



# Collective choice and individual action: Education policy and social mobility in England



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## ABSTRACT

It is recognised that expressive preferences may play a major role in determining voting decisions because the low probability of being decisive in elections undermines standard instrumental reasoning. Expressive and instrumental preferences may deviate and in electoral settings it is more important to make policies expressively appealing. But policies are even more attractive if they can be made both expressively and instrumentally appealing. This paper studies education policy in England and proposes that the argument for increased state spending in school education is expressively appealing as it appears equitable, but the allocation of students to schools by catchment area is also instrumentally appealing to middle-class families. Allocation to schools by lottery may be expressively but not instrumentally appealing. Cutting education spending and dividing the proceeds between a tax cut to the affluent and a cash transfer to the poor may be instrumentally but not expressively appealing. The effort to provide instrumentally appealing policies with sufficient ethical content to satisfy expressive preferences may lead to inefficiency and distract attention from more serious ethical problems related to the policies.

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## 1. Introduction

The idea that expressive preferences are the key determinant for individual decision making in collective choice situations, such as voting, has now received wide acceptance. Furthermore, in many situations it would also seem that expressive preferences are quite different to the standard instrumental preferences that economists traditionally consider. This means that expressively made collective decisions may differ significantly from collective decisions that would have been predicted to have been made under instrumental logic. This paper aims to pick up on a variation on this theme. While it is true that expressive logic may imply a different collective choice than instrumental logic, in certain circumstances it may not differ so radically. It could be that a policy option is expressively appealing because it has been packaged in expressively appealing language that would appear to make the policy run contrary to the instrumental interests of the voter, but in truth, the policy largely aligns expressive and instrumental preferences. While a policy must be expressively appealing for it to be favoured by voters, it is even more appealing if the policy can be presented in such a way that it is both expressively and instrumentally appealing. This paper will investigate education policy in England as an application of this idea. A further serious implication of the insight that policies that are instrumentally appealing may require expressive packaging is that inefficiencies may be generated that would not exist if the expressive veneer was not required to win votes.

A more detailed elaboration with regard to the concepts just described is required. Expressive logic addresses the simple idea that actions undertaken by individuals in collective settings are likely to be conducted in order to generate direct benefits associated with the action itself. Action X is not conducted to generate a set of benefits associated with the outcome Y that may result from the set of individual actions that produce the collective action. Conventional economic logic focuses on these instrumental benefits so action X is

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considered in relation to the benefits that outcome Y will produce. The problem with the conventional instrumental logic for collection action scenarios is that the probability of an individual action X bringing about outcome Y is very small. Indeed, for actions such as voting in mass elections the probability of being decisive is approximately zero. If there is any cost associated with voting (or other actions in collective settings) then it is very hard to see how instrumental logic can explain participation in collective actions at all. Expressive logic provides an explanation for participation. The benefit associated with the action itself is sufficient to outweigh the cost.

Expressive logic explains the decision to vote, but this is arguably not the most important insight. If expressive preferences exactly match instrumental preferences, the problem as to why people vote is solved, but the prediction as to how they vote remains the same. This limits the extent to which we should be interested in expressive logic. However, it is logical and evident that in many cases the choice that an individual makes expressively differs from that which would have been made instrumentally. For example, wealthier individuals may choose to vote for higher levels of redistribution when they know their vote has no consequence compared to the level of redistribution they would choose if they were informed that their vote is decisive in determining the outcome of the election. This means that understanding expressive logic is crucial in understanding not just why individuals participate in collective action, but how they are likely to act or choose given their participation.

Much of the attention in the literature on expressive choice has focussed on this deviation in expressive and instrumental choices. Individuals may use the opportunity that collective settings, such as voting, provide to express personal identity, which is not expressed in their behaviour in individually decisive settings such as market choice. The result is that policies are enacted that run contrary to the instrumental interests of many people who nonetheless voted for them. This insight runs contrary to the conventional economic wisdom, that people vote for their instrumental interests.

The analysis here shifts the attention from the deviation of the expressive from the instrumental. It starts from the same premise that if two policies are presented to a voter the one which is expressively preferable will be voted for rather than the one that is instrumentally preferable. However, policies can be packaged in language that makes policy choice more nuanced. If a policy can be made to be both expressively and instrumentally attractive this will be preferred to a policy that is expressively (but not instrumentally) attractive. If such policies can be found, policy outcomes might not be so different from those that would have been predicted using conventional economic logic. However, in a crucial way they might be different and different in a way that implies inefficiency caused by the necessity to coat policy in an expressive veneer. It could be that policy options that are Pareto superior are rejected because it is impossible (or at least extremely difficult) to provide them with an expressive justification.

To put flesh on the rather abstract idea just presented, education policy in England will be used as an application. The precise details will be presented in [Section 3](#) but the broad idea can be presented now. Education policy is obviously an area that is intimately linked to ethical issues concerned with equality, both in terms of equality of opportunity and as a form of redistribution as a benefit in kind paid for through the tax system. Allocation of students into schools may not foster equality of opportunity to the extent that it is primarily determined by place of residence or catchment areas. This leads potentially to a divide between 'good' state schools in wealthy areas and 'bad' state schools in poor areas. A parent in a wealthy area might like to view themselves as an ethical individual who is concerned with equality in both the senses described. At the same time they wish to do what is in the best interest of their child, which is likely to be living in an affluent area so their child can attend school with other children from affluent backgrounds.

If a choice is presented between a system of school allocation which is random such as a lottery versus allocation based on catchment areas, the wealthy parent is likely to trade their ethical desire for equality of opportunity in favour of the use of catchment areas to favour their child. This is the case if their choice is decisive. If they were, instead, one of thousands voting on the issue they are more likely to expressively vote for a lottery as their ethical stance is given more weight. However, there is another form in which choice regarding education policy could be presented. It does not mention any change in the system of catchment areas, but rather presents the choice as spending more rather than less on education. For a wealthy person higher spending implies a higher tax rate and redistribution as a benefit in kind to the poor. For expressive reasons they might vote for higher education spending, which they would not approve if they were decisive. The crucial point is that higher education spending may simply be providing an expressive veneer to what is otherwise an education policy (allocation by catchment area) that works entirely for the benefit of wealthier parents. It could well be that lower education spending is more efficient and more equitable as follows. Since equality of opportunity has been undermined by division by catchment area, a cut in education spending which could be distributed between a tax cut to the wealthy and a cash transfer to the poor could be Pareto superior to high spending on education. The problem, of course, with this proposal is that it is unappealing expressively in that it offers a tax cut to the rich and cash transfers to the poor which does not carry the same ethical force as an argument for redistribution as a benefit in kind. The policy that wins is one that is expressively and instrumentally appealing versus options that are either instrumentally appealing and more efficient, or expressively appealing and more equitable. Empirically, a policy may win because it has instrumental appeal. But the argument put forward here is that we should look carefully for the use of expressive packaging before we conclude that expressive logic is undermined empirically.

In the next section background and related literature will be outlined, in [Section 3](#) the details of the analysis applied to education policy will be provided, [Section 4](#) will provide a discussion and [Section 5](#) will offer some concluding remarks.

## 2. Background and related literature

An early statement of the expressive perspective can be found in [Tullock \(1971\)](#) in which he considers the extent to which a genuine concern for the affluent towards the poor (as analysed by [Hochman and Rodgers \(1969\)](#)) is actually reflected in policy. His conclusion is that Pareto optimal redistribution plays only a very minor role in the redistribution that is actually implemented by the state. He argues that one might expect it to be higher given the incentives for the affluent to appear charitable. If a sufficient number experience this desire, then in a setting such as voting large levels of redistribution might be expected as no single individual is

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