
From GHG to GCG: The Individual Moral Obligation to Act on Climate Change

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Abstract: With the dire forecast of the latest report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and growing global movements for climate action, the stark reality of the climate crisis has come into new focus by the public. Yet while it seems clear to many that elected officials and government institutions must advance efforts to combat the climate crisis, the extent to which individuals have a moral obligation to do so—if they have one at all—remains fiercely contested. Individual efforts at sustainable living such as going vegetarian seem radically insufficient to make a meaningful difference on climate change given the scale of the crisis, which is why philosopher Aaron Maltais contends that individuals instead have a duty to vote green, since this practice appears more likely to engender the kinds of systemic policy changes necessary to truly combat climate change. This paper will evaluate Maltais’s claim and argue that voting green actually falls short of individuals’ true minimum moral obligation to contribute to collective efforts at climate action. To fulfill this obligation, individuals must practice greater civic greenness.

In “Radically Non-Ideal Climate Politics and the Obligation to at Least Vote Green,” Aaron Maltais considers whether individuals’ contributions to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions imply a moral obligation to address climate change by reducing their own emissions. Given the magnitude of the problem, it seems “only large-scale collective efforts” can stabilize atmospheric GHG concentration at a safe level to avert climate change’s worst effects.¹ To this end, Maltais rightly argues that in the absence of a strong chance that collective efforts will come into place, individuals do not have a moral obligation to voluntarily reduce their emissions. Instead, he claims, they have a minimum moral obligation to take political action to improve prospects for such efforts to occur by at least voting green. I contend, however, that voting green cannot satisfy this obligation. Rather, individuals must engage in greater civic greenness (GCG) or in the kinds of collective political advocacy that can catalyze serious climate action from policymakers. Section I examines Maltais’s claim that one is not obligated to reduce one’s emissions but rather, to support collective efforts in a low-cost and near-term effective way by at least voting green. Section II reveals how the ambiguous and impracticable nature of voting green fails to satisfy one’s duty for climate action, while offering GCG as an alternative minimum moral requirement. Section III contends that even with little to zero chance for collective efforts to arise, individuals still have an obligation to practice GCG and must start doing so now to fulfill their duty, as the consequences of failing to act at all are severe.

¹ Maltais, 590.

I. The Insufficiency of Voting Green

Maltais claims that individuals do not have a moral obligation to voluntarily reduce their personal GHG emissions. He arrives at this claim by adopting two premises: one, that only large-scale collective global efforts can succeed in mitigating climate change and two, that the responsibilities of governments to pursue these collective efforts at emissions reduction do not extend to individuals with regards to their own emissions.² This granted, Maltais considers philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's claims about the harmlessness of one's emissions, as well as the inability of reducing one's emissions to inspire others or have meaningful effects until collective efforts are adopted. While he recognizes that one's emissions in isolation can, in fact, cause a harm, Maltais concludes that it is so small so as to be morally irrelevant. For him, only a reasonable chance that collective efforts will occur justifies a duty to unilaterally reduce one's emissions as in their absence, such action is futile.³ This duty may require reducing one's emissions both prior to and after efforts' implementation.⁴ Otherwise, one might fail to sufficiently limit one's cumulative emissions to one's due share of the safe carbon budget and "violate standards of fair burden sharing" by a *de facto* shift of the costs of reduction. Yet prospects for collective efforts seem almost impossible at present. Given this low likelihood, Maltais finds it "extremely difficult to defend a moral obligation to make burdensome cuts in personal emissions."⁵ Even if it is desirable to reduce one's emissions, he says, one cannot be morally bound to do so when it will likely result in meaningless sacrifice.

Rather than personal emissions cuts, Maltais argues, individuals have a moral obligation to push governments to fulfill their responsibilities to pursue global climate mitigation efforts. For Maltais, this obligation is satisfied by voting green. Like Sinnott-Armstrong, Maltais claims that whatever "indirect political reasons" individuals may have to reduce their emissions, they are expected to "invest heavily in political advocacy."⁶ It is insufficient for environmentalists to refuse to "come down out of the hills" to do so; refraining from engaging in emissions-producing activities cannot compensate for failing to engage in the kinds of political action that have meaningful effects.⁷ Given the low likelihood of collective efforts, however, the obligation to take this action must be low-cost, as there is a considerable chance that such sacrifice will be 'wasted' if collective efforts do not emerge. This obligation must also be effective in the near future when stabilizing atmospheric GHG concentration at a safe level is still possible. While those able to influence public policy and living in Western democracies may have "special responsibilities," Maltais claims, for most people voting green is the

² Maltais references Sinnott-Armstrong's demonstration that "government obligations do not always imply parallel individual obligations." Sinnott-Armstrong, 333.

³ Maltais, 599.

⁴ *Ibid*, 604.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ *Ibid*, 602.

⁷ Sinnott-Armstrong maintains that "environmentalists should focus their efforts on those who are not doing their job" or policymakers instead of average individuals who needlessly emit. "It is better to enjoy your Sunday driving while working to change the law so as to make it illegal for you to enjoy your Sunday driving." Sinnott-Armstrong, 344.

minimum moral requirement to satisfy these criteria.⁸ Though implementing green political agendas may be costly, voting itself is low-cost if not costless.⁹ Voting can also spur rapid policy change without imposing an unjustifiable duty to assume leading roles in advancing green agendas. To the claim that voting green is too intrusive, Maltais states that he does not propose coercing voters but only subjecting voting to moral examination. He also recognizes that some may find voting green too weak: “even the low probability of effective collective efforts should be enough to justify obligations to make beneficial, no cost or very low cost emissions reductions.”¹⁰ The challenge of qualifying “low” and “no cost” reductions, however, makes this proposed duty difficult to realize.

II. GCG as an Alternative Moral Standard

The ambiguous nature of voting green means it cannot satisfy the individual moral obligation to further collective mitigation efforts. Even accepting Maltais’s criteria for individual duties for climate action to be low-cost and effective in the near term, this duty is not a viable one. Without clear definition, what voting green means remains open to broad interpretation. That people may interpret this obligation in starkly different ways makes it implausible for them to appeal to voting green as clearly fulfilling their broader obligation to engage in meaningful political action. Consider current controversy over the use of nuclear power: while some environmentalists view nuclear power as a vital clean energy source, others fiercely oppose the environmental and human health risks of nuclear plants. It seems unclear what voting “green” would demand in an election between two candidates with polar opposite positions on the issue. This lack of clarity, inherent in Maltais’s call for voting green, makes it impossible to discern how one should vote so as to fulfill one’s moral obligation. While establishing objective standards for a “green vote” might remedy cases where one is not intuitive, the complex nature of environmental issues makes determining such standards extremely difficult. As a result, people may cast votes that are insufficiently or even anti-“green.” Although such voting may be low or no-cost as Maltais requires, it seems unlikely to create conditions for collective mitigation efforts to arise within the needed time frame, if ever at all.

If every individual voted so as to satisfy an objective societal standard for what it means to vote green, there might still be no way to meaningfully vote green given the scale of voting needed to make a difference and the present lack of green electoral options. Just as reducing one’s emissions to net zero has virtually no effect on atmospheric GHG concentration, casting one’s greenest vote has virtually no effect in any large-scale election. Except in the nearly impossible case that a single vote proves decisive, only a collective effort great enough to secure an electoral majority can make a difference. To meaningfully vote green then still requires having green platforms for

⁸ Maltais, 602-604.

⁹ Even if green agendas are very costly, such costs only come into effect with collective efforts to put those agendas into place. Voting, by itself, does not incur such costs. Except in extreme cases when citizens face strong efforts at voter suppression or in areas that lack free and fair elections altogether, voting is a minor, if any, inconvenience for the average citizen.

¹⁰ Maltais, 603.

which one can vote. Their absence undermines the ability to do one's moral duty. Yet the greenest candidates out there may propose green agendas too weak to produce serious climate action, reducing the moral significance of voting for them. Or, truly green candidates may not be electorally viable. Absent massive efforts, it seems these underdogs would never make it into office, so a vote for them is inevitably wasted. Supporting the U.S. Green Party over the popular Democratic Party, for instance, seems futile even if it in theory better aligns with one's moral duty. Voting for the greenest party may also have steep costs. Imagine that a Green candidate with a mega-green agenda who is also an anti-vaxxer becomes U.S. President. She might ban vaccines, causing a national health epidemic that crushes U.S. capacity to pursue global mitigation efforts. Even if her other policies do not undercut climate action yet cause clear harms, such as eliminating the education system, that would be reason enough not to vote for her. We cannot expect people to vote green at the cost of supporting candidates with other morally unjustifiable policy positions.¹¹ Hence, as even voting for the greenest candidate may have severe effects, one cannot rely on voting green to fulfill one's moral duty.

That voting green cannot satisfy our individual moral obligation suggests we must take further political action to do so: specifically, we must pursue greater civic greenness (GCG) to create the kinds of conditions that would allow governments to meet their duties of putting the collective efforts necessary for global warming mitigation into place. Although I agree with Maltais that there are limits to individuals' duties—not every citizen must be a notable climate leader—it seems clear that there exist greater yet morally justifiable and still relatively low-cost ways for citizens to more effectively engage in political advocacy. For individuals to truly meet their obligation, the moral minimum requirement must extend beyond voting green. If there is no situation in which individuals can meaningfully cast a green vote, then they must *create* the conditions for this situation to arise by practicing GCG or mass political action that foments a green electoral environment. To this end, GCG might include forming alternative political parties, working for campaigns, grassroots organizing, and street canvassing. It might also entail removing obstacles to global climate agreements, such as industry opposition, through citizen lobbying and consumer choice. While meeting Maltais's criteria, GCG provides a more likely route than green voting to enabling collective mitigation efforts in the near term without demanding significant personal costs.

III. The Imperative to Practice GCG Now

One might contend that an individual obligation to pursue GCG is far too burdensome given a decreasing likelihood that collective efforts will occur and that it suffers from the same deficiency as voting green of proving meaningless if not practiced by a popular majority, yet at even greater personal cost. Despite a growing public environmental consciousness, a surge in extremist politics due to stresses like mass migration has undermined global climate action. These stresses will only magnify as climate change does, making such action nearly if not totally impossible. As these

¹¹ There may arise cases when it is not so costly to vote for a green candidate who has only unfavorable instead of repugnant or dangerous views. Then, we can expect people to accept the low cost of sacrificing some principles to vote for such a candidate.

prospects diminish, it seems unjustifiable to burden people with a duty to pursue GCG. Unlike voting, GCG may entail significant time and energy, the limits of which are unclear, even if it does not demand climate leadership. With greater costs also comes a greater magnitude of meaningless sacrifice if collective efforts do not arise. Even if such efforts are likely, one might argue, the efficacy of a duty to pursue GCG still requires its collective practice. Just as one person voting green cannot make an electoral difference, one person practicing GCG seems unlikely to cause political change. That GCG might be more effective than voting green if adopted by most people is irrelevant in this majority's absence. A majority of GCG practitioners, moreover, also seems less plausible than one of green voters due to the higher costs of action. Since individual action is thus futile in either case, one might conclude, it seems individuals are left with no duty to act on climate change at all.

Even if GCG is more burdensome and will almost certainly lead to meaningless sacrifice, people still have a moral obligation to pursue this course of action. It seems intuitive that if they are collectively responsible for climate change, people should collectively bear the burden for political action to support mitigation. Thus, there must be an individual duty to do one's fair share of such action. That doing one's fair share could have no chance of success does not negate this duty. There are reasons independent of efforts' success to uphold one's moral obligation.¹² To this end, just because voting green is not impactful unless most people do so does not mean one does not have a duty to vote green. Rather, it means that one has a duty to do more than that through GCG. Though it still requires popular practice to have an effect, GCG's inherently collective nature makes it far more likely than voting green to achieve global mitigation efforts.¹³ Moreover, if there is even a marginal chance that such efforts will emerge given their diminishing prospects, then there is a unique imperative for individuals to start pursuing GCG now. Otherwise, by the time such efforts come into place, individuals may have already done too little to meet their fair share of the collective burden for political action in their lifetimes, unjustly shifting the burden for action to others.

Furthermore, to reject the individual moral obligation for GCG and green voting so as to let people off the hook entirely for acting on climate change would produce unjustifiable consequences. In effect, it would severely reduce any present likelihood, even if only a marginal one, for collective efforts to occur. As governments are

¹² If every individual refuses to do his part because he does not believe that collective action will be taken, then collective action will surely never occur, producing serious consequences when it comes to climate change. One could therefore suggest that individuals have a duty to pursue actions that, if taken collectively, would be effective, regardless of whether collective actions actually come into place. Yet there is a greater reason to do one's moral duty even with zero chance of success. Consider a citizen in Nazi Germany. It seems impossible that his individual resistance will make any progress toward changing the regime or saving lives in concentration camps. Still, it might seem intuitive to think that he ought to resist—that it is inherently wrong to be a bystander while atrocities unfold when one can do otherwise. Individuals may thus have a duty to act when to not do so would seem inherently wrong. There might even be an intrinsic value in taking such action, irrespective of its efficacy.

¹³ Whether GCG requires majority participation, as green voting does, or merely the participation of a sufficient number of people—whose efforts could galvanize greater climate action—merits further consideration.

comprised of individuals, releasing people of any moral obligation to act on climate change could weaken the willingness of those in positions of power to do so, impeding prospects for a serious green agenda. Even worse, letting people off the hook in this way could create perverse incentives to exacerbate the climate crisis. Considering oneself free from responsibility for climate action might lead people to indulge in high-emitting activities, vote irresponsibly if at all, and become apathetic to any kind of political action requiring time and energy. While at best, such perverse incentives would only preserve the status quo, at worst, they would greatly accelerate climate change and make wholly impossible the emergence of global mitigation efforts. An individual moral obligation to pursue GCG is therefore necessary for more than doing one's fair share in creating the conditions for such efforts to arise; it guards against the severe planetary degradation to which absolving individual responsibility could lead.

References

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