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Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

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Rethinking the Modern Prince:
Partisanship and the Democratic Ethos

This article lays out and defends the role of political parties in cultivating a democratic ethos amongst citizens. It argues that citizens' commitment to the democratic idea of self-rule requires positive conviction in the worth of collective political agency, and suggests that this conviction draws on three main sources, characterised as normative, motivational and executive. The article shows theoretically why parties are able to cultivate all three sources in a way no other political actor can match, thus constituting a unique and indispensable mode of civic engagement. Moreover, it proposes that the widely-noted shortcomings of parties in contemporary democracy leave this basic capacity unimpaired, indeed that certain important developments herald renewed opportunities.[*]

A number of recent studies have sought to capture processes of change in contemporary democracies by reference to ideas of 'depoliticisation' (Mair 2006), 'citizen disaffection' (Schmitter 1995) or 'political malaise' (Offe 2006). These words imply that something to whose presence we have become accustomed, and which has perhaps played an important ethical role in democratic life, is in danger of being lost, though quite what the thing is remains contested. Some diagnoses focus on the rise of policy-making by non-majoritarian institutions, seeing in this the erosion or the streamlining of democratic practices. Others focus on decreasing levels of political participation and an increase in electoral volatility. Still others focus on the narrowing of political choices made available to voters at election time. Most accounts give at least some of these developments a critical reading, noting how they tend to weaken the ability of citizens directly to influence policy-making, or how they increase political alienation and deprive institutions of democratic legitimacy (Offe 2006).

At the heart of these concerns seems to be the vitality of the democratic ethos itself, understood as a positive conviction amongst citizens of the worth of engaging with collective political agency so as to exercise the fundamental democratic principle of collective self-rule. This paper explores the conditions necessary to the maintenance of this conviction, and advances an ideal-typical conception of the role of political parties in promoting it. It does so not by providing a comprehensive empirical account of the current challenges faced by parties in Western countries, or by seeking to offer a positive causal model for contemporary processes – these issues have already been carefully explored by other scholars. Rather, the paper takes a distinctly theoretical route. It

begins by suggesting that, at least since the advent of democracy as collective self-rule, conviction in the worth of collective political agency has drawn on three sources: first, an ability amongst citizens to articulate political ideals that can be addressed through collective action (the *normative* source); second, a willingness to see these goals as *ours*, in the sense that our own fate or that of those with whom we identify is bound up in their achievement, and that they may require 'our' collective engagement to be met (the *motivational* source); and third an understanding that political agency can be institutionally applied to secure them (the *executive* source). The article then examines which modes of civic engagement, if any, can nourish these sources, and argues that the crucial role is best played by political parties. The paper goes on to show that although there are other forms of civic activity which are able to cultivate *some* of the three sources mentioned, the party is unique in being able to address all.

In contemporary scholarship, despite the industry with which empirical research on parties continues to be conducted, their centrality in rendering meaningful the idea of collective self-rule is often forgotten. Parties are acknowledged as exercising an important procedural role, organising the mechanisms of government, legislation and the selection of office-holders, and they are recognised as a key component in the idea of *representation*, notwithstanding increasing doubts about their capacities in this regard (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). But rather less attention is given to the role of parties in cultivating a broader democratic ethos. Such an ethos, in addition to the liberal virtues of tolerance and respect of individual rights, entails a commitment to the idea of dealing collectively with matters of common concern. It implies the conviction amongst citizens that self-government is possible and desirable. As we shall note, parties and their relationship to society have changed significantly in recent decades, yet their importance to the idea of democracy, and to some of its most significant practices, persists. By exploring their role as essential modes of civic engagement necessary to cultivate conviction in the worth of political agency, the intention is to contribute to a wider rethinking of the place of political parties and partisanship in contemporary democracy (Muirhead 2006) (Rosenblum 2008) (Biezen and Saward 2008).[1]

Three Sources of Commitment to Political Agency

It is often emphasised that one of the most fundamental features of democratic politics has to do with the possibility of connecting political agency to collectively determined

goals. "Government of the whole people by the whole people, equally represented", to use J. S. Mill's definition (Mill 1861, ch. 7), is what democracy ultimately means, and it holds true for any conception which takes seriously the idea of collective self-rule and not merely the constitutional restraint of authority. The recognition by citizens that certain situations are a matter of concern, and that they can and should be addressed in common rather than by individual adaptation, is what publicises them and makes them relevant to decision-making by democratic means. A political community that can adequately be regarded as democratic is one in which the citizenry holds on to the basic conviction that political engagement is for these reasons meaningful, notwithstanding the possible limitations of existing structures and practices.

Yet a question more rarely explored concerns the conditions under which conviction in the worth of political agency can be strengthened and reproduced. For simply the existence of institutional structures to some degree responsive to public influence hardly suffices to ensure its endurance. A democratic ethos requires that the idea of collective self-rule be given focus and rendered meaningful to citizens. While this issue has been widely problematised by republican political theorists, scholars with purely normative interests have often taken civic engagement for granted as a natural inclination of citizens, leaving the sources necessary to cultivate it unexamined. In this section we argue that a democratic ethos may be seen as drawing nourishment from three sources: *normative*, *motivational* and *executive*, understood as explicitly political in focus. Let us consider these in turn.

The *normative* source concerns the ends of political action and the principles by which they are inspired. It involves the appreciation that there are political goals which deserve to be pursued, and that there is a relationship between them such that they need to be pursued as part of a more or less coherent whole. Cultivating this source involves giving political shape to the grievances which are manifest in society, to the dissatisfactions which persist despite outward appearances of consensus, and connecting these to normatively grounded, powerful notions of the possibility of a better society. It involves appeals to general interests and/or to political values such as freedom, justice and equality, and implies analysing conflicts between these, identifying normative priorities in particular historical circumstances, and combining them to address substantive political problems (White a, 2010).[2]

The normative source is necessary to guide citizens' critical appraisal of their joint political institutions, to allow them to form judgments on matters of common concern, and to articulate such judgments in a way that could appeal to the

understanding of all. In its absence the quality of political judgments formed by citizens would inevitably suffer, they would be unable to share their concerns with others in a coherent way, and the lack of a larger perspective on the basis of which to assess the role and conduct of political representatives would render them vulnerable to political manipulation.[3] Political agency would not be worth engaging with because there would be no shared political ends to speak of; citizens' interactions with each other would be either entirely parochial or grounded on interests which they would be unable to defend or negotiate from a non-solipsistic perspective. Indeed, even the assessment of political institutions based on purely private interests requires availing oneself of normative sources. Without these, citizens would be unable to express their interests in a way that is meaningful and could be understood, if not immediately agreed upon, by the rest of the citizen-body.

Whether phrased in the language of interests, values or problems, active political engagement of this kind requires putting forward interpretations of the common good designed to appeal to a wide variety of citizens. Such interpretations are normative first in the sense that they involve the adoption of justifiable positions on basic aspects of human affairs and the life in common where 'facts' underdetermine how these positions should look. The meaning of basic political values can be developed in different ways, and no simple appeal to reality can adjudicate between these. In this sense, all political orientations – including those which depart little from the common-sense views or 'centre ground' of their particular historical moment – contain normative elements. Even a pragmatic politics of problem-solving never fully divests itself of such elements.[4] Yet interpretations of the good which are normative in a deeper sense are marked by certain patterns of coherence and continuity, such that different aspects of the political world are linked together across subject and time rather than each taken piecemeal. In order to inspire a commitment to ongoing political agency – and not just the fulfilment of an isolated cause, whose resolution then results in democratic disengagement – links must be drawn across political issues so as to project a degree of coherence onto the complexity of the political world and to highlight the necessity of democratic political action. Similar patterns of coherence and continuity need not, of course, be so encompassing as to conjure a closed ideational system (even accepting such a possibility); indeed they may allow for ongoing revision and reinterpretation of political judgments according to the requirements of public reason-giving.[5]

Naturally the recognition that certain normative goals are worth pursuing is unlikely on its own to generate real commitment to the exercise of political agency. One

can believe that something needs to be addressed in a certain way without supposing that it is a matter for 'us' – the onus (or privilege) may be assumed to fall to others, whether remote in space or time.[6] Thus the *normative* source of conviction needs further *motivational* support, and it is this motivational source which is the second in our typology. This consists in the availability and promotion of the discursive resources and forms of engagement by which citizens can perceive themselves as political subjects. The dissemination of these, and thus the building of political constituencies whose members feel a sense of common purpose and are inclined to show solidarity towards one another, is crucial if the normative goals just discussed are to be met with an impulse to see them realised. There needs to be the conviction that these ends are in some way 'ours' and need to be pursued through action in common rather than individually, else there is likely to be little emotional engagement with them and little sense of indignation or disappointment if they are inadequately fulfilled. Without the feeling of belonging to one or several collective 'we's, conviction in the worth of joint action is likely to be absent, and efforts to advance political programmes in the face of opposition are likely to have little resonance with citizens, who may treat them rather as squabbling amongst elites (White a, 2010). Only where the motivational source is present is disenchantment amongst citizens towards political institutions likely to take the form of active mobilisation rather than cynicism or disinterest.

Moreover, in order to be supportive of the worth of political agency, this sense of collective subjecthood needs to have an explicitly *political* focus. It needs to be bound up in the idea of pursuing shared political projects which can only be achieved collectively through individuals acting in concert: forms of collective identification which lack this are as likely to inspire a retreat into the private sphere as a receptiveness to political engagement. It may be that some such forms of subjecthood draw on the symbolic resources associated with bonds of cultural commonality, or on the ties of solidarity associated with pre-existing social groupings, though as the modern world becomes increasingly fluid and as individuals engage in increasingly diverse forms of identification this pattern may become rarer. In any case, to foster commitment to political agency these forms of subjecthood cannot simply involve a perception of common attributes or diffuse feelings of sympathy: they must acquire a political direction such that they refer to the pursuit of shared projects (Ypi 2008; Ypi 2010).

The third element relevant to deepening conviction in the worth of political agency involves demonstrating that those political ends to which 'we' are committed may be successfully realised: that is, that there exists the political power and means

needed to tackle them. It is this projection of the successful *execution* of political programmes which demonstrates, in the form of visible outcomes, the credibility of political agency. Demonstrations of this kind are likely, in many cases, to involve the application of legal means: they require using the coercive power of institutions to transform ideas into rules of societal regulation. Popular sovereignty obtains tangible expression for citizens only when the normative ideals they engage with are transformed into practice-orienting rules, reshaping the conduct of both individual and institutional actors. Citizens need not necessarily understand the workings of parliaments, government and other bureaucratic institutions in their most intricate details – the complexity of modern democracy makes this most unlikely – but some sense that they all, in concert, can serve meaningful ends is indispensable (White b, 2010).

Note that this source cannot be subsumed under the normative and motivational ones, since it does not rely for its effect on an identity between those programmes successfully executed at a given moment and those which are dear to 'us'. Indeed, this would undermine the very objective of the political process, which is to confront and select particular views on the common good in the midst of a plurality of conflicting perspectives. If all political ideals could be endorsed by all citizens at all times, politics would be superfluous: the government of people might as well be replaced by the administration of things, as Saint Simon urged. What matters in this context is the perception that political ideals, in general, can be feasibly realised. Even where some groups of citizens oppose the particular programmes of specific actors, they may still be convinced of the meaningfulness of political agency insofar as it succeeds in leaving an institutional imprint.

One may propose, then, that it is the erosion of these three sources – *normative*, *motivational* and *executive* – which leads to democratic disengagement and a loss of conviction in the worth of political agency. In the absence of the *normative* source, citizens may experience powerful feelings of dissatisfaction with the social and political world yet will be weakly able to articulate these, tending rather to a state of resentful bewilderment. In the absence of the *motivational* source, the social and political world may be fully *intelligible*, yet citizens are likely to be unmoved to engage in its problems, thus rendering politics the activity of a small elite. In the absence of the *executive* source, citizens may recognise the urgency of certain projects and their relevance to 'us', yet they are likely to doubt their capacity to be realised.

The Role of the Political Party

When one or more of the three sources mentioned is absent, the likely consequence is democratic disengagement amongst citizens. An effective exercise of collective self-rule requires forms of civic engagement in which all three sources are made available. In what follows, we shall propose and defend the role of political parties in promoting this task. Indeed, we shall argue that parties are not only well suited to cultivate these sources of conviction in the worth of political agency but that they respond to the normative, motivational and executive demands in ways that no other type of actor can match.

Before proceeding we should specify further what is to be understood by 'political parties' for the purposes of this discussion. A remarkable diversity of forms may be subsumed under the term, ranging from catch-all parties to cartel parties, reformist parties to anti-system parties, nationalist parties to religious parties, and many besides. Indeed, the application of the term is never politically neutral, and groupings which might more appropriately be described under a different name (we shall touch on the contrast with 'factions' below) may have strategic reasons to present themselves as 'parties', or may be commonly described as such by observers for the sake of convenience. Our own conception, expressed in the three roles we discuss, should be understood as an ideal type. It is clearly rooted in empirical reality, drawing inspiration from the roles parties have historically performed and, as we shall argue, may still perform, yet it is also informed by our reading of the ethos to which citizens in a democracy are generally understood to aspire. As a model, it is intended not merely to *describe* reality but to regulate the observations and evaluations one makes of it, to draw attention to what partisans at their best may achieve, and to highlight those cases where such achievements are unmet. Perhaps no existing party fits the model precisely, but nor should it be regarded as an ideal formed in disregard of practical conditions.

Let us take each of the three elements discussed in the previous section in turn. The *normative* one is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of parties, and has been well-captured in the definitions of authors as diverse in political orientation and historical background as Burke and Gramsci. For Burke, a party is 'a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed' (Burke 1770, p.271). For Gramsci, the party represents 'the modern prince', 'the first cell in which there come together the germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total' (Gramsci 1971, p.129).

Gramsci's reflection on Machiavelli is particularly instructive here. For Gramsci, the aim of Machiavelli's "Prince" was not to depict the political biography of a historically existing figure but to articulate a theoretical reflection on political agency able to move beyond both existing treaties on political utopia and the pedantic realism contained in the mirror-for-princes literature. Gramsci's conceptualisation of the party as the 'modern prince' aimed to capture, from a theoretical perspective, the role of artificially constructed agents in addressing the issue of political reform from a particular perspective, sensitive both to the normative force of universal ideals such as freedom and equality, and to the historical circumstances in which a specific combination of them obtained particular significance.

That parties, properly understood, have a special role in articulating interpretations of the public good has been a staple theme for those philosophers who have addressed the question of their place in a healthy democracy. Voltaire, in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* as well as the entry on 'faction' that he contributed to the *Encyclopedia*, uses the normative focus of parties as the basis of a distinction with 'faction'. A faction for him represents a 'seditious party', something which is 'still weak' and does not 'participate in the state' (Voltaire 1752, p. 319), whereas parties constitute a unique mode of civic engagement serving the *general* interest by expressing distinctive visions on the future of the polity. Montesquieu follows Voltaire on this, arguing that while factions build their allegiances on particularistic interests and egoistic causes, parties reflect the position of a collective on matters of common concern. As he argues, their role is essential to ensuring citizens' participation in accordance with a political ideal of the good polity: 'what is spoken of as union of the political body is in fact something very ambiguous, the true one is a union of harmony, following which all the *parties*, albeit seemingly opposed to each other, concur to the common good, just like some dissonances in music concur to the overall harmony' (Montesquieu 1734, ch. IX).

This normative role, it should be noted, tends to be badly captured in political-science accounts of parties inspired by rational-choice or economic perspectives. Following an aggregative model of politics, parties are generally conceived as seeking to represent preferences which are given, and as distinguishing themselves mainly by the *combinations* of interests to which they appeal. Partisans' concern to remain faithful to these interests is held to be conditioned by their own interest in maximising their appeal to the 'median voter', and thereby securing and retaining office (Downs 1957) (Schlesinger 1991). Yet even parties which speak only the language of interests are in

no sense merely a passive medium of representation – not to mention those which make explicit appeal beyond interests to reflexively chosen values. Interests have to be *selected*, *defined* and *articulated* compatibly with a certain idea of mutual advantage, and it seems hardly possible to perform this role without reference to *principles* of some kind.[7] Such oversight in this literature is ironic, given that it is this aspect of parties which marks their most important contribution to realising the idea of democracy as collective self-rule. Unless one acknowledges their role in advancing normative interpretations of the collective good, rather than simply their organisational dimension as clientelist networks that maximise the likelihood that certain individuals attain the votes needed for political office (Downs 1957), one has little reason to see anything distinctive or attractive about democracy as a regime form (Goodin 2008, pp. 204-224). Without the normative dimension of parties, voters can select representatives only with reference to a narrow range of personal characteristics (competence, integrity, the extent to which they resemble 'me'). Politics becomes purely the 'politics of presence' (Phillips 1994). No doubt some parties may compromise their normative commitments on certain occasions (*opportunism*), perhaps so as to take immediate advantage of opportunities for institutional power, and undoubtedly normative commitments are adjusted over time (*pragmatism*), perhaps because earlier positions are deemed unworkable or no longer relevant. But if one treats these purely as a sequence of ad hoc manoeuvres, rather than as acts of deviation and repositioning relative to ongoing ideational commitments, one will have left no space for democratic politics as collective self-rule.

When we move to the *motivational* element, we find again that parties are of peculiar relevance. For they have the capacity to generate a sense of political collectivity amongst citizens, both by articulating political identities and giving visible expression to their cross-temporal and cross-spatial reality, and by projecting a sense of common purpose in pursuit of a political project. Because they involve multiple individuals acting in concert, parties can cohere as political entities beyond the life-spans and career-spans of individuals, thus giving a sense of continuity of struggle across periods. They act as the carriers of political memory, as well as the embodiment of collective will. Such a mode of civic engagement expresses and reinforces the individual's sense of place within a wider constituency. Of course, parties do not construct such constituencies from scratch: they draw considerably on the discursive resources which pre-exist them in society. But only parties – and to some extent social movements, as discussed below – can elaborate explicitly *political* identities, which

citizens do not passively inherit as part of their social experiences and position within society, but towards which they orientate themselves reflexively based on an evaluation of the associated political objectives (Urbinati 2006, pp. 36 ff.). And while individuals may develop distinctive normative perspectives and run for political office with the claim to promote them, only parties can credibly embody the continuous and coordinated action required to realise specific values in practice, to take on other organised actors in political struggle and overcome them.

Again, it is a role which much of the political-science literature on parties tends to ignore. Seeing parties primarily as mechanisms of passive representation, these accounts tend to assume a largely unidirectional relationship between the forms of subjecthood existing in society and those in the political arena. Political constituencies tend to be seen as a function of underlying societal cleavages, whether rooted in interests or sedimented cultural oppositions (e.g. Rokkan and Lipset 1967), with the groups involved in these cleavage structures assumed to be already endowed with a sense of collective identity (Gallagher, Laver and Mair 1995, p.210). They are treated already as groups *for themselves* as well as *in themselves*, in other words: the role of the party in developing this self-consciousness, by creatively articulating political subjects, is often under-specified. The literature on 'linkage' between parties and citizens (or state and society) also tends to suppose interaction between two pre-defined groupings rather than an ongoing process of mutual constitution. While some of the classic accounts note that party activities are in no sense entirely derivative of cleavage structures – not all cleavages are translated into dimensions of political conflict, and parties have some degree of creative role in *shaping* as well as responding to citizen preferences (Sartori 1976) – even these accounts tend to have little to say about the creative role of parties in defining their constituency and thereby offering citizens ways of understanding not just their preferences but their very selves.

Parties are equally significant when we consider the third, *executive* source of conviction in the worth of political agency. For only parties are in a position to demonstrate in full the capacities of government for implementing public policies responsive to the democratic process. Parties serve two purposes here: they render political contestation *possible*, and they render it *comprehensible*. In their absence one may still have political decision-making of some kind: even where all representatives of a decision-making chamber have been elected as individuals rather as members of a party, they may organise votes and thereby choose policies, perhaps forming ad hoc coalitions on each piece of legislation (Goodin 2008, pp.205-211). They may also, as

individuals, secure certain basic advantages for the constituency which elected them – improvements in local infrastructure, for example. But there cannot be organised agenda-setting such that a programme with some basic level of normative coherence is translated into policies. The policy proposals on which votes are taken will be drawn up piecemeal and in isolation, perhaps each sponsored by a different representative, and unless practices of ideas-based cooperation between representatives across issues start to emerge (i.e. parties emerge) there will be no discernible coherence in these decisions – either in their origins or in the justifications retrospectively given to them. There will therefore be little sense that the resultant policies are expressions of collective political agency – indeed, given the self-contradictory results which decision-making by a sequence of votes can produce, there is a strong probability that some will look decidedly arbitrary.[8] Even where there is rudimentary coordination, the premises on which it rests will not be subject to organised contestation. Shared normative perspectives will emerge as the prerequisite of coordination, but they will remain largely tacit and unproblematised unless organised groupings emerge to challenge them. Nor will there be any mechanism by which the experiences of policy-making, including their successes and failures, and the practical knowledge representatives acquire in the course of governing, are able to feed back into normative political visions. In sum, without parties there will be a chaotic or opaque quality to decision-making which gives citizens no reason to take normative objectives seriously, and which therefore precludes widespread conviction of the worth of collective political agency.

Undeniably, while the presence of parties seems a *necessary* condition for provision of the executive source, it may not be *sufficient* at all times. There may be cases when its provision is undermined by an ineffective government bureaucracy which fails to respond to the outcomes of political contestation, or when the major media outlets systematically under-report the activities of the legislature or diminish their ideational basis. Moreover, one of the strategies of opposition parties is likely to be to try to cultivate the perception that the execution of policy-making is weak or disjointed. For parties in government, convincing citizens of the efficacy of their decision-making – in addition to its normative desirability – will evidently be one of the challenges of office. But though it is a case that needs to be made, it is a case made possible by party-led coordination amongst political representatives.

Three Alternatives to the Party

The argument we have sketched faces a number of objections. Perhaps most importantly, even those who acknowledge that parties have played these roles at certain points in the history of democracy may want to argue that under contemporary conditions there are other actors which may perform them equally well or better. In this section we examine three alternative actors and show how each of them is able to perform one, perhaps two, but not all three of the roles identified above, thus failing to cultivate conviction in the worth of political agency along the dimensions specified.

The first alternative perspective might consider social movements rooted in civil society as performing largely the same function (Tilly & Tarrow 2007). Social movements and parties may be distinguished, at least at a definitional level, by the fact that while both attempt to define and raise support for collective goals, and seek to do so over a sustained period of time, social movements focus on a more narrowly defined set of issues and do not seek to hold office themselves. Due to organisational and financial constraints, social movements tend to be most successful when they focus their energies on a closely delimited set of campaigns (Offe 1990), which means the majority of them are unlikely to develop comprehensive political visions and attempt to transform political institutions in accordance with these. Their strategy is to make claims *on* governments and the institutions of state without seeking to become *part of* their ruling administrations. But this very fact seems to make social movements unsuited to maintaining expectations of collective political agency by means of the *executive* role described above. Not only do they reject institutionalisation, but they reject the power which comes with this. The most they will be able to project therefore is the capacity to *influence* the governmental agenda – not the capacity to design it and execute it independently. This is not to say that they do not exert an important influence on the public sphere, simply that their rejection of integration into mainstream institutional politics is likely to render them inadequate to perform the executive role without support from other political actors.

Where social movements may contribute most to the fulfilment of the three roles identified is with regard to the *motivational* role. Historically, such movements have been distinctly successful at articulating collective subjects oriented to the pursuit of specific political goals, based for instance on categories of social income, gender, race and sexuality. Moreover, their ability to create networks of activists, to transfer information, and to engage in awareness-raising campaigns has been widely documented (Della Porta 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Social movements are undoubtedly a

significant alternative provider of motivational resources in times when parties are weak. What they cannot do is substitute for parties on all of the three roles described above. Furthermore their inability or unwillingness to engage in the executive role may end up undermining conviction in the worth of political agency amongst citizens who are not activists. The risk that these latter perceive the work of movements as well-intentioned yet utopian may lead to a sceptical if sympathetic attitude, thus contributing to a weakening of the democratic ethos.

If one of the arguments against social movements from a party-centred perspective is that they are unable to cultivate the *executive* source, parties themselves have often been subjected to a similar critique from those emphasising the reality of corporate pluralism (Schmitter 1974). Neocorporatist authors maintain that the role of parties in articulating or channelling institutional proposals and dictating the priorities of public policy has been increasingly replaced by direct communication between specialised interest groups and state agencies. Rather than following what Rokkan has termed the 'partisan-electoral' channel, political representation – neocorporatists emphasise – increasingly takes the form of a direct relation between formal, hierarchically-ordered associations (e.g. trade unions) and state agencies. Whilst providing organised interest-groups with recognition, legitimation and a certain 'representational monopoly' vis-à-vis alternative actors, state agencies trade such benefits with the possibility to maintain control over their selection of leaders, the kind of pressure exercised on the political system, and the articulation of political demands (Schmitter 1974). This has naturally raised doubts about the role of parties, and indeed parliamentary government more generally, in the delivery of public policy, and has led some to question whether liberal corporatism may be on the point of superseding democratically elected institutions (Lehmbruch 1979, p. 149).

The limits of this alternative proposal emerge if we assess the issue of political representation from a more normative perspective. Without denying the relevance of organised interest-groups in the execution of public policy, it is this type of critique of corporate actors that reminds why political parties remain relevant. Indeed while the latter constitute modes of civic engagement with a view to promoting the collective political good, and try to appeal to the reasons of all, corporate actors renounce this ambition by definition. Hence they appear particularly vulnerable to the democratic critique of factional groups, well captured in the words of Rousseau: "when particular interests begin to make themselves felt, and small societies to influence the larger society, the common interest diminishes, and meets with opposition […] the general will

is no longer the will of all, contradictions and disagreements arise, and the best opinion no longer carries the day unchallenged" (Rousseau 1762, p. 121-122). Of course, if one views parties only as agents aggregating self-evident interests in a competitive way, one will have trouble seeing the difference. Indeed their function would be reduced to merely replicating what corporate actors already do in more powerful ways. But if we take seriously their role as 'discursive architects', providing a variety of normative resources upon which to draw in deliberating upon competing policy options with a view to the collective political good, then parties cannot be so easily discarded. As Norberto Bobbio emphasises, while the 'sectional representation' offered by interest groups may be appropriate to numerous sub-domains of public life, in the political arena it cannot substitute for the advocacy of general visions provided by parties (Bobbio 1987, p.51). The very process by which the interests of corporate actors are integrated is subject to political negotiation, the modality of incorporation depends on the importance ascribed to specific interests at any given time and may be subject to different normative assessments.

If, as Rousseau exhorts us, we should be suspicious of interests entering the public sphere in an unmediated way, then the best way to counter their disruptive effects is to elaborate policies of dealing with them through the open, deliberative and normatively-informed environment that parties make available. The role of parties thus cannot be replaced by corporate agents. They may be powerful, but they cannot be directly controlled by citizens, nor can they modify what they stand for in accordance with public expectations of collective agency and normative ideas of the good polity. To normalise them at the expense of parties would be to sacrifice the idea of collective self-rule to that of absolute rule by the strongest interest group(s) (Kelsen 2000, p.93). Hence rather than relieving the symptoms of democratic disengagement, corporate actors run the risk of merely aggravating the disease. They may well perform the *executive* role we have associated with parties, and sometimes even the *motivational* one, but they cannot substitute for them in performing the *normative* role.

If the critique to corporate actors as alternative political agents focuses on their failure to provide the resources for informed and non-egoistic political deliberation, parties themselves have been often subjected to an analogous critique. One of the standard objections advanced by theorists of deliberative democracy is that they lie at the heart of a process in which only preference-aggregation matters, not the reasons citizens might have for expressing those particular preferences. Of course, as emphasised, no party aggregates votes automatically: some measure of deliberation is

unavoidable. Perhaps why defenders of deliberative democracy really object to party-centred political agency is on the grounds that parties foster commitment to oppositional activity rather than encouraging engagement with the opponent's argument (Young 2001, p. 671). Hence comes the deliberative democrat's emphasis on discourse, reciprocal argumentation and consent. Whether conceived as electronic improvements on familiar mechanisms of deliberation (Lupia and Matsuaka 2004), citizens' juries and deliberative polls (Fishkin 1991) or mini-publics convening to discuss issues of common concern (Fung 2003), such alternative political agents have all recently been considered more authentic expressions of the democratic idea.

Ironically, theoretical arguments on the superiority of deliberative fora proliferate as empiricists increasingly lament the tendency towards political disaffection and democratic disengagement (Mair 2006, p. 28). 'So what?', the deliberative democrat, may respond. If citizen apathy is the problem, participatory democracy might provide the solution. After all, deliberative decision-making constitutes an ideal, one which becomes all the more appealing in the face of the failure of traditional agents such as parties to operate as emancipatory forces in society. A deliberativist may be quite comfortable with any putative failure of partisanship, since deliberation is understood to be anchored in conceptions of justice that transcend the partisan perspective. In an ideal speech situation, all relevant arguments emerge in debate of their own accord, and organised collective agency may be a source of distortion, or may limit levels of citizen participation (Biezen and Saward 2008; Muirhead 2006).

Let us leave aside the conceptual question of whether the general interest may plausibly be conceived as something transcending partisan conflict and susceptible to access through a non-partisan exercise of public reason.[9] Let us focus instead on the motivational capacities of deliberation. Historically speaking, those (admittedly few) experiments in deliberative democracy that have left the most durable marks have been able to cultivate conviction in the worth of political agency only when paired with an additional motivational component. They have taken shape in times of both commitment to the realisation of a normative ideal of the just society *and* widespread partisan engagement on the side of the citizen body. One may think here of the soviets in 1917 Russia, or workers' councils in 1917-1918 Germany, or peasants' organisations in 1936-1937 Spain, or citizens' deliberative fora in 1956 Hungary. Even if deliberation is simply proposed as a normative ideal, it would be wrong to seek to abstract from the body of meanings and opinions derived from political conflict when constructing deliberative political agency. One may confront views when one has views to confront;

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one may try to persuade others of the worth of a political cause when a political cause is worth devoting oneself to; one may engage in a process of political transformation when a process of political transformation has been initiated. An organised political agent is needed, one able to define topics of concern, to create enduring constituencies, to support principled alignment, and to provide a sense of shared commitment to a collective political project, if citizens' conviction in the worth of collective political agency is to be maintained.

Deliberative agents lack this motivational capacity: they convene on an ad hoc basis, and once the theme on the table has been exhausted, deliberating agents are liable simply to leave the room and return to their private affairs – perhaps less certain of their beliefs than previously. One of the interesting findings of research on public discussion and deliberation is that participants tend to avoid the overt contestation of opinions, preferring to leave disagreement latent or, where recognising it, to avoid deeper engagement and argumentation over the bases of preferences (Conover, Searing and Crewe 2002, p.58; Duchesne and Haegel 2007, p.8, 11; Ryfe 2005). Such acts of personal distancing from political conflict suggest that while political talk may illuminate the lines of division on which political actors can draw, it is not in itself likely to be the precursor to political action. As Rosenblum puts it, 'deliberative settings may be endured; participants may even be enlightened. But it is not clear that they will be politically energised.' (Rosenblum 2008, p.310). Deliberative constituencies have no past and no present: no history of joint struggles and defeats, no political errors to reflect upon, no projects to articulate in common. Deliberative political agents cannot replace parties. This is not to say that deliberative democracy is an unworthy enterprise. But rather than replacing parties with deliberative constituencies, the point is to think of ways to integrate the two by rendering constituencies more partisan and/or encouraging parties to deliberate within (Biezen and Saward 2008).[10]

If conviction in the worth of political agency derives from three main sources – *normative*, *motivational* and *executive* – it seems that parties offer a contribution that none of the other familiar actors in contemporary politics can match. Social movements are able to supply the *normative* and *motivational* components but lack the *executive* capacity; corporate interest groups can supply the *motivational* and *executive* components, but without *normative* resources; and deliberative fora provide the *normative* and possibly *executive* components, but seem to lack the capacity for *mobilisation*.

An Impossible Task? Concluding Thoughts on Parties in Contemporary Democracy

It is, of course, one thing to argue that political parties represent a mode of civic engagement indispensable to maintaining conviction in the worth of political agency, and quite another to insist either that currently existing parties are up to this task or that the future emergence of such parties can be expected. For well might it be argued that, although the ideal type sketched alerts us to the fundamental yet overlooked functions which parties may serve, it does so ultimately so as to invite a depressing conclusion. Indeed, the dominant tone of contemporary academic scholarship on parties is itself often one of scepticism concerning what can be achieved. While contemporary political theorists of most descriptions tend to be altogether silent on parties, for empiricists the notion that 'parties do matter' has come to be seen as a questionable thesis. A sizeable literature observes that parties are in a state of fundamental change and perhaps long-term decline, as membership rates fall, leaders act as disconnected cartels, electoral contests focus on the dramatic personalities of individuals, and processes of transnational integration render the established political groupings obsolete (Mair 2006; Crouch 2004; Ginsborg 2005).

Accordingly, one may note that the three roles identified for parties in this article are currently weakly performed. First, talk of 'third-way' consensi expresses the way normative innovation appears to be missing in mainstream politics (Mouffe 2005). Policy-making seems to respond more to a need to assuage transitory fears, many of them inflated by parties themselves, than to promote a long-term and interconnected set of goals. Second, parties seem increasingly to want to construct their constituencies not in terms of clearly defined collective political identities but as free-floating individuals or 'consumers', who exercise 'choice' between party brands external to their sense of self rather than political programmes continuous with their self-understandings. The rise of the 'catch-all party' (Kirchheimer 1966) has been widely documented, and held responsible for the increasingly amorphous voting patterns which see voters switching parties from one election to the next (Knutsen 2006). Third, a whole host of concerns about whether the party-composition of governments has meaningful effects on the types of policies pursued, about trends towards presidentialist politics and the increasing popularity of the term 'governance' over 'government', raise doubts regarding the relationship between parties and decision-making (Mair 2008). Insofar as parties continue to influence government and the structuring of legislative chambers, thereby

serving a procedural function, it is argued they do so increasingly as appendages of the state, as small networks of 'managers' concerned mainly with office-holding rather than as organisations responsive to the concerns of a broader array of citizens (Mair 2003). In the light of such patterns, democratic disengagement, understood as the loss of conviction in the worth of political agency, now seems a thinkable prospect, even if presently incomplete.

These points would signal reason for the utmost pessimism concerning the fate of democracy if they could be attributed to structural changes which ruled out alternative paths of development. If the argument of the preceding sections is accepted, and parties are indeed crucial to fostering the ethos on which democracy survives, then any suggestion that their task is an impossible one must be regarded as a challenge to the possibility of democracy. So let us examine the plausibility of such arguments. Are parties really incapable of playing the *normative* role? At the extreme level, one might argue that, following the achievement of universal suffrage and the establishment of basic human rights, all worthwhile political ideals have already been realised and that what remains is merely a steering role – that the 'end of history' has indeed been reached. More circumspectly, one might argue that the contemporary world is no longer receptive to narratives of transformation rather than pragmatic reform, and that principle-based thinking – whatever its merits – no longer has an audience. Yet there seems no good reason why even those who accept such arguments should be inclined to sacrifice political ideals such as the commitment to collective self-rule. For it is exactly under conditions of uncertainty that conflict over political ends becomes vital: where no single perspective can claim absolute authority, a horizon of possibilities opens out. Uncertainty entails not universal doubt – a most impractical disposition, as Wittgenstein reminds – but a recognition of the contestability of viewpoints, something which is not only consistent with normative creativity but conducive to ensuring that political conflict takes democratic forms. Scholars of ideology inform us that the totalistic and rather fixed *Weltanschauungen* of the twentieth century may be fragmenting and waning, but emphasise the persistence of ideational formations of considerable structure and popular resonance (Freeden 2005).

Likewise, one should be dubious about the idea that there are structural-determinative reasons why contemporary parties are unable to play the *motivational* role. To be sure, it seems that, due to changing patterns of economic production and increasing levels of migration, the well-defined mass social groupings associated with Fordist society are passing, thus disrupting some of the organisational and symbolic

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resources on which parties of the recent past have been able to draw. But this does not mean that mobilisation itself is no longer viable. Quite the contrary, it increases the opportunities available to parties for creatively redefining the terms of political conflict. The decline of older social groupings and their attendant patterns of political behaviour, to the extent this can be observed (e.g. Franklin et al., 1992), is exactly what makes possible the articulation of new forms of collective identification which transcend partisanship in the sectarian sense. A new political space is opening, one which enables appeals to wider groupings than those rooted in narrowly defined ethno-cultural or productivity-based criteria, and which prioritises bonds of choice over those of tradition and inheritance. This space enables not only a politics of pragmatism, anodyne catch-all-ism, or quasi-universalist technocracy, as many identify in contemporary Western societies, but its opposite: a clash of citizens who understand themselves as, and who are constructed by organised actors like parties as, advancing competing interpretations of the collective political good. Mobilising citizens to this type of endeavour becomes increasingly possible as more sectarian forms of collective identification recede. As a possibility proof, one may consider the example of Europe's increasingly prominent 'new populist' parties, which succeed in drawing together under the sign of 'the people' groups of citizens hitherto politically incompatible (Laclau 2005). These parties' capacity for mobilisation is unquestionable. What they lack is a contribution to the *normative* and *executive* roles: they tend to have few clear political objectives beyond opposition to the existing system (Mudde 2004; Canovan 2005), and thus tend to be exposed as vacuous and substantively disappointing when extended a role in the formation of government policy.

Finally, what of the argument that structural changes in the contemporary world have rendered impossible parties' performance of the *executive* role? Such a position is often taken in view of processes of globalisation and regional integration which increase the porousness of political boundaries and the complexity of decision-making. In a world of transborder problems, ever more demanding swathes of information, and the consequent need for expert knowledge, bounded and election-oriented organisations may seem obsolete. 'Government', it may be argued, must give way to 'governance', leading to a system where power is widely diffused, elections result neither in the visible formation of a party-led centre of authority nor a clearly defined opposition, and no single political actor can hope to influence the decision-making arena as before. In such conditions, those who commit themselves to supporting a given party are denied the chance to see a tangible outcome to their efforts in the form of the coordinated

enactment of a political programme: hence there can be no *executive* source of commitment to political agency. On the one hand, such reasoning seems to rests on an often exaggerated and determinist reading of the changes currently being experienced by states and their political institutions. The retreat of state power is arguably far less advanced than such arguments suggest (Hirst and Thompson, 1999), and whatever pressures for such changes may exist have origins which are ideological at least as much as they are material (Hay 2007, chap. 4). On the other hand, many such arguments rest on a rather limited conception of the possible forms of transnational institutional structures. The fact that existing ones, for example those associated with the European Union, are arguably inadequately responsive to political contestation and the direct influence of parties does not mean that parties are no longer relevant to governmental decision-making. Rather, as sites of decision-making power multiply, it is likely that parties will have an increasingly important role to play in linking up political conflict across different arenas of contestation. What this requires is that parties use the existing influence they retain – indirectly through national governments, and through their ability to foster transnational networks – to redesign the system so as to increase its responsiveness to direct forms of influence. Certainly there will be parties with principled objections to doing so, either because they are localist in orientation or because they are content to divest themselves of political responsibilities and powers – but this should not be mistaken for a structural imperative.

The possibility of projecting the successful execution of political programmes through governments and legislative bodies remains and is necessary. A democratic ethos can be maintained only where the citizenry retains control over the legislature and where governments are accountable to democratic will. Where legislatures have lost connection with the people, or where their capacity to orient the activity of governments has been supplanted by other domestic or international political actors, the democratic ethos suffers. Even where such transformations have become an unavoidable part of political life, rather than being hailed, they should invite further reflection on the quality of democracy and its implications for citizens' conviction in the worth of political agency.

'Only self-deception or hypocrisy,' wrote Kelsen, 'can lead one to believe that democracy is possible without political parties. A democracy is necessarily and unavoidably a *party state'* (Kelsen 2000, p.92). E.E. Schattschneider, in a passage almost too famous to bear further repetition, likewise pronounced modern democracy

'unthinkable' save for parties (Schattschneider 1942, p.1). As we have tried to show, numerous thinkers have made the link between the principle of democracy – collective self-rule – and the necessity of certain modes of civic engagement by which citizens mobilise for the purpose of realising an interpretation of the common good. Yet it is with some irony that one notes that authors such as Kelsen and Schattschneider understood themselves explicitly as *realists*, stating truths which in the last instance could be defended as mere statements of the way things are. Kelsen called his observation a 'simple assertion of fact', something 'of which one can convince oneself by a glance at the development of all historical democracies' (p.92). Schattschneider's convictions were similar. Today, defenders of the normative and empirical significance of parties seem more likely to be cast in the role of nostalgics or utopians. The temptation has been to downgrade the role of parties, and to overlook the reasons other than the purely procedural for why they became a central political feature. The result has been that moves towards the individualisation and technocratisation of politics have been criticised without pairing this concern with an analysis of the modes of citizen engagement able to restore conviction in the worth of collective political agency.

As our last remarks have indicated, an insistence on the centrality of parties for strengthening the democratic ethos seems anything but an exercise in yearning for an era past or fated never to come. Though not strictly descriptive in its intent, the sketch given in this paper is by no means without empirical plausibility. To be sure, as the forms of democracy change, parties must adapt to new conditions, and a more detailed examination of the options available to them is one of the tasks for future discussion. But it seems as premature to doubt parties' capacity to adapt as it is ill-advised to overlook the importance of partisanship for collective self-rule. The future of modern democracy remains inseparable from the future of the party.

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[1] A number of interesting, theoretically-focused works on political parties have appeared in recent years, attempting to highlight and remedy the continued estrangement of debates in political theory from discussions of partisanship in comparative politics, as well as to challenge wider currents of scepticism towards partisanship as a democratic ideal. (Muirhead 2006) and (Rosenblum 2008) have both contributed to a rehabilitation of the ethical standing of partisan activists, showing how many of the standard critiques of partisanship in political thought can be countered not just on realist grounds to do with the functional necessities of modern democracy, but with regard to the intrinsic virtues of participation in collective political action. (Biezen and Saward 2008) have indicated the depth of the intellectual divide between democratic theorists and party scholars, as well as possible lines of re-engagement based on examining the contribution of parties to matters of shared interest, notably political deliberation. The present piece is of a different but complementary focus. It concerns primarily the effects partisanship may have on the public *beyond* the party organisation, and reflects on citizens' commitment not to particular standards of democratic practice (such as the deliberative ideal) but to the very principle of democracy, i.e. collective self-rule. More importantly, our insistence on the unique combination of three different sources of conviction in the worth of collective political agency (normative, motivational and executive) traces the significance of partisanship back to the core idea of collective self-

rule and to what we call the 'democratic ethos' which underpins it. It allows a deeper appreciation of the distinctiveness of partisan engagement vis-a-vis other modes of civic participation, and thereby offers additional important reasons for taking seriously the democratic role of political parties.

[2] Note that for the purposes of this paper it is unnecessary to draw a strong contrast between appeals to interests and values: both are interpretational acts which involve putting forward one of the many possible descriptions of the world, whether for the purposes of orientation or as a prelude to action.

[3] This is why Kant cautions against authoritative figures trying to discourage citizens from articulating their judgments in a normative perspective (Kant 1784, p. 11 ff.).

[4] Such is the implication of John Maynard Keynes' famous observation that 'practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist' (Keynes 2007, p.383).

[5] Parties in practice may of course betray such an ideal. If and when they do, the detachment of leaders from the normative goals endorsed by other members of the party is itself problematic.

[6] The distinction between normative reason and motivation is a familiar one in political theory and bears particular weight in discussions concerning moral universalism and particularism. For further analysis of its implications see Ypi 2008, pp. 54-56.

[7] The more sophisticated accounts of parties have recognised this (see Sartori 1976; Mair 1997, p.65), but it tends to be overlooked in contemporary accounts – perhaps because empirical research is considerably easier if a party's normative position is taken to be measurable by socio-economic data about its members and voters.

[8] Note then that this feature of parties allows decision-making to be both coherent *and* politicised. In the absence of parties, and where the choice is between direct majoritarian voting and non-majoritarian deliberation, one may rightly fear a trade-off between the two (Pettit 2001).

[9] One critique may be found in (Kelsen 2000, p. 93).

[10] For example, it is possible to imagine deliberative polls being used to address both technical issues regarding ruling procedures like membership fees and financial subsidies, and more normative questions such as the content of electoral manifestos, specific policy-prescriptions and the selection of leaders. For further analysis of deliberation within parties see (Ware 1986) (Teorell 1998); for a sceptical view see (Hendriks et al. 2007).

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