

The Possibility of Democratic Autonomy

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Abstract. What makes democracy valuable? One traditional answer holds that participating in democratic self-government amounts to a kind of autonomy: it enables citizens to be the authors of their political affairs. Many contemporary philosophers, however, are skeptical. We are autonomous, they argue, when important features of our lives are up to us, but in a democracy we merely have a say in a process of collective choice. In this paper, we defend the possibility of democratic autonomy, by advancing a conception of it which is impervious to this objection. At the core of our account is the idea of joint authorship. You are a joint author of something when that thing expresses your joint intentions. Democracy may not make any one of us sole author of our political affairs, but it can make us their joint authors. It is in such joint authorship, we claim, that the intrinsic value of democratic self-government consists.

1. Introduction

What makes democracy valuable? For one thing, democratic institutions are widely thought to have good causal consequences. Perhaps they forestall famine¹, promote peace², generate growth³; perhaps democratic regimes tend to respect the rights of their citizens—more reliably than non-democratic regimes do, at any rate.⁴ Yet democracy’s value cannot be exhausted

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¹ As Amartya Sen famously claimed. See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford University Press, 1982). For criticism, see Oliver Rubin, "The Merits of Democracy in Famine Protection—Fact or Fallacy?," *The European Journal of Development Research* 21, no. 5 (2009): 699-717.

² This claim comes from Immanuel Kant, "Toward Perpetual Peace," in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1999). For a review of the contemporary literature on Kant’s claim, see Jarrod Hayes, "The Democratic Peace and the New Evolution of an Old Idea," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 4 (2012): 767-791.

³ As Acemoglu *et al* have recently claimed. See Daron Acemoglu, Suresh Naidu, Pascual Restrepo, and James A. Robinson, "Democracy Does Cause Growth." *Journal of Political Economy* 127, no. 1 (2019): 47-100. But for a contrary view see Julia Ruiz Pozuelo, Amy Slipowitz, and Guillermo Vuletin, "Democracy Does Not Cause Growth: The Importance of Endogeneity Arguments." Inter-American Development Bank Working Paper Series, no. IDB-WP-694 (2016). <https://ideas.repec.org/p/idb/brikps/7758.html>.

⁴ For this claim, see Christian Davenport, *State Repression and the Domestic Democratic Peace* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). For a skeptical view, see Daniel Hill, "Democracy and the Concept of Personal Integrity Rights." *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 3 (2016): 822–35.

by these instrumental benefits, because, clichéd as they may be, it is easy to imagine cases where autocracy has better consequences than democracy. Imagine being ruled by a competent and benevolent dictator. They might forestall famine, promote peace, generate growth. They might assiduously respect their citizens' rights. Yet, however good the consequences of the dictator's rule, it seems that such a society would be missing out on something in not being governed democratically. If we take this intuition at face value—and why shouldn't we?—we must conclude that democracy is intrinsically valuable.⁵

What, then, makes democracy intrinsically valuable? We can begin to answer this question by noting that democracy has two distinguishing features: in a democracy people govern themselves together—either directly or through their representatives—and they do so as political equals. As an initial hypothesis, it seems plausible that *both* of these features are valuable. If that's right, then a full explanation of democracy's value needs to account for both. An attractive approach to doing so—one with deep historical resonance⁶—appeals to two broader values: equality and autonomy. The importance of political equality can be explained as a special case of a broader egalitarian ideal. The importance of collective self-government can be explained as a

⁵ As we'll use the term, 'intrinsic value' just means value irreducible to causal effects. We do not mean that the value depends exclusively on a thing's intrinsic properties. *Pace* Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *The Philosophical Review* 92, no. 2 (1983): 169-195, we take this to be in line with common philosophical usage. Note that our definition of intrinsic value is compatible with the item in question being intrinsically valuable in virtue of (partly) constituting something else of intrinsic value.

⁶ Most famously, this was Rousseau's view in *The Social Contract*. He took (legislative) democracy to be the only system wherein citizens could enjoy both equal political standing and 'moral freedom.' For a more recent discussion of the view that the justification of democracy appeals to both freedom and equality, see Henry Richardson, *Democratic Autonomy: Public Reasoning about the Ends of Policy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 24–25.

special case of a broader ideal of autonomy. Together, equality and autonomy explain the value of governing ourselves together as equals: that is, of governing ourselves democratically.

In recent years, however, it has become increasingly common to eschew any appeal to autonomy or collective self-government, and instead attempt to explain democracy's intrinsic value on the basis of equality alone. The leading contemporary versions of this approach understand the relevant kind of equality in relational terms. Niko Kolodny, for example, thinks that political inequalities constitute an objectionable social hierarchy, akin to hereditary caste.⁷ Democracy is intrinsically valuable, on his view, because it avoids contributing to such hierarchies. Daniel Viehoff thinks that equalities of political power have intrinsic value because they partly constitute certain egalitarian relationships, akin to friendships, that are themselves intrinsically valuable.⁸ Both views, then, locate the intrinsic value of democracy exclusively in the contribution that political equality makes to egalitarian social relationships.

We are sympathetic to the relational account of the value of political equality, but we deny that this exhausts democracy's value. The point of democracy, we think, isn't just to avoid social inequality; self-government is a good thing in its own right. It is a positive form of autonomy, understood as the authorship of one's life. Just as it is valuable for me to be the author of my private life, it is valuable for me to share in the joint authorship of our common political life. We will call this *democratic autonomy*.

⁷ Niko Kolodny, "Rule Over None I: What Justifies Democracy?," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2014), 195-229; and "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014), 287-336.

⁸ See Daniel Viehoff, "Democratic equality and political authority," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014), 337-375. Viehoff makes clear his rejection of self-government as an intrinsic value of democracy in Daniel Viehoff, "XIV—The Truth in Political Instrumentalism," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 117, no. 3, October 2017, pp. 273-295.

Why think democratic autonomy is valuable? Well, the rhetoric of self-government and autonomy is remarkably pervasive in both the theory and practice of democracy—so much so that even dictators often claim to be instruments of the popular will. More importantly, in eschewing this important strand of our democratic tradition, theorists deprive themselves of the evaluative resources needed to fully vindicate democracy’s intuitive moral significance. In democracies citizens have (some degree of) power over what their governments do. This is part of any plausible definition of democracy. But one way to avoid problematic political power relations is for no one to have any political power. If that were the only thing intrinsically valuable about democracy, the full realization of democracy’s intrinsic value wouldn’t, in principle, require anything recognizable as a democracy at all. That seems like the wrong result. One needs full-blooded democracy, we think, to realize the full value of democracy.

We can back up the point with some science fiction. Imagine a reliable deity creates an algorithm for morally impeccable legislation: input current social conditions and it produces perfectly just laws.⁹ We could change our constitution, replacing our legislature with the algorithm. In a society as gravely unjust as ours, weighty reasons speak in favor of making the change. Still, it seems clear that in doing so we would be losing out on some important democratic value. A theory of democracy’s value should account for that sense of loss. The problem doesn’t consist in interpersonal power relations, since under the algorithm everyone is equally powerless. A natural hypothesis, we think, is that the loss of influence over our government is regrettable because it deprives us of democratic autonomy.

Some philosophers (not us!) find this case too fantastic to confidently assess. But the legislative algorithm is effectively just a high-tech version of the familiar democratic concern with

⁹ The example is drawn from Jake Zuehl, *Collective Self-Determination*, Diss. Princeton University, 2016.

government by the ‘dead hand of the past.’¹⁰ It is a common and plausible idea that entrenched constitutional constraints are, in some way, anti-democratic. But the problem isn’t with interpersonal power relations: the constitution isn’t a person, and the people who wrote it are dead.¹¹ Kolodny, at least, is happy to concede this point.¹² He thinks that if ‘the dead hand of the past’ is problematic, it is for purely instrumental reasons. Rigid constitutional constraints, on his view, pose no essential threat to democratic values. But the case of the legislative algorithm suggests that the problem with the dead hand of the past cannot be fully explained away in instrumental terms. The legislative algorithm is stipulated to have excellent consequences. Yet it nevertheless seems to involve an important loss of democratic values.

There are some other difficulties in explaining democracy’s value solely in terms of interpersonal power relations. For one, the full realization of the value of democracy seems to depend, constitutively, on *actual participation*; if I don’t take part in the public life of my society, then there is an important part of the value of democracy which I do not enjoy. Yet the concern with problematic power relations is most often interpreted as concern with the equal distribution of access to or opportunity for political influence, rather than with the distribution of political influence as actually exercised;¹³ power, after all, is an opportunity concept, and you are not my

¹⁰ The point is commonly associated with Thomas Jefferson. See Jefferson’s famous “Letter to Madison” of September 6, 1789, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 15 (Princeton University Press: 1958). The objection to the dead hand of the past is importantly distinct from an objection to ‘juristocracy’ (rule by judges). It would persist even if the constitutional court were democratically elected, so long as the constitution provides substantive political constraints.

¹¹ This assumes – plausibly, we think – that the relevant sort of problematic power relation can’t exist between the dead and the living.

¹² Kolodny, “Rule Over None II,” 312.

¹³ Kolodny, “Rule Over None I,” 197.

superior or master or dominator simply because you voted and I didn't. Our view is that the politically apathetic miss out on the good of democratic autonomy.

Relatedly, the *quality* of people's participation seems to matter to democratic values. For example, many political scientists think that most citizens are ignorant and irrational.¹⁴ They know very little about politics. When they reason about politics, they bend the evidence to show their party in the best possible light. This, if correct, is disquieting, for reasons over and above its bad effects. It seems to undermine part of a democratic good. Yet, again, the problem here is not merely that some people enjoy unequal, arbitrary, or unaccountable power over others. It would not be solved were all citizens *equally* ignorant and irrational. That would exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the problem. Instead, the problem lies, at least in part, in the value of self-government. To make autonomous choices requires some measure of knowledge and rationality. If ordinary citizens really are ignorant and irrational, then this undermines their ability to make such choices. Thus, even when they participate in politics, they fail to get much of the value of self-government. They fail to enjoy democratic autonomy.¹⁵

It seems to us, then, that there is a powerful *prima facie* case that democracy is valuable in part due to its connection to autonomy. Yet how should this connection itself be understood? It is standard to understand it in negative terms.¹⁶ The idea is that the state's coercion of its citizens,

¹⁴ For a review of the evidence, see Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 36–41, 267–297.

¹⁵ This argument is from (and is spelt out in more depth in) Adam Lovett, "Democratic Autonomy and the Shortcomings of Citizens," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 18, no. 4 (2020): 363–386.

¹⁶ We take Rousseau's *The Social Contract* to be the source of this conception of the value self-government. Anna Stilz and Philip Pettit defend two important contemporary versions of the view. According to Stilz, the state's 'coercion presumptively threatens autonomy,' but "[w]here the state's use of coercion reflects subjects' own judgments as to how, and by whom, they should be governed" this "allows individuals to experience autonomy, even while subject to

or its interference or ability to interfere with them, threatens to make them unfree. Self-government, the thought goes, provides a solution to this problem: as long as state coercion manifests citizens' will, it doesn't impair their autonomy. Versions of this view differ in how they spell out the relevant kind of freedom, the nature of the threat posed by political coercion, and the ameliorative role of self-government. But they agree in relegating self-government to a negative, protective role. In this way, they are much like the egalitarian views discussed above: they all take the intrinsic value of democracy to consist in it preventing certain objectionable (unequal or freedom-impairing) relations.

Perhaps self-government does prevent state coercion from impairing freedom. But that doesn't seem to exhaust its the value. One can see this by reconsidering the example of the legislative algorithm. Plausibly, coercion is a relationship between agents. One cannot be coerced by a mere algorithm (or by a detailed constitution). Yet, if so, replacing our legislatures with an algorithm would, on the view under discussion, not make things worse with respect to the value of self-rule. It would prevent the ultimate source of legislative authority from coercing us, by

political power." See Anna Stilz, *Territorial Sovereignty: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 107. The threat state coercion poses to freedom is disabled, on Stilz's view, by this relation between citizen judgments and state institutions. According to Philip Pettit, *On The People's Terms* (Cambridge University Press: 2012), democratic institutions prevent the state from dominating its citizens, and so from rendering them unfree in the 'republican' sense of freedom as non-domination. For other views of this general sort, see Richardson, *Democratic Autonomy*, ch. 2; Arash Abizadeh, "Democratic Theory and Border Coercion," *Political Theory* 36, no.1 (2008), 39-42; David Miller, "Democracy's Domain," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 37, no. 3 (2009), 221-222; and James Wilson, "An Autonomy-Based Argument for Democracy," *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume 7* (2021), 194. For views more similar to our own account, see Daniel Philpott, "In Defense of Self-Determination," *Ethics* 105, vol. 2 (1995), 352-385; and Andrew Altman and Christopher Heath Wellman, *A Liberal Theory of International Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2009). We think these latter two views fall prey to the objections discussed in section 2.

making it the wrong kind of thing to coerce anyone. But, intuitively, something would be lost by such a reform. So there must be more to the value of self-government than it merely protecting its citizens' freedom. The deeper issue here is that, as we've said, on this approach self-government is valuable in a purely negative way. It merely helps avoid a bad, the bad of unfreedom. But self-government seems to be positively valuable: it helps us achieve a good. We should not merely fear the absence of self-government; we should affirmatively desire its presence. Thus, our main aim in this paper is to spell out a positive conception of the value of self-government. This is a contribution to the tradition that construes the value of democracy in part in terms of autonomy but extends it in articulating that value in a defensible and affirmative form.

Let us state our view. We think that self-government should be understood in terms of joint authorship. Joint authorship should itself be understood in terms of joint intentions: when self-government is achieved, citizens' joint intentions are made manifest in state policy. Achieving this is valuable in the same sort of way that it is valuable to be individual author of one's private affairs. Both consist in important features of one's life expression one's intentions. Both contribute to one's autonomy in an important, positive, sense of autonomy. Democracy is valuable, in part, because it enables citizens to enjoy such autonomy with respect to their social and political affairs. The most immediate challenge to this view is that there are obvious differences between the individual choices that constitute autonomy in private life, and the role an individual citizen plays in collective decisions determined through democratic procedures; it is up to me what *I* decide, but it isn't up to me what *we* decide. These differences can make it seem like collective decision-making couldn't realize a genuine kind of autonomy. Kolodny and Viehoff, we think, have both been convinced by these considerations. But these problems are not insoluble. Properly understood, they lead not to the rejection of democratic autonomy, but rather to a novel account of its nature. On the view we propose, democratic autonomy is an essentially social phenomenon: it consists essentially in *jointly* authoring our shared political lives. By developing such an account, we aim to defend the possibility of democratic autonomy.

Our discussion proceeds as follows. In section 2, we'll develop our account of the value of democratic autonomy, and show how the idea of joint authorship allows our view to avoid certain common objections. In section 3, we explore how democratic institutions facilitate this value, and which forms of democracy do so most effectively. In section 4 we address the worry that, on our account, one cannot achieve democratic autonomy under conditions of deep disagreement. We argue that disagreement plausibly impairs the achievement of the value but is quite consistent with achieving it to some degree. In section 5 we address the worry that one cannot achieve democratic autonomy in large-scale, modern, polities. We argue that, although there might be contingent reasons to prefer smaller polities, there is no in principle barrier to achieving the value of self-government in very large political communities. In section 6, we outline how the value of self-government and that of equality relate. Our ultimate picture is that the value of democracy is rooted in both these values, but that the two values are deeply entwined.

2. Self-Government as Self-Authorship

The view we will defend here is that self-government is valuable as a form of autonomy. We follow Joseph Raz in understanding autonomy as the authorship of one's own life (self-authorship, for short).¹⁷ The autonomous life is authored by its subject; it is shaped in significant part by their choices, and so it reflects or expresses their purposes, priorities, and personality, as those develop over time. In short, we will say that the self-authored life expresses the author's aims or intentions. This seems like a good thing. People don't just want to live lives full of good stuff; they want to live lives of their own making. Consider your romantic partner, or your career,

¹⁷ As he famously puts it, "[t]he autonomous person is part author of their life." See Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Clarendon Press, 1986), 370.

or where you live. It is valuable to be with someone you choose to be with, rather than to have your partner chosen by lottery. It is valuable to have the career you choose to have, rather than have it decided entirely by events outside your control. It is valuable to live where you choose to live, rather than be tossed around by the waves of fate. The value here is not simply instrumental. It's not just that you're likely to make better decisions about your partner or career than chance, or than anyone else. Authoring one's life is a good thing in its own right.

Clearly, such authorship not just a matter of approving, endorsing, or liking the life one leads or has led: expressing one's aims isn't the same as one's life matching them. At a minimum, self-authorship requires causing the relevant aspects of one's life. (We say more about the nature of this causal requirement below). Liberalism and democracy are, among other things, two different strategies for realizing the casual connections that self-authorship requires. Liberal institutions enable self-authorship in our private lives by protecting a sphere of personal choice. They thus enable causal connections between our own choices and various features of our personal lives. Democratic institutions create the causal mechanisms which make it possible for our social and political lives to be shaped by our choices. They thus extend self-authorship from our personal to our social and political affairs—areas of our lives that would otherwise remain beyond the sphere of our deliberate agency. This kind of autonomy consists in jointly authoring the parts of our lives that we share with our fellow citizens. In our view, the value of self-government consists in the achievement of such authorship.

This, we think, is an appealing view. But it faces an obvious line of objection. Citizens seem to stand in quite different relations to personal decisions than they do to democratic ones: the former they individually determine, the latter they each have only a say in. Why think that whatever autonomy-value inheres in the former carries over to the latter?

As it stands, this objection is too impressionistic to engage with. But there are two clear ways to make it precise. First, one might articulate it in terms of causation. We just observed that authoring some aspect of your life requires causing it: mere approval isn't enough. But, one might

think, individual voters don't cause political decisions or their consequences. After all, it's almost never the case that the outcome of an election (and so the consequences that follow from that outcome) counterfactually depends on how any single voter decides to vote. Were any single voter to have voted differently, the outcome of the election would not have changed. So, one might think, participating in the democratic process almost never makes any individual citizen the author of its outcome.

Put in this way, the objection depends on an implausibly narrow conception of causation. It depends on the thought that causation requires counterfactual dependence: A causes B only if, were A not to have occurred, then B would not have occurred. Yet, as others have observed, there is a clear and intuitive notion of causation—we might term it “causal contribution” or “partial causation”—that does not require such counterfactual dependence.¹⁸ When you vote for a winning candidate, you causally contribute to their victory. Their victory may not be counterfactually dependent on how you voted. But, nonetheless, your vote is one of its (many) partial causes. This is the notion of causation in which democratic institutions enable a causal connection between citizens' choices and their social and political affairs. Such institutions set up mechanisms that allows citizens to influence those affairs, or which establish a connection of partial causal or causal contribution between what citizens want (politically) and what happens. So this way of articulating the objection is not persuasive.

Let's turn to a second way of making the objection precise. We might put it not in terms of causation but in terms of control. Authoring some aspect of your life, it might seem, requires more than merely causally contributing to how one's life goes in that domain. It requires control over that aspect of your life. Yet, clearly, individual citizens in a democracy don't control the

¹⁸ See, e.g., Alvin I. Goldman, "Why Citizens Should Vote: A Causal Responsibility Approach." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 2 (1999), 201-217.

operation of their state; so, the objection concludes, democratic citizens do not count as authors of the activities of their state.¹⁹

This version of the objection tells against *atomistic* conceptions of democratic self-authorship. Such views construe the authorship of our social and political affairs as the same, in all important respects, as the authorship we can enjoy over our private affairs.²⁰ Yet authorship over our private affairs *does* seem to require our having control over them. It's important that we each have some control over our who we marry, what career we pursue and where we live. Only then, so it seems, will such things manifest our individual intentions. But, as the objection points out, citizens can't all have such individual control over our social and political affairs. So, if authorship is construed along these atomistic lines, democratic autonomy is an unachievable ideal. It is simply impossible for the state's activities to express multiple of its citizens' individual intentions at once.

How do we solve this problem? We reject the atomistic conception of self-authorship. We think that it is valuable for one's personal affairs to express one's individual intentions: this makes one sole author of those affairs. But this is not the only kind of authorship. One's affairs can also express one's *joint* intentions. A joint intention is an intention one shares with other people. Imagine you are planning to paint a house. You might decide on the color, and paint it, on your own. Then you will be sole author of the house's color. Its color will express your individual

¹⁹ For this objection, see Kolodny, "Rule Over None I", 210. Essentially the same objection, with slightly different terminology, can be found in Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 89–90; Thomas Christiano, *The Rule of the Many* (Routledge, 1996), 25; Richardson, "Democratic Autonomy," 7; Allen Buchanan, "Self-Determination and Secession," in *National Self-Determination and Secession*, ed. Margaret Moore (Oxford University Press, 1998), 17-18; and Altman and Wellman, *A Liberal Theory*, 18-20.

²⁰ See, for example Philpott, "In Defense of Self-Determination," 356–58.

intentions. But, alternatively, you might decide together with another resident what color the house should be. You might, for example, form an intention, with them, that the house be painted blue, and execute that intention together. These joint intentions don't reduce merely to you both individually intending to bring about your aim. You might not have such an individual intention. You might have no wish to paint the house on your own. Rather these are distinctively shared intentions. And just as individual intentions, when expressed, give rise to a kind of authorship, so do joint intentions. This, then, is the kind of authorship important to democratic autonomy. In a democracy, no citizen is *the* author of any important feature of their political environment. But, if all goes well, they can be joint authors.

Various different accounts of the nature of joint intention could serve our purposes, but it will be useful to have a working account on the table. On the view we favor, joint intentions arise from the interrelated attitudes of individuals.²¹ Some plurality of people have a joint intention to X when the following three conditions are met. First, each member of the plurality aims at the plurality X-ing. So, for example, both you and your partner might individually aim that you together paint the house blue. Second, each member of the plurality has a plan to contribute to their together X-ing and these plans are jointly compatible. So, you might plan to paint the front and back of the house, and your partner might plan to paint the sides of the house. Third, the

²¹ The account that follows is based on Michael Bratman, "Shared Cooperative Activity," *The Philosophical Review* 101, No. 2 (1992). There are many other accounts of what joint intentions are. See e.g., Margaret Gilbert, "Shared Intention and Personal Intentions," *Philosophical Studies* 144, no. 1 (2009), 167-187; J. David Velleman, "How to Share an Intention," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57, no. 1 (1997), 29-50; and Philip Pettit and David Schweikard, "Joint Actions and Group Agents." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 36, no. 1 (2006), 18-39. One could execute our view with one of these alternative accounts, but we think that it is useful to proceed with a particular account in mind.

members of the plurality are mutually responsive.²² That means that most of them are disposed to execute their plan to contribute to X just in case they think that enough other members are disposed to execute their own such plans for their own execution to facilitate the plurality X-ing. So, if you know your partners won't paint the sides of the house, you won't paint the front and back (and vice versa). Our view, then, is that when these interrelated attitudes bring about something in the normal way²³—when they are expressed in the world—those who share in the intention are joint authors of the outcome. And this sort of joint authorship is valuable in much the same way that individual authorship is valuable.

It is intuitively plausible that such joint authorship is valuable. To see this, consider some examples. First, imagine you are a partner in a large business. You plan on strategy together with thousands of your fellow partners, and once a strategy is hammered out you each have a role to play in implementing it. Some people have to call clients; other have to build products; others have to cut costs. If you all play your role and so implement the strategy successful, you are joint authors of the strategy's success. You share this authorship with your fellow partners, and this sort of collaborative action is a valuable thing. Second, consider marriage. In a healthy marriage, the partners both shape the norms and expectations that structure their relations together. In many cases they start with shared ideas, drawn from a common cultural repertoire, about the kind of relationship they are signing up for. But much of the value of a relationship comes in the ways the

²² At this point, accounts of joint intention typically include a requirement that the above conditions being met is common knowledge among the participants in the joint intention. Some such epistemic condition is attractive, but the requirement of common knowledge is implausibly demanding for large-scale groups. There are various ways that we might go about weakening the epistemic requirement, but, for reasons of space, we cannot address the issue here. For discussion, see Olivier Roy and Anne Schwenkenbecher, "Shared Intentions, Loose Groups, and Pooled Knowledge," *Synthese* 198, no. 5 (May 2021): 4523–41.

²³ 'In the normal way' is meant to rule out 'deviant' causal paths. We will discuss this issue shortly.

partners make it their own. When they succeed in doing so, its norms and expectations express their joint intentions, and they thereby enjoy a distinctive kind of autonomy: the autonomy of jointly authoring their relationship.

Third, consider some musical examples. Imagine a jazz quartet is playing a song. Each player aims that they together play a beautiful piece of music. Each has a part to play in achieving it, each contributes a different sound to the piece. And they are mutually responsive: when the drummer changes tempo, the clarinetist does too. When the players succeed in playing a beautiful song, they are joint authors of the song's beauty, and that is good for them. The same goes for larger musical arrangements. Consider a symphony orchestra or a vast marching band. When the band plays an awe-inspiring arrangement, each play is an author of the arrangement. This is why it is valuable to be part of such collaborations.²⁴ Our view is simply that the value of joint authorships extends to political cases too: it is valuable to jointly author your social and political affairs. This allows us to bypass the objection from control: in all these cases someone can be a joint author of something without individually controlling it. Our view is that self-government consists in citizens being, in this sense, joint authors of their state's activities.

Let's distinguish our view from a different class of non-atomistic view. These views employ a *corporatist* notion of self-authorship.²⁵ On this notion, the citizens together form a corporate, or group, agent. We might call this agent "The People." This agent has a will of its own—distinct

²⁴ We have in mind egalitarian forms of an orchestra or marching band. These points don't apply to very hierarchical bands. For these, see our discussion of hierarchical organizations in Section 3.

²⁵ Altman and Wellman defend a view of this general sort, arguing that "the inherent value of democratic rule cannot be grounded in individual rights but rather must be based on an irreducibly collective moral right of political self-determination," in *A Liberal Theory*, 11. In the main text, we haven't stated the view in terms of rights, but our objection survives translation into these terms.

from that of any individual citizen—and that will can be expressed by state action. When the state's actions do express the will of The People considered as a group agent, the group agent is autonomous, and this is a good thing. We reject such views. The general problem with them is that they struggle to connect the autonomy of the corporate entity with the interests of individual citizens. The obvious candidate for such an interest is an interest in autonomy. But it's mysterious what the connection between the autonomy of the group agent and the autonomy of the individual is supposed to be. After all, the group agent's will is, by hypothesis, distinct from the wills of the individual citizens who make it up. On our view, in contrast, the key intentions are those of individual citizens, but they constitutively depend on the attitudes of other individual citizens: they are individual citizens' joint intentions. The contrast lets one see our view as a synthesis of atomistic and corporatist views. From the former, it takes the exclusive focus on the will of individuals. From the latter, it takes a focus on wills that are more than merely individual; these are intentions grounded in the circumstances of pluralities of people. We believe this synthesis has the virtues of both views while avoiding their vices.

To further clarify our position, we want to make several additional points about the notion of 'authorship' at play in both joint and sole uses. First, the sense of 'expression' in which authorship amounts to the expression of one's aims isn't essentially communicative; the self-authoring agent needn't intend to communicate anything about themselves through their actions. Rather, their life expresses their intentions in the sense that it realizes or manifests them. This requires a special kind of connection between your priorities and their fulfillment. We've already mentioned that this connection is not merely endorsement; it has to be a causal connection. But not just any causal connection will do. Some connections are 'deviant' in a familiar but hard-to-define sense. If a third-party constantly arranges the world such that your joint intentions are

fulfilled, that may not count as you expressing these intentions. Nevertheless, while difficult to analyze, this idea of expression is perfectly serviceable for our purposes.²⁶

Second, self-authorship requires that the intentions expressed in one's life be in some sense authentic. If one is fundamentally alienated from one's aims and choices, or manipulated into one's convictions, then one is in a poor position to be author of one's own life.²⁷ It follows that, where inauthenticity in political aims is widespread, democracy's full value will not be realized. This seems like a plausible consequence. We embrace it. Yet is important to note that, though the value of self-authorship may depend on the authenticity of one's priorities, we may sometimes owe others the 'external' conditions of autonomy regardless of whether they will form an authentic will. This is familiar from the individual case; you may, for example, owe your adult children the chance to make their own decisions even when their will is inauthentic. This may obtain in the democratic case, too. Thus, the claims people have to self-government may be relatively insensitive to whether they will satisfy the 'internal' conditions to realize its full value. We might, on autonomy grounds, owe democracy even to those with inauthentic political preferences.

²⁶ This sense of 'expression' features heavily in a variety of philosophical contexts, including discussions of moral responsibility, where various theorists have held that an agent is fit to be held morally responsible for some outcome if and only if that outcome expresses something about them, such as their 'quality of will.' Important sources of this idea include P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, (Routledge, 2008); and Gary Watson, "Two Faces of Responsibility," *Philosophical Topics* 24, no. 2 (1996), 227-248. It also seems to be the sense of 'expression' at play in Elizabeth Anderson's expressive theory of rational action, which can be found in her *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

²⁷ There is a sizable literature on the conditions under which an agent's will counts as authentic or non-alienated, much of it following in the wake of Harry Frankfurt's influential work. For Frankfurt's work, see the papers collected in Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). For our purposes, we needn't take a stand on the correct account of these matters.

Third, this idea of joint authorship is ‘procedural’ rather than ‘substantive.’ A ‘substantive’ account of self-authorship holds that an agent is only really the author of their actions, or of the intended outcomes of their actions, if they act on the basis of considerations which in fact justify those actions.²⁸ We think such accounts are implausible: they imply that one cannot author any life which is not perfectly in accord with reason, but we are all too familiar with autonomously authoring things that, on reflection, we had less than sufficient reason to author. However, while we prefer a procedural account of self-authorship, we are open to the idea that there are substantive conditions on its *value*. Indeed, we are even open to the idea that an otherwise bad life, especially a morally bad life, is *worse* for being self-authored.²⁹ If such a view is correct, then self-government can actually be regrettable, when people use their powers of self-government to make objectionable decisions. In that case, the central claim in this paper—that self-government is part of the value of democracy—should be understood to be conditional on the sufficient quality of that self-government.

Fourth, as Raz emphasizes, when you make a choice, the extent to which you are its author depends on how adequate your options were.³⁰ Two features of your option set seem to us

²⁸ For a helpful discussion of procedural versus substantive conceptions of autonomy, see Christman, John, "Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/autonomy-moral/>>.

²⁹ Cf. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 390–95.

³⁰ See Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 373–78. For a more general discussion see Robert Sugden, "The Metric of Opportunity," *Economics & Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (1998), 307-337. ‘Frankfurt cases,’ as applied to joint authorship, put some pressure on this thought. To see this, suppose the people in some country elect a right-wing party, but had they elected the Communists a foreign power would have launched a coup and put the right-wingers in power. Here is a case in which the party in power is that the people endorse, but the people could not have put in power a different party. We regard this as a case in which the joint authorship of the people is impaired. For Frankfurt’s original

important. On the one hand is how diverse, or importantly dissimilar, your options are. When all your options are the same, you have little room for self-authorship. If you're deciding between five hundred almost identical brands of cereal, you're not in a good position to be author of what you have for breakfast. On the other hand is how many decent options you have. When very few of your options are minimally decent, you have little space for authorship. If you are deciding between becoming an engineer or getting shot in the head, you do not enjoy much authorship over your choice to be an engineer. We're inclined to say that the more decent options you have, and the more diverse they are, the better position you're in to enjoy authorships (although there are plausibly diminishing marginal returns to both). And we're inclined to understand both the diversity and the decency of your options subjectively. What matters is not whether your options are objectively dissimilar or objectively acceptable. What matters is whether you see them as importantly different and whether you see them as acceptable. This provides a general, albeit somewhat schematic, account of what features of your option sets matter to your autonomy.

It is worth being clear about what it is to have an option in the first place. Most generally, you have an option to do something when you're able to do that thing. This goes for both individuals and groups, yet there are problems that can stop groups being able to do things that do not arise for individuals. Consider, by way of example, the *corvée* laborers who built the pyramids. They were not able to collectively decide to build cylinders or cubes or just return to the farm. This is because they couldn't coordinate on such alternative activities. If one of them spoke out, or started organizing, that person would have been executed. These coordination difficulties meant the group didn't have the option of doing anything other than building the pyramids. Thus,

discussion of examples with this structure in the case of individual agency, see Harry Frankfurt, "Moral Responsibility and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," *Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23, 829-839.

they were not joint authors of any pyramid's construction. Such coordination problems have no obvious counterpart in cases of individual choice, but often matter to collective choices. Often, groups lack options because they cannot easily coordinate. And such coordination problems hold special relevance to democratic theory: in non-democracies citizens often can't collectively resist the ruling regime, because coordinating resistance is so difficult.³¹

To summarize, then, the picture is this: an autonomous life is a life you yourself author. Authorship in general is a matter of the expression of intentions. This admits of both individual and shared variants. You are the individual author of something just in case it expresses your authentic individual intentions. You are the joint author of something when it expresses your authentic joint intentions. Both types of authorship are valuable; it is valuable to be the individual author of one's affairs and it is valuable to be the joint author of one's affairs. In both cases, we should speak of the relevant value in terms of autonomy. To be the author of one's affairs is to be autonomous in some sense. To be individual author of one's private affairs is to be individually autonomous. To be joint author of one's social and political affairs is to enjoy a distinctively collective kind of autonomy. It is simply impossible for democracy to help everyone be individual authors of their social and political affairs. Their individual authorship by one person would clash with that by every other. But it is possible for democracy to help everyone jointly author these social and political affairs. This, we think, constitutes the positive, autonomy-based, aspect of democracy's value.

³¹ For some discussion of this in the case of Mexico under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), see Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and its Demise in Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 193-226.

Our discussion so far has focused on articulating political autonomy as a kind of joint authorship. In the next section we will explain in more depth how democratic institutions help realize this value.

3. Democratic Participation as Joint Authorship

Let us see in more detail how democracy facilitates citizens' joint authorship of their social and political affairs, and what that means for concrete democratic institutions. We'll start by more or less stipulatively defining a democracy as a political system with two components: first, citizens all have equal political power and, second, this power collectively largely determines the state's decisions. In such a system, it is the citizens, rather than the party or the king, who set state policy. The second component of democracy, citizen determination of state decisions, is *necessary* for citizen joint authorship of those decisions. If the citizens do not determine state decisions, then those decisions do not express their shared political aims. Thus, one core component of democracy is a condition for achieving citizens' joint authorship of their political affairs. This is how democracy facilitates the value of self-government.

Let us make this a little more concrete. Consider the creation of Social Security in the United States. Imagine that, by 1932, many Democratic Party voters had formed the aim that they together with their fellow Democrats would bring social security into being. On this basis, they may have formed a plan to vote Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) into office that year. And they may, also on the basis of this aim, have formed a disposition to vote for FDR conditional on their thinking that enough other people might vote for him for their vote to help elect him. Then, by our account of joint intentions, these Democrats had a joint intention to create social security. Now further suppose that this joint intention, these aims and plans, lead to FDR being elected in 1932 and gave the Democratic Party big congressional majorities in 1934, which lead to the

creation of Social Security the subsequent year. Then these citizens, those with the joint intention, would be joint authors of social security. Social security would express their shared aims.

Consider also a different example: that of people authoring a non-policy outcome. Every election, millions of people make voting decisions on economic grounds. They vote for the party who they think will best boost the economy. Plausibly, many voters have a joint intention in this respect: they enter the voting booth intending to contribute to a collective effort, on the part of themselves and like-minded citizens, to ensure that the party who will do best for the national economy takes power. Now suppose that they succeed in doing that: the party with the more economically advantageous policies takes power, and, as a result, the economy grows. In that case, the citizens who shared this joint intention are authors of this outcome. It expresses their shared aim. There are many ways, then, in which democracy can facilitate citizens' joint authorship of their social and political affairs.

It is illuminating to compare democratic states with nondemocratic states on this score. In a personalized dictatorship the dictator is, often, the sole author of state policy. Saddam Hussein, for example, was the author of Iraq's invasion of Iran. He set the policy; he called the shots. In party dictatorships, party members (or perhaps the Politburo) are authors of state policies. The Chinese Communist Party is, today, author of the Belt and Road Initiative. It is the Party which has set this policy. The citizens of these states who are not members of the ruling party do not share in determining state policy, and so they are not among its authors. It is only that subset of citizens who *do* collectively determine political decisions who are their author. Democracy thus allows more citizens to be authors of government policies (and their outcomes) than does nondemocracy. This is the sense in which democracy helps achieve a distinctively democratic kind of autonomy.

This is true even when the dictator enjoys widespread support. Here there are two different cases to consider. In the first case, the dictator is popular, but the people could not easily remove him were he to become unpopular. This is by far the most common case in the real world. In such

a case the dictator's power is not caused by their public support. So, there is little in this political system over which the people are joint authors. In the second case, the dictator could be easily removed if he became unpopular. This doesn't arise in the real world very often. But it may have a counterpart in small-scale, pre-state, societies in which elders make the important decisions.³² The elders might depend entirely on their legitimacy in the wider community, rather than on any coercive apparatus. In such a situation, the people would enjoy authorship over the character of their political system: they are authors of their being ruled by the elders. But, unless they determine what policies the elders actually enact,³³ they cannot enjoy authorship over the more fine-grained features of their political affairs. They cannot author what their community actually does. So democracies in principle have an advantage over these (rare) sorts of autocracies too. They help citizens achieve joint authorship over more features of their political affairs.

Democratic states also contrast with nondemocratic organizations of other kinds. Consider, for example, the US army. The US army is a hierarchical organization. The generals decide what it does. But sometimes the army achieves goals which, one assumes, were shared throughout the ranks. When the US army helped liberate France, for instance, the liberation was presumably a goal shared by privates and generals. Why, then, does the army not count as a paragon of soldiers' self-rule? The answer to this question parallels our prior discussion of the pyramids. Soldiers, much like *corvée* laborers, do not have a good range of options with respect to the army's activities. This is because the rank-and-file soldiers couldn't coordinate on the invasion of Belgium (over France). They would be punished if they, contrary to the officers'

³² Stütz, *Territorial Sovereignty*, 129.

³³ And, if the community members genuinely do determine policy, calling the political system a "dictatorship" is somewhat misleading. Such a system realizes central features of a well-functioning representative democracy: societal elites make decisions, but under the influence of everyone else.

wishes, tried to do so. You cannot, as a private, encourage other soldiers to ignore the orders of the officers: this will get you court-martialed. That stops the privates, as a group, from being able to decide to invade Belgium. The point goes generally for hierarchical organizations: those in the upper echelons can make decisions but those in the lower echelons cannot. In contrast, in a democracy citizens have a wide range of decent options to choose between when it comes to government policy. If enough of them want different government policy, they can coordinate to bring it about. Thus, soldiers in the army don't enjoy much self-rule at all; citizens in a democracy can do so.

Democratic autonomy, then, requires a core component of democracy. But there are many kinds of democratic institution. Which such institutions, exactly, best serve the value of democratic autonomy? For a start, democratic autonomy can be well-served by directly democratic institutions. The outcomes of initiatives and referendums can express many citizens' joint intentions. When these outcomes are transmitted into policy, that means policy expresses those intentions. Democratic autonomy can also, in principle, be well-served by representative institutions. These institutions have elected representatives determine the details of state decisions. Insofar as ordinary citizens are the (indirect) sources of such decisions, such decisions can express citizens' joint intentions. For this, ordinary citizens must affect policy by affecting what their representatives do. They can do this either by selecting representatives who share their views, or by sanctioning those who diverge from them.³⁴ Both can make ordinary citizens the distal source of state policy. So, both direct and representative democracies can realize democratic autonomy. Which one is better at doing so seems to us a practical and contingent matter: we take no stand on this issue.

³⁴ Jane Mansbridge, "A 'Selection Model' of Political Representation," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2009), 369–98.

Yet democratic autonomy cannot be realized by just any non-autocratic arrangements. Most interestingly, we doubt it can be achieved by lottocracy. A lottocracy is a system in which the members of legislative chambers are chosen by a lottery in which all citizens are included. The idea is that the chosen citizens will put more thought into policy than they otherwise would, which will lead them to pass better policies than those the public actually supports.³⁵ The problem with this system is that it would sever the causal connection between what the citizens (jointly) want and what government does. There would be a causal connection between what the members of the lottocratic legislative chamber want and what government does. But no feasible system could include more than a tiny fraction of the millions of citizens of a modern state in such a chamber. This means the joint intentions of the vast majority of people, those people not in the lottocratic chamber, would not influence policy. And so lottocracy would prevent the vast majority of people from authoring government policy.

One might reply to this by invoking some hypothetical connections between the output of the lottocratic chamber and what people outside the chamber want. One might, for example, stress that *were* citizens better informed, they *would* endorse the policies actually passed by the lottocratic chamber. Indeed, additionally, one might suggest that most citizens, were they in the chamber, would vote for such policies. Both suggestions identify a hypothetical connection between citizens and policy. But such connections are immaterial. One does not get policy to express people's actual will by making policy people would contribute to in appropriately hypothetical conditions. To achieve democratic autonomy, one needs an actual causal connection between people's will and policy. Thus lottocratic institutions, even (and perhaps especially) very deliberately sophisticated ones, seem incapable of achieving the full value of democracy.

³⁵ For this view, see James Fishkin, *When the People Speak*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), and Alexander Guerrero, "Against elections: The Lottocratic Alternative," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 2 (2014), 135-178.

That completes our account of the value of self-government, and its link to democratic institutions. We turn now to address some objections to this account.

4. Objection I: Winner-Takes-All?

We'll start with an objection from (dis)agreement. One might think that our account makes the value of self-rule, in a sense, too narrow. For, on our view, one is only self-ruling with respect to some policy when that policy expresses one of your shared aims or intentions. But, obviously, people disagree about how their societies should be governed, so they have different and conflicting aims. Where their aims conflict, they have to compete, and only one side can win, so only one side can have their aims expressed in policy. So it will only be those on the winning side (of any particular issue) who enjoy self-rule (with respect to that issue). But one might think this is too restrictive. Is it really true that political 'losers' don't enjoy the value of self-government? Call this the *winner-takes-all objection*.

Our reply to this objection is nuanced. On the one hand, we think the objection contains a grain of truth. It is true, on our account, that those on the winning side of a disagreement will enjoy more of the value of self-rule than the others. They will enjoy authorship over the policies that the winning side implements. Indeed, as a corollary, it is true that the more disagreements there are in a polity the less of the value of self-government can it realize. When everyone agrees on an issue, they can all enjoy self-rule with respect to that issue; when some disagree, those who don't get their views enacted lack self-rule with respect to the issue. Yet we do not regard these as implausible consequences of our account. Quite the opposite. On the first point, it seems to us very plausible that persistent minorities, at minimum, enjoy less democratic autonomy than persistent minority. This is because losers don't enjoy self-rule on the issues on which they don't get their way. On the second point, it seems to us very plausible that a society riven by very deep disagreements is in a worse position to achieve democratic autonomy than is a society in which

these is complete consensus. The fact of pluralism may leave some democratic values (equality, for instance) untouched, but it does set limits on the achievement of democratic autonomy. That our account implies these claims is a virtue not a vice. We think it reasonable, then, to conclude that political losers enjoy less of the value of self-government than political winners.

On the other hand, however, it is important not to overstate this conclusion. It is not true, on our account, that political losers enjoy *none* of the value of self-government. This is for two reasons. First, often losers are not perennial losers. Competitive political systems involve an alternation of power. Those who lose today's election won elections in the past. And policy is cumulative. When a party wins power it does not remake policy *de novo*. It just changes, often incrementally, the existing body of policy. Insofar as those who lose contemporaneous elections influenced policy in the past, they still enjoy some self-authorship. They are still author of much of the policies they are subject to, for they are subject to more than the policies of the day. It's true that this won't apply to those who are *never* in the majority; but intuitively, such persistent minorities share relatively little in the value of self-government. Temporary minorities can still enjoy much democratic autonomy.

Second, political losers can author the general character of policy even if they don't author its specific details.³⁶ Consider, for instance, the United Kingdom's National Health Service (NHS). Citizens might disagree on whether to spend £190 billion or £200 billion on the NHS. But all might agree that the state should provide healthcare for its citizens. Those who disagree on the service's exact funding level cannot all author that specific funding level, but all who agree the NHS should exist can share an intention that it exists, and this can make them joint authors of

³⁶ Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1956), and Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (University of Chicago Press, 1964), 283, also make this point.

that existence. The point generalizes. In many cases, there is consensus on the broad character of policy amid dissensus on the details. There might be consensus that we make political decisions democratically, protect free speech, or provide support for the unemployed, amid dissensus on whether to institute recall elections, protect hate speech, or on how much unemployment benefits to provide. The losers on the specific details of policy cannot see their will expressed by those details. But they can still be winners on the general character of policy, and so they can author that general character. Thus, overall, political losers can still enjoy some (and perhaps quite substantial) democratic autonomy.³⁷

Let us mention one interesting upshot of this discussion. There is an important question about the extent to which democracy is appropriately decentralized. Is it better when democratic decision-making occurs in small communities rather than in larger nations?³⁸ The positions we've just advanced suggests that, plausibly, it is. The key thought here is that small communities will generally contain less disagreement than larger communities. The thought, to be clear, is not the small communities are full of comity and good will. Rather, it is that any disagreement in a small

³⁷ We confine one further point to do this footnote. Sometimes, people disagree about a decision but agree about the procedure for making decisions. People might, for example, disagree on how much money to spend on healthcare but agree that the decision should be made democratically. In these cases, we think an important feature of such decisions can manifest even the losers' joint intentions. They can author the fact that the decisions are made democratically. This doesn't make them author of those very decisions. But it makes them author of the fact that such decisions were made via a particular procedure. Such people author fewer issues than were they also author of the decisions themselves: merely authoring procedures falls far short of fully authoring one's social and political affairs. But this nonetheless helps explain why, in a well-functioning democracy, people are less alienated by even political decisions that they disagree with.

³⁸ For a general discussion of this in the EU context, see Andreas Føllesdal, "Survey Article: Subsidiarity," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (1998), 190–218.

community must also be there in a larger community of which it is a part. And it is likely one will add more disagreements as one adds more people. This means that, insofar as disagreement does tend to diminish democratic autonomy, it is better to make decisions in smaller communities. And one will have special reason to choose the boundaries of those communities in a way that maximizes agreement: one will want to bundle together people who tend to agree on the issues. That does not mean that democratic autonomy cannot be achieved in national communities. It is just means that there is much to be said for federalization and decentralization and subsidiarity: smaller communities are often better positioned to achieve the value of self-rule. To reiterate, we see this sort of implication as a feature, rather than a bug, of our view: it is plausible that smaller, more homogeneous communities can better realize democratic autonomy.

5. Objection II: Scale

Let's turn to a deeper issue about size. The enormous scale of modern democracies means that each citizen wields a tiny share of influence over collective decisions. As we've already discussed, one of the most influential objections to the idea of democratic autonomy has been the objection from control. Our response to that objection was to describe a form of authorship, *joint authorship*, which does not depend on individual control. But there is an objection in a similar vein which does not rely on the claim that authorship requires control. This objection simply points to the tiny share of influence possessed by each individual citizen, and asks: does each of us *really* count as an author of national policy in virtue of having one vote out of 300 million? And even if you do count as an author, isn't your authorship so weak as to be of negligible value? Call this the *objection from scale*.

This is, of course, not a new objection; it is, in effect, the same observation that led Benjamin Constant to conclude that the liberty of the ancients was no longer possible in modern times, since, given the size of modern polities, the influence of any particular individual is simply

“lost in the multitude.”³⁹ What should we say about this line of objection? One option would be to simply grant it. Various thinkers, including Constant, have found it very plausible that the value of collective self-government is heavily diluted in large societies. That wouldn’t, on its own, show that our account is without interest. Though democratic autonomy wouldn’t then contribute to the justification of contemporary democracies, our account of democratic autonomy would retain important consequences. On the face of it, it would give us a reason for radical decentralization, and perhaps the splitting up of large states into many smaller ones. If that is politically unfeasible (as seems plausible), it would at least give us a good understanding of the kind of autonomy inaccessible in the modern age: it would help clarify the costs of modernity.

Yet this is not our view. We find it plausible that the value of self-rule *can* be enjoyed even in large-scale modern societies, so we wish to outline a reply to the objection from scale. The lynchpin of our reply is that the objection from scale rests on an important presupposition: that how much one enjoys the value of self-rule with respect to something is wholly proportional to how much causal influence you individually had on that thing. If the government enacts social security, for example, the extent to which you are the author of the policy is proportional to your individual influence over the decision to enact it. Call this the *individual proportionality premise*. This premise leads to the view that, in a country of 300 million people, most people cannot possibly have much authorship of government policy. The idea is that because each person individually has such a small amount of influence on government policy, by the individual proportionality premise each person must have little authorship of that policy. And so, in large modern democracies, citizens cannot much enjoy the value of self-government. The objection from scale, then, hinges on the individual proportionality premise.

³⁹ Benjamin Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared With That of the Moderns,” in *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 303.

We reject the individual proportionality premise. We deny that the extent to which you are author of something is proportional to your individual causal influence on that thing. This thesis gels rather poorly with our account of joint authorship. On our account, what matters to whether you author something is whether it expresses your joint intention. It is most natural, then, to think that what matters to your authorship is not how much influence you have on it individually, but rather how much influence you had on it jointly with those you share an intention. To put the point differently, imagine you have some individual intentions, these partially ground some joint intentions, and that joint intention leads to some policy. The individual proportionality thesis expresses the idea that, to assess how much you are author of the policy, one should look at the degree of causal contribution of your individual intentions to the policy. We deny this: we think one should look at the degree of contribution from your joint intention to the policy. What matters is how much your joint intentions causally contributes to the policy. But the contribution the joint intention makes is not diminished by your sharing it with a lot of people. You can share a joint intention with millions of people, and that intention can still have an enormous influence on state policy. If anything, it has a lot of causal influence precisely because it is so widely shared. So the objection from scale fails. You can enjoy a substantial amount of democratic autonomy even in modern large-scale states.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ We confine an alternative reply to the objection from scale to this footnote. The objection from scale rests on the fact that one's individual causal influence over policy is more diluted the larger the polity. But one might observe that large polities can do more things: the United States can do much more than California could alone. One might claim that from the point of view of autonomy the two forces cancel out: although one has less influence over each policy in the US than one would in an independent California, each US policy has a bigger impact on the world. So, one might claim, one's values are equally manifest in reality in both large and small polities. We think this is an interesting reply, but we fall short of endorsing it. The issue is that, intuitively, it seems to matter more to be author of one's own social and political affairs rather than those of someone else. It contributes more to Californians' autonomy for them

Nonetheless, there is a grain of truth to the individual proportionality premise. Plausibly, in order to be a joint author of something you must have some individual causal influence on it. There must be some causal connection between your individual intentions and the thing. This is simply because your individual intentions, we think, ground or constitute your joint intentions. But then, if your joint intentions cause something, your individual intentions also have some causal influence of it. Grounds inherit the causal force of what they ground: when the momentum of a thrown brick causes a window to break, the momentum of each of the atoms out of which the brick is made each causally contribute to the window breaking. Likewise, when a joint intention causes a policy, the individual intentions of which it is made each causal contributes to the policy. This establishes a kind of causal minimality thesis: you only author a policy if you have some non-zero causal influence over it. And that makes a lot of intuitive sense: if you really had no causal influence, it's not clear why we should take your joint intentions (rather than those of a smaller group) to be causally efficacious. But that does not imply, or even much support, the idea that your authorship of a policy scales in proportion to your individual influence on it. It scales, instead, in proportion to your joint influence on that policy.

We want to address one challenge to this position. One might think that, by rejecting the individual proportionality premise, we commit ourselves to the view that were you merely joint author of your personal life, you would suffer no loss of autonomy.⁴¹ The worry is this. Imagine

to decide Californian policy than for them to decide Massachusetts's policy. If so, diluting each Californian's influence over local policies but giving them influence over Massachusetts policy is a questionable trade: it takes from them the most important kind of influence. So we prefer the reply to the objection from scale advanced in the main text: that no important dilution happens in large polities. Nonetheless, we thank an associate editor for suggesting this alternative response.

⁴¹ Kolodny and Brennan both make related objections in passing, but do not develop them. See Kolodny, *Rule Over None I*, 210, and Brennan, *Against Democracy*, 89.

you jointly authored your choice of spouse or of career, with all your fellow citizens. We all voted on who you were to marry, and you had to obey the result of the vote. This would involve a loss of autonomy. Yet, one might think, that can only be explained via endorsing the individual proportionality premise. It is because joint authorship of your choice of spouse would give you less individual influence on that choice that it would impair your autonomy. And so, one might think, rejecting the individual proportionality premise implies that there is nothing problematic with our deciding what happens in your personal life by putting it to the vote.

We think two points suffice to meet this challenge. For a start, if we put your personal life to the vote, then often you'll be on the losing side: you'd end up having to pursue careers or pick partners who you do not want to pick. As follows from our position in the previous section, in these cases you won't be the author of these facets of your personal life. This is a direct and straightforward way in which giving you mere joint authorship over your personal affairs would almost inevitably impair your autonomy. Additionally, and relatedly, even when you were on the winning side you could easily not be so. Had you voted differently, you would not have enjoyed authorship of the choice. Yet often we want not just to achieve a value, but to achieve a value in a modally robust way. We, for example, want not just to be free from coercion, but to be robustly free from such coercion. When you are individual author of your personal choices you usually author them in a modally robust way. This is a general advantage individual authorship has over joint authorship, and so a general reason to prefer giving people individual authorship of things rather than only joint authorship of them. Giving people joint authorship of their personal affairs

makes their authorship much less robust. So, in sum, we can explain why putting your personal life to the vote is problematic without appealing to the individual proportionality premise.⁴²

Let us make one final remark. In this section, we've argued that there is no essential tension between the large size of modern polities and democratic autonomy. It is not the case that, as a matter of necessity, increasing the size of a democracy dilutes the value of self-government. But that doesn't mean that, as a contingent matter, increasing the size of democracies cannot impair the achievement of democratic autonomy. We've already emphasized one way that it can: in larger polities there is more disagreement, and more disagreement impairs democratic autonomy. Yet there are other ways too. As we said at the start of the paper, to achieve the value of self-government citizens need to be informed and rational political actors. One might plausibly think that political ignorance and irrationality will be more widespread in larger polities. And, of course, to achieve the value of self-government one must actually participate in one's democracy. Again, one might think that, *ceteris paribus*, participation rates are lower in larger polities.⁴³ So, to emphasize, our view is not that there are no benefits to smaller polities. Rather, it is that the large scale of modern democracies poses no ineluctable problem, in itself, to democratic autonomy.

⁴² Perhaps there is more to be said here: perhaps it is bad when other people author your personal affairs in a way that goes beyond it just robbing you of some authorship. It's hard to see how the individual proportionality thesis could help explain this, and so the possibility doesn't imperil our position in this section.

⁴³ These thoughts all follow from rational choice models of political behavior. See e.g., Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Harper, 1957). It's somewhat tricky to empirically establish how knowledge and rationality (and even participation) differ cross-nationally. But for some empirical work see Jason Ross, "Public Ignorance and the Quality of Democracy," PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2008, and Daniel Stockemer, "What Affects Voter Turnout? A Review Article/Meta-Analysis of Aggregate Research." *Government and Opposition* 52, no. 4 (2016): 698–722.

That completes our account of democratic autonomy. In the next section, we turn to exactly how democratic autonomy and democratic equality interact.

6. Self-Government and Equality

We think the value of democratic autonomy and democratic equality are largely independent. Each can be well-achieved without achieving much of the other. We've already seen that much democratic equality can be achieved without achieving any democratic autonomy: the legislative algorithm exemplifies this. Yet much democratic autonomy can also be achieved without achieving any equality. To see this, consider J.S. Mill's system of plural voting. Mill thought that well-educated people, and those with certain occupations, should get extra votes. Such a system would clearly preclude democratic equality. Yet unequal voting power wouldn't prevent citizens forming joint intentions, nor prevent these intentions being made manifest in government policy. So, plural voting systems are compatible with democratic autonomy. Thus, our overall picture of democratic values is a pluralistic one. There is no one master democratic value, but rather two primary, largely independent, democratic values. Yet these values are not *entirely* independent. They are connected in the sense that one can only achieve certain very valuable kinds of democratic equality when one achieves democratic autonomy, and vice versa. Thus, it is no coincidence that democracy unites these values. In the rest of this section, we'll explain how that connection comes about.

Our explanation hinges on an expansive conception of democratic equality. We mentioned previously that some people, like Kolodny, think of democratic equality in terms of a bad escaped: they think political equalities allow us to avoid social hierarchies. We agree that this is part of democracy's egalitarian value. But we also think democratic equality has a positive aspect. It allows us to get into positively valuable relationships with our fellow citizens. Here we follow Daniel

Viehoff in thinking of these relationships as like friendships, but on a civic scale.⁴⁴ The idea here is that friendship, at least ideally, requires equalities of power. Inequalities in power mar a friendship; ideal friendship requires their absence. Of course, that's not all that's required in friendship. Plausibly, friends must also care about one another's welfare, and perhaps they must have affection for one another, as well. But once all these conditions are in place then, in most cases, so is a friendship. And friendships are intrinsically valuable. They are not just bads escaped: they are goods captured.

Such conditions can also be in place when it comes to our relationships with our fellow citizens. Of course these relationships are very different than our relationships to most of our friends. We don't have individual interactions with our fellow citizens. Yet it is not obvious why this should prevent a friendship-like relationship with them from being valuable in itself. It is true that much of the value we get from our friendships comes from the many small interactions we have with our friends. But the value of the relationships itself is not entirely constituted by the value of those interactions. Thus, with Viehoff, we think that 'civic' friendship between citizens is a valuable relationship.⁴⁵ These relationships would be precluded by asymmetries of power. If some citizens had extra votes, and so extra power over their other citizens, this would preclude the civic version of friendship. Thus, democracy facilitates a positively valuable egalitarian relationship. It doesn't just evade social hierarchies; it engenders civic friendships.

We now connect this to democratic autonomy. On the one hand, among the things it is valuable to author are one's relationships. This is brought out by one of our primary examples of self-authorship: authoring a marriage. It is, we claimed, valuable for marriage partners to author the norms and expectations of their relationship. Their relationship is a distinctive domain in which

⁴⁴ Daniel Viehoff, "Power and Equality," in *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, Vol. 5 (2019).

⁴⁵ For an extended discussion of this, see Viehoff, "Power and Equality," 25–34.

autonomy can be exercised. As with marriage, so with civic friendship. It is valuable for citizens to author the norms and expectations governing their civic relationship; this too is a distinctive domain over which autonomy can be exercised. But, to a large extent, those norms and expectations are mediated by the state. The state's laws often determine, or even constitute, what we expect of our fellow citizens. If the laws make voting compulsory, we expect them to vote; if the laws set the tax rate at thirty percent of income, we expect them to give thirty percent of their income to the state. Thus, to really author the norms and expectations of these relationships, citizens need democracy. So, the egalitarian relationships that make up the positive aspect of democratic equality are one of the important domains of self-authorship.

On the other hand, these relationships are themselves better when they are responsive to their participants' values and priorities.⁴⁶ Consider friendship. Imagine you live in a society where the expectations of friendship were entirely rigid. Certain things were expected of friends, and you could not change the expectations. Perhaps, for example, substantial politeness is expected between friends. You cannot lift this expectation; biting sarcasm will always, in this society, be out of place between friends. The norms of your friendships are not responsive to your values. This seems to make your friendships themselves worse. It doesn't make them any less egalitarian; they might still be marked by equality of power. But these relationships would be better were the participants able to mold them as they willed. As with the personal, so with the political. The relationship of civic friendship is better when its participants are able to author its norms and expectations. Yet that is just to say that joint authorship of this part of the social domain is necessary for realizing the full value of these relationships. The full value of democratic equality, then, is realized only by realizing democratic autonomy.

⁴⁶For a very similar point, see *Ibid.*, 32.

So democratic equality and democratic autonomy are independent but entwined. Egalitarian relationships are an important domain of authorship. And the full value of such relationships is in part contingent on that authorship. On our view, it is the genius of democratic institutions that, when all goes well, they facilitate both these values.

7. Conclusion

Let us sum up. Our claim is that being joint author of one's social and political affairs is valuable, and that democracy facilitates this value. The value of joint authorship flows naturally from the idea that a shared will is a type of will which, in an important sense, belongs to the individuals who share it. Since it is generally valuable for one's affairs to express one's will, it follows that it is valuable for one's affairs to express one's shared will. Democracy facilitates this because democracy consists, in part, in citizens collectively determining what their government does. This is a necessary component of their authoring government actions. Democracy thus helps realize a distinctive kind of autonomy, the value of jointly authoring our affairs. This isn't the only part of democracy's value—democratic equality is of value too. But this distinctively democratic kind of autonomy is, we think, an indispensable part of what makes democracy worthwhile.