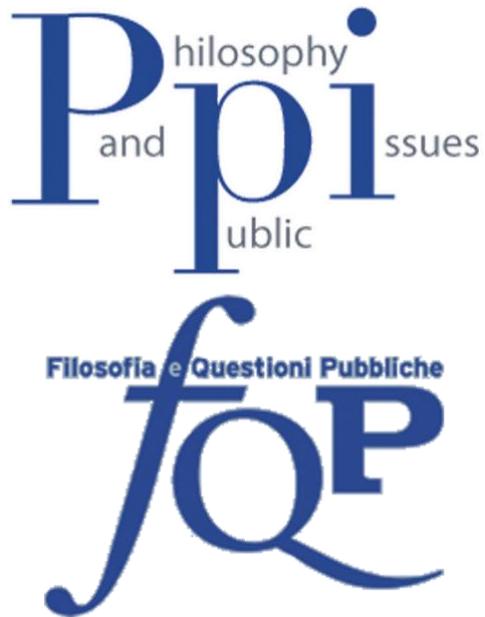# DOES PARTISANSHIP CONTRIBUTE
TO STABILITY?

BY

JAY RUCKELSHAUS

[THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK]

Does Partisanship Contribute to Stability?

Jay Ruckelshaus

Introduction

Many of the ills of contemporary liberal democracy concern political parties and partisanship. In the United States, partisanship is polarized, and many fear the citizenry is divided into warring camps, making compromise impossible (Campbell 2016; Iyengar et al., 2019). In many European democracies, where the party landscape is increasingly fragmented, declining rates of partisan affiliation instantiate generalized political disengagement, alienation, and distrust in democratic institutions (Ignazi 2017; Mair, 2013). Political scientists warn, in a vast empirical literature, that both forms of partisan pathologies threaten to destabilize democratic governance.

Yet despite the abundance of empirical examination, the topic of parties and partisanship has been greatly neglected within normative political philosophy. Political philosophers have tended to think about politics at such a high level of abstraction that parties and partisanship have become almost totally invisible, due no doubt in part to John Rawls's influence on the field. It is particularly fortunate, then, that there has begun to emerge a

literature on parties and partisanship – a literature to which Matteo Bonotti's *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* is a significant contribution (Bonotti 2017, see also Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White and Ypi 2016; Wolkenstein 2019).

One of Bonotti's distinctive claims is that partisanship is vital to liberal-democratic politics because "parties contribute to the overlapping consensus that for Rawls guarantees stability in diverse societies" (Bonotti 2017, 3). To show this, Bonotti points to various features of political parties that enable them to contribute to overlapping consensus and stability, including, for instance, the fact that partisanship "involves a commitment to the common good rather than the sole advancement of merely partial interests" (Bonotti 2017, 101). This argument is highly significant, as it promises not only to remedy the anti-party bias within Rawlsian political liberalism, but to do so by arguing, against the trends just mentioned, that partisanship is essential for liberal-democratic stability, properly understood.

In this paper, I question this argument from partisanship to stability, and hence question stability-based arguments for partisanship's normative value. I do so by claiming that Bonotti's argument faces a dilemma generated by the fact that real-world partisanship does not typically display the stability-supporting features he supposes, such as a commitment to the common good, but, on the contrary, often exerts destabilizing effects. If Bonotti modifies his conception of partisanship to make it more closely resemble real-world partisanship, then his argument from partisanship to stability is put in jeopardy. Yet if he continues to conceive of partisanship in terms of features that do not closely resemble real-world partisanship, then it is unclear whether this argument is particularly interesting or significant. Furthermore, I will show how Bonotti's likely response – an appeal to the

normative status of his account – fails to provide a solution to the dilemma, and instead raises further problems and questions.

In addition to posing challenges to Bonotti's argument, the paper offers a dose of methodological self-consciousness that has so far been fairly absent in the new partisanship literature. My discussion casts light on certain issues within the debate over ideal and non-ideal theory – a debate that has so far played out, ironically enough, at a fairly ideal level, rather than in relation to first-order political phenomena such as parties and partisanship.

In this paper, then, I first summarize Bonotti's stability-based argument for partisanship (Section II). I then present the dilemma for Bonotti's argument (Section III), before exploring each horn of this dilemma in more detail (Sections IV and V).

I

From partisanship to stability

The overarching goal of Bonotti's book is to defend the place of parties and partisanship within Rawlsian political liberalism, so it is natural that the notion of stability he thinks partisanship supports is that of Rawls. Concerns relating to stability play a prominent role in Rawls's later work – indeed, the canonical view is that stability is the core motivation for Rawls's revision of *A Theory of Justice*. *Political Liberalism* investigates how the liberal state should respond to "the fact of reasonable pluralism" of comprehensive doctrines (or "conceptions of the good") (Rawls 2005, 3, and *passim*). The conditions of freedom in modern societies rule out agreement on the good. But, partly because of this pluralism, it remains important to "establish and preserve unity and stability" (133) amongst reasonable citizens around the "basic structure of society" – "a society's main political, social, and

economic institutions, and how they fit together into one unified system of social cooperation" (Rawls 2005, 11). Thus, as Rawls frames the problem (a framing which Bonotti endorses (Bonotti 2017, 1)): "How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" (Rawls 2005, 3).

Rawls believes such stability can be achieved via "an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines," which I will first explain before recounting how Bonotti believes political parties are essential to achieving it (Rawls 2005, 133). Although citizens hold a great diversity of comprehensive doctrines, what they all share is endorsement of society's basic structure of institutions and foundational laws: "the political conception is a module, an essential constituent part, that in different ways fits into and can be supported by various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endure in the society regulated by it" (Rawls 2005, 144). Whenever acceptance of the basic political structure conflicts with one's more sectarian beliefs – those not party to the overlapping consensus – then the former outweighs the latter (Rawls 2005, 145, 154). Rawls believes it is the existence of an overlapping consensus – the "congruence" between one's views and support of the political conception – together with the assurance that one's fellow citizens are similarly inclined that ensures societal stability.

The fact that political allegiance "rests on the totality of reasons specified within the comprehensive doctrine affirmed by each citizen" gives one reasons to maintain such allegiance even in cases where one's interests are not (or are perceived not to be) adequately considered in the political process (Rawls 2005, 170). This helps clarify that Rawlsian stability is a highly moral concept; it is stability "for the right reasons." This is distinguished from a "mere modus

vivendi," which is "founded on self or group interests" and contingent on circumstances (*ibid.*, 147, 145-148). Society's basic structure is "affirmed on moral grounds" and not "a compromise compelled by circumstances" or political expediency (*ibid.*, 147, 169). The motivation for Rawls's political turn therefore appears less concerned with practical worries about societal collapse or insufficient citizen virtue and more concerned with the philosophical justifiability of the modern state under terms diverse citizens can all endorse.

This explains the importance of the final relevant element of Rawls's notion of stability: its relationship to the liberal principle of legitimacy – justification through public reason. The overlapping consensus demarcates, for Rawls, a kind of shared deliberative space – a "common currency of discussion" based around citizens' common endorsement of the political conception (*ibid.*, 165). This makes it "rational," Rawls thinks, for citizens "to move out of the narrower circle of their own [comprehensive] views and to develop political conceptions in terms of which they can explain and justify their preferred policies to a wider public" (*ibid.*, 164). This is public reason – the demand to appeal only to reasons that are generally shared when entering public discourse, rather than relying on one's more contentious, comprehensive views. As such, the process of public reasoning plays an essential role in the achievement and maintenance of an overlapping consensus, while also ensuring that such consensus is legitimate according to liberal standards.

What role might political parties and partisanship play in this understanding of stability? This question, virtually unaddressed in the vast secondary literature on Rawlsian political liberalism, is the subject of a key argument in Bonotti's book. As part of his broader argument for partisanship within political liberalism, Bonotti maintains that "parties are carriers of an overlapping consensus

and, they are desirable for the stability of liberal democracies within the confines of Rawls's political liberalism" (Bonotti 2017, 120). The key way in which parties support the overlapping consensus, according to Bonotti, is by encouraging public reasoning, "helping citizens to relate their comprehensive doctrines to political liberal values and institutions" (Bonotti 2017, 100).

To develop this case, Bonotti distinguishes between parties and factions – a distinction common to other recent rehabilitative accounts of partisanship. Factions are political associations that promote interests or values that are in some sense narrow, sectoral: "the sole advancement of merely partial interests" (Bonotti 2017, 101). Factions do not speak to all of society, nor do they offer a plausible interpretation of the common or public good. Parties, in contrast, "promote the interests of the whole political community" (*ibid.*, 104). In Rawlsian terminology, factionalism involves the promotion of specific conceptions of the good not widely shared across the citizenry, whereas partisanship involves a commitment to move beyond reasoning on this basis toward public reasoning. Partisanship helps citizens in "presenting partial values and demands in a way that takes into account general ends and the common good" (*ibid.*, 105). Bonotti's understanding of partisanship, then, involves "just the kind of commitment that underlies Rawls's political liberalism" – commitment to public reason (*ibid.*, 105).

Bonotti identifies three features of real-world parties in virtue of which they contribute to the overlapping consensus. First is parties' linkage function, much discussed by political scientists. Parties are unique among vehicles of political participation in that "they are located halfway between state and civil society and provide a unique, hybrid, and semi-institutional connection between the two domains" (*ibid.*, 120). Partisanship therefore encourages translation between citizens's comprehensive doctrines

and the demands of the public sphere. "Given that they must appeal both to their members and supporters, on the one hand, and to the broader public, on the other hand, they are in a unique position to show how comprehensive doctrines and values relate to widely shared political principles" (*ibid.*, 100). Second is the fact that parties "are not mere vehicles for promoting single, contingent, and temporary issues," but stitch individual concerns together into a credible, broad party platform (*ibid.*, 120). This encourages, Bonotti thinks, partisans to "relate particularistic values and interests to the broad range of policy areas and long-term political issues that the government of a modern nation-state normally involves" (*ibid.*, 120-121). Third, the creative power of parties to "actively create political divisions and choose how to reframe societal demands" provides a suitable environment for citizens to experiment with new ways of relating their comprehensive conceptions to political conceptions of justice (*ibid.*, 121-122).

For Bonotti, these features demonstrate that partisanship involves an "intrinsic" relation to public reasoning at the center of Rawls's account of stability (*ibid.*, 108). Rawls briefly notes that there is something about democratic competition that makes it "rational" for citizens "to move out of the narrower circle of their own views and to develop political conceptions in terms of which they can explain and justify their preferred policies to a wider public" (*ibid.*, 164). Bonotti's argument gives us reasons to believe that, in practice, it is political parties that most often and most effectively perform this broadening role. Contrary to what previous theorists assume, then, there is "no inherent tension between" a normative understanding of partisanship and "the demands of the Rawlsian overlapping consensus" (*ibid.*, 5). Instead, there exists a "correspondence between the normative demands of political liberalism and those of partisanship, as both of them require that policies and laws be defended on the basis of public

reasons, rather than by appealing to sectarian and factional values that only reflect the interests and conceptions of the good of a specific group of citizens" (*ibid.*, 111). So, even though Bonotti's defense of parties is idealized, in that he declines to argue that all real-world parties display these stability-promoting features, his argument still turns on functions core to the logic of parties. (I return to this point below.)

If successful, this argument about the broadening effects of partisanship on public discourse would support the overlapping consensus at the heart of Rawls's conception of stability. Stability requires citizens to converge on a set of fundamental political principles and the basic political structure – attachment that is moral, not strategic or a matter of compromise. Parties help citizens reconcile the partiality of their own views with the basic structure necessary for securing such convergent allegiance. And stability requires such allegiance to consist in terms and forms of reasoning that abstract away from their more partial commitments; the political imperatives of party competition encourage such reasoning, thereby contributing to the moral and justificatory autonomy of the political conception from private comprehensive doctrines. Thanks in large part to parties and partisanship, then, Rawls's goal of achieving a freestanding yet stable conception of justice is achieved.

II

A dilemma

Bonotti's argument from partisanship to stability is sophisticated and powerful. If successful, it would significantly advance the case for partisanship's role in our normative understanding of liberal democracy. However, the argument faces a dilemma, which I introduce in this section before exploring in

more detail each horn in the following two sections. To summarize upfront: the gap between the picture of parties within Bonotti's account and how they operate in the real world means that his argument from partisanship to stability is either false or of limited relevance.

The dilemma begins by asking: how similar is the picture of parties and partisanship presented by Bonotti to the way those phenomena look in the real world? That is, how often does real-world partisanship contribute to processes of public reasoning, thereby helping secure a Rawlsian overlapping consensus? The empirical evidence from the social sciences, I fear, does not give us much reason for optimism. Party competition in contemporary liberal democracies is rife with stability-detracting properties at odds with the idealized conception of parties Bonotti presents. I highlight three in particular: partisanship's factionalism, identity-based attachment, and gamesmanship.

Bonotti claims that partisanship involves a commitment to generalizable forms of reasoning according to which partisans "speak to all citizens as citizens, not as socially situated in this or that social class or income group or as having a particular comprehensive doctrine," and that this is what distinguishes partisanship from factionalism (Bonotti 2017, 107). In reality, though, appeals to narrow, particularist interests and constituencies are commonplace features of both campaigning and governing. Parties make "widespread" and "strategic use of group-based appeals," targeting certain groups in the public as a matter of course and promising to support their interests once in power (Thau 2019, 64). In giving voice to sectional interests, parties engage in forms of reasoning that very often fail to achieve strict standards of accessibility, eschewing public reason constraints. Consider, for instance, the United States Republican Party's 2020 campaign platform, which frequently fails to restrict its policies or

their justification to the realm of the political right, instead drawing on contested comprehensive doctrinal reasoning (often evangelical Christian). Or consider the British Labour Party's 2019 campaign slogan: "For the many, not the few." This is a clear appeal to a non-universal class of the citizenry that the party takes itself to be representative of that draws its power precisely by treating citizens as differentiated, not as universalized citizens.

Of course, it would be unfair to Bonotti to construe his argument as denying any role for group-based appeals. What he claims is that parties significantly broaden the terms of partial interests, situating them always within a broader, universalizing story about the common good using accessible reasons. But is it plausible to suppose that parties do this in a manner that is consistent and genuine – faithful to the spirit of public reason morality? This latter clause alerts us that offering halfhearted attempts to describe as good for the public what is actually a sectoral demand do not count, common as they are ("generous farm subsidies ought to be supported by any right-thinking citizen"). Do parties meaningfully encourage citizens to conceive of their comprehensive doctrines as merely partial, and do they regularly filter out the controversial aspects of such doctrines and direct discourse exclusively toward issues concerning the public political conception of justice?

I am skeptical. As the examples above show, parties frequently make no effort to broaden the terms of positions aimed at securing the support of their narrow constituencies. Indeed, it seems conceivable that the imperative to discipline their messaging in this way would be counterproductive – viewed by the constituency, perhaps, as unacceptable "selling out" or "weakening" the spirit of what it means to truly stand up or fight for our group. I think it is safe to say that real-world parties very often make appeals to their actual or desired coalition of groups with little effort to translate

their demands into a broader, citizen-wide idiom, whose reasoning could be accepted by all citizens in a non-trivial way (Hicken 2011; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Thau 2019).

And the tendency for parties to appeal to narrow bands of citizens only seems to be increasing. As noted above, the landscape of party competition in many European democracies is increasingly fragmented, owing to the collapse of parties' traditional ideological linkages to class and religious cleavages – partisan dealignment (Dalton & Wattenberg 2002). While it may be tempting to think that partisan dealignment would create favorable conditions for parties to channel partial interests to a public unconstrained by old attachments, recent work suggests that it is "precisely because political parties can no longer" rely on traditional coalitions that "they now feel a stronger push to highlight which categories of people they represent" in distinctively factional terms (Thau 2019, 64). This undercuts Bonotti's optimism that parties' "creative character" in drawing and reshaping the lines of political contestation "offers a crucial contribution to the overlapping consensus" by guiding discourse toward generally-shared political values (Bonotti 2017, 121-122). In fact, party leaders often use this very creative capacity opportunistically to identify "wedge issues" that purposefully divide the citizenry. Contemporary trends in Western polities indicate that the manipulation of political salience (particularly by insurgent right-wing populist parties) has moved in a narrowing, not a broadening direction, from a traditional redistributive left-right dimension to a culturally-divisive, "open versus closed" dimension (Dalton 2018; Kitschelt & Rehm 2019).

A much-discussed feature of the fragmentation of the party landscape is the way it has allowed the rise of populist political parties. Populist parties adopt a moralized division of the citizenry, elevating a conception of the "true" or "authentic" people over the

rest (usually especially historically marginalized groups) and aiming to govern in the former's name only (Müller 2016). Though addressed in a superficial sense to the whole citizenry, populist appeals rely on an understanding of the people "unreasonable" from a Rawlsian point of view, given that they frequently rule out the political equality of all citizens.

In addition to providing another (particularly pernicious) instance of sectoral appeals in party politics, populist partisanship calls attention to another widespread feature of empirical partisanship absent from Bonotti's picture: its affective dimension. A significant part of party politics is the cultivation and mobilization of a distinctive form of identity that is separate from ideological- or policy-based components of partisan appeals. So even setting aside the interpretive question of whether partisan claims are truly generalizable or not, and therefore instances of public reasoning, we must contend with this additional difficulty of empirical partisanship. A wealth of social-scientific work demonstrates how partisanship is often not a carrier of a citizen's prior beliefs as they pertain to politics, but is a deep-seated source of belonging and attachment that guides political thinking (Bankert et al. 2017; Green et al. 2002; Huddy & Bankert 2017). Under conditions of polarization, such as those obtaining in the contemporary United States, partisan identity is strengthened, contributing to dangerous forms of inter-partisan animosity and the development of an us-versus-them, zero-sum political conflict (Iyengar et al. 2012; Mason 2018b). Such dimensions of partisanship are missing from Bonotti's idealized account.

Partisanship's affective and identitarian nature makes more likely a third destabilizing tendency of contemporary parties: gamesmanship over electoral rules. Party competition depends on an architecture of laws and norms, incorporating such elements as the content of voting rights, honesty and fact-sensitivity, and

generalized faith in free and fair elections as the means of transitioning power. These laws and norms help constitute, for Bonotti, party competition as "a fair scheme of cooperation" (Bonotti 2017, 23). But in reality, party competition is an adversarial enterprise, characterized by competition, not cooperation. Adversarial competitions "present special ethical dilemmas, because they often incentivize or even require behaviors of participants that are normally considered unethical" – including, for partisans, the temptation to subvert faith in or otherwise tamper with the electoral architecture in ways that yield their side an advantage (Bagg & Tranvik 2019, 973). The development of such "arms race dynamics" (Bagg & Tranvik 2019, 976) does not happen all the time, in all places, but there are features inherent to the logic of partisanship itself – its competitiveness, its high stakes, its group-based nature – that invite the possibility of electoral gamesmanship. The choice of countries' electoral systems is frequently the result of "ruling parties [seeking] to maximize their representation" (Boix 1999, 609), such as the adoption of a proportional-representation system in France in significant part to benefit the Socialist Party (Knapp 1987). Gerrymandering in the United States and partisan control of the timing of district drawing in the United Kingdom are other common examples (Rossiter, Johnston, and Pattie 1999).

The disjunction between partisanship as a real-world practice and partisanship as a component of Bonotti's theory presents the following dilemma for his argument. Making his conception of partisanship more in touch with its empirical realities will threaten his stability-based argument for its normative value, while continuing with the current level of idealization does not provide a convincing defense of partisanship as we are likely to find it. I argue for each of these conclusions in the following two sections.

III

The first horn: getting real

One response Bonotti might make to this dilemma is to revise his conception of partisanship to make it more closely resemble real-world partisanship. He can, in other words, decrease the amount of idealization in his theory and accept that partisanship very frequently involves factional claims, identity, and gamesmanship. The problem with this move, though, is that it immediately threatens the soundness of his argument from partisanship to stability, and therefore threatens his project to defend the role of partisanship in normative democratic theory (at least in this respect). I note in advance that Bonotti is highly unlikely to make this move, for reasons explored in the next section. But in order to fully appreciate the impact partisanship's non-ideal empirical realities have on his argument, it is necessary to spell out, in more detail than last section's preliminary remarks, precisely in what ways empirical partisanship threatens the overlapping consensus.

Factional partisanship by definition fails to reason publicly. When parties make factional claims, they make free use of controversial reasons stemming from comprehensive doctrines. But even if parties fail to engage in public reasoning, might they still play some role in fostering the kind of moral attachment to the basic structure Rawls takes stability to consist in? In other words, how necessary for the possibility of an overlapping consensus is the practice of public reasoning? Someone interested in making a stability-based argument for the normative value of partisanship might insist that even partisanship that does not conform to public reason constraints can still support the overlapping consensus.

There does seem a sense in which public reason is tangential to, or instrumental to – not constitutive of – the overlapping consensus. Public reasoning is a mode of citizen interaction in which citizens commit to justifying policy in a certain way, whereas the overlapping consensus signifies "concordance" between citizens' private moral reasoning and acceptance of the basic political structure (Rawls 2005, 171). Rawlsian stability seems concerned, in the first instance, with the moral character of the (vertical) relationship between each citizen and the basic structure of the state, rather than the character of the (horizontal) modes of discourse among citizens. We can imagine a society in which the former obtains but not the latter. We can imagine a society, that is, in which all support the political conception based on "a balance of reasons as seen within each citizen's comprehensive doctrine," (Rawls 2005, 168) thus apparently satisfying the overlapping consensus, but whose citizens fail consistently to generalize (or who support parties or other groups who fail to generalize) the justifications for their arguments in political discourse to all others. Here we appear to have an overlapping consensus of affirmation of the political conception without public reason – and, perhaps, a reason for assuaging the fear that the prevalence of factionalism prevents an overlapping consensus.

This rescue attempt, however, is unconvincing. Even in cases where many citizens do genuinely support the political conception on the balance of their own private reasons, it is difficult to imagine such allegiance continuing – remaining stable – in the face of any significant amount of political associations who consistently reinforce more factional forms of reasoning. The reason for the practical, if not conceptual, linkage between the overlapping consensus and public reasoning is the mediating and social roles of the public sphere – public discourse and participative institutions such as parties. The public sphere is not simply a one-way channel of engagement whereby citizens register their prior, relatively static

political beliefs. Instead, it has an important shaping function; the arguments and narratives circulating in the public sphere help citizens make sense of their political beliefs, which they update and contextualize in a reciprocal manner. Parties do not just passively mirror an existing landscape of opinion, but provide more precise articulations of individual comprehensive views and how they might be related to the basic structure. It follows, then, that if the public sphere is populated by factional parties that constrict the deliberative pool to reasons and forms of analysis that encourage sectoral attachment to the state, then many, perhaps most, partisans will conform. In practice, factions' particularist forms of reasoning are very likely to be accompanied by substantively particularist policies, encouraging the belief among their followers that allegiance to the political structure is conditional on satisfaction of their sectoral interests. Factions' nonpublic reasoning, that is, "helps" citizens conceive of their relationship to the state in terms that conflict with the demands of the overlapping consensus.

The failure of public reasoning is, in all likelihood, indicative of a concomitant failure to endorse the political conception for the right reasons; the lack of one is a publicly-visible signal of the lack of the other. The imperative that all citizens endorse the basic structure based on moral reasons from within their own comprehensive doctrines may be, strictly speaking, and as a matter of conceptual analysis, separable from the requirement that the state (and citizens) refrain from supporting laws that cannot be justified to all. But, at least when it comes to partisanship, public reasoning seems contingently necessary for the overlapping consensus given the social nature of public discourse and the mediating role it plays between the private moralities of individual citizens and the basic structures of the state that must be endorsed. The attempt to rescue the stability argument for partisanship in the face of factionalism, therefore, appears unlikely to succeed. This is

not, of course, to deny that forms of factional partisanship may yet have a great many other democratic virtues, nor even that some of these virtues may plausibly be describable as yielding political stability. But it is to suggest that when factional partisanship is widespread, the very specific form of stability operative in Rawlsian public reason liberalism, and the one Bonotti is explicitly interested in – an overlapping consensus of freestanding moral allegiance to the basic political structure – becomes unlikely.

How serious a challenge is the second common feature of empirical partisanship, its identitarian and affective nature, to the overlapping consensus? I submit that this kind of partisanship threatens the overlapping consensus in two main ways. First, affective polarization distorts public discourse in ways that make public reasoning less likely. The "strengthening of partisan affect," together with the rise in echo chambers and partisan sorting along manifold demographic lines, increase the incentives for partisans to speak primarily to their own audience. It becomes more important to confirm one remains loyal to the "partisan team," rather than seek to persuade those who disagree (Iyengar & Krupenkin 2018; Mason 2018a). Under conditions of polarization, such as those obtaining in the United States, partisanship begins to look more like a social identity (or, perhaps, a comprehensive doctrine), in that it marks an associative group that itself drives political beliefs and behavior (Huddy et al. 2015; Huddy & Bankert 2017). This means, among other things, that when inter-partisan communication does occur, it is more likely to take the form of sheer denigration rather than the exchange of accessible justifications.

Second, and on a deeper level, partisanship's identitarian and affective nature replaces the propositional, belief-based nature of party competition with an expressive politics that minimizes the sense in which partisanship could even be the type of phenomenon

that could play a role in a justificatory enterprise such as the overlapping consensus. When partisanship becomes an identity that one cannot reflect upon, it encourages a type of argumentation (if, indeed, it can be called argumentation) in which partisan identity is asserted as a fact rather than a set of propositions. Partisan identity transforms the content of political beliefs from "claims about the world" to "mere characteristics of persons" leading partisan argumentation to consist not of genuine disagreement, but "cheerleading" one's side and "bad mouthing" the others' (Jones 1999, 82). On this reading, Bonotti's distinguishing criterion between party and faction – the type of reasoning each engages in – is not so much wrong, as irrelevant. It fails to capture that what is interesting (and worrisome) about affective polarization is not degradation in the quality (i.e., publicity) of reason, but displacement of reason simpliciter. Not only do partisans not endorse the political conception for the right (moral) reasons, in line with Rawlsian stability, but, if this vein of empirical research is to be believed, it is not clear that many of them endorse the political conception for any reasons beyond the maintenance of partisan identity.

The third and final empirical feature of partisanship, its tendency toward gamesmanship, also threatens the overlapping consensus. Agreement on basic procedural rules of liberal democracy is, for Rawls, a prerequisite for an overlapping consensus and state stability. Stability entails "the urgent political requirement to fix, once and for all, the content of certain political basic rights and liberties, and to assign them special priority…thereby establishing clearly and firmly the rules of political contest" (Rawls 2005, 160). But this is precisely what the competitive nature of partisanship, especially when combined with certain other non-ideal features such as polarization, calls into question. Parties frequently push for policies "insincerely," hoping primarily to maintain power (Blau 2018, 207). Indeed, such

gamesmanship threatens not only the overlapping consensus, but also the less ambitious constitutional consensus, which requires universal acceptance of "the political procedures of democratic government" (Rawls 2005, 159). Even in the best of times, absent such divisive gamesmanship, the adversarial nature of partisan competition makes concerns of political expediency such as coalitional bargaining core to the institution – undercutting the moral grounds and moral objects that are essential features of Rawls' overlapping consensus (Rawls 2005, 147).

It is certainly true, as both Rawls and Bonotti note, that the imperative of winning elections is a powerful incentive for parties to seek the support of a majority of voters (Rawls 2005, 164; Bonotti 2017, 107-108). But parties' commitment to public reasoning does not follow from this. Electoral incentives may sometimes push partisan rhetoric and strategy in the direction of public reasoning, but it may just as often involve denigrating minorities or political scapegoats to mobilize the "true" majority (as in the case of populism) or the partisan base (as in the case of polarization). And the temptation looms to strike at the bedrock rules of political competition. These realities are a long way from Bonotti's pristine picture of partisan competition as "a fair scheme of cooperation" (Bonotti 2017, 23); there is much about partisanship in the real world that stands in the way of its contribution to stability.

IV

The second horn: sticking with the ideal

If Bonotti wishes to save his stability-based argument for partisanship, then he must accept the fact that his conceptions of parties and partisanship diverge significantly from many real-world instances of those phenomena. In fact, he does seem to recognize

as much; I suspect none of the arguments in the preceding section would surprise Bonotti, since he is concerned with an idealized form of partisanship. Bonotti, then, would seek to challenge the second horn of the dilemma I have constructed. I consider such a response in this section, but ultimately conclude that it yields an argument limited in significance.

Bonotti's scattered methodological comments make clear that he is interested in constructing a normative theory of partisanship. As he explains, one should resist "the tendency (encouraged by most contemporary political scientists) to conceive parties solely as real-world organizations that contest elections, with no reference made to any normative ideal establishing how they ought to behave" (*ibid.*, 105). As theorists, we should be concerned primarily with what partisanship ought to be, not with what it is, and so "the fact that many (perhaps most) partisans do not actually fulfill this commitment to public reasoning does not undermine the claim that they ought to" (*ibid.*, 109). Bonotti's conception of partisanship, then, is meant normatively – meant to retain some contact with the practice of partisanship we see in the world, but be revisionary or reformist in some way. As with Rawls, and the bulk of public reason liberals who follow him, Bonotti works in ideal theory, insofar as he aims to provide a defense of partisanship for "liberal democracies [that] are reasonably just" (*ibid.*, 12, and *passim*). As such, he would likely claim, the gap between partisanship in his theory and partisanship in practice does not trouble his argument from partisanship to stability.

But the appeal to ideal theory, I argue, leaves Bonotti open to further problems and questions. The first is a worry that Bonotti's argument is made true by mere definitional fiat, and thus threatens an unedifying circularity. There are many instances in the text that encourage the suspicion that much of the argument from partisanship to stability hinges on definitional matters. Bonotti

claims to show how "in fact the very normative demands of partisanship are in syntony with those of public reason" (*ibid.*, 3). The nature of the connection between partisanship and the commitment to public reasoning is intrinsic, on his account: "partisanship itself, as a normative conception, embodies an *intrinsic* commitment to public reason" (*ibid.*, 108, emphasis in original); and: "once we understand the distinctive normative demands of partisanship, we can see that there is no inherent tension between them and the demands of the Rawlsian overlapping consensus" (*ibid.*, 101). The language of "intrinsic" and "inherent" – as well as the repeated usage of stressing modifiers such as "in fact" and "itself" and "once we understand" – indicate Bonotti thinks there is something inevitable, almost natural, conceptually speaking, about the connection between partisanship and public reason (and hence stability). There seems a real sense, on this account, in which the proposition that "political parties threaten societal stability" is simply unintelligible.

The question to ask here is: Is this the right way of understanding partisanship? Is the political party, at least as an ideal type, as naturally committed to public reason, and as inevitably facilitative – at least, given the proper normative guidance – of the overlapping consensus and stability as Bonotti supposes? The book contains surprisingly little motivation for the move of building the normative demands of public reason into the very concept of partisanship, as opposed to other candidate normative functions partisanship might fulfill. Instead of partisanship's intrinsic connection to public reason, why might partisanship not suggest an intrinsic connection to, say, a morally-valuable form of loyalty, as Russell Muirhead has argued, and which does not involve an intrinsic commitment to public reason? (Muirhead 2014, Chapter 5). This latter view, to emphasize, is also a normative one. True, Bonotti does point to various historical and empirical reasons to suggest that parties naturally, at their best, but also in

political practice, exert the sort of broadening effects on public discourse that may plausibly be distilled into a commitment to public reason (Bonotti 2017, 120-122, 104-109). This is the kind of motivating story that is needed to convince that his normative definition is the right one, but, alas, I do not think it is up to that challenge. Equations between partisanship and other normative functions can equally lay claim to plausible emergence from partisanship as an empirical practice – consider, again, loyalty. Partisan loyalty, for Muirhead, involves "a kind of commitment that goes beyond what reason alone can underwrite," and is rooted in the "partisan community" as an enduring political identity (Muirhead 2014, 16). The fact that this (and other) normative values do not require a commitment to public reasoning, and therefore might not necessarily support the overlapping consensus, suggests that Bonotti's argument trades in significant part on the definitional move.

The worry then becomes that it is not very interesting that Bonotti's idiosyncratic normative conception of partisanship contributes to stability, since it seems to be made true, in significant part, by conceptual assertion. How surprising is it that partisanship contributes to stability, given that partisanship is defined as the very thing that stability happens to require? To the extent this is true, it gives us no independent reasons to value political parties or partisanship. In this light, Bonotti's statements such as "once we understand the distinctive normative demands of partisanship" assume a question-begging ring (Bonotti 2017, 5). Nor is this issue avoided by Bonotti's construal of the commitment to public reasoning as something that partisans automatically take on when they decide to become partisans: "when citizens decide to promote their religious or other comprehensive doctrines qua partisans, that is, via political parties, they are already committing to public reason and to an overlapping consensus" (*ibid.*, 109). Bonotti is proposing that public reason is not really constraining of partisanship, since

being a partisan simply means conforming to public reason. But this simply moves back the constraining effects a level, to the definitional question of who counts as a partisan. Again, definitional work looms large.

Another way of framing the problems with Bonotti's definitional argument is to say that he connects a highly idealized and technical concept with another highly idealized and technical concept. He defends, that is, the value of partisanship (understood as something fairly esoteric from the perspective of everyday partisans) with reference to its support of the normative value of stability (understood as an equally esoteric overlapping consensus of a particular kind of moral allegiance to the state). But one problem with this argument is that, where neither the concept being argued for nor the concept it is supposed to support is particularly self-evident from the perspective of everyday political observation, it invites the question: So what? Why care about this phenomenon describable as "partisanship," when to do so, we must also get on board with this other phenomenon describable as "stability"? Bonotti has not provided much motivation or argumentation for why Rawls's notion of stability is correct, or important – important enough to ground a defense of a concept of which democratic theorists (and many democratic citizens) have long been skeptical. Those predisposed to either agnosticism or hostility toward the contribution of parties to democratic politics are unlikely to be persuaded. I do not mean to say that we are therefore doomed to merely descriptive analysis of partisanship. One might, for instance, argue that partisanship-as-public reasoning fosters recognizably-valuable democratic goods, such as motivation to get involved in politics. Such an argument connects a technical concept with a familiar concept, thereby making the argument for partisanship more plausible.

At this point, Bonotti might insist that there is still value to the normative nature of his conception of partisanship, since it provides valuable critical purchase on real-world political pathologies. Politics would be better – and stability would be supported – if more partisans conformed to the demands of public reason more often. The action guidance of normative theory justifies its idealization. But a relevant issue here that he does not explore – one essential to addressing critical usefulness – is the feasibility of his normative project. Concerns of feasibility have generated a rich literature as part of broader inquiries into non-ideal theory and political realism (See, e.g., Stemplowska 2016; Lawford-Smith 2013), but I limit myself to a relatively simple thought: that the degree of action guidance of a normative theory of partisanship is limited by infeasible conditions (a simple version of "ought implies can"). More specifically, I want to suggest that, in the case of partisanship, the likelihood of a given normative ideal being realized matters for its normative validity. This is already to move away from Bonotti, with his claim that "the fact that many (perhaps most) partisans do not actually fulfill this commitment to public reasoning does not undermine the claim that they ought to" (Bonotti 2017, 109). What he should have said is that the empirical reality does not necessarily undermine the normative claim – for, as non-ideal theorists have long emphasized, there are cases in which stubborn, unfavorable empirical realities should indeed influence the character or attractiveness of normative ideals.

It is worth examining, then, the feasibility of the idealizing conditions Bonotti sets out – what politics and partisans would have to look like for partisanship to contribute to stability – and the nature of the barriers that stand in the way of their realization. Bonotti enumerates a number of background conditions that must be met in order for party politics to be "a fair scheme of cooperation," largely in the context of his discussion of political obligation (*ibid.*, Chapter 2). These criteria also seem central to the

broader political-liberal project within which he situates his general defense of partisanship, including the argument from stability. How realistic are these conditions? I call attention, in particular, to the stubbornness of motivated reasoning, group-based thinking and other psychological mechanisms that underpin the three destabilizing features of partisanship identified above. Summarizing the relevant findings on these "formidable obstacles to thinking rationally" about politics, Aaron Ancell notes that "since these obstacles arise from normal features of human psychology together with features endemic to politics," – and, I would add, especially endemic to partisan politics – "there is no reason to believe that they will disappear in [even] an ideal liberal society" (Ancell 2019, 420). An explanation for the unlikelihood of Bonotti's idealizing conditions focusing on the structural features of partisan competition can supplement the psychological explanation. The contention is that parties are more likely to foster a strategic attachment to the basic structure rather than the deeply moral one that the overlapping consensus requires. The reason is that compromise, bargaining, coalition-building, and logrolling are central to the partisan experience. Due to the fact that at least some of contemporary partisan pathologies are rooted in structural features of party competition and in certain tendencies of human psychology, there is reason to think they will be relatively stubborn.

I do not wish to overdraw the point. It is not impossible for some partisans to heed the call to engage in public reasoning; Bonotti's normative recommendations do not completely lack action guidance. But given the nature of the barriers – the inherently adversarial nature of party competition, and the way this exacerbates tendencies with deep roots in human psychology – I remain skeptical on grounds of feasibility that partisanship will contribute to the overlapping consensus and stability for any great proportion of the citizenry. This helps show why the likelihood of a normative ideal of partisanship being realized is relevant for its

normative validity. David Estlund, notably, has argued that "it is not the case that ought implies reasonably likely" (2014, 116). But there is a crucial difference, as Ancell has argued (2020), between something being reasonably unlikely because it is random or out of character (such as Estlund's example of dancing like a chicken in front of a lecture (*ibid.*, 118)), and something being reasonably unlikely because it is difficult – rooted in deep psychological tendencies or structural-political circumstances of electoral competition. Partisanship is more like the latter. Hence, the fact that the realization of Bonotti's normative criteria for achieving stability is technically possible, but importantly unlikely for a large swath of the population, matters for the normative relevance of public reason constraints sufficient to generate or support societal stability.

And this, I think, severely limits the scope of Bonotti's argument. Even if we grant Bonotti's claim that partisans who strictly adhere to public reason can contribute to the moral stability of a well-ordered liberal regime, the relevance of this argument to our own world may be fairly called into question. Even if, that is, Bonotti has shown that there are stability-related reasons to value some specific practice describable as "partisanship," if that "partisanship" consists in a rarefied practice that few actual partisans can live up to or perhaps even recognize, then he has not shown that there are stability-related reasons to value partisanship as we find it in the real world. This argument risks becoming idealized in the pejorative sense of the term, vindicating the criticisms of non-ideal and realist thinkers, and encouraging the wrong attitude toward the relationship between partisanship and stability in our own polities. For the fact that a form of partisanship we are unlikely to see in the near future (if ever) would contribute to stability does not tell us what kind of partisanship best contributes to stability today.

The extent to which one thinks this is a loss will partly depend on one's deeper commitments about the nature and purpose of political theory. My own position should, by now, be obvious. But whatever one's position on the role of feasibility constraints in normative political theory in general, there is a sense, I argue, in which they ought to apply a fortiori in the realm of partisanship. As Patrick Tomlin has pointed out, different kinds of concepts warrant different levels of idealization, and there are some – including democracy and discourse – about which we should be especially "utopophobic" (Tomlin 2012). These concepts, and here I would include partisanship, are distinct from "first-order normative/deontic" concepts such as justice and equality in virtue of the former's role in adjudicating disagreements about the latter (Tomlin 2012, 45). Concepts such as democracy and partisanship must be "significantly more embedded in social and physical reality" than concepts like justice, because otherwise we risk idealizing away the very problems such concepts are meant to address – thereby limiting action guidance. In the case of partisanship, these might include substantive trade-offs between support of party and support of basic liberal-democratic norms putatively part of the overlapping consensus (Bagg & Tranvik 2019). This and other problems are assumed away by definition, in Bonotti's account, as he attributes all the destabilizing characteristics of real-world partisanship to its sinister conceptual cousin, factionalism. A complete defense of this claim would require further argumentation. But I hope this is enough to cast doubt on the action guidance of Bonotti's argument due to the level of idealization it incorporates.

University of Oxford

References

Ancell, Aaron. 2019. "The Fact of Unreasonable Pluralism," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 5 (4), 410-428.

_____. 2020. "Political Irrationality, Utopianism, and Democratic Theory," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 19 (1), 3-21.

Bagg, Samuel. and Tranvik, Isak. 2019. "An Adversarial Ethics for Campaigns and Elections," *Perspectives on Politics* 17 (4), 973-987.

Bankert, Alexa, Huddy, Leonie, and Rosema, Martin. 2017. "Measuring Partisanship as a Social Identity in Multi-Party Systems," *Political Behavior* 39 (1), 103-132.

Barry, Brian. 1995. "John Rawls and the Search for Stability," *Ethics* 105 (4), 874-915.

Blau, Adrian. 2018. "Cognitive Corruption and Deliberative Democracy," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 35 (2), 198-220.

Boix, Carles. 1999. "Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies," *American Political Science Review* 93 (3), 609-24.

Bonotti, Matteo. 2017. *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Campbell, James E. 2016. *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dalton, Russell J. 2018. *Political Realignment: Economics, Culture, and Electoral Change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

_____ and Wattenberg, Martin P. (eds.). 2002. *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Disch, Lisa. 2011. "Toward a Mobilization Conception of Democratic Representation," *American Political Science Review* 105 (1), 100-114.

Green, Donald., Palmquist, Bradley and Schickler, Eric. 2002. *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hicken, Allen. 2011. "Clientelism. Annual Review of Political Science," 14 (1), 289-310.

Hill, Thomas E. 2000. "The Problem of Stability in Political Liberalism," In *Respect, Pluralism, and Justice: Kantian Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Huddy, Leonia and Bankert, Alexa. 2017. "Political Partisanship as a Social Identity," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.250

_____, Mason, Liliana & Aarøe, Lene. 2015. "Expressive Partisanship: Campaign Involvement, Political Emotion, and Partisan Identity," *American Political Science Review*, 109 (1), 1-17.

Ignazi, Piero. 2017. *Party and Democracy: The Uneven Road to Party Legitimacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Krupenkin, Masha. 2018. "The Strengthening of Partisan Affect. Political Psychology," 39 (S1), 201-218.

_____, Lelkes, Yphtach, Levendusky, Matthew, Malhotra, Neil, & Westwood, Sean J. 2019. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22.

_____, Sood, Gaurav and Lelkes, Yphtach. 2012. "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76 (3), 405-431.

Jones, Peter. 1999. "Beliefs and Identities," in John Horton & Susan Mendus (eds.), *Toleration, Identity and Difference*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kitschelt, Herbert and Rehm, Philipp. 2019. "Secular Partisan Realignment in the United States: The Socioeconomic Reconfiguration of White Partisan Support since the New Deal Era," *Politics & Society* 47 (3), 425-479.

_____ & Wilkinson, Steven I. 2007. "Citizen-Politician Linkages: An Introduction." In *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, edited by Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Knapp, Andrew. 1987. "Proportional but Bipolar: France's Electoral System in 1986," *West European Politics* 10 (1), 89-114.

Krasnoff, Larry. 1998. "Consensus, Stability, and Normativity in Rawls's Political Liberalism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 95 (6), 269-292.

Lawford-Smith, Holly. 2013. "Understanding Political Feasibility," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21 (3), 243-259.

Mair, Peter. 2013. *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso Books.

Mason, Liliana. 2018a. "Losing Common Ground: Social Sorting and Polarization," *The Forum* 16 (1), 47-66.

_____. 2018b. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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

Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Rawls, John. 1999. *A Theory of Justice.* Revised Edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rawls, John. 2005. *Political Liberalism.* Expanded Edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rosenblum, Nancy L. (2008). *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rossiter, David J., Johnston, Ronald J., & and Pattie, Charles. J. 1999. *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the UK's Map of Parliamentary Constituencies.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Saward, Michael. 2010. *The Representative Claim.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stemplowska, Zofia. 2016. "Feasibility: Individual and Collective," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 33 (1), 273-291.

Thau, Mads. 2019. "How Political Parties Use Group-Based Appeals: Evidence from Britain 1964-2015," *Political Studies* 67 (1), 63-82.

Tomlin, Patrick. 2012. "Should We be Utopophobes about Democracy in Particular?," *Political Studies Review* 10 (1), 36-47.

Weithman, Paul. 2010. *Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

White, Jonathan and Ypi, Lea. 2016. *The Meaning of Partisanship.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wiens, David. (2016). "Assessing Ideal Theories: Lessons from the Theory of Second Best," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 15 (2), 132-149.

Wolkenstein, Fabio. 2019. *Rethinking Party Reform*. Oxford University Press.

Ypi, Lea. 2019. "A Sufficiently Just Liberal Society is an Illusion," *Res Publica* 25 (4), 463-474.