

The Epistemic and Metaphysical Roles of Voting: Addressing the Dual-Role Dilemma

There are votes for people: votes cast to select a person or group of person to serve as one's representative. And there are votes for policy: votes cast to select an option to be the governing policy or decision of some group or collective. These two kinds of votes are distinct in important ways, but they are alike in this regard: votes of both kinds can and usually do serve both an epistemic role and a metaphysical role.

The epistemic role can be seen as an expression or emanation of a judgment that a particular person or policy would be best, at least relative to the other options under consideration. It is also sometimes expanded to include the expression or emanation of non-comparative judgments (of varying strengths) that a particular person or policy is a good, attractive, correct, or optimal option.

The metaphysical role, which we might also think of as a moral or normative role, is to alter various facts about what we might call the "normative landscape." The metaphysical role is to transfer a certain kind of force or power to a particular person or policy, to make it so that particular people have certain powers or abilities, to make it so that certain policies come to be given legal or other kinds of force, or to make it so that a group is committed to some decision or course of action. In many cases, this metaphysical role is also a moral role, since the new force, power, or commitment itself has a moral dimension: creating moral authority, legitimacy, obligations, and permissions that otherwise would not exist.

On some level, we are all aware that votes have these dual roles, and that—in the normal case—a single vote plays both of these roles simultaneously. Indeed, a natural story to tell about voting is that these roles are related: we accord to votes the metaphysical role because of our understanding that votes also involve the relevant epistemic dimension. In this way, votes are importantly different than lotteries. The former, but not the latter, are intimately bound up with selecting a person or policy on the basis of our judgment and reason.

That said, not enough attention has been paid to the way in which these two roles—the epistemic and the metaphysical—can come into conflict with each other. Specifically, these different roles can create dilemmas for would-be voters, at least under plurality voting systems in which a person can vote for only one candidate or policy, and in which they either vote wholly for that candidate or policy or not at all.

Differential responses to this dilemma on the part of voters raises problems for both the epistemic and metaphysical roles of voting. Because voters respond to this dilemma in different ways, that will have the effect of muddying both the epistemic and metaphysical waters.

In this paper, I will begin by saying a bit more about these two different roles. In the second part of the paper, I will discuss how plurality voting systems generate dilemmas for would-be voters. In the third part of the paper, I will consider alternative voting systems that do better on this front. And in the final part of the paper, I will argue that both social epistemologists and political philosophers should take a greater interest in the precise connections between the epistemic role of voting and the metaphysical role accorded to voting in particular voting systems.