

Tired of Politics? On the Influence of the Wealthy and Oligarchic Fatigue

Electoral representative institutions are at risk of cooptation by an oligarchy, who due to their wealth exert a disproportional influence over the outcomes of political decision making and intrinsically exclude ordinary citizens from formal political communication. I contend that people experience *oligarchic* fatigue when faced with the domination of an oligarchy. This paper explicates the concept of fatigue as a persistent feeling of impotence and exhaustion experienced when an oligarchy dominates democratic decision making and serves as a conceptual critique of democratic fatigue. Oligarchic fatigue materializes in two analytically distinct manners: (1) people may experience fatigue when faced with obstacles to political participation due to oligarchic constraints; and (2) due to inefficacy of formal political structures, some may actively participate in politics and feel exhausted by continued failure to have an impact on decision making. Oligarchic fatigue is a new analytical concept that captures the exhausted response by the people.

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Democracy is praised as a panacea against inequality and domination, yet a certain consensus is emerging that, at the time of writing, a small economic elite rules and allows only a nominal realization of the democratic ideal. Electoral representative institutions are at risk of cooptation by an oligarchy, who due to their wealth exert a disproportional influence over the outcomes of political decision making and intrinsically exclude ordinary citizens from formal political communication. Republican leaning scholars of democratic theory have pleaded for class-specific institutions (Harting 2023), a Petition-Assembly-Referendum model (White 2020), and sortition (Van Reybrouck 2013) in an attempt to counteract the material imbalance found in many modern democracies, while others aim to replace electoral models completely (Guerrero 2014). However, the establishment of new institutions and procedures to combat perpetuating oligarchy (Bagg 2018b) and calls for substantive political equality alone do not adequately address the affective dimension of oligarchic democratic practice. Implementing measures against elite capture of representative democracy to foster more egalitarian political, social, and economic conditions is important; however, as scholars debate new institutions, procedures, and policies, it is essential to also clearly articulate the aggregate affective response of the people within a democratic polity. In other words, understanding people's disposition towards democratic institutions might identify and benefit institutional changes. The aim of this paper is to complement the literature on structural inequalities by theorizing the social impacts of the current political structure.

People show a distrust in their government (Bertsou 2019) and there is a visible turn towards right-wing populist leadership by many (Apostolidis 2022). People are dissatisfied with the status quo political landscape, but not many appear to direct their anger towards those with material power. Prior to establishing a theory of substantive political equality, I think it is

warranted to establish a theoretical understanding as to what affective response people may have in response to oligarchic attempts to prevent the people's participation. Why is it that many people are not actively looking for ways to minimize oligarchic input in real-world democracy? What psychological and physical response does the inability to change the current political landscape elicit among the people?

Electoral representative models of democracy rely on promoting policies which the people want, and which represent their interests (Guerrero 2014). When this is not the case, i.e., when representatives push forward policies which are not representative of the wishes and needs of their constituency, then the system is not representative of the whole. Many accounts describe the structural burdens placed on the citizens which results in various negative consequences: citizens are "thwarted by ignorance" (Guerrero 2014, p. 240; see also Achen and Bartels 2016), simply too busy (Elliott 2023), and hindered by motivated reasoning (Bagg 2018a) to make sure that representatives are held accountable. Scholars conclude that constituents do not—and cannot—hold their representatives accountable and as a result democracy becomes prone to elite capture. I agree overall with this assessment; it is difficult for citizens to meaningfully engage when government passes legislation curtailing democratic participation and the expectations of labor are so demanding that people avoid further responsibility. I see this as directly due to a systemic oligarchization of democratic procedures which, I argue, is followed by a lack of citizen engagement. As a response to this lack of meaningful political participation, people may respond passively to politics due to a feeling of fatigue. Put another way, it is not individuals who fail to act democratically, but rather a systemic current prevents people from having political sway, which results in an overwhelming exhaustion and sense of impotence.

In this paper I explicate the concept of fatigue as a negative affect people experience within modern democracy. I argue that citizens may plausibly experience fatigue when faced with the domination of an entrenched affluent minority. *Oligarchic* fatigue materializes in two analytically distinct manners: (1) people feel fatigue to the point of non-participation when they are faced with oligarchic constraints; and (2) due to inefficacy of formal political structures, some may actively participate in politics – vote, call a representative, or be a union-member – and develop fatigue because their participation is largely in vain. Oligarchic fatigue is a new analytical concept which describes the passive response by the people. Fatigue is a feeling of chronic tiredness; and oligarchic fatigue is one caused by the underlying political inequality due to a material imbalance. Oligarchic fatigue – in both its instances – is a manifestation of the underlying condition of being unable to counter the interference of oligarchic domination.

In brief, this paper shows that when there is oligarchic domination, institutions become tortuous, unresponsive, and unaccountable, thus causing the people to feel powerless. In turn, the inability to effectively participate in political decision making, and yet be subjected to the results of political decisions results in fatigue. The inability to counter the oligarchs, i.e., to successfully challenge the oppressing class, is due to the inefficacy of political institutions. This is manifested as a physical response – fatigue – for members of a democracy and at the same time is a symptom of the decay of electoral representation. This is what I call *oligarchic* fatigue.

Section I outlines what oligarchization of electoral representative democracy entails. The argument suggests that people have certain minimal procedural and substantive expectations of a democratic system and when these are not met – due to an increased material imbalance in political power – one can speak of oligarchization. Section II develops the concept of oligarchic fatigue and I juxtapose it with the literature on democratic fatigue. Section III discusses the two

analytically distinct manifestations of oligarchic fatigue, diagnosing the ways in which fatigue arises when oligarchic domination is present. Section IV concludes.

I. Democracy and Oligarchy

Democratic societies are threatened by a small number of affluent people who have a disproportionate amount of influence over political decision making. In the field of American politics, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014, p. 565) have for years argued that “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence.” More generally, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2019, p. 14) write that the current neoliberal government is “rule *by* a small number of elite . . . and *for* the wealthy.” It appears that oligarchic interests threaten democratic regimes today (Arlen 2019). What in electoral democracy makes rule by the elite possible and how exactly do elite interests threaten democracy? After all, if a country has free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and broad suffrage, and if representatives are responsive to their constituents, then it is not clear why and by what mechanism democracy is under threat by moneyed interests. I contend that it depends on what citizens expect from democracy, which is not merely procedural (see also Klein 2022). A democracy requires at minimum some form of egalitarian justice (Anderson 1999) and inclusion (Young 2000)¹.

¹ By analogy, in Aristophanes’ comedy titled *Plutus*, Plutus – God of wealth – is installed in the acropolis by majority vote, yet the play suggest that Plutus was not installed democratically. Rather even if there are procedures in place associated with democracy, it

Democracy comes in degrees (Young 2000); hence my aim here is not to define a democratic ideal – nor to define it in complete material terms, but as a model which people may reasonably accept to be true. I take democracy to have procedural components and normative components which together organizes power in society (Klein 2022). Normatively, I include the concepts of equality and inclusion. Democratic equality, following Elizabeth Anderson (1999, p. 288-289), demands an end to oppression and at the same time create a community of people who see each other as equally worthy². In other words, unjust arrangements arise when other humans and groups are responsible for oppressive hierarchies; and just arrangements rely on the conceptions of equal respect and distributive justice. This sort of equality can be derived from Steven Lukes' (2021) radical view of power, where those with power can be found more responsible for upholding unjust arrangements. When people lack access to certain democratic and distributive goods because others prevent them from attaining them, then the relationship between these two groups is one of unequal power differential with the latter group being politically responsible because of their access power (Lukes 2021). As such, unequal access to political power constitutes an injustice and furthermore refers to a relation between superior and inferior persons (Anderson 1999)³. Democratic equality opposes such forms of oppression and

remains oligarchic if the rule of Plutus constitutes rule by wealth (for a further discussion see Dardot and Laval 2019).

² For more recent accounts see Bejan (2021) and Anderson (2017).

³ Iris Marion Young (1990) identifies this form of relationship with the faces of oppression which include marginalization, status hierarchy, domination, exploitation, and cultural imperialism.

sees equality as a social relationship where one has to justify their actions to another (Anderson 1999).

Democratic inclusion, the second substantive component, assumes that people in a polity are equally capable of participating in political decision making. Given people's equal ability, "The normative legitimacy of a democratic decision", Young (2000, p. 5-6) writes, "depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes" (Young 2000, p. 5-6). Thus, free and fair elections and freedom of speech are important to inclusion but by itself do not and cannot constitute a democracy. Voting rights and voting equality are today the minimum expectation of inclusion, but there are additional and deeper conditions for inclusion, which attend to "social difference, representation, civic organization, and the borders of political jurisdiction" (Young, 2000, p. 6). Democratic inclusion thus provides an understanding of how best to solve collective problems which cannot be addressed by voting alone. To return to Lukes (2021), he suggests that US Steel – a steel producer in the United States – was able to control the hegemonic discourse in Gary, Indiana – a small midwestern city – to prevent anti-pollution policies from even being brought forward for consideration. This means that the inclusion principle was not reached, because voting rights alone could not and cannot prevent such forms of oppression (see also Bagg 2024).

Democratic equality and inclusion are not the only normative components of a democracy, nor are normative and procedural components the only aspects of a democracy; however, democratic institutions, at minimum, require these normative components for relationships of power-with rather than power-over (Klein 2022). Thus, if average citizens have little to no influence over policy and law – including what makes it on the agenda, then these

normative requirements are not met. Specifically, equality is not met when certain human arrangements uphold oppressive hierarchies and inclusion is not met when political decisions do not depend on and often ignore those who will be most affected by a given policy or law. For example, the elimination of environmental protections and loosening trade regulations allows big oil corporations to extract more and increase their profit, while working class people living around extraction sites risk drinking contaminated water and breathing polluted air (O'Rourke and Connolly 2003). This at ones upholds oppressive hierarchies – big oil dominates workers – and excludes people who are affected by the policy decisions. In what follows, I show that moneyed interests have effectively negated these normative components, making government subservient to their wishes, making democracy today oligarchic.

A group of wealthy members of a polity is possible – and indeed inevitable – in the above given definition of democracy; it does not demand perfect equality. However, if the moneyed elite enter the political realm – which they inevitable do – and use their material benefits to sway political decision making, then they become oligarchic and thus illegitimate. Specifically, I adopt the definition of Darcy K. Leach (2005, p. 312) of oligarchy as “a concentration of illegitimate power in the hands of an entrenched minority”. Leach (2005) argues that not all power is oligarchic and not every minority an oligarchy. Specifically, following Gordon Arlen (2019, p. 394), oligarchs are “those who use personal access to concentrated wealth to pursue harmful forms of discretionary influence.” Leach (2005) suggests that formal power is illegitimate when it is coercive and informal power becomes illegitimate when it is manipulative. In fact, the illegitimate use of informal and formal power often go together. The affluent may persuade an elected official to change election plans according to their wishes (i.e., manipulate), like philanthropists (Saunders-Hastings 2018) and Super-PAC donors (Arlen and Rossi 2021). While

an official may cut pensions and eliminate worker protections (i.e., coerce), such as Donald Trump (Arlen 2019). Leach's account of informal and formal power is an appropriate place to start the considerations of oligarchy for the analysis grants a way to determine when a democratic organization has been seized by oligarchic control.

The informal and formal power of an entrenched minority is often analyzed distinctly from other forms of power. For example, Jeffrey Winters and Benjamin Page (2009) view material power as separate from other sources of power, such as those related to race, gender, and religion. They observe that wealth is not the only form of political power, but that it is "often the most important source" of power (Winters & Page 2009, p. 732). While material power may be analytically distinguishable from other sources of power, it is also true that it is often entangled with these other forms. For example, Inés Valdez (2023) observes that the ability of Western countries to dominate others abroad (thus exercising self-and-other-determination) follows from material interests and power but depends as well on racial hierarchies that legitimate these actions. Nancy Fraser (2022, p. 14) finds that capital accumulation proceeds not just through domination and exploitation but also requires "expropriation – the forcible seizure, on a continuing basis, of the wealth of subjugated and minoritized peoples." Additionally, Silvia Federici (2004) notes that capitalist accumulation is specifically connected to the productive and reproductive force of women. While I focus on material sources of power, I take oligarchy to function as a composite with other modes of power. I develop the concept of oligarchic fatigue with this in mind.

Given the definitions of democracy and oligarchy given above, a democratic regime and oligarchy appear mutually exclusive, because when oligarchic power takes over democratic rule, this regime ceases to be a democracy. Winters and Page (2009, p. 731), however, argue that this

is not a necessity; “oligarchy is not inconsistent with democracy.” Given that there are free and fair elections, freedom of speech, and suffrage is nearly universal, democracy exists, at least procedurally. At the same time, echoing earlier concerns, “democratic governments seem decreasingly adept at preventing society's wealthiest members from wielding excessive influence over law and policy making” (McCormick 2011, p. vii). There is thus a tension present. I believe this tension is resolved if we differentiate between democracy as a procedural mechanism – empty of substantive practices – and democratic practice which assumes a dynamic approach sustaining relations build on equality and inclusion (Klein 2022). Procedurally speaking, democracy and oligarchy may coexist. I may, for example, vote in elections and help my representative garner votes by volunteering. Furthermore, I may oppose certain government actions publicly. At the same time, this does not prevent a dominant oligarchic logic to prevail. Under current procedural conditions, precarity and austerity are normalized and the financialization of politics demands further accumulation and expansion for the ruling class. This is not anti-democratic in a merely procedural definition of democracy, but when democracy and oligarchy coexist we no longer speak of a democratic relationship of power-with but power-over where access to decision making is unevenly distributed.

Following this logic, I draw on Camila Vergara (2020a, p. 39) who has aptly termed this “oligarchic democracy,” where citizens legitimate dispossession and oppression through procedural mechanisms. This does not suggest people actively want to legitimate dispossession; rather, as Salvador Santino F. Regilme, Jr. (2020) suggests, this legitimation arises from the constitutional discourse where a hegemonic neoliberal interpretation has taken hold. Specifically, Regilme (2020, p. 128) writes, “oligarchic tendencies emerge because extremely wealthy stakeholders . . . succeed in promoting hegemonic and dominant interpretations of constitutional

provisions . . . These hegemonic interpretations and discourses attempt to legitimize illiberal public policies in ways that undermine emancipatory counter-narratives and counter-discourses in the public sphere.” The consequence of this systemic process means that the growing material resources of the very rich result in a more secure regime of oligarchy. While the United States – among a host of other Global North countries – today may be called a democracy, it is clear that “the people” do not have the power to rule, because the discrepancy between income and political power of the superrich has exponentially grown, while that of most people – especially racialized and gendered groups – have decreased (Vergara 2020a; Winters and Page 2009; Putnam and Garrett 2020). A democracy that has been seized by oligarchic control is nominally democratic; the people exercise a thin form of power which they only receive once every couple of years through voting – it is procedural only and does not include equality nor inclusion in any meaningful way.

John P. McCormick (2011) takes this coexistence as evidence of an incomplete democracy, where the richest citizens are not restrained to use their power to assault, undermine, and manipulate the workings of a democratic government. He writes, “voters almost inevitably choose [the rich] in electoral contests” and when the rich do not run for office, they “fund, groom, and/or bribe” candidates” (McCormick 2011, p. 91). The defining qualities of oligarchy as outlined above come to the fore in this discussion where wealth translates to direct political power – winning elections – and indirect political power – grooming and manipulating⁴. Since

⁴ Interestingly, recent work by David Szakonyi (2023) suggests that when anticorruption reforms, such as financial disclosures, leads to fewer people running for office or seeking reelection when they have a suspicious financial history.

electoral representative democracy ultimately favors the wealthy, such a regime will slide into oligarchy if no countermeasures are put in place. The inevitable occurrence where a small minority accumulates a disproportionate amount of wealth and with it the power to control “the rules of the game” can be characterized as systemic corruption (Vergara 2020a, p. 2). Power becomes oligarchized when society’s wealthiest members use their material power to influence politics. By extension it prevents citizens from exerting power or participating in the democratic decision-making process. Systemic corruption suggests that electoral democratic models fail to prevent “elites [from] enrich[ing] themselves at the public’s expense” (McCormick 2011, p. vii).

The accumulation of power – which is a power-over (Klein 2022) – is systemic to political structures, including democracy. In a democracy this process suggests that political corruption comes from a process of loss of virtue. This trend can be captured by the idea of “oligarchization of power” (Vergara 2020a, p. 3), which suggests that the power to decide on law and policy are increasingly in the hands of the richest members of the state. A democratic society generally claims to function to advance the interests of the majority, but entropy may ensue when the pursuit of individual interests trumps majority interests. It would be a mistake to see the pursuit of interests as an individualist form of corruption, because this mystifies the social degradation. The “bad apple” should of course be removed, but just as important is the realization and theorization of what made the presence of a bad apple possible. Pursuing individual interests is inevitable in a free state, therefore entropy is an inevitable occurrence as well.

System-level corruption is thus a type of political corruption that is inescapable and “a constant threat to liberty” (Vergara 2020a, p. 43) within a democracy. This is because democracy “should give an *equal voice* to all citizens, and [political institutions] should be *able to act* on

their wishes,” but this principle itself depends on citizens being relatively equal; when economic inequality grows, “democracy suffers” (Page & Gilens 2020, p. 19, 54). And economic inequalities inevitably grow, because “very wealthy people . . . have the power to thwart the majority and prevent egalitarian actions” (Page & Gilens 2020, p. 37-38). Hence, the relative equality a democratic regime might have enjoyed is slowly decimated because the wealthy few are able to use their money to direct political power toward their further enrichment, thus making the society more unequal.

Systemic corruption entails the wrong of material inequality and while public officials may not gain too much power and influence, wealthy citizens might. Since oligarchs are not guarded against within many current electoral democracies, this allows oligarchs to grow in political prominence. McCormick (2011, p. 1) observes, “constitutions seldom if ever explicitly guard against the likelihood that the wealthy will fill the ranks of elected magistrates disproportionately or the possibility that the former will dictate the behavior of less-wealthy citizens who do ascend to office.” This then is the crux of the matter, oligarchy and democracy may coexist in a mixed polity without leading to conflict precisely because there are no constitutional measures to prevent the affluent from accumulating power through whatever channel possible. There are no substantive democratic mechanisms preventing oligarchs from directing politics.

The next section discusses how the current structure affects the people. By turning towards an analysis of social impacts of the current political structure, this paper maintains that merely looking at the structure of politics – and the laws within it – is not enough to grasp the problem. To do so would be a mistake since the system-level analysis serves a mono-causal and deterministic function that does not take the social impact into account (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018).

An account of people's disposition towards democratic institutions is important because it reveals the entanglement between institutional programs and the social ramifications that they have. In this section I have taken a realist interpretation to inequality in democracy to highlight the structural limitation of democracy as is; the next section adds to this literature with a discussion of how the structural issue affects the people. In the remainder of this paper, I unpack how the existence of oligarchy in tandem with democracy creates oligarchic fatigue among an atomized citizenry as a (non)response against domination.

II. Oligarchic Fatigue

The realist theory of oligarchy reviewed in the previous section posits that democracy is prone to the disruption of democratic practices by oligarchic forces. This section adds to that literature by exploring the outcomes of such domination, i.e., an *oligarchic* fatigue among the population. Oligarchic fatigue is a conceptual critique of democratic fatigue (Van Reybrouck 2013), which captures the disconnect of citizens of a democracy from democratic participation or practice. Democratic fatigue does not second guess the health of the regime, which it continues to call "democratic" and leaves unaddressed the root cause of the disconnection, which I argue is directly due to the illegitimate power wielded by the affluent. Furthermore, democratic fatigue sees democracy itself as a threat to its citizens and while the literature argues that this is a dialectical move, ultimately, they miss the fact that democracy has been captured by oligarchs. Since the regime itself slides into an oligarchic democracy, fatigue arises due to oligarchic oppression, not democratic practices itself. This section introduces the concept of oligarchic fatigue and defines how it is distinct from other political fatigues, while the next section looks at its application.

Fatigue is itself a contested concept – it may have multiple causes, various effects, and at times it may be termed as a condition of something else. I take fatigue to be a general tendency to feel impotent and, unlike tiredness, fatigue is a persistent and uncomfortable feeling. As a result, one may be more inclined to abstain from participating in activities or going out of their way to do something because they feel unable to do so. Thus politically, fatigue entails abstaining from, rather than participating in, political decision making because one feels impotent to do so. Fatigue generally arises from prolonged activity, which politically obtains when one attempts to participate but remains unheard. At the same time, however, fatigue can occur without activity; one may feel impotent because of systemic injustice and violence against them. Thus, the cause of fatigue may be twofold. On the one hand, fatigue may be caused by exertion where the onset of fatigue is gradual over a prolonged period of time. This type of fatigue is one which is observable because it has a clear cause: one attempts to do something, but fails and this leads to fatigue. On the other hand, the onset of fatigue may be due to a structural issue where one does not engage in a laborious activity, but fatigue ensues nevertheless due to the underlying condition. Ultimately, persistent sense of impotence – in both its iterations – elicits feelings of both weakness and powerlessness because of psychological damage caused by an inability to change the existing order.

Specifically, oligarchic fatigue occurs in two distinct ways. First, when citizens legitimize their own dispossession and oppression, this results in a sense of impotence and powerlessness. In an effort to be actively involved in politics in representative democracy – this is exertion – and this involvement leads to further entrenchment, it is the activity itself which further entrench participants, and this leads to fatigue. Second, citizens may not engage in politics, because they recognize that their productive participation is constrained by oligarchs who prevent people from

meaningfully participating in politics, and this causes a feeling of lack of efficacy. The repeated experience of injustice and violence – itself anti-democratic – causes fatigue without exertion. Anti-democratic measures taken up by oligarchs prevent or discourage people to participate. What both processes have in common is that citizens notice the limits and failures of electoral democracy – which as the previous section showed has slid into an oligarchic democracy, but also have a sense of irreversibility of this decay. This does not mean that citizens can accurately diagnose that the problem is due to oligarchic domination, but they can tell that something prevents their voice from being heard. Attempting to participate in or merely observe politics is therefore an exhausting endeavor and it is easier to withdraw than to attempt to actively fight against the shortcomings of oligarchic democracy.

The use of fatigue in a political sense has become common recently with the rich literatures on democratic fatigue, Black fatigue, and climate fatigue. Regarding the latter, discourse on climate fatigue argues that rhetoric of a potential existential threat may lead to disengagement (Saab 2023; Suttie 2018). Instilling fear may lead to action, but fear may also lead to uncertainty and powerlessness, triggering flight (Saab 2023). Furthermore, the American Psychological Association Task Force (2010) finds that climate fear may lead to “denial, paralysis, apathy, or actions that can create greater risks than the one being mitigated.” Indeed, Leiserowitz, Maibach, & Roser-Renouf (2009) find that only 6% of people in America are confident that we can reduce global warming, it is not surprising that many feel fatigued by the possible calamities of climate change. The discourse on climate fatigue focuses on fear. Fear is the driving motive that leads to a sense of impotence which in turn leads to fatigue. There is an important similarity with oligarchic fatigue, even if people are able to identify the problem –

either climate change or economic inequality – they are uncertain if there is anything they can do to change it which causes the fatigue.

The second form of fatigue is one related to racism – especially in the U.S. Mary-Frances Winters, author of *Black Fatigue*, feels “an underlying syndrome of sorts that permeates [her] very being” (Merschel 2022). This underlying syndrome is what Winters (2020) calls Black fatigue, which arises from the daily experiences of Black people: exposure to injustice, micro aggressions, disrespect, and violence. The psychological damage is what causes one to feel exhausted. Black fatigue is an apt description because it addresses the underlying cause of fatigue, namely racism. It is the structural existence of racism which leads to fatigue among Black people. Black fatigue and oligarchic fatigue are entangled in this sense. The fatigue arises from structural burdens placed upon people in their daily lives. What is more, economic constraints and a denial to participate in politics are especially prominent among racialized peoples. Therefore, it should not be surprising that Black fatigue and oligarchic fatigue occur simultaneously in many cases and thus to address oligarchic fatigue, one has to see the entanglements of wealth, race, and other sources of power.

More centrally, the last form of fatigue discussed here is one related to democracy. The literature on democratic fatigue is blooming with scholars in various disciplines studying various democratic countries. The discourse here focuses on powerlessness, but rather than stemming from fear or structural inequality, democratic fatigue is considered a reaction to democratic backsliding (Rupnik 2007), there thus appears to be a sort of dialectic. With regards to the dialectic, Ingolfur Blühdorn (2019, p. 391) writes that “the dynamic of democratization itself persistently depletes and destroys the foundations of the democratic project.” It is the ideal of the autonomous subject itself which threatens to hollow democracy from within. Democracy aims to

liberate the people – making them autonomous if successful – and this requires revolutionary energy. Fatigue here suggests that this energy has been depleted (Blühdorn 2019).

In developing countries, fatigue has led to a backlash against democratic promotion (van de Walle 2016), given that democracy is seen as not having made headway against oppression and lack of freedom (see for example Kelley 2022 in the context of the U.S.). This leads to people disconnecting and disengaging from politics. When democratic fatigue occurs, there is an increase in referenda, lower voter turnout during elections, and a rise in populism (Van Reybrouck 2013), symptoms that are congruent with democratic backsliding. Thus here again the dialectic returns where democratic promotion inadvertently also leads to backsliding.

Arjun Appadurai (2017) and David van Reybrouck (2013; 2017) are two of the early theorists on democratic fatigue. Their argument is simple: the struggle for the autonomous subject in today's representative democracy is an exhausting endeavor exaggerated by the fast paced and global society marked by constant panic and crises. Where resistance and opposition to a decline in organization is required, they observe a rejection of or exit from democracy. As a result, they observe a rise in illiberal and anti-democratic populist rhetoric by corrupt politicians. Specifically, Van Reybrouck (2013, p. 43) argues that citizen frustration and political corruption are correlated in that both stem from the “global evangelization”⁵ of the electorate. This means that “[e]lections are the sacraments of this new religion” but the content or substance of elections matters less than their formal occurrence⁶ (Van Reybrouck 2013, p. 43). While the content of

⁵ “mondiale evangelisatie”

⁶ “Verkiezingen zijn de sacramenten van dat nieuwe geloof . . . waarvan de vorm belangrijker is dan de inhoud.”

democracy refers to officials representing their constituency and acting in the interest of the people. Van Reybrouck argues that the form, elections as rituals of this global evangelization have trumped the content, leading to fatigue.

Form is both crucial and a danger to current electoral democracies because it creates electoral fundamentalism (Van Reybrouck 2013). Democracies are stuck in a pattern of belief that identifies the virtue of the constitution as the protection of individual rights and equates the perfect state structure to this formal requirement. Thus, on the one hand, political structure has gone to the fore; and certain formal attributes or “rituals” of representative democracies have become synonymous with democracy itself. On the other hand, political structure, because it has become synonymous with representative democracy, is no longer addressed. Electoral fundamentalism is a threat to democracy because such a minimalistic definition cannot register the decay. This then produces democratic fatigue among the people due to electoral constraints and constitutional fundamentalism.

This analysis of democratic fatigue hints at the question of corruption by critiquing the empty formalism of electoral democracy, but—ironically—it remains a formal critique and eschews the material causes of this corruption. In fact, Van Reybrouck (2013, p. 20) sees citizens as powerless members of a hierarchical system due to “incidentalisme,” a Dutch term meant to describe a policy agenda which only considers short term incentives without regard for the long-term impacts. The formalism lacks content because the policies pursuit are incidental. Such an explanation is incapable of capturing the economic offensive by the wealthy we have witnessed over the last 40 years. The radical transformation of democratic societies over this period of time requires a different explanation, one in which the oligarchization of democracy becomes visible. Democratic fatigue thus lacks the analytical clarity to pinpoint the source of the fatigue which

remains in a dialectical realm. Instead, I propose that where democratic fatigue sees a dialectic, oligarchic fatigue arises from the economic power of some to dispose of the interests of the majority. For this reason, democratic fatigue differs from oligarchic fatigue, because it describes electoral democratic structures as the cause of fatigue. This deviates attention from the source of the corruption outside of institutional politics, namely the oligarchs.

I now return to Vergara's work on systemic decay to find the root of fatigue: the oligarch as autonomous subject. Formally considered electoral democracies may not be democratic in the sense described above due to corruption. Corruption, in this context, refers to constitutive principles which gradually decay over a prolonged period of time (Vergara 2021). The inevitability of systemic corruption comes from the autonomous subject, who ultimately wants to pursue their own individual interest. Thus, the interest of the masses – a common good – disappears in pursuit of the needs and wants of the autonomous subject. The autonomous subject who threatens democracy, Blühdorn suggests, entails individual rights and collective rights. There appear to be two avenues through which systemic corruption entails. First, through “subjugation, manipulation, and mutilation” (Blühdorn 2019, p. 392), economic elites may simply obstruct the autonomous subjectivity in its entirety. Democratic fatigue is not concerned with this form of obstruction, but clearly the obstruction of subjectivity in favor of oligarchic interests may cause oligarchic fatigue. The fatigue caused here is due to the exhaustion of fighting the political order. Blühdorn identifies a second threat to the autonomous subject, the autonomous subject under neoliberalism – and the money economy more generally – becomes less relevant as we move into complex society. Democracy ought to be ruled by market logic and the individual has autonomy in so far as they can choose “from the range of choices provided by the market” (Blühdorn 2019, p. 394). It is the latter which democratic fatigue aims to critique. It

is the perceived dysfunctionality of democracy – that is, the marketization of democracy – which causes fatigue. When the dysfunctionality, and with it the loss of self, is directly due to economic agents, then it can—and should—be called oligarchic fatigue.

These political forms of fatigue share an important underlying cause: the feeling of powerlessness, which results in weariness and impotence. What Black fatigue identifies – and that which democratic fatigue does not – is that fatigue occurs after prolonged and systemic oppression. While Blühdorn (2019) supplements the literature of the oppression of democracy, others do not. The source of fatigue – including for Blühdorn – is democracy itself. Oligarchic fatigue follows the literature of Black fatigue by making visible the source of weariness, which otherwise remains unaddressed by the account that focuses on the institutional shortcomings of democracy. The affluent use their material resources to dominate politics and make sure that their ideals are those which are visible. This paper contends that the people are not powerless because of democracy's failures (a negative claim) but because of the actions of oligarchic elites (a positive claim), whose actions aim to prevent the people's participation. Oligarchic fatigue is thus a direct consequence of systemic corruption.

Those who are in power rule to keep the citizens out of power. The powerful pass policies that explicitly impoverish the people, such as cutting pensions, squashing unions and passing neoliberal financial regulations (McCormick 2023) among other regulations that deny citizens' ability to exercise power. Oligarchic fatigue occurs because citizens cannot act politically to protect their well-being; they are filled with uncertainty, and, because of their repeated and ineffective rapport with the political apparatus of which they are no part, they develop fatigue.

My account of oligarchic fatigue does not mean to imply that the universe of the people are fatigued. In fact, Cristina Beltrán's work shows how one of the populations most shut off from the political system, undocumented migrants, respond instead with a mixture of anger, outrage and joy (Beltrán 2009). This suggests that, while the institutional channels may remain closed, certain groups, including climate change activists and movements fighting for racial and/or economic justice, are unaffected by fatigue and instead respond with anger. Anger, as opposed to fear, gives one a sense of confidence and control and triggers an active response (Saab 2023).

III. Fatigue and Participation

I now turn my attention to identifying oligarchic fatigue in democratic regimes. How can we diagnose a democratic system with oligarchic fatigue? And what exactly about current politics leaves people exhausted? In the previous section, I suggested that oligarchic fatigue occurs from simply observing politics or from an effort to get involved which fails. Thus, on the one hand, one may observe fatigue when there is an obstacle preventing people from participating in politics; this is the population who is most disempowered. On the other hand, one may observe fatigue when people do attempt to participate but due to the inefficacy of formal political structures, they feel exhausted. What exactly do these two diagnoses look like? And more importantly why is it due to oligarchic constraints? The literature on democratic fatigue diagnoses the phenomenon well. I thus now turn to their diagnosis of fatigue first before turning towards the unique aspects of oligarchic fatigue. Ultimately, what sets oligarchic fatigue apart is its dependency on the very oligarchic nature of a given regime, whereas democratic fatigue applies itself to any electoral representative regime where democratic backsliding occurs.

Democratic fatigue, importantly, arises where there are elections to determine the representatives of the people⁷. The elections are sacred, yet at the same time the representatives chosen in those elections never satisfy the needs of the people. The “Cruel Optimism”, to use Lauren Berlant’s (2011) terms, presented by the desire of democracy and its constant disappointment leads to fatigue. Democratic fatigue does not profess to be a causal theory, but rather a diagnosis of a crisis in democracy, which reads that electoral fundamentalism, as a cruel optimism, may lead to despair, frustration, depression, and disappointment. The conjunction of these affects is a sense of exhaustion – or fatigue. In this move we also see the nominalization of democracy. As the first section discussed, citizens expect more from democracy than only procedural components. Without a substantive core to democracy, we miss something. The literature on democratic fatigue goes further, not only are we missing something, alternative democratic forms of expression are repressed by the dominant form of democratic governing: electoral representative democracy.

Here is the important point of divergence: democratic fatigue relies on the corruption of democracy through the empty formalism of democratic procedures but fails to find a source of democratic corruption. The nominalization of democracy rarely happens at the hands of the

⁷ This is not the consensus per se with regards to the literature on democratic fatigue, but the authors who limit themselves mostly to European and North American democracies agree that it is due to electoral representative democracy and not due to politicians, democracy itself, or representative democracy (for more, see Appadurai 2017; Van Reybrouck 2013; and Van Reybrouck 2017). For an alternative definition of democratic fatigue see Anna Kern and Marc Hooghe (2018).

people; a given political structure depends on the organization of power and the justification of those structures, which enables those with more political and economic power to enable or disable certain actions (Vergara 2020a). The nominalization of democracy, then, more likely occurs where there is an oligarchic democracy, where citizens legitimate dispossession and oppression through procedural mechanisms controlled by the elites. The question to which the remainder of this paper turns is how sociopolitical power structures of a democratic state give rise to fatigue, which is through the two ways described above: (1) people are either prevented from participating, or (2) they participate but fail to make a difference.

While it may appear rare that certain people are prevented from participating in political decision making, it is more prevalent than expected. The core tenets of Robert Dahl's Polyarchy⁸ persist in most democracies. One may conclude that people have never before been as free and open about engaging in politics as in modern democracies. Such explanations look for other reasons why there is a crisis in democracy, which leads to a concern over the efficacy of democratic systems itself. However, political participation is difficult if not impossible for certain groups in the polity. In the United States, someone may have their voting rights taken away after committing a criminal offense. In France, the government passed a new pension reform bill which hits women, people of color, and the working class the hardest, and in the process the French government ignored the calls to not accept the reform. In the Netherlands, climate activists were attacked by police forces and 2400 activists – including minors – were

⁸ The six tenets are 1) elected officials; 2) free and fair elections; 3) inclusive suffrage; 4) freedom of expression; 5) alternative information; and 6) associational autonomy (Dahl 2015, p. 92).

detained after peaceful protests (Bosman and Fasel 2023). In Argentina, the appointment of Javier Milei has led to such a steep increase in the cost of living that working class people cannot get by with one job; with some suggesting that the current government wants Argentines “to be slaves” (Grinspan 2024). In Canada, the Trans Mountain Pipeline has been government approved even though it will devastate the sacred grounds of the Stk’emlupsemc te Secwepemc Nation (Razavi 2023). These are but a few examples highlighting the ways in which law, oil corporations, and austerity policies dominate various groups of marginalized peoples⁹.

These occasions constitute preventative measures from participating in politics because they limit a person’s ability to engage with and shape their democratic life. In other words, in these examples one of the requirements – most likely the normative components – of democracy defined above is missing. The first example where U.S. government may take away voting rights from individuals who have been found guilty of committing a crime is a lack of both procedural and normative components, because a person cannot vote (procedural) and as such they are not equal nor included in political decision making (normative). Such examples are relatively rare and may constitute a possibility of oligarchic fatigue because the structure of democracy in the United States today is oligarchic, but such account need not be oligarchic. The person harmed by oppressive structures is exhausted by their inability to change their political trajectory thus fatigue ensues. This form of oligarchic fatigue is most similar – and indeed is entangled with –

⁹ According to Freedom House (2023) all countries are considered free and electoral democracies. Their respective scores are: United States (83/100), France (89), Netherlands (97), Argentina (85), Canada (98).

Black fatigue which suggests that a person is exhausted due to white supremacy and racist systems of which mass incarceration is but one example.

The other examples discussed above are not necessarily procedurally lacking any democratic rights. Although one may argue that austerity policies lead to scenarios in which people cannot participate in the procedural components of democracy, this would go beyond the scope of my argument here¹⁰. Even with these concerns tabled, the above examples all pose a threat to the minimal normative threshold democratic participation requires. Most obviously when protests in France were responded to with police violence and the reform bill was passed. If people cannot voice their concerns about real world issues because the police will have them arrested, this intuitively feels undemocratic. Similarly, if precarity is dominant among most of the population, they cannot be fully included in decision making because this requires relative equal standing. More to the point, oligarchic fatigue may arise here because people either attempt to participate or voice their want to participate and this call for participation is either ignored or taken as a threat. If the latter is true, then we see a rise in arrest rates. Both however suggest that one feels impotent because of systemic injustice and violence against them. In the case of social movements though, fatigue does not occur without activity; one may feel impotent because of

¹⁰ Such an argument does of course have merit. At worst, the road taken by austerity measures may in fact lead to further oligarchic entrenchment endangering democracy itself. But also, to a lesser extent this may be the case, because if workers are kept poor through these measures, even the minimum threshold of equality and inclusion can be met at which point voting and freedom of speech are mere empty signifiers.

systemic injustice and violence against them, which is something I return to at the end of this paper.

Democratic fatigue does not account for such encounters; rather the literature focuses on how the empty formalism of electoral representative democracy leads to referendums (Van Reybrouck 2013), populism (Appadurai 2017), and losing trust in institutions (Blühdorn 2020). In other words, they see that the “social and political developments of the past few years have brought about a rapid weakening of what seemed an encompassing and solid level of organizing public life” (Van Reybrouck 2017, p. 133). This fatigue is not due to historical legacies, nor due to certain actors who function within a corrupt system, but rather the overwhelming amount of change that occurred the last few years. Such accounts fail to make sense of why people may be exhausted due to precarity and what is more, it mistakes relative stability for a “solid level of organizing public life.” Instead, I follow Paul Apostolidis (2022) in identifying the interconnectedness of right-wing populism and precarity. Precarity constitutes a desperate responsibility among workers which “disengage people from the practices of *political* responsibility that Antonio Vásquez-Arroyo construes as vital to democratic citizenship, particularly citizenship involved in struggles for social democracy” (Apostolidis 2022, p. 123; see also Vásquez-Arroyo 2016). Democracy does not cause fatigue here, Apostolidis and Vásquez-Arroyo even suggest that precarity prevents people from participating in democratic practices. Precarity and right-wing populism are mutually reinforcing, in that precarity stultifies democratic citizenship and encourages right-wing populist enthusiasm (Apostolidis 2022)¹¹. In

¹¹ My account of right-wing populism and oligarchic fatigue is too simplified; however, my goal is not to provide a full account of their reinforcing mechanisms. Rather, I merely hope

this particular example, democratic fatigue does not account for right-wing populism; Apostolidis is not suggesting that electoral democracy opens the door to right-wing populism, it is precarity¹². Similarly, Deva Woodly (2015; see also Myers 2017) suggests that the dominant logic of neoliberalism could explain why so few have politically organized against precarity.

Fatigue here constitutes the political exhaustion – literally and figuratively – of workers. First, fatigue here may ensue because people do protest austerity policies which lead to precarity, such as in France. This is fatigue caused by active participation without result which I turn to at the end of the paper. In another sense, fatigue may arise due to no exertion by those who feel exhausted. The oligarchy prevents people from meaningfully participating in politics due to precarity which elicits a feeling of lack of efficacy among the workers. The repeated experience of injustice and violence is socially bivalent, “it both exceptionalizes and generalizes, such that even as precarity singles out specific groups for especially harsh treatment, it also spreads throughout the working world” (Apostolidis 2022, p. 116). Thus, while certain groups may experience precarity more harshly, the working population is likely to be exposed to it.

to show that democratic fatigue cannot comprehensively discuss the rise of right-wing populism without finding some explanation of the empty formalism. For a longer discussion on oligarchy and populism see Vergara (2020b)

¹² Right-wing populism is not unidimensional and in certain scenarios it may arise out of democratic exhaustion; however, in the examples the democratic fatigue literature offers, I think a more apt description includes socioeconomic living situations, not democracy. Unless democratic practice itself is polluted with socioeconomic precarity.

Oligarchic fatigue here arises from the lack of political reflection due to precarity and this can be widespread as Apostolidis suggests.

Fatigue may also arise when people are active in politics and are exhausted by continued failure to have an impact on political decision making. Such experiences may occur in formal politics or outside of institutional politics. In the United States, gridlock thwarts the policies which the majority of citizens want (Page and Gilens 2020). And more generally, the elite do the agenda-setting behind closed doors (Prinz & Westphal 2023), wealth allows for media ownership and with it what is and is not problematized (Arlen & Rossi 2021), and private philanthropy bypasses formal political institutions (Saunders-Hastings 2018). As such real political decisions often remain invisible to democratic participants.

The second form of oligarchic fatigue is due in part to “distractions that inflate the relative importance of the *sense* of belonging in relation to dealing with the hard questions of distributing resources, risk, and vulnerability in the polis.” (Berlant 2011, p. 262) and in part by the incredible economic disparities in politics today where economic interests can and do trump the needs of people. One can think of this in relation to the idea of creating a space, by the rich, in which normative questions are no longer on the horizon. Formal politics is constantly addressing the recent past – “incidentalisme”, and this past causes a certain ubiquitous crisis in the present. Incidentalisme, however, primarily takes hold with those who pass policies. Many people are not faced by incidentalisme, but by real world problems which they want to see addressed. In the United States, for example, evidence suggests that citizens want to address gun violence, education, infrastructure, and climate change, but when lobbyists, large corporations, and private donors do not want these policies, these topics are not addressed (Page and Gilens 2020). Someone in the United States may feel exhausted because “the average American citizen

has *little* or *no* independent influence” (Page and Gilens, 2020 p. 67) leading to a lack of belonging. Democratic fatigue addresses this concern, if people lose a sense of belonging in democratic politics, this may result in fatigue due to democratic practice. When this democratic practice is part of oligarchic democracy – which it often is, such exhaustion becomes oligarchic fatigue. People in that case lose a sense of self, not because democracy is exhausting, but because democracy is corrupted.

Vergara (2020a) suggests that people may legitimate their own dispossession in oligarchic democracy, and I have added that such legitimation may bring about fatigue. It is in this second way of fatigue that Ana Hofman (2020, p. 304) sees “Exhaustion as a kind of prevailing social atmosphere of uncertainty, precarious life and a crisis of political agency that has different meanings and modalities in various societies and contexts. This exhaustion is strongly tied to a collective feeling of impotence and it is a result of the structural exclusion by global political mechanisms that are experienced as completely beyond the reach of people while deeply influencing their everyday life.” Hofman (2020) here does not suggest that voting is beyond the reach of people, but that the general condition of political agents is exhausted by such procedural – yet empty – action. This form of politics, according to Hofman (2020), loses all its political value because it only serves as a spectacle, while the real political mechanisms are now invisible (see also Berardi 2009). Therefore, the fatigue arises here through a process of almost a sort of alienation. One may be fatigued, in this second sense, because in an attempt to change their current situation, they have legitimated oligarchic rule.

Lastly, I turn to an example – activist work – where people do exert themselves and at the same time are ignored by the systemic mechanisms of government which do not attend to them. Vincent Bervins (2023) recalls that many participants of social movements in the 2010s thought

their case was inevitable: “democracy, freedom, and progress” will happen because the people demand it on the street. However, for many it did not turn out that way. In such cases both forms of fatigue may be present, people are double exhausted. Yet in this exhaustion lies the beginning to a possible politics of recognition. Akwugo Emejulu and Leah Bassel (2020) highlight the physical and psychological toll of activism on women of color and they see this as a politics of exhaustion. Central to the politics of exhaustion, Emejulu and Bassel (2020, p. 401) write, is “Extreme tiredness and demoralization [which] are both the signal that activists are doing meaningful work, but also the breaking point that stops them from continuing with their activism over the long term.” To participate in solidarity work with marginalized communities may lead to exhaustion, because one is so committed to helping the community, they no longer care for themselves. They continue, “it is the insidious ways in which austerity, xenophobia and fascism operate in different contexts that evoke exhaustion” (Emejulu & Bassel 2020, p. 402). These themes return in the argument on oligarchic fatigue; however, they note that exhaustion can serve as a binding force as well. The politics of exhaustion signifies, on the one hand, the physical and psychological state one is in, but, on the other hand, Emejulu and Bassel (2020, p. 405) state that “it acts as a structure of mutual recognition within precarious collectives.”

While exhaustion may not be experienced by everyone equally, following Apostolidis (2022) phrasing, fatigue is also generalized among the populace. It is generalization of fatigue, not the exceptionalization, which allows for a mutual recognition within oligarchic domination. Within exceptional cases, one may also find mutual recognition with one another as well, but a politics of recognition depends on a general sense of fatigue (something which Berlant (2011) suggests is a general condition of political depression). Hence activist work serves as an avenue towards the reconciliation within democratic practices because the oligarchic fatigue it brings

about is one where one recognizes themselves with others because activist work brings people together; voting, for example, does not.

IV. Conclusion

This paper contributes to understanding the politics of oligarchic democracy by developing the concept of oligarchic fatigue, which complements the growing literature on oligarchy and political exhaustion by theorizing how people's perceived sense of powerlessness result in fatigue. I begin with a discussion of what constitutes democratic politics and how it gets corrupted by those with wealth. Even if formally politics appears to be democratic, without substantive security of equality and inclusion, such politics is nominally democratic. I conclude that politics under these conditions constitutes an oligarchic democracy where democratic and oligarchic components are present. The argument engages with republican critiques of oligarchy to argue that the accumulation of wealth is intrinsic to the current system: oligarchs are not only an entrenched minority, but oligarchy is also itself entrenched in current democratic institutions. Next, the paper showed that the cumulative effect of living under an unresponsive electoral democracy can lead to oligarchic fatigue. The people are exhausted by the domination and powerlessness that they experience in everyday politics. I identified two ways in which fatigue may arise, although these are not mutually exclusive. In the first instance, oligarchic democracy prevents people from meaningfully participating in politics and this causes a sense of impotence and lack of efficacy. In the second instance, citizens legitimize their own dispossession and oppression, resulting in a sense of impotence and powerlessness. I differentiated oligarchic fatigue from democratic fatigue by showing that when the empty formalism of democracy is due to moneyed interest, it is not democracy which causes fatigue but the corruption of democracy which leads to fatigue. In the last section, I turned to the politics of exhaustion to show the ways

in which the two forms of fatigue may materialize in representative electoral democracies. In this section, I also opened the door to a potential politics of reconciliation through activist work.

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