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# Democracy Without Participation: A New Politics for a Disengaged Era

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**Abstract** Changing patterns of political participation observed by political scientists over the past half-century undermine traditional democratic theory and practice. The vast majority of democratic theory, and deliberative democratic theory in particular, either implicitly or explicitly assumes the need for widespread citizen participation. It requires that all citizens possess the *opportunity* to participate and also that they *take up* this opportunity. But empirical evidence gathered over the past half-century strongly suggests that many citizens do not have a meaningful opportunity to participate in the ways that many democratic theorists require, and do not participate in anything like the numbers that they believe is necessary. This paper outlines some of the profound changes that have been experienced by liberal democratic states in the 20th and early 21st Centuries, changes which are still ongoing, and which have resulted in declines in citizens participation and trust, the marginalisation of citizens from democratic life, and the entrenchment of social and economic inequalities which have damaged democracy. The paper challenges the conventional wisdom in rejecting the idea that the future of democracy lies in encouraging more widespread participation. The paper takes seriously the failure of the strategies adopted by many states to increase participation, especially among the poor, and suggests that instead of requiring more of citizens, we should in fact be requiring less of them. Instead of seeking to encourage more citizen participation, we should acknowledge that citizens will probably not participate in the volume, or in the ways, many democratic theorists would like, and that therefore we need an alternative approach: a regime which can continue to produce democratic outcomes, and which satisfies the requirements of political equality, in the absence of widespread participation by citizens.

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Rates of political participation among citizens of liberal democratic states are low and becoming more unequal; participation is becoming increasingly concentrated among those at the top end of the wealth and income distribution, and as a consequence political power and influence have also become increasingly concentrated among members of this group (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2014; Solt 2008). This is a problem for democratic theory and practice. Citizen participation in a democracy acts as a check on elite power. It prevents the rise of civil oligarchies and the capture of democratic institutions by privileged groups, and ensures that democratic structures are not reformed in ways which result in the systemic exclusion of non-elites over the longer term.

It is not surprising, then, that the last two decades have seen a growth in research by political scientists into the problem of low rates of political participation among citizens of liberal democratic states (Birch 2014; Birch et al. 2013; Bromley et al. 2007; Hay 2007; Hansard Society and Electoral Commission 2012; Jacobs et al. 2004; Lawrence and Birch 2015; Macedo et al. 2005; Putnam 2001; Schlozman et al. 2012; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Stoker 2006; Whiteley 2012). They have also seen a growing concern among many political philosophers about the state of democracy, and the need to establish a more deliberative model of democracy in place of conventional aggregative majoritarianism (Benhabib 1996; Cohen 2009; Dryzek 2012; Fung 2015; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Mansbridge et al. 2012). These two literatures are at once complementary and in tension.

Deliberative democrats connect insights among Anglo-American political philosophers working in the egalitarian tradition about the association between socio-economic and political inequality with analyses produced by political scientists about changing patterns of political participation in democracies around the world. In doing so, they infuse normative debates about the future of liberal democracy with an awareness of hard empirical data, and contribute to the wider search for solutions. Deliberative democracy is appealing to many liberal egalitarians as it folds a critique of markets, and a defence of egalitarian redistribution, into arguments for democracy. Democracy, for deliberative democrats, is not separate from social justice: social justice is required in order for democracy to function as it should.

However, the case for deliberative democracy is weakened by its reliance on a conception of civil society that is not found in the contemporary liberal democratic states suffering from the most significant declines in political participation, and the most significant forms of political inequality. Theories of deliberative democracy require that individuals possess the opportunity to participate in appropriate forms of deliberation with others *and* that they take up this opportunity (Parvin 2015). This is a demanding requirement which has led to a split in the literature characterised by Simone Chambers (2009) as being between supporters of *deliberative democracy*, who argue for a thoroughgoing and holistic conception of deliberative democracy as

a system which operates at all levels of citizens' lives, from explicitly political participation through to 'everyday talk' (Mansbridge et al. 2012; Cohen 2009), and *democratic deliberation*, who focus less on establishing deliberative democracy as an alternative to traditional representative democracy, and more on the incorporation of more deliberation into traditionally conceived representative democratic systems through the use of mini-publics (Fishkin 2009; Fung 2015). While support for *democratic deliberation* is growing, support for *deliberative democracy* among political theorists remains strong. Indeed, many have rejected Chambers's claim that deliberative democrats have 'abandoned mass democracy', emphasising the need to think big, and establish a full deliberative democracy grounded in widespread participation rather than a traditionally conceived representative system augmented by mini-publics (Benhabib 1996; Chambers 2009; Dryzek 2001; Goodin 2012).

Deliberative democracy embodies a vision of democracy in which individuals engage actively with one another within and through a network of civil associations, groups, and organisations which mobilise political action, provide political information, and communicate collective concerns to decision makers (Habermas 1996; Fraser 1990; Parvin 2015). But civil society has withered in liberal democratic states throughout the world in ways that are directly challenging to the feasibility and persuasiveness of such a vision. A diverse range of overlapping social, political, cultural, and economic forces have conspired to weaken civil society and also disconnect citizens from political life; hence, arguments for political reform which rely on the presence of civil society and the presence of the political knowledge and capacities in citizens that civil society creates and nurtures face considerable challenges (Parvin 2016).

I argue in this piece that strategies for democratic reform which emphasise wider and richer forms of citizen participation at the level of mass society, as opposed to strategies which seek to bolster representative institutions through the incorporation of complementary mechanisms (including, but not limited to) mini-publics, are more likely to *entrench* the social, economic, and political inequalities which characterise contemporary democracies than *resolve* them. I argue that once we take seriously the nature and scale of the civic and political changes which have given rise to the participatory inequalities which characterise liberal democratic states, and the specific problems that these changes pose for democratic theory and practice (first and second sections), it becomes clear that the agenda for democratic reform must be to reject *deliberative* and *participatory* models of democracy in favour of a more robust model of *representative* democracy which can produce outcomes which are as fair as possible in the *absence* of widespread citizen participation (third section). Citizen participation, traditionally conceived, can no longer provide the check on elite power that the system requires, I argue, and so we need a new check: an institutional check which incorporates citizens' voices into the democratic system but which does not rely on widespread citizen participation.

## Political Participation, Socio-Economic Inequality, and the Decline of Civil Society

Political participation in liberal democratic states is low and, on some important measures, in decline. In Britain, for example, many millions of those eligible to vote in general elections do not do so. Even fewer vote in local and European elections and the newly established elections for police and crime commissioners and local authority mayors (all of which see average turnouts of around 30%). Furthermore, the number of people registered to vote fell by over 1.5 m between 2011 and 2016 (Office of National Statistics 2017). Membership of political parties across the OECD countries has fallen precipitously since the mid-1950s. Despite recent rises in the memberships of smaller parties in the UK such as the Greens and UKIP, and recent increases in the membership of the Labour Party, party membership is still very unpopular. The combined membership of the two largest parties—Labour and Conservative—currently total 940,000—a fall of around 2 m since the 1950s (Keen and Audickas 2017). Trade union membership has also fallen from 13 m in 1979 to around 6.4 m in 2014 (UK Dept. of Innovation and Skills 2015). All this during a time in which the UK population has been *growing* by over 6% per decade. In the US, turnout in mid-term and presidential elections continues to be low, with only 55% of voters casting a ballot in the 2016 presidential election, and 36% doing so in the 2014 mid-terms. In a story that is familiar across many states, the decline is most noticeable among younger people: not only has there been a noticeable decline in turnout among US 18–24 year-olds (of 10%) during this period, but the number of people registering to vote in this age group has fallen by 14%. Similarly, like in Britain, membership of political parties and trade unions have also seen continued declines (Berry 1999; Macedo et al. 2005; Putnam et al. 2005; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999).

Low aggregate rates of participation among citizens of liberal democratic states like Britain and the USA are largely attributable to disproportionately low rates of participation among citizens at the lower end of the wealth and income distribution. The correlation between socio-economic status and political participation is well-established in the empirical literature, as is the correlation between social and economic inequality and overall levels of civic and political participation (Almond and Verba 1963; Jacobs et al. 2004; Lijphart 1997; Schlozman et al. 2004; Skocpol and Jacobs 2005; Skocpol 2004a, b; Stoker 2006; Putnam 2001; Verba et al. 1995). Broadly speaking, the more socially and economically unequal a society is, the less politically engaged is its citizen body, and the poorer one is relative to others in society, the less one will participate. Hence, social democratic states with comparatively low levels of socio-economic inequality like Norway, Sweden, and Denmark have among the highest and most stable levels of political and civic engagement of all OECD countries. By contrast, more 'market-oriented' Anglophone democracies such as Canada, New Zealand, the USA, and Britain, have greater inequalities in wealth which are strongly associated with inequalities in political participation, and a decline in aggregate rates of participation across society as a whole (Hay 2007).

Changing patterns of participation in formal political activities are also mirrored in the take-up of informal opportunities to participate (Brannan et al. 2007). While some British citizens, for example, engage in informal political activities such as signing petitions, attending demonstrations, or boycotting products or companies on ethical grounds, take-up as a percentage of the citizen body as a whole is very low, as it is too in other states (Whiteley 2012). Similarly, a small percentage of citizens in liberal democratic states use NGOs and interest groups to represent their interests in the democratic system, and over time these kinds of organisations have assumed an increasingly important place in democratic states relative to traditional membership and grassroots organisations which tend to require more of their members. Britain, many EU member states, and the USA have all seen a significant growth in the number and significance of NGOs and lobby organisations since the 1960s at the same time as they have also seen the number and memberships of traditional broad-based and grassroots organisations such as political parties and trade unions decline.

This ongoing decline in civil society and traditional membership associations—including political parties—has eviscerated the public sphere, and polarised citizens and political life. Declines in social capital and in the associated willingness of citizens to engage in political activities with one another through traditionally configured civic associations, have resulted in the creation of a new stratum of interest groups and lobby organisations which serve the interests of their member constituencies not through grassroots activism but through representation at the elite level via sophisticated lobbying and public relations initiatives and the provision of expert policy advice to decision makers (Berry 1992; Skocpol 2003; Schlozman et al. 2004). As a result, broad-based citizen associations have declined in number, size, and influence, and have been eclipsed by newer, more hierarchical organisations which operate at a distance from the citizen body, and from their own members. Policy development and decision making in contemporary liberal democratic states are conducted now at the elite level, among political actors which have little or no direct relation with the people more generally. Grassroots membership organisations have been forced to choose between recasting themselves as professionally managed lobby organisations capable of engaging with other similarly structured organisations at the elite level, or watch their influence in democratic debates decline. Organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth which have been successful in embracing this change have seen their status as influential 'insider' organisations grow (Parvin 2016). Those that have refused, or found it more difficult, to change, such as political parties and trade unions, have seen their central role in defending their members' interests and mobilising political action diminish disproportionately (Parvin and McHugh 2005).

Changes in the character of associational life in liberal democratic states, the decline in face-to-face political and civic communication, and the eclipse of broad-based citizen associations by professional lobby organisations have together resulted in a radical disjuncture between citizens and the democratic process, and the move from an era of government to one of governance; a move from a model of democracy in which decisions are made by elected representatives in consultation with citizens, to one in which they are made by elected representatives in

consultation with a variety of insider organisations capable of providing technical expertise, and of representing the interests of citizen groups without that group's active involvement (Bevir 2010). Politics, in an era of governance, is something done by other people on behalf of citizens rather than by citizens themselves.

Furthermore, interest among citizens in informal forms of political participation characteristic of this new era of governance conforms to wider patterns of inequality and inactivity in that take-up among citizens as a percentage of the citizen body as a whole is not only very low but also overwhelmingly dominated by members of economically advantaged groups. Liberal democratic states are characterised by low and, often, declining rates of citizen participation in formal *and* informal political activities, and the business of governance has been increasingly centralised within elite institutions, and conducted in a language, and according to rules, that ordinary citizens cannot speak and do not understand. Democratic decision-making has become disconnected from the citizen body in general, and disproportionately so from poorer citizens who do not engage in even the minimal opportunities which still exist for them to voice their concerns (Mair 2013). Indeed, the decline of grassroots and broad-based membership organisations has had a disproportionately negative impact on poorer citizens, and further entrenched their exclusion from democratic politics. The professionally run, centrally managed elite organisations which have replaced traditional mass-membership organisations are less suited to mobilising grassroots activists from less advantaged, less educated, backgrounds or representing their interests in elite political discussions (Skocpol 2004a, b; Skocpol and Jacobs 2005).

The problem facing contemporary democracies is not merely that poorer people are not choosing to participate in politics. It is that contemporary democratic states have reconfigured themselves in ways which exclude the poor. Democratic states no longer provide citizens at the bottom end of the wealth and income distribution with the ability to develop democratic capacity or political knowledge through participation in the civic and associational activities which play a central role in the development of these things. As a result, poorer citizens are losing both the desire to participate and the capacity for effective or informed political participation. Participation in traditional mass-membership and non-political associations plays a key role in providing citizens with the intellectual, psychological, and practical resources for political participation: it helps develop political knowledge and the ability to engage in reasoned political discussions with others. Political participation is more frequent, more reflective, and more effective among citizens who share strong associational bonds with others (Macedo et al. 2005; Putnam 1993, 2001, 2002; Whiteley 2012). This is because civic participation encourages in citizens the sense that they have a stake in collective endeavours: it builds mutual trust and a sense of belonging. Participation in civic associations builds social capital: it encourages members of the polity to think of themselves as *citizens* who share common concerns and can find collaborative solutions to problems, rather than abstract individuals, who seek individualistic solutions to concerns that they see as unique to them (Galston 1999; Stoker 2006). It cultivates habits of mind and body over the long term: a self-identification as a person who understands themselves as sharing particular relations with others and acts on this basis.

Participation in civic associations has been found to build democratic capacity by cultivating political knowledge and deliberative competences which are important for effective democratic engagement, competences which include a sense of give and take, and the ability to discuss issues in ways that others can understand and accept. Citizens become more able to 'test the veracity of their own views' against the views of others either through 'casual conversation or … more formal deliberation' and, hence, to develop a more reflective, less dogmatic attitude toward their current ideals, values, and beliefs (Putnam 2001, pp. 288–289).

Empirical evidence about the changing role of civic associations in liberal democratic states thus goes some way in providing an explanation as to why the least advantaged participate in democratic life less often and less effectively than more advantaged citizens. The principal problem does not seem to be the unfairness of institutional mechanisms such as the electoral system or the current configuration of state or constituency boundaries, although they no doubt exacerbate the problem: political disengagement among the least advantaged is disproportionately visible across states which have very different rules governing these things, and in which power is distributed across very different jurisdictions. The problem is, at least partly, that individuals of low socio-economic status do not identify as *citizens* (in anything other than a purely legal sense) or participate as such. What participation they do engage in is largely uncoordinated and ineffective (Knight and Johnson 1998).

Social and economic inequality, changing patterns of social capital, the decline in traditional forms of associational and civic life, and the retreat of democratic politics from citizens into an elite community of insider organisations, have together combined to create a profound disconnection between citizens (and poorer citizens in particular) and the democratic system which undermines democracy at the ground level. Citizens themselves say as much. The reasons that citizens give for not caring about politics, and for not getting involved, are that politics is too divorced from their own lives to be meaningful. Politicians do not listen. Debates conducted within political institutions among politicians do not speak to peoples' concerns. They do not trust politicians, or the political system. They do not, in the main, talk about having too little time to vote or to join a pressure group. They talk about feeling cut off from the political process, and resentful towards it. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many of these citizens have embraced the need for a radical change from the status quo, either in the form of Brexit or Donald Trump. And it is also not surprising that many of the measures which have been introduced in order to increase participation among 'hard to reach groups' and the poor in particular have had limited success. Initiatives such as the increased use of e-petitions in Britain, and targeted campaigns aimed at 'getting out the vote' among young people and other disengaged groups, have only really succeeded in marginally increasing participation among the middle classes and thus have, as a consequence, served to further entrench existing political inequalities rather than ameliorate them. Similarly, the introduction of more democracy at the local level in the UK, through initiatives such as elected mayors and police commissioners, as part of successive governments' agenda of localism have merely entrenched the same inequalities in participation, power, and influence present at the national level at the local level

(Parvin 2009, 2011, 2012). The sense of disconnection goes deeper than mere lack of time or opportunity, and is bound up with wider trajectories of change in the fabric of democracy and civil society.

We need to be clear. The problem for democrats is not merely that the decline in traditional civic associations has made it harder for poorer citizens to get their views heard. It is that liberal democratic states no longer ensure the fair value of the political liberties for their poorest members; they have failed, and continue to fail, to ensure the requisite social, political, civic, and economic environment necessary for citizens to learn to articulate their views in ways that others can understand and accept, think of themselves as citizens joined in a collective political project with others, or internalise the norms of reasonableness necessary to engage in productive democratic debates with others. The reconfiguration of civil society and its associations has closed off the principal routes through which poorer citizens used to obtain political representation and social capital, and markets have not taken up the slack: indeed, they have made the situation worse. As traditional non-political and mass-membership associations capable of mobilising citizens of low socio-economic status decline and have been replaced with newer associations and groups which mobilise citizens of a predominantly higher socio-economic status, and as the opportunity for entering into non-economic relations with one another has diminished in the face of expanding free markets and a withering of civil society, so social capital has become concentrated among the wealthy. As a consequence, we are seeing not just a concentration of power and influence among elite organisations and institutions which operate at a distance from the citizenry at large, but also the emergence of a 'political' class, whose members tend to be of high socio-economic status, engage in a range of formal and informal political activities, and have a disproportionately high degree of political knowledge and influence, and an 'apolitical' class, who tend to be of a lower socio-economic status, do not tend to engage formally or informally in politics, and have a disproportionately low degree of political knowledge and influence.

## The Problem of Participatory Inequality for Deliberative Democracy

The fact that the politics of liberal democratic states has become so inhospitable to poorer citizens, and has become characterised by forms of governance which exclude citizens, and poorer citizens in particular, has led many political theorists to defend deliberative democracy as a strategy for democratic reform. Deliberative democrats have taken seriously the claim that social and economic inequality tends to translate into political inequality, and also that citizens have become increasingly estranged from democratic life. Hence, they propose to wind back the changes that have created this situation, to reduce the gap between citizens, and between citizens and states, and to resolve political inequalities through an egalitarian redistribution of wealth and resources. But deliberative democrats underestimate the scale and nature of the problem and, hence, propose solutions which would not serve to better include citizens in the democratic process.

Deliberative democracy embodies a positive vision of politics which has attracted many political theorists from different philosophical traditions. It invokes a rich, inclusive public sphere in which citizens are capable of participating in substantive discussions about the laws that will bind them and the decisions made in the institutions that govern them. It suggests that citizens should be at the heart of the democratic system, and that the legitimacy of democratic institutions—and the decisions they make—is dependent on their acceptability to the people who live under them (Landemore 2017). Politics should not be something done by other people behind closed doors in institutions that citizens do not understand or recognise; it should be a process whereby individuals identify and resolve social and political problems, and set the terms of their common life together, through their participation in collective discussions with one another as equals (Chambers 2009; Dryzek 2012; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Mansbridge et al. 2012).

Deliberative democrats are therefore very keen to ensure the removal of barriers to participation. But what are these barriers? For deliberative democrats, the problem is that citizens experience '*structural* … deficiencies which have to do with problems of scale, complexity, lack of information and knowledge, and opportunities to speak and be heard' (Chambers 2009). This emphasis on structural deficiencies explains the deliberative democrats' faith in the need to increase the opportunities open to citizens to participate: a lack of participation indicates in part a failure of the system to ensure sufficient institutional means to participate in the relevant ways. It also explains the deliberative democrats' faith in redistribution as a means of addressing political inequality: barriers to deliberation are primarily structural, and hence they can be rectified by measures which re-allocate structural resources in ways which are more equitable.

But the empirical work discussed in the 'Political Participation, Socio-economic Inequality, and the Decline of Civil Society' section suggests that the problem in fact lies as much, if not more, at the *psychological* level. Let us consider the data as it applies to non-deliberative democracies as currently configured in the world. There is, as we have already discussed, a significant and growing body of evidence to suggest that among the various things that people need in order to build democratic capacity and to participate is membership in a certain kind of community, the norms of which nurture and strengthen in its members a certain *identity*. The *ability* to participate, and the willingness to *actually* participate, in democratic life depends not just on the possession of certain kinds of goods which can be redistributed from one person to another, or a diverse range of participatory options. It depends upon one's access to, and immersion in, a particular set of *norms*. It requires people to have developed certain habits of mind and body over the long term, and to have developed a self-identification as a person who shares certain associative bonds with others and acts as such. That is, participation requires certain cognitive capacities and attitudes of mind in citizens; it requires citizens not only to *have* certain things but to *think* in certain ways and, hence, to be a member of a certain kind of normative community. Democratic innovations which have focused on merely identifying and then removing *structural* impediments to citizen participation, but which have ignored the importance of building in all members of the polity an *identity* as a *citizen*, have had only moderate success in raising

aggregate rates of participation, and little success in motivating members of marginalised groups to participate in greater numbers (Birch et al. 2013). Equal capacity for participation needs not only the amelioration of structural inequalities in social and economic resources, but also the establishment of a particular set of norms in society which support and encourage the development of habits of mind and body and a conception of oneself as the kind of person for whom political activity is meaningful.

But the state cannot redistribute norms. It cannot redistribute social capital by taking it from one place and putting it in another, or by taking it from some people and giving it to others. By its nature, social capital and a sense of citizenship must emerge and grow organically out of the experiences and activities of the individuals concerned. Of course, the state can identify and then redistribute certain important structural goods in the hope that doing so will lead to the organic development of the social norms necessary for widespread participation in deliberative politics (Cohen and Sabel 1997). But to do so would be a vast, long-term, and uncertain undertaking, which, if successful, would not produce the necessary benefits for many years or even generations. Indeed, it would not even be possible to know if our reform efforts were *on track* for many years. At the very least, such an endeavour would require nothing less than the rebuilding of civil society, and hence the reconfiguration of liberal democratic states, from the ground up. It would require the re-emergence of a flourishing civil society at the local and national levels, and the building of a grassroots politics the likes of which has not been seen in democratic states in decades. The necessary resources would need to be identified, policies would need to be tested and then implemented by appropriately reconfigured institutions. The policies would need to succeed in providing the right resources to the right people in the right amounts. The experience of possessing these resources would need to *bed in*. People, families, communities would need to develop a new sense of self, and of self-confidence, freed from their prior circumstances. They would need to learn to trust one another, to take an interest in one another, and see their own wellbeing as in some sense connected to the wellbeing of others and, in doing so, would build for themselves a more coherent civic life which would connect them to the wider polity. And then, once this has been achieved, states would need to begin the long and complicated process of winding back the institutional and cultural changes which have resulted in the marginalisation of citizens from the political system and relocated the business of governance in an elite community of political actors divorced from the citizen body at large. Trajectories of governance would need to be reversed and replaced. Institutions would need to be radically altered or created from scratch.

While this is not theoretically impossible, the scale of the undertaking poses a serious problem for democrats who see more widespread participation among citizens as important to the enrichment of democracy (Parvin 2016). The more emphasis that democrats place on the need for widespread and equal political participation, the bigger the role that citizens are required to play in the democratic system, the more important it is for democrats to explain (a) how they will ensure this participation in democracies which have experienced the kinds of social and political changes that they have, (b) how they will identify with sufficient certainty

the resources people need in order to participate in the way (their conception of) democracy requires, (c) how they would ensure not just a more equitable distribution of social and economic resources, but the re-establishment of the social norms that are necessary for participation but which have all but disappeared in contemporary states, and (d) how they will reliably judge the relative success or failure of these initiatives over the medium term.

All of this poses a significant problem for those non-deliberative democrats who nevertheless see an increase in rates of formal political participation among citizens as a central part of rejuvenating democracy. However, it is a much more significant problem for deliberative democrats. The idea that deliberative democracy would improve upon the situation we have now, or offers a better guide to democratic reform than an alternative non-deliberative model, is deeply problematic precisely because deliberative democracy is such a rich and demanding conception of democracy: if recent trends represent a threat to non-deliberative forms of democracy, they represent an even greater threat to deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy sets the bar for citizens significantly higher in terms of how involved they are required to be and also what kind of involvement is required. This, it was noted earlier, is for many its principal appeal. For deliberative democrats, democracy is not simply about counting votes, or about encouraging citizens merely to get more involved in politics. It is about encouraging in citizens the capacity and the willingness to engage in particular forms of democratic debate, to accept the rules in which these debates are grounded, to voice their concerns in appropriate ways, and to abide by the outcomes of these debates. Democratic citizenship is understood to be a much more central part of one's life than it is in non-deliberative forms of politics: politics in a deliberative democracy is more present, more visible.

Deliberative democrats differ on the stringency of the requirements for appropriate participation. Liberal deliberative democrats drawing on Rawls's later work require citizens to be able to participate, and to actually participate, in particular, and quite demanding, forms of deliberation (Cohen 2009; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Mansbridge et al. 2012; Parvin 2015). Non-liberal deliberative democrats reject as exclusionary the Rawlsian preoccupation with establishing a constrained form of public reasoning (Benhabib 1996; Dryzek 2001; Habermas 1996). However, they, like the liberals, nevertheless presuppose and require the existence of an active, participatory public sphere in which citizens can develop a sense of citizenship, build democratic capacity, and engage with one another in various ways in the interests of producing fair democratic outcomes through civil society associations, broad-based political movements, and other such intermediary structures.

Both liberal and non-liberal deliberative democrats thus require as crucial that the knowledge, and attitudes, as well as the cognitive capacities, necessary for active citizenship are provided for all citizens and are not just possessed by a wealthy few. And both liberal and non-liberal deliberative democrats join with the social capitalists in emphasising the important role of civil society associations in providing these skills and attitudes. For liberal deliberative democrats, public engagement within and through civic associations not only develops 'self-esteem' and 'political competence', but also encourages in citizens the capacities necessary

for their engagement in liberal public reasoning among reasonable citizens (Cohen 2009; Knight and Johnson 1998; Rawls 1971, 1993, 2001). For non-liberal deliberative democrats, the society-wide clash of ideas characteristic of a genuinely flourishing democracy is conducted across civil society by a diversity of social and political movements, associations, and groups which act to build democratic capacity (Benhabib 1996; Dryzek 2001; Fraser 1990). It is thus a particular problem for both varieties of deliberative democracy that the civic infrastructure necessary for participation in democratic politics has eroded in liberal democratic states around the world with the consequence that citizens have lost touch with politics and lack political knowledge and democratic capacity. What democratic capacity and knowledge does exist has become concentrated among affluent citizens. If civil society plays an important role in educating people for participation, then the erosion of civil society in liberal democratic states in the contemporary era poses a significant problem for strategies of democratic reform which put citizen participation at the centre.

But this is not the only reason that the erosion of civil society is problematic for many deliberative democrats. Deliberative democracy does not only rely on a flourishing civil society for its *educative* role, but also its role in ensuring fair and effective *representation*. Deliberative democrats emphasise the need to secure stronger and more effective links between citizens and states, but they also emphasise the key role that civic associations can play in building these links. Rawlsian deliberative democrats unite with more radical deliberative democrats in arguing that in a deliberative democracy civic associations, grassroots movements, and other intermediary groups provide an important link between citizens and decision-making institutions. Civic associations operate as deliberative spaces in which citizens can develop the capacity for public reason, but they also communicate the concerns expressed in these spaces to elected representatives in order that they shape the decision-making process. The fact that in liberal democratic states such as the USA and the UK, many grassroots movements capable of providing deliberative space for poorer citizens have disappeared and been replaced by hierarchical sectional interest groups more suited to mobilising and representing wealthier citizens is therefore severely problematic for the deliberative democratic project. The decline in traditional associational life, and the erosion of those organisations and groups in which poorer citizens used to participate, mobilise, and gain political knowledge suggests two things: that the principal means by which citizens gain political knowledge, self-esteem, and political competence are becoming increasingly estranged from citizens at the lower end of the wealth and income distribution, and that these same citizens are losing the central means by which their concerns might be raised among policy makers and decision makers. In deliberative democratic theory, civil society associations anchor decision-making in the shared will of the public (Habermas 1996). Civil society, through its associations, embodies and communicates the political will of the people, and makes this will accessible to those charged with making decisions. Hence, if civil society is dominated by associations which are incapable of mobilising and communicating the concerns of the poorest members of society, then the political will on which decision makers draw in their own deliberations will be dominated by

the concerns of the wealthy. This is exactly what has happened (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2014; Achen and Bartels 2016; Thomas 2017).

A growing number of deliberative democrats have sought to resolve this problem by creating more diverse opportunities for the incorporation of citizens' political ideas, for example, through the creation of multiple publics, or the incorporation of 'everyday talk' (Mansbridge 1999; Benhabib 1996; Dryzek 2012; Fraser 1990; Mansbridge et al. 2012). Others still have sought to abandon the idea of representation entirely in favour of a more 'open' democracy which has a strong ideal of citizen deliberation at its core (Landemore 2017). But again, the problem does not seem to be simply that the deliberative process is insufficiently attentive to the expressed political concerns of the least well off, but that the least well off are not expressing political concerns. Landemore's claim that deliberative democracy should be disaggregated from representative democracy entirely, in order to more directly harness citizens' deliberative insights is undermined by the fact that the deliberation she values and requires is not really happening, at least not outside of the wealthy middle classes. As a result of social and economic inequality and a decline in social capital (especially among less affluent citizens), the vast majority of citizens are not engaging in the kind of informal 'everyday talk' about politics across 'multiple publics' that many deliberative democrats believe is crucial. The decline in formal and informal political participation among citizens at the lower end of the wealth and income distribution suggests that what is occurring is a more profound disengagement from politics among these citizens than a simple rejection of certain activities, a trend which is bound up with wider changes in democratic governance. As associations capable of mobilising poorer citizens decline in strength and influence, as political and civic participation becomes increasingly concentrated among the wealthy elite, and as politics becomes increasingly divorced from the citizen body, the bleaker the prospect of encouraging widespread participation among citizens, or rebuilding the forms of local and grassroots politics that deliberative democracy requires, becomes. And the more that civil society becomes dominated by hierarchical interest groups disproportionately suited to protecting the interests of a narrow range of politically active citizens, the more unfeasible the deliberative democratic vision appears. The deliberative democrats' reliance on a thriving civic society to provide deliberative capacity and representation to all citizens runs against the grain of empirical trends in civic associational life, and the trajectory of liberal democratic politics over the past half-century. The kind of civil society that deliberative democrats invoke in their vision of democracy, the level of engagement on which they rely for this vision to make sense and to function, and the forms of local and national politics that they require in order for a deliberative democracy to flourish, do not exist, have not existed for several decades, and could not be secured through redistribution or the provision of more diverse institutional opportunities for participation.

## An Alternative Strategy for Reform

The response among many political theorists to low and declining rates of political participation, as well as increased participatory inequality, has been to reaffirm the importance of citizen participation and to develop strategies aimed at increasing it and making it more equal. In particular, it has been to develop a conception of democracy grounded in the widespread participation of citizens in rich and ongoing forms of deliberation aimed at identifying and resolving social and political problems, and also building a sense of commonality among participants. The reasons for this are intelligible enough. As mentioned earlier, citizen participation has always provided an important check on elite power. Hence, if citizens are not participating in large enough numbers and in the relevant ways, then elite power is not subject to appropriate checks. So participation needs to be encouraged in order that elites are not afforded disproportionate power. However, this approach is mistaken. It places too much emphasis on building a desire and a capacity for participation among citizens who, as a result of overlapping changes and developments in the fabric of liberal democratic states, no longer find themselves in circumstances which support their capacity to participate, or provide them with the requisite knowledge to deliberate on political matters in the way democracy requires. The idea common among democratic theorists that it is *citizens'* responsibility to hold elite power in check, and also to ensure against the rise of civil oligarchies, places too much of a burden on citizens who for reasons often beyond their control are unable to discharge this responsibility. We can see the consequences of this in the developments outlined in 'Political Participation, Socio-economic Inequality, and the Decline of Civil Society' and 'The Problem of Participatory Inequality for Deliberative Democracy'. States such as the UK and the USA have held citizens responsible for curbing elite power without providing them with the relevant opportunities and resources to do so and in doing so they have allowed economic elites to dominate the democratic process and to leverage their wealth and networks in order to reform institutions in ways which have entrenched their own power and structurally excluded less privileged citizens over the long term.

Empirical trends describing the low levels of political participation among citizens and the increasing inequality of this participation do not suggest that we need to reform democracy in ways which make it more participatory, therefore. They suggest that we should de-emphasise the role and importance of citizen participation and seek instead ways of securing fair and democratic outcomes in the *absence* of widespread participation. This may sound paradoxical. But it is only paradoxical if we share the increasingly common assumption that the strength of a democracy should be measured according to the level of participation that it encourages among its citizens. I have suggested that if we use this as the fundamental criterion for judging the performance of a particular set of democratic institutions, then we are likely only to conclude that achieving a strong democracy is very difficult indeed and almost impossible to achieve in the near future given the psychological, non-structural preconditions of political participation and the acute

antipathy among many of the poorest and most marginalised citizens towards current political practice.

Deliberative democracy is not a viable strategy for democratic reform. It sets the bar too high and requires too much of citizens. What democrats interested in genuinely reforming democracy for the better should seek is a form of democracy which builds in the scale and nature of the challenges facing democracy in the contemporary era. We need what Achen and Bartels have called a 'democracy for realists': a conception of democracy that fits the world in which we live, a world in which citizens face vast and entrenched obstacles to participating, in which many citizens possess little or no political knowledge or enthusiasm for contributing to democratic debates, and in which politics has become marginal to their lives (Achen and Bartels 2016). Instead of focusing on how we can improve participation, therefore, I suggest we focus on how to improve *representation* by embracing the trajectories of change that I have described herein, rather than seeking to reverse or ignore them.

The challenges posed by political disengagement, participatory inequality, and low political knowledge among citizens are better dealt with through a strengthening of *representation* over *participation* because such a strategy need not require citizens to act and think in ways that empirical data gathered over the past 70 or so years tells us they do not or cannot. It is also less demanding in terms of the information that citizens need in order to participate in the relevant ways, and it can produce fair and legitimate outcomes in the absence of widespread participation or even engagement among citizens. This is a foundational, rather than accidental, quality of representative democracy which emerged at least partly out of the need to make democracy compatible with the increasing diversity, size, and complexity of modern mass societies (Manin 2010). As mass societies became too large to allow for direct participation in decision-making by each and all citizens, so new structures had to be conceived to better track the preferences of the citizenry and ensure freedom and equality through self-government (Urbinati 2008). The rise of representative democracy was thus in part a *pragmatic* response to the new challenges posed by modernity, but it was also a coherent *philosophical* response to the fact that the participatory model of democracy no longer fits the world. The transition from direct to representative democracy embodied a shift in democratic theory and practice about what kind of institutions could hope to make good on democratic principles of freedom, equality, and self-government given the world as it is. The appeal of representative democracy was not then, and is not now, merely that it provides the most practical response to the deep and wide changes that characterise modern states, although it does so. It is that it is the best philosophical approach we have thus far come up with capable of making good on democratic principles in the modern era.

Empirical trends strongly suggest that any model of democratic decision-making and legitimacy needs to contend with the fact of widespread political disengagement and low levels of political knowledge. That is, it needs to incorporate this fact at its foundation. What we should not do is design a system of democracy which requires citizens to participate more than we have reason to believe that they will, know more than they will, or avail themselves of participatory opportunities that they have

historically shown themselves to be uninterested in. Helene Landemore rejects representative democracy for the fact that it keeps 'the people at a safe distance from political power' and makes 'no room for democratic deliberation among ordinary citizens' (Landemore 2017, p. 5). But again, the lived experience of liberal democracy in the twenty-first century suggests that these are good things or, at least, that in doing these things representative democracy offers a realistic and normatively persuasive hope for a better democratic future. The point is not that representative democracy 'keeps people at a safe distance from power'. It is that representative democracy can continue to function in the event of citizens becoming disconnected, or disconnecting themselves, from political power, as they have done. And the point is not that representative democracy marginalises or ignores citizens' deliberations, but that it can continue to function in circumstances like those in which we find ourselves: circumstances in which 'democratic deliberations among ordinary citizens' is either not happening or not being conducted in a way that is required by whatever model of deliberation we choose to defend, or in a way that is consistent with political equality.

The central challenge, therefore, is not how to make democratic institutions more reliant on citizen engagement, just as it was not in the initial emergence of representative democracy in response to the rise of complex mass societies. Rather now, just as it was then, it is how to construct a democratic politics which can cope with the absence of citizens, and poor citizens in particular. It is not how to better harness the combined knowledge of the citizenry, but how to produce just and defensible outcomes in the absence of widespread relevant knowledge among citizens (Achen and Bartels 2016; Somin 2016). It is not to reverse the growth of elite democracy and governance, but rather to reconfigure representative institutions in ways which ease some of the pressure on the general citizenry to participate, ensures that representative institutions are not captured by socio-economic elites, and establishes representatives as the agents of political change rather than citizens themselves (Parvin 2017).

This last point is crucial. Reasonable uncertainty about the ability of economic redistribution to ensure the fair value of the liberty to participate in democratic life in the way that democratic theory requires, for the reasons outlined here in 'Political Participation, Socio-economic Inequality, and the Decline of Civil Society' and 'The Problem of Participatory Inequality for Deliberative Democracy', necessitates that we should not be too confident in assuming that recipients of redistribution who are not participating are not participating through choice. An over-optimism about the ability of redistribution to ensure the fair value of the political liberties can skew normative debates and lead to perverse conclusions. For example, it can lead to a complacency, even among egalitarians, about the ability of citizens at the bottom end of the wealth and income distribution to whom resources are being distributed to take charge of their lives and to drive forward change. Because the fair value of the political liberties are not straightforwardly ensured by the redistribution of structural resources, we cannot assume that recipients of state redistribution will be able to exercise their political liberties in the way democracy requires in order to use democracy to improve their own lives.

Unlike participatory or deliberative regimes, which make the poorest and most marginalised members of society responsible for improving their *own* lives by participating in the democratic system and affecting change that way, a representative system can improve these citizens' lives through the activities of representatives. The burden of responsibility for the improvement of citizens' lives, their communities, and their freedoms best lies with representatives rather than with citizens themselves who, for a variety of overlapping and complex reasons, are not able to fully identify or resolve the problems that they face. Because we cannot be sure that in the current historical moment even people in receipt of redistributed resources of one kind or another can be said to have what they need to participate in the way democracy requires, or in ways which offer any hope of getting their voices heard or improving their lives, we need to require less of citizens, not more, and hold them less, rather than more, responsible for their own lack of engagement. We need to ease the burden on individuals to improve their own circumstances, and establish institutions which can do this *for* them, or *with* them. We need representative institutions to act and deliberate in ways that, for a variety of overlapping reasons, many individuals cannot. We need representative institutions to lead; to identify and resolve political problems in ways which are consistent with guiding liberal democratic principles of freedom and equality.

We need to ease the burden on citizens to participate in ways that they cannot, then, and look instead to representative institutions to govern in the common interest. We also need to ease the pressure on traditional mechanisms of participation (e.g. voting) in order to incorporate citizens' voices at other points in the decision-making process in ways which compensate for their lack of democratic capacity. Helene Landemore criticises representative democracy because it 'does not, in theory, require any form of popular participation besides voting' (Landemore 2017, p. 5). As we have seen, given current circumstances, not requiring much citizen participation is actually a strength of representative democracy, rather than a weakness. But Landemore is correct that representative democracies have tended to place too much emphasis on one form of participation over all others. Hence, while requiring widespread deliberation among citizens at the level of mass society is unviable, and while seeking to *replace* the idea of representation with deliberation as Landemore does is also unviable, incorporating democratic deliberation in the form of mini-publics into representative democratic regimes in the service of *strengthening representation* may be helpful. To express this in terms of Chambers's distinction, we need to reject *deliberative democracy* and instead explore what opportunities might exist for introducing more *democratic deliberation* into representative institutions.

The most obvious way in which this might be done, and the way that has received the most empirical analysis, is through the use of mini-publics. Mini-publics are most often defended for their epistemic benefits: supporters have argued that small groups of individuals afforded the right support and information in controlled circumstances can reach informed and helpful conclusions which, if fed into democratic debates, can enrich democratic decision-making and improve governance (Fung 2015; Fishkin 2009; Goodin 2012). But mini-publics can also facilitate the inclusion of citizens' voices in ways more appropriate for the contemporary

democratic age than rich forms of citizen participation and deliberation. Strategies which seek to incorporate the perspectives of small groups of citizens into the traditionally configured institutions of representative democracy may serve to open up the decision-making process to the views of all citizens and, hence, serve to break up the structural asymmetries in influence which emerge as a consequence of too heavy a reliance on widespread, society-wide participation. They also offer a possible solution to the lack of political knowledge among many marginalised citizens by providing opportunities for reflective deliberation and knowledge gathering in controlled environments: inviting small groups of citizens to reflect collectively on issues, providing these citizens with the relevant facts on which to reflect, and then incorporating the resulting insights either formally or informally into the decision-making process may go some way to plugging the epistemic gaps which characterise contemporary mass societies, improve decision-making, and provide a real voice for citizens who have been genuinely empowered to know and defend their own interests. A representative system augmented with mini-publics would be more able to cope with the endemic obstacles to democratic capacity and inclusion that characterise contemporary democracies than theories which prioritise widespread citizen participation, and would also go some way to softening the influence that the media and other external factors have over the form and content of people's participation. They formally introduce diverse voices into the democratic system through means which run alongside, but are independent of, other formal activities such as voting. Introducing citizens' voices into conversations conducted among political actors at the elite level through the formal inclusion of mini-publics theorises a response to widespread concerns about declining participation, and in participation among the poor in particular, by leaving traditional forms of participation intact while de-emphasising their importance in communicating the concerns of citizens to decision makers. Disengagement with the traditional mechanisms of representative democracy becomes less problematic because these traditional mechanisms are required to do less work. The fact that few people vote, for example, or that affluent people vote in disproportionately higher numbers than less affluent ones, is less of a problem in a democracy which incorporates marginalised voices in other ways at other points in the democratic system. In such a system, mini-publics may act as a check on majorities, and provide a more balanced set of perspectives on which elected representatives and representative organisations including lobby groups can draw in their discussions about possible outcomes.

Additionally, there may at the same time be ways of introducing further opportunities for meaningful debate and citizens' voices into representative institutions. Rules governing legislative debates among representatives, for example, might be reformed in ways which make them more meaningful (even the acceptance among politicians that few people will be watching or caring about the conduct of these debates might serve to reduce their theatrical and rhetorical character). The passage of legislation could be made more consultative, with lobby organisations and interest groups as well as citizens (through focus groups or mini-publics) providing expertise and insights into the formal process, subject to appropriate checks and balances. In the UK, citizens' insights might be more formally incorporated into the scrutiny provided by select committees, or through

the creation of new committees or bodies designed to provide elected representatives with information and wider perspectives on specific questions. And so on.

It is not possible to consider the precise institutional reforms necessary to strengthen representative institutions in the way that this new, more realistic, vision of democracy requires, or to evaluate the burgeoning empirical literature on the strengths and weaknesses of different democratic innovations, and it has not been my intention to do so. Rather, my aim has been to suggest a shift in perspective *away* from the importance and centrality of citizen participation, and *towards* the importance of representation. It has been to engage with the enduring assumption among many political theorists that the key challenge for democracy in the twenty-first century is to increase participation, to rebuild the bridge between the citizen and the state, and that strong democracies are synonymous with active citizenries. Such views place too much importance on participation, ignore the complex and often intangible needs that citizens have in order to be active in the ways that participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy require, and, in doing so, place too much of a burden of responsibility on citizens to act and think in ways they cannot, and know things they do not know, in order that they participate in ways which improve their lives and the lives of others. My aim has been to encourage a shift in our thinking about democracy, to suggest that the key challenges for democracy are not how to make democracy more reliant on citizen participation but how to cope with disengagement, and to suggest that the dominant approach to democratic renewal in the field of Anglo-American political philosophy and political science (an increase in political participation facilitated by redistribution) is in fact counter-productive and irresponsible in that it requires widespread participation but cannot reliably, and with sufficient certainty, explain how citizens might acquire the resources that they need in order to participate. The forces of social and political change that have reconfigured liberal democratic states over the past half-century are too strong, too deep and widespread to sustain any real optimism about increasing, or equalising, participation among citizens at the level of mass democracy. Taking empirical trends in participation, and their analysis by political scientists, seriously requires us to be more circumscribed in our approach to democratic reform. It requires us to seek new, more limited, solutions to political disengagement and the participatory inequalities which characterise contemporary liberal democratic states which do not place particular emphasis on citizen participation, and do not require citizens to engage in activities that they do not, or cannot, engage in.

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