

SYMPOSIUM
PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



PARTISANSHIP AS LOYAL ANTAGONISM NOT
REASONABLENESS

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Partisanship as Loyal Antagonism not Reasonableness

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Complex representative democracies are unthinkable without political parties, but current polarised polities have fostered an antipartisan sentiment according to which parties and partisanship undermine the respect citizens need for one another and make them unresponsive not only to citizens' claims but to reality as well (Chapman 2020; Mason 2016; McWilliams 2021). While normative theories of democracy traditionally share this antipartisan framework, many authors recently claimed that parties and partisanship, if properly constrained, are fundamental to promote essential functions of democracy (Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White and Ypi 2016; Wolkenstein 2020). This normative reevaluation of political parties is, at least partially, grounded in

* This research has been funded by the Department of Humanities (University of Piemonte Orientale) and MUR's PRIN 2017 programme under the research project "Deceit and Self-Deception. How We Should Address Fake News and Other Cognitive Failures of the Democratic Public".

their justificatory potential according to which they empower citizens and facilitate their exercise of political agency by structuring the political debate among perspectives that are committed to the common good and comprehensible to every member of the polity. As rightly pointed out by Bonotti, this partisanship revival considers parties the “shapers and articulators of public reason” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 104), but it does not clarify which justificatory standards political parties should meet and how these standards can be compatible with the comprehensive doctrines that seem to characterise partisanship. *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* is a fundamental contribution to the partisanship revival because it holds that parties and partisanship need to fulfil Rawlsian public reason requirements to strive for the common good and not defend particularistic interests as factions do. This perspective might be challenged by claiming that Rawlsian public reason does not allow for the level of contestation and disagreement that should characterise a partisan debate. Bonotti rebuts this objection by showing that public reason is more hospitable to disagreement and contestation than it is usually credited for. While it is correct that proposals cannot deny the basic values of liberal democracy, these constraints are compatible with a multiplicity of perspectives, especially in the socioeconomic sphere. Social democratic, libertarian, and conservative parties might legitimately have different ideas on how to address the unemployment crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they will propose different policies to realise these ideas. Provided that these parties ground their claims in expert opinion and are not incompatible with the shared values of a liberal democracy, this kind of disagreement is fully compatible with the Rawlsian framework adopted by Bonotti. It is thus possible to conclude that this view does not curtail interparty disagreements and conflicts but only ensures that they strive for the common good rather than the interests of part of the polity.

Even if I share the belief that it is important to normatively reevaluate parties and partisanship and I strongly believe that *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* is the most systematic and interesting attempt to clarify the justificatory potential of political parties, I challenge the above perspective and claim that it contains a problematic account of partisanship. This view, I contend, undermines the pluralism that should characterise a lively political debate, and it is biased against radical perspectives. It moreover underestimates the agonistic dimension of partisanship and develops a proposal that cannot properly guide political parties. To overcome these ambiguities, I develop a strictly political account of partisanship that is more open to disagreement and conflicts without collapsing into factionalism.

I

The partisan revival and Rawlsian public reason revisited

Democracy acknowledges its members as free and equal by recognising them as full political agents rather than mere beneficiaries of policies chosen by others and by granting them the opportunity to exercise this role without incurring excessive burdens (Biale 2018; Dahl 1989). If this were not the case and a demanding account of political agency was adopted, inclusiveness and responsiveness would be undermined. Only a limited number of people will be motivated to participate and it is very likely that the participation will be greater among the most advantaged or those who have special interests to defend (Verba et al. 1978; Schlotzman et al. 2012). To avoid these shortcomings citizens should not be actively involved in all political decisions, but they should recognise themselves in the decisions made, have the opportunity to shape the political process by influencing it and having their interests and ideas represented, grasp the rationales

for the choices made and have the opportunity to challenge them if the choices do not respond to their interests or ideas (Lafont 2019).

Since this exercise of political agency might be demanding as well (it entails collecting information, interacting with others to cultivate proper political preferences, and properly understanding and critically reflecting on political decisions and their rationale), many authors have contended that political intermediaries are needed to ensure that citizens are truly included and have claimed that political parties are the ideal actors to empower citizens (Goodin 2008). To challenge the antipartisan framework that once characterised normative accounts of democracy, these authors point out that it is critical to distinguish parties from factions and clarify the normative requirements that parties need to meet. While factions aim at defending particular interests and addressing their claims to those who share them, parties politicise these interests and transform them into proposals that promote some conceptions of the common good and are grounded in reasons that everyone can comprehend and accept. This justificatory function of political parties empowers citizens by ensuring that they are committed to an idea of common good that they can perceive as theirs, by fostering their epistemic qualities, and by ensuring they have a critical grasp of the rationales for the different claims (Biale and Ottonelli 2019). Let clarify these points.

First, the bilingualism of intraparty relationships (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006) allows citizens to politicise their demands, values, and interests by connecting them to general principles and providing interpretations of these principles that are shaped by those particular values and interests. As a consequence, citizens can ground their proposals in values that they acknowledge as theirs but are also publicly acceptable.

Second, to properly exercise their political agency citizens need to understand and use the information that circulates in the public sphere, but this might be too demanding if this information is too technical. Parties can epistemically empower citizens by reducing informational complexity and making the information accessible to them. Political parties develop programmes that define sufficiently coherent orderings of normative commitments and integrate expert knowledge into a policy agenda (Ebeling 2016). And they translate specialised information into accessible language and make such information appealing and relevant to citizens (Bistagnino and Biale 2021; White and Ypi 2010).

Finally, since parties aim at convincing citizens that their proposals are better than the alternatives, they challenge one another's claims, programmes, and values. This adversarial process (Manin 1987; Leydet 2015) ensures that political proposals are criticised, compared, and critically assessed, making citizens aware of the values, foreseeable consequences, and claims at stake in a decision and calling for a constant assessment and redefinition of the arguments on which political proposals are grounded.

To conclude, parties and partisanship are fundamental for a normative account of democracy because they ensure that citizens can exercise their reflexive agency without incurring excessive burdens. This conclusion can be challenged by pointing out that parties could undermine the control exercised by citizens by manipulating the public, demanding blind loyalty, and being unreceptive to any challenge that citizens might raise against their proposals. This critique might be further strengthened by the fact that the partisan revival seems to assume that political parties serve these justificatory functions but does not clarify the normative requirements that they need to meet to empower citizens. Given this shortcoming the partisan revival cannot ensure that parties do not act as factions by eroding rather than reinforcing the control

exercised by citizens. Once properly evaluated against the way in which actual political parties act, the distinction between factions and parties does not hold and it seems to be the outcome of a process of idealisation of the role and content of parties and partisanship. This idealisation is confirmed by the demanding conception of political agency that the partisan revival conveys. According to this perspective, the critics claim, citizens need to satisfy justificatory requirements and critically assess every political claim. While this form of reflexive engagement might be persuasive at first glance, it is particularly burdensome because it denies that members of the polity can be committed to comprehensive doctrines and requires that they act as impartial deliberators. If political parties facilitate the exercise of political agency but make overly demanding claims on political agency, then the exercise of this agency is burdensome and the inclusiveness of democracy is undermined.

Partisanship and Political Liberalism tackles these critiques by holding that since parties ensure stability for the right reasons in diverse societies, they should meet public reason requirements. Party members choose to join an association that grants them more political influence, provided that the democratic process is fair and does not systematically disadvantage their parties. As a consequence, partisans, qua party members, have a political obligation to support and be loyal to the institutions that grant them this political advantage. Within the liberal framework adopted by Bonotti, to achieve this aim parties and partisans need to ground their proposals in accessible reasons (the accessibility requirement) and explain how their proposals are connected to shared liberal values (the weak shareability requirement). As Bonotti (115) writes, “On the one hand, parties and partisans ought to refrain from advancing illiberal arguments which, even if accessible, contravene those basic liberal values that are shared in liberal democracies (e.g. equality, freedom, etc.). On the other

hand, they ought to take those political values and rank them in more specific ways.” This is particularly important in a pluralistic society because it ensures that people who are committed to comprehensive values and perspectives do not undermine but support liberal democratic institutions and the values on which these institutions are grounded. This approach does not only ensure that political parties promote their justificatory empowerment; it conveys an account of political agency that is not particularly burdensome for citizens. While party members need to meet the public reason requirements, these standards do not constrain lay citizens who may be committed to comprehensive doctrines. Public accountability is thus granted by partisan antagonism and not citizens’ critical engagement.

To conclude, Rawlsian public reason grants that political parties can promote their justificatory functions and empower citizens to ensure that they can exercise democratic control without incurring excessive burdens.

II

The challenge of democratic pluralism

In the previous section, I pointed out that Bonotti’s proposal overcomes one of the main shortcomings of the partisanship revival and, without conveying an overly demanding account of political agency, clearly defines the justificatory standards political parties need to meet to empower citizens. Despite these undebatable merits, his perspective entails a problematic understanding of parties and partisanship that limits political pluralism and curtails democratic conflict. Let me clarify this point.

The justificatory requirements defined by Bonotti ensures that the proposals developed by political parties are addressed to the

whole political community, promote an idea of the common good and are committed to the values in which a liberal democracy is grounded. These strictures clearly rule out antidemocratic or illiberal parties but, Bonotti contends, are compatible with a significant level of disagreement regarding the social and economic policies that realise the ideals of freedom and equality to which every member of the polity should be committed. It is undebatable that citizens need to be committed to these ideals, but the Rawlsian framework represents only one possible interpretation of the ideals and not necessarily the most inclusive one.

A democratic polity in which different political parties ground their proposals in partisan interpretations of the common good entails that these parties must develop worldviews that make their claims coherent. If these worldviews need to be compatible with a Rawlsian framework, this curtails all perspectives that are committed to democratic values but critical of the Rawlsian (or liberal) interpretation of these values. Let me clarify this point by focusing on some concrete examples: progressivism and libertarianism.

Imagine a progressive party according to which the Rawlsian framework cannot properly address injustices within our society because it does not acknowledge the impact that asymmetry of power has on the control citizens exercise over their lives, it excessively prioritises freedom over equality, and it problematically takes as given the economic structure of liberal societies. To ensure justice and develop a proper transformative project, this party contends, a more egalitarian perspective needs to be adopted (Biale et al. 2021) and citizens need to be empowered by broadening the set of issues subject to democratic control (Azmanova 2020; Dryzek 2002, Fung & Wright 2001; Raekstad and Gradin 2020). On the opposite side of the political spectrum, libertarian parties challenge the Rawlsian interpretation of the liberal framework by

claiming that all distributive policies are incompatible with the ideals of freedom and equality in which a liberal democratic society needs to be grounded. According to this perspective, self-ownership and economic freedoms should be considered among the fundamental rights to be granted to citizens and the free market should not be constrained at all.

We can disagree with these views, but it would be problematic to claim that they do not convey an acceptable idea of the common good or that they undermine citizens' commitment to democratic values. Since these views explicitly challenge the Rawlsian framework adopted by Bonotti, if public reason defines the standards that political parties need to meet, then it is likely that the expressions of these views will be curtailed. As rightly suggested by Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, political justifications do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they require "some degree of common ground, or 'frame resonance,' ... (1) to be recognized and understood as such, and (2) to be received as convincing" (White & Ypi 2011, 389). This implies that a political justification is not accepted only for the force of its reasons but for its fit with what citizens consider as common ground. If the Rawlsian framework defines this common ground, progressivism and libertarianism might be considered legitimate and admitted to the public arena, but the background against which they will be included will clearly disadvantage them by limiting their appeal to the public and curtailing their message (Freeden 1996). This creates unfairness and problematically limits the level of disagreement that is allowed within a democratic society and ensures that citizens are not exposed to a plurality of perspectives.

It might be claimed that my critique overestimates the demandingness of Rawlsian public reason and pointed out that, according to Bonotti, it only requires that proposals be committed to ideals of freedom and equality and not to their Rawlsian

interpretation. If this were the case, pluralism would be ensured but the normative work of Rawlsian public reason would be very limited and, contrary to what Bonotti suggests, would not imply a commitment to a liberal but strictly democratic order. This way out would however entail a lax reading of the Rawlsian framework that void its content and nature. To conclude, either we ensure democratic pluralism but adopt a lax reading of the Rawlsian framework or we adopt a stricter reading of the Rawlsian framework but limit democratic pluralism.

III

Reasonable partisanship is not partisanship

In the previous section I pointed out that Bonotti's interpretation of Rawlsian public reason clarifies the justificatory constraints that parties need to meet but curtails democratic pluralism and the political conflicts that this pluralism inevitably triggers. These limits are confirmed by the idealised idea of partisanship that this perspective conveys, an account that transforms partisanship into a form of reasonable reflexivity that is problematic and burdensome. If partisans need to meet public reason requirements, they do not only have to justify their proposals but have to assess them on their merit and adopt a certain detachment and impartiality. Within this context, partisans are not adversaries who aim at winning but individuals who are ready to change their mind if a better alternative for the polity is suggested. This process of idealisation is confirmed by the fact that Bonotti's work analyses in detail the standards that partisans need to meet in order to develop proposals that are addressed to the whole political community, but it does not specify how interparty competition should be constrained. This kind of antagonism disappears because of a tension between the Rawlsian framework,

and its idea of reasonableness, and a proper account of partisanship.

Partisanship entails an adversarial relationship that does not require to assign the same value to every proposal. Within a partisan context proposals and values are continuously challenged but partisans are epistemically partial and attribute different burdens of judgement to their claims and those of their counterparts. Even if partisans address their opponents' challenges, they revise their proposals while maintaining, or minimally updating, their values and ideological background. The adversarial process that characterises interpartisan relationships aims not at analysing and revising political proposals in order to identify the best alternative according to some standard of correctness that is external to the preferences of citizens but at winning the argumentative struggle and defending the partisan viewpoint to which someone is committed. This form of partisan antagonism does not simply require that partisans support a certain perspective but that they limit the alternative perspective that is incompatible with theirs. Within this context, partisans aim at defining a language or values that constitute the common ground on which citizens develop the arguments that are most favourable to the values to which the partisans are committed. This is confirmed by the fact that partisans are ready to adopt strategic behaviours, such as supporting their second-best option if this reduces the chances that worse alternatives will be realised, that are not compatible with the idea of identifying the best solution for the polity.

It might be claimed that Rawlsian public reason does not necessarily entail detachment and is thus compatible with a form of partisan antagonism. If this were the case, it would still be necessary to clearly define the constraints that partisans need to meet in order to ensure that citizens have access to reasoned

exchange and can exercise their reflexive agency. Since, in fact, parties aim at winning if their partiality and antagonism are not constrained, they will transform citizens into passive recipients of their claims rather than facilitating their exercise of political agency. To conclude, though Rawlsian public reason ensures that political parties develop proposals addressed to the whole political community, it idealises partisanship either by excluding its antagonistic dimension and then ruling out one of its essential features or by conveying an unconstrained account of partisanship that undermines its justificatory empowerment. To overcome this problem and ensure that the antagonism and partiality characterising partisanship do not transform citizens into passive objects of decisions made by others, the following requirements should be met:

1) Justifiable antagonism. Those who are committed to a partisan worldview aim at realising it by interpreting reality according to this worldview. Since to achieve this aim the support of a significant number of citizens is needed, it is necessary to show them that a set of coherent proposals that are grounded in this partisan horizon respond to their interests and are better than the alternatives. To win the contest against the alternatives, it is legitimate to engage in strategic behaviours provided that every claim or strategy adopted to support the claim is compatible with the partisan horizon (political justifiability) and responds to the citizens who believe that their interests are not being taken into consideration (responsiveness).

2) Democratic loyalty. Even if partisans can challenge one another and try to defeat their adversaries, they need to support those institutions that make possible this conflict and need to be loyal to democratic ideals. If they do not, they will not act as political actors but will simply impose their views. Democratic loyalty requires developing perspectives that are compatible with

the democratic ideal and addressing the challenges raised against these proposals. It is moreover important to recognise that the democratic process needs to ensure equal consideration to every interest at stake and support this goal by avoiding partisan behaviour when the rules of the game (for example, electoral districts or voting systems) or fundamental decisions (for example, the selection of Supreme Court members) are at stake.

3) Intellectual honesty. Given the complexity of political issues and given that they involve elements that can be differently interpreted, there is room for partisanship but partisans cannot distort reality to defend their claims. Intellectual honesty requires that citizens accept that their perspective is not the only one available, but it does not rule out epistemic partiality. This does not mean that someone who is committed to a partisan horizon must deny the possibility of revising their framework or the proposals that are grounded in it. Since it is legitimate to attribute more importance to the partisan worldview to which one is committed than to alternative worldviews, it is possible that partisans will revise their proposals along with partisans who share the same horizon (that is, intraparty interaction).

This form of loyal partisanship does not idealise partisan interactions, because it acknowledges their antagonism and partiality but constrains these features to ensure that they do not collapse into a form of factionalism. If these requirements are met, partisan proposals will be politically justifiable because they will embody democratic values and will be situated against an ideological background that citizens can feel as theirs. This ensures that citizens can exercise their agency and control without incurring excessive burdens, but it does not transform partisans into detached deliberators. According to this model of democracy, citizens need to acknowledge one another as equal political actors, support the values and practices that make it possible to exercise

their political agency, and consider every political proposal even if they can be committed to a partisan interpretation of the common good and can aim at realising this idea and supporting policies that pursue this task. This idea of democracy embodies the spirit of *Partisanship and Political Liberalism* (including partisan interactions within a normative account of democracy) but challenges the idealisation that characterised Bonotti's account. Bonotti clearly showed us that the Rawlsian framework is richer and more hospitable than we usually think. The inclusion of political parties requires, however, a further expansion of this view, and we have to understand whether there is room for this option or whether a more radical change is needed.

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