that have emerged and the related empirical work. We identify three broad categories of expressive theories; relating in turn to expressing identity, expressing moral views, and expressing social pressures, rational irrationality and self-delusion. With these three broad accounts in place, we will then turn to questions of the efficiency or inefficiency of expressive behaviour and its institutional implications. Section 4 will offer some concluding comments.

## **2. Expressive Behaviour: towards a definition**

A major reason why the idea of expressive behaviour has received so much attention in the analysis of voting is that its defining logic seems both clear and attractive.<sup>6</sup> While the specific content of expressive choice is contentious, the basic definition of what it means for a choice to be expressive appears uncontroversial. However, we will suggest in this section that this view is a little too optimistic, and that definitional aspects of expressive behaviour need rather more careful consideration. We will also suggest that

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<sup>5</sup> For critical discussion see Green and Shapiro (1994), and Mueller (2003). The essence of these criticisms is that the inclusion of non-instrumental terms in the analysis may render it tautological and unable to generate testable predictions. Dowding (2005) argues that these criticisms are unfair, but that the ‘desire for deeper reasons’ to be provided is fully justified.

<sup>6</sup> An early discussion of expressive choice is to be found in Buchanan (1954). Discussions of expressive choice and voting are to be found in Riker and Ordeshook (1968) who focus on duty; Tullock (1971) and Goodin and Roberts (1975) who focus on ethical voting. Fiorina (1976) links expressive voting to party allegiance. Brennan and Buchanan (1984), discuss expressive voting in more general terms and focus on the problems it causes for the normative evaluation of political outcomes.

the strong focus on the voting context can be unhelpful in identifying a more general definition of expressive behaviour.

We begin with simple comparative statements of the instrumental and expressive cases. In the instrumental case, individuals are assumed to take actions or make choices in such a way that the consequences of those actions/choices maximally serve their interests (whether narrowly or broadly defined). Put simply, individuals undertake action *X* in order to achieve their all-things-considered preferred outcome *Y*.

Instrumental choice is in this way indirect and inclusive. Indirect insofar as you choose an action in order to gain access to the full range of consequences of that action however remote they may be from the action itself. Inclusive in the sense that all consequences are deemed relevant and are included in an overall consideration.

By contrast, in the expressive case, individuals are assumed to take actions or make choices in such a way that those actions/choices maximally express that individual (or some aspect of the individual). Put simply, individuals undertake action *Z* in order simply to *Z* (and perhaps to be seen to *Z*).<sup>7</sup> Expressive choice is in this way direct and exclusive. Direct in the sense that you choose an action in order to gain the direct or intrinsic benefits of so choosing/acting, regardless of the further or more general consequences (if any) of that action. Exclusive in the sense that this is not an all-things-considered evaluation but one which focuses on a specific sub-set of benefits.

It should be clear from these statements, that expressive concerns are a sub-set of the concerns that will be considered in a full, all-things-considered, instrumental evaluation; so that the contrast between the expressive account and the instrumental account is best understood as the contrast between a part and the whole, rather than the contrast between two disjoint alternatives.<sup>8</sup>

But this simple comparison conceals further complications. First we should recognize that not all direct and intrinsic benefits (or costs) are 'expressive' in nature. Consider the link between the basic idea of expressive voting and Olson's (1965) *Logic of Collective*

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<sup>7</sup> To be a 'Z-performer' as Schuessler (2000) puts it.

<sup>8</sup> Although we must recognise that in many usages, writers do not use the terms 'instrumental' and 'expressive' in this whole/part way, but rather seem to identify two disjoint sets of ideas.

*Action.* In Olson's discussion, a fundamental contrast is between those benefits associated with the group that are dependent on collective action and so are subject to possible free-riding, and those benefits of group membership that are directly accessible to individuals and which can therefore act as selective incentives for individuals to join the group. These selective incentives play a very similar role in Olson's theory to the role played by expressive benefits in expressive voting theory – in both cases they focus attention on the direct or proximate benefits that are individually accessible – but there is no sense in which Olson's selective incentives must be truly expressive in their nature. Indeed, the standard examples are simple consumption benefits.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that expressive ideas play no part; it may be that one selective incentive that relates to joining particular groups is the desire to identify with that group (Hamlin and Jennings 2004), the point here is simply that the link between the idea of a benefit that flows directly from the performance of an act, and an expressive benefit is not automatic. The expressive idea must be seen as identifying a sub-set of all possible direct, performative benefits. In this way, the theory of expressive behaviour is necessarily narrower than the theory of behaviour motivated by direct, immediate or intrinsic costs and benefits. It happens to be plausible that, in the case of voting, the most apparent direct or intrinsic benefits likely to be associated with the act of voting are expressive in nature – but this should not hide the fact that not all direct and intrinsic benefits (or costs) are expressive.

But the simple idea of 'expression' may be in another way too broad. Consider my behaviour when I accidentally hit my thumb with a hammer. I may cry out in pain, and that cry may naturally be termed an expression of my pain. But is this the sort of expression that we are concerned with in developing and delimiting a theory of expressive behaviour? Our approach here is to place the theory of expressive behaviour firmly within the rational choice approach – so that the types of expression that concern us are those that relate to the motivating of rational action. Now, in the case of my hammering, certainly the possibility of a painful blow provides me with reason to be

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<sup>9</sup> The standard examples include such things as the provision of private benefits such as discounts on insurance or access to sporting facilities to incentivize membership of trades unions.



careful, but the idea of the expression of pain (as distinct from the pain itself) plays no obvious motivational role.<sup>10</sup>

So, roughly speaking, the types of expression that we are concerned with as being relevant to a theory of rationally expressive behaviour are those expressions that serve as reasons either for or against particular actions – we might term this sub-set of expressions the set of motivating expressions.

So far, then, we have done no more than mark out the territory that we believe the theory of rationally expressive behaviour seeks to occupy. It aims to focus attention on the potential motivating and incentivizing effects of certain forms of expression that attach directly to actions or choices. As such, the theory may be seen both as capable of offering distinctive understandings of particular situations (such as voting) where more standard rational choice theory focussed on more practical and instrumental outcomes of actions/choices fail to convince; and of contributing to the more general understanding of rationality in a wider range of situations. As we have stressed, all-things-considered rational choice should be seen as including both direct and indirect costs and benefits, both outcome-oriented and expressive aspects of behaviour. Expressive considerations may not be relevant in all choice situations, or may be of vanishingly small importance in some situations, but the general idea that expressive ideas may be relevant alongside other considerations in many situations is important; not least since it points to the idea that expressive and outcome-oriented motivations are best seen as parallel inputs into an overall analysis of behaviour, rather than as alternative models.

In any given situation where both expressive and non-expressive considerations are relevant, the action that would be chosen on expressive grounds may differ from the action that would be chosen on either outcome-oriented grounds or as the result of all-things-considered choice, but this is not necessarily so. Clearly, without some further account of the substantive content of the relevant idea of expression, we cannot be specific as to the nature of expressively motivated choices, but it is clear from the

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<sup>10</sup> Of course one can always add special features to the example – perhaps I am concerned not to cry out because it may wake a sleeping child – but while such additional features may make the possibility of my crying out relevant, this relevance is achieved by adding further instrumental detail rather than focussing on the expressive aspect of the cry.

structure of the relationship between expressive and more outcome-oriented considerations that there is nothing that guarantees either that expressive concerns will pick out the same action as the outcome-oriented concerns, or how these two sets of concerns may interact in an all-things-considered calculus.

The expressive theory of voting might have either of two objectives. On the one hand, it might simply focus on providing a logic to explain voter turnout (answering the ‘why vote?’ question). On the other hand, it might also seek to claim that expressive voting leads to a different outcome than would have arisen under instrumental voting, by claiming that expressive benefits not only bring you to the polls but also re-direct your vote (addressing the ‘how to vote?’ question). Clearly this distinction depends on whether the expressive and outcome-oriented reasons for voting for a particular option or candidate pick out the same preferred voting action or not.

To the extent that expressive and outcome-oriented arguments pull in different directions, it is common to locate the trade-off between them as part of standard price theory.<sup>11</sup> We should expect to see essentially expressive choice triggered more readily in those situations where the ‘price’ of such behaviour is low; where price is construed in terms of outcome-oriented considerations foregone. In cases where the decision-maker is fully decisive, expressive considerations will still be relevant but the price that has to be paid to choose expressively in terms of the more outcome-oriented benefits foregone is high. By contrast, in cases where action is essentially inconsequential, as in the case of voting in large scale elections, the price of expressive behaviour is low, and we should expect it to dominate.<sup>12</sup>

However, the voting situation presents a number of features that frame the definition of expressive behaviour, and we should be careful in teasing them apart. Here we will consider three aspects of defining expressive behaviour. The first concerns the structure of collective action problems and the more general idea of directly inconsequential

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<sup>11</sup> See Brennan and Lomasky (1993), Brennan and Hamlin (2000), Brennan (2008).

<sup>12</sup> This would locate voting within a more general ‘economics of low-cost decisions’ (Kliemt 1986), (Kirchgässner 1992). Kirchgässner compares decisions, such as voting, ‘where the individual decision is irrelevant for the individual himself/herself, but the collective decision is relevant for all individuals’ with decisions such as, judicial decisions, ‘where the individual decision is irrelevant for the individual himself/herself, but it is highly relevant for other individuals’ (p. 305-06).

behaviour, the second concerns the potential audience for expressive behaviour, and the third concerns the relationship between expressed views and true views.

As we have seen, the argument in relation to expressive voting starts from the presumption that an overall decision is to be made by voting, so that voting in the aggregate is instrumentally causal. The argument then moves to the large number of individuals involved in mass elections so as to establish a collective action problem, a claim about the probability of any individual vote being decisive, and finally to a claim about the inconsequential nature of individual voting. But it should be clear that it is only the conclusion of this chain of argument that matters for defining the idea of expressive behaviour. Whatever the argument supporting the inconsequential nature of a particular choice or piece of behaviour, the mere fact that it is seen as inconsequential will deny the logic of outcome-oriented behaviour and support the logic of expressive behaviour. In this way, we can immediately drive a wedge between collective action problems and expressive behaviour; while situations that can be described as collective action problems may sometimes give rise to expressive behaviour, they are by no means necessary for the display of expressive behaviour, and certainly should have no place in the definition of expressive behaviour.

For example, consider a situation in which an individual decides to write to a local newspaper to complain about some feature of local life and to suggest a remedy. How can this behaviour be explained? The standard outcome-oriented, instrumental line would have to be that the individual concerned sees this as a means of effecting a desirable outcome: most obviously the implementation of the suggested remedy. But the expressive line might suggest that the behaviour is best understood simply in terms of venting dissatisfaction, or identifying with the critical position, and that the observed behaviour might be expressively rational even if the individual knew in advance that writing to a newspaper would have no impact on the situation complained about. Here several aspects of the standard voting story are absent – there is no background belief that decision making relative to the particular aspect of local life is made by reference to the aggregate level of letter writing, there is no necessary reference to interactions amongst large numbers of individuals, so this is no collective action problem, and there is no necessary reference to any probability of decisiveness. But even so, the act of letter writing is (*ex hypothesi*) inconsequential, and it is just this fact that both invites

and suggests an expressive account. And once this invitation is accepted, we can go on to ask whether the content on the letter and the remedy it suggests might differ from the remedy that this same individual might put in place if, in fact, they had full decision-making power relative to the relevant aspect of local life.

This example suggests that the case of expressive voting may not be a good guide to the more general class of expressive behaviour, not least because the case of voting tends to focus our attention on issues such as collective action and the large number case which are not defining aspects of expressive choice.<sup>13</sup> And this point is at least reinforced by considering the analogies and examples that are commonly used within the expressive voting literature. Brennan and Buchanan (1984) and Brennan and Lomasky (1993) compare expressive voting to cheering at a sports match, or to dinner party conversation. Both these examples are taken to describe inconsequential situations. Furthermore, they are literally ‘expressive’ in terms of visible actions and voice. While we agree that these are good examples of expressive behaviour, we are not convinced of the analogy with voting. In the dinner party case, the general idea is simply that I might express support for policies that I would not enact if I were in power, simply because of the direct benefits of expressing those views.<sup>14</sup> But here again a number of key features of the voting case are missing. There is no valid assumption that the aggregate of dinner party conversations is causally effective in choosing policy, there is no necessary reference to the size of the dinner party (or the number of dinner parties) and so on. All there is, and all there needs to be, is a plausible claim that dinner party statements are (largely) inconsequential with respect to the apparent content of those statements. If I say ‘I support X’, it has no significant effect on whether X comes about. And the whole point of the dinner party analogy, presumably, is that this inconsequential setting is likely to produce statements that are at variance with the actions that the same individual would actually undertake if they were decisive. In this way the dinner party story speaks directly to the ‘how to vote?’ question, rather than to the ‘why vote?’ question.

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, this is not to suggest that large number collective action problems are not one arena in which expressive choice is relevant – just that this is not the only arena and so cannot define expressive choice.

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps in terms of impressing my friends, or establishing a particular persona at little cost, or simply in generating an enjoyable debate.

In the case of cheering at sports events, even if we accept that cheering may be instrumentally effective (in increasing the probability that your team wins) in aggregate to at least some extent, and that the large numbers involved at a sports venue generates a collective action, free-rider problem,<sup>15</sup> it seems that the most that can be offered here is an account that addresses the ‘why cheer?’ question rather than the ‘how to cheer?’ question. After all, it is hard to see a Manchester United fan cheering *against* his team and explaining his behaviour on the expressive grounds that it didn’t make an instrumental difference!

The provisional conclusion of this discussion of the collective action/inconsequential nature of expressive behaviour is that it is the inconsequential nature of the choice or behaviour facing the agent that is a necessary condition for expressive behaviour. Collective action problems of the type faced in large scale voting may provide one line of argument in support of the inconsequential nature of particular choices, but other possibilities exist, so that collective action problems are not necessary to the definition of expressive behaviour.

Our second concern relates to the visibility or anonymity of the behaviour under consideration. While the act of voting is at least somewhat public, the secrecy of the ballot typically assures us that the content of our vote is private. By contrast, the examples of expressive behaviour already given - writing to newspapers, cheering, and dinner party conversation – are all essentially public, so that we can immediately see the possibility of them being expressive in nature. This raises the question of whether an act must be at least somewhat public in order to qualify as an expressive act; in short, whether an expressive act requires an audience.

One line of response to this suggestion is that the actor may form her own audience; i.e. that expression can, at least sometimes, be self-directed. This is sometimes linked with the argument concerning expression as a form of identification (to be considered in more detail below), where identifying with some position or cause combines elements of self-identification and identifying oneself to others.

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<sup>15</sup> But note that this would not explain the phenomenon of the individual cheering for his team while watching on TV, here it is the basic nature of the situation that implies the inconsequential nature of the action, rather any collective action problem.

In the context of voting, the lack of an obvious audience in the context of a secret ballot might be thought to undermine the incentive to vote expressively, but here we might point to slightly more complicated interpretations of the expressive argument. Suppose that I have an expressive desire to support a particular political position, or identify with a particular political cause. Even if we admit that merely voting for that position or cause cannot in itself count as ‘expressing’ myself because of a lack of relevant audience, I can surely hold that I may wish to express my political views in all sorts of public (but inconsequential) arenas, and the only way in which I can make these expressions in future while maintaining a degree of internal consistency and integrity is to vote expressively. Here then the vote is not itself expressive, but it is a precondition for relevant further expression, and it can play this role precisely because of its inconsequential nature.<sup>16</sup>

Another version of the idea that you may be your own audience in matters of expression arises in the discussion of certain public goods such as philanthropy. For example, Andreoni argued that individuals actually derive private benefits from a ‘warm glow’ and it is for this reason that philanthropy occurs on a much greater scale than standard economic theory would lead us to expect (Andreoni 1990). To the extent that expressive voting is analogous to the ‘warm glow’ in charitable giving, it is clear that the relevant audience is oneself.

While it seems reasonable to allow the possibility of being your own audience, is it plausible to allow the possibility of there being no audience at all? Here we think that the answer is no; although we accept that this is largely a matter of stipulation. It is difficult to see how the idea of a motivating expression can generate the required motivational force if it has no possible audience. But note that we are here adding the rider of a ‘possible’ audience; it may well be the case that a motivating expression operates on the basis of an intended (or perhaps even a hoped for) audience that never in fact materialises. So that it is the intended, possible audience that matters in building an

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<sup>16</sup> We recognise that this chain of argument involves an element of instrumentality; voting ‘expressively’ in this case is instrumentally related to further expressive behaviour. We do not believe that this undermines the claim that the vote is nevertheless ‘expressive’ in nature since it is part of a more general pattern of behaviour.

explanation of the underlying behaviour, and the fact that there was no actual audience may be neither here nor there.

Our third concern relates to the issue of whether expressed views hold any particular relationship to truly-held views. A variant of this issue concerns the question of preferences, where again the issue is whether preferences expressed in circumstances that are inconsequential are more, or less, reliable indicators of true preferences than those preferences revealed in circumstances of fully consequential choice. There is much debate to be had in this area, but we offer some simple initial thoughts. First, it seems deeply inappropriate to begin from a position that identifies either purely instrumental or purely expressive preferences/views/opinions with true preferences/views/opinions as a matter of definition. The more reasonable and less restrictive starting point seems to be one that recognises that any individual at any time is likely to hold a range of preferences, views and opinions - both outcome-oriented and expressive - where there is no necessary requirement of absolute coherence as between the various preferences, views and opinions. And any of these may be relevant to decision/action in appropriate institutional and contextual circumstances. From this starting point, it might seem that a context that brings both instrumental and expressive considerations to bear on decision making, each with their appropriate weight, is one which would allow the individual to reach an all-things-considered decision that might be as close as we are likely to get to reflecting some idea of 'true' or 'fully considered' preferences/views/opinions.<sup>17</sup> And in circumstances that privilege either instrumental or expressive concerns at the expense of the other, we are likely to reveal only a limited sub-set of the full range of preferences/views/opinions of the relevant individual. In this sense, neither outcome-oriented nor expressive preferences may be taken as 'true', while each reflects an element of some underlying truth. Kuran (1995) focuses on cases in which external pressures may lead individuals to express views which are not their own, (and, in extreme cases, even to internalise such views), and we will consider this position more closely below. The basic point is that external pressures can significantly affect both behaviour and, ultimately, beliefs; and this fact needs to be borne in mind when engaging in normative debate relating to revealed behaviour.

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<sup>17</sup> This is not the place to press deeper questions of the endogeneity of preferences (whether instrumental or expressive) or the nature of the 'truth' sought in the phrase 'true preferences'.

Our provisional conclusion here then is just that in defining expressive behaviour we should avoid prejudging the normative status of ‘expressive’, ‘outcome oriented’ or ‘instrumental’ preferences or opinions, either directly or by labelling them relative to ‘true’ preferences and opinions. Conclusions on these matters should emerge from further discussion rather than be built into definitions.

So, at this stage, we offer the following three defining aspects of expressive behaviour and the distinction between expressive and outcome-oriented behaviour.

(1) The context or institutional setting in which the behaviour is to be undertaken will determine the extent to which behaviour is outcome-oriented or expressive in nature – and the more inconsequential is the behaviour (regardless of the nature of the detailed argument that supports the conclusion of inconsequentiality) the more expressive will that behaviour be. Note that this indicates a continuum from fully outcome-oriented behaviour (in circumstances where expressive concerns are absent or irrelevant) to fully expressive behaviour (where outcome-oriented concerns are either absent or irrelevant) via a middle ground in which expressive and outcome-oriented considerations are both relevant to at least some degree in determining actual behaviour via an all-things-considered evaluation.

(2) Expressive behaviour is to be understood relative to an audience, either directly or indirectly, and allowing for the fact that an individual may, in at least some circumstances, be their own audience. This is to indicate that the specification of the audience, as well as the specification of the actor, may be required to fully understand expressive behaviour. I may have good reasons to express myself very differently to different audiences, even though my underlying preferences (both outcome-oriented and expressive) are constant.

(3) The normative status of expressive (or indeed, outcome-oriented) behaviour is a matter for further analysis, rather than a matter for initial definition. So that, initially, behaviour might be considered as expressive to the extent that it responds to immediate, concerns that depend only on the behaviour itself (and, perhaps its observation) rather than more remote, outcome-oriented and investment-like concerns that depend crucially on factors over which the individual lacks proximate control.



However it should be clear that these three statements do not serve to fully characterise expressive motivations or expressive behaviour – they serve only to provide the structure within which such expressive behaviour can be understood and analysed. In order to complete the definitional exercise we must confront the more fundamental question of the content of expressive motivations.

### **3. Theories of Expressive Choice**

We will now survey the various substantive theories of expressive choice that have emerged, and the empirical work associated with them. Clearly, while most of the work on expressive choice has been developed in the context of the discussion of voting, it should also be clear that we view voting to be a special case within the broader class of expressive behaviour. Therefore, in what follows some reference will be made to theories and applications that bear no direct relationship to mass elections.

One version of the expressive account would seem to provide a reason for voting, but have no impact on the decision of how to vote and, as a result, might allow us to proceed with the outcome-oriented account of how to vote undisturbed by other factors. This is essentially the idea of ‘expressive choice as duty’ developed by Riker and Ordeshook.<sup>18</sup> Such an approach tells us that voters vote out of a sense of duty, so that they express their respect for the duty through voting. However, since there is clearly no duty to vote for any particular candidate or option, duty itself can have no impact on precisely how the voter votes. On this account, the expressive value of ‘doing one’s duty’ gets around the paradox of voting without seriously challenging the key results of the standard instrumental model.

Since this is a version of expressive voting behaviour that is limited to addressing the ‘why vote’ question, it is in line with the evidence for strategic voting that is normally interpreted in outcome-oriented terms (Alvarez, Boehmke, and Nagler 2006). This tells us that where a candidate ranks candidates A, B and C in order of outcome-oriented desirability, but where A is known to have no chance of winning the election, a strategic

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<sup>18</sup> See Riker and Ordeshook (1968) and Jones and Hudson (2000).

voter might vote for B rather than A in an attempt to prevent C from winning. This clearly seems to be an outcome-oriented explanation for strategic voting since the voter would seem to be selecting a less preferred candidate in a manner that relies on the possibility that their vote is decisive and might allow their least preferred candidate C to win. Theories of expressive choice that also address the *how* (and not just *why*) question in relation to voting might appear to have some difficulty explaining strategic voting. However, Brennan (2008) rebuts the claim that evidence of strategic voting provides evidence against expressive voting and advances two arguments that might reconcile strategic voting and expressive voting. First, that voting is a serious undertaking and that the voter might consider it frivolous and irresponsible to vote for A if A is widely thought to have no chance of winning. Second, expressive choice may be about booing as well as cheering. There may be greater expressive value in booing for C (by voting for B) than in cheering for A.

Brennan's defence of an expressive understanding of strategic voting seems to accept the idea that the expressive ranking of A, B and C is the same as the ranking which would be made in outcome-oriented terms. But clearly this need not be the case. An alternative explanation of apparently strategic voting might rely on differences in these rankings. So that while a particular pattern of voting might appear to be 'strategic' when considered in terms of the instrumental ranking, it is revealed to be straightforwardly optimal when considered in terms of the expressive ranking (which would still allow for Brennan's possibility of booing, rather than cheering). This raises the questions of what factors are likely to determine an expressive ranking in the first instance, and under what circumstances instrumental and expressive rankings are likely to diverge? In order to categorize expressive accounts in terms of the broad nature of their claims regarding the content of expression, we begin by considering variations on the theme of expressing identity, before considering the possibility that morality may provide the relevant content for expressive behaviour. Finally we consider the idea that the content of expression may derive from social pressures, ignorance or illusion. With these three broad accounts in place, we will then turn to questions of the efficiency or inefficiency of expressive behaviour and its institutional implications.

### **3.1 Expressive Choice as Identity**

#### **3.1.1 Expressive Choice as Social Identity**

Schuessler proposed the idea that what motivates voters is how many others vote for a particular option or candidate, and who the other voters are (Schuessler 2000). In this approach, voting is a form of social identification with types and/or numbers of other voters. In simple terms, voting for *X* identifies you with the set of people who vote for *X*. Numbers may matter because you would not wish to identify with too small a group, but also because too large a group may reduce the value of the expressive attachment. But the particular identity of the voters that you seek to identify with, rather than just their number, may be the more relevant. Of course, if all voters are seeking purely to associate themselves with groups of other voters, using the candidates or electoral options only as points around which to congregate as a club, there may be many possible equilibria, and the prospect of instability with tipping points and the possibility of bandwagon effects. However, if there are at least some voters who might be considered as partisans, in the sense that their motivations for voting points to voting for a specific option or candidate, these partisans reduce the tendency to instability.

Of course, candidates and, in particular, political parties, faced with such voters, have a clear incentive to appeal to groups that would also provide them with a winning level of support. Parties may find that vagueness and ambiguity is the best form of election strategy, since it allows the party to mean all things to all people. More generally, parties will want to present themselves as a club with an attractive combination of membership type and membership numbers.

Another prediction deriving from Schuessler's approach is that expressive choice can help to explain the impact of negative campaigning and the polarisation of voters. Negative campaigns focus on identifying the character of other parties, and attacking that character so as to make it seem an unattractive club. Seen from the perspective of any single party, negative campaigning will be a useful weapon in reducing the attractiveness of rival clubs. However, negative campaigning by all parties will make all of the available 'clubs' less attractive, implying lower turnout overall. And, of course, it will be the least committed members of the electorate who will be dissuaded from voting by negative campaigning, and so the remaining voters are more likely to be partisans so that parties are more likely to be polarised.

Rotemberg (2009) also depicts voting as identity based, but in his model voters identify with individuals that they agree with. This model builds on two psychological tendencies. First, people tend to be altruistic to individuals that agree with them; and second, individuals gain in self-esteem from discovering agreement. One challenge to the idea that voting is expressive is the correlation between voter turnout and the closeness of the election. This correlation might suggest that voters are behaving instrumentally and the higher turnout reflects an increase in the (admittedly small) probability of being decisive. Interestingly, Rotemberg argues that this correlation can be explained with reference to the psychological tendencies that motivate his model, as voters receive greater psychological benefits in close rather than one-sided elections. In this way, Rotemberg argues, the correlation between the closeness of the election and turnout can be provided with a basis in the logic of expressive voting.

### **3.1.2 Expressive Choice as Identification with Parties or candidates**

Brennan and Hamlin (1998) put forward the idea that expressive choice may be related more to identifying directly with parties, candidates or political positions rather than groups of other voters. They suggest that elections may be dominated by issues that capture expressive interest, and that these issues may exist in a domain that differs from that which would more normally describe the outcome-oriented approach. But even if the domain of expressive concerns is similar to the domain of outcome-oriented concerns, the distribution of expressive preferences may differ from the distribution of instrumental preferences.

In the Brennan and Hamlin model, voters vote for positions/candidates that are sufficiently close to their ideal point in the expressive domain. If there are no positions/candidates within a certain distance of their ideal point, they do not vote. And parties/candidates can adjust their platforms strategically to attract voters. This leads to a result that is roughly parallel to the standard median voter theorem in the setting of outcome-oriented voting.

However, the Brennan and Hamlin paper leads to an empirical prediction that distinguishes their expressive model from the otherwise similar outcome-oriented model. Although parties face similar incentives in the two models, and will tend to

converge on 'moderate' positions, the decision of whether to vote is very different in the two models. Brennan and Hamlin predict that moderates will vote with extremists abstaining, while the standard Downsian model suggests the opposite because extremists have greater outcome-oriented incentives to vote compared to moderates. In an outcome-oriented model moderates are non-voters because they are *indifferent*, while in an expressive model extremists are non-voters because they are *alienated*.<sup>19</sup>

Greene and Nelson (2002) set out to test this prediction and find that extremists are as likely to vote as moderates and thus argue that Brennan and Hamlin's prediction does not hold.<sup>20</sup> But Greene and Nelson rule out outcome-oriented voting by assumption (due to its supposed irrationality). A fuller test of the Brennan and Hamlin prediction would be to check the nature of motivation for extremists and moderates. If the former are instrumentally motivated and the latter expressively motivated, then the Brennan and Hamlin prediction is not contradicted. Drinkwater and Jennings (2007) conduct such an analysis and find some support for the Brennan and Hamlin prediction. Calcagno and Westley (2008) also find evidence in support of Brennan and Hamlin's thesis by considering the effect of primaries on turnout in general elections. Closed primaries lead to greater divergence between general election candidates than open primaries. An instrumental account of voting would predict that turnout should be higher in states with closed primaries, while the expressive account of voting would predict that the greater identity with the convergent candidates should lead to higher turnout in states with open primaries. Calcagno and Westley find that turnout in a general election is greater the more open the primaries.<sup>21</sup>

The normative implications of the two models surveyed so far are unclear. They predict ambiguity and limited convergence in an, as yet, unspecified expressive dimension. One strong implication, however, from the Brennan and Hamlin model is that global

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<sup>19</sup> Poutvaara (2003) applies the idea of alienation and indifference to party membership decisions prior to elections.

<sup>20</sup> Nelson and Greene (2003) provide their own version of expressive choice which is founded on imitative behaviour. This version of voting (similar to Schuessler's) is based on identity with fellow voters rather than with candidates and for that reason they argue it explains why extremists are not less likely to vote than moderates.

<sup>21</sup> In earlier work Guttman, Hilger and Shachmurove (1994) find evidence in the 1976 US Presidential election which supports the expressive story that where non-voting occurs it is more likely due to alienation than to indifference. They find that voting was a function of absolute utility and not utility difference.

instability (due to cycling) is implausible. Quite simply, political positions that are too far from voter's expressive preferences will never be selected because of alienation.

## **3.2 Expressive Choice as Moral Choice**

### **3.2.1 Voting for moral or desirable characteristics**

In a further paper, Brennan and Hamlin (1999) attack the idea that the argument for representative democracy over direct democracy is essentially of a second-best nature, where direct democracy would be superior to representative democracy but for the costs involved and other issues of feasibility. The attack is two-pronged. First, direct democracy may be rendered problematic by inefficient expressive choice on policy issues, which will be discussed in more detail below. Second, and more positively, in the case of representative democracy, voters may pick out moral or other desirable qualities in their representatives that suit them for work in the public sector; so that representatives are on average more moral (or otherwise more talented or competent) than would be the case if they were drawn from the population randomly or in some way that was statistically representative. The institutional implications are striking.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the heavy emphasis on constraints that normally exists in the public choice literature,<sup>23</sup> there is less need to be concerned about the principal/agent problem between politicians and the citizenry. In short, the focus of attention shifts, at least to some extent, from the imposition of constitutional constraints on politicians assumed to be self-interested, and toward the design of institutions that select politicians with appropriate characteristics.

But the link from this aspect of the expressive literature to the wider debate on constitutional design also has another element. To the extent that constitutions themselves are approved by popular voting, we might expect the expressive argument to apply to the choice of constitutional provisions, as well as those provisions governing the political institutions within which expression occurs.<sup>24</sup> This link reminds us that constitutions are themselves the outcomes of political processes and must be seen as endogenous.

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<sup>22</sup> And are developed in Brennan and Hamlin (2000). See also Brennan and Pettit (2002). For related discussions see Besley (2006).

<sup>23</sup> See, in particular, Brennan and Buchanan (1980) and (1985).

<sup>24</sup> See Brennan and Hamlin (2002) and (2006). We return to this theme in section 3.5 below.

The idea of the expressive selection of moral, competent or otherwise desirable politicians also links with the idea of understanding individual political motivations more in terms of dispositions and commitments rather than pure preferences.<sup>25</sup> The combination of politicians who can credibly commit to particular dispositions, and voters who select politicians at least partly on the basis of their disposition, reinforces the idea that constitutional arrangements that empower politicians rather than constrain them may sometimes be warranted. And there is at least some empirical support for this general perspective. Feddersen et al provide experimental evidence that large elections display what they term ‘moral bias’ such that outcomes that are thought by voters to be morally superior are more likely to win in large-scale elections than in small scale elections.<sup>26</sup> Since the distinction between large and small-scale elections maps onto the distinction between expressive and outcome-oriented voting, this result provides some support for the idea of moral expressive voting.

### **3.2.2 Voting for merit goods**

Brennan and Lomasky argue that a distinction can be made between ‘expressive choice’ (political choice), ‘instrumental choice’ (market choice) and true reflective choice based on fully considered underlying preferences (Brennan and Lomasky 1993). The normative appeal of the idea of individual autonomy (and consumer sovereignty) rests on the basis of fully reflective choice, but choices actually made in particular institutional settings are just as much a product of those settings as they are instances of reflective choice. In choosing between institutional settings (politics versus the market, for example) we should be aware that, in some cases, expressive choice may be a closer approximation to true reflective choice than is instrumental choice. How then do we identify such cases? One example relates to merit goods (Brennan and Lomasky 1983) where it is argued that the more expressive political environment will be more appropriate than the market which can be expected to consistently under-supply merit goods. Furthermore, to the extent that a political mechanism is used, the act of contemplation prior to a vote may bring more reflective preferences to the fore, such that they may have a subsequent effect on how individuals behave in market choices. This implies that reflection contributes to an expressive choice which may in turn

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<sup>25</sup> This link is developed in Brennan and Hamlin (2000) and (2008) and Hamlin (2006).

<sup>26</sup> Feddersen et al (2009). See also Feddersen and Sandroni (2006).

influence instrumental choice – pointing to a possible route by which the interaction between expressive and outcome oriented choices may be mutually informative.

### **3.2.3 Voting for redistribution**

Redistributive taxation may result from voting even where each individual is narrowly self-interested and purely outcome-oriented.<sup>27</sup> But there is a major strand of the literature on redistribution that starts from the presumption of at least some degree of altruism – understood in terms of a concern for the welfare, or income level of others.<sup>28</sup> Once a degree of altruism is in place, the expressive possibility is clear, and the expressive aspect of political choice may be important.<sup>29</sup> In Tullock’s striking phrase voting offers an easy opportunity for the uncharitable to appear charitable. The basic story, then, is that if we compare the situation in which redistribution is basically a matter of private philanthropy with the otherwise similar situation in which a public redistributive scheme may be enacted via a popular vote, we would expect significantly more redistribution in the latter case; and this for two very different reasons. First and most obviously, some voters will expect to benefit directly from redistribution and will have (outcome-oriented) reason to vote for it, but to the extent that the election is large, this may not be sufficient to actually cause them to vote. Second, even those who will contribute to the redistributive scheme will recognise the opportunity to express their altruism, and the fact that the election is large will ensure that there is little cost to such expression and so encourage them to vote.

This case then is closely related to, but not identical to, the case of moral voting. The distinction between these three cases is subtle but interesting. In the case of altruism the individual is expressing a particular preference that they happen to have – in this case a preference that relates to the well-being of others. This preference would be relevant to private decisions too, but in the setting of fully consequential action, the preference for philanthropy would have to be weighed against other preferences, whereas in the setting of individually inconsequential voting, the preference for altruism can be expressed to

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<sup>27</sup> For an early paper making this point see Roberts (1977).

<sup>28</sup> The idea of Pareto optimal redistribution requires some such concern, see Hochman and Rodgers (1969). See also Paul et al (1993) and Andreoni (1989) and (1990). In contrast Hillman (2009) disputes the idea that private philanthropy involves a concern for others arguing that it may simply reflect an expressive attempt to self-identify as a generous person.

<sup>29</sup> The argument was set out in Tullock (1971). Brennan (2001) revisits the argument as one of five accounts explaining the welfare state. See also Sobel and Wagner (2004).



its full extent. In the case of the moral egalitarian who has no personal preference for altruism, the political setting may still allow and encourage a vote for redistribution, but this vote is based in a belief about morality, rather than a personal preference for altruism. Of course, one might easily believe that individuals who have a private preference for altruism may be likely to be moral egalitarians, but there is no necessary connection and the logic of the two cases differs even if the general conclusion is similar. One might add that there is also a link to the case of voting for merit goods, to the extent that income distribution is seen as a merit good.

There have been numerous empirical studies of the expressive case for voting for higher levels of redistribution. Carter and Guereau (1992) find only weak evidence, but Fischer (1996) builds on weaknesses in that study to find stronger evidence. Support is also found in a number of further studies (Eichenberger and Oberholzer-Gee 1998; Feddersen, Gailmard, and Sandroni 2009; Sobel and Wagner 2004). Interestingly, Tyran (2004) does not find direct support for expressive approval of redistribution, but does find support for the view that voters tend to approve proposals if they expect others to support them.<sup>30</sup>

### **3.3 Social Pressure, Information and Illusion**

We have argued that the idea of true preferences should play no role in the definition of expressive behaviour. Consider the issue of redistribution, where we might observe an individual choosing ‘selfishly’ in their private or market based activities, but choosing more ‘benevolently’ in the political arena. It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to ascertain whether the ‘true’ preferences of the individual are ‘selfish’ or benevolent’ since we argue that each institutional setting elicits a particular behaviour from some underlying set of preferences, rather than directly ‘revealing’ true preferences.

A background assumption here is that behaviour is equally informed, free, and autonomous whether it is in a market setting or in a political setting, and it is partly because of this symmetry assumption that we conclude that neither setting is the superior or ‘fully revealing’ context for choice. If it could be argued that one setting was

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<sup>30</sup> Tyran’s study could be viewed as complementary to the idea that expressiveness may help to explain high levels of turnout even where the margin of victory is large. Empirical evidence for this is provided in Ashworth et al (2006) and Coate et al (2008).

systematically inferior to the other in terms of information, or autonomy, or in some other relevant way, this would certainly be relevant to the overall consideration of the relationship with true preferences. We will now consider examples where limitations or constraints are imposed upon political action such that political behaviour which seems expressive may also be interpreted as artificially or exogenously constrained. In these examples, the statement that expressive behaviour may not reflect true expressive preferences is explicitly built into the discussion.

Consider again the distinction between examples like cheering at a sports match or participating in a dinner party conversation on the one hand, and voting on the other. As already noted, one key difference lies in the identification of an audience. Voting is conducted privately. Does this imply that voting is not a strong example of expressive behaviour? There would seem to be a trade-off here. In both the sports and conversation examples there is also a possibility that what is being expressed is not in fact a true reflection of how the individual feels. As Kuran (1995) argues, individuals may be conforming to social pressure. On the one hand the anonymity inherent to voting reduces its expressive content by limiting the direct audience, and perhaps offers a reasonable explanation for why a proportion of the electorate choose not to vote. On the other hand, the anonymity would seem to protect the voter from social pressure thus increasing the likelihood that the expressive content of a vote is in some relevant sense 'authentic'.

Where expressions are public, there may be hidden costs in the form of social pressure that distorts the expression made. And while the secret ballot may provide some insurance against such pressures, voting is not the only politically relevant form of expressive behaviour. Many actions such as attending demonstrations or political meetings, engaging in political debate, indeed almost all aspects of 'political participation' are likely to engage expressive behaviour.<sup>31</sup> Since these forms of behaviour are often essentially public, the question arises of whether there is a way of separating authentic from socially constrained expressions?

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<sup>31</sup> This more general approach to political collective action and expressiveness is explored in Jones (2004) and (2007).

In the examples explored by Kuran (such as the support of repressive regimes in pre-1989 Eastern European countries), political equilibrium is highly unstable as the views expressed are not actually held and we should expect bandwagon effects leading to new equilibria to operate (as happened in post-1989 Eastern European countries). In contrast, one might expect views that are truly held to be more stable as a political equilibrium. So, the stability of political equilibria, where the equilibrium clearly features mass support and thus expressive behaviour as a feature, might offer a potential test of how authentic the underlying political expression is.

If we observe individuals engaged in collective action where we are confident that the views expressed are not the result of distorting social pressure, can we now be sure that the opinions displayed are expressive? There are at least two further challenges. These are the roles played by information and illusion.

In addition to the paradox of voting, Downs (1957) famously drew attention to the idea of rational ignorance. Given the low probability of being decisive there is not only a low incentive to vote but (perhaps even more seriously) there is also a low incentive to become informed about issues. Caplan (2007) extends this idea by developing the idea of 'rational irrationality' to suggest that while voters happily incur the low costs of voting, in doing so they may express ill-informed and biased opinions which, when aggregated, can lead to inefficient policies, assuming that democracies are indeed responsive to the aggregate voter opinion. Of course, it is the claim of bias, rather than the simple claim of relatively ill-informed opinion that is important to this argument. A crucial finding in Caplan's supporting empirical work is that citizens untrained in economics have systematically biased beliefs relative to those trained in economics. He argues that these biases can be seen in four main areas: an anti-market bias, an anti-foreign bias, a make-work bias, and a pessimistic bias. He argues that the untrained hold these biases because people desire certain beliefs and will hold these beliefs even when they run contrary to evidence or expert opinion.

Beliefs are viewed as a normal good, so that when their price is low demand for them will be high. The price will be low in situations where that belief has no direct day-to-day implications for the individual concerned. There will be many areas in which individuals face low-cost decisions between alternative beliefs and may 'choose' their

beliefs to fit with their preferences and prejudices. But when individuals vote by expressing such beliefs, they may have important social and political implications when aggregated.

Rationally irrational voters do not possess information that would conflict with their belief system as they have no incentive to acquire it. Note that rational irrationality differs from the simpler case of rational ignorance because of the role of the idea of choosing beliefs and the possibility that this leads to bias. Although it seems that this is just a possibility and not a necessity. Rational irrationality is clearly a member of the same family as expressiveness as the argument is driven by the underlying idea of the inconsequential nature of certain choices, but Caplan is careful to distinguish between the two.

*'In expressive voting theory, voters know that feel-good policies are ineffective. Expressive voters do not embrace dubious or absurd beliefs about the world.....In contrast, rationally irrational voters believe that feel-good policies work.'* (p 138-39).

So a further condition would need to be fulfilled. To judge a vote to be expressive of true preferences rather than rationally irrational we would need to check how well-informed the voter is. One suspects that this issue may be similar to social pressure. If information were made available, digested and diffused through the population, a relatively rapid shift in the political equilibrium may arise. If voting is an expression of truly-held preferences, however, the political equilibrium will be much more stable.<sup>32</sup>

A further challenge to a conclusion that voting is expressive of truly-held preferences stems from Akerlof's (1989) analysis of illusion.<sup>33</sup> The market (or, more generally, our every-day interactions) may influence the preferences we bring to politics. For example, where a market failure exists due to free-riding, those who engage in free-riding may justify it through the process of cognitive dissonance. So that, when an attempt is made to solve the market failure through the political process, voters may vote to maintain the inefficiency since they have already justified their actions in the market as appropriate. This is a particularly thorny problem. Voters would appear to be expressing their true

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<sup>32</sup> Jones and Dawson (2008) in a study of the UK, find that voters are better informed than non-voters.

<sup>33</sup> See also Fiorina (1976) and more recently Cowen (2005) on the same theme.

beliefs, but these beliefs are the result of an act of self-deception. Is it reasonable to describe these as expressive of true preferences? Once again we would simply note that any attempt to locate 'true' preferences is likely to run into a wide range of difficulties of this type, involving the endogeneity of preferences through both voluntary and involuntary processes. While we certainly accept the difficulty in saying anything very clear about true preferences, we do not think that this difficulty arises, or is seriously exacerbated, as a result of distinguishing between expressive and outcome-oriented behaviour, and so we are content to leave the deeper issues of true preferences on one side.

### **3.4 Inefficient Expressive Choice?**

If some arguments paint a picture of expressive behaviour that seems normatively benign and even desirable, there is also an alternative picture available that portrays expressive choice in terms of prejudice, fear and intemperate reaction. Two ideas emerge from this more negative conception of expressiveness.

The dark side of expressiveness seen as identity relates to the fact that identification with a group can often be framed in terms of identification against a rival group, perhaps in forms that result in inter-group conflict. So that expressive choice may help to explain both the likelihood of conflict and the cost of conflict which might be avoided by more outcome-oriented behaviour.<sup>34</sup> Kaempfer and Lowenburg (1988) explore the role of nationalist attachment in cases of international sanctions. The traditional argument for economic sanctions has been an instrumental one: sanctions may bring favourable policy change in the target country by imposing, or threatening, severe economic harm. But the instrumental case for economic sanctions often appears very weak. High costs are very often incurred by the sanctioning as well as the target country, without compensating benefits. Kaempfer and Lowenburg argue that while some pressure groups in the sanctioning country gain instrumentally from sanctions, most citizens gain purely expressive benefits by taking a stand against objectionable behaviour by the targeted country even though the collective stand may lead to high pecuniary costs for these citizens. In turn the imposition of sanctions may paradoxically

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<sup>34</sup> See Glazer (1992) on expressiveness and strikes and Hamlin and Jennings (2004) and (2007) on group conflict and the potential role for the expressive selection of group leaders who are willing to engage in conflict.

strengthen the objectionable government in the targeted country as the citizens there expressively ‘rally around the flag’.<sup>35</sup> Glazer (2008) models the role of anger in party political competition and uses this to explain possible divergence in the position of the competing parties. Tyran and Engelmann (2005), in an experimental study, investigate consumer boycotts and find that consumers often approve of boycotts for essentially expressive reasons in situations where there is no instrumental reason, in that the boycott is ineffective in reducing prices.

Related to factionalism is the role of populism and how it could be used to help explain inefficient redistribution. Expressive choice could help to explain inefficient transfers without recourse to complex explanations based on information asymmetry or transfers to maintain numbers within the interest group. Consider Acemoglu and Robinson’s (2001) discussion of inefficient redistribution.<sup>36</sup> They focus on the inability to form binding commitments as the trigger which leads interest groups to seek transfers inefficiently through market interventions rather than efficiently through cash transfers. Political power comes with maintaining large numbers and inefficient transfers keeps current and future members within the interest group whereas with cash transfers membership of the interest group would decline over time and thus the group would weaken and with it the group’s ability to extract transfers. Therefore, inefficient transfers are in the material self-interest of the members of the interest group. They apply the model to agricultural, labour market and trade policies. While this is a theory that would explain a significant fraction of the support for inefficient transfers (namely the members of the recipient group), it is also the case that such policies are often supported by a further group of voters who are not members of the interest group and who are actually hurt by such policies. These are the sorts of voters who appear in this paper and it is unlikely that these ‘emotional’ voters would find cash transfers to interest groups emotionally appealing. Further, it seems likely that where an inefficient policy appears to receive a very large level of support it would seem likely that a large proportion of those supporters are not material beneficiaries of the policy.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Karahan and Shughart (2004) for an analysis of expressive voting and flags.

<sup>36</sup> See also Coate and Morris (1995).

<sup>37</sup> See Jennings (2009) for an analysis of populism and expressive voting in the context of a political agency model.

A key point here is that political entrepreneurs who make instrumental choices (because they are more likely to be in a position of decisiveness) may potentially manipulate collectives to support positions that actually leave them worse-off, but benefit the interest group that the political entrepreneur represents; Kliemt (1986) makes this same point.

Clearly expressive voting and other expressive political behaviour can produce inefficient and even disastrous outcomes. There can be no claim that expressive behaviour is always a force for good in the world. But this is an appropriate point to underline the idea that political outcomes are always the result of the interaction between expressive and outcome-oriented behaviour. Even if many ordinary citizens can be expected to act expressively in many political situations, there will typically be some individuals who will face strong incentives to act in outcome-oriented ways: not least politicians. To the extent that professional politicians are in the business of getting elected, they will face incentives to present themselves in ways that appeal to voters – even where those voters behave expressively. As we have seen, this will involve a whole series of trade-offs. Some voters may be expressively drawn to candidates who exhibit certain characteristics that they wish to identify with, even where these characteristics may not relate directly to political positions or policies. Others may be expressively drawn to support moral positions. Still others may be drawn to express anger or display hostility to external groups. And so on. We might expect politicians of various types to emerge to reflect this range. The recognition of the relevance of the logic of expressive action does not make the analysis of politics simpler – rather it shifts the domain of the debate away from the domain of interests (in all their diversity) and towards the domain of expressed opinion (in all their diversity).

### **3.5 Institutional Implications**

Expressive choice shifts attention from the institutional implications of political agents acting against the principal's instrumental interests, and toward the institutional implications of the fact that principals may not express their interests when they vote or act in expressive settings – so that the link from popular political expression, whether in elections, opinion polls or in expressive debate, cannot be taken to track all-things-considered interests. Even if political agents could be bound to implement the expressed

preferences of the political principals, this would not be sufficient to ensure that policies were optimal relative to underlying all-things-considered interests.

However, as we have seen, whether this implies that political outcomes are ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than might have been supposed under the more instrumental model, depends upon the precise nature of expressive choice. This may cause the reader to feel that the myriad possibilities of expressive choice lead to a lack of predictive or normative bite. This criticism, though, can be offset to the extent that we can identify structures and institutions within a society that are more likely to prompt some particular kinds of expressions as opposed to others. Furthermore, to the extent that expressive choice leads individuals to step outside of themselves in a style reminiscent of the Rawlsian original position (Rawls 1971), and consider the effects of policies beyond the direct effects upon themselves, it could be argued that expressive choice may be directly welfare-enhancing. The interesting question then is the balance between welfare-increasing and welfare-decreasing aspects of expressive choice and whether there is anything that can be done by way of institutional design to select for the former and against the latter.

The emphasis on institutional design has formed the cornerstone of the normative approach taken by public choice and constitutional political economy. Since *The Calculus of Consent* the argument has been made forcefully that political outcomes are best seen as functions of the particular political institutions and rules-of-the-game in place, and that the construction of an artificial social welfare function will not resolve disputes (Buchanan and Tullock 1962). In short, at the level of real-world, or in-period, political decision making, consensus on specific policy questions will not be found as an outcome of the political game. On this view, hope lies in finding more basic agreement on the rules of the game, as citizens might choose them behind a ‘veil of uncertainty’. This insight is not fundamentally altered by an awareness that much political behaviour is likely to be expressive in nature. All that would seem to be required is that the role of expressive choice is given full consideration when institutions are designed (Brennan and Hamlin 2000).

Brennan and Hamlin (2002) highlight the problem that follows from acknowledging the presence of expressive choice in the process of institutional design. Essentially, the issue is that institutional design may itself be subject to a political process and so



subject to expressive behaviour. Large numbers of citizens being asked to support a constitutional proposal in a referendum may reject it expressively even though they may have accepted it instrumentally (or vice versa). Brennan and Hamlin argue that subjecting constitutional proposals to a popular vote may undermine well-designed rules. Perhaps, these proposals should be decided by small (but representative) groups, who might be more likely to take an all-things-considered view. Crampton and Farrant (2004) make explicit the potential problem that such a small group might design institutions that enrich themselves if they are not fully representative in a relevant sense. Therefore, a trade-off may exist between the problem of expressiveness on one hand and allowing too much room for the narrow self interest of unrepresentative groups on the other. More recently, Brennan and Hamlin (2006) revisit the topic and point to the significance of written versus unwritten constitutions in that written constitutions may provide more clearly specified rules, but are more likely to be infected with rhetorical appeal and heavy symbolism that may limit the operational efficacy of the constitution. Written constitutions are themselves to be seen as ‘expressive documents’ that are used to express identity or ideology as well as to specify the rules of the political game.

More optimistically, Jennings (2007) argues that if a constitution must be passed by referendum then additional institutional apparatus may be required within that constitution that may not have been required from a purely instrumental perspective. It is especially useful if these institutions could be designed so as to have little actual impact, as illustrated by reference to the 1998 Belfast Agreement where it could be argued that aspects of that Agreement were included primarily to stave off expressive rejection at the stage of the popular referendum.

So far, in this section, we have focussed mainly on the idea that expressive concerns can be relevant at the constitutional level (of institutional design) as well as at the political level (of policy choice within given institutional arrangements). But we began with the contrast between the principal-agent conception of the design of political institutions that is recommended by the standard, instrumental account of political behaviour, and the broader conception that accompanies the expressive perspective. This should not be taken to indicate that the principal-agent idea becomes irrelevant in a more expressive world. Rather, it is no longer the only game in town. At least two further ideas become relevant. The first is the general idea of selection. Politicians, and leaders in all arenas,

may be selected for particular characteristics, rather than simply as the embodiment of a package of policy measures. And to the extent that the characteristics selected for have normative dimensions (not least in terms of the motivations of candidates, or characteristics such as honesty) we might expect the selection mechanism to carry direct normative implications. On this reading, politics clearly runs the risk of institutionalizing an adverse-selection problem, but also has the potential to institutionalize a more positive selection game. Similarly, since the basic idea underlying the expressive behaviour literature is that different institutional settings will elicit different behaviour patterns that reflect different aspects of our motivations, there is a clear role for what we might term feedback or reinforcement effects. Once we recognise that variations in the institutional environment can be important in influencing how we express our political preferences (and what political preferences we express), it is a short step to building this idea into our thinking on institutional design, so that we may favour those institutional structures that elicit the most ‘positive’ or relevant aspects of our motivation. In many cases, this may imply institutions that avoid individually inconsequential behaviour and encourage what might be loosely referred to as ‘responsible’ choice. Such institutions will carry the flavour of the market. But in other cases, it will be necessary and appropriate to design our institutions in such a way as to elicit political expressions, and here it may not always be appropriate to rely on the institution of voting on a mass scale since, as we have seen, there may be occasions where such an institutions yields predictably inefficient outcomes.

#### **4. Concluding Comments**

In exploring the idea of expressive behaviour we have both attempted to understand the essential structure of the expressive argument and to illustrate the great variety of substantive ideas that can be articulated within the expressive framework. We will not attempt to summarise or review the wide range of points made, but will restrict ourselves to just two final thoughts.

In working toward a definition of expressive behaviour we have stressed the idea that expressive and outcome-oriented aspects of motivation sit alongside each other as parts of all-things-considered motivation, so that it is inappropriate to ask whether expressive or outcome-oriented preferences reflect true preferences. Expressive preferences, like

outcome-oriented preferences reflect a valid part of our motivations, but only a part. Different institutional settings may elicit responses that reflect different parts of our motivational structure, and we should recognise this fact both when analyzing and evaluating the outcomes achieved under different institutional settings and when designing and reforming institutions.

The broad range of substantive ideas that may be relevant within the category of the expressive may, at first sight, seem to restrict the value of the expressive insight since there can be no easy argument that expressive behaviour is always of a particular type. But closer consideration recognizes that the variety of ideas with the expressive domain is no more problematic than the variety of preferences in the outcome-oriented domain. What is important is that the heterogeneity of expressive consideration, as well as the heterogeneity of interests, is reflected in our political and institutional analysis. Of course this implies that politics is complex, and the appropriate design of political institutions is subject to a large variety of considerations and trade-offs, but it also allows us to recognise the value of a range of institutional and political mechanisms that might appear rather mysterious under a purely outcome oriented understanding of politics. In this way, the expressive literature both adds to the diversity of political problems recognised within this branch of political economy, but also adds to the diversity of potential solutions to those problems.

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