Centripetal Representation

Daniel Hutton Ferris

Newcastle University

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Political theorists have spent the last few decades arguing that elected politicians are not the only political representatives. So too are leaders of civil society organizations like the National Rifle Association (Montanaro 2017), delegates from states to international organizations (Rehfeld 2006), and campaigning public figures like Arundhati Roy (Saward 2009; 2010).

Such claims do not necessarily depend on any new or innovative conception of political representation, although they have often been coupled with one. A wide variety of actors represent in the most conventional way: by "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin 1967, 209).

The network of people, both elected and unelected, who promote interests and respond to preferences can be thought of as a *system* of political representation (Disch 2011; Mansbridge 2018; Rey 2020). Adopting a systemic approach can help us to analyse and evaluate divisions of labour between different kinds of representative, including transnationally, and to compare processes of representation over time, across space, or in different policy areas.

This paper takes one such comparison as its starting point. The complexity of representative systems across much of the (post-)industrial world has exploded in recent decades as organizations and policy-making processes have stretched across borders, especially in the European Union, as relatively stable patterns of post-war party competition have broken down (Mair 2013), and as rhizomatic governance networks have sprung up alongside older bureaucratic hierarchies (Bevir 2010). Technological developments have compounded these changes, propelling us into an era of unprecedented *communicative plenty* (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2018) characterized by a superabundance of new and diverse *representative claims* (Saward 2010) refracted across a broad spectrum of channels (Mancini 2013) and sometimes directed at minutely segmented audiences (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2018).

Deliberative democratic and constructivist theorists of representation tend to agree – despite substantial disagreement elsewhere (Disch 2011) – that this kind of *emulsification* of representative practices is likely to bolster democratic legitimacy. Deliberative democrats recommend making public discourse more pluralistic by randomly selecting legislators (Landemore 2020) and lacing policy processes with deliberative assemblies and hence with the "citizen representatives" of various publics and perspectives (Bohman 2012; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008; Warren 2008). Constructivists want to open electoral politics to a much more diverse range of competitors (Disch 2011) or surround it with a more vibrant ecosystem of representative claims made by the unelected (Saward 2009). They share the intuition that complicating representation permits new voices to be heard, exposes policy proposals to more robust contestation, and challenges unjustifiably hegemonic claims, actors, and institutions.

Yet *the fragmentation of the representative system* poses a serious threat to democratic legitimacy. Multiplying veto-points and "voice points" (opportunities for influence without a veto) makes it harder for ordinary people to monitor and sanction representatives, who thereby become liable to shirk their duty to represent constituents and vulnerable to capture by well-resourced minorities. Powerful representatives in fragmented institutional environments often also face a dilemma: should they collude with opponents to get things done or risk gridlock by providing principled opposition? *Discursive* fragmentation, moreover, can distract, deceive, and disengage people by making it harder for them to contextualize and interpret claims by and about representatives and less sure of how or whether those claims relate to each other and to outcomes. Ordinary people may be dangerously alienated from powerful representative institutions if high-profile public justifications look like window-dressing for policies cobbled together in labyrinthine processes of networked bargaining. Highly personalized media consumption and microtargeted communications can threaten their understanding of what political disagreement is really about and why it might be reasonable.

Ordinary people would benefit from a *democratic simplification* – a change that makes it easier for them to interpret and intervene in systems of representation. A handful of political theorists have clearly recognized this fact: populists identify some important strategies of discursive simplification (J. E. Green 2010; Laclau 2005) and advocates for robust partisanship have demonstrated that parties are not lamentable vehicles for faction, but irreplaceable institutions for simplifying politics in a way that engages and empowers the mass public (Muirhead 2014; Rosenblum 2010; J. White and Ypi 2016). One recent and singularly forceful call for democratic simplicity argues that representative systems work best when centred on two big strong parties that are insulated from civil society pressure (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).

These existing proposals for democratic simplification have some important limitations. Populists play fast and loose with liberal democracy when they celebrate the empowerment of small groups of strong and relatively unaccountable leaders or whip up hostility to social pluralism. Defenders of strong parties or robust partisanship have more generally persuasive arguments. Nonetheless, they would do well to pay serious and systematic attention to the relation between partisan politics and *non-electoral* representation. No single institution can generate democratic legitimacy by itself, not even an elected legislature (Habermas 1996, 440) and networked responsiveness between various kinds of representative, including societal and electoral, is an important supplement to direct responsiveness to constituents (Grant and Keohane 2005; Pettit 2009; Mansbridge 2009; 2018).

This article develops a theory about how representative systems might best promote democratic legitimacy – one that recognizes the potential benefits of networked responsiveness between diverse kinds of representative but is alert to the threat of fragmentation and the value of democratic simplicity. In what follows, a *system* is a set of elements connected in such a way that a

change in the behaviour of one or more of them produces changes in others and a *representative* system is one whose parts are people who perform representation. I adopt a core and periphery model, according to which a representative's centrality is defined by their *power*, understood as capacity to cause outcomes by virtue of their position in bureaucratic hierarchies or access to money. *Complexity* is a measure of the amount of information needed to describe the behaviour of a system (Bar-Yam 1997, chap. 0). It is often helpful to distinguish between the amount of information required to know the rules and procedures that structure the behaviour of representatives (*institutional complexity*) and that required to know the claims made by representatives (*discursive complexity*). My central contention is that democratic legitimacy would be promoted by making powerful representatives more responsive *to* and surrounded by less institutional and discursive complexity *than* their less powerful counterparts. More precisely, the capacity of a network or system of representation to generate democratic legitimacy normally depends on the extent to which it embodies a mutually-supportive relationship between three very general principles of institutional design:

1. Democratic simplicity, both institutional and discursive, towards the centre (the *democratic simplicity* principle).
2. Broad inclusion of a wide variety of claims, actors, and institutions towards the periphery (the *broad inclusion* principle).
3. Networked responsiveness of representatives closer to the centre to their counterparts nearer the periphery, in addition to direct responsiveness between representatives and constituents (the *networked responsiveness* principle).

I call this the *theory of centripetal representation*. The term "theory" is used in roughly the same way as it was by John Rawls: to denote the *hypothesis* that there are a set of general principles can jointly describe or explain how informed and reflective people might best reconcile their diverse and well-

considered judgements on a topic of normative enquiry (Rawls 1971, sec. 9). The metaphor of *centripetal motion* (which is borrowed from Lacey 2017) captures the idea that power and influence should flow "inwards" from a heterogenous assemblage of claims, actors, and institutions on the periphery to a relatively small and organized group at the core.

This article is relevant to three audiences. For normative political theorists it provides a distinctive perspective for evaluating electoral, administrative, and societal representation, one that avoids either uncritical celebration of complexity or anti-pluralistic visions of democratic simplicity. For empiricists it may recommend new lines of enquiry and hypotheses for testing. To political practitioners it suggests a vision of democratic reform centred on the idea that adding centripetal dynamics to systems of political representation can empower ordinary people by making it easier for them to push back against gridlock, collusion, shirking, and capture.

I make the case for centripetal representation in five stages: first mapping how political theorists have updated their conceptions of representation in light of real-world complexifications (§1); then arguing that fragmentation threatens the power and influence of ordinary people (§2), reviewing populist and partisan proposals for democratic simplification (§3); and showing why centripetalism can offer a superior alternative (§4) that can serve as a useful *filter* for deliberative and constructivist proposals for democratic reform, such as opening electoral politics to a much more diverse range of competitors or sequencing numerous deliberative assemblies into processes of networked governance (§5).

§1. Complexification

The institutional complexity of systems of representation has increased unevenly but often dramatically across most of the rich (post-)industrial world in the post-war period. Globalization has incentivised new forms of transnational co-ordination between both private and public actors,

generating new border-crossing forms of interaction and representation. An increasing number of transnational organizations are influencing, formulating, and even executing policy on issues including refugee resettlement (Betts 2009), plant genetic resources (Raustiala and Victor 2004), and the protection of endangered species (J. F. Green 2013). Post-war patterns of electoral competition between mass parties catering to clearly defined constituencies have, in many places, given way to much more dynamic and heterogeneous forms of contestation (Mair 2013, chap. 2). Furthermore, since the 1980s political leaders began supplementing hierarchical bureaucratic policy-making processes with more flexible, ad-hoc and dynamic practices of multilevel network governance that bring together a wide array of public and private parties (Bevir 2010, chap. 4). As part of this larger shift, a wide array of "participatory technologies", such as deliberative assemblies (i.e. "minipublics", Fung 2003), have been rolled out since the 1970s and used by both public and private organizations to consult citizens about their preferences (Martin 2015).

Discursive complexity has also been growing rapidly in recent decades. This is partly driven by institutional heterogeneity: the volume of claims "to represent or to know what represents the interests of someone or something" has increased with the number of actors and institutions performing representation, or attempting to do so (Saward 2010, 38). New TV channels and media organizations and the growth of online and social media have *refracted* those claims, projecting them across a broader spectrum of platforms (Mancini 2013). Finally, increasingly sophisticated political microtargeting has allowed office-seekers to present specific individuals with precisely tailored messaging focusing on wedge issues. The United States, especially, has already entered a new era of "dog-whistle politics" in which a political message can often only "be heard only by those it is intended to reach" (Hillygus and Shields 2008, 6).

These changes make a *systemic approach* to political representation more useful (Disch 2011; Kuyper 2016; Mansbridge 2018; Rey 2020). This helps us analyse the increasingly differentiated

divisions of labour between *electoral* representatives, *administrative* representatives in local, national and transnational governmental bureaucracies, and *societal* representatives, for instance in lobbying firms, labour unions, and third sector organizations (Mansbridge 2018). It may also give us greater analytic and normative leverage over border-crossing kinds of representation in the EU and transnational governance networks, if we think of the borders and structure of representative systems varying over time and by policy area.[2]

From a systemic perspective, differently-situated representatives can promote democratic legitimacy in distinctive ways (Cf. Sabl 2002). They do so not only by contributing to distributed processes of political deliberation (i.e. to the "deliberative system", for which see Bohman 2012; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008) but also by exerting non-deliberative *pressure*, for instance when bargaining or competing with one another (Disch 2011; Mansbridge 2014). The system as a whole should be evaluated in light of the "legitimating aspirational norm" of democracy, which is political equality: "representative systems should be judged by the criteria of whether they provide equal opportunities for the expression of diverse perspectives on the common good and equal power when interests conflict" (Mansbridge 2014, 246 n.1).

Representative systems are *prima facie* more likely to measure up to this ideal when they are *broadly inclusive* of varied kinds of representative and involve *networked responsiveness* between participants. Recursive communication between different (types of) representatives, as well as with constituents, is likely to improve everyone's understanding of what it would take to represent diverse constituencies

[2] An issue-specific approach to evaluating systemic representation raises substantive questions of rightful inclusion – who deserves to be represented in a particular decision-making process? – that are beyond the scope of this paper (but see Abizadeh 2008; Näsström 2011; Williams 2017).

well (Mansbridge 2018). Moreover, representatives are often more likely to stay responsive to constituencies when there is a fair amount of competition between them for resources and popular support (Disch 2011; Saward 2009; Warren 2011). Finally, accountability to professional networks might encourage representatives to effectively promote the interests of constituencies (Mansbridge 2009; Pettit 2009), especially when the latter have limited opportunity for direct monitoring or sanctioning, as is often the case in transnational governance processes (Grant and Keohane 2005).

Deliberative democratic and constructivist theorists of representation have often, ignoring countervailing considerations, used these *pro tanto* reasons for *broadly inclusive systems* and for *networked responsiveness* to ground some very bold proposals for discursive and institutional complexification.

Deliberative democrats argue that policy-processes that are more open to wide spectrum of discourses or perspectives tend to be not only more inclusive (Bohman 2012) but also more rational, because less likely to be cast in “narrowly economistic and administrative terms” (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, 491). To achieve discursive diversity they recommend sequencing greater numbers of consultative minipublics into polycentric processes of network governance (Warren 2009) and selecting participants – “citizen representatives” (Warren 2008) – to maximise the diversity of their social characteristics or perspectives (Bohman 2012), perhaps even to the extent of including Devil’s Advocates for positions that nobody actually holds (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008). Deliberative democrats also now frequently make the case for diversifying discourse in the legislature by randomly selecting some or all of its members (Abizadeh 2020; Gastil and Wright 2019; Landemore 2020; Vandamme and Verret-Hamelin 2017).

Constructivist theorists of representation argue that policy may become more rational if citizens are exposed to more diverse framings of political issues (Disch 2011) and have pointed out that unelected actors such as climate scientists, religious leaders, and public intellectuals provide help

create that diversity (Saward 2009). They suggest that democratic values could be better served by the freer market in representative claims that would exist if there were numerous elected legislatures acting as sources of diverse framings of public issues (Disch 2011), or if there were no political parties (Saward 2010, 136) or an indefinitely high number of them (Bourdieu 1991). Lisa Disch argues that the process of repealing a law in Condorcet's Girondin constitution, which involves shuffling proposals back and forth between literally *thousands* of interlocking legislative chambers, could help "guide a more expansive democratically representative practice today" because it take seriously the idea that pluralistic competition promotes virtuously diverse public discourse and hence democratic legitimacy (Disch 2011, 111).

This widespread appreciation of complexity is particularly striking in light of deep disagreements between deliberative democrats and constructivists elsewhere. The former argue that the quality of political decision-making generally depends more on whether political debate is well-informed and co-operative than how voting is organized (Chambers 2003). They accordingly tend to want representatives to adopt a *deliberative stance* towards one another: "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). The basic insight of constructivists is that would-be representatives can help to forge the interests and wills and groups they purport to represent by mobilizing people around a shared political identity (Saward 2010). This rhetorical process, they argue, inevitably requires them to adopt a highly *strategic* orientation towards one other, as well as towards those they seek to mobilize (Disch 2011). Despite these very different visions of healthy democratic politics, both deliberative democratic and constructivist theorists of representation tend to agree that complexification promotes democratic legitimacy by pluralising discourse in a way that reduces the unjustifiable hegemony of privileged representative claims, actors, and institutions.

§2: Fragmentation

These arguments for complexity are insightful and often, within limits, plausible. But they suffer from some serious sins of omission. A very complex system of political representation can reduce the political influence of ordinary people – those who are not connected to networks that control substantial resources – at the expense of elites, who are (Cf. the distinction between elites and non-elites drawn by Tilly 2007, 196).[3]

Institutional complexity can disempower ordinary people. Multiplication of veto-points and even "voice points" (nodes of deliberative influence without formal veto power) blurs lines of responsibility, making it harder for citizens to know what empowered representatives are doing and impeding effective *persuasion* and *sanctioning* by making exit and voice less precise instruments of pressure and influence.[4] High monitoring and sanctioning costs are ones that organized and well-resourced actors are able and willing to pay, but that resource-poor and relatively unorganized groups and individuals cannot. In these circumstances we would expect empowered representatives to *shirk* responsibility to act on behalf of ordinary people and allow themselves to be *captured* by the powerful because reducing the size of the coalition they rely on to maintain their power simplifies the collective action problems representatives face in mobilizing political support (Riker 1962). It is easier, for

[3] I use the phrase ordinary people rather than ordinary *citizens* to avoid implying that the borders of representative systems always align with those of polities, or that undocumented migrants and other non-citizens have no right to representation.

[4] Some empirical support for this hypothesis comes from research into economic voting, where there is broad agreement that veto points reduce citizens to allocate responsibility for outcomes. Bigham Powell and Guy Whitten (1993) provide the classic statement.

instance, for parties to garner economic resources from a small group of wealthy individuals rather than a large group of poor ones. Moreover, empowered representatives with little prospect of sanction from below also face incentives to *collude* with each other to reduce competition to their hegemonic position (Schattschneider 1960). Finally, a principled refusal to collude creates problems of its own. It can mire particularly complex systems in gridlock and hence a status quo bias likely to produce serious problems for the relatively powerless (Hacker 2004).

The unusually complex representative system in the United States exemplifies many of these problems. Machine politics in the early twentieth century was made easier by the decentralization of the representative system, which facilitated collusion between the parties to maintain their dominance in different regions (Schattschneider 1942). Collusion has now given way to gridlock that has hit the poor particularly hard, since many benefits need legislative updating in order to ensure constant social protection effects (Barber and McCarty 2015). The high number of veto points makes it hard for ordinary people to hold empowered representatives to account and hence easy for the latter to shirk (Page and Gilens 2017; Shapiro 2016, chap. 4). Finally, the media has to prioritise which of many representative institutions to prioritize in their coverage, which tends to free state level representatives from intense popular scrutiny. Partly for this reason, most of them know that they are virtually immune to electoral sanction for adopting ideologically extreme positions (Rogers 2017).[5] This likely helps

[5] In a 2012 survey of 1000 state level elected representatives in the US, only 15% of them agreed that "voters know who in government to blame for policies they do not like" (Rogers 2017).

explain why pro-business lobbying groups have had substantial recent success targeting – and arguably sometimes capturing – state-level representative institutions (Hertel-Fernandez 2019).[6]

Institutional complexity is not the only problem, however. Too much *discursive* complexity can make processes of public justification surrounding representation harder to contextualize and interpret and their relevance to each other and to outcomes harder to see. Substantive political inequalities are rarely dismantled without informed participation and, before that, *engagement* by the relatively powerless (Elliott 2018). But people will engage emotionally and intellectually with political discourse only if it seems broadly legible and politically consequential, which can be less likely if it is highly complex.[7] Much policy-making is quite detached from high visibility processes of public justification covered by the mass media and delegated instead to networks in which justifications tend to be local, contextual, and to small groups of stakeholders. The danger is that this makes public discourse look like inconsequential window-dressing for decisions made elsewhere, undermining people's sense of why they should pay attention. Legibility may also be endangered by microtargeting and highly personalized media consumption, which threaten to drain the life from processes of public justification with thousand cuts – or perhaps a single corpus callosotomy – by distracting and deceiving ordinary people,

[6] The single best predictor of a state government passing legislation designed to restrict union bargaining rights in 2011 was the presence of a state chapter of Americans for Prosperity with a paid director (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

[7] Some support for this claim is provided by Aina Gallego's important cross-national study of political inequality, which strongly suggests that the participation gap between more and less educated citizens widens when ballot structure is more complex, coalition governments more common, and high quality primetime TV news harder to access (Gallego 2015).

making it harder for them to see what is really at stake in political disagreement (or, more worryingly, even why such disagreement might be reasonable).[8]

Practices of public justification in the EU exemplify many of these problems. Decisions are made through complex co-ordination between institutions including the European Council, the Council of Ministers, the Committee of Permanent Representatives, coalitions of party groups in the European Parliament, the Commission, the Directorates-General and the European Economic and Social Committee. This complexity of this process makes it barely legible even for well-informed citizens and has probably contributed to the widely shared sense that policy is made through insider horse-trading, rather than principled public justification and contestation. It is an important source of Europe's democratic deficit (Follesdal and Hix 2006; Rose 2013).

We can consider a representative system *fragmented* when its institutional or discursive complexity (or both) undermine its capacity to contribute to democratic legitimacy. This kind of system is unlikely to be fixed by more complexity. What it needs is a *democratic simplification*: a change that engages and empowers ordinary people by reducing the amount of information they need to understand and therefore effectively intervene in the system.

§3: Populists and Partisans

A handful of political theorists – *populists* and *partisans* – recognize the value of democratic simplicity. European "post-Marxists" have argued that "the people" is a useful rallying cry for counter-hegemonic struggles aiming to build a more genuine democracy (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018). They make unlikely bedfellows with North American academics with an interest in Roman republicanism, who lambast plutocracy and call for "plebeian democracy" (J. E. Green 2010; 2016), or at least for a

[8] These latter claims have not, as far as I know, been empirically tested.

restoration of the modern-day plebs to their rightful position as an equal partner in a mixed republic (McCormick 2011). Advocates for robust and loyal partisanship (Rosenblum 2010) and enduring and programmatic party competition (Muirhead 2014; J. White and Ypi 2016) argue that parties encourage leaders to adopt a longer-term perspective than they otherwise would, make government effective by tying together its branches, and – crucially – make the state responsive to a broad array of opinion and social groups by "staging the battle" in a way that engages citizens and promotes broad-based participation. Frances Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro take such arguments to a kind of logical conclusion when they argue that democratic values are best served by competition between two big disciplined parties that are insulated from extra-electoral pressure and influence from their own members, corporate lobbyists, labour unions, well-organized groups of professionals such as doctors, and citizens engaging in "issue-by-issue participation" (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018, 231, Cf. 104-09, 149–51, 181–89). The claimed result would be programmatic competition for the median voter that "discount each policy proposal by the costs it imposes on every other", promoting the long-run interests of the majority (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018, 4–5).[9]

While populists may well be right that ordinary people could be politically engaged in politics by spectacular symbolism and simple discursive tropes, including the rhetorical construction of an "antagonistic frontier" between groups (Laclau 2005), their proposals often pose a threat to healthy democratic politics. Ernesto Laclau and Jeffrey Green, for instance, both support political personalization around a charismatic leader, which they view as necessary for mass engagement, and

[9] Shapiro's embrace of simplicity should be read in light of his criticisms of various kinds of undemocratic complexity in the US political system (Shapiro 2016, chap. 4). While those forceful arguments often resonate with my own, we disagree on the appropriate response to complexity (see below), as well as about whether representation is a coherent concept (Shapiro 2016, 100).

want to see some portion of the population cast as "outsiders" from an otherwise unified political community (J. E. Green 2010, 27ff), or as *enemies of the people* (Laclau 2005, chap. 4). Empowering a small and relatively unaccountable group of representatives is not a reliably democratic tactic for institutional simplification in the longer run and the normalization of friend-enemy rhetoric does not bode for the robust protection of vulnerable minorities and can help justify hostility to constitutionalism, pluralism, and liberalism (Cohen 2019).[10]

Enduring and programmatic electoral competition between parties – and therefore also robust and loyal partisanship – is, however, a crucially important mechanism for the democratic simplification of the representative system. Deliberative democratic and constructivist visions of democracy beyond elections or parties ignore the fact that there is no other institution that can engage and empower ordinary people in the same way. Representative systems without institutionalized parties tend to be sorely lacking in vertical accountability between leaders and ordinary people, making space for shirking and capture and alienating people from formal political institutions (for the Peruvian case see Levitsky and Cameron 2003). Partisanship should be loyal and robust to support *enduring* parties capable of structuring political competition somewhat predictably in the longer-run (Muirhead 2014; Rosenblum 2010). Moreover, parties must be *programmatic* if they are to *engage* ordinary people by making the value- and interest-basis for political decisions legible (J. White and Ypi 2016, chap. 3) and if they are to *empower* people by facilitating the long-term commitment and co-ordination necessary for large-scale political projects (J. White and Ypi 2016, chap. 4).[11]

[10] Empiricists are in the process of devising ways to test the claims in this paragraph, though the literature on democratic backsliding is still in its infancy (Waldner and Lust 2018).

[11] One party systems are not discursively simple in the requisite sense. The dominant party lacks important incentives to provide clear and persuasive public justifications of its policies. This

This does not mean, however, that we should follow Rosenbluth and Shapiro in pinning our hopes for democratic renewal on the further empowerment of highly autonomous elected representatives. This is to credit leaders with more virtue and foresight than is sensible, to expect too much from the relatively blunt instrument of elections, and to ignore the information asymmetries that often exist between more and less powerful representatives that make non-electoral linkages between them epistemically valuable. The latter tend to be more genuinely responsive *to* and therefore informed *about* the interests and preferences of their avowed constituencies for at least three reasons: their relative lack of access to state power makes them less attractive objects of capture by well-resourced groups and individuals; their relative lack reliable sources of funding and opportunities for influence means they must work harder to maintain good relations with the constituencies they rely on for discursive and material support (Habermas 1996, sec. 8.3.1); and, finally, more peripheral actors often represent smaller groups, who find it comparatively easy to monitor them (Olson 1965). Democratic legitimacy would be not secured but critically undermined by cutting ties between electoral and societal representatives. They need not *severing* but *improving*.

This is a topic ripe for further exploration by normative theorists of parties and partisanship. Empiricists have begun paying serious attention to the connections between electoral representatives and others, for instance between partisans and social movement activists (McAdam and Tarrow 2013). Normative theory has not kept up. It might fruitfully widen its focus to consider how parties and partisans could perform various types of networked responsiveness to other kinds of representative.

§4: Centripetalism

problem is compounded when elections are missing entirely, even if there various non-electoral responsiveness mechanisms, as in "deliberative authoritarianism" (He and Warren 2011).

Systems of political representation are most likely to promote democratic legitimacy when they are structured in a way that embodies a mutually-supportive relationship between democratic simplicity, broad inclusion, and networked responsiveness. The theory of centripetal representation suggests, in general terms, how such a relationship might be achieved. In this section I recap the basic lines of argument for of its three constituent principles argument for each and propose *why they should* and, in a preliminary way, *how they could* be fit together.

The Democratic Simplicity Principle. Pluralistic and broadly inclusive representation can, at least in certain circumstances, promote democratic legitimacy (§1). However, institutional fragmentation creates incentives for powerful representatives to shirk their duty to represent ordinary people, to collude, and to accept capture by well-resourced group and discursive fragmentation can disengaging ordinary people from high profile processes of public justification and facilitate distraction and deception (§2). *Democratic simplicity, both institutional and discursive, is therefore crucially important towards the centre of representative systems.*

The Broad Inclusion Principle. Democratic simplicity is not as important towards the periphery of the representative system because less powerful representatives can, in general, be expected to be more responsive to their constituents than others (§3), and are therefore not as liable to engage in shirking and collusion or to be captured. *Broad inclusion of a wide variety of claims, actors, and institutions is therefore more generally desirable towards the periphery of the system.*

The Networked Responsiveness Principle. Systemic responsiveness is likely to be more robust when more powerful representatives are responsive to their less powerful but often more responsive counterparts, because this can channel informative influence and pressure to respond appropriately to different constituencies "inwards" to those with most power. *Networked responsiveness of more central to*

more peripheral representatives is therefore an important supplement to direct responsiveness between representatives and constituents.[12]

The theory of centripetal representation can be summarized by the hypothesis that a system of representation is more likely to promote democratic legitimacy to the extent that it embodies a mutually reinforcing relationship between the democratic simplicity, broad inclusion, and networked responsiveness principles. It identifies a desirable way of distributing simplicity (more towards the centre) and inclusion (more towards the periphery) and a way of connecting representative systems up (networked responsiveness of the centre to the periphery).

A centripetal system is more likely to promote democratically legitimacy than the alternatives – systems that are fragmented or exclusionary or whose less powerful representatives are disconnected from highly autonomous elites - because it is more likely to engage and empower ordinary people. Broad inclusion on the periphery exposes policy proposals to robust contestation and multiplies the challenges to unjustifiably hegemonic representative claims, actors, and institutions. Institutional simplicity makes it harder for powerful representatives to shirk their duty to represent ordinary people, to collude with adversaries, and to solicit capture by powerful minorities. Discursive simplicity helps ordinary people engage with their words and actions, increasing political knowledge and interest. The networked responsiveness of more to less powerful representatives provides the former with more

[12] We should expect networked responsiveness to normally be performed via multiple nested intermediaries, rather than directly from the edges of representative systems to their centres. For instance, a local residents association might be linked to a state-level minister for housing via urban- and provincial-level representative organizations.

and better information about how to represent and encourages them to reconcile diverse interests and preferences whilst linking the latter the empowered decision-making processes in a way that helps them represent constituents more *efficaciously*. Furthermore, when democratic simplicity and networked responsiveness are well-combined this should make veto-playing and gridlock less likely. Centripetal systems therefore *engage* and *empower* ordinary people by connecting them with powerful representatives both directly (via discursive and institutional simplicity) and indirectly (via networked responsiveness between diverse representatives). By engaging and empowering ordinary people, centripetal systems promise to iron out political inequalities better than others. That is why centripetal representation contributes to democratic legitimacy.

The theory of centripetal representation should be treated as a hypothesis that could help orient the evaluation of specific kinds of representation by normative theorists and whose plausibility in different domains could in principle be tested by empiricists. While such fine-grained analysis and testing is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief comparative sketch of some concrete representative practices will help flesh out how the theory might guide judgement and what centripetalism might look like in different parts of the system.

What would a centripetal *party system* look like? Given the substantial power and influence of partisan representatives, democratic simplicity is, *prima facie*, of utmost importance. From this perspective, the Westminster-style disciplined programmatic two-party competition celebrated by Rosenbluth and Shapiro looks distinctively attractive (Cf. Powell 2000, chaps. 3–4). Fragmented party systems can be vulnerable to capture, for instance when Weimar's many small parties were unable to build a coalition to resist the Nazi takeover (Jones 1972), and to collusion, as in the European Parliament, which was was dominated until recently by an entrenched *red-black cartel* whose members routinely violated their manifesto commitments (Rose 2013, chap. 7). Discursive complexity can also

cause problems. For instance, microtargeting is probably more likely to distract or deceive in the absence of programmatic competition between disciplined parties that generates a relatively clear conventional narrative of what an election is *about*.[13]

Yet multiparty systems have something important in their favour: networked responsiveness between representatives in more and less powerful parties. The latter, though far from "peripheral", nonetheless have *somewhat* less reliable power and access to influence than the former and therefore slightly greater incentives to appeal to and hence respond to constituencies that may otherwise be excluded from representation. For instance, the descriptive representation of women is normally better in multi- than two-party systems, which is partly because more attractive exit opportunities for voters have created more pressure for big parties to emulate minor party rivals who choose women as candidates (Matland and Studlar 1996).[14]

It is tempting to see this as a straightforward choice between either democratic simplicity (achieved with two parties) or networked responsiveness (in multi-party systems). The theory of centripetal representation, however, encourages us to seek a party systems that can embody both desiderata at once (Cf. Carey and Hix 2011; Shugart and Wattenberg 2001). One intriguing possibility is that preferential voting systems such as the Alternative Vote might create simple single-party

[13] Hannah Arendt compared Westminster's engagingly legible politics of principled disagreement with the transactional interest-group politics in the proportional Weimar system, which, she argued, alienated the much of the population from parliamentarianism (Arendt 1951, 252ff).

[14] In the terminology of economics, the limited supply of representation in a duopolistic system creates a deadweight loss and voters, who lack sufficient exit-options to counter this electorally, must try to ameliorate it with other, non-electoral, linkages to parties (Hirschman 1970, chap. 6).

governments while granting a meaningful electoral role for minor parties as recipients of first-preferences votes and hence also important contributors to debates at election time (Jansen 2004). A century of preferential voting in Australia has resulted in government by single parties (or pre-election coalitions) combined with institutionalized patterns of networked responsiveness, with major parties granting minor-party rivals influence over policy in exchange for the second-preference votes of their supporters (Reilly 2001, chap. 3).[15]

One particularly clear example of centripetalism beyond electoral politics is provided by comparing processes of administrative representation in parliamentary and presidential bureaucracies.[16] Bureaucrats sit near the centre of systems of political representation, mediating multiple streams of power and influence from electoral and societal representatives. Democratic simplicity is of paramount importance for effective oversight of administrative representation. Presidential systems, however, often create pressures for bureaucratic fragmentation, because established agencies are difficult to destroy and legislators recognize that creating new ones (and using their position in committees to protect them) is a way of entrenching their policy preferences. Agency proliferation presents an obstacle to influence for the representatives of relatively resource-poor constituencies, who cannot afford to navigate complexity as easily as others. Moreover, the connections between relatively submerged processes of administrative representation and higher

[15] To be clear: it is not the process of counting votes in Australia that is "simple", but the institutional factors such as the absence of post-election bargaining to form governments and discursive factors such as programmatic competition between disciplined centre-seeking parties.

[16] This paragraph draws on the wide-ranging synthesis of the empirical literature by John Gerring and Strom Thacker (2008, chap. 4).

visibility processes of electoral representation are more prone to becoming gridlocked in presidential systems. Not only are there likely to be more moving parts, but chief executives and legislative subcommittees compete for influence over the agencies, for instance by appointing ideologues to top positions or else legislatively micromanaging administrators. These dynamics, which are much less relevant in parliamentary systems, often generate the kind of opacity and difficulty acting that incentivises capture and shirking.

The differing fates of the Occupy Wallstreet and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements can help suggest how the theory of centripetal representation captures important desiderata of *societal* representation that are sometimes overlooked. Occupy's horizontalist embrace of consensus decision-making did little to simplify patterns of representation in ways that could be leveraged by sympathetic onlookers and turned into real political change. Reflecting on the movement in 2019, one of its two principle founders argued that "Occupy was a failure" because "the goal of Occupy […] was not to change the discourse" but "an actual change in the political regime, and actual transformation of who had power in our world" (M. White 2019, 2). BLM activists learned from this mistake. Partly as a response to the failures of Occupy, they linked their activism to party politics and consciously designed their umbrella association *the Movement for Black Lives* as a more disciplined organization that intervenes in electoral politics as part of a general embrace of "margins to centre" politics (Woodly 2018). BLM have persuaded powerful representatives to order investigations into the killings of several unarmed civilians, change discriminatory stop and frisk policies, pay reparations to the victims of police torture – and they have also mounted multiple successful campaigns to remove insufficiently reform-minded Attorneys General from office (Mullings 2020).

These examples can only give a flavour of what centripetal representation might look like in particular domains. There are plenty of good empirical resources available for more sustained enquiry.

Network analysis is a promising tool for comparing the structure of networks of representatives across policy areas or over time and space (Kim 2013; Widerberg 2016). A variety of work has explored the idea that simplifying powerful representative institutions and discourse can promote democratic inclusion (e.g. Gallego 2015; Page and Gilens 2017; Powell and Whitten 1993). Some empiricists even use the word "centripetal" to refer to a kind of politics that realizes democratic inclusion by centralizing power in the hands of a relatively small group of representatives (Fiorina 1981; Gerring and Thacker 2008).[17]

§5: Centripetalism and Democratic Theory

The theory of centripetal representation is compatible with the basic insights of both deliberative democracy and constructivism and can serve as a filter for assessing their recommendations for democratic reform.

In the wide field of deliberative democratic theory, the theory presented here resonates best with work that recognizes the need to engage the "mass public" in processes of opinion- and will-

[17] The language of centripetalism has been used by empiricists in a variety of ways, none of which is equivalent to my own (see e.g. Bryce 1901, chap. 4; Cox 1990; Reilly 2002). Gerring and Thacker's *Centripetal Theory of Democratic Governance* (2008) has important similarities with the theory presented here but is not focused on the relation between representation and democratic legitimacy. One normative democratic theorist uses the phrase "centripetalism". Joseph Lacey's *Centripetal Democracy* (2017) is innovative and impressive, but only tangentially relevant to centripetal *representation*, as it focuses on the directly democratic processes of initiatives and referendums.

formation (Chambers 2012; Lafont 2020) and is sympathetic to the idea that "political polarisation again needs to crystallise between the established parties on substantive issues" (Habermas 2016). The metaphor of centripetal motion arguably has some advantages over the popular deliberative democratic imagery of "sluices" channelling influence from an "anarchic" public sphere into formal politics (Habermas 1996, 307, 327). It avoids the implication that most of the activity by less powerful representatives is frustrated – a river hitting a dam – and that what little influence does spill over is then neatly channeled by the surrounding formal institutions, such that its flow on the leeside bears little or no relation to the fluid dynamics upstream. My choice of metaphor reflects the dynamism of our political moment, especially its substantial but fragile political transnationalization, by implying a more *continuous* process of democratic responsiveness and greater endogenous *reflexivity* by the system itself.

The compatibility of centripetalism with constructivism is perhaps less obvious. It could be objected, for instance, that constructivists have recently undermined Pitkin's argument that representation is a matter of "substantive acting for" another – promoting their interests in a way that is responsive to their preferences (see, for instance, Disch 2011; Saward 2010, chap. 1). They are perhaps better read, however, as *supplementing* Pitkin and making us cautious about how we identify representatives, rather than rejecting the substantive conception outright. Michael Saward doesn't *reduce* representation to claims-making – he reminds us that broad acceptance of a representative claim is an important guide to judgements about *who substantively represents whom*. Nor does Disch entirely abandon substantive representation – she *scales it up* to the level of the system as a whole.[18]

[18] Disch argues that the system should be evaluated by whether self-proclaimed representatives react appropriately to well-formed citizen preferences – the "judgement clause" – and whether they appear to promote people's interests – the "non-objection criterion" (Disch 2011).

Despite this basic compatibility, the theory of centripetal representation reveals the limitations of many proposals by both deliberative democrats and constructivists. It is clearly at odds with the idea that democracy might function well without political parties (Saward 2010, 136) or perhaps with an indefinitely high number of them (Bourdieu 1991), or with thousands of legislatures involved in a single political decision (Disch 2011). The theory of centripetal representation is also hard to square with deliberative scepticism about elections (e.g. Bohman 2012; Landemore 2020) – a crucial source of both discursive and institutional simplicity.

It is worth reflecting at slightly greater length on the topic of deliberative *minipublics*. These are sometimes captured by organizers and funders to obfuscate who is being represented in policy-making processes, serving as a kind of *anticipatory consultation* that forestalls more authentic policy input by ordinary people (Curato, Niemeyer, and Dryzek 2013; Freschi and Mete 2009; Lee, McQuarrie, and Walker 2015; Johnson 2015). For instance, Cadbury Schweppes funded a series of townhalls on childhood obesity in which facilitators focused on individual behavioural change and took mandatory industrial regulation off the table (Lee 2015, chap. 6).[19]

Minipublics can, however, also simplify political processes. The Oregon Citizens Initiative Review (CIR), a minipublic that provides voters with information about a ballot measure, provides a clear example. Three quarters of those who read the CIR report delivered to Oregonians in 2010

[19] It could be objected that legislatures are *also* vulnerable to capture and this is more worrying because minipublics are only consultative. My worry is that the latter's deeper submersion of minipublics in relatively dense and opaque governance networks can make it harder for citizens to learn about their capture, let alone oppose it, and that the accumulated effect of many small captures of consultative bodies can be substantial (for an example see McQuarrie 2015).

found it helpful for deciding how to vote (Gastil, Richards, and Knobloch 2014) and it significantly enhanced the sense of more disengaged citizens – ordinary people – that they were capable of effective political action (Knobloch, Barthel, and Gastil 2020).

One way to make deliberative assemblies a reliable source of democratic simplicity would be to find ways to ensure that elected representatives are responsive to the citizen representatives who participate in them. Some minipublics include activists, who know how to use the media to put pressure at election time on politicians who failure to respond to their recommendations (Polletta 2015). The 2012-14 Constitutional Convention in Ireland brought together 33 elected politicians with 66 randomly sampled citizens, ensuring substantial media coverage. Its call to legalize gay marriage "somewhat forced the hand of the Taoiseach", who called a referendum on the issue, which then saw unusually high turnout with a clear majority in favour (Elkink et al. 2017, 364). The first ceremonies took place later the same year.

I conclude by considering one possible line of objection to the theory of centripetal representation. It could be argued that centripetalism threatens to valorize the co-optation of less powerful groups and is "suppressive" in the sense that it implicitly treats intergroup differences as "dangerous and destabilizing" and tries to bring them under control (Williams 1998, 9). Perhaps centripetalism overlooks the value of (at least *temporary*) disengagement from powerful discourses and institutions, which can help the relatively powerless build epistemically and motivationally valuable *subaltern counterpublics* (Fraser 1990).

It would indeed be a problem if discursive and institutional simplification suppressed productive political dissensus. It is important to recognize, however, that a politics of withdrawal or resistance that strongly values local, particularistic, and small-scale activity comes at a serious cost if it impedes efforts to build large coalitions aiming at broad reform (Srnicek and Williams 2015). Fragmented systems make space for the full-spectrum expression of granular perspectives but

eliminate their capacity to trouble power, suppressing political conflict in a subtle yet powerful way, making it harder for less powerful groups to secure fair representation.[20]

As patterns of political representation become more complex, both normative political theorists and empirical political scientists should think hard about how to capture the potential benefits of this change while avoiding undemocratic fragmentation. The theory of centripetal representation is a first step in this direction. It can help guide democratically legitimizing reforms to our evolving systems of political representation that promise to make ordinary people more likely to be seen and heard, rather than helping the powerful to hide.

[20] This claim is sometimes couched in the language of "depoliticization" (Urbinati 2010), "neoliberal governance" (Brown 2015, 122–34), or "post-democracy" (Rancière 1999).

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