

Deliberative Responsiveness
the Philosophical Limits of the Median Voter Theory
and the Value of Ranked Choice Voting in a Polarized United States

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Median voter models capture something important about democratic politics but suffer from indeterminacy, imply that representatives should act unjustly when constituents prefer it, and embody an atomistic conception of democracy that neglects the fundamentally co-operative nature of collective self-rule. We can salvage their crucial insights by incorporating them into a hybrid conception of responsiveness that also draws on deliberative democratic theory: representatives should defer to median preferences but also engage in respectful public reasoning with citizens and their proxies when their decisions pertain to matters of basic justice or constitutional essentials. The change in perspective this implies can be illustrated by considering the current wave of ranked choice voting reforms in the United States, which can be understood as a way of encouraging representatives to talk to constituents in the right way, as well as tracking their preferences, and therefore of improving the deliberative responsiveness of the American representative system.

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Neo-Downsian models of democracy that focus on responsiveness to the median voter suffer from serious conceptual and normative shortcomings. They successfully capture the need for representatives in specific circumstances to treat citizens as equals by working to realize their preferences without giving any special weight to those of any class or section of the citizenry. Median voter models cannot guide our judgement consistently, however, when majorities prefer something other than responsiveness to the median voter (Sabl 2015) and they cannot guide it reliably when they prefer policies that would violate basic demands of justice, for instance by disenfranchising a minority. They also arguably encourage analysts to evaluate a representative system according to its political egalitarianism rather than whether it permits citizens to recognize government as an exercise of their shared agency (Booth Chapman 2022). If political scientists consistently prize the ideal of political equality over that of collective self-government they risk endorsing governance arrangements that alienate the citizenry from their representatives and from one another (Lafont 2020). Conventional median voter models are therefore vulnerable to objections from indeterminacy, from injustice, and from alienation.

We can develop a more robust conception of democratic responsiveness by incorporating some of the central insights of recent democratic theory. Deliberative democrats have long argued that representatives often react appropriately to their constituents not by promoting their fairly-balanced preferences but by communicating with them in the right kind of way (see Gutmann and Thompson 1996, chap. 4; Mansbridge 2019; Young 2000, chap. 4). They advocate a practice that could be called *deliberative responsiveness*: representatives should listen to citizens and their proxies and consider and justify their decision in relation to their reasons. The hybrid model of responsiveness developed here follows this deliberative democratic tradition, but only halfway, treating deliberation as an appropriate substitute for aggregation only *within specific circumstances*. It turns on the idea that

representatives should perform aggregative responsiveness unless this would be unjust, in which case they should perform deliberative responsiveness instead. Such deliberative responsiveness should be *wide*: representatives should seek genuinely to persuade a diverse group of constituents. And it should be *deep*, in that they should appeal not only to citizens' conceptions of their own interest and benefit, but also their sense of justice and the common good. A hybrid conception of democratic responsiveness that incorporates both tracking and talking is not vulnerable to objections from indeterminacy, injustice and alienation and provides a more normatively attractive and conceptually robust standard for evaluating representative processes and institutions.

Amending median voter models in this way gives us a weighty reason to value an electoral system sometimes known as preferential, instant-runoff, or ranked-choice voting. Elections with ranked ballots in single-winner districts – here referred to as the Alternative Vote (AV) – may well create the strongest possible incentives for elected representatives to perform wide and deep deliberative responsiveness to constituents, when that is appropriate. There are theoretical reasons to expect that AV's true majoritarianism and preferential dynamics could provide the best possible incentives for broad and deep deliberative responsiveness because, in the right conditions, single winner ranked choice voting can be uniquely punitive of appeals to a narrow electoral base.

These arguments have important implications for our understanding of contemporary electoral politics in the United States. Millions of Americans already vote using AV, including in Maine, Alaska, the Bay area, and New York City. Ranked choice voting reforms have been celebrated as “the Archimedean lever of change” for combatting destructive forms of polarization (Diamond 2017) but there is disagreement about exactly why we should value them. Some researchers hypothesize that switching from single-member plurality (SMP) to AV is likely to encourage campaign civility (Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2016; Reilly, Lublin, and Wright 2023; Richie 2004), while others argue that AV can mitigate democratic backsliding, for instance by

drawing on centripetal theories of democracy in divided societies (Reilly 2018; see also Tolbert and Kuznetsova 2021). The *civility analysis* is promising but tends to simply assume without explaining the value of civility, whereas *backsliding analyses* tend to be imprecisely stated or underdeveloped, including because it is unclear whether the US can really be considered a deeply divided society. The hybrid model developed here suggests a more normatively sophisticated framework for evaluating these reforms, grounded in debates in democratic theory about the value of political equality and collective self-government: ranked choice voting is best understood as a way of making American politics more democratic by generating some much-needed deliberative responsiveness.

These arguments speak to at least three audiences. They seek to demonstrate the importance of certain key insights of deliberative democratic theory to the large-n researchers who employ median voter models and to suggest one way for them to improve their conceptualization of responsiveness by integrating aggregative and deliberative criteria for good representation. The hybrid or track and talk model of responsiveness also provides a normative framework that could orient and suggest hypotheses that could be tested by the growing number of Americanists studying ranked choice voting (including Cervas and Grofman 2022; Kropf 2021; John, Smith, and Zack 2018; Juelich and Coll 2021; McDaniel 2016; Santucci 2018; Sinclair et al. 2024). Finally, the hybrid model suggests one way of understanding the complementarity of aggregative and deliberative modes of responsiveness to democratic theorists seeking to incorporate deliberative insights into a comparative assessment of electoral systems (Herman and Muirhead 2021; James 2004; Leydet 2021; O’Flynn 2006; Wolkenstein 2021; see also related work drawing on Rawlsian theories of public reason liberalism by Bonotti 2017, 143–55; 2022).

The arguments underpinning the hybrid model appeal to three basic normative concepts: justice, democracy, and alienation. A representative’s action is *just* when compatible with citizens’ fundamental rights and liberties and a decision *pertains to justice* (and, I will argue, should therefore

trigger talking, rather than tracking) when it might change those rights and liberties because it touches on matters of basic justice and constitutional essentials (in the sense discussed by Rawls 2001, §12). A process or system of representation is *democratic* to the extent that it honors and helps better realize the core democratic ideals of political equality (Beitz 1989) and collective self-rule (Booth Chapman 2022). Finally, a citizen is *alienated* to the extent that they cannot reflectively endorse processes or the product of lawmaking as a result of their shared agency (Lafont 2020).

The argument is structured in three sections. After elaborating some important criticisms of conventional median voter models (§1) it introduces the track and talk model and the idea of deliberative responsiveness and demonstrates their conceptual and normative importance (§2). The stakes of this change in perspective are then illustrated by considering ranked choice voting reforms in the contemporary United States (§3). The conclusion considers possible objections to the track and talk model from deliberative democrats and constructivist theorists of representation.

§1. Aggregative Responsiveness

Empiricists often understand responsiveness by reference to the neo-Downsian “master theory” of politics that has been hugely influential since the late 1950s: the median voter theorem (Hacker and Pierson 2014). This theory predicts, on the basis of an idealized model of electoral competition, that elections under certain well-defined conditions encourage would-be representatives to appeal to the voter whose preferences are medial to those of the group (Black 1948; Downs 1957).

Median voter models have generated a vast literature in political science. Researchers have developed increasingly sophisticated ways of measuring responsiveness to the median (see, for instance, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; and, for an overview, Canes-Wrone 2015) and investigated – and arrived at no consensus about – whether one kind of

electoral system produces better responsiveness than others (Blais and Bodet 2006; Golder and Stramski 2010; Powell 2000; 2009). Many have now turned to the more fundamental question of whether responsiveness to the median occurs at all, in the wake of a series of results that seem to show that representatives track median preferences only incidentally and when they happen to align with those of the rich (Gilens 2012; Lupu and Warner 2022). The jury is still out on these findings however, since there is some reason to believe they may be an artefact of research design and, in any case, they make it hard to explain the existence of the welfare state and other policies favoring the middle class over the rich (Elkjær and Iversen 2020).¹

Researchers who try to measure responsiveness to the median view it as a standard of well-functioning electoral politics (see, for instance, the discussions by Powell 2000; and Soroka and Wlezien 2010). And this makes a lot of sense in some circumstances. Median voter models often accurately capture the requirements of a fair balancing of people's opposed preferences when their political disagreement is unidimensional and their preferences have single-peaked distribution (and are stable enough to be thought of as *theirs*).

The basic normative logic of median voter models can be illustrated with a simple thought experiment. Imagine a group of citizens disagreeing about the best level of governmental

¹ There are also long-running debates about whether aggregative responsiveness is possible in light of supposed problems with its inputs (some claim that citizens are too politically ignorant or irrational to deserve responsiveness, but see Lafont 2020, 5–6) or with its outputs (a long tradition of social choice theory claims that there is no way to aggregate a set of preferences in a fair or meaningful way; but Mackie 2003 provides solid theoretical reasons for doubting the empirical relevance of their formal models and shows just how little evidence there is for the problems they predict; and for evidence that these effects have rarely occurred in US elections using AV see Graham-Squire and McCune 2023).

redistribution, such that their preferences can be imagined as lying on a spectrum. Now imagine the citizens themselves standing in a line according to the strength of their preferences for redistribution. The person in the middle of the pack is the median voter. If the group were asked whether they would prefer to enact her preferences or those of any other person in the group, they would always prefer hers. There would be no more generally acceptable policy, hence none that aggregates preferences more impartially, than one that is congruent with her preferences.

The normative value of responsiveness to the median, which might also be called aggregative responsiveness, is internally connected to the democratic ideal of political equality. This implies that, in situations of genuinely irreconcilable interests, citizens should have equal power to shape collective decisions (Mansbridge 1983). It also implies an anti-vanguardism that should make us *prima facie* suspicious about the long-term persistence of a law that the majority would prefer to be otherwise (Shapiro 1999, chap. 3). The demand that representatives perform aggregative responsiveness to the median voter by trying to realize their preferences captures these majoritarian and anti-vanguardist aspects of political equality.

Yet the median voter model suffers from some important problems when considered as a normative standard for democratic politics. Andrew Sabl argues that the median voter model is vulnerable to an objection from indeterminacy because it is “at war with itself to the extent that the majority of a given public *itself values something other than responsiveness*” (Sabl 2015, 352). When voters endorse counter-majoritarian institutions or leaders who stand up for what is right even when it contradicts majority opinion, aggregative standards of democratic responsiveness seem to demand both deference and non-deference to public opinion, which is inconsistent.

A closely related *objection from injustice* starts from the insight that, contra conventional median voter models, representatives should sometimes avoid certain acts no matter what their constituents think: legally sanctioning torture, for instance, or opting to overturn the results of a free and fair

election. Median voter models effectively deny this fact by bracketing the substantive justice of decisions and, indeed, they may be viewed as attractive partly because such bracketing appears to promise the analyst a position of value neutrality, according to which they take no stance on the normative quality of citizen preferences (Sabl 2015, 352). But this introduces important lacunae into the model, for instance because within its parameters there is no principled or consistent way to decide how an official should act if most voters or constituents prefer her to abolish elections. Researchers must then appeal in a more-or-less ad-hoc way to further normative assumptions to define the scope of decisions within which there is properly deference to the median (Sabl 2015, 353 points out that Gilens 2012 omits preferences from his dataset whose satisfaction would require a constitutional amendment). Median voter models would therefore be more theoretically and normatively robust if integrated into a wider theory of healthy representative-constituent relations that limits the scope of deference in a principled way.

Median voter models are also vulnerable to a subtler kind of objection that turns on their neglect of two normative desiderata of elections that could be called *expressiveness* and *cooperativeness*. Emily Booth Chapman (2022) draws attention to the significance of these two goods by asking: what, if anything, would be wrong, in a future more technologically advanced world, with abolishing elections and programming an algorithm to vote on citizens' behalf by predicting their likely preferences from online behavior? This would be undesirable, she argues, because the act of voting has important expressive and educative effects that depend on the fact that it creates a moment of shared agency (in the sense of Bratman 2013; see also Stiliz 2015). A well-ordered representative system should promote democratic citizenship by embodying and hence inculcating the idea of government as a collective undertaking in which everyone can and should play a role. Different electoral rules, moreover, can realize these expressive and educative effect better or worse: compulsory voting laws are just, for instance, because they help elections express the idea that

everyone is involved in self-rule (Booth Chapman 2019). While there is plenty of scope for disagreement about mandatory voting (for an overview of debates see Lever and Volacu 2019), the core of Booth Chapman's argument weaves together two individually plausible insights: that the value of electoral institutions depends on the way they express or embody certain democratic values; and that they embody not only political equality, but also the equally basic ideal of citizens ruling themselves together (for more on this idea see Klein 2022; and Lafont 2020).

These ideas underpin an objection to conventional median voter models *from alienation*. Eleanor Ostrom once worried that a generalized acceptance of rational choice assumptions as helpful guides to social and political life might encourage citizens to interpret their actions and ultimately to behave in a more self-interested way (Ostrom 1998, 2–3). Similarly, there is reason to suppose that a society in which median voter models color our habitual ways of thinking might incline us towards viewing democratic politics in atomistic terms as the expression of private preferences. This could make it harder for us to see and reflectively endorse elections as expressions of our shared agency, creating a distinctively political alienation that involves multiple types of estrangement: from political decision-making and decisions, from other citizens considered as co-deciders, and, ultimately, from a lively sense of ourselves as democratic citizens with meaningful political agency (see Jaeggi 2014 for a fuller discussion of alienation and its disvalue).

§2. Deliberative Responsiveness

Representatives should not always defer to the median. When it would be unjust to try to realize median preferences, representatives should do what is right, instead. There was nothing wrong with British MPs decriminalizing homosexuality in the 1960s, even though they were clearly leading public opinion on this topic (Clements and Field 2014) and if the results of a future free and fair

election in the United States are called into question, state-level representatives with the power to certify its results should do so even if a majority of their constituents would prefer them not to.

When representatives defer to the demands of justice, even against the preferences of the median, they should, however, follow this up by trying to close gaps between policy and preferences over time. Citizens' interests are not unjustly violated by the enactment of just laws. Everyone has an interest in avoiding being compelled by law to act unjustly and we probably also have an interest in living in a society whose laws and decisions are sensitive to considerations of basic justice. When such laws are at odds with mass opinion, however, this does introduce a *prima facie* tension with the ideal of self-rule and its implication that democratic citizens should be able to reflectively endorse the laws they live under as expressive of their own agency. Christina Lafont suggests one way to mitigate this tension, arguing that the desirability of overcoming alienation explains why (and when) deliberation is a democratic necessity: when discussing issues of basic justice and constitutional essentials, representatives should try to persuade constituents of the rightness of their decisions to help them come to reflectively endorse the laws they live under as just (Lafont 2020, chap. 6).

Such attempts at persuasion are compatible with the autonomy of the audience and hence with democratic equality, however, only when they meet specific conditions. Those conditions, captured here in the idea of *deliberative responsiveness*, have been analyzed in an extensive literature on deliberative democracy (and related topics, such as public reason) and they boil down to the requirement that representatives genuinely listen to constituents as well as speak. Representatives perform *deliberative responsiveness* when they are willing to discuss their actions in public with constituents or their proxies, listening to and considering of ideas and arguments and justifying their actions in relation to them, where this discussion is both *wide* – distributed equitably across groupings of citizens who tend to hold distinctive opinions – and *deep*, in the sense of involving claims about the demands of justice and of the common good, as well about particular group

identities and interests. These discussions should also be more than just pro-forma: representatives should adopt a *deliberative stance* towards their interlocutors, “a relation to others as equals engaged in the mutual exchange of reasons oriented as if to reaching a shared practical judgment” (Owen and Smith 2015, 228), and consider those reasons in the way George Canning promised to consider those of his electors in Liverpool (as reported by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin 1967, 164):

It may happen that your own judgement may occasionally come in conflict with my own. [...] In all such cases, I promise you not indeed wholly to submit my judgement to yours; [...] but I promise you that any difference of opinion between us will always lead me to distrust my own views, carefully to examine, and, if erroneous, frankly to correct them.²

Pace median-voter models, deliberative responsiveness is the appropriate way for representatives to honor political equality when making decisions that pertain to justice. The democratic formulation of laws that protect common interests (including those in avoiding coercion by unjust laws) self-evidently cannot be understood as a matter of balancing or reconciling interests that are in conflict. This kind of jurisgenerative process is better understood in deliberative democratic terms, as an attempt by citizens to decide together on a matter of common concern. The ideal of political equality here demands not equal power but equal rights to try to influence public debate (Mansbridge 1983) – a contemporary analogue of *isegoria*: the equal right of adult male citizens to

² The term “deliberative responsiveness” has recently been used in a different way by Claudia Landwehr and Armin Schäfer (2024). Our contributions are potentially complementary, with this article developing an argument about deliberative responsiveness by specific *individuals* and theirs focusing on how responsiveness is created by an entire political system.

address key decision-making assemblies, which the ancient Athenians apparently valued above all other kinds of equality (Hansen 1991, chap. 4).

Deliberative responsiveness is desirable for both instrumental and intrinsic reasons. It honors democratic ideals by expressing commitments to collective self-rule and to the politically egalitarian idea that ordinary people are competent political actors and leaders cannot be expected to have any privileged insights into the demands of justice. Its instrumental benefits include its generation of publicity or legibility for decisions, which can mitigate informational and hence political inequalities between the more and less privileged (Hutton Ferris 2024; Schattschneider 1960) and between people with more and less time and attention to devote to politics (Elliott 2023).

There may well be interaction effects between deliberative and aggregative responsiveness. When preferences and particularistic interests are translated into the language of fair and rational policy this encourages individuals and organizations to launder their public communications, framing their policy preferences in the impersonal terms of what is right and good for society as a whole, which filters the kinds of policies they propose (Goodin 1995, chap. 9). Jon Elster (2000) calls this discursive filter the “civilizing effects of hypocrisy” and explains it with rational choice theory: when powerful people appeal strategically to justice and the common good they are more likely to win support for a policy if they propose one that does not match perfectly with their own interests and that makes concessions to weaker counterparts. A party is more likely to win support for a broad tax cut, for instance, than one aimed only at the super-rich. Framing political debate using language of justice or the common good might also help cultivate the habits of impartiality and solidarity necessary to balance the individualism of modern democratic societies and delegitimize a politics of raw self-interest, which tends to favor the socially powerful who have greater capacity to generate pressure to realize their ends (see Lafont 2020, chap. 2). Practices of deliberative responsiveness could, in short, encourage the fairer balancing of conflicting constituent interests

(and therefore potentially ameliorate the differential responsiveness discovered by Gilens 2012 and others, if it is indeed as skewed as they believe).

It is not easy to empirically gauge the open-mindedness characteristic of a deliberative stance (Steiner et al. 2004, 56), but we can imagine other ways to measure deliberative responsiveness. Researchers could investigate the frequency, length, and sophistication of representative's written or verbal communication and whether they engage in some genuine back and forth with interlocutors. One representative would exhibit greater deliberative responsiveness than another, for instance, if they held more frequent press conferences and spent more of the sessions answering journalist's questions. Researchers could assess the *breadth* of deliberative responsiveness by comparing communication across different groups, for instance men and women, rich and poor, and members of different racial or ethnic groups. They could get a preliminary handle on its *depth* by evaluating how frequently representatives adopt the language of justice and the common good.

These measures of deliberative responsiveness could foreseeably be combined with aggregative measures and integrated into an operationalizable model for evaluating hybrid or track and talk responsiveness. Political scientists already have fairly well-developed tools for measuring aggregative responsiveness, which can in principle be analyzed in terms of the relation between just two variables, such as one that measures shifts in public opinion and another that measures some aspect of legislative behavior or policy-making (see, for instance, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, chaps. 8–9; Soroka and Wlezien 2010, chap. 7). One challenge in measuring hybrid

responsiveness would be the identification of a plausible but operationalizable “switching point” defining the limits of appropriate aggregative responsiveness.³

The track and talk conception of responsiveness is not vulnerable to the objections to pure median voter models discussed above. It implies neither that representatives faced with majority preferences for countermajoritarian institutions or leadership should simultaneously defer and not defer to them, nor that they should commit injustice.⁴ Representatives should defer to the median voter unless doing so would be unjust, in which case justice should be pursued and just institutions defended and deliberative responsiveness should be substituted for aggregative. Nor is the track and talk model vulnerable to the alienation objection, because it accords due weight to deliberative processes that express the idea of all citizens as participants in a fundamentally cooperative process of reasoning about how to govern themselves to realize their shared interests.

§3. Tracking and Talking in a Polarized America

³ An intuitive quick and dirty approach might be to rule aggregative responsiveness inappropriate when achieving it would require a constitutional amendment (following Gilens 2012) and then compile measures of median responsiveness and communicative volume and quality into an index.

⁴ To be clear: it is constituents’ first-order opinions about *substantive policies* that representatives should sometimes defer to. These may sometimes be at odds with their opinions on the second-order question about how deferential representatives should be. But this latter question should be answered by reference to considerations of basic democratic justice (captured by the track and talk model), rather than by the median voter.

Adopting a hybrid model of responsiveness may inflect our evaluation of representative institutions and their reform. Exploring how this reorientation might inform our assessment of contemporary American electoral reform will help illustrate the difference it might make.

This exercise faces some imposing obstacles, however. Most importantly, researchers disagree on many of the conditions for aggregative responsiveness⁵ and there is no research at all on the conditions for deliberative responsiveness. Empiricists drawing on deliberative theory have investigated which institutional conditions promote high quality communicative interactions between representatives (Steiner et al. 2004) or between citizens (Schmitt-Beck and Lup 2013), but not between representatives and constituents, except in smaller scale forums engineered by researchers (Farrell et al. 2019; Neblo, Easterling, and Lazer 2018). Even a book subtitled “Deliberative Elections”, for instance, rules electoral reform unrealistic in the US and focuses on how electoral politics could be improved by debate within small assemblies of citizens (Gastil 2000). And even at a theoretical level there are limited materials to work with here, because deliberative democrats have rarely subjected electoral institutions or electoral reforms to comparative analysis (see, for instance, the very brief remarks by Habermas 1996, 170–71, 181, 183).⁶

⁵ Earlier findings that proportional electoral formulae produces greater congruence (e.g., Powell 2000) have been challenged by new data and measurement techniques (Blais and Bodet 2006; Golder and Stramski 2010) and the “ideological congruence controversy” (Powell 2009; see Golder and Lloyd 2014) is currently “fiercely contested” (Becher and González 2019, 694).

⁶ There are, however, important exceptions to the deliberative neglect of elections: John Dryzek (2005) and Ian O’Flynn (2006) discuss deliberation and electoral design in the context of deeply divided societies; Dominique Leydet (2021) compares proportional electoral systems with SMP; and Michael

In light of these serious barriers to informed speculation about the conditions for deliberative responsiveness, the aim here is to generate some initial hypotheses for further investigation: an exercise in what has been called “predictive” political theory (Bagg 2016).

One promising place to start this investigation is with the idea that representative-constituent relationships are more likely to involve deliberative responsiveness when they are programmatic, rather than clientelist or charismatic (for this typology of linkages see Kitschelt 2000). Charismatic politics is patently lacking, from a deliberative perspective, because it relies for persuasion not on justification but on spectacle: a politics of the image, not the word (of the kind described by Green 2010). The distinction between clientelist and programmatic linkage turns on the way benefits are distributed: clientelists win support from well-defined constituencies with narrowly targeted incentives before and after elections, whereas programmatic politicians articulate universalistic policies distributing harm and benefit equally to both supporters and similarly situated non-supporters. Politicians combine both types of linkage in practice, though some may skew further in one direction, and all of them have incentives to exhibit deliberative responsiveness to at least some small and favored constituencies, such as the representatives of well-resourced and well-organized interest groups (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018, chap. 4). But this responsiveness may be *broader* in the case of programmatic politicians (i.e., more equitably distributed across diverse groups), relative to clientelists who rely on more sharply defined sections of the population. This deliberation may also be *deeper* than the more transactional discussions of clientelists because representatives with a more universalistic orientation are likely to speak the language of justice and the common good

Rabinder James (2004, chap. 5, discussed presently) develops an impressively systematic and rigorous framework for evaluating electoral formulae according to both deliberative and aggregative criteria.

more habitually, such that policy debates pertaining to justice are more likely to be understood and discussed as involving *questions of justice*, rather than as topics fit for bargaining and self-interest.

The Alternative Vote may be the best electoral system for incentivizing the programmatic politics necessary for deliberative responsiveness. Candidates under AV experience stronger pressures to win broad support than under any other system because they must win a true majority of voters, including by seeking second preferences beyond their base. Relative to alternative electoral formulae, this incentivizes responsiveness that is deep because reflective of more universalistic policy orientations and broad because it reaches across plural groups (for which see also Pottle 2023, who argues persuasively that AV can help mitigate epistemic injustice by promoting especially broad responsiveness). Two round systems can also create similar sorts of pressures to broad and deep responsiveness, but they may kick late in the campaign season and may be weak, at best, towards the start, when narrowly targeted base mobilization can help a party to get past the first round. This point was exemplified by the 2002 French presidential election, in which Jean-Marie Le Pen got into the second round with 17% of first-round votes, presenting voters with a choice between two non-popular parties; Le Pen's chief rival, Jacques Chirac, received 20% of first-round votes and 82% in the final tally. AV is likely to produce deliberative responsiveness better than any other system, therefore, because it creates the greatest possible pressure for candidates to make broad appeals framed in the language of justice and the common good.

This argument has direct relevance to the contemporary United States, where Alternative Vote is being adopted across multiple jurisdictions with increasing frequency. Electors already use it to choose mayors and city councils in New York, San Francisco, and many other cities (especially in California, Colorado, Minnesota, and Utah). Nevada voters recently approved AV for all general elections; Alaska already uses it for general elections; and Maine uses it in all statewide races.

Some normative interpretations of this shift to AV focus on the value of campaign civility, whilst others present ranked choice voting as a solution to recent democratic backsliding. The *civility analysis* focuses on AV's potential to encourage broad electoral appeals and penalize negative campaigning that mobilizes the base but alienates others (Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2016; Donovan and Tolbert 2023; Reilly, Lublin, and Wright 2023; Richie 2004). *Backsliding analyses* present the reforms in more existential terms, arguing either that AV would counter destructive forms of polarization by improving aggregative responsiveness (Tolbert and Kuznetsova 2021) or mitigating ethnic tensions (Reilly 2018). This latter *racial backsliding* argument draws on work by centripetal theorists of democracy in deeply divided societies, who endorse AV as a way to ameliorate group division by encouraging representatives to seek the second or third preferences from voters beyond their core ethnic, religious, or regional constituency (Horowitz 1992; Reilly 2001; 2002; Stojanović 2016). Benjamin Reilly's innovative application of centripetalist theory to the American case implies, without explicitly stating, that constitutional fragility in the US can be partly traced to ethnic or racial divisions (see also Howe 2019).

Arguments for AV as a solution to democratic backsliding have not yet been elaborated in sufficient detail to be fully persuasive. Although there is some hard evidence of backsliding (e.g., Grumbach 2022; Mickey 2022), elected representatives in the United States don't appear to exhibit notably less aggregative responsiveness to the median voter than those in other, less fragile, polyarchies, whether one is generally optimistic about the reality of responsiveness (Soroka and Wlezien 2010) or pessimistic about it (Lupu and Warner 2022). The racial backsliding analysis looks a lot more promising because Republicans have long used racially-freighted messaging to mobilize supporters (Stephens-Dougan 2021) and White identity politics has become increasingly important in recent years (Jardina 2019) and arguably decided the 2016 election (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018, chap. 8). These racial-political dynamics may plausibly threaten the health of democracy in the

US if they exacerbate negative partisanship, which licenses politicians to violate political liberties without fear of too much pushback from their supporters (Graham and Svobik 2020). However, centripetalist arguments normally assume a more rigidly group-based party system than exists in the US, where (for instance) plenty of Whites vote Democrat and plenty of Latinos vote Republican.⁷

The civility analysis, by contrast, is plausible but incomplete. As presently stated, it simply assumes the value of civil campaigning, which is normatively unsatisfying in itself and overlooks the ways uncivil, adversarial, and divisive rhetoric and contestation can sometimes help improve broader processes of political deliberation, including by creating salutary pressures for both citizens and leaders to attend to under-appreciated perspectives, including those of less socially powerful groups (Medearis 2005; Young 2001). Claims about the value of civility would benefit from being connected to a normative theory about when civility is appropriate and why.

The hybrid model can help. A demand for civility is implicit in the idea of deliberative responsiveness and its requirement that representatives express respect for ordinary citizens and a willingness to listen to their opinions even when they contrast sharply with their own. Such civility is valuable for the same reasons as deliberative responsiveness: because it implies a commitment to the democratic ideals of self-rule and political equality, creates politically egalitarian forms of legitimacy for ideas and arguments, and may also reduce pro-powerful policy-bias and help inculcate norms such as impartiality and solidarity (see above, §2). The hybrid model thus explains the value of

⁷ I thank an anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing out that American parties may be less straightforwardly racial than they would be in a PR system and that US politics is already *somewhat* centripetal, thanks to its majoritarianism (and presidentialism: Horowitz 1992, 205–14), which may have limited the political salience of racial division. There may therefore be scope for research on the US as a *potentially* divided society.

civility by reference to a broad tradition of deliberative democratic theory whilst also doing justice to the insight that its value is neither universal nor unconditional by distinguishing those moments when democratic ideals demand it from those when they do not. Specifically: civil debate and discussion are necessary when discussing issues that pertain to justice.

From the perspective offered here, ranked choice voting reforms can be understood as a way of encouraging American representatives to perform wider and deeper deliberative responsiveness to their constituents. If AV encourages campaign civility, as evidence suggests (Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey 2016), this should be celebrated because it likely reflects an improvement in deliberative quality and hence of one kind of democratic responsiveness in American elections.

To be sure, American adoption of the Alternative Vote will improve deliberative responsiveness only if races are structured appropriately. Majoritarianism and preference-swapping can induce wide and deep responsiveness only if lower-order preferences matter to outcomes, which requires that races are genuinely competitive that there are more than two candidates with any chance of success (see McCulloch 2014, who makes a parallel argument about AV as a tool for ethnic moderation). It could be argued, therefore, that AV would struggle to broaden and deepen deliberative responsiveness in an apparently often-uncompetitive two-party system such as the US.

Yet the right kind of conditions for preference swapping do exist in many parts of the American polity. There are many more competitive races than a glance at the House would suggest. AV could have a powerful effect even in solidly Republican or Democrat Congressional districts, for instance, if employed in more party primaries, which may help reinforce polarization by empowering radicals (an idea at odds with findings by e.g. Hirano et al. 2010; but see: Barton 2023; Grose 2020). Competitive races and candidate pluralization can, moreover, be engineered by creative institutional reforms in places they do not currently exist. Consider, for instance, so-called Top Four or Top Five systems used to fill all state and federal elective office in Alaska and recently approved by voters in

Nevada: four or five candidates from any party (or none) are selected in a common jungle primary (known as a tundra primary in Alaska) and then AV is used to select the winner from amongst them. This promotes competitive races and candidate proliferation by inducing competition in safe seats between candidates from different factions of any locally dominant party (for an analysis of the Alaskan case see Reilly, Lublin, and Wright 2023).⁸

Ranked choice voting reforms in the US illustrate one way of improving deliberative responsiveness and thus help reveal what might be at stake in adopting a hybrid model that supplements the norm of deference to the median with a deliberative component. The idea that responsiveness should involve talking as well as tracking is justified by the conceptual and normative problems with median voter models. Yet a hybrid model expands the range of phenomena that analysts must consider when investigating the conditions for healthy representative-constituent relations and hence also the kinds of policies they might suggest to reformers. And the American case illustrates this change in orientation. From a purely aggregative perspective, the incivility associated with destructive forms of polarization might be compatible with democratic responsiveness, whereas some of it looks suspect and at odds with this ideal, from the perspective of the hybrid model.

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⁸ Further technicalities also matter: voters must be required to rank a decent number of preferences for their vote to count as valid, to reduce the problem of ballot exhaustion (described by Burnett and Kogan 2015) and we should offset political inequalities created by a more complex ballot structure (see Booth Chapman 2022, 136-37, who suggests that compulsory voting would help).

This article has developed a track and talk model of responsiveness that recommends substituting deliberative for aggregative responsiveness when deference to the median voter would require a representative to violate the demands of justice. Supplementing median voter models with a deliberative element promises to immunize them from objections from inconsistency, injustice, and alienation. One possible consequence of recognizing the importance of deliberative responsiveness is a greater appreciation for systems of preferential voting in single-winner districts, which are likely to generate programmatic politics and hence a kind of deliberative responsiveness that is both wide and deep. This deliberative democratic reinterpretation of ranked choice voting has important implications for our understanding of an ongoing wave of electoral reform in the United States, which could help improve deliberative responsiveness and democratic responsiveness in general.

One possible objection to the track and talk model draws on recent work by constructivist theorists of representation (Disch 2021; Saward 2010). Lisa Disch argues that we tend to imagine that there is a “bedrock” of citizen preferences that are deserving of responsiveness because they are authentic or autonomous, in the sense of being formed independently of mobilizing or manipulative communication by powerful representatives (Disch 2011). She counters that, in reality, all mass political preferences are endogenous to such communications, that representatives respond only to preferences that they have helped create, that responsiveness is therefore a poor safeguard for citizens’ political autonomy, and that it should therefore be abandoned as a democratic ideal.

It is not true that preferences are heteronomous simply because they are endogenous. All our ideas, identities, and opinions are shaped by communication from representatives and other elites of various kinds, as well friends, families, acquaintances, and so on. We might read novels recommended by the jury of a literary prize, just as we might take a policy proposal more seriously if voiced by columnist we respect, and in neither case must we cede our powers of independent judgement and reflection. Those powers might be stunted or developed in a one-sided way, to be

sure, if the discursive environment is unduly reflective of the ideas and perspectives of some groups and not others. When publishing and literary criticism were dominated by male voices, for instance, tastes may have been insensitive to novels reflecting women's experiences and sensibilities and some women may have struggled to find good books to read, under-developing their capacities for independent literary judgement. But when elite discourse is properly receptive and reactive to the concerns and interests of diverse and less privileged groups then it need not pose a threat to sensitive and autonomous judgement.

This raises the question, of course, of whether elite *political* discourse is receptive and reactive in the right kind of way. This is more likely when there are discursive and institutional feedback loops between elites and ordinary people (Chambers 2017), including via recursive interaction between constituents and their representatives, including non-elected representatives such as activists or participants in citizens assemblies (Mansbridge 2019; see also Deligiaouri and Suiter 2023; Landwehr and Schäfer 2024; Neblo, Easterling, and Lazer 2018). But it is not clear exactly how well our representative systems approximate that ideal (Hutton Ferris 2024). The crucial point here, however, is that preference endogeneity *as such* is not at odds with citizens' autonomy or democracy.

A second objection to the track and talk model holds that deliberative responsiveness is practically impossible, which makes it a poor guide for evaluating or reforming politics. Disch argues that the competitive imperatives facing representatives almost always deter them from adopting a deliberative stance towards constituents; citizen preferences are shaped by specifically *strategic* communication by representatives. And deliberative democrat Michael Rabinder James (2004, chap. 5) makes a related argument when he argues that the asymmetry in policy-relevant information

between representatives and constituents inevitably impedes the back and forth of validity claims characteristic of genuine deliberation.⁹

The idea of deliberative responsiveness is not, however, too much to aim for. Though it does establish a demanding standard for rightful representative-constituent relations it only looks completely unrealistic if we imagine representatives and constituents as separated by yawning gaps of power or information and then try to imagine them talking together with all the intimacy and spontaneity of close family or friends. It is important to recognize, however, that representation is a complex systemic process distributed across multiple forums and networks (Hutton Ferris 2024; Mansbridge 2019; Rey 2020). Deliberative responsiveness is normally elicited by citizens' proxies, such as journalists and other representatives (including informal ones in civil society, Montanaro 2017), who may be able to exert pressure for genuine listening by politicians. Think of a fresh-faced legislator sharing a stage with a powerful union leader or informed think tanker or being put on the spot by an experienced journalist in a TV interview. Whilst powerful representatives are unlikely to visibly change their minds in public conversation, they do react to what they hear, albeit over time, in fits and starts, and in co-ordination with others, such as co-partisans. And while bloody-mindedness will remain the political style for some, it is not utopian to expect powerful representatives to express a willingness to listen, especially if incentivized by appropriate institutional reforms and norms and a supportive deliberative culture (Chambers 2000; Sass and Dryzek 2014).

And if spaces for deliberative responsiveness are lacking then we can try to manufacture some more. The 2012-14 Irish Constitutional Convention got representatives and ordinary citizens deliberating together about policy and there is evidence the former genuinely listened to the latter

⁹ James nonetheless endorses preferential voting systems, including AV, because he believes they encourage deliberation between representatives.

(Farrell et al. 2019). The Parliament of East Belgium recently set up a permanent process that creates Citizens Assemblies and empowers them to discuss their recommendations with legislators and ministers (Niessen and Reuchamps 2022). Finally, elected representatives in the US have experimented with Electronic Town Halls involving online policy discussions with a random sample of their constituents. This innovation is especially promising because it is scalable: if Congresspeople devoted just two hours a week to talking with constituents in this way they could reach a quarter of the entire voting age population over a six year period (Neblo, Easterling, and Lazer 2018, 122–23).

One final objection to the track and talk model of responsiveness is likely to come from deliberative democrats who are skeptical of aggregation. The idea that tracking and talking can serve as substitutes for one another within certain situations might appear to clash with deliberative commitments to high quality epistemic outcomes and could also contradict the idea that decisions are legitimate when sensitive to *deliberative*, rather than “raw”, opinions or preferences: those shaped, refined, and stabilized through fair-minded discussion and reflection. The idea that responsiveness is owed only to deliberative opinion is shared, after all, by a wide range of deliberative democrats who may agree on little else (including, for instance, Fishkin 2009; and Lafont 2020, pp. 144-46, 170-75). It helps explain deliberative enthusiasm for sequencing organized deliberative assemblies into policy processes, in which citizens’ debate is structured and facilitated to promote reflection and learning. Perhaps representatives should do whatever they see as best, constituent preferences be damned, even when they clearly evident to representatives and even when making decisions on which there is wide latitude of reasonable disagreement, for instance on whether to spend tax-payers money on a

specific piece of public art (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 137–44). Why, a deliberative democrat might ask, should representatives ever defer?¹⁰

This is a question that can be turned back on deliberative democrats themselves. After all, they normally do endorse the authority of raw preferences at *election time*, rather than the authority only of preferences we have special reason to view as reflective. The important question is therefore not *whether* aggregative responsiveness is ever an appropriate way to make political decisions but *when*. The hybrid model defended here suggests that the relevant switching point between deference and reference to public opinion is reached when a decision pertains to justice. Aggregative responsiveness is an appropriate way to appoint legislators because, as argued most influentially by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the universalism of the demands of justice makes them blind to leaders' individual personalities: they cannot demand the appointment of just one party or person and the decision of who to appoint is therefore rightly left to the citizenry and a procedure that fairly aggregates their preferences. The hybrid model extends this logic to the activity of representing itself: when matters of basic justice are not at stake and citizens clearly prefer one policy – for instance (*pace* Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 140–42) when it is known that a large majority dislikes some proposed piece of public art – then representatives should defer to their constituents.¹¹

¹⁰ One response is: democratic politics won't find many supporters if representatives never defer to citizens opinions (Landwehr and Schäfer 2024)

¹¹ A few deliberative democrats reject elections entirely in favor of some other way of selecting legislators (Bohman 2012; Landemore 2020). This topic raises issues far beyond the scope of the present argument, including complex instrumental considerations that speak in favor of electoral representation for top legislative office (Hutton Ferris 2023; Landa and Pevnick 2021).

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