Authority through Service: A Mesoamerican Approach to Political Expertise

Matthias Kramm

Abstract

In this article, I draw on the Mesoamerican institution of community offices (*cargo*) to support the view that political authority should be based on both political legitimacy and political expertise. I argue that the Mesoamerican tradition of *cargos* allows for a notion of political expertise that one acquires by rendering a service to one's community. This expertise could be made a prerequisite for political representation without being vulnerable to several charges that have been levelled against epistocracy.

1) Introduction

Does political expertise, that is, expertise in the art of governance, exist? Are some people better equipped than others to govern their community? If so, how can one acquire such expertise in leadership, political negotiation, and decision-making? According to some Western political philosophers, political expertise either does not exist or should not be invoked to justify the political authority of people who hold political office (Viehoff 2016: 406–7). Others have argued that, while political expertise is not necessary for legitimate political authority, it can at least be a ground of it (Peter 2019: 37). In this article, I provide support for the second view by referring to a specific Mesoamerican institution, the *cargo* system. The *cargo* system can be defined as a customary system that requires political office-holders to progress through a hierarchical order of public offices (so-called *cargos*) as an unpaid service to their community in order to gain political credibility. I argue that

persons who have assumed various offices or *cargos* within their community acquire a specific kind of political expertise which justifies assigning political authority to them.

Rather than proposing the rule of political experts as an outright replacement for democratic forms of representation, I uphold the value of democracy and discuss the role of political experts *within* a democracy (Gunn 2019: 70–75).[1] In this paper, I refer to four key notions of political philosophy: political authority, political legitimacy, political expertise, and political credibility. A clear distinction between an office-holder's political authority and political legitimacy can help distinguish their legitimacy to wield power from their authority to demand compliant behaviour. With the term "political expertise," I refer to skills and epistemic resources that support political officials in the exercise of their office. In contrast to the previous terms, the term "political credibility" is a new concept that I introduce to discuss the *cargo* system.

In the following argument, I conceptualise political authority as having two components: political credibility and political legitimacy. My argument is based on a *reciprocity* justification of political credibility, which is granted to a person who has proven their expertise and virtue in serving the community in a specific *cargo*. Here, reciprocity serves as a moral principle that prescribes the evaluation of the service of a person and that determines a potential reward, which consists of assigning political credibility to that person.[2] Political credibility can only be assigned by members of a community that is already in a relationship with the *cargo* holder, and the *cargo* holder must have a history of service to that community. Furthermore, political credibility is informal and cannot be

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[1] The debate about the role of political expertise in democracies can be broadly divided into two sub-questions. The first is the question of whether voters must be experts in some sense to be allowed to participate in democratic decision-making (Brennan 2016). The second question is whether a certain kind of expertise should be required of those who hold political offices.

[2] Viehoff (2016) provides a *service* justification of expertise-based authority, in which authority is justified by person A providing guidance to B to act more reliably. By contrast, the *reciprocity* justification of expertise-based authority in the *cargo* system is primarily procedural, in that it requires the explicit acknowledgement and evaluation of A's authority by B, but it does not presuppose any fixed set of substantive criteria that B must use to justify such an acknowledgment.

transferred to other communities. The *cargo* holder only enjoys political credibility in the community that assigned it to them.

Regarding political legitimacy, I adopt a slightly modified version of Allen Buchanan's definition. According to Buchanan, an entity has political legitimacy if and only if it is morally justified in wielding political power; furthermore, wielding political power is an attempt to exercise a monopoly within a jurisdiction through the making, application, and enforcement of laws (Buchanan 2002: 689–90). To the last sentence, I would add "[laws], *rules, customs, and traditions*" (the italics highlight my additions). For my argument, I presuppose a conception of political legitimacy that can be morally justified based on procedural values or public reason. In contrast to political credibility, political legitimacy does not require a history of service between the office-holder and a specific community, but merely a justification by "public reasons, […] unanimous or near-unanimous consent, or […] an inclusive decision-making process" (Peter 2020: 379).

Political authority can be based on both (1) political credibility and (2) political legitimacy. Such authority confers on the person who possesses it the right to hold political office and demand compliant behaviour from others who fall within the scope of the relevant laws, rules, customs, and traditions. According to Stephen Darwall, the justification of political authority is based on the premise that we share a common basic authority to make claims of one another, and the addressees are accountable to this authority within a relationship of mutual accountability (Darwall 2013: 167). Darwall's justification connects public reason, political legitimacy, and political authority. However, following Joseph Raz, expertise is also relevant to political authority, for example, to solve coordination problems or to determine boundaries (Raz 2010: 301). Raz thus establishes a link between political expertise and political authority.

Understanding the main difference between the two opposing views within Western political philosophy is helpful here. According to the first view, political authority can be reduced to political legitimacy, whereas in the second, it encompasses both political legitimacy and political expertise and/or credibility. Proponents of the first view consider political legitimacy sufficient to demand compliant behaviour in a specific community, whereas proponents of the second view argue that political legitimacy must be accompanied by an additional justification, such as political credibility or mutual accountability, for an office holder to have the authority to demand compliant behaviour in a specific community. The Mesoamerican institution of the *cargo* system supports the second view. In the *cargo* system, only those who have both acquired political credibility and who have been elected in a legitimate procedure can hold political office and demand compliant behaviour.
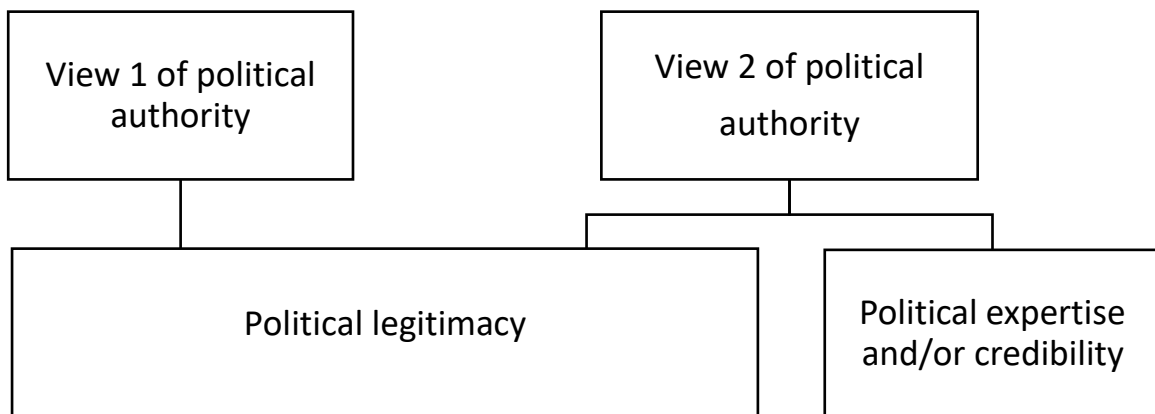

Figure 1: Two views of political authority

Methodologically, I combine a conceptual reconstruction of the *cargo* system, based on existing anthropological and sociological fieldwork, with a comparison between this system and the Western concepts of political expertise and representation. My research is an example of what Katrin Flikschuh (2014) has called "philosophical fieldwork." It engages with a Mesoamerican conceptual framework,

but it also involves an ongoing dialogue with Western and non-Western experts on the *cargo* system. Rather than seeking convergences between Mesoamerican and Western political institutions, I focus on the differences between these systems and the resulting challenges.

Anthropologists and sociologists have extensively studied the *cargo* system. However, to the best of my knowledge, this paper is the first to discuss the *cargo* system from the perspective of political philosophy. Before discussing the implications of this system for the general claims of Western political philosophy, I must first abstract (to some degree) from the various forms the *cargo* system can take and from the ontology in which it is embedded.

Mainstream Western political philosophy often assumes ontological individualism; that is, it assumes an ontology that prioritises the individual over the community and nature. By contrast, the Mesoamerican *cargo* system is embedded in the way of life of *comunalidad*. According to the Indigenous scholars Floriberto Díaz (2007) and Jaime Martínez Luna (2010; 2015), the five main elements of *comunalidad* are the relationship to one's territory, consensus-based decision-making in the community assembly, voluntary communal work (*tequio*), the distribution of political offices within the community (*cargos*), and the rites and ceremonies through which the community celebrates its existence (*fiesta*).[3] The ontology that underlies *comunalidad* emphasises the connectedness of human beings to the land on which they live and their embeddedness within their communities. It could therefore be seen as an instance of a communitarian ontology. Furthermore, the two ethical principles that structure *comunalidad* are reciprocity and mutual help (Maldonado Alvarado 2015: 159).

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[3] The Spanish equivalent of the English term "Indigenous," namely "*Indígena*," has recently come under criticism for homogenising the great diversity of Indigenous identities and replicating a developmentalist reconstruction of Indigenous identity. Alternatives are the Spanish term "*pueblos originarios*" or the name of the specific Indigenous community or people to which a person belongs.

In this paper, I do not engage with the ontological underpinnings of the *cargo* system; rather, I discuss this system as an institution that meets the criteria of ethical individualism. While ontological individualism reduces communities and relationships to the properties of individuals, ethical individualism does not make such a claim (Robeyns 2017: 184–85). Ethical individualism posits that each individual—speaking normatively—should count equally. As an ethical principle, ethical individualism does not deny that individuals are ontologically connected with each other through their relationships. It also does not deny that individuals are ontologically connected with the land on which they live. The *cargo* system can thus be combined with ethical individualism, but it is incompatible with ontological individualism. It is possible to acknowledge that human beings are constituted by their relationships but still demand that each individual should count equally. This requires, for example, opening political deliberation within the community assembly to all community members. However, it does not require abandoning the underlying notion of community and the communitarian ontology according to which these individuals are formed and constituted by their relationships within their community.

This paper has two aims: On the one hand, it presents an argument for adopting the *cargo* system in liberal democracies. On the other hand, it provides a normative defence of the Mesoamerican *cargo* system using the conceptual means and tools of Western political philosophy.[4] The argument proceeds in five steps. First, I introduce the *cargo* system and its socio-cultural background and construct an ideal type of the *cargo* system as a basis for subsequent discussion. Second, I discuss three objections to the rule of political experts and examine whether and to what extent they apply

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[4] Such a defence is not necessary to demonstrate the political effectiveness of the *cargo* system. This effectiveness can be derived from the history of the system and the way in which it has successfully contributed to the self-determination of Indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica. The defence merely provides additional support, from a Western perspective, to this historical argument. A third argument for maintaining Indigenous systems of governance is the care of Indigenous peoples for the territory on which they live. Eighty percent of Earth's biodiversity is located on Indigenous territories, which has led the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to recommend the continuation of Indigenous land tenure and governance for ecological reasons (Nitah 2021: 907).

to the *cargo* system. Third, I argue that the *cargo* system and its conceptualisation of political credibility can be advantageous for liberal democracies. Fourth, I discuss how the *cargo* system's resilience against contemporary political pressures could be strengthened. Finally, I identify the remaining internal and external challenges of the *cargo* system and outline a possible pathway to implement the system in liberal democracies. The conclusion provides a brief summary of my argument.

2) The Mesoamerican *cargo* system

One of the most prominent places in which the Mesoamerican *cargo* system has been established is south-eastern Mexico. In the state of Oaxaca, 417 of 570 municipalities are not based on the party system and representative democracy, but instead exercise their traditional practices of community organisation (*usos y costumbres*). This change in policy was introduced in 1995 and can be considered a government response to the Zapatista uprising in the neighbouring state of Chiapas (Eisenstadt 2007). The most plausible interpretation is that the authorities were willing to concede some power to Indigenous community organising practices, but they were also careful not to empower Indigenous political organisations that were anti-regime (Benton 2017). These practices included the *cargo* system and participation in that system as a prerequisite for community leadership (Wolfesberger 2019: 40–41).[5] While the state legally recognises these traditional practices, in some instances, the local jurisdiction and state jurisdiction have been in conflict (Wolfesberger 2019: 50).

Some elements of the *cargo* system predate the Spanish colonisation of the Mesoamerican region and were later incorporated into it. Hence, the system's continuity can be considered a symbol of

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[5] The term "*usos y costumbres*" (practices and customs) emphasises the practical and traditional character of Indigenous forms of government. However, a more adequate term would be "*sistemas normativos Indígenas*" (Indigenous normative systems), which acknowledges the normative character and validity of these political systems (Castillo Cisneros 2019: 3).

Indigenous self-determination and resistance against colonial and neo-colonial structures (Ibarra Eliessetch and Carrasco Orellana 2021: 85; Gómez Pellón 2016: 65).

I provide an initial illustration of the *cargo* system through the following fictitious account of Miguel. Miguel is member of an Ayuuk community and has just reached the minimum age to participate in the local government structure. In his youth, he observed how family members assumed different *cargos* within the community to serve it in a variety of ways. Miguel understands that authority in his village must be earned and is connected to voluntary service. He therefore asks the authorities to nominate him for the *cargo* of the *topil*. This specific *cargo* is usually shared with other community members, as it involves ensuring security within the village, especially at night. After the authorities suggest his name for this office, Miguel must present himself in the community assembly.

In Miguel's community assembly, political parties are not permitted. Decision-making is usually based on consensus-oriented deliberation but can sometimes take the form of majority voting. The ballots can be secret or public, with public ballots (e.g., by a show of hands) being much more common (Magaloni, Díaz-Cayeros, and Ruiz Euler 2019: 1850–51). Finally, with a broad consensus among the community members, Miguel is elected.[6]

Miguel immediately begins to work as a *topil* in his community, a task that requires much of his leisure time. He knows that this *cargo* is only the first step in a series of *cargos* for which he will have to apply to gain credibility and authority in his village. As an entry requirement for holding further political

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[6] For a critical discussion of community assemblies, see Benton (2017: 527). Benton criticises the fact that the supervisory board of community assemblies can restrict political rights, for example, the right to passive suffrage. According to Benton, restricting the pool of candidates for political positions to those who have participated in the *cargo* system is symptomatic not so much of democratic regimes as of authoritarian ones. However, her critique seems to presuppose a substantive view of democracy that requires, for example, universal passive suffrage. I discuss the question of suffrage briefly in section 3 from the perspective of office-seekers and the electorate's perspective. Furthermore, the mere possibility that supervisory boards can change these rules makes them vulnerable to political abuse and manipulation but does not render community assemblies authoritarian political institutions per se, as long as these rule changes can be contested.

offices, he will need to occupy a certain number of *cargos* and acquire a certain degree of political credibility.

Deliberation in the community assembly is usually based on finding a consensus. Hence, community members are not expected to defend their own interests, but rather to align their interests with the commonly expressed will of the community. Ideally, this commonly expressed will confirms the candidate's political credibility within the community.[7] As Miguel climbs the ladder of the various *cargos*, he will gradually be given more leadership responsibility and more opportunities to develop his political skills. Being a *topil* is thus merely preparation for what is to come. However, he is determined to serve his community as his father and grandfather did because he has learned that reciprocity is the key to holding the community together.

Miguel is one of many young community members who may want to participate in the *cargo* system in their respective communities. However, the *cargo* system can take many different forms (Korsbaek and Ronquillo Arvizu 2018: 40). Based on the work of Pedro Carrasco and Leif Korsbaek, Hilaro Topete and Alberto Díaz (2014) have compiled a list of features that characterise these various forms:

> (a) it is a traditional or customary system; […]
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> (b) the public *cargos* constitute a hierarchy arranged according to rank and line of political authority;
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> (c) the *cargos* are generally held for one year or at least for a short period, and there is no re-election;
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> (d) the *cargos* are arranged in a ladder and must be filled in a certain order; after passing the highest position, one reaches the rank of elder or principal;

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[7] Of course, consensus-based deliberation is not completely immune to manipulation by, for example, local leaders who dominate the discussion or ignore dissenting voices (Fishkin, Luskin, and Jowell 2000: 661).

(e) the ladder combines civil and religious *cargos*, so that the participants alternate with each other; in the traditional organisation, there is no separation between church and state;

(f) participation in the ladder of *cargos* is open to all members of the community;

(g) when the community is divided into districts, there is alternation of positions among the representatives of each district;

(h) there is individual patronage of public functions; the official is usually unpaid (or has a negligible salary) and must carry the expenses during their exercise of office or as a requirement of holding it; furthermore, religious ceremonies and feasts are an important part of these expenses; and

(i) such expenses take a person's resources away from the possible accumulation of material goods or investment in productive activities, and they instead increase the sponsor's prestige. (Topete Lara and Díaz Araya 2014: 3–4, translated and adapted by author)[8]

For this article, I construct an ideal type of the *cargo* system—one that is characterised by gender equality and a separation of religion and politics—which meets the criteria of ethical individualism.[9] In this way, I can focus on how the *cargo* system assigns political credibility without having to engage with its various historical forms. Moreover, this idealisation aids my exploration of the possibility of implementing such a system in Western liberal democracies.

To construct the ideal type of the *cargo* system, I must address elements (e) and (f) of the list above. Regarding (e), there is a difference between the official laicism of the Mexican state, with its separation between church and state, and the way in which both civil and religious *cargos* form part of the overall *cargo* system in local communities. For my discussion of the *cargo* system in this paper,

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[8] For the sake of readability, I have reversed elements (a) and (b) and shortened the detailed account of (a).
[9] I adopt the Weberian notion of an ideal type as a heuristic device that helps determine the extent to which an actual empirical example (e.g., the *cargo* system of a specific municipality) falls under or deviates from it. Thus, ideal types are still descriptive, but abstract from certain empirical features.

I bracket the question of the role of religion within politics and assume that no *cargos* are affiliated with religion.

Regarding element (f), in some communities, women are still excluded from the *cargo* system, and their political participation thus remains restricted (Martínez-Cruz 2016: 175). However, this discrimination against women is not generalisable to all communities in which the *cargo* system is practiced (Aguilar Gil 2019: 34; Leavitt-Alcántara 2022: 617). In the following sections, I assume that all *cargos* are accessible to both men and women alike and also to people who self-identify as neither men nor women.[10] The resulting gender equality is another presupposition of ethical individualism, which is the third and final characteristic of the ideal type of the *cargo* system in this paper. According to ethical individualism, the *cargo* system must treat all individuals as beings of equal value. Consequently, all community members must have access to the *cargo* system by being eligible to become *cargo* holders and by having a vote in the community assembly that nominates a community member for a *cargo*.[11]

3) Epistocracy and its problems

One crucial reason that a group of Western political philosophers reduces political authority to political legitimacy (view 1) is the fear of epistocracy. In an epistocratic political system, experts have more political credibility than non-experts; therefore, according to my definition above, they would also hold more political authority. According to proponents of view 1, outlined above, however, epistocracy encounters two problems: one is political, while the other is epistemic.

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[10] For example, in the Mexican city of Juchitán, there is a tradition of so-called "*muxes*" who self-identify as a third sex and often dress in female Zapotec clothes and assume traditional female roles in households (Mirandé 2012).

[11] In most Mesoamerican communities that maintain the *cargo* system, there is a minimum age for political participation. This minimum age does not appear to contradict the principle of ethical individualism.

The political problem is that assigning political credibility to experts disadvantages non-experts in terms of representation. If only experts can assume political offices, a gap would quickly emerge in the representation of non-experts. Opponents of epistocracy therefore recommend that political offices remain accessible to both experts and non-experts alike. Once non-experts hold political offices, they can still consult experts to arrive at informed political decisions (Moraro 2018: 206).

The epistemic problem can be described as the risk that educated experts may disproportionally display "epistemically damaging features" compared to the general population; such features include, for example, racist views (Estlund 2008: 215). Within a given population, experts often constitute a homogeneous group because of their education and socio-economic backgrounds. If the members of that group share implicit biases, the group's homogeneity means that these biases are unlikely to be challenged and tend to be reproduced from generation to generation. As a result, educated experts would remain biased and prefer certain policies over others. In addition, they might devalue the knowledge and epistemic resources of non-experts in deliberation and decision-making procedures.

Moreover, there is general scepticism toward the claim that "political expertise" as an entity exists— consequently, there is also scepticism regarding a possible set of criteria by which political experts could be identified (Viehoff 2016: 406). According to the proponents of this sceptical position, politics is so complex and diverse that it would be difficult to identify a specific set of skills or epistemic resources that each holder of a political office should possess.

In sum, most critics of epistocracy concede that there are good reasons to defend the claim that a well-educated population might, all other things being equal, tend to rule more wisely than a less well-educated population (Estlund 2008: 211). However, the idea that well-educated experts should hold political offices is untenable to these critics because of the political and epistemic implications.

Considerations of expertise-based political credibility should not influence political authority; rather, political authority should remain restricted to political legitimacy and questions of representation.

Given the background of this debate, I now explore how the *cargo* system can address the political and epistemic problem and the general scepticism regarding the existence of political expertise. I begin with the sceptical challenge: While the *cargo* system does not indicate how a universal set of political skills or political epistemic resources should be defined, it offers a highly contextualised and community-based approach to political expertise. Political expertise is acquired by a person assuming different *cargos* within their community, and such expertise respects the local context and the local laws, rules, customs, and traditions. While the content of political expertise may vary from location to location, the *cargo* system ensures that community members can acquire political expertise in the local context. On a local level, it would therefore be possible to identify a set of criteria to evaluate the expertise and virtue of a *cargo* holder.

Furthermore, political expertise that is acquired within the *cargo* system does not merely consist of information about the socio-political background of one's community; it also includes experiential knowledge about alternative ways of implementing policies and the degree to which such implementations have been successful (Pía Méndez 2022: 154). While the ladder of *cargos* usually begins with the *cargo* of the *topiles*, who work as community police, later *cargos* include the work of treasurers, committee secretaries, and political representatives. As some of the *cargos* are directly connected to policy-making and implementation, *cargo* holders can learn which policies work for their respective communities.[12]

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[12] Furthermore, political expertise can be passed from one generation to the next within a community. In this process, former office-holders can pass on their experiential knowledge to newly appointed ones (Oakeshott 1991).

In addition, by acquiring political expertise, community members can also obtain some degree of normative expertise. While political decision-making always concerns values and potential trade-offs between values, a good political decision does not necessarily have to track moral truth—if moral truth exists. It is sufficient if political experts can identify values and analyse value conflicts (Holsta and Molanderb 2019: 549). In sum, the sceptical objection to political expertise can be rebutted by pointing to local and experiential forms of political and normative expertise that are acquired within one's own community.

The next point of my discussion concerns the political problem of epistocracy. To some extent, the *cargo* system is vulnerable to the objection that it disadvantages a part of the community in terms of representation, but this objection can be addressed. From the perspective of office-seekers, their right to be elected for a certain political office is constrained, as candidacy requires them to have occupied certain *cargos* before. Yet the ideal type of the *cargo* system that I outline above, in which there is gender equality, is in principle open to all community members so that everyone can build up expertise through experience in *cargos*. Hence, only the right to become the holder of a certain political office at a specific moment in time is restricted, not the right to seek to become the holder of that office in the long term (López-Guerra 2014: 154). In practice, however, the fact that most *cargos* are unpaid requires that those who enter the *cargo* system have a certain financial background. To prevent the *cargo* system from replicating socio-economic differences within a community, it should provide compensation for some holders of *cargos*, depending on their financial background.[13]

From the electorate's perspective, their right to vote for anyone they choose is limited, since only those who have previously occupied certain *cargos* are included in the pool of candidates. However, this limitation is not based on reasons that are external to the voting procedure. The question of

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[13] This compensation should remain compensation and not amount to a full salary. Otherwise, the service character of the *cargo* would be lost. An alternative long-term goal would be to raise the overall standard of living in the community to facilitate all community members' participation in the *cargo* system.

whether a specific candidate can be elected can be traced to that candidate's service to the community and the community's acknowledgement of that service. Voters thus actively determine the pool of candidates by recognising the service and expertise of some candidates while not recognising that of others.

The final point of my discussion concerns the epistemic problem of epistocracy. Similar to the political objection, the epistemic objection only applies to a limited extent. Since no costly formal education is required to participate in the *cargo* system, there is no risk that a homogeneous group of biased experts will emerge. However, while political expertise is accessible to all community members, it is true that the holders of political offices could develop a tendency to disregard the expertise of those who do not hold office.[14] However, political credibility is awarded according to the principle of reciprocity. If the holder of a *cargo* does not exhibit some degree of expertise and virtue toward the community as a whole, the community will not accord them political credibility and might not elect them for a subsequent *cargo*.[15] Hence, there is a strong incentive for the holder of a *cargo* to develop virtuous behaviour, which includes the epistemic virtues of open-mindedness, conscientiousness, and inclusiveness.

The criticism that an epistocratic government might lack the "incentive to cater to the interests of all citizens" is thus counteracted by the principle of reciprocity (Malcolm 2022: 191).[16] This principle could even be anchored in law—for example, in the form of a procedure for challenging political authority

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[14] In many Mesoamerican Indigenous communities, this tendency is counterbalanced by a strong focus on consensus-based decision-making procedures in which each community member—irrespective of whether they hold a political office—must consent to a decision.

[15] Regarding the epistemic problem of epistocracy, it is important to distinguish between a *reciprocity* justification of political credibility and an *evidence* justification of political expertise. An evidence justification would mean that person X acknowledges the political expertise of Y because Y has provided evidence that they possess this expertise. By contrast, a reciprocity justification means that X evaluates the political expertise of Y and acknowledges Y's political credibility to the extent that Y has provided a service to X's community.

[16] The community decides whether a person is deemed sufficiently virtuous to hold political office. However, there is no inherent need to appeal to a maximalist account of virtue, as Plato does when he refers to the Philosopher King.

in case of a lack of virtue—to prevent the epistemic domination of experts over non-experts (Blunt 2020: 371).

4) Advantages of including political credibility

According to view 1, discussed above, political authority is based on political legitimacy and the question of whether an office-holder represents the interests of their electorate; their expertise might play only an external and non-foundational role. By contrast, the *cargo* system would support view 2 and include the consideration of political credibility. Accordingly, candidates for political offices would not merely be elected in a legitimate procedure, but also on the basis of the political credibility they have acquired in a variety of *cargos*. In liberal democracies, criteria such as political experience and political track record may play a role in the evaluation of political candidates who have held political office in the past. However, no barriers prevent candidates who lack political experience from pursuing a career in politics or being elected. In the *cargo* system, by contrast, prior political experience is a prerequisite for occupying a political office.

Making the consideration of political credibility the basis for electing political candidates would yield three benefits, which would address the problems of short-termism, campaigning, and the acceptance of authority. First, the *cargo* system removes pressure from office-holders to focus on short-term political success. Because they have already acquired political expertise in a specific *cargo* that their community recognises, they do not have to rely on political success in the short term to justify having been elected. Nor do they have to provide reasons for future re-election in that same *cargo*, as such re-elections are not envisaged in the system. Although performance in one *cargo* plays a role in one's election in the next *cargo*, this performance would not be the sole criterion that would determine one's political success or failure. Instead, by having been elected for a certain *cargo*, the office-holder already possesses a certain degree of political credibility, and good political performance consists of living up to that credibility rather than building it from scratch. This move away from short-term

political success and political myopia would, among other outcomes, enable office-holders to include long-term demands in their political vision and support them, for example, in implementing long-term climate and environmental policies (Caney 2019: 13).[17]

Second, the inclusion of political credibility would broaden the set of criteria that the electorate employs to evaluate a political candidate. A convincing election campaign and electoral promises would be merely two factors among many others—such as local political expertise, virtuous behaviour, and epistemic inclusiveness. While voters in liberal democracies may choose to evaluate their candidates according to the latter set of criteria, in the *cargo* system, these criteria are foundational. Every candidate must already have gathered political experience before being elected to political office. Many liberal democracies attempt to compensate for their narrow set of criteria for evaluating political candidates by relying on a party system that—in the best case—provides voters with the heuristic advantage of being able to evaluate a political candidate in relation to that candidate's party (Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). However, the party system has potential downsides, such as political polarisation. Such polarisation would become less significant with the introduction of the *cargo* system, as it relies less on the opposing identities of political parties and more on the political expertise and virtuous behaviour of individual candidates.[18] In turn, the problematic consequences of political polarisation, such as the inability to see fellow citizens as political equals, could be prevented (Talisse 2021: 223).

Third, political credibility offers the possibility of acknowledging the political authority and leadership of a person, even among voters who did not support that candidate. Political legitimacy is primarily

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[17] There are additional reasons for short-termism beyond the pressure of upcoming elections or potential re-elections. One example is the human tendency of future discounting (Thompson 2010: 18–19). While the *cargo* system can address some factors that facilitate myopia, others may persist and must be addressed through other institutional measures.

[18] In addition to their heuristic function, political parties of course also have other functions in terms of the coordination and mobilisation of voters.

procedural and focuses on the question of whether a majority has elected an office-holder in a fair procedure. By contrast, political credibility also refers to the previous service of the office-holder to the community and thus also to those who voted for someone else. This approach would mitigate the problem of persistent minorities experiencing constant exclusion from collective decision-making and political representation because of, for example, their religious or spiritual views (Christiano 2008: 288–99). Even though they do not participate in the winning coalition or do not feel represented by the winning candidate, they are part of the community that the office-holder has served and should ideally continue to serve. In the *cargo* system, the relationship between office-holders and those whom they serve would not be based solely on a fair election, but also on a history of reciprocal serving and acknowledging. Hence, while the minority would nonetheless remain excluded and underrepresented, it could in principle acknowledge the political authority and leadership of an office-holder based on this history of service.

It is true that the advantages of a political system in which political offices are distributed based on both political legitimacy and political credibility could be achieved by other means. Introducing longer terms of office could address the problem of short-termism and political myopia. Forms of democracy in which deliberation takes centre stage would allow for a broad set of rational criteria for the election of office-holders, such as deliberative virtues (Bächtiger et al. 2018). Furthermore, the problem of persistent minorities could be alleviated by giving minority groups permanent representatives, such as ombudspersons. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the *cargo* system combines all three advantages and has proven sufficiently flexible for adaptation to various contexts. It has supported the self-organisation of numerous communities over decades of practice.

5) Strengthening the resilience of the *cargo* system against political pressure

Although the *cargo* system has proven its value as a political institution in the past and present, the external and internal pressures on it are becoming increasingly problematic. Returning to the above account of Miguel, who had just been nominated for his first *cargo*, various incentives and factors currently discourage young people from providing service to their community. Many factors could be discussed in the Mesoamerican context, such as migration, urbanisation, and the enduring legacy of colonialism, which have had negative impacts on participation in the *cargo* system. In this section, I focus on three factors that are to some extent related to the political paradigm of liberal democracies.

The first factor is the influence of political parties on local politics. The *cargo* system is often restricted to the local level and co-exists with party-based and ballot-based systems of political representation at the regional and national levels. In this frequently tense political constellation, political parties have an interest in recruiting supporters at the local level for their own political agenda and for regional and national elections. As different members of a community usually support different political parties, however, lines of division are created within the community, posing a challenge for consensus-based politics and the *cargo* system at the local level (Bautista 2013: 18).[19]

The second factor is the introduction of an ideal of individual wealth accumulation. Once money is introduced in communities to pay for certain services, the concept of an uncompensated service or *cargo* comes under pressure. Moreover, the strategy of accumulating wealth in order to climb the social ladder leads to cracks in the egalitarian fabric of the community. A common side effect is corruption, which occurs when there is a lack of transparency in political procedures and institutions.

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[19] In Mexico, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) was able to maintain a strong influence on local politics from the 1950s to the 1980s, when Mexico became *de facto* a one-party state (Anaya Muñoz 2005: 549). At present, a variety of political parties competes for voters.

A third and final factor is the high opportunity costs in terms of time investment required by a political system based on a community assembly, a consensus-oriented decision-making procedure, and voluntary service to the community. Careful coordination is required to gather all members of a community who are eligible to vote in the community assembly, and reaching a common consensus usually takes more time than a simple majoritarian decision (Bautista 2013: 26). Furthermore, assuming a one-year *cargo* can demand significant time, which cannot then be used to pursue one's own work and livelihood.

A key concept for strengthening the resilience of the *cargo* system against these three types of political pressures is political self-determination. A community that is self-determined can challenge the influence of political parties, guarantee that individual wealth is not converted into political power, and reform political institutions to increase their efficiency. An example of a community that has succeeded in restraining the influence of political parties is the Purépecha community of San Francisco de Cherán in Michoacán, Mexico. Having successfully defended itself against organised crime and illegal logging activities, the community initiated legal and political procedures and attained legal protection for its right to self-determination in 2011. Subsequently, the community adopted the *cargo* system and built legal protection against the remnants of political parties that were reluctant to relinquish their political power (Aragón Andrade 2020).

Regarding the impact of individual wealth accumulation on community cohesion and political decision-making, there is a high probability that the interests and biases of the wealthy could lead them to support and promote policies that undermine the interests of the less well-off (Christiano 2012). A self-determined community, however, can ensure that the *cargos* are distributed independently of community members' economic and financial backgrounds and can promote policies that increase financial transparency and curb corruption. Finally, a self-determined community can re-

organise itself and its political institutions in such a way that community assemblies and the *cargo* system require less time and are integrated into the working schedules of community members.[20]

6) Translating and adapting the *cargo* system

While the *cargo* system has many advantages compared to party-based and ballot-based electoral systems, it often co-exists alongside these systems in Mesoamerican nation states (Lebrato 2018: 68). A further question is therefore whether the *cargo* system could be implemented in liberal democracies. However, even if we assume an ideal type of the *cargo* system that includes gender equality, normative challenges remain, and these would persist when the community-based system is adapted to a complex and pluralist context on a large scale.

One internal challenge is the unequal starting positions of those who assume a *cargo*. While some community members may possess sufficient financial resources, others might not. Hence, normative questions arise if persons A and B both assume a *cargo*, but person A has sufficient financial resources to compensate the time investment (e.g., by paying someone else to work their field or company), while person B does not. Here, it would be necessary to address these inequalities by compensating the economic needs of those who assume a *cargo* but cannot compensate for the time investment with their own resources. Otherwise, person B could create harm for themselves and the community by failing to fulfil the duties of their *cargo*, or they might suffer considerable economic loss through the need to compensate for the time investment without having sufficient resources to do so.

An external challenge would arise if the community-based *cargo* system was applied to complex contexts in which there is social differentiation and a widespread division of epistemic labour. The

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[20] Communal self-determination does not necessarily involve secession. It can also be embedded in a federal context, so that each self-determined community relates to other political agents through a federal government, which represents both that community and other political agents. Within this federal framework, the sub-units can claim that the federal unit should enable the realisation of their right to self-determination (Tully 1995: 140; Young 2005: 147; Kramm 2021).

more complex the context, the less office-holders can rely on their own expertise. Instead, they require interactional expertise—namely, the skills to communicate with experts and non-experts—and a willingness to accept expert advice. This type of expertise would enable them to make well-informed decisions about complex questions regarding economic, financial, and environmental policies (Collins and Evans 2007: 77–90). An example would be housing policy, which requires collaboration with experts in architecture and infrastructure planning.

Furthermore, liberal democracies are characterised by representative pluralism, which means that they consist of diverse agents. Examples include democratically elected representatives, public officials who are not elected but have a legal mandate to represent sectorial interests, and informal representatives such as non-governmental organisations (Rey 2020). Expertise in interacting with these diverse democratic agents would be crucial for *cargo* holders to navigate complex democratic spaces.

A second external challenge concerns the implementation of the *cargo* system in communities with heterogeneous political positions and values. In Mesoamerica, the *cargo* system is usually imbedded within comparably homogeneous communities that are organised in a communitarian way and live according to the principles of *comunalidad.* Implementing the *cargo* system in liberal democracies would therefore require building bridges between different political factions and normative outlooks by, for example, introducing councils or assemblies in which these different groups are represented.[21] In this way, the *cargo* system could even contribute to strengthening a sense of community in the long run. Moreover, since politicians must provide a service at the community level, the system could also help strengthen the relationship between local politicians and local communities.

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[21] These challenges should not be underestimated, as processes that have led to greater diversity in political and normative terms, such as urbanisation, have put the *cargo* system in Mesoamerica under severe strain (Osorio Franco 2014).

A third external challenge concerns the question of how the *cargo* system can be translated to a pluralist context that involves a diversity of conceptions of the good. To what extent does the *cargo* system imply a specific—for example, Mesoamerican—conception of the good that would be imposed on a society? Can the principle of reciprocity and the virtue of service still be considered parts of the normative presuppositions of a liberal democracy, or do they go beyond it? I cannot provide a conclusive answer to this question here. However, I offer two reasons that reciprocity and service could theoretically be considered normative ingredients of a democratic system, as long as this system is based on deliberation.[22]

A deliberative procedure demands that the participants adopt a certain system of rules that guarantees that each speaker can have their say, that each speaker is listened to, and so on. This system of rules does not necessarily include the principle of reciprocity and the virtue of service, but it is at least compatible with them. Rendering each other the service of listening can be considered a deliberative virtue. In addition, listening to others just as they have listened to us can be considered an application of the principle of reciprocity. While this argument merely establishes the compatibility of reciprocity and service with deliberation, it nonetheless proves that reciprocity and service do not have to be located outside of democratic deliberation.

In this article, I have constructed an ideal type of the *cargo* system based on Topete Lara and Díaz Araya's list of characteristic features, which I introduced above. I modified this list by bracketing the role of religion, adding gender inclusiveness and equality, and incorporating ethical individualism. Furthermore, I proposed providing compensation to *cargo* holders to the extent that their financial background requires. A final recommendation was to strengthen the degree of self-determination of the respective communities in order to facilitate their continuation of the *cargo* system.

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[22] The democratic system would not necessarily have to be pervaded by deliberation on all levels, but it should at least include deliberation at the level of the election of political representatives.

Having discussed several internal and external challenges, one option would be to implement this modified, ideal type of the *cargo* system in liberal democracies at the local level, while implementing (or continuing) other representative systems that are ballot-based or party-based at the regional, national, and international levels.[23] At the local level, political representatives would not have to be members of political parties. Such representatives would instead receive their political authority by participating in the *cargo* system. Accordingly, participation in the *cargo* system would constitute an entry requirement for local positions of authority. By contrast, at the regional, national, and international levels, there would be no *cargo* system, and the political authority of representatives would be based on fair elections. Over time, more and more political representatives would move from the local to the regional, national, and international levels. This movement would gradually establish participation in the *cargo* system and the acquisition of political credibility as an additional criterion of political authority.

In the above scenario, the excessive focus on short-term political success and election campaigns could be mitigated and the acceptance of political authorities by minorities strengthened. An additional positive effect of this inclusion of political credibility at the regional, national, and international levels would be a high standard of accountability for office-holders whose political credibility is based on recognition by the public that elected them. A high standard of accountability would require office-holders to be transparent about their possible relationships with lobbyists and would render corruption relatively difficult.

A *cargo* system for liberal democracies could assume different forms depending on the local circumstances. Each *cargo* should preserve the characteristic of service so that *cargo* holders can

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[23] Of course, implementing the *cargo* system in liberal democracies would also mean that it would no longer be based on traditions and customs, as it is and continues to be in Mesoamerica. Hence, element (a) of Topete Lara and Díaz Araya's list would have to be removed.

acquire political credibility in exchange for their service to the community. Members of the local community could be nominated for *cargos* by existing political institutions (e.g., village or city councils) or by a newly established community assembly.[24] The structure of the system would continue to resemble a ladder with several rungs, with the highest rung marking the transition from local to regional politics.

Possible *cargos* could include (1) a coordinator of cultural activities and festivities; (2) a secretary of local committees on education, environment, and health; (3) an administrator of community property (e.g., parks, lakes, and forests); and (4) the treasurer of community funds. These *cargos* would need to be coordinated with the existing structures of citizen participation in local government. To prevent the *cargo* system from becoming too rigid, it would also be conceivable for local governments to occasionally recognise other types of expertise and service as meeting the entry requirements for political offices.

7) Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the Mesoamerican *cargo* system provides support for the view that political authority should be based on political legitimacy, political expertise, and/or political credibility by introducing reciprocity-based conceptions of political credibility and political expertise. With reference to an ideal type of the *cargo* system, I explored how such a system can address the political, epistemic, and sceptical objections that have been raised against the rule of political experts. I then provided three reasons why implementing the *cargo* system in liberal democracies would be advantageous. It would remove the incentives for short-termism, prevent an exclusive focus on election campaigns, and validate the acceptance of an office-holder's political authority even among people who did not elect that candidate. Subsequently, I proposed a strategy based on communal

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[24] There is some empirical evidence that such a newly established community assembly, one that is based on deliberative decision-making procedures, could also boost the motivation of citizens to participate in civic life and apply for political offices (Hans, Gastil, and Feller 2014: 702).

self-determination that could help strengthen the *cargo* system's resilience against political pressures. In a final step, I considered the remaining internal and external normative challenges to the *cargo* system and suggested a gradual approach of implementing a modified version of this system in liberal democracies at the local level.

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Matthias Kramm, Wageningen University & Research, matthias.kramm@wur.nl