

It is the duty of having to act not for individual benefit, but for the benefit of the larger society

There is a puzzling trait that is pervasive and human. It is that we often judge others with a different yardstick than with which we judge ourselves. When I visit an organisation, there is always somebody who complains that their colleagues do not work at all. Ironically, the colleagues also say the same thing about others in the organisation. Our self-perception is often at odds with the way others see us. This is also part of a deeper human malaise: we think others are wrong and we are right in our beliefs and opinions. Elections exemplify these tendencies very well.

In the time of elections, we repeatedly hear these sentiments about other voters. The upper classes will tell you that poorer citizens vote only to get benefits such as cash, clothes, television sets and other consumer goods. The majority group will say that the minorities vote as a bloc since they have all been told whom to vote for. These are seen as examples of voters not doing their duty of voting for the best person, namely, the best political representative who will govern well. Those who support a particular party will say something similar about those who are voting for another party. It is as if when people vote for money or as a vote bank, they are not doing what they should. But then it could also be argued that a person who blindly votes for one ideology or another is pretty much doing the same thing.

Getting paid to vote

What does it mean to perform the act of voting correctly? It is often said that voting is a duty, but what kind of a duty is it? Is it to make a mark on a sheet or is it actually a particular process of thinking and deciding?

Consider the act of voting by those who get paid before they vote. This practice is not only endemic across States but is also done quite brazenly in some places. Party members go house to house and distribute money and other goods. This is done in the open and is a performance in itself. In other cases, people are given money and goods in more surreptitious ways. This cash-for-votes practice seem to go against the very grain of democratic election. But why so?

In the case of taking money or goods, voters see elections as a transaction. What they are basically asking is this: what am I getting in return for voting for you? This goes against a

fundamental principle of democratic voting, which is that voting is not a transaction. When we do a job for someone we don't know, and which benefits that person, we generally expect to get paid for that act. Voting is not a job in that sense. It is not a job which is eligible for some compensation. So, the fundamental question about voting is this: are we voting for our own sake or for the benefit of others? Does voting improve our well-being or that of others, the elected politicians? Or is it that the ultimate purpose of an individual's vote is to improve the well-being of the larger society?

We are clearly helping somebody else by voting. If a person wins because of our votes, then he or she derives enormous benefit from being a member of the legislature. There is a direct benefit to the person who is elected – she enjoys a lot of power after being elected. This is the dilemma in electing somebody. We are supposed to vote for free, whereas the result of our action ends up making another person better off. So why is voting not seen as a business transaction since the winner of the election profits from the action of the voter? Why can't the voter who is enabling opportunity for another person's wealth ask for a share in that wealth? If voters do so, then they are behaving rationally.

People who stand for elections understand this logic well and they deal with it merely as a problem of economics. Their calculation is also based on this understanding: let us say a person wins an election, because of which she expects to make one crore in the next year. The person needs enough votes to make this happen and spends in anticipation that she will be able to recoup the money if she wins. Giving money to voters is thus like an investment. The amount of payment to voters is really a measure of how much elected representatives hope to make during their tenure!

When we vote based on our ideology, we are following the same logic as those taking money. Those for whom small amounts of money do not matter ask for other favours, including protection of their interests, whether their religion, their caste or even economic benefits appropriate to their class. When a group of rich people vote for a person who supports lower taxes, they are doing exactly the same as the poor, since voting is used as a transaction to get something they desire.

The dynamics of voting is thus a complex problem of rationality, similar to problems in rational choice theory. First, how do politicians know that the people will vote for them after taking their money or listening to their promises, especially if more than one politician pays the same group of people or makes similar promises? Moreover, how do they know that enough people will vote for them to make them win? For the voter, it is a

much simpler calculation. They get paid for a service they perform by voting. Interestingly, many of them do vote for the person they take money from, because they feel they are morally bound to do so.

For the larger good

The fundamental problem lies in viewing voting as a transaction, the aim of which is to get some benefit for an individual or a group. But we have to recognise that voting is not like any other transaction. The duty that is inherent in the act of voting is an ethical duty, not just a constitutional one. It is the duty of having to act not for individual benefit, such as money or ideology, but for the benefit of the larger society. Such benefit for the larger society will include others benefiting as much as each one of us does through each of our votes. That is, when I vote, I vote on behalf of others as much as on behalf of myself. This duty is the ethical rationality related to voting. It is also a recognition that a democratic action like voting is primarily for the good of something larger than one's self interests.

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