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Expressive behavior in economics and politics

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ABSTRACT

Expressive behavior is the self-interested quest for utility through acts and declarations that confirm a person's identity. Expressive voting is an example of expressive behavior. I introduce expressive behavior in the forms of expressive rhetoric and expressive generosity. The questions for society and for public policy are whether expressive behavior affects others, and if so whether beneficially or disadvantageously. In experiments, expressive behavior often benefits others. There are adverse social consequences when, in real-life decisions, expressive behavior results in unwanted public policies of expressive-policy traps. I consider the prospects for avoiding or exiting expressive-policy traps.

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H53

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Voting
Rhetoric
Generosity
Policy trap

1. Introduction

Hypocrisy: The practice of professing standards, beliefs, etc., contrary to one's real character or actual behavior, esp. the pretence of virtue and piety. Collins English Dictionary

Neo-classical economic models describe people rationally maximizing utility derived from material aspects of life — consumption or leisure and income or wealth. Behavioral economics explains perceived "non-rational" behavior inconsistent with the traditional rationality axioms. Expressive behavior also departs from the traditional neo-classical view of behavior but in positing that people behave rationally in seeking expressive utility from acts or decisions that substantiate or confirm personal identity.

Attributes of identity can be chosen to reflect a view that people have of themselves in terms of who they are and what they stand for, or support or oppose. People obtain expressive utility, for example, by confirming pleasing attributes of being generous, cooperative, trusting and trustworthy, or ethical and moral. In conflict situations, confirming a pleasing identity can be confirmed or signaled by being conciliatory and open to compromise and being opposed to violence.
An identity can be chosen as self-pleasing or pleasing to others, or if possible simultaneously both. The expressive utility from being pleasing to oneself is founded in psychological aspects of self-approval. Pleasing others has a basis in wishing to be liked or popular, which can be achieved by expressively signaling conformity with group-defining norms.1

Insofar as all people have an identity that influences their behavior, all people behave expressively. The questions for society and for public policy are whether expressive behavior affects others, and if so whether beneficially or disadvantageously. Benefits for others are revealed in experiments when people choose behavior that confirms a pleasing identity to themselves or to others. Outside of experiments, in the domain of real-life decisions, the same pleasing behavior has socially adverse consequences when public policies are supported only for reasons of personal expressive utility. As a result of the quest for expressive utility, societies can find themselves in disadvantageous expressive-policy traps with majority-supported policies that the majority does not actually want.

Section 2 summarizes elements of expressive behavior. Appendix A provides a more extended formal presentation. In Section 3, expressive behavior is illustrated through expressive voting. Section 4 introduces behavior that I call expressive rhetoric. Section 5 introduces behavior that I call expressive generosity. Section 6 reviews evidence on expressive behavior. Section 7 addresses remaining issues: I consider the relation between expressive and other types of behavior, the effects of institutions on expressive behavior, and solutions for social costs. Section 8 provides brief concluding remarks.

2. Expressive behavior

Expressive behavior is self-interested and rational. If the behavior affects others, the consequences for others are not internalized in individuals’ decisions. Expressive behavior is therefore distinct from, and devoid of, altruism and malice.2

The attributes of identity confirmed by expressive behavior can be either predetermined or discretionary. Predetermined identity, for example, affects behavior through gender and ethnicity.3 I shall be concerned with attributes of identity that are a choice.4

For exposition, I shall view total utility as the sum of material and expressive utilities, or

Total utility = Material utility + Expressive utility.

There need be no conflict between material and expressive utility. Because of moral hazard and the undermining of the work ethic, a high-income person may object to a policy of high taxation that finances generous welfare payments. The high-income person’s policy position is consistent with personal material self-interest. At the same time, the high-income person can obtain expressive utility from substantiation of identity as a person who believes that incentives of public policy should encourage self-reliance.

In other cases, expressive utility is inconsistent with material self-interest. A person may, for example, forego income by choosing to live in a location for expressive reasons. From the observed locational preference, we infer that, if material losses from the locational decision are high, expressive utility from the locational choice is higher.

Material losses incurred because of expressive behavior can be insignificantly low or zero. In such cases, people disregard material utility and make decisions based on expressive utility alone. Such low-cost expressive behavior has been extensively studied in the form of expressive voting.5

3. Expressive voting

The expressive-voting hypothesis contrasts with an instrumental view of rational voting (Downs, 1957) in which voters are described as believing that their vote is with some significant likelihood decisive in determining the outcome of an election. Whether the institutions are those of representative or direct democracy, and whether voting is optional or compulsory, a single vote in general does not affect a voting outcome. The “paradox of voting” is that instrumental voters, if rational, are predicted not to vote because the cost of voting in terms of time exceeds the expected benefit of voting based on the insignificant likelihood of one vote being decisive.6 The addition of expressive utility from voting can however change the rational-voting cost–benefit calculation.7

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1 Paul Robin (2002) describes the small-group hunter-gatherer origins of much human behavior that ostensibly include the wish to appear likeable, and thereby be liked by others. Chen and Xin Li (2009) and Klor and Shayo (2010) describe experiments that reveal benefits from shared group identity.

2 I consider coexistence of expressive behavior with altruism or malice in Section 7.

3 Rose (1988) proposed that gender-based identity explained the emergence of specialized “breadwinner–homemaker” households in England in the 19th century (see also De Vries, 2008, on preferences, technology, and incomes). Akertol and Kranton (2000) proposed that gender-based identity explains why a woman earning market income may contribute disproportionately to housekeeping (the woman does not wish to emanculate the man) and observed that ethnic identity can affect behavior through attitudes to educational achievement (see also Austen-Smith and Frier, 2006, on “acting white”).


5 Kirchhase (1992) described “low-cost” decisions.

6 See Tullock (1967). Pivotal-voter instrumental-voting models (see the overview of such models by Feddersen, 2004) are of limited real-world relevance when rational instrumental voters are aware that their vote is not decisive.

Voting involves two related decisions: whether to vote, and for whom to vote. The decision whether to vote can involve conceptions of civic duty that underlie expressive confirmation of identity as a socially responsible person. Having decided to vote, individuals also make an expressive decision regarding for whom to vote. They can obtain expressive utility by voting for policies that they truly wish to see implemented. However, rationally recognizing that their individual vote will not affect the voting outcome, voters can choose to vote expressively for candidates and policies that they would oppose if they believed that their vote were decisive.

In Table 1 two expressive taxpayers choose how to vote on financing an income transfer to a third person. The two voters will be taxed, and the income transfer will take place, only if there is a consensus vote in favor. Abstention by one voter is therefore a veto and so is sufficient to block the income transfer.

With expressive utility of voter \( j \) denoted by \( U_j^{\text{EXP}} \) and material utility by \( U_j^{\text{MAT}} \), and total utility determined as the sum of expressive and material utility so that \( U_j = U_j^{\text{EXP}} + U_j^{\text{MAT}} \), for each person in Table 1:

\[
\begin{align*}
U_j^{\text{EXP}} & \quad \text{from voting for the transfer} = 1 \\
U_j^{\text{MAT}} & \quad \text{from paying for the transfer} = -2 \\
U_j & = U_j^{\text{EXP}} + U_j^{\text{MAT}} \quad \text{from voting against the transfer} = 0.
\end{align*}
\]

Voting against the income transfer provides no expressive utility and results in no material loss. A voter is best off with expressive utility 1 from voting for the income transfer that is not made because the other person has vetoed the transfer. The maximum personal benefit is achieved in the efficient Nash equilibria at \((1, 0)\) or \((0, 1)\) in which the other voter has vetoed the income transfer. The circumstances are those of the volunteer-public-good game. The public good that the “volunteer” provides is avoidance of the common loss that is incurred if the income transfer is made.

If voting is sequential (and observed), the order of voting determines which of the Nash-equilibria \((1, 0)\) or \((0, 1)\) is attained. The person voting first has expressive utility from voting to be generous and the second voter maximizes utility (for both voters) by vetoing the income transfer.

In a mixed-strategy equilibrium, the outcome can be \((-1, -1)\), in which case utility of the taxpayers is minimized. The taxpayers are then in a policy trap that has arisen because of expressive voting. They have both expressively voted in favor of a policy that neither wants.

In majority voting in actual elections, there are many voters, each of whom is aware that a single vote is not decisive in determining whether the income transfer will take place. Each voter maximizes expressive utility by voting in favor of the income transfer, which therefore takes place, resulting in the expressive-policy trap in which all voters have utility \(-1\). Externalities are present in voting because voters do not internalize the consequences of their voting decisions for others (Tullock, 1959; Hillman, 2009, chapter 6). With expressive voting, there are mutually disadvantageous externalities among expressive voters if voting results in an expressive-voting trap.

Expressive voting can result in expressive-voting traps in which there is majority support for public policies that each individual member of the supportive majority would veto if he or she could.

To summarize, other than the time taken to vote, voting does not affect a voter’s material utility because of the effectively zero probability of one vote being decisive in determining policy outcomes in usual elections. Voters can therefore rationally disregard material utility and vote to maximize expressive utility, and the result can be an expressive-policy trap.

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 1 votes against the income transfer</th>
<th>Person 2 votes in favor of the income transfer</th>
<th>Person 2 votes in favor of the transfer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person 1 votes against the income transfer</td>
<td>0, 0</td>
<td>0, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person 1 votes in favor of the income transfer</td>
<td>1, 0</td>
<td>-1, -1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 Jones and Hudson (2000).

9 Kliemt (1986) described decisions made behind a “veil of insignificance”. The comparative reference is to the veil of ignorance of Rawls (1971). The metaphor of the veil of ignorance describes people confronting uncertainty about their future selves. The veil of insignificance involves no uncertainty. People know who they are but they know that they are insignificant in determining actual outcomes or policy decisions.

10 The example is from Hillman (2009, chapter 7).

11 On the “volunteer” public good, see Hirshleifer (1983) and Diekmann (1985); for a textbook exposition, see Hillman (2009, chapter 3).

12 For the values in Table 1, in the mixed-strategy equilibrium, a voter vetoes the income transfer with probability 0.5. The likelihood of the outcome \((-1, -1)\) is therefore 0.25.

13 On social traps and the volunteer public good, see Diekmann (1986).

14 The outcome is the “inefficient unanimity” of Brennan and Lomasky (1984). A voter cannot influence the material loss of \(-2\) from paying to finance the transfer but obtains expressive utility of 1 by voting non-decisively in favor of the transfer, resulting in utility of \(-1\).
4. Expressive rhetoric

Expressive rhetoric, like expressive voting, is low-cost behavior that can provide expressive utility. The rhetoric can be an accompaniment of expressive voting on income redistribution. The rhetoric then takes the form of declarations such as “we should have a social conscience” or “people less well off than we are should be helped”. For diversity, I shall describe expressive rhetoric against the background of the policy issue of public safety when an adversary has supreme-value objectives.

4.1. Public safety in the face of supreme values

Supreme values allow no trade-offs in objectives.

Definition. Supreme values (Bernholz, 1993)

A supreme-value ideology or belief system ranks objectives lexicographically.

The supreme-value objective may be annihilation of peoples who are declared inferior (as in national-socialism), change in the consciousness of people (as in communism), or submission of all people to a designated belief system (as in the case of radical Islam). Although compromise with a supreme-value adversary is impossible, expressive utility can be obtained from conciliatory expressive rhetoric. The rhetoric can use the narrative of “strong” and “weak” conjoined with “rich” and “poor”:

“When one side in a conflict is strong and rich and the other side is poor and weak, the strong side should be conciliatory and generous, and make offers of compromise”.

The source of expressive utility is in the continuation, implicit or explicit:

“I would be conciliatory and generous toward the weak if I were strong”.

The conjoining of “weak” and “poor” in the expressive rhetoric parallels expressively voting for policies that would require high-income people (the strong) to be generous in sharing income or wealth with low-income people (the weak). Evidence does not substantiate the association between being a threat to public safety and being poor. However, to let the rhetoric proceed, we allow the evidence to be disregarded. Expressive utility from conciliatory rhetoric then nonetheless requires that supreme values be called into question:

“Supreme values should not be taken at face value: all people are reasonable (as I am), and compromise with reasonable people is always possible.”

The next step in the rhetoric after the calling into question of supreme values is the rhetoric of “engagement”:

“We should engage with adversaries to achieve compromise and mutual understanding”.

Table 2 shows the volunteer public-good game implicit in the above expressive rhetoric. The public good “public safety” is provided if at least one of the two persons acknowledges that an adversary exists and poses a threat to public safety. The following values are used in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Utility Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policies ensure public safety</td>
<td>$U_{j}^{MAT}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public safety is threatened</td>
<td>$U_{j}^{MAT}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when both admit the threat to public safety</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when the other denies there is a threat to public safety</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when both deny the threat to public safety</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when the other favors policies to provide public safety</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


16 On the evidence that terror is not due to low income or low wealth, see Krueger and Maleckova (2003), Abadie (2006), Piazza (2006), and Krueger (2007). Examples indicate on the contrary a positive relation between wealth and being a terror threat. Particular cases confirm the general evidence. Osama bin Laden was born into a high-wealth Saudi family. September 11 terrorists and other terrorists in the US, the UK, and elsewhere have been university-educated. The terrorist from Nigeria who sought to down a plane on December 25, 2009 on the approach to Detroit airport was the son of high-wealth parents: he had been educated at a college of London University, and had lived in one of the more exclusive areas of London. The convicted killer of the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, whose beheading was videotaped, had attended an English private high school and had been a student at the London School of Economics. Nonetheless, the conjoining of “weak” and “poor” allows the rhetoric: “Ending poverty is the means of ending threats to public safety”.

The benefits of a policy that provides public safety, and the losses if public safety is not provided, are in terms of material utility. Both persons have utility of 10 if at least one of them admits the threat to public safety (in which case policies to ensure public safety are implemented) and they both lose 20 when neither admits that public safety is threatened (in which case there is no public safety).

There are externalities because the expressive utility from rhetoric depends on the rhetoric of the other person. In the symmetric cases, common expressive utility is 2 when both persons admit and 5 when both deny the existence of the threat to public safety. In asymmetric cases, expressive utility of 5 is lost by admitting the existence of the threat to public safety when the other person denies that public safety is threatened, and expressive utility of 10 is gained by denying the existence of the threat to public safety when the other person acknowledges that the threat is present.

When decisions are sequential, public safety is provided in the efficient Nash equilibria at \( (20, 5) \) and \( (5, 20) \), with the first person to decide having high utility and the other person low utility. The expressive externality can be through the rhetorical question of the high-utility person:

“Why are you not peace-loving and conciliatory as I am?”\(^{18}\)

With no means of pre-commitment, we have a game of chicken. In the mixed-strategy equilibrium, both persons can have declared themselves to be “peace-loving” and can find themselves in the expressive-policy trap at \( (−15, −15) \) where both incur a material loss (danger to their lives) but benefit from their expressive behavior.

The moral dilemma in providing public safety also provides a means of seeking expressive utility. An apprehended terrorist has information that, if divulged in time, will save innocent lives, but compelling means are required to elicit the information.\(^{19}\) In these circumstances, the case in support of public safety is:

“Public policy should ensure public safety, even if the means are inconsistent with usual standards of legal and civil rights.”\(^{20}\)

The expressive counter case is:

“Saving innocent lives can never justify forceful means of eliciting information.”

The hypocrisy is in the continuation, which may remain unspoken:

“Unless it is my life that is saved.”

In the 2-person game in Table 2, one person can “volunteer” to acknowledge the need for policies that provide public safety. As in the case of voting, we proceed to a multi-person game in which a sufficiently large number of “volunteers” (for example a majority) is required to admit the need for public safety.\(^{21}\) With each individual recognizing that he or she is personally ineffectual in ensuring public safety, material utility is disregarded and all people maximize their individual expressive utility. The outcome is the expressive-policy trap \( (−15, −15) \).

The conclusions regarding expressive rhetoric parallel those of expressive voting:

People can maximize utility by expressively proclaiming the merits of policies that they know would be personally harmful if actually implemented.

People may expressively proclaim the merits of policies that they would oppose if they were decisive.

Expressive rhetoric that influences policy can result in expressive-policy traps.

\(^{18}\) The rhetoric in alternative circumstances in which both persons admit the existence of the threat to public safety is: “if you were peace-loving and conciliatory as I am, we would be liked by everybody.”

\(^{19}\) Franck et al. (2005) describe the moral dilemma when the population from which terrorists come is known but not the specific identity of terrorists.


\(^{21}\) On the multi-person volunteer game when one person is decisive in providing the public good, see Xu (2001).
4.2. Soft power

Soft power (Nye, 2004) is a concept proposing that persuasion is effective in achieving conciliation with adversaries through appeal to the rationality of avoiding conflict. There is no qualification for supreme values. Advocates of soft power in the face of a supreme-value adversary obtain expressive utility from their expressive rhetoric. Soft power is often expressed as a “carrot” set before the adversary.22

4.3. “Useful idiots”

Lenin described the Western supporters of communism as “useful idiots”. The behavior of “useful idiots” is expressive. They are not decisive and obtain utility from the rhetoric that displays their peaceful non-violent identity.

4.4. Advice for others

“Useful idiots” obtain expressive utility by denying the need for their own defense. Denial of the existence of a threat to safety and thereby of the need for self-defense can be advice for others. For example, following the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, large majorities in western European countries declared that they were of the opinion that the U.S. should not act to preempt further terror attacks.23 The responses may have been an indication of the presence of malice (see Section 7). However, the declarations are also consistent with expressive rhetoric that confirms an identity of being opposed to violence.24 Expressive conciliatory rhetoric in face of threats that others face imposes costs on those others who are placed in the unnatural circumstances of being told not to defend themselves. The externalities are in the diminished feeling of self-worth and indicated low value of life for those to whom self-defense is denied. Advocates of soft power and “useful idiots” deny, for their expressive utility, that someone wishes to do them harm but would change their rhetoric and would acknowledge the need for self-defense if decisive and actually personally threatened. There are no such self-limiting bounds on people obtaining expressive utility for themselves from expressive rhetoric that advises against self-defense for others.

4.5. Self-defamation to please others

The intention of expressive rhetoric may be to please others. The personal benefits from the rhetoric can take the form of expressive utility (from being liked) or material reward (monetary payments or privileged invitations). Pleasing others may require self-defamation. Thus, for example, some U.S. commentators joined Europeans and others in rhetoric that declared that the United States had brought the September 11 terror attacks upon itself.25 The rhetoric of self-defamation takes the form:

“We deserve what others do to us because we are condescending in supposing the primacy of our culture”.

The rhetoric can be conjoined with the familiar:

“We are strong and the populations from which the terrorists come are weak and we should be more respectful”.

Self-defamation is predicted in particular from persons with foreign peer groups.26

5. Expressive generosity

Expressive behavior can take a form that I call expressive generosity. For some people, voting for or expressively declaring the virtue of generosity while not actually personally giving may not provide expressive utility. Rather, expressive utility from confirming generous identity may require the act of actual giving.27

I have defined expressive utility from voting and rhetoric without interdependent utility. Likewise:

Expressive generosity is motivated solely by own expressive utility and not by altruism in caring about consequences of giving for others.

22 As if the supreme-value adversaries were rabbits.
23 Opposition to a U.S. defensive response against countries harboring terrorists was voiced by 71% of French respondents, 79% of Italians, 82% of British, 83% of Germans, and 88% of Spaniards. Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project, reported in Kirchick (2009).
24 On the relation between survey responses and true preferences, see for example List and Gallet (2001).
26 Expressive benefits from group approval and material benefits compensate for loss of expressive utility from self-defamation. Frey (2003) observed self-defaming utility-maximizing behavior in academic publishing when authors acquiesce to idiosyncratic requirements of reviewers whose proposed “improvements” are a requisite for a favorable publication decision.
27 In a counter to the usual perspective, Cornes and Grünner (2000) suggested that generosity can decrease expressive utility. If utility from social status requires high income or wealth, people who give money away can find themselves lacking the wealth or income that allows them to express themselves as having high social status.
In the absence of altruism and with no expressive utility, the decision is to give nothing. As with voting and rhetoric, expressive utility can change behavior, in this case to result in actual giving.

We again consider low-cost decisions. Expressive generosity can be low-cost because it is the act of giving that provides expressive utility rather than necessarily the amount given.

Beneficial externalities from expressive generosity are indicated in behavior in experiments (which I consider in the next section). There are negative externalities from expressive generosity in the following cases.

5.1. Expressive generosity in a natural experiment

Two high-income visitors to a low-income country encounter a school-age child offering trinkets for sale at a time of day when the child confirms that she should (and could) be in school. One of the visitors (an economist) points out that the purchase of trinkets will discourage the child’s parents from sending her to school. The other visitor responds by withdrawing from the purchase, but later is seen furtively buying trinkets from the child. The purchase of the trinkets is inconsequential for the material utility of the buyer: the amount of money spent on the trinkets is insignificant, and the buyer obtains no material utility from the trinkets. The purpose of the purchase of the trinkets is only to provide expressive utility for the buyer by confirming a generous identity. There is a negative externality from the expressive behavior through the adverse incentives for the child’s education. The buyer’s decision was however not based on outcomes for the child. Only the buyer’s own expressive utility mattered.

5.2. Overfeeding children

In another example, parents obtain expressive utility through expressive generosity by overfeeding children. Utility is obtained by the parent, at the expense of the overfed child.

5.3. Ineffective aid as expressive generosity

Donors in the forms of international agencies, governments, and non-government organizations have provided development aid in face of conclusive evidence that their aid is ineffective in promoting economic growth and in benefiting the poor in the low-income countries (Easterly, 2001, 2006; Hillman, 2002; Doucouliagos and Paldam, 2008). The aid is ineffective because of the predatory nature of government in the aid-receiving countries and absence of the accountability of democracy (Hillman, 2004; Borooah and Paldam, 2007). Beyond being ineffective, the aid is harmful because of the rent-seeking incentives associated with contestability of the aid (Svensson, 2000). Donors would prefer that the aid that they give be effective. However, aid being ineffective and harmful does not deter the giving of the aid. The giving of the ineffective aid allows the donors expressively to signal:

We care about poor people in poor countries.

Expressive utility thus explains why ineffective and harmful aid continues. One donor among many might wish to cease giving the ineffective harmful aid. Ceasing to give is expressively costly when a donor who continues giving ineffective aid asks:

Why are you not generous in giving aid as I am?

An expressive-policy trap sustains the ineffective or harmful aid. Each donor continues expressively to give aid, although each donor if given the opportunity would veto all aid.

6. Is behavior expressive?

I have described expressive-policy traps that are the consequence of expressive voting, expressive rhetoric, and expressive generosity. The substantiation of the policy traps requires evidence of prevalence of expressive behavior. I turn now to the evidence. I begin again with expressive voting.

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28 The following is from an interview (Spiegel Online International, accessed April 20, 2010) with James Shikwati, an economist in Kenya. Spiegel: The industrialized nations of the West want to eliminate hunger and poverty. Shikwati: Such intentions have been damaging our continent for the past 40 years. If the industrial nations really want to help the Africans, they should finally terminate this awful aid. The countries that have collected the most development aid are also the ones that are in the worst shape. Despite the billions that have poured into Africa, the continent remains poor. Spiegel: Do you have an explanation for this paradox? Shikwati: Huge bureaucracies are financed (with the aid money), corruption and complacency are promoted, Africans are taught to be beggars and not to be independent. In addition, development aid weakens the local markets everywhere and dampens the spirit of entrepreneurship that we so desperately need. As absurd as it may sound: Development aid is one of the reasons for Africa’s problems.

29 We are concerned here with aid predicated on expressive utility from generosity. Aid can be based on reciprocal benefit. See Younas (2008) on trade as reciprocating aid and Dreher et al. (2008) on reciprocation of US aid in exchange for UN General Assembly voting.

30 Because aid-dispensing bureaucracies benefit by being the conduit for the expressive generosity, the ineffective aid may provide more than expressive utility, through the material benefits to donor-countries’ citizens employed in donor bureaucracies (Vaubel, 1996). See Weaver (2008) on the World Bank and the disparity between aid rhetoric and development outcomes. Welzman (2010) investigates the consequences of asymmetric information between donors and recipient governments.
6.1. Is voting expressive?

A possible alternative to expressive utility as the explanation for voting is avoidance of regret. If no one voted because everyone believed that a single vote is not decisive, every voter would regret not having voted. No one voting is therefore not a Nash equilibrium. Because in actual elections no individual voter can reasonably expect to be decisive, regret in having missed the opportunity to be decisive by not voting cannot explain why people vote. Regret can, however, confirm expressive voting. New information or changed sentiments can lead people to express regret about how they voted. Such regret is clear evidence of expressive voting because the opportunity to change a voter’s decision would not change the electoral outcome.

Instrumental voters would maximize utility by voting for the policy or candidate closest to their ideal from among available alternatives and abstain from voting only if indifferent between alternatives. Expressive voters are, in contrast, influenced by the distance between their ideal and political parties' policy positions or candidates' attributes. They abstain when there is too great a distance between their ideal and the alternatives offered (Brennan and Hamlin, 1998; Hillman, 2009, chapter 6). People who do not vote because they declare that they have “no one to vote for” confirm expressive voting.

Guttmann et al. (1994) investigated whether voter abstentions are due to “indifference” as predicted by instrumental voting or “alienation” as predicted by expressive voting. The evidence was consistent with expressive voting: distance of available candidates from voters' ideal policies and not indifference determined whether people voted or abstained. The study also found that the propensity of an individual to vote decreased with the number of “politically eligible adults” in the household. Such behavior is inconsistent with instrumental voting but consistent with expressive voting: the number of household members that votes does not affect the voting outcome but expressing identity can be delegated within the household.

An instrumental view of voting predicts greater participation in voting by low- than high-income people because low-income people have a lower value of time. The evidence indicates to the contrary a greater likelihood of voting by high-income people, which is consistent with expressive voting. We expect low-income people in general to be more concerned with the material requisites of life than with seeking expressive utility through expressive voting.

6.2. Other cases of expressive voting

Expressive voting is revealed in circumstances other than election of political representatives. Feigenbaum et al. (1988) hypothesized that if capital owners voted in their self-interest, they would support nuclear power, but found that they voted expressively to oppose nuclear power. Fort and Bunn (1998) also found expressive voting on the issue of nuclear power: they concluded that people who incurred high costs of participation in voting voted against nuclear power because their vote provided sufficiently high expressive utility to compensate for their high costs of participation in voting. Glazer (1992) proposed that majority decisions of workers to strike were instances of expressive behavior. Voting on a flag is expressive (Karahan and Shughart, 2004), as is voting on the choice between retaining a non-resident monarch and becoming a republic (Davidson et al., 2006), voting in the Eurovision song contest (Ginsburgh and Noury, 2008), and voting on the official languages of multinational bodies (Fidrmuc et al., 2009). Voting in the United Nations General Assembly is expressive (Potrafke, 2009).

Behavior is expressive in ways other than voting. People expressively confirm identity, for example, through the clothes that they wear, the tone of voice that they adopt, the neighborhood in which they choose to live, and the cars that they drive.

6.3. Behavior in experiments

If behavior is expressive, this should be revealed in experiments. Indeed, expressive utility appears to explain much posited “non-rational” behavior in experiments.
6.3.1. Experiments on expressive voting

Although individual voters are not decisive in real-life voting in usual elections, in experiments voters can be informed that they will be decisive with indicated probabilities. Expressive voters are predicted by incentives paralleling those of table 1 to vote to give money to charity when the probability of being decisive is small, and to keep money for themselves when the probability of being decisive is high. Voters who are expressively generous are predicted to vote to give away small sums of money when the probability of being decisive is high. Experiments designed to investigate expressive voting reveal expressive generosity.

Carter and Guertette (1992) presented students from economics and accounting classes at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester Massachusetts with the choice between keeping $6 or $9 (in different experiments) for themselves and giving $2 to charity. Giving to charity was thus relatively costly. Only “weak support” was indicated for expressive voting: students tended to vote to donate to charity when decisive. The students’ behavior exhibited expressive generosity. The students did not know — and did not seem to care — to whom they were giving charity.\footnote{Identity confirmation through expressive behavior also explains why money is not returned. An individual who does not return money in the trust game has an identity for which utility is maximized through material success.} They chose to confirm generous identity. In conversations with friends and family, they would have incurred a loss of expressive utility when describing their participation in the experiment and reporting that “I took the money where possible for myself and did not care about donating to charity”.

Tyran (2004) conducted a similar experiment: students were given the equivalent of $6 and were informed of their probability of being decisive in a majority vote on alternatives of keeping the money and giving the money “to charity”. In a first type of experiment, if a majority voted in favor of charity, all students were obliged to donate their money without regard for how they had personally voted. In a second type of experiment, if a majority favored giving to charity, students could keep their money for themselves, provided that they had personally voted against donating the money. Expressive voters would vote in favor of giving to charity in the first type of experiment but not the second. There was, however, no significant difference in behavior in the two types of experiments.\footnote{On donor behavior when attributes of recipients are known, see Fong (2007). Donors then care about whether recipients are deserving of charity.} Students in either case ostensibly voted to confirm a generous identity without regard for how the conditions of the experiment affected the likelihood of giving up the small sums of money that were at stake.\footnote{The students could have voted to take the larger sum for themselves and independently donate more than $2 to charity, thereby effecting a Pareto improvement. Carter and Guertette noted that the presence of true charitable intentions would have had a “confounding” effect on their experiments. They viewed a claimed intention to donate part of retained money to charity as “rationalizing” a vote for personal money.}

In an experiment reported by Fischer (1996), students were offered the possibility of keeping $200 for themselves. The sum of money was sufficiently high to evoke expressive behavior without expressive generosity. Students voted to keep the money when their likelihood of being decisive was high and voted in favor of giving to “charity” when their likelihood of being decisive was low.

6.3.2. Experiments involving cooperation and trust

In the single-interaction prisoners’ dilemma or in public-good games, it is rational behavior not to cooperate, yet often in experiments students achieve the efficient cooperative outcome. In repeated games with a predetermined number of rounds, they often cooperate until before the final round, and sometimes in the final round as well. Cooperation is predicted if the payoffs perceived by the students include expressive utility from confirmation of a cooperative identity. The attempt to free ride to exploit the goodwill or kindness of others is inconsistent with “being a nice person”.\footnote{On the prisoners’ dilemma amended for utility from a cooperative identity, see Hillman (2009, chapter 1); on public-good games, see chapter 3.} In the trust game, expressive behavior by the donor allows confirmation of being a trusting person and expressive behavior of the recipient allows confirmation of being a trustworthy person. In the predicted Nash equilibrium based on material gain alone, no money is transferred. Expressive utility explains why money is transferred and also returned.

6.3.3. Experiments involving distribution

In ultimatum games, there is often affront and rejection of offers when recipients perceive unfairness. Recipients who feel that they have been treated unfairly are prepared to incur a personal material cost in response to the perception that the donor is not a generous person. Rejection of offers perceived as unfair confirms the identity predicated on reciprocating behavior that “I am a reasonable person provided that others are reasonable in their behavior to me”. Expressive utility also explains otherwise seemingly anomalous outcomes in which very high offers are rejected: the high offers are regarded as an affront to pride and thus as confounding. (see for example Chen and Tang, 2009). The intended recipient would lose expressive utility if the “excessively” generous offer of the donor was accepted.

The dictator game is the purest test of expressive generosity. Because the decision whether to share is unilateral, people give only to confirm a generous identity. Donors do not in general know to whom they are giving, and may well be giving to people who are better off than themselves. The purpose of their giving is not to help people who are less fortunate but to obtain expressive utility from their expressive generosity.\footnote{Identity confirmed through expressive behavior also explains why money is not returned. An individual who does not return money in the trust game has an identity for which utility is maximized through material success.}
Eichenberger and Oberholzer-Gee (1998) reported outcomes of “bandit” games in which a student could take money from another student. The behavior was consistent with expressive generosity, with “bandit” students leaving some money for the other student. The behavior was not charitable or generous in leaving money for people in need. The behavior was expressively generous because there could be no presumption that the participant with whom a student had been paired deserved charity. List (2007) and Bardsley (2008) reported that behavior changes when the “dictator” can take money as well as give. Less is then on average given. The less generous behavior is expressive. When taking as well as giving is an option, a generous identity can be confirmed by not taking and giving less. Fischer (1996) reported that expressly voting for charity increased when behavior was observed by others, indicating the presence of a social approval motive. Expressive utility obtained from approval from others is also indicated by outcomes in which nothing is given when the decision is completely anonymous, including with respect to the researcher overseeing the experiment, and by evidence (Cason and Mui, 1997) that donors are more generous in their proposals for giving when decisions are made collectively.

6.3.4. Behavior of economics students

The experimental evidence indicates that knowledge of economics is correlated with being more self-interested. A question regarding behavior of economics students is whether the students have chosen their identity in the sense of having preselected themselves through predetermined attributes to study economics — or whether their behavior is a consequence of an identity that is formulated through their education in studying economics. Perhaps there is pre-selection through the decision whether to study economics. However, when economics students are introduced to the prisoners’ dilemma, they not only learn the concepts of dominant strategy and Nash equilibrium; they are also told that payoffs as material rewards are the sole source of utility. Expressive utility is not included in the valuation of outcomes. Non-economics students tend to show greater awareness of expressive utility and seem to be more inclined to seek to conform behavior on similar identities in professional roles, but they differ in the identities confirmed in more personal aspects of behavior. In dictator games, for example, when giving is subject to a penalty, women tend to be less deterred by the cost of giving than men, and are more expressive than men in conforming a generous identity without regard for the personal cost of giving.

6.3.5. Gender differences

There are gender differences in behavior. Although gender is predetermined, there are aspects of gender-related identity that are nonetheless a choice. Croson and Gneezy (2009) summarize the evidence as indicating that men and women often behave differently but the “exceptions to the rule” are “managers and professional populations”. Men and women, thus, are indicated to predicate behavior on similar identities in professional roles, but they differ in the identities confirmed in more personal aspects of behavior. In dictator games, for example, when giving is subject to a penalty, women tend to be less deterred by the cost of giving when deciding whether or how much to give to others (Andreoni and Vesterlund, 2001). Women therefore exhibit behavior consistent with a more sympathetic and less calculating identity than men, and are more expressive than men in confirming a generous identity without regard for the personal cost of giving.

6.3.6. Intrinsic motivation

Expressive behavior explains “intrinsic motivation”. People are often unwilling to create the markets predicted by the Coase theorem but are willing to do for no material reward that for which they reject payment. The offer of money is an affront to their identity. The decline in expressive utility from accepting payment outweighs the material benefit.

6.4. Expressive behavior as a unifying explanation in experiments

In various experimental situations, being nice or pleasant is not predicted to yield best personal outcomes based on rational behavior motivated by material reward. Yet, some cases of economics students aside, people are often, or even in general, in experiments. The niceness is expressive behavior. Expressive utility makes the observed nice behavior in experiments rational. People respond in their behavior not only to material benefit, but also to the expressive utility from decisions about whether to cooperate, be reciprocally kind, trust others, be trustworthy, and be fair or ethical in sharing. As is clear from the behavior described as due to intrinsic motivation, material gain is willingly forgone when offsetting expressive utility is higher.

7. Final issues

I now address some final issues concerning (1) other related types of behavior, (2) institutions, and (3) resolution of problems when there are social costs of expressive behavior.

45 See for example Frank et al. (1993) and Frank and Schulze (2000). For an overview of the literature comparing behavior of economists and non-economists, see Kirchgassner (2005).
47 On the evidence, see Hillman (2009, chapter 5).
48 In programming experiments in repeated games based on rational behavior with solely material benefits, nice behavior does not ensure efficient outcomes (Donninger, 1986).
7.1. Related behavior

Various types of behavior are related to or can coexist with expressive behavior.

7.1.1. Morality and ethics

Morality and ethics, of course, affect behavior.\textsuperscript{49} Moral or ethical behavior is subsumed into expressive behavior through choice of identity as being a moral or ethical person.\textsuperscript{50} Some people might choose to behave morally only if material benefit foregone is sufficiently low. However, people may also refuse to compromise their identity as an ethical person irrespective of the material incentive.\textsuperscript{51}

7.1.2. Altruism and malice

What are the consequences when expressive behavior coexists with altruism or malice?

Voting is the expressive when a person votes for the altruistic reason of supporting democratic principles because one vote is inconsequential for sustaining democracy. Malice is present if the decision for whom to vote is made to “punish” a candidate or political party.\textsuperscript{52} Because an individual vote is inconsequential in “punishing”, voting to “punish” (or to protest) is expressive.

In the case of expressive rhetoric, malice can underlie the declaration that other people should not defend themselves. The declaration can also be expressive and intended to signal “your defense would entail additional violence and I am not a violent person”. In terms of outcomes if the advice is followed, the reason for denial of self-defense does not of course matter.\textsuperscript{53}

Malice has no role in expressive generosity because disadvantageous consequences for recipients are not intended. Altruism is, on the other hand, a natural complement of expressive generosity: people may give to confirm a generous identity and also because they obtain utility from better outcomes for others.\textsuperscript{54}

7.1.3. Delusion

The literature describes behavior based on delusion. Akerlof (1989) described willful delusionary behavior in which people choose bias in perception of information that trades off their “desires to feel good about themselves” and reality. Cowen (2005) proposed that voters disregard information that is inconsistent with their self-image or that would imply that they had made incorrect decisions in the past; their delusionary behavior includes the belief in being the decisive voter. Caplan (2007) proposed that people willingly delude themselves by believing what they want to believe and choose the beliefs that give them highest utility. Expressive behavior differs from these descriptions of delusionary behavior, because behavior can change according to whether people’s decisions are expected to affect their material utility.\textsuperscript{55}

7.2. Institutions

The media and political parties can reflect or internalize expressive behavior.

7.2.1. Expressive media

The media have incentives to base reporting on consistency with the requisites of the expressive utility of readers and listeners.\textsuperscript{56} The media can profit by catering to identity-confirming interpretations and perspectives of expressive populations. The media can, for example, expressively prescribe soft power. When populations to whom the media cater obtain expressive utility whether people’s decisions are expected to affect their material utility.\textsuperscript{57}

Various types of behavior are related to or can coexist with expressive behavior.

\textsuperscript{49} See for example Holler (1986), who returns to Adam Smith’s Moral Sentiments, and Holler and Kannaiainen (2010).

\textsuperscript{50} Thus for example Feddersen et al. (2009) described generosity in expressive-voting experiments as “moral bias” but “moral bias” is expressive behavior.

\textsuperscript{51} The saying “every man has his price” presupposes expressive utility. The sufficiently high “price” compensates for expressive utility lost when principles of moral behavior are compromised. The saying is most famously attributed to the first British Prime Minister Robert Walpole (1676–1745) but, as could be anticipated, predates him. Walpole made the statement in the context of contemporary politics and as a politician of his time was concerned only with the price of men.

\textsuperscript{52} See Glazer (2008), who describes voting to anger (or please) others.

\textsuperscript{53} If there is malice, we are led to seek the reasons. See Glaeser (2005).

\textsuperscript{54} Andreoni (1990) distinguished “impure” from “pure” altruism in personal contributions to a public good. Altruism was “impure” when the source of utility was increased availability of the public good and “pure” when utility increased only because of the act of giving. In the context of expressive behavior, utility from “pure altruism” is expressive through confirmation of generous identity, and is not altruistic if the donor is motivated only by own expressive utility.

\textsuperscript{55} People can be delusional when voting expressively. Sobel and Wagner (2004) observed greater redistribution of income by government in more populous U.S. states, which they attributed to voters in these states perceiving themselves as less likely to be decisive than voters in states with small populations. There is in that case delusion because the probability of being a decisive voter is negligible when the size of the electorate reaches that of the U.S. states with the smallest populations.

\textsuperscript{56} The financial media in general refrains from being expressive: accurate information and not expressive rhetoric is sought when decisions are made about personal finance and wealth.

\textsuperscript{57} Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) describe manipulation of reporting of news. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) present experimental evidence showing that people match personal preferences with choice of media ideology.
7.2.2. Expressive political parties

There would be disappointment if, after a majority of voters has expressively voted for an outcome that the voters do not want, elected representatives set out to implement the policies. Disappointment is avoided when political representatives are also expressive. Expressive voters then achieve their preferred outcome of obtaining expressive utility without incurring the personal material costs of the policies for which they voted. Before an election, the political party supported by the expressive majority uses expressive rhetoric to proclaim the need for generous sharing of income and wealth, or proclaims the merits of compromise and conciliation in face of supreme-value adversaries. Then, having won the election, elected representatives may be aware that proceeding to implement the expressive policies will result in defeat in a future election by another political party that is expressive in rhetoric and understands that voters do not actually want the policies for which they expressively vote. The policies proclaimed before the election are therefore not implemented. Expressive rhetoric can continue, and increases when the rhetoric substitutes for the unimplemented expressively supported policies.\(^{58}\)

7.3. Solutions

When expressive behavior imposes the social costs of expressive-policy traps, a society might seek means of avoiding or escaping the traps.

7.3.1. Usual remedies for social costs

Usual remedies cannot be applied to the social costs of expressive behavior. Coase bargaining and Pigovian tax-subsidy solutions cannot be used. Direct regulation of expressive behavior is also not feasible.\(^{59}\)

7.3.2. Resistance to remedies

There are societal incentives to resist solutions to social costs of expressive behavior. The resistance is through the conventions of political correctness, which impose the restriction: "You are not allowed to say (or write) that — even if it is true".\(^ {60}\) People behaving expressively do not wish to be informed that their expressiveness is in disregard of facts and data. They do not wish to be told what they may already know.\(^{61}\) As an example, prosperous people in rich countries who seek to expiate feelings of guilt by behaving expressively do not wish to be informed that their expressiveness is in disregard of facts and data. They do not wish to be told what they may already know.\(^{61}\) As an example, prosperous people in rich countries who seek to expiate feelings of guilt by behaving expressively do not wish to be informed that their expressiveness is in disregard of facts and data. They do not wish to be

7.3.3. Salient events

Expressive behavior has been changed by salient events. Thomas Moore (1551) and then, more influentially, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the 19th century, described "utopia" as a state devoid of the inequalities of private property. Expressive support for the utopian vision persisted in the west into the latter part of the 20th century, undeterred by professional analysis (Hayek, 1944) and personal description (Solzhenitsyn, 1974) of an elitist enslaving system. The expressive support subsided when communism ended.\(^{62}\) Salient change may similarly diminish the expressive behavior that sustains other expressive-policy traps. In welfare states, demographic change and adverse selection through immigration may diminish expressive support for generous welfare entitlements and for immigration independently of the human capital and productiveness of immigrants. For issues of public safety, expressive soft-power rhetoric may decline when threats that previously confronted only those who are preached to, begin to make an appearance in the preachers’ own personal lives. In foreign aid, on the other hand, expressive generosity may be difficult to curb because of the symbiotic benefits to the expressive donors and to the recipient governments engaged in the pretense of benevolence.

\(^{58}\) An expressive political party such as "new labor" in the United Kingdom allowed the middle class to vote expressively — as similarly has been the case with the Labor Party in Australia and "social democratic" parties elsewhere.

\(^{59}\) Paternalistic solutions that can be effective for children (prompting by parents can lead the children to shed their expressive identities) cannot be readily applied to adults.

\(^{60}\) In contrast, cognitive dissonance (for example, Akerlof and Dickens, 1973) is unwillingness to accept verified information as objective truth.

\(^{61}\) There may be public knowledge (everyone knows); political correctness attempts to protect expressive utility by preventing information from becoming common knowledge (everyone knows that everyone knows). Loury (1994) pointed out the reputational concerns that underlie incentives for voluntary adherence to restraints of political correctness. Morris (2001) showed more formally that a person with known true information has a reputational incentive to lie in order to avoid being regarded as politically incorrect. In Hillman (1998), I considered political correctness as a pedagogic devise to protect an ideology. Kuran (1995) described the inhibitions on truth when people are obliged to live with "private truths" and "public lies". Stigler (1982, p. 13) noted the restraints of political correctness in describing economists as preachers and proposing that the main lesson that I draw from my experience as preachers is that we are well received in the measure that we preach what the society wants to hear".


63 In academia, in the year of the beginning of the end of Soviet communism, a popular textbook informed students that: “the Soviet economy is proof that, contrary to what many skeptics had earlier believed, a socialist command economy can function and even thrive” (Samuelson and Nordhaus, 1989, p. 837). Norwood (2009) documents prior support in U.S. academia for German national-socialism. I cite these examples in a context of expressive support for communism and national-socialism even in the U.S., compared to Europe where the support has been more pervasive.
8. Concluding remarks

I have proposed expressive behavior as a replacement for the explanations of behavioral economics for why people (according to behavioral economics) depart from rationality. It is not irrational to choose to forego a small sum of money in order to confirm a pleasing identity or to decide that the expressive utility from being accommodating without monetary compensation exceeds the material gain from participating in Coase negotiations. Public policy is not at issue in the personal decisions of experiments. In societal outcomes, the expressive low-cost behavior that is beneficial in experiments is the reason for the unwanted public policies of expressive-policy traps. This has left us with the question of how expressive-policy traps might be escaped.

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Appendix A

The appendix sets out with more formality the description of expressive behavior, using the characterization of expressive voting. An individual in a population of size \( n \) obtains expressive utility by voting to confirm own identity, or perhaps does not vote. There are \( m \) candidates for office. We denote individual \( j \)’s decision to vote for candidate \( v \) by \( x_j^v \) and the decision to abstain by \( x_j^A \). Personal benefits and costs are defined with reference to the consequences of the voting or abstention decision. Individual utility from voting is

\[
U^{\text{MAT}}(x_j^k) = B_j(v) - C_j(x_j^k), \quad k = A, 1, \ldots, m; j = 1, \ldots, n. \tag{1}
\]

\( B_j(v) \) is personal material benefit for individual \( j \) if candidate \( v \) wins the election, which in a general setting can depend on the individual's decision \( x_j^v \). \( C_j(x_j^v) \) is the material cost personally incurred from the decision \( x_j^v \). The cost of abstaining is zero for all individuals:

\[
C_j^A = 0, j = 1, \ldots, n. \tag{2}
\]

The material cost in terms of time of individual \( j \) voting for one of the \( m \) candidates is positive:

\[
C_j^v = C_j > 0, v = 1, 2, \ldots, m; j = 1, \ldots, n \tag{3}
\]

When individual \( j \) is not decisive, the voting decision does not affect material benefit from voting. The individual benefits materially when the outcome of voting is election of a candidate with favorable policies; however, the benefit from the election of the favorable candidate is not attributable to the individual’s voting decision when the individual’s vote is not decisive. Given Eqs. (2) and (3), individual \( j \) if not decisive maximizes material utility (1) by abstaining from voting.\(^{64}\)

If individual \( j \) is decisive (or pivotal) with respect to his or her preferred candidate \( v_j^*, \) then:

\[
v_j^* = \arg\max \{ B_j(v) - C_j \mid v = 1, \ldots, m; j = 1, \ldots, n. \tag{4}
\]

The decision in Eq. (4) by a decisive voter to vote for candidate \( v_j^* \) is based on material utility (1). However, when individual \( j \) is not decisive, material utility does not influence the voting decision. If only material utility mattered, the individual would rationally abstain. Expressive utility can lead the non-decisive individual to vote.

Expressive voters care about closeness of candidates' attributes to their expressive ideal. A Euclidean measure of distance between candidates is therefore required as perceived by individual voters with respect to their expressive ideal. With \( v_j^{\text{ideal}} \) indicating individual \( j \)'s ideal expressive candidate, expressive utility of individual \( j \) from voting for a candidate \( v \) is

\[
U_j^{\text{EXP}}(x_j^k) = I_j - L_j \left| v_j^{\text{ideal}} - x_j^k \right|. \tag{5}
\]

\(^{64}\) Rather than zero probability of being decisive, the voter may perceive some small probability of being decisive.
An expressive individual may decide to abstain, which can provide expressive utility, or there may be loss of expressive utility from being unable to express oneself through voting. We denote expressive utility from not voting by:

$$U_{j}^{\exp}(x_{j}) = Q_{A}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (6)

When the individual chooses to vote for one of the candidates, the choice that maximizes expressive utility is:

$$x_{j}^{e*} = \arg \max U_{j}^{\exp}(x_{j}^{E}).$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)

If $$x_{j}^{\text{ideal}}$$ is feasible, that is, if $$x_{j}^{\text{ideal}} = x^{z}$$ for some $$z = 1, \ldots, m,$$

$$x_{j}^{e*} = x^{\text{ideal}}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (8)

If $$x_{j}^{\text{ideal}}$$ is not feasible, expressive utility declines with the distance of $$x_{j}^{\text{ideal}}$$ from $$x_{j}^{e*}.$$ The decision whether to vote depends on whether there is a candidate sufficiently close to the individual’s expressive ideal. Total utility is:

$$U_{j}(x_{j}) = U_{j}^{\max}(x_{j}^{k}) + U_{j}^{\exp}(x_{j}).$$  \hspace{1cm} (9)

An individual expressively votes for one of the candidates if:

$$L_{j}(|x_{j}^{e*} - x_{j}^{\text{ideal}}|) \leq I - Q_{j} - C_{j}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (10)

Define the voting decision that maximizes Eq. (9) as:

$$x_{j}^{e*} = \arg \max U_{j}(x_{j}).$$  \hspace{1cm} (11)

For an individual who is not decisive, possibilities are

$$x_{j}^{e*} = \begin{cases} x_{j}^{k} \\
 x_{j}^{e*} = x_{j}^{e*} \\
 x_{j}^{e*} \neq x_{j}^{e*} 
\end{cases}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (12)

An individual who abstains for material reasons may also not vote for expressive reasons: the presence of expressive utility thus does not ensure that a non-decisive individual votes. When, based on expected material utility alone, an individual would decide not to vote, expressive utility changes the decision to voting for the preferred feasible expressive alternative, if the condition (10) is satisfied.

All individuals with the same material preferences need not have the same expressive preferences. Also, some people might maximize expressive utility by voting contrary to material self-interest whereas others do not. However, in the absence of expressive utility, voting would never be contrary to material self-interest and expressive-policy traps could not arise.

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