

Challenges for Promoting Democratic Partisanship

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Introduction

Political parties – or more accurately, *partisans* - are enjoying something of a moment in normative democratic theory. A recent surge of interest in and “appreciation” of partisanship bridges the gap between the theory of deliberative democracy and empirical political science’s traditional focus on electoral politics. This emerging normative theory of partisanship characterizes an ideal-type of democratic partisanship that fosters healthy deliberative shaping of political conflicts and that helps to cultivate virtuous forms of citizen engagement. The literature makes a compelling case for the value of ideal-type partisanship in pluralist democracies.

I view this literature as a positive development; this paper aims to advance the project of normatively theorizing parties and partisanship by identifying a number of challenges that arise in thinking about how to apply recent normative theories of partisanship to the real world of parties and partisans. I identify three strands of empirical research on political behavior and institutions that put pressure on the model of ideal-type partisanship lauded by political theorists. In raising these issues, I do not mean to contest the usefulness of an ideal model of partisanship as a critical tool, nor the claim that partisanship, insofar as it approximates this ideal, contributes to a healthy democracy.

Rather, I argue that empirical research on political attitudes and behavior should shape both our model of what ideal partisanship can and should look like, and our search for a path forward in promoting healthy partisanship.

Section I – Defining and Defending Democratic Partisanship

Scholars of political parties have long argued that parties play a critical role in the process of defining political agendas that structure political competition and enable meaningful aggregation. In contemporary electoral democracies, of course, parties play an essential role in the formal agenda-setting process by nominating candidates for office. But parties also “simplify alternatives” by linking multiple offices to a common platform or political identity¹ and defining “cleavages” - clear narratives of their primary disagreements with opposing parties - thus raising the salience of those particular dimensions of conflict.²

Recently a few normative political theorists have revived and updated the classic account of parties’ agenda-setting value, linking it to the ideals of deliberative democracy and emphasizing the attitudes and habits of ordinary partisanship. In *On the Side of Angels*, Nancy Rosenblum argues that partisans “articulate positions, define divisions, and their antagonism is the engine of ‘trial by discussion.’”³ Likewise, Lea Ypi and Justin White have argued that practices of partisanship contribute to “the systematic generation of principled alternatives,” a

¹ See John Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 42–48 on the incentives of office-holders and office-seekers to link political offices in this way.

² See Stein Rokkan and Seymour Martin Lipset, “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments,” in *The West European Party System*, ed. Peter Mair (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990); E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1975), 112–125.

³ Nancy Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 160.

necessary precondition for deliberative justification.⁴ Partisanship, according to Ypi and White, also contributes to shaping the background of shared understandings against which justifications can be intelligible. Partisan agents compete to structure political discourse in a way that will allow their claims to resonate widely. In the process, they “develop, consolidate, and systematize” the common premises used in political argument.⁵ By raising the salience of a finite set of alternatives and shaping a common discursive framework within which they can be evaluated, partisan deliberation defines a manageable political agenda, organizing and directing what would otherwise be chaotic and fruitless debate among different interests and values.

Partisanship’s contribution to democratic agenda-setting might be best understood through the contrast that defenders of partisanship have drawn between citizens who identify as partisans and those who identify as independent. Nancy Rosenblum explains that, unlike independent political action, partisan political action has “characteristics of a collective act,”⁶ which necessitates a “disposition to compromise” with one’s fellow partisans.⁷ In *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, Russell Muirhead likewise articulates the value of partisanship (or “party spirit”) by contrasting it with the attitude of the “moral purist” and the “zealot.” The moral purist and the zealot adhere absolutely to their principles, and, therefore, neither contributes to the democratic project, which requires managing disagreement among citizens to achieve collective self-rule.⁸ By contrast, the partisan gains practice in compromise and cooperation in the process of building a coalition around principles and strategies that each can accept. Common political beliefs and goals are no more inherent in a group of fellow partisans

⁴ Jonathon White and Lea Ypi, “On Partisan Political Justification,” *The American Political Science Review* 105, no. 2 (May 1, 2011): 385.

⁵ Justin White and Lea Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 66.

⁶ Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 355.

⁷ Rosenblum, 361.

⁸ Russell Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 49.

than they are in the broader community of citizens. As Muirhead argues: “There is no way to stand in a group (even a group of merely two) without trimming our convictions.”⁹

Party systems and their accompanying practices of partisanship thus help to define the domain of conflict in a society and shape a meaningful and manageable political agenda through two kinds of deliberation: deliberation among partisans, characterized by compromise and the goal of finding common purpose, and deliberation between partisans of different stripes leading to a clarification of their disagreements. From the interplay of these two forms of deliberation, particular proposals and issue cleavages emerge as most salient to the community. But why should we prefer such a process to, say, nonpartisan deliberation within a small body charged with agenda-setting¹⁰ or the pressure politics of interest group pluralism? Defenders of parties and partisanship have suggested three democratic virtues of partisan deliberation:¹¹ first, partisan deliberation allows healthy conflict, but is non-factional in character; second, deliberation within and between parties is *public*; and third, partisan deliberation yields an agenda-setting process that is appropriately responsive to the agency of all citizens.

An important strand of the recent normative political theory of partisanship is the idea that parties are political groups with a distinctively anti-factional character. As defenders of partisanship repeatedly point out, parties have largely been treated with neglect or suspicion

⁹ Muirhead, 18. Of course, there is (and should be) a limit to how far individuals are willing to compromise their own principles for the sake of partisanship, but Muirhead argues, “locating this limit is what debate within a party is usually about. It is the willingness to engage in that debate that marks off the democratic virtue of partisans, at least in the ideal.” (ibid, 19)

¹⁰ Many of the existing and proposed deliberative “mini-publics” serve an agenda-setting function, aimed at defining the terms of electoral campaigns or at proposing measures for a public vote (See, e.g. James Fishkin et al., “Deliberative Agenda Setting: Piloting Reform of Direct Democracy in California,” *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 4 (December 2015): 1030–42.). And one of the suggested features of deliberation is its ability to generate single-peaked preferences, thus making democratic aggregation more suitable for settling disagreements (Christian List et al., “Deliberation, Single-Peakedness, and the Possibility of Meaningful Democracy: Evidence from Deliberative Polls,” *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 01 (January 2013): 80–95.)

¹¹ Defenders of partisanship have also suggested that party antagonism may have an important epistemic function (e.g. White and Ypi, “On Partisan Political Justification,” 386). But I do not think this is a distinctly democratic argument for partisan agenda-setting (it can easily apply to an elitist model of political competition), so I leave it aside in this paper to focus on the *democratic* arguments for partisanship.

in modern democratic theory because political divisions raise the specter of factionalism: the condition in which one group seeks to seize power in a society and to exercise that power in their own interest and at the expense of others. Factionalism spells the death of democracy when one faction successfully gains control of the apparatus of government and uses it to effectively rule over other factions within the society. Given this inherent tension between factionalism and democracy, recent defenses of the democratic value of political parties have emphasized a conceptual distinction between parties and factions.¹² While recognizing that this distinction does not always hold in practice, democratic theorists have argued that non-factionalism must be central to partisanship as a regulative ideal.

The conceptual distinction between parties and factions – or between partisanship and factionalism – is the most consistent thread linking classic twentieth century descriptive theory of parties and the more recent normative defenses of partisanship. In the earlier scholarship on parties, the distinction between parties and factions is grounded in the different strategic approaches that parties and sectional interest groups employ to gain political influence. These accounts define parties primarily by their aim of achieving control of government by winning elections. Because it generates competitive pressure to appeal to a large number of voters, this strategy makes parties more resistant to factionalism than pressure groups who forgo electoral politics.¹³

¹² And not only recent defenses: in his essay on the development of concept of “party,” Terrence Ball has argued that the development of a conceptual distinction between parties and factions enabled a positive view of parties in democratic theory and practice in nascent early modern republics (Terrence Ball, “Party,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terrence Ball, James Farr, and Hanson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 166–169.)

¹³ See esp. E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York, NY: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1942), 31. On the classic distinction between parties and pressure groups, see also Samuel H. Beer, *Modern British Politics: Parties and Pressure Groups in the Collectivist Age* (New York: Norton, 1982).

In recent normative defenses of partisanship, non-factionalism is not merely a byproduct of parties' distinctive strategy; rather, it is their defining feature. Drawing on Edmund Burke's classic definition of a political party as "a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed,"¹⁴ democratic theorists have argued that the key distinction between parties and other political groups is that parties aim to advance some conception of the *common* interest. Rosenblum defends partisanship partly on the grounds that "the 'we' of partisanship is more inclusive than other political identities."¹⁵ Ypi and White claim that "partisanship, unlike factionalism, involves efforts to harness political power not for the benefit of one social group among several but for that of the association as whole."¹⁶ Partisan clashes do not reflect bare conflicts of interest, but rather, disagreements over the common good.

Though Rosenblum and Muirhead still see a link between the electoral focus of parties and their non-factional character, they maintain that a commitment to advancing a principled and broadly appealing platform is constitutive of partisanship.¹⁷ Ypi and White, on the other hand, decouple the normative concept of partisanship from any particular political strategy, locating the distinction between parties and factions exclusively in the kinds of claims that parties make on behalf of their political projects.¹⁸ Their ideal of partisanship is typical of a cluster of recent theories of partisanship identifying healthy partisan deliberation with the exchange of public reasons.¹⁹

¹⁴ Edmund Burke, "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," in *The Portable Edmund Burke*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1999), 146.

¹⁵ Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 356.

¹⁶ White and Ypi, "On Partisan Political Justification," 382.

¹⁷ Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 127–133; 357; Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, 18.

¹⁸ White and Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, 26; 55.

¹⁹ See, e.g. Lise Esther Herman, "Democratic Partisanship: From Theoretical Ideal to Empirical Standard," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 4 (2017): 738–54; Fabio Wolkenstein, "A Deliberative Model of

A second democratic virtue of agenda-setting through partisan deliberation is its *publicity*. Ypi and White argue that for deliberative justification to be suitably public, “arguments need to be amplified so as to be hearable by the constituency to which they are addressed, and they need to be cognitively accessible to that constituency so as to be acknowledged when heard.”²⁰ Political parties, which have an incentive to address a mass audience in terms they can understand are well-positioned to serve this function. Theorists of deliberative democracy argue that deliberation must be suitably public if it is to demonstrate appropriate respect for the moral and political agency of all citizens. The publicity of the partisan agenda-setting process enables citizens to understand why their ballots reflect a particular set of choices and to regard this set of choices as a legitimate representation of the domain of political conflict; they can see how different options correspond to principled debates with which they are familiar.

The publicity of partisan deliberation also contributes to an essential characteristic of democratic decision-making: that the political agenda emerges through a process that is appropriately responsive to the political agency of all citizens. This is the third virtue democratic theorists have linked to partisanship. Departing from the elitist model of democratic competition associated with classic 20th century defenses of party politics,²¹ recent defenses of partisanship within normative democratic theory have lauded a more participatory model of political partisanship. On this model, agenda-setting through partisan deliberation can be understood as

Intra-Party Democracy,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2016): 297–320; Matteo Bonotti, *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁰ White and Ypi, “On Partisan Political Justification,” 386.

²¹ For the purposes of this paper, I largely set aside the competitive model, focusing on the practical upshot of the more participatory democratic theory of parties. In a separate working paper, I present an argument that the participatory model, while perhaps more demanding, is in fact both more realistically attainable (at least approximately) and also more normatively attractive.

democratic because it draws a wide range of citizens into the creative work of defining salient political issues.

Crucial to the contemporary model of democratic partisanship is the idea that partisanship promotes widespread, active participation by ordinary citizens in the internal deliberations that shape party identities. Lea Ypi and Justin White argue that deliberation in partisan fora contributes to a more engaged citizenry, providing support for “the socialization of their members into complex political, economic, and legal affairs.”²² Importantly, Ypi and White argue that these partisan fora do not just create blindly loyal followers. Rather, partisanship plays an important role in enabling citizens to see themselves as political agents in their own right. Ypi and White argue that “the broad agreement on certain shared political principles that characterizes partisanship of whatever stripe acts as the basis on which individuals can develop confidence in their views before having them exposed to more radical challenge.”²³ Thus, “When partisan fora successfully perform their civic role, they supply the opportunities for political exchange that anchor individuals in shared normative frameworks while valorizing the experience and judgment of each.”²⁴

The classic competitive model of party democracy would suggest evaluating the democratic credentials of a party system exclusively through the behavior of party elites (typically those holding or seeking elected office). By contrast, the participatory model emphasizes the habits and attitudes of ordinary partisans and their involvement in intra- and inter-party deliberation. On this model, the democratic credentials of deliberation within a party system derive from an ideal-type of a participatory partisanship. To the extent that the recent

²² White and Ypi, “On Partisan Political Justification,” 387.

²³ White and Ypi, 388.

²⁴ White and Ypi, 388; On the participatory value of intra-party deliberation, see also Wolkenstein, “A Deliberative Model of Intra-Party Democracy.”

democratic theory of political parties offers normative prescriptions, then, these prescriptions should focus on the promotion of this ideal-type of partisanship. Ideal partisans do not eschew taking sides in political debate; indeed, they are self-consciously attached to particular parties and their principles. But ideal partisans do not just accept the political agenda as it emerges from competition among elites of opposing parties. Instead, partisans take responsibility for the creative work of defining the political agenda, for helping to shape the principles, platforms, and the broad conception of the common interest that constitute their party's identity. Insofar as partisanship fosters broad participation in these processes that define salient political conflicts, it lends the political agenda-setting process a democratic character,

Section II – Three challenges for promoting healthy partisanship

The ideal-type model of partisan deliberation outlined in the previous section is only partially reflected in reality, and recent defenders of participatory partisanship have distanced their ideal of ordinary partisanship from the structure of party politics currently in practice. Nancy Rosenblum defends the democratic value of parties in large part on the grounds that they are “carriers of partisanship,”²⁵ but she is careful in her analysis to distinguish ordinary partisans from the politicians and party agents that we would typically identify as the party itself.²⁶ Party leaders and party organization are even more conspicuously absent from Russell Muirhead's and Lea Ypi and Justin White's defenses of partisanship. Ypi and White explicitly distinguish their defense of “partisanship” as a practice from a defense of “party” as an organizational form.²⁷

The distance between political reality and the model of partisanship defended by normative democratic theorists is not itself a problem, since the participatory model of

²⁵ Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 322.

²⁶ Rosenblum, 360.

²⁷ White and Ypi, “On Partisan Political Justification,” 382; See also White and Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, 28.

partisanship is meant to serve as a regulative ideal. However, for this regulative ideal to provide useful normative guidance, it still must be formulated in a way that is sensitive to existing patterns of deviation from the ideal. At the very least, the realities of political attitudes and behavior in real-world democracies should inform any agenda for political reform aimed at promoting healthier partisanship. More seriously, consistent patterns of deviation from the ideal of partisanship may point to endemic features of human behavior that cannot – or perhaps should not – be excised from our political life.

The goal of this paper is to lay some groundwork for more careful analysis of the relationship between ideals of partisan deliberation and the realities (and realistic possibilities) of party politics. In this section, I discuss three crucial areas of research on political attitudes and behaviors that must be attended to in a normative democratic theory of political parties. Then in section III I briefly discuss how consideration of these facts might shape an agenda for further normative theorizing about parties and guide pro-partisan institutional reform efforts.

Marginal Partisans and Negative Partisans

Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead defend the ideal of participatory partisanship against the competing ideal of the independent citizen, which has a certain moral appeal in contemporary society. This opposition between an independent identity and a partisan identity does not reflect the reality of party loyalty and party identification in contemporary political behavior. In particular, it obscures two important phenomena: 1) the disposition of “party-leaners,” and 2) negative partisanship.²⁸ Most citizens are neither ideal-type participatory

²⁸ Though this discussion draws most heavily on research on partisanship in the US, most of it has been shown to apply across Western democracies. There is a substantial body of literature on the broad decline in party membership and partisan identification in Europe (See, e.g. Ingrid Van Biezen, Peter Mair, and Thomas

partisans nor “moral purist” independents. Many of them are what political scientists call “party-leaners.” Party-leaners tend to be habitually loyal to a party in their voting habits and patterns of information consumption.²⁹ At the same time, these citizens often exhibit distaste for the idea of partisanship and decline to *identify* with the party.³⁰ They also refrain from publicly standing with their party and from taking part in internal deliberations about the party’s principles or platforms.³¹

The disposition of party-leaners is reinforced by the growing phenomenon of “negative partisanship.” Negative partisanship describes political behavior that is driven more by dislike (or disgust) of the opposition than by any positive affirmation of one’s own party.³² When negative partisanship is strong, citizens might act like strict partisans in regard to the opposing party – refusing to consider the merits of their candidates or platforms, even punishing their

Poguntke, “Going, Going, . . . Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe,” *European Journal of Political Research* 51, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 24–56; Russell J. Dalton, “The Decline of Party Identifications,” in *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, ed. Martin P. Wattenberg and Russell J. Dalton (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002.) and on the attitudinal and behavioral significance of negative partisanship (E.g. Sabrina Jasmine Mayer, “How Negative Partisanship Affects Voting Behavior in Europe: Evidence from an Analysis of 17 European Multi-Party Systems with Proportional Voting,” *Research and Politics* January-March 2017 (2017): 1–7; Mike Medeiros and Alain Noël, “The Forgotten Side of Partisanship: Negative Party Identification in Four Anglo-American Democracies,” *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 7 (2014): 1022–46.)

²⁹ In the US, party loyalty in voting behavior has increased substantially in recent years, while partisan identification has not (Alan I. Abramowitz, “Partisan Nation: The Rise of Affective Partisanship in the American Electorate,” in *The State of the Parties: The Changing Role of Contemporary American Parties*, ed. John C. Green, Daniel J. Coffey, and Cohen, Seventh (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 23.)

³⁰ Samara Klar and Yanna Krupnikov, *Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³¹ Klar and Krupnikov, 83–106.

³² Scholars of party polarization in the US argue that the increase in polarization has been predominantly characterized by an increase in negative affect toward opposing parties. Over the past few decades partisans and party-leaners have tended to give opposing (and opposing partisans) increasingly negative ratings on “feelings thermometers,” exhibit greater social distance, and are more likely to attribute negative stereotypes to supporters of the opposing party. During the same time period, however, positive affect towards one’s own party and party identification have not increased. (Shanto Iyengar, Guarav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405–31; See also Abramowitz, “Partisan Nation: The Rise of Affective Partisanship in the American Electorate.”) Similar evidence suggests that negative affect toward opposing partisans has increased in the UK as well, though much less dramatically than it has in the United States. (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization,” 416–421.)

party's leaders for compromising with an opposing party.³³ But these same citizens may act like independents with regard to their own party. While negative partisans may be loyal to their party, they decline responsibility for shaping the party's identity or, like Muirhead's zealot, may insist on imposing their own preferred platform without a willingness to engage in the kind of compromise necessary to maintain a broad coalition.³⁴

The widespread phenomena of negative partisanship and of party loyalty without party affinity demonstrate that institutional design for democratic partisan deliberation needs to be attentive to various components of partisanship. Framing the ideal of partisan identity in opposition to independent identity may obscure the most relevant challenges to cultivating widespread participatory partisanship. Though the independent label does have a certain moral attraction in many contemporary societies, even those citizens who adopt this label do not adopt the dispositions that Rosenblum and Muirhead ascribe to an independent. Contemporary citizens typically do not fall short of the ideal of participatory partisanship because they have withdrawn entirely from party politics; rather, they remain loyal to a party, without feeling affinity or responsibility for the party's prospects or identity.

Defenders of partisanship might argue that the research on marginal and negative partisans is largely orthogonal to the normative project they are engaged in. In defending the democratic virtues of partisanship, Rosenblum, for example, does not argue that *all* citizens ought to be partisans; in fact, the virtues of partisanship she lauds might work to best effect in a society with a mix of partisans and independents.³⁵ Other defenders of partisanship take care to

³³ Klar and Krupnikov, *Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction*, 128–139.

³⁴ Rosenblum also takes note of this deviation from her ideal of partisanship, criticizing “hyperpartisans” or “party purists” who fail to exhibit the virtues of partisanship as much as independents, but “Instead of circumventing parties, they set out to capture them.” (387)

³⁵ I'm grateful to Prithvi Datta for helping me see this point.

distinguish between different levels of partisanship, suggesting that it is activist partisans, not marginal partisans, who most interest them.³⁶

The attitudes and behaviors of parties' broad base of support cannot be ignored in the formulation of a normative ideal of participatory partisanship, though. The normative appeal of the participatory model of democratic partisanship derives largely from its potential to draw a broader swath of the population into the creative work of politics. This model loses much of its attractiveness, then, if it aims only at somewhat expanding the elite political class, while having little to say about the vast majority of citizens who engage only minimally in the processes of deliberative agenda setting.³⁷ Perhaps even more importantly, the behaviors of activist partisans, may well have consequences for the attitudes of less active party supporters, as may efforts to promote healthy activist partisanship. These consequences undoubtedly need to be considered in any normative theory of parties and partisanship. A key challenge facing proponents of the participatory model of partisan deliberation, then, is how to discourage the mobilization of negative partisanship and encourage the mobilization of positive, engaged partisanship.

Cue-taking and the effect of partisanship on judgment formation

The participatory model of partisan agenda-setting – especially as articulated by Lea Ypi and Justin White – locates the democratic value of partisanship in its ability to draw citizens into the political arena and foster widespread participation in the creative work of deliberative

³⁶ Lise Herman explicitly argues that evaluating the health of a political party system requires looking at the claims of partisan activists, not the broader category of party supporters or party members (Herman, "Democratic Partisanship: From Theoretical Ideal to Empirical Standard," 748.) Ypi and White are less explicit about this point, but their proposals for distinguishing the rights and responsibilities of more active from more marginal partisans suggest that they adopt a generally similar view.

³⁷ This may at first appear to be an example of making the perfect the enemy of the good, but the participatory partisan model of deliberative agenda-setting serves as an alternative to the elitist competitive model and to a post-partisan model of subsidiarist or lottocratic citizens assemblies. All have their particular drawbacks to be weighed against their relative virtues.

agenda-setting. Through partisan deliberation, ordinary citizens take part in the practice of articulating relevant political possibilities and characterizing the most significant political conflicts in a society. Partisanship thus invites citizens to actively exercise their agency in the democratic process

A realistic application of the normative theory of partisan agenda-setting must confront the reality that ordinary citizens' political preferences are not firmly fixed; they are often context-dependent, and especially sensitive to the way of framing the question and to environmental "primes" that cause citizens to unconsciously view issues through a particular lens.³⁸

As Lisa Disch has recently argued, this malleability of citizens' preferences is not inherently pathological for democracy.³⁹ In fact, democracy depends on it. Effective political agenda-setting requires that citizens be prepared to consider issues through different frames and to focus on different dimensions for evaluating alternatives. This is the only way to narrow the domain of conflict in a community enough for citizens to reach a common understanding of the decisions that they will make together. "Constructivist" accounts of representation, like Disch's, view the speculative appeals of would-be representatives as an essential part of this process of constructing a political agenda.⁴⁰ This is only possible if citizens are open to accepting new claims or proposals put forward by political representatives.

The malleability of citizens' preferences does present a challenge for democracy, though, because of the possibility that a few elites might be able to manipulate citizens' preferences and

³⁸ See Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 103–26.

³⁹ Lisa Disch, "Toward a Mobilization Conception of Representation," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2011): 100–114.

⁴⁰ See Lisa Disch, "Democratic Representation and the Constituency Paradox," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (September 2012): 599–616.

political attitudes.⁴¹ One mechanism for this is through elite control of media narratives, which can significantly influence the frames that citizens use in forming their political judgments. But citizens' judgments also often appear to be directly responsive to cues from party elites; citizens often adopt the expressed view of politicians and activists as their own, typically without even realizing they are doing so.⁴²

The potential for elite manipulation of citizens' political attitudes poses a clear difficulty for the participatory model of parties' democratic value. The participatory model holds that partisan agenda-setting is democratic insofar as ordinary citizens actually play a role in shaping their party's identity and platform. But if ordinary partisans simply parrot the positions of the party leaders without reflection, then it's not clear that broader participation within the party actually adds to the democratic character of partisan deliberation.

Lea Ypi and Justin White argue that the ideal practice of partisanship helps citizens to develop "critical awareness" that makes them resistant to elite manipulation and "encourages alertness to the dangers of political instrumentalization and misinformation on the part of more powerful actors."⁴³ Ypi and White claim that the practice of generating alternative political possibilities, which is the business of partisanship, leads citizens to recognize "the limits of existing discourses"⁴⁴ and to be critical of popular narratives.

⁴¹ Disch, "Toward a Mobilization Conception of Representation," 110.

⁴² See, esp. Gabriel S. Lenz, *Follow the Leader?: How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2012). The instability of ordinary citizens' political attitudes has often been cited as a reason to favor an elitist, competitive model of party democracy over the more participatory model. But the potential for elite manipulation of citizens' judgments belies the claim that democratic competition incentivizes ambitious party leaders to anticipate and track the preferences or interests of the great majority of citizens. If citizens might come to endorse a particular position *just because* they heard an elite propose it, then the need to gain majority support may not significantly constrain elected officials, especially when the phenomenon of negative partisanship leads citizens to systematically discount any claims from an opposing party.

⁴³ White and Ypi, "On Partisan Political Justification," 389.

⁴⁴ White and Ypi, 389.

But even if healthy skepticism characterizes ideal-type partisanship, it is by no means commonplace among partisans in practice. In fact, more active, engaged, knowledgeable, and partisan citizens are even more prone to elite cue-taking than their non-partisan compatriots.⁴⁵ Partisans identify strongly with their party and desire to stand with their party. This party loyalty can take the form of adopting the expressed beliefs of party elites, especially when the claims of party leaders often stand in for the positions or identity of the party itself.

Given that partisans are particularly prone to elite cue-taking, it is essential to take seriously the concern about the potential for elite manipulation of partisans' attitudes. This requires careful attention to how the design of party systems creates avenues for citizens to critically evaluate and contest the claims of a party's would-be representatives.⁴⁶

Partisan identity and Social identity

The ideal of non-factionalism is crucial to the normative concept of partisanship. The participatory ideal of partisanship holds that political parties are a distinctive kind of political group insofar as they aim to promote the common good of the community, rather than the narrow interests of a particular social group, and insofar as they seek support from all sectors of society. This distinctive, non-factional character of political parties is essential if decision-making processes dominated by political parties are to satisfy the democratic desiderata that no subgroup within a society rules over any other.

The relationship between social identities and partisan identities in contemporary democracies puts pressure on this vision of the non-factional character of political parties, though. Party leaders often couch their proposals and appeals for support in terms that aim to

⁴⁵ Rune Slothuus and Claes H. de Vreese, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Issue Framing Effects," *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 03 (July 2010): 630–45.

⁴⁶ Consistent with what Lisa Disch refers to a "systemic" approach to evaluating political representation. (Disch, "Toward a Mobilization Conception of Representation," 102.)

attract particular social groups, and partisan identification is often driven by other social identities or interest group affinities. Many political parties in pluralist societies are explicitly built around ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities. Even where party divisions are defined primarily in terms of economic cleavages, partisans often express their affinity with the party not in terms of ideology or policy programs, but in terms of class identity.

A model of party politics that emphasizes the importance of non-factional party identities might diagnose these ties to particular social identities as deviations from an inclusive ideal of partisanship. But there is good reason to think that the role of particular group identities cannot be eliminated from party politics (or from any politics). Social group affinities drive partisan identification even when the party's official platform does not explicitly appeal to them. In nineteenth century American politics, partisan divisions, especially within particular cities typically broke down along ethnic lines, and party agents explicitly appealed to inter-ethnic suspicions to mobilize supporters.⁴⁷ Even during the height of "Catch-all" parties in the twentieth century United States, racial and regional identity played a significant role in determining party identification, especially during the realignment that accompanied the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁸ Scholars have also demonstrated that racial divisions remain an important driver of negative partisanship in the United States.⁴⁹ Most significantly, experimental research has demonstrated that the salience of individuals' social identities has a profound effect on attitudes and behavior in a variety of contexts.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Richard Bense, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 246–258.

⁴⁹ See, e.g. Joseph Bafumi and Robert Y. Shapiro, "A New Partisan Voter," *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 1–24.

⁵⁰ See, esp. Henri Tajfel, "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination," *Scientific American* 223 (1970): 96–102.

The reality of the role of social group identity in partisan politics should affect how we understand the ideal of non-factionalism. Proponents of the democratic value of parties have tended to emphasize a sharp distinction between political parties and interest groups formed around a particular social identity. But this distinction does not exist in practice, and an ideal of non-factionalism built on such a sharp distinction is too far from reality to provide a useful regulative ideal. Partisanship does not substitute for social group identities any more than a common civic identity can substitute for partisan identity. In reality, civic identity is interwoven with partisan identity, and partisanship is likewise interwoven with other social group identities.

At the same time, the ideal of non-factionalism cannot be abandoned entirely if parties' role in agenda-setting and governance is to be *democratic*. A key challenge for normative theorists of parties and partisanship is to account for how the endemic relationship between partisanship and other social identities can avoid sliding into mere factionalism.

Section III – Reforming Democratic Party Systems

Any attempt to develop and apply the new normative theory of democratic partisanship to reform real world party systems needs to address the realities of contemporary party politics that I outlined in section II. This discussion points to two main questions that should drive a theoretical and practical reform agenda. The first is *how do we mobilize citizens as partisans*. That is, how do we cultivate the kinds of attitudes and virtues of ideal-type partisanship lauded by contemporary appreciators of partisanship. The second is *how do we facilitate intraparty democratic deliberation*. That is, how do we balance the need for leadership and party coherence while avoiding elite monopolization of intra-party debate and manipulation of

partisans' beliefs and attitudes. In this paper, I focus on the first of these questions. In the remainder of this section, I discuss the challenge of mobilizing citizens and partisans and point to some potential fruitful areas of inquiry on these two questions.

My decision to focus on the challenge of mobilizing partisans should not be taken as an indication that the challenge of facilitating intraparty deliberation is straightforward to address. On the contrary, ensuring the democratic character of large-scale deliberation is perhaps the thorniest question facing contemporary democratic theory, and a small but growing body of literature has arisen to address it within the particular context of political parties and party systems.⁵¹ The challenge of designing party systems to *mobilize* healthy partisanship – especially in response to the particular issues raised in this paper – has, by contrast, been largely neglected.

Mobilizing Citizens as Partisans

On the participatory model, a party-centered process of political agenda-setting functions democratically when the party system widely cultivates an ideal-type of partisanship. These ideal-type partisans feel a personal stake in the party's identity and its success. They are committed to cooperating (and compromising) with fellow partisans to advance a shared vision of the common good, and they aim to win broad support for this vision.

As I discussed in Section III, though, partisanship in contemporary politics typically does not take this ideal-type form. Participatory partisanship does not arise organically from party competition. How, then, can we cultivate it? Here I want to suggest two possible directions for institutional reform. The main purpose of this paper is not to advance any particular normative proposals, though, but to advance the theoretical agenda. Consequently, the following discussion

⁵¹ See, e.g. Wolkenstein, "A Deliberative Model of Intra-Party Democracy"; White and Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, 213–220.

is highly speculative, though it is also informed by a historical view of how political parties and party politics have transformed over time.

The first suggested direction for reform is the creation (or recreation) of a public Election Day culture in which political parties play a central and visible role. Elections provide an ideal context for mobilizing citizens around a durable political identity because elections recur regularly in established democracies. This provides an opportunity (and incentive) for parties to mobilize citizens around political identity not simply in terms of a particular timely issue, but in terms of durable principles that will continue to be relevant in future elections. Electoral mobilization does tend to be durable – mobilizing a person to vote in one election makes it more likely that she will vote in future elections as well.⁵² Mobilizing participatory partisans around durable principles rather than particular immediate issues should lead citizens to do more than “stand up and be counted;” it should also lead them to consider *how* they want to be counted.

The actual Election Day experience in most established democracies increasingly hinders this kind of durable partisan mobilization, though. As electoral administration becomes increasingly bureaucratized, political parties play an increasingly marginal role in the Election Day experience of most voters. Much of this has resulted from efforts to eliminate voter intimidation and Election Day violence. These achievements should not be discounted, but it is worth considering what might have been lost in the process, especially with the trend toward more “convenience” voting, which further contributes to an experience of voting as a private, individual act, and thus may further marginalize or even stigmatize the role of partisanship in electoral decisions.

⁵² Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Ron Shachar, “Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment,” *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 540–50. Electoral mobilization also tends to create durable partisan identities voting for a particular party in one election makes it more likely that she will vote for the same party in future elections (Ron Shachar, “Party Loyalty as Habit Formation,” *Journal of Applied Econometrics* 18, no. 3 (2003): 251–69.)

The alternative to a lackluster Election Day scene is one that celebrates partisanship and reveals voting to be an experience of massively shared agency.⁵³ Rather than push parties to the periphery of democracy's most public ritual, local communities might encourage parties to set up booths at Election Day festivals, to compete against each other in games, and to share a meal afterwards. The aim of reviving a social Election Day is to raise the salience of partisanship as a public identity, thus giving partisans a sense that their identity is at stake in decisions about what the party stands for.

The second direction for reform to foster participatory partisanship that I want to suggest involves promoting the social integration of political parties. Further tying political parties to social institutions with particularist identities may seem to run counter to the ideal of non-factionalism. But if, as I have suggested, partisan identity cannot be disentangled from partial social identities, then the ideal of non-factionalism needs to be radically rethought. Formalizing and strengthening the ties between political parties and social identities – and especially social *institutions* – has substantial potential benefits for mobilizing engaged partisanship, and may paradoxically hinder factional takeover of democratic institutions.

In their typology of parties, Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond have argued that the electoral context in many contemporary democracies favors the development of “electoralist” parties: essentially campaigning organizations which maintain a “skeletal existence” between elections.⁵⁴ These electoralist parties tend to revolve around the personalities of prominent politicians rather than a principled partisan identity.⁵⁵ Consequently, electoralist parties’

⁵³ This does not require the elimination of the secret ballot (indeed, the risk of bribery, blackmail and exploitation of vulnerable individuals seem likely to outweigh any purported benefits of public voting). Even if the ultimate act of marking a ballot remains private, this need not stop citizens from marching to their polling place with their fellow partisans, declaring their stance, and encouraging passersby to take a side in the fray.

⁵⁴ Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond, “Species of Political Parties: A New Typology,” *Party Politics* 9, no. 2 (2003): 185.

⁵⁵ Gunther and Diamond, 187.

mobilization strategies tend not to highlight the recurrence of elections to foster durable political identities. Instead, campaigns often make candidate and election-specific appeals to draw supporters to the polls,⁵⁶ In contemporary politics, electoralist strategies that do draw on partisan identity often prime citizens' negative affect, portraying rival candidates as the embodiment of the worst features of the hated opposing party.

Electoralist parties might be contrasted with “mass-based” parties.⁵⁷ Gunther and Diamond explain: “pluralist mass-based parties seek to win elections as the principal avenue towards achieving their programmatic objectives, and their vote-mobilizational strategy relies heavily on the development and activation of a mass-membership base.” Rather than the ad-hoc appeals of electoralist parties, mass-based parties build a broad base of supporters “who remain active in party affairs even during periods between elections.” Mass-based parties typically accomplish this through penetration into many spheres of social life. The classic example of this party form is the “class-mass” party in which strong links between left parties and labor organizations play an essential role in political mobilization,⁵⁸ but this model of mass party also characterizes many religious parties,⁵⁹ and might also be seen in the myriad youth organizations associated with party politics in the nineteenth century US.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Gunther and Diamond, 168.

⁵⁷ Apart from electoralist and mass-based parties, Gunther and Diamond describe three other “genera” of political parties: “elite-based,” “ethnicity-based,” and “movement” parties, but none of these forms of political parties contribute to a democratic agenda-setting process on either of the models I have presented in this paper, so I do not discuss them here.

⁵⁸ Gunther and Diamond, “Species of Political Parties: A New Typology,” 179; See also Stein Rokkan and Henry Valen, “The Mobilization of the Periphery: Data on Turnout, Party Membership and Candidate Recruitment in Norway,” *Acta Sociologica* 6, no. 1 (1962): 11–152.

⁵⁹ Stein Rokkan refers to this social integration of political parties with the Dutch term *Verzuiling*, which originally referred to the networks of associations meant to maximize integration in and loyalty to a church. (Stein Rokkan, “Toward a Generalized Concept of *Verzuiling*,” in *The West European Party System*, ed. Peter Mair (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), 139–49.)

⁶⁰ See Jon Grinspan, *The Virgin Vote: How Young Americans Made Democracy Social, Politics Personal, and Voting Popular in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

There are at least three reasons why the integration of political parties with other social groups and associations can help promote participatory partisanship. First, linking political parties with other “sticky” social identities and relationships helps to maintain durable partisan identity between elections. Party leaders’ claims about the most salient political conflicts and relevant political possibilities are more likely to resonate with citizens if they can be linked to social divisions, identities, or interests that are already perceived as relevant. And because social groups are often deeply embedded in people’s lives, they provide effective channels for building robust partisan identification and participation. Second, social organizations with more narrowly defined missions or membership are likely to better serve the educative function that Ypi and White attribute to partisanship, enabling citizens to “develop confidence in their views before having them exposed to more radical challenge.” Political theorists have long touted educative value of experience participating in local, small-scale, and familiar institutions.⁶¹

Finally, the closer integration of political parties with social groups can provide an important check on the potential for partisanship to slide into factionalism. This may seem counterintuitive at first, but by tying these particular identities to a broader partisan identity, parties politicize these social identities and open them up to contestation. The creation (as well as the contestation and revision) of a party identity involves transforming citizens’ various social identities and particular interests into a comprehensive and durable political identity, by creating new narratives about how interests align, asserting new lines of division by redefining political conflicts or introducing new alternative possibilities.

Political attitudes and behavior are never independent of social group identities.

Avoiding factionalism cannot depend on eliminating the political salience of group identities, but

⁶¹ Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970); see also Paul J. Weithman, *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002) on the role of churches in socializing many citizens into democratic participation.

should focus rather on shaping how such social identities operate in the public sphere. Explicitly linking political parties with social organizations enables public contestation and deliberation about the political relevance of group identities that might otherwise be taken for granted.

Conclusion

The recent surge of interest in political parties and partisanship among contemporary democratic theorists, and especially among deliberative theorists is a positive development. It is hard to have a conversation about the health of contemporary democracies without speaking of the structure of parties and party systems or the character of partisanship. If normative democratic theory is actually to offer useful guidance to citizens and would be reformers in this – or any nearby – world, it cannot ignore parties nor wish them away. Normative democratic theory also has much to offer empirical scholarship of parties, which has largely been built on the limited set of available normative assumptions about the democratic functions of political parties.

Empirical scholarship on parties also has a great deal to offer normative democratic theory, and not simply because it points to the importance of parties as a subject of inquiry or to problems that can be diagnosed with existing normative concepts. As I have argued in this paper, at the very least, empirical scholarship should inform normative theorists' understanding of the kinds of obstacles inhibiting the promotion of more democratic forms of partisanship. But I think the potential lessons of the past century or so of empirical work on parties run much deeper than that. Normative democratic theories of parties – especially those with a distinctively deliberative flavor – almost unanimously build from Edmund Burke's famous definition of a

party as a group aiming to promote a shared conception of the national interest.⁶² But Burke's definition was formulated before the era of mass suffrage. It is at least worth considering that Burke's characterization of parties, and especially the way of distinguishing partisanship and factionalism that it points to, may be anachronistic. The vast expanse of empirical (and descriptive-theoretical) scholarship on political parties that has proliferated along with the extension of suffrage points to a different defining feature of parties: parties mobilize the masses. Though I reject the easy equation of democracy with majoritarianism in classic twentieth century defenses of parties, I think that the crucial distinction between parties and factions is more likely to be found in the distinctive party structure and strategy than in the partisan claim. In any case, the normative concepts of party and partisanship will be enriched by greater attention to the mobilization function of modern parties.

⁶² Burke, "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," 146.

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