The importance of voting, while highly contested, is no doubt a right that many Americans value greatly. Stemming from the ideals of the Revolution, Americans have developed an innate need to have their opinions heard and using both the First Amendment and voting rights, Americans are free to express themselves in almost any manner they choose; thus American democracy is able to function continuously and for the most part, properly so far. However, just as with most topics surrounding democracy, a controversy has emerged that strains the American value of voting against abstaining from voting, which is overall the more pragmatic and logical option of the two. This controversy is an extremely polarizing, yet recurrent type of argument where one side manipulates sentimental appeals in contrast to the logical arguments posed by the other, eventually ending in the conclusion that even though civic duty and patriotism are compelling forces, there currently is absolutely no logical reason to vote.

According to Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt, the reasons that one should not vote boil down to three simple points: the ability of a single vote to influence the outcome of an election is very low, the closer an election is, the more likely that one’s vote will be disregarded and voting entails many hidden costs that an individual incurs in order to voice his already nearly negligible opinion. Expanding on the first point introduced by Dubner and Levitt, where the probability of one vote in influencing an election is very low, one must also consider the context within which that person is voting. For example, if that person is living in Texas and he is a Democrat, his vote in the presidential election is practically meaningless now and will never influence the outcome due to the fact that the majority of Texans are conservative and the winner-take-all system of the Electoral College ensures that all electoral votes from Texas will go towards the Republican candidate. However, this scenario does not account for the smaller elections that occur, such as
congressional and state elections, of which only 8 out of 56,000 elections since 1898 have been decided by a single vote (Dubner & Levitt, 2005). Logically, the only conclusion one can draw is that the odds of influencing an election are small and influencing the presidential election is even more farfetched, which is somewhat disheartening as the President in the symbol and representation of every citizen in the United States. Addressing the final point made by Dubner and Levitt, voting is a costly endeavor “in time, effort, [and] lost productivity.” One must be properly informed before one votes and the process of gathering the information about politicians takes time and effort that could easily be dedicated to making money or an enjoyable hobby. Also, because of one’s vote being practically meaningless in the grand scheme of things, this cost is applied directly to the voter while he faces no “discernible payoff except perhaps some vague sense of having done [his] ‘civic duty’” (Dubner & Levitt, 2005). Overall, the costs of voting outweigh the benefits of it, resulting in the conclusion that voting is an unnecessary process for the individual, as he can free ride off of the collective action of many other Americans (Krumm, 2016).

In contrast to the previous arguments, the film Selma portrays Martin Luther King’s arguments for why voting is important. Specifically, King alludes to the idea of being able to control one’s own destiny through the ability to vote. However, this idea is quickly dismissed by the previous argument that an individual vote hardly matters in the outcome of an election. Interestingly however, because King is fighting for the right of millions of African Americans to vote, their combined vote does stand to influence the outcome of certain elections. So while the individual vote still does not matter in this instance, the collective vote of millions does matter. As a result, it appears that while voting on an individual level is far from important, voting as a
collective is quite important and in order for democracy to function, the ability for groups of people to vote must remain intact.
References
