"Elections, Representation, and the Democratic Value of Parties"

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*A Note to WPSA conference participants: This is the fifth chapter of my current book project on the distinctive value of voting in contemporary democracy, though I think the argument here stands on its own. I realize it is a bit long for a conference paper, so I suggest skipping or skimming the discussion of E. E. Schattschneider's account of Responsible Party Government on pgs. 4-13.

Voting plays a distinctive and valuable role in contemporary democracy. As I argued in chapter 3, elections mark special moments for mass participation that formally and concretely realize the equal political authority of all citizens. Elections simultaneously embody both the dignity – indeed, the indispensability – of individual participatory contributions in a democracy, and the fundamentally collective nature of the democratic project. The centrality of popular voting in contemporary democratic practice structures the public life of democratic communities around recurring moments in which *all* citizens are expected to contribute to political decision-making and to exercise their political agency on equal terms with their fellow citizens in a shared enterprise.

Understanding this distinctive role that voting plays in contemporary democracy should affect how we assess the efficacy of elections and electoral systems. In chapter 4, I briefly outlined a set of broad structural conditions that contribute to the ability of voting to successfully fulfill its role in the plan for democracy. In this chapter, I focus on two of what I have called the

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structural conditions for external efficacy: 1) elections should be impactful and 2) elections should offer citizens a meaningful choice. Both of these conditions apply to the electoral agenda – what political question is placed before voters on the ballot, how is that question framed, and how will voters' answer shape public life?

In chapter 4, I argued that interpreting these conditions in relation to the distinctive role of voting in contemporary democracies requires taking seriously the social choice and citizen competence problems associated with collective decision-making that I described in chapter 1. Social choice theory's "impossibility" and "chaos" theorems have demonstrated that voting can only be regarded as a meaningful way of aggregating individual preferences or judgments into a collective choice against a background condition in which citizens share an understanding of the relevant alternatives (effectively creating a narrow choice set) or of a single relevant "dimension" along which alternatives can be ranked. The social choice problem suggests that for voting to be democratically significant, voters need to share an understanding of what the election is "about." I argued that solving the social choice problem while also satisfying the conditions of impactfulness and meaningful choice in elections means that electoral choices should correspond to the most salient political conflicts within a community.

But this correspondence between electoral choices and major lines of division within society is not sufficient to satisfy the conditions of meaningful choice and impactfulness. Satisfying these conditions also requires attention to how conflicts are defined and made salient in the first place. Most citizens do not have definite, fixed political attitudes. Citizens' preferences and judgments seem to be context specific and significantly responsive to the claims of political elites. Drawing on work by Lisa Disch, I argued that the apparent fluidity of citizens' preferences is not pathological, but rather essential to group decision-making. For

citizens to reach a shared understanding of relevant choices – of which decisions they will make together, they have to be responsive to efforts to define conflicts and frame relevant alternatives. The problem of citizen competence does represent a pathology in democracy, though, when the creative work of democracy – shaping major lines of political division, and identifying salient political possibilities – is dominated by a small group of political elites. Whether voting effectively contributes to democracy depends in part on the democratic character of the process for determining both the formal and informal electoral agenda.

In this chapter I discuss in greater detail a prominent, common component of that process – political parties. Political parties are essential to creating the background conditions that make vote aggregation meaningful; parties "simplify alternatives." Parties are key players both in setting the formal electoral agenda through the nomination of candidates, and in setting the informal electoral agenda by linking offices and different electoral contests to a common conflict between party principles.

In this chapter, I aim to develop a normative account of political parties' role in the process of political agenda setting. In section I, I discuss the limitations of the most prominent existing account of political parties' value as agenda-setters – the doctrine of responsible party government, mostly clearly articulated by E.E. Schattschneider. In section II, I argue that recent normative defenses of partisanship present a more attractive account of the democratic value of parties as cultivators of valuable citizen attitudes, in particular, a widespread sense of creative political agency. In section III, I argue that the creation of partisanship is intimately bound of up with the task of electoral mobilization, but also depends on the organization of the party and party system. I conclude section III with a speculative account of how my account of the

democratic value of political parties might yield conclusions about salutary party forms that differ from those of responsible party government.

The Limitations of Responsible Party Government

One of the best-known accounts of the democratic value of political parties is the doctrine of responsible party government. This account has significantly influenced scholarship on American political parties, in particular. It has helped to shape the normative standards of representation against which scholars seek to assess parties and political systems, as well as the understanding of the relationship between ordinary voters and party organizations.

The doctrine of responsible party government provides a good starting point for my inquiry because it advances an account of parties' value *as political agenda-setters*. The doctrine of responsible party government locates the value of political parties in their ability to simplify political alternatives and present a clear choice to voters, enabling elections to elicit a meaningful majority voice. Responsible party government had many defenders among American political scientists in the mid-twentieth century, but E. E. Schattschneider's book, *Party Government,* is generally regarded as the definitive statement of the doctrine of responsible party government,[1] so my discussion will focus on Schattschneider's work.

In *Party Government*, Schattschneider describes responsible party government as a remedy for a fractured political system that is too easily captured by special interest groups and political bosses who promote their own interests at the expense of the "great public interests" and the majority of citizens. Interest group politics, according to Schattschneider, inevitably

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[1] Another major statement of the doctrine can be found in a 1950 statement by the American Political Science Association committee on political parties ("Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System," *The American Political Science Review* (Supplement) 44, no. 3, part 2 (September 1950).), but Schattschneider's account of responsible party government is more theoretically sophisticated and has had a greater influence on contemporary political theory and political science. "

disadvantages majority interests, because large groups are much more difficult to organize than small ones. This is a serious problem for democracy understood as majority rule.

Schattschneider regards a system of strong, unified parties as the antidote to special interest politics, because parties' purpose and methods make them, almost by definition, mobilizers of majorities. A political party, according to Schattschneider "is first of all an organized attempt to get power. Power is here defined as control of the government."[2] Aiming for control of government distinguishes parties from pressure groups, which do not aim at control of the whole government. The distinctive purpose of parties is linked to the characteristic method of the political party, which Schattschneider describes as "a maneuver with numbers carried out in connection with governing in some numerous body having the power to govern." That is, parties aim to get control of the government by winning votes. By describing the party method of winning elections as "a maneuver with numbers," Schattschneider emphasizes that parties win control of government only by gaining supporters – in a competitive system, only by gaining a majority.

In Schattschneider's account, a competitive party system in which at least two major parties compete to win electoral majorities is democratically valuable because it reliably leads to the mobilization and advancement of significant majority interests. In a competitive party system, parties have to win over majorities of voters, which means they have to advance policy programs with broad appeal.[3] And if the party in government fails to deliver policies that are

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[2] E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York, NY: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1942), 35."parties are defined in terms of the bid for power because it is impossible to define them in terms of any other objective" (36) - people have differing motives for joining a party: "it is ridiculous to assume that men cannot collaborate to get power unless they are actuated by the same impulses. Possession of the vast resources of a modern government, its authority, its organization, administrative establishment, and so on, will provide something or nearly everyone willing to join hands in the political enterprise…But power is the common denominator of all their ambitions…Finally it is futile to try to determine whether men are stimulated politically by interests or ideas, for people have ideas about interests." (37)
[3] Ibid., 61–62; 84–88.

satisfactory to the majority, then voters will replace them with the opposition party.[4]

Schattschneider argues that democratic representation is achieved by a system that fosters

competition between strong, unified parties, enabling voters to distinguish between clear, party

platforms and to easily attribute responsibility for political outcomes to the party in government.

What distinguishes Schattschneider's account of responsible party government from

standard theories of democratic competition and electoral accountability is the emphasis he

places on the creative role of political parties as persuaders and *mobilizers* of majorities. In

Party Government, Schattschneider argues that gaining majority support requires representatives

to play an active role in creating, not just responding to majorities. Representatives cannot

merely respond to the voice of the people, because, Schattschneider argues, the people are a

sovereign who "can speak only when spoken to." Representatives must first make proposals that

the people can then accept or reject: "As interlocutors of the people the parties frame the

question and elicit the answers."[5] Schattschneider argues that parties create from the "raw

material of politics" – from the chaos of various special interests – the conditions for the people

to speak with a meaningful voice. Parties mobilize unorganized majorities "in recognition of the

great public interests" and through the synthesis of various special interests.[6] Schattschneider

thus describes parties as engaging in the kind of speculative claim-making that Lisa Disch has

identified a core feature of democratic representation[7] and that, as I have argued in previous

chapters, is essential for creating the background conditions for a meaningful social choice.

Schattschneider acknowledges that citizens' political preferences and judgments are not

fixed, but that citizens respond to elite efforts to characterize public interests and to make certain

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[4] Ibid., 82.
[5] Ibid., 51.
[6] Ibid., 31.
[7] Lisa Disch, "Toward a Mobilization Conception of Representation," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2011): 102.

conflicts salient. In his later book*, Semi-Sovereign People*, Schattschneider further elaborates how political structures and elite efforts to determine "the scope of conflict" affect the framing of political questions, and possible political outcomes.[8] But Schattschneider sees this primarily as a question of whether majority or minority interests are likely to advanced. Special interest groups endeavor to keep the scope of conflict small, to frame the political outcomes they want to influence as the subject of a narrow struggle between competing particular interests. Consequently, Schattschneider argues, interest group politics tends to promote minority private interests at the expense of public interests, because most citizens do not see how their interests are involved, and because it is difficult to mobilize the kind of support for public interests that is required to successfully compete in the arenas of interest group politics.[9]

According to Schattschneider, strong party government is likely to lead to the advancement of more majority interests, though, because parties have to broaden the scope of conflict to win elections. Parties mobilize supporters on a broad scale by framing political conflicts in terms of the public interest.[10]

Schattschneider acknowledges that parties play an important role in shaping citizens' political preferences and judgments through their claims about the major political conflicts and interests at stake in an election. What sets parties apart from other political actors, though, and, according to Schattschneider, makes party government democratically valuable is that parties' claims to represent the people and act on behalf of the public interest "are subjected to periodic

[8] E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1975). See, also Lisa Disch's discussion of Schattschneider's work on structural bias in a representative system Lisa Disch, "Democratic Representation and the Constituency Paradox," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (September 2012): 602–603.
[9] Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, 34–35.
[10] Ibid., 52–56.

tests of strength" through elections.[11] To act on their claims, parties have to actually achieve

support from a majority of citizens.

Schattschneider thus defends responsible party government on the basis of a starkly

majoritarian conception of democracy. He rejects the American system of decentralized, often

fragmented parties that, as Austin Ranney has argued, is appropriate for a society ambivalent

toward majority rule.[12] It is precisely the inhibition of majority rule and the accompanying

empowerment of minorities in pressure politics that Schattschneider criticizes: "the minorities

have a right to be heard," he argues, "they do not have a right to govern. The power to govern

must be reserved to the majority acting through the political parties."[13]

Schattschneider's defense of parties as mobilizers and representatives of the majority

does not provide a satisfactory account of the democratic value of political parties. The

presumptive authority of the majority depends on the assumption that a particular,

democratically relevant, majority exists prior to and independent of the political process. But, as

I argued in chapter 1, this assumption, characteristic of aggregative conceptions of democracy,

does not hold. The creative work that party leaders undertake in framing salient political

conflicts and defining relevant alternatives advances some "great public interests"[14] at the

expense of other potential majority interests. Schattschneider himself acknowledges in *Semi-*

Sovereign People that different political "cleavages" can yield different majority/minority

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[11] Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 200. This, for Schattschneider is the key distinction between parties and pressure groups, and why Schattschneider thinks that party government is more democratic than pressure politics: "The distinguishing mark of pressure tactics is not merely that it does not seek to win elections but that in addition it does not attempt to persuade a majority. A pressure group is not a minority becoming a majority…Pressure politics is a method of short-circuiting the majority" (189)

[12] Austin Ranney, *The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government, Its Origin and Present State* (University of Illinois Press, 1954), 160.

[13] Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 204.

[14] Ibid. 31; 204–206.

breakdowns, that the dominance of particular cleavages can alienate large numbers of citizens[15] and that political elites, and especially political parties play an important role in determining which cleavages appear most salient.[16]

Parties cannot be understood as democratically valuable agenda-setters just because they mobilize and represent "the majority," since it is not obvious that we should favor one majority over another. There are many plausible ways of characterizing the most important dimensions of political conflict: liberal vs. communitarian or nationalist, conservative vs. progressive, big government vs. small government. Major political conflicts might also focus on differences in foreign policy, or competing views of the existential threat of climate change. They might track religious disagreements or ethnic disputes. Parties mobilize majorities by making particular cleavages seem most salient, and often by providing a narrative explaining how many different cleavages can be understood in terms of a single salient dimension of political conflict.

This creative work of defining the most salient cleavages in society - of articulating relevant political possibilities - is essential to large-scale democracy, and the democratic value of political parties depends in part on the role they play in this creative work of democracy. But since citizens' political judgments, preferences, and even perceptions of their own interests depend on how political conflicts and questions are framed, the *democratic* value of political parties cannot just be that they achieve a coherent understanding of the most important political cleavage, and mobilize a particular majority around a particular cleavage. If party leaders do not discover existing public interests or reflect the views of a predefined majority, but instead create

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[15] Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, 102–105.
[16] Ibid., 131. Schattschneider acknowledges the importance of parties' agenda-setting for determining political outcomes in Party Government, as well, though he makes less of it in that book: "parties frame the question and define the issue. In doing this they go a long way toward determining what the answer will be." Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 51.

majorities and define the salient issues of public interest, then the democratic value of political parties turns on the role of citizens in the formation of party positions and identities.

This is where Schattschneider's majoritarian defense of parties proves inadequate. Schattschneider's majoritarian conception of democracy leads him to argue that the identification and advancement of the public interest can *only* be accomplished through highly centralized, elite-driven parties acting as representatives of the people. Perversely, in Schattschneider's view, it seems that more direct participation by citizens will be less likely to achieve democratic outcomes, since citizens acting alone or in small groups are prone to pursue partial interests, rather than public ones.[17] On the other hand, he argues, party elites in a competitive system always have an incentive to seek out the broad interests that can secure the support of an electoral majority.

Responsible party government limits citizen participation to the choice between parties that is placed before them at election time; ordinary citizens have no role in shaping the options before them. Schattschneider compares democracy to a market, and citizens to consumers: "The sovereignty of the voter consists in his freedom of choice just as the sovereignty of the consumer in the economic system consists in his freedom to trade in a competitive market."[18] Ordinary citizens do not have a share in the creative work of shaping the political "products" available to choose from at election time; they only judge between the options provided for them. More direct citizen involvement would only interfere with the unity and thus the responsibility of the parties.

Schattschneider acknowledges the limited scope of this understanding of citizenship, but he argues that a more robust understanding of self-rule is not possible: "the parties take from the

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[17] Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 31.
[18] Ibid., 60.

people powers that are merely theoretical."[19] Parties are possible and necessary in democracy, Schattschneider argues, because of "the immobility and inertia of large masses." The citizenry as a whole simply cannot act on its own without the organizing ability of parties.

Schattschneider insists that the creative process of articulating the public interest, defining salient political conflicts, and relevant alternatives cannot be democratized. He argues that attempting to achieve intraparty democracy is not only fruitless, but also sabotages the project of meaningful democracy *between* the parties.[20] Providing ordinary citizens a role in shaping the claims that parties make would destroy the unity and coherence necessary for responsible parties, and it would compromise the ability of voters to judge the representative claims of the parties at the time of election. The limited role Schattschneider ascribes to citizens as judges of competing parties only has democratic value, though, if citizens' judgments of the parties are taken to be somehow independent of the claims that party leaders make, and if parties' efforts to persuade a majority incentivize them to discover pre-existing public interests. Without the independent judgment of citizens, or appeal to an underlying majority will, there is nothing to differentiate responsible party government from oligarchy.

Though many contemporary scholars of parties reject Schattschneider's hard distinction between political parties and pressure groups,[21] Schattschneider's insistence that ordinary voters should not be thought of as party members is commonplace in contemporary political science. Party scholars agree that most citizens have no role in the creative work of characterizing political conflict, setting party positions, or shaping party identities.[22] In fact, scholars still

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[19] Ibid., 52.
[20] Ibid., 57–59.
[21] See, e.g. Kathleen Bawn et al., "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (September 2012): 571–97; John Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
[22] Some scholars emphasize a difference in how we interpret the membership of citizens within different roles. John Aldrich, for example, argues that when ordinary citizens happen to act in the mode of party activist, they can be

typically use the two analogies Schattschneider offers to explain the party loyalty of voters: the

"brand loyalty" of a consumer, and the team loyalty of a sports fan.[23] Voters, according to this

orthodoxy may faithfully buy their party's product, or cheer for their team, but voters do not

contribute to producing that product;[24] they do not compete for the team.

This model of the relationship between parties and voters suggests a bleak outlook on the

democratic value of political parties. On the one hand, most citizens are excluded from the

creative work of political parties – defining conflicts and salient alternatives, creating and

refining claims about the public interest – that enable meaningful collective decision-making.

On the other hand, citizens do not even act as impartial judges of party offerings, but are often

(perhaps typically) loyal to a party "brand." It seems, then, that when parties play a significant

role in a representative system (as they do in all large, established, contemporary democracies),

most citizens do not actually exercise any meaningful political authority. Only a handful of party

elites determine the character and direction of public life. This can hardly be understood as

democratic self-rule.

Democratic minimalists argue that democratic self-rule is unrealizable because elite

control of political outcomes through manipulation of the political agenda and of public opinion

cannot be overcome. But, as I argued in Chapter 1, the minimalist response is too hasty.

Schattschneider's pessimism about greater citizen participation is unwarranted. Schattschneider

takes an unnecessarily corporate view of democracy, assuming that democracy only occurs when

the people speak with one voice (through majority rule). In this view, before democracy can take

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considered party members, but voters, qua voters, cannot. (Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look*, 18.) I don't think
this role differentiation between citizens as activists and citizens as voters is tenable, though. As I will argue in
section III, there may be a distinctive democratic value to mobilizing citizens qua voters.

[23] See Schattschneider, *Party Government*, 59–60; and Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look*, 19 e.g.

[24] Alan Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6–7; Aldrich, *Why
Parties? A Second Look*, 18.

place, there must already be a coherent popular will of some kind – democracy refers only to the articulation and enactment of that popular will.

Democracy does not depend on pre-existing corporate agency, though. In chapter 2, I argued that the shared activity of democratic self-rule is better understood as a less demanding variety of shared agency. Democracy is not the articulation and enactment of a pre-existing popular will. It is a jointly intentional activity of individuals committed to working together on the collective project of self-rule. Democracy understood in this way includes the process of *creating* a coherent popular will. It includes the process of developing a shared understanding of the kinds of decisions that need to be made collectively, of the most important dimensions of political conflict, and of the most relevant possible alternatives. Democracy includes the process of forming individual and shared political judgments as well as the process of combining individual perspectives through deliberation, bargaining, and aggregation.

Because the joint intentions understanding of democratic agency allows more space for indeterminacy in democratic outcomes, and for ongoing contestation of political decisions, it does not require leaving the creative work of interest articulation to a few party leaders. Schattschneider's claim that more popular participation within the parties hinders the advancement of public interests lacks merit because the characterization of "public" interests is partly determined through the political process. Likewise, the concern that popular participation within the parties interferes with the articulation of coherent alternatives carries less weight, since it is not clear why (at least on democratic grounds) we should value a particular set of coherent alternatives that reflects the political agency of only a few elites.

The orthodoxy that ordinary voters cannot be considered members of a party is based on a strong dichotomy between "proprietary"[25] membership in political parties and simple spectatorship. This dichotomy is grounded in a strong corporate understanding of democratic agency and what Lisa Disch has called a "correspondence" view of democratic representation. Correspondence views of representation hold that representation is democratically valuable insofar as it *reflects* something that might be called the "popular will" – a majority voice or some other relevant synthesis of the varied interests and opinions of individual citizens. Correspondence views see democratic representation as a unidirectional relationship – representatives are responsive to the people, and not the other way around.[26] Within a correspondence view of representation, parties are only democratically representative when citizens directly or indirectly *control* the party and the behavior of party leaders. Ordinary citizens clearly do not control political parties, though. The relationship between citizens and parties is not unidirectional. Public opinion and popular attitudes undoubtedly influence party messaging and strategy, but party activity also influences public opinion. Citizens who identify with or typically support a party usually accept and affirm their party's nominations for office and political platform, and they often revise their judgments in response to the claims of party elites.[27]

The bidirectional influence between parties and citizens undermines the democratic value of parties on the correspondence view of representation. But an alternative conception of representation – one that is more consistent with a shared intentions account of democratic

[25] Schattschneider, *Party Government,* 59.
[26] Disch, "Toward a Mobilization Conception of Representation," 100.
[27] See, e.g. Gabriel S. Lenz, *Follow the Leader?: How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2012). Lenz argues that individuals' tendency to shift their own views when party elites shift their positions is not just a matter of treating the statements of some party leaders as a heuristic for identifying which positions are most in line with some particular interest and ideology. Lenz shows that many individuals even shift their own expressed ideology in response to shifts in the ideological position of political elites.

agency – can recover the value of this mutual responsiveness between citizens and political parties. Lisa Disch has argued that representation is creative work. Representatives do not merely stand-in for a particular group of people, and they do not merely reflect some relevant political characteristic of their constituencies. Through their claims to speak or act on behalf of a group, representatives help to *create* the constituency they claim to represent and to establish the political relevance of the interests, attitudes, or judgments that define the constituency.[28] Drawing from Hannah Pitkin's more radical moments, Disch argues that representation refers to a dynamic relationship in which representatives make speculative claims to represent an interest, judgment, or feeling within the population, citizens respond to these claims, representatives in turn respond to citizens' uptake (or rejection) of representative claims, etc. in a constant iterative process.[29] Because representation is a bidirectional relationship, on this understanding, the democratic value of representation does not turn on whether a representative's behavior appropriately reflects the judgments or interests of her constituency. Instead, Disch, like Pitkin, argues that the democratic character of representation should be evaluated systemically.[30]

Disch's systemic understanding of representation is appropriate for a jointly intentional understanding of democratic agency that is attentive to the problems of social choice and citizen competence. Democracy cannot be just a matter of combining pre-existing individual preferences or judgments to yield a collective choice. Meaningful aggregation requires a shared

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[28] Disch, "Democratic Representation and the Constituency Paradox," 607–608.

[29] Ibid., 606.

[30] Ibid., 608. : "The representativity of such claims turns not so much on their correspondence to pre-existing demands as on the response they solicit: Do they succeed in rallying a constituency? And on what terms of identification…The idea of responsibility lends to the normative analysis of democratic representation a new critical edge by shifting its narrow focus on assessing the match between what representatives do and what constituents say they want (i.e., responsiveness) to a much broader consideration of the role that systemic features…have on fostering or foreclosing political conflict. That is, responsibility redirects attention from congruence toward what I have called 'constituent effects.' I propose this notion of constituent effects to open for analysis the impact that a system of representation has on the encouragement or discouragement of constituencies and on the constitution of political conflict."

understanding of the dimension of conflict or of the most relevant alternatives in the choice set. Speculative claims to speak on behalf of the group are essential to the process of developing such a background understanding. Representation should be understood as embedded within democracy. Representatives do not simply reflect existing attributes of the people. Representatives make and refine creative or speculative claims about the public interest or the popular will as part of a process through which citizens form shared judgments about what they *might* do together, and individual judgments about which they *should* do.

This understanding of representation as a dynamic relationship embedded within the democratic process calls for an account of the relationship between ordinary citizens and political parties in a democracy that moves beyond the dichotomy between spectatorship and proprietary membership. A democratically valuable party system should foster a critical attitude toward and widespread participation in the process of refining claims about the most salient issues of public interest, contesting party programs or identities, defining conflicts and relevant alternatives, and creating the conditions for meaningful aggregative decision-making.

In the next section, I examine recent normative defenses of partisanship to show what such a relationship would look like, and in section III, I argue that the close relationship between parties and popular elections (and in particular the expectation of universal electoral participation) plays a central role in forming this kind of relationship. This argument also provides insight into the kinds of party forms and party systems that are most likely to be democratically valuable.

The Value of Partisanship

While parties have loomed large in empirical scholarship of established democracies, democratic theorists have traditionally been skeptical about the democratic value of political parties.[31] Recently, however, a few democratic theorists have offered a novel account of the value of political *partisanship*. By investigating the significance of partisanship as an identity or attitude held by ordinary citizens, this literature helpfully moves past the dichotomy between voters as spectators, and voters as proprietary members of political parties. The emphasis on the democratic value of partisanship *as a political identity* offers a new starting point to understand the value of the relationship between ordinary citizens and political parties in a way that accommodates the dynamism and reflexivity essential to a more embedded conception of representation.

Three general strands in recent defenses of partisanship characterize partisan identity as an essential aspect of a conception of democratic citizenship in which citizens are expected to exercise creative political agency. One strand emphasizes the contrast between a partisan disposition and an "independent" disposition - partisanship is associated with collective action; it involves acting or standing *with* others. A second strand emphasizes the contrast between partisanship and factionalism. Partisanship may be a partial identity, but it is nevertheless bound up with the party's aim for majority status and democratic legitimacy. Because of this aspiration, partisan identities tend to develop a "comprehensive" character, unifying a broad range of goals and issue positions within a common interpretation of the public interest. Finally, a third strand emphasizes the value of partisanship for enabling meaningful political deliberation.

In *On the Side of Angels*, Nancy Rosenblum offers an "appreciation of parties and partisanship," arguing that normative democratic theory's traditional aversion to partisanship is

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[31] See Nancy Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008) for an extended discussion of political theory's traditional distaste for political parties.

indefensible. Rosenblum canvasses the history of political thought for "moments" of appreciation of parties, but the most distinctive and original contribution of the book is her argument for the moral and democratic value of partisanship as a social identity. One of the values of parties, she argues "is to serve as 'carriers' of partisanship."[32] Rosenblum resists the tendency in recent empirical literature to treat party ID as synonymous with a strong attachment to or affinity for a party organization (akin to brand loyalty), or as a cognitive shortcut.[33] There is something significant about *identifying* as a partisan, Rosenblum argues. Understanding the democratic value of partisanship requires understanding it as a social identity, but also appreciating its distinctiveness as a certain kind of identity.

To understand the significance of "identification as a partisan", Rosenblum contrasts it with identification as an independent: "in plain contrast to partisanship, consideration of acting with others for effect is no part of independent identity."[34] Independents view voting as an act of individual judgment. By contrast, "voting by partisans has characteristics of a collective act. "Partisans are not voting alone."[35] The sense of acting together with others is the hallmark of partisanship as a social identity, and like other social identities, partisanship depends upon loyalty, trust, and a politics of presence.[36]

In *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, Russell Muirhead likewise articulates the value of partisanship (or "party spirit") by contrasting it with the attitude of the "moral purist" and the "zealot." The moral purist and the zealot adhere absolutely to their principles, and, therefore, neither contributes to the democratic project, which requires managing disagreement among citizens to reach collective decisions in a way that is consistent with the equal political

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[32] Ibid., 322.
[33] Ibid., 340.
[34] Ibid., 351.
[35] Ibid., 355.
[36] Ibid., 341–347.

agency of all citizens. The moral purist adopts an apolitical stance, but the zealot aims to shape

society without regard for the agency of her fellow citizens. The zealot, Muirhead explains

"comes to believe not only in his own righteousness, but that there is no justifiable impediment

to bringing this righteousness to the world."[37]

Both Muirhead and Rosenblum identify compromise as one of the key features

distinguishing partisanship from the purist or independent disposition. Both argue that

compromise – at least with fellow partisans if not with rivals – is an essential part of political

partisanship. Rosenblum lists the "disposition to compromise" as one of three "preliminary

articles in defense of partisanship,[38] and a key component of an "ethics of partisanship."

Muirhead argues: "There is no way to stand in a group (even a group of merely two) without

trimming our convictions."[39] Common political beliefs and goals are no more inherent in a

group of fellow partisans than they are in the broader community of citizens. Parties, Rosenblum

argues, are themselves "arenas of political discussion internally,"[40] in which the partisan identity

is formed through a process of debate and compromise. Of course, there is (and should be) a

limit to how far individuals are willing to compromise their own principles for the sake of

partisanship, but Muirhead argues, "locating this limit is what debate within a party is usually

about. It is the willingness to engage in that debate that marks off the democratic virtue of

partisans, at least in the ideal"[41]

For Muirhead, the democratic value of this willingness to compromise is closely tied to

parties' distinctiveness as a political group that aims to *govern,* and that seeks to gain control of

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[37] Russell Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 49.

[38] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 361.

[39] Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, 18.

[40] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 361.

[41] Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, 19.

government by seeking an electoral majority.[42] "By trimming their own convictions," Muirhead argues, partisans "are willing to participate in the 'process' of creating a group that is large and stable enough to possess democratic legitimacy."[43] This is part of the second strand of recent normative justifications of partisanship, which focuses not only on the virtues of partisanship as a group identity, but on the distinctive character of that group identity. Thus Muirhead argues that "one democratic virtue of partisans" is their willingness not just to stand with a group, but to stand with the kind of group that could "generate a legitimate claim to rule."[44]

Central to this second strand of the normative defense of partisanship is the idea that parties are political groups with a distinctive character – their interest in power is tied to a concern with a legitimate public interest. Parties may, of course, be composed of individuals with all kinds of partial interests, but on this account, to identify as a partisan means to identify with a particular general conception of the public interest.[45] In his essay on the development of concept of "party," Terrence Ball has argued that the development of a conceptual distinction between parties and factions enabled a positive view of parties in democratic theory.[46] Nancy Rosenblum similarly identifies nonfactionalism as essential to the democratic character of partisanship. Rosenblum endorses the understanding of parties as loyal opposition – committed to maintaining the community, to playing by the rules of the game and achieving their aims

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[42] Muirhead argues "compromise is always with a view to a particular goal: collecting a majority, so as to both win and win legitimately" (Ibid., 89.)

[43] Ibid., 19.

[44] Ibid., 18.

[45] See, e.g. Jonathon White and Lea Ypi, "On Partisan Political Justification," *The American Political Science Review* 105, no. 2 (May 1, 2011): 382. "Partisanship, unlike factionalism, involves efforts to harness political power not for the benefit of one social group among several but for that of the association as whole, as this benefit is identified through a particular interpretation of the common good."

[46] Terrence Ball, "Party," in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terrence Ball, James Farr, and Hanson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 166–169.

through success in *political* competition, and to using any power they win to govern according to their conception of the common interest.[47]

Rosenblum provides a number of arguments for the democratic value of partisanship grounded in the particular political character of the partisan identity and the distinctive "ethic of partisanship." The first "preliminary article" Rosenblum offers in defense of partisanship is the "*inclusive* character of party ID" (at least in the United States). Though they may have originate as a political mobilization of particular social identities – and may even retain names that reflect that history – most major parties are not exclusive, and do not claim to represent specific groups. "Where it is an original identity, or at least not reducible to prior social identities," Rosenblum argues, "the 'we' of partisanship is more inclusive than other political identities"

This isn't to say that partisans have a deep commitment to inclusiveness and toleration of diversity. Rather, Rosenblum argues that inclusiveness will be a feature of partisanship, "wherever partisans are ambitious to be in the majority."[48] Moreover, she claims, this ambition is characteristic of partisanship. Partisans do not just want to win – there are many forms of political associations that can gain political power to enact a policy program. Partisans seek the "moral ascendency" that comes with persuading a majority.[49]

Related to this aspiration to majority status is the "aspiration to tell a comprehensive story…for the nation as a whole."[50] Rosenblum argues that partisans take responsibility for advancing some broad account of the public welfare: "for telling a comprehensive public story about the economic, social and moral changes of the time."[51] According to Rosenblum, this aspiration to comprehensiveness comes in part from the constraint of seeking a majority, but is

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[47] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 121–127.
[48] Ibid., 357.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 360.
[51] Ibid., 359.

also basic to the partisan identification. "Partisans," she argues "are sincere in proposing their allies as decision makers for the nation as whole across a broad set of problems in terms that can appeal to 'the great body of the people.'" Whatever a party's short-term strategy, the partisan *identity* does not consist in beliefs about or responses to particular political issues. Partisan identity is bound up with durable values and principles that can act as a guide on a broad range of political questions across time.

A third strand in the recent accounts of the democratic value of partisanship emphasizes the deliberative value of political partisanship. Both Muirhead and Rosenblum discuss the potential deliberative value of partisanship with reference to John Stuart Mill's account of a dialectical relation between "parties of order" and "parties of progress." On Mill's account, both parties – and the tension between them – are needed to achieve the appropriate path for a political community.[52] Muirhead argues that the best understanding of Mill's defense of this party antagonism is not that truth metaphysically requires the combination of opposites, but rather that human psychology is limited. In public life, truth "has to be made by the rough process of struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners"[53] because most human beings lack the mental capacity or impartiality to appreciate nuanced or multi-sided truths.

Both Rosenblum and Muirhead note the fragility of this understanding of the deliberative value of parties. For the antagonism between rival parties to be fruitful, Muirhead notes, partisans need to be able to occasionally adopt an impartial stance to appreciate the value in the opposing party line. The risk of partisanship is complete polarization and gridlock that prevents

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[52] See ibid., 144.
[53] Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, 100.

any kind of synthesis of partisan perspectives. For Muirhead, overcoming this partisan tendency toward polarization is essential to realizing the value of political partisanship.[54]

Nancy Rosenblum expresses greater ambivalence toward the Millian account of the deliberative value of parties. Rosenblum observes that "principles or values or interests do not arise in antagonistic pairs."[55] Expecting partisanship to embody a progressive dialectic invites disappointment and threatens to overshadow the more mundane (but democratically essential) achievements of political parties.[56] Still, Rosenblum offers a tempered account of the deliberative value of parties and partisanship: "parties articulate positions, define divisions, and their antagonism is the engine of 'trial by discussion.'"[57] Parties may not embody Mill's great principled opposition, but they do organize and direct what would otherwise be chaotic and fruitless debate among different interests and values. "Shaping conflict," Rosenblum argues, "is what parties and partisans do and what will not be done, certainly not regularly, without them."[58]

In "On Partisan Political Justification," Lea Ypi and Justin White offer another account of the deliberative value of partisanship, focusing on the value of partisanship to the project of political justification, central to many contemporary accounts of deliberative democracy. Ypi and White argue that partisan efforts to promote particular political principles or agendas contribute to three essential "circumstances of justification." First, justification of a political principle or program requires an alternative against which it can be compared. The deliberative process of justification, therefore, depends on "the systematic generation of principled alternatives"[59]. Second, they argue, the "relational dimension" of partisan competition is likely to

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[54] See ibid., 110.
[55] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 159.
[56] Ibid., 156–157.
[57] Ibid., 160.
[58] Ibid.
[59] White and Ypi, "On Partisan Political Justification," 385.

enrich political justification. By contrast, "if just one political agent is responsible for generating

proposals and the comparators by which they are evaluated, then there will be little incentive to

engage in the challenging scrutiny of these proposals."[60] Finally, for political justification to be

democratically valuable it needs to be public. Partisanship can amplify arguments "so as to be

hearable by the constituency to which they are addressed" and can help make arguments

"cognitively accessible to that constituency so as to be acknowledged when heard."[61]

In addition to the role that partisan speech plays in fostering these three circumstances of

justification, Ypi and White defend "the educative potential" of partisanship. Partisan fora

contribute to a more engaged citizenry, providing support for "the socialization of their members

into complex political, economic, and legal affairs."[62] Importantly, Ypi and White argue that

these partisan fora do not just create blindly loyal followers. Rather, partisanship plays an

important role in enabling citizens to see themselves as political agents in their own right. Ypi

and White argue that "the broad agreement on certain shared political principles that

characterizes partisanship of whatever stripe acts as the basis on which individuals can develop

confidence in their views before having them exposed to more radical challenge."[63] Thus,

"When partisan fora successfully perform their civic role, they supply the opportunities for

political exchange that anchor individuals in shared normative frameworks while valorizing the

experience and judgment of each."[64]

These three strands of the recent normative literature on partisanship helpfully moves the

normative question of the relationship between political parties and ordinary citizens beyond the

"membership" question. The membership question focuses on control, with the underlying

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[60] Ibid., 386.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 387.
[63] Ibid., 388.
[64] Ibid.

assumption that the people have an agenda or set of interests that they want to hold their representatives to. The focus on partisanship emphasizes the creative work of politics that is often ignored in correspondence views of democratic representation. Democracy is not just a matter of appropriately combining the various pre-existing individual preferences, interests, beliefs and judgments that citizens hold. Rather, democracy is a matter of *creating* legitimate collective decisions (and collective action), while also respecting the dignity of citizens as equal, and discrete, agents.

The recent normative focus on the partisan identity emphasizes the recognition of ongoing disagreement among citizens. Rosenblum argues that "partisans do not want or expect the elimination of political lines of division."[65] Normative defenses of partisanship distinguish ideal-typical modern partisanship from factionalism with this point. Partisans recognize that they do not constitute the entire political community (though they may have as their ultimate goal persuading the entire community to their partisan cause).

At the same time that they recognize the durability of disagreement, partisans do not simply retreat into their own personal convictions. Rather, they take part in the work of forging collective self-rule from the conflicting contributions of equal political agents. The three strands of the normative defense of partisanship demonstrate how the partisan identity relates to the creative work of politics: partisans participate in the deliberative dynamic of defining lines of division in society, linking solutions to various social problems, and articulating alternatives…And they do not do this randomly, but join together with others, and in a process of compromise try to forge groups that can effectively govern and have a claim to legitimacy. Rosenblum summarizes the characteristic stance of the partisan: "The moral distinctiveness of party ID is that partisans do not think they could or should speak *for* the whole while still

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[65] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 354.

thinking they should speak *to* everyone."[66] This is a fundamentally democratic stance:

representing the tension between individualism and collectivism.

Defenders of partisanship view it as an active, critical attitude of citizenship. In

aggregative conceptions of democracy or correspondence views of representation, all that

democracy demands of citizens is that they allow themselves to be measured and counted and

that they assent to the outcome of the counting process. Recent defenses of partisanship, though,

highlight the inadequacy of this view. Democratic outcomes are not simply discovered among

the attributes of citizens. Membership in a democratic community entails "participating in the

contest over what the community is about,"[67] and participating in this contest involves more than

just registering a final judgment. It also involves defining the salient cleavages and relevant

alternatives that shape the contest in the first place. Rosenblum, Muirhead, and Ypi and White

argue that this is the work of partisanship. In fact, it is the work of citizenship.

These accounts of partisanship offer a fruitful new starting point for thinking about the

normative significance of the relation between ordinary citizens, representatives, and political

parties, but the emphasis on partisanship still doesn't offer a complete account of the democratic

value of parties' agenda-setting role. In the next section, I will address two major limitations in

this recent literature on partisanship. I will argue that how party organizations interact with the

distinctive practice of popular voting is essential for identifying how and when parties' agenda-

setting powers can be understood as democratically valuable.

The most serious limitation of the recent normative literature on partisanship is that it

largely neglects political *parties.* In characterizing the ethic of partisanship, Rosenblum, takes

care to distinguish ordinary partisan voters, who are the exemplars of her brand of partisanship,

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[66] Ibid., 365.
[67] Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, 76.

from other political actors - "activists," "candidates," and "election strategists"[68] – who might be thought of as the *party* membership or organization. Ypi and White choose to focus on partisanship rather than party because the term partisanship "points to a practice rather than a particular organizational form,"[69] and it is the deliberative value of this practice that interests them.

This neglect of parties is not necessarily a problem for what these authors aim to accomplish – it allows them to isolate the value of a particular mode of citizenship. But the neglect of party organization in discussions of the democratic value of partisanship does mean that it is limited as tool for evaluating of parties' role within a system of democratic electoral representation. It is impossible to assess the value of parties "as carriers of partisanship," without understanding what kinds of parties, and under what conditions, actually promote this model of partisanship.

Political parties do not necessarily promote *partisanship*. Partisan identification has declined in recent decades across Western democracies,[70] but this decline in partisan identification has not apparently been accompanied by a decline in party voting or in the power of major parties to determine the electoral agenda. Scholars of political parties have argued that available technologies and contemporary political contexts encourage parties to favor organizational forms and electoral strategies that do not tend to cultivate widespread

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[68] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 360.
[69] White and Ypi, "On Partisan Political Justification," 382.
[70] See, e.g. Russell J. Dalton, "The Decline of Party Identifications," in *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, ed. Martin P. Wattenberg and Russell J. Dalton (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002).

partisanship. And political parties have long been regarded as exemplars of elite dominance in large associations – "the iron law of oligarchy."[71]

Ypi and White respond to concerns about the iron law of oligarchy and the power of elites in political parties by arguing that partisan activism fosters the critical capacities of citizens and "encourages alertness to the dangers of political instrumentalization and misinformation on the part of more powerful actors,"[72] but this simplifies the experience of partisanship, and neglects the reality that citizens form their views in response to – often in deference to political elites. Partisanship does not seem to damp this effect – in fact, cue-taking from political elites is often magnified by partisan identity.[73] As I argued, following Lisa Disch, in section I, the responsiveness of citizen preferences to the claims of political leaders is not necessarily a bad thing. But the democratic quality of partisans' responsiveness to elite cues depends on whether it is part of a more dynamic, reflexive relationship between citizens and party leaders in which citizens really do have the opportunity to develop the critical and creative attitudes of partisanship.

A second problem with defenses of parties based on an ideal of partisanship arises from the understanding of partisanship as "non-factionalism." Non-factionalism is a key aspect of the second strand of recent defenses of partisanship, and it is essential to understanding partisanship as a distinctly democratic political identity. But a defense of "non-factional" party identities must grapple with the role that special interests and social group identities play in shaping party identification. A normative account of parties can reasonably regard some particularist groups

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[71] Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001).
[72] White and Ypi, "On Partisan Political Justification," 389.
[73] Rune Slothuus and Claes H. de Vreese, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Issue Framing Effects," *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 03 (July 2010): 630–45.

that label themselves parties[74] as deviations from an ideal type of party. But these aberrant parties are not the most serious empirical puzzle for the non-factionalist account of partisanship. More serious are claims like those made by Bawn, et al, that interest groups play a regular, central role in the core functions of political parties,[75] the indications that social group identities are consistently an important determinant of party identification in *all* kinds of parties, and that parties often mobilize supporters by leveraging these partial identities.[76] This reality is a serious challenge to normative defenses of partisanship that emphasize its non-particularity, and aspiration to comprehensiveness, universality, or the legitimacy of majority status.[77]

In the next section, I will address these two concerns and articulate a more modest account of the value of political parties as "carriers of partisanship" that is grounded in the close connection between parties and voting. The interaction between political parties and elections for representatives plays a crucial role in creating the kind of partisan identity – the kind of citizen identity – needed to sustain meaningful representative democracy. This account of the mechanism by which parties become "carriers" of a valuable form of partisanship provides leverage for assessing the democratic value of existing party forms and party systems.

What are parties? What are parties good for?

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[74] For example, the "movement" and "ethnic" parties that Gunther and Diamond include in their detailed classification of parties Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond, "Species of Political Parties: A New Typology," *Party Politics* 9, no. 2 (n.d.): 167–99..

[75] Bawn et al., "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics."See also Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look*, 191.

[76] See Achen and Bartels *Democracy for Realists*

[77] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 386."To be sure, this comparative dimension may be negated in the case of factions, since to the extent that the political scene consists only of groups making appeal to partial, pre-defined collectivities, individual citizens may be in no position to make comparisons on how best to interpret the public good. They may perceive their identities as so tightly linked to certain political groupings that they are unable or unwilling to consider others. But where the normative visions available are those one can associate with parties, addressed to a good that is not reducible to parts, this comparative dimension is well served."

The preceding discussion has yielded an account of parties' democratic value. Parties perform two essential democratic functions: 1) parties create the conditions in which mass collective decision-making can be meaningful, defining the most salient political conflicts through the creation of comprehensive partisan identities; and 2) parties cultivate attitudes of partisanship, which encourage citizens to recognize and exercise creative political agency. Of course, not all (perhaps not even most) political groups that call themselves parties actually perform these functions. What we want, then, is a normative definition of parties by which we can identify certain party forms (or party systems) as deviant or undemocratic parties.

Perhaps the most famous normative definition of political parties is Edmund Burke's assertion that 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."[78] Burke's definition has two key features that align with the definition I want to offer here. First, the members of the party *aim to act together* to promote their shared understanding of the national interest (so they are not just a group of people who happen to share a set of beliefs). Second, the agreement among the party members is principled agreement on the subject of the national interest. By emphasizing agreement on the national interest, Burke's definition distinguishes parties from factions or groups that may have a narrow political agenda. Principled agreement on the national interest has a similar flavor to the democratically valuable comprehensive partisan identities that our normatively valuable parties help to create. And by emphasizing the shared activity of party members to promote their conception of the national interest, Burke distinguishes parties from unorganized groups that might enjoy principled agreement. His

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[78] Edmund Burke, "Thoughts on the Present Discontents," in *The Portable Edmund Burke*, ed. Issac Kramnick (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1999), 146.

definition thus comes close to positive definitions of parties that characterize parties as

institutions organized for the purpose of pursuing some goal.[79]

Burke's definition is lacking in one important respect, though. He takes principled

agreement as the starting point for party activity. Political scientists who study parties tend to

reject the notion that parties need to enjoy principled agreement among their members.[80] Of

course, since we are advancing a normative definition of parties, we might say that

democratically valuable parties are characterized by principled agreement. Still, in this respect,

Burke's argument jumps the gun. Part of the democratic value of political parties is that they

define the major political conflicts and identify the most salient political possibilities in the

process of developing comprehensive partisan identities. For party members to unite around

principled agreement about the national interest, there must be a background understanding of

what the relevant political issues are, and where the lines of division between competing

conceptions of the national interest should be drawn. If parties are key to the creation of this

background understanding of the salient political conflicts in a community, then the definition of

a party cannot rely on pre-existing principled agreement among its members. Burke's definition

does better if we reverse it to assert that a party is "a body of people united for the purpose of (or

at least to the effect of) *generating* principled agreement about the national interest, and acting to

promote it."

This definition incorporates the insight of empirical scholarship that agreement does not

precede party organization, and that the key actors within parties are not necessarily aiming to

promote a particular conception of the common interest.

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[79] See Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*, 5; Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look*, 23.
[80] See Schattschneider, *Party Government*; but also Ware, *Political Parties and Party Systems*, 5; Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look*, 23.

I want to emphasize, though, that this is not meant to be the only, or the "true" definition of a

political party – the term "party" is used heterogeneously, and different definitions of parties

may be useful for different kinds of projects. I settle on this particular normative definition of

parties because it enables me to examine a particular political phenomenon that purports to have

democratic value without having to untangle all of the various ways in which the term party is

deployed. At the same time, I want to avoid defining party too narrowly. Because I hope to shed

light on debates about the value of political parties and of particular party forms, it is important

that the definition of parties corresponds to familiar uses of the term, even if it doesn't capture

some of the ways it is used at the margins. For this reason, my normative definition of parties

does not include a condition that they cultivate widespread valuable forms of partisanship,

though this is still an important standard for evaluating which party forms are democratically

valuable, one that I will address later in this section.

The definition of parties that I have offered does not include any mention of elections,

perhaps surprising in a book about voting. But parties often promote their ends in non-electoral

arenas and these party activities can be just as relevant for determining the electoral agenda and

creating the background conditions against which aggregation can be a meaningful form of

collective decision-making. Still, I will argue that parties' tendency to generate comprehensive

political identities and to cultivate widespread partisanship is intimately tied to their electoral

activity.

My examination of the democratic value of political parties begins with Schattschneider's

core insight: parties' democratic value derives from their role as mass mobilizers.[81] This role is

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[81] Schattschneider is of course not the only person to have noted this. Many other political scientists have argued
that political parties were critical to the expansion of the franchise and to the actual mobilization of newly
enfranchised groups See, e.g. Richard Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge,

intimately tied to the distinctiveness of popular elections. The formal equality instantiated in

elections through the equal counting of votes makes electoral victory a numbers game. Parties or

candidates cannot win major election solely with a small, but vocal and enthusiastic band of

supporters. Nor can they win elections solely with wealthy or well-connected supporters. [82]

Winning elections requires attracting more votes than the opposition. Insofar as parties are

concerned to win elections, they have to mobilize citizens to exercise their political authority.

      The tendency of parties to create comprehensive party identities and to foster widespread

partisan attitudes around these identities is a response to the challenges of mobilizing supporters

on such a large scale and to the distinctive context of elections. Compared to the countless

public decisions made daily by officials and public servants, elections are relatively rare. Thus,

while impactful elections may present an important opportunity for citizens to shape the

character and direction of public life, it also presents a significant *opportunity cost*. Unlike many

other forms of political activity, voting is explicitly framed as a choice. To advance one electoral

outcome is to reject or at least to forgo others. As many scholars have pointed out, winning an

election requires achieving *exclusive* mobilization – convincing citizens to support one electoral

outcome and NOT others – of citizens who will inevitably hold a wide range of interests,

preferences and concerns. Rallying such a diverse group to support a particular electoral

decision requires parties to tell a story about which are *the most important* political conflicts and

which are the most relevant alternative possibilities. Of course, parties can string together

support from a coalition of "single issue" voters,[83] but even this requires convincing voters that

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UK: Cambridge University Press, n.d.); Samuel H. Beer, *Modern British Politics: Parties and Pressure Groups in the Collectivist Age* (New York: Norton, 1982).

[82] Of course, one or both of these conditions is generally *necessary* for winning elections in contemporary democracies, but they are not sufficient.

[83] Robert A Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, expanded edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 128.

they can best advance their cause through a particular electoral agenda. The task of securing

majority support is made easier through the creation of a comprehensive party identity that

relates a number of specific issues to a central conflict or political principle.

For Schattschneider, the fact that parties seek a majority to win elections is sufficient to

explain their democratic value, because mobilizing such widespread support will require parties

to identify and advance "the great public interests." As I argued in section I, though, there are

many possible ways of characterizing major conflicts in a society, and hence many possible ways

of dividing majorities and minorities. "The great public interests" are not simply discovered, but

rather *defined* within the political context. The democratic value of parties cannot be determined

without examining their role in this process of defining salient political conflicts. For a

conception of democracy that

is not solely majoritarian – or at least recognizes that creating majorities or defining which

majorities are salient is an important part of political agency – the fact that parties mobilize large

numbers of supporters in pursuit of electoral victories is not sufficient to account for the

democratic value of parties. What matters is *how* parties attract their supporters.

The democratic value of political parties in representative democracy depends on their

mobilizing *people.* That is to say, parties do not just mobilize majorities, or opinion, or interests.

They mobilize political agents. This does not mean that there is no value in mobilizing citizens

by appealing to particular political attitudes or interests. But when parties mobilize people, and

not just majorities, they encourage citizens to see themselves political agents, not just bearers of

a particular preference or interest. Democratically valuable mobilization does not just encourage

citizens to "stand up and be counted" but leads them to consider how they ought to be counted.

Political parties may be particularly successful in achieving this kind of mobilization for two reasons: first, parties mobilize people to *vote*. Effective partisan mobilization both reinforces and relies upon the distinctive value of voting and the characteristic expressive effects of voting. Parties reach out to large numbers of ordinary citizens and encourage them to take a side in the political fray, to exercise their political authority by voting. Parties thus reinforce the publicly shared understanding of elections as special occasions for mass participation. They convey that all citizens' contributions are valued and expected in a democracy. They encourage citizens to recognize their status as equal political agents.

Parties thus reinforce the publicly shared understanding of voting as a form of mass participation, but at the same time, parties trade on this shared understanding in their efforts to mobilize citizens. Parties do not have to invent reasons for citizens to vote, instead, they remind citizens of existing social norms around the universality of voting, and encourage citizens to perceive these norms as salient and applicable to them personally.

The fact that parties trade on the distinctiveness of elections as occasions for mass participation might be expected to result in durable mobilization because elections are not a one-off thing. Elections recur regularly in contemporary democracies. When parties mobilize supporters around the expectation that citizens contribute to electoral decision-making, and not simply around the importance of a particular timely issue, they encourage citizens to recognize the importance of their participation not only in this, but also in future elections. Electoral mobilization does tend to be durable – mobilizing a person to vote in one election makes it more likely that she will vote in future elections as well.[84] Electoral mobilization also tends to be

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[84] Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Ron Shachar, "Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 540–50.

partisan – voting for a particular party in one election makes it more likely that she will vote for the same party in future elections.[85]

Electoral mobilization seems to be partisan even when parties are not the primary mobilizing agents.[86] This points to a second reason why parties may be distinctively effective at achieving durable and robust political mobilization. An independent candidate may be able to trade on shared norms about the universality of voting to mobilize supporters, but parties may be more effective at turning this into durable mobilization, because parties themselves are durable. In the absence of parties, candidates standing for office can only appeal to their own qualities, to the decisions likely to be made in the next term or two in office, to particular instantiations even of longer term conflicts. Parties, however, by linking offices and issues (both contemporaneously and across time), can credibly mobilize supporters around a more durable partisan identity.

The democratic value of parties derives in part from the way that they mobilize people around a partisan identity. Unlike mobilization around a particular timely issue or interest, mobilization around a partisan identity encourages citizens to see their political agency in broader terms, to think not only about the preferences they happen to have or their judgments on particular questions, but about how their general political identity or orientation will lead them to judge on future possible iterations of major social conflicts. The durability of partisan identity leads citizens to think not only about the political questions and alternatives that they do face on the present ballot, but those they *might* face.[87]

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[85] Ron Shachar, "Party Loyalty as Habit Formation," *Journal of Applied Econometrics* 18, no. 3 (2003): 251–69.
[86] Compulsory voting, for example, seems to promote stability in party systems. M. Mackerras and I. McAllister, "Compulsory Voting, Party Stability and Electoral Advantage in Australia," *Electoral Studies* 18 (1999): 229.
[87] Nancy Rosenblum also argues that the durability of partisanship sustains attention, not just from one elections to the next, but also to the work of governing that goes on between elections (Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 355–356.)

Recent normative literature on parties has emphasized parties' value as carriers of a partisan identity that encourages citizens to appreciate their creative political agency, but it has not examined how parties cultivate partisan identity, and therefore does not offer sufficient critical leverage for assessing the democratic value of particular party forms. Parties do not always cultivate partisanship. In fact, in recent decades, there has been a global decline in party identification. It is important, therefore, to understand what kinds of parties tend to foster widespread partisanship (and under what conditions) In the remainder of the section, I will discuss how understanding the tie between political parties and the distinctive role of elections provides such critical leverage, and I will elaborate on a few "deviant" party forms and party systems that threaten the democratic value of political parties in a representative system.

Schattschneider argued that only responsible parties could be democratically valuable. He called for parties with a strong, unified leadership, composed of ambitious politicians and criticized the fragmented American party system that gave too much power to local bosses and special interest groups. But Schattschneider's justification of such valuable parties is ultimately inadequate; citizens are not independent judges of party programs. The alternative way of thinking about the value of political parties I have presented here may lead to different conclusions about which forms of party organization are more democratically valuable. In the remainder of this section, I will speculate on the question of which party forms are likely to contribute to democratically valuable mobilization of partisanship. Contra Schattschneider, I will suggest that the most democratically valuable parties may be those characterized by a messier internal organization. Borrowing vocabulary from John Aldrich, I will argue that the tendency of parties to mobilize citizens as political agents, as *partisans*, arises from the

collaboration and competition between "office-seekers" and policy motivated "benefit-seekers" within parties.

To understand why this might so, consider a recent, troubling trend in party organization that many scholars of political parties have noted: the increase of what Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond have called electoralist parties.[88] These parties are essentially just mobilization machines that operate at election time to turn out supporters for party candidates. These electoralist parties do not strive to create partisans, but primarily aim at short-term mobilization around particular candidates. The recent rise of candidate-centered electoralist parties belies Schattschneider's argument that a party of office-seekers would have an incentive to propose and implement clear, coherent policy programs and to identify "the great public interests" around which it could mobilize a majority. Gunther and Diamond's electoralist parties are dominated by office-seekers. They are made possible precisely by conditions (esp. mass broadcast media) that lessen candidates' need for the resources that policy-motivated benefit seekers can provide, and thus weaken benefit-seekers' influence within the party.[89] Free from the constraints of benefit-seekers, though, a party of office-seekers does not need to mobilize citizens around a durable partisan identity – short term, opportunistic campaigning can galvanize supporters around a candidate's personal qualities or a particular pressing issue. These electoralist parties mobilize opinion and maybe interests, but they do not mobilize *citizens*.[90]

Unlike pure office-seekers, policy-motivated benefit-seekers care about *how* the party attracts supporters. Because their goal is to promote a particular interest or policy-agenda, benefit-seekers are likely to resist purely opportunistic mobilization in favor of principled claim-

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[88]Gunther and Diamond, "Species of Political Parties: A New Typology," 185–187.
[89] Ibid., 168.
[90] Here some references on the decline in party membership/partisan identity (Including *Parties without Partisans*), but note that this is not associated with a decline in party-line voting (thus no rise in "true" independence)

making.[91] Moreover, insofar as policy-motivated benefit-seekers are interested in protecting

their political achievements and securing future victories for their particular interests, they have

reason to strive for durable mobilization of partisans who will be loyal not only to the party label,

but to a particular set of interests, principles, and agendas.[92]

Of course, a party composed simply of policy-motivated activists would not necessarily

yield a coherent partisan *identity* around which to mobilize citizens – certainly not one with the

characteristics of a normative conception of partisanship I discussed in Section III. A party of

benefit-seekers might instead arrive simply at a bundle of policies and positions that is sufficient

to satisfy each of the interest groups in the party coalition.[93] This is not so much a partisan

identity as it is a negotiated modus vivendi. The party as pure interest group coalition attracts

supporters on the basis of existing, particular, interests that are treated as fixed. It need not

attempt to create a comprehensive narrative relating the party's various issue positions, nor

attempt to define the most salient political cleavages. A party composed entirely of policy-

motivated benefit-seekers with fixed agendas would not have reason to create space for citizens'

to contest the party's positions or claims.

This analysis of problematic party forms suggests that it is the combination of the activist

benefit-seekers and the office-seeking elements within the party that drive the creation of

partisan identity. Benefit-seekers concerned to promote particular agendas and protect particular

achievements have reason to push for mobilization around specific substantive claims, and to

favor durability in party positions. Office-seekers may be opportunistic in their mobilization

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[91] See Aldrich, 189 on the claim that the increased power of policy-motivated benefit-seekers in the late 20th century US parties may be responsible for more durable partisan cleavages

[92] That party loyalty is valuable in large measure because of its commitment to protecting political achievements is a key insight of Russell Muirhead's defense of partisanship (Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*, 128.)

[93] Bawn et al., "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics."

strategies, but faced with the constraint of benefit-seekers demands for substantive consistency, office-seekers have two reasons to strive to transform a disparate coalition of interest groups into a coherent partisan identity.

First, it is difficult to achieve mass mobilization around a collection of special interests. This is true for simple reasons for economies of scale – candidates with a party slogan that represents a comprehensive political identity can appeal to large numbers of potential supporters at one time, without having to appeal to each interest group. When the partisan identity is couched in terms of the public good or tied to a conception of universally affirmed principles like freedom and equality, office-seekers can appeal to the entire citizenry at once.

Even more importantly, the distinctive demands of mass mobilization for the purpose of winning an election favor mobilization around a comprehensive partisan identity. Electoral mobilization is essentially exclusive. Voting for one party or candidate (usually) precludes voting for the opponent. A person may be a member of many different interest groups, and it is often possible to promote those different interests simultaneously. Elections, however, force citizens to choose between different interests, or preferences, or judgments they might hold. Electoral mobilization, then, requires more than just appealing to existing groups of citizens with common interests or opinions. It requires making claims about which are the most important issues, or which interests are most likely to be affected by the electoral outcome, or even which personal characteristics are most important in an elected leader. It is, of course, possible to mobilize supporters by appealing to the singular importance of a particular issue. But it is much easier (and likely in the party's long-term interest) to mobilize supporters around a comprehensive partisan identity that connects numerous issues by defining the most salient political conflicts along the lines of general principles – a partisan identity that as Nancy

Rosenblum suggests, strives to tell "a comprehensive public story about the economic, social, and moral changes of the time."[94]

Office-seekers concerns' do not end with winning office, though. They are also likely motivated by the ability to effectively exercise power once in office. Indeed, some scholars of political parties have argued that politicians cooperate to form parties in part to solve characteristic collective action problems in government.[95] Governing effectively does not just require the cooperation of other public officials; it also requires a sufficient degree of compliance and cooperation from citizens and various interest groups and corporate agents.[96] Parties that aim to govern need to secure legitimacy. They do this not only by attracting large numbers of supporters and building majorities, but also by framing their claims in terms of broad principles and the public good.

This discussion suggests that party forms that foster interaction – and even tension – between office-seeking and benefit-seeking elements within the parties will also foster valuable forms of partisanship. Parties striving to simultaneously achieve the goals of policy-motivated activists and of ambitious office-seekers face pressure to maintain a durable, substantive, and comprehensive party identity, and to mobilize supporters around this identity. As defenders of partisanship have argued, the creation, endorsement, and contestation of this kind of partisan identity involves substantial creative representation – it requires partisans to make claims about the most salient conflicts in political life, and about which are the most relevant possible alternatives. It requires partisans to make claims about how various groups and interests are implicated in those conflicts, and thus potentially to call forth new constituencies. It requires partisans to advance a conception of the public good. Mobilizing supporters around a durable,

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[94] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, 358.
[95] Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look*, 43.
[96] See Beer, *Modern British Politics: Parties and Pressure Groups in the Collectivist Age*, esp. 321–325.

comprehensive partisan identity encourages citizens to think of their political agency, not only in terms of the immediate decisions they face, but also in these broad terms about the character and direction of their shared public life.

This account of how the pressure to maintain a durable, comprehensive party identity might arise from the interplay between benefit-seeking and office-seeking elements within a party also provides a response to the dilemma I raised in the last section: how can we square a normative conception of partisan identity based on claims about universal principles and the public good with the reality that party loyalty and party identity tends to be closely tied to existing social identities and particular interests?

The creation of a partisan identity does not start from scratch. To achieve uptake among citizens, speculative claims of representation have to resonate somehow with citizens, usually through their existing understanding of relevant political divisions, identities, or interests.[97] Parties often mobilize supporters by connecting partisan identity to particular social groups – indeed, because these groups are often better organized and more deeply embedded in people's lives, they provide effective channels for building robust mass partisanship (through the socialization of labor unions, churches, and families). By tying these particular identities to a broader partisan *identity*, though, parties politicize these social identities and open them up to contestation. This is what distinguishes the democratically valuable party forms that foster partisanship from those that serve merely as a strategic vehicle of a particular defined interest group or coalition of interest groups. The creation (as well as the contestation and revision) of a party identity involves transforming citizens various social identities and particular interests into an exclusive and durable political identity, by creating new narratives about how interests align,

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[97] Disch, "Democratic Representation and the Constituency Paradox," 608.

asserting new lines of division by redefining political conflicts or introducing new alternative possibilities.

There is, I admit, something undeniably unsatisfying about this account of the value of parties and of particular party forms. It is messy. The account of parties' democratic value that I've offered here does not just acknowledge the messiness of parties; it asserts that the messiness is an indispensible part of that value. The quality of interaction between benefit-seekers and office-seekers in a party is not something political scientists can easily measure. The partisan contestation of representative claims and social identities cannot easily be assessed against a checklist of concrete democratic standards. On this account the democratic value of particular parties is neither easily confirmable nor falsifiable.

Still, we should resist the temptation to resolve the messiness of political parties by articulating concrete universal standards for party organization or by heavily institutionalizing parties.[98] Such institutionalization, even in the name of democratizing party leadership, often has the effect of stifling the contestation of party conflicts and partisan identities – the essential creative work of politics – and reinforcing the agenda-setting power of party elites. Institutionalization of party systems and party organization – bringing parties closer to the state - tends both to result from and to further enable the formation of "cartel" parties that collude in limiting the scope of political conflict and preventing the emergence of challengers who might advance new claims about the public good or the most important political conflicts of the day.[99] Cartel parties can be electoralist, or they may be based on particular social identities or a fixed coalition of interest groups, but in any case, by preventing the contestation of party identity, they exclude ordinary citizens from most of the creative work of politics.

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[98] This is not to say that there should be no institutionalization.

[99] Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, "The Cartel Party Thesis: A Restatement," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 4 (December 2009): 753–66.

The reasons for living with messiness in political parties are not simply pragmatic. The flexibility that accompanies parties' semi-public status may be an appropriate response to the various tensions inherent to democracy. In this chapter, I have appealed to the tension between the dignity of individual contributions and the need for collective decisions, but the democratic project also involves a tension between stability of purpose and openness to changing opinions and judgments, between the pursuit of coherent political goals and responsiveness to disagreement. Achieving any measure of collective control over our shared public life requires institutionalizing decision-making in a democracy, but these decision-making structures inevitably foster certain kinds of organization, rather than others; enable the contest of some conflicts, but not others; and favor the consideration of certain kinds of alternatives, while ignoring others.[100] The existence of a space of political contestation without a fully fixed decision-making structure provides an important potential corrective to this concern. The flexibility of political parties allows them to resist a permanent solution to democracy's tensions and thus to more easily adapt when adjustment is needed.[101]

Conclusion

One of the most common explanations of the democratic value of political parties is that they "simplify alternatives" – they define the most salient political conflicts and set an electoral agenda that enables meaningful aggregation. In Chapter 4, I argued that meaningful choice – an essential condition for voting to effectively fulfill its role in the plan for democracy – requires that the options available on the ballot should reflect the most salient lines of political division

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[100] See Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, 20–42; Disch, "Democratic Representation and the Constituency Paradox."

[101] The flexibility and openness of parties also allows them to adapt to different political contexts.

within a community. But since political cleavages can be defined in many ways, and since the definition of salient cleavages helps determine which political outcomes are possible or likely, it is also important that the process by which particular cleavages become salient should itself have a democratic character. In this chapter, I have argued that insofar as political parties play a prominent role in determining both the formal, electoral agenda and the informal political agenda, the democratic value of political parties depends in part on the extent to which they permit and cultivate widespread participation in the process of determining which issues, alternative possibilities, or dimensions of conflict become politically relevant.   Responsible party government is not sufficient for rule by the people. It is not enough to say that parties elicit and reflect majority interests when they are held responsible to voters at election time. Since the majority can be defined in many ways, depending on which issues seem most politically salient, and since citizens' judgments and preferences are deeply responsive to the claims of political elites, parties' tendency to represent majority concerns has little democratic merit unless the process by which majorities are defined itself has a democratic character. The idea of the voter acting as an independent judge among party programs does not stand up in the face of the social choice and citizen competence problems. On the other hand, the more realistic idea of voters as loyal supporters or fans of the party "brand" lacks democratic value. A normative conception of democracy as rule by the people is not compatible with responsible party government's insistence on excluding citizens from the creative work of defining, refining, and contesting party positions and identities.

Recent normative literature on political partisanship provides an account of the relationship between ordinary citizens and political parties that can allow space both for the speculative claims and opinion leadership of party leaders and for the contestation of party

narratives and identities by ordinary citizens. Identifying as a partisan is different from simply

being a party supporter or a party voter. Theorists of partisanship argue that identifying as a

partisan involves taking responsibility for the party identity and for the creation of a

comprehensive narrative about the most important political problems of the day. In short,

partisans take responsibility for the creative work of politics.

On this account, the question of which forms of party organization and party systems are

democratically valuable turns in part on the extent to which they cultivate widespread

partisanship. This analysis may lead to very different conclusions about which kinds of party

forms we should foster than a primary concern with *responsible* parties. In this chapter I

suggest, contra the doctrine of responsible party government, that democracy may be better

served by parties with a messier internal structure, characterized in particular by a tension

between office-seekers and benefit-seekers with space for ongoing contestation of the party

identity.

The account of parties' role in democracy offered in this chapter does not just affect how

we evaluate party organization. It also affects how we evaluate the relationship between direct

and representative electoral democracy. One of the major objections to subjecting substantive

questions of law or policy to a popular vote is that it interferes with electoral accountability.

Critics argue that ballot initiatives muddle the attribution of responsibility and tie the hands of

elected representatives, preventing them from acting in the interests of the constituents to whom

they are accountable. This criticism loses its force, though, once we recognize that responsible

party government is only democratically valuable if citizens are able to contest and check the

narratives and definitions of constituencies that parties are responsible to. Referenda may afford

an important form of political contestation – a channel for mass mobilization orthogonal to

parties – that allows citizens to take a more critical view of partisan identity, and especially to

contest cleavages that have become entrenched in party programs.