



Does Individual Participation in the Global Public Sphere Matter?

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Abstract

An influential tradition within democratic theory holds that democracy involves not only electoral procedures, but also the participation and representation of individual citizens in the formation of collective opinion in the public sphere. Perhaps surprisingly, however, several prominent accounts of how the global order ought to be democratised reject the core assumption from domestic democratic theory that *individuals* should have access to sites and processes of public deliberation. The paper argues that these prominent perspectives in the literature on global democracy are wrong to do so. The argument proceeds in three parts. The first asks whether a global public sphere already exists, and whether one ought to exist. The second considers and critiques the view that we should emphasise deliberation not between individuals but between “discourses” at the global level. The third addresses and rejects an alternative family of arguments which suggests that there is insufficient agreement on values across different “lifeworlds” at the global level for meaningful deliberation between individuals to be possible.

Keywords Global democracy · Global governance · Public sphere · Deliberation · Democracy

Does Individual Participation in the Global Public Sphere Matter?

An influential tradition within democratic theory holds that democratic citizenship involves not only the right to vote but also the opportunity to participate in public deliberation. For those who hold this view, democracy requires the participation and representation of individual citizens in both electoral processes, *and* in the formation of collective opinion in the public sphere (Habermas 1992, 1998; Cohen 1989). How,

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if at all, does this perspective transpose to the global level? Surprisingly, when we turn to accounts of how the global order ought to be democratised, we find a number of prominent accounts which reject the core assumption from domestic democratic theory that *individuals* should have access to sites and processes of public deliberation. Are such prominent perspectives right to reject this axiom of domestic democratic theory? In this paper I argue they are not. The argument proceeds in three parts. The first asks whether a global public sphere already exists, and whether one ought to exist. The second considers the view that we should emphasise deliberation not between individuals but between “discourses” at the global level. The third addresses an alternative family of arguments which suggests that there is insufficient agreement on values across different “lifeworlds” at the global level for meaningful deliberation between individuals to be possible.

Is There a Global Public Sphere?

The public sphere, in general terms, is the domain of social life in which citizens come together to discuss matters of shared interest. It serves as a forum in which to test ideas, form public opinion, and legitimise laws and policies generated by the political system.¹ For canonical accounts of the public sphere, it plays a crucial role in how citizens come to be involved in political processes. As Jürgen Habermas puts it: ‘This “public sphere” is a “realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. *Access is guaranteed to all citizens*”’ (Habermas 1974, p. 49).² Individual participation in the public sphere is thus “built in” to its standard formulations. As a result, the reluctance of theorists of the global order to promote individual participation in the global public sphere presents something of a puzzle.

Before considering this puzzle in depth, we must address two prior, and potentially more fundamental questions: *Does* a global public sphere exist? *Should* a global public sphere exist? After all, if we answer both in the negative, then the whole question of whether individuals should participate in it would be moot.

Regarding the first, there are compelling reasons to believe a global public sphere does already exist in some form, even if it operates in a dysfunctional manner. As evidence, we can point to a number of its components. First, there are sites of public deliberation associated with supranational decision-making entities. Many of the international institutions which have come into existence since the Second World War have deliberative procedures and fora associated with them. The United Nations (UN) General Assembly, for example, and the commissions associated with various of the UN’s other organs are all sites of public discussion. A second component of the global public sphere comprises the networks and structures of global civil society. Entities as ideologically and sociologically different as the *World Economic Forum* and the *World Social Forum* exist in this space. Finally, there are communication networks which facilitate public conversations across national borders. These include

¹ These general purposes can be decomposed into more specific functions which I categorise and analyse in assessing below particular accounts of how the global public sphere ought to operate.

² Emphasis added.

informal communication networks, such as those enabled by social media platforms, as well as more formally constituted media organisations. The *Financial Times*, for example, speaks to, and is read by, an international audience united more by interest, industry, and socioeconomic background than by nationality. Given its emergent and decentralised nature (as is the case for public spheres in general), one might prefer to talk about multiple global public spheres, to avoid the impression of a unified global forum. And few would argue that the existing global public sphere is well-ordered. But there is a case that something akin to a public sphere is already in operation.

Even if one is disinclined to label the above a public sphere, we can identify clear reasons for why a public sphere *ought* to exist. Public spheres are normatively desirable because they enable public deliberation, which itself enables the legitimisation of political outcomes. Following Nancy Fraser, we can say that wherever an institution is wielding power to which people are subject, it should be accompanied by a public sphere in which those affected by that institution can engage in public discourse regarding its actions (Fraser 2008). This condition—of power being exercised—clearly obtains at the global level, where a variety of institutions (the International Monetary Fund, UN Security Council, World Trade Organisation, and so on) make binding decisions. Moreover, the actions of nation-states frequently have effects beyond their borders (in the case of powerful states, not only in their foreign policy but in domestic policy as well). Without an international public sphere, these actions will be the subject of public deliberation only within the public sphere of the nation itself. This clearly runs counter to the principle—invoked not only by Fraser but accepted by many democratic theorists—that those affected ought to have a say in the way power is exercised over them.³

We see, then, that the question of how the global public sphere operates is a crucial one. A natural next question is *how* should individuals be invited to participate in it. After all, one might suggest that asking the question outlined in this paper is unnecessary, because few theorists believe that individuals should be actively prevented from voicing opinions in the global public square. Individuals are free, for example, to make social media accounts, publish blogs, pay for advertising billboards outside UN buildings, and so on. However, this overlooks an important difference between the current access mechanisms for individuals in domestic and in the global public spheres.

Fraser's distinction between strong and weak publics is helpful here. "Weak" publics are those concerned with opinion formation only. Strong publics, by contrast, help to form public opinion *and* have access to power structures (Fraser 2010, pp. 142–144). At the domestic level, most political theories (at least democratic theories) take it for granted that some measure of individual access to strong publics is morally necessary. This consensus is reflected in actual political practice: within domestic public spheres, there are a range of mechanisms which—while they do not offer an equal voice to everyone—nonetheless provide individuals and informal associations with access to decision-making entities. Within the United Kingdom, for example, individuals have mechanisms for writing to—and expecting a reply from—Members of Parliament and ministers, and have the right to create petitions with a correlate

³This is the "all-affected interests principle" articulated by Goodin (2007).

undertaking that they will be debated in Parliament once they pass 100,000 signatures. Political parties (to varying degrees) allow members a say in the production of party platforms which then get presented to the electorate, and so on. There is a clear difference between the structure of the current international public sphere and its domestic counterparts in this respect.⁴ Very few, if any, equivalent mechanisms enable individual access to sites of deliberation associated with international decision-making institutions. The question in this paper, then, is whether individuals are owed any measure of access to strong international publics.

There are a variety of ways in which the principle of individual participation in the global public sphere might be *institutionalised*. It is helpful to think about these different possible institutional arrangements on a spectrum. At the minimal end of the spectrum, one might identify policies which facilitate greater access to existing international institutions, or sites of public deliberation. Creating mechanisms analogous to the right of correspondence with public officials in the UK at the UN level, say, would constitute an example of this kind. Equally, one might imagine citizens of one state (X) having institutional channels through which to communicate with public officials of another state (Y) about the positions Y is taking in its foreign policy.⁵ Institutional reform of the (currently state-oriented) UN General Assembly might also be used towards the same ends, as would access mechanisms to any number of other international organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, International Labour Organisation, and so on. At the other end of the spectrum of institutional possibilities, one could place proposals for a directly elected global parliamentary body. The claims defended in this paper are compatible with a range of possible institutional configurations at the global level. The motivation for this paper is that before assessing the relative merits of these different proposals, it is important to establish a more foundational claim: that the global public sphere should not be a space solely for corporations, states, or other group agents; the participation of individuals in the formation of global public opinion is a moral imperative.

At the domestic level, I noted above, there is widespread agreement that individual access to the public sphere is necessary. This generates a presumptive case in favour of individual access to the global public sphere. So why have several theorists, including John Dryzek and Jürgen Habermas, offered accounts of the public sphere which do not guarantee individual access to supranational public deliberation? The strategy I employ below is to consider—and reject—two of the most prominent arguments given for why individuals are *not* owed access to strong global publics.

⁴Regional institutions such as the European Union provide evidence that such mechanisms are feasible and practicable at the supranational level. The EU allows for citizens' petitions in a broadly similar vein to the UK, requiring one million signatures from at least seven member states. The petition is checked for relevance regarding EU competences, after which there is a hearing with EU officials. The European Parliament and Commission must then discuss it and consider proposing legislation on the matter or explain why they will not do so (European Parliament 2024).

⁵The idea that individuals should have political participation rights in states other than their own has been proposed in the context of electoral participation (Koenig-Archibugi 2012).

The “Discourses” Proposal

The first, associated with the “discursive model” of global deliberative politics, denies that individual representation is required in deliberation at the global level. This position has been developed by John Dryzek and elaborated in collaboration with a number of co-authors, including Simon Niemeyer, and Ana Tanasoca (Dryzek 2006; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008; Dryzek and Tanasoca 2021). According to the “discursive model”, what matters at the global level is not the representation of individual preferences or viewpoints, but the representation of competing ‘discourses’ in an ongoing process of contestation. A “discourse”, on Dryzek’s formulation, is a ‘shared set of concepts, categories, and ideas that provides its adherents with a framework for making sense of situations...and provides basic terms for analysis, debates, agreements and disagreements’ (Dryzek 2006, p. 1). Examples of prominent discourses in international deliberation include “market liberalism”, “globalisation”, “realism”, and “sustainable development”.

Dryzek and his co-authors have suggested two broad ways in which to operationalise deliberation between discourses. The first is a global “Chamber of Discourses”, a transnational deliberative forum in which representatives of various discourses engage in a process of deliberation and contestation (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, pp. 485–486). The second locates deliberation between discourses in informal processes in the broader public sphere. On this view, it is civil society actors, not individuals, who challenge the prevailing “discourses” (such as “neoliberalism”, “realism”, and so on) which structure global decision-making, thus making global deliberation more democratic.

There are challenges for both strategies. The challenge for the “Chamber of Discourses” proposal is to identify and represent discourses in a legitimate way. The challenge for the civil society proposal is that it relies on the assumption that civil society actors will adequately represent the interests of all parties affected by decisions made at the global level. Yet, as James Bohman notes, this overlooks the fact that different segments of civil society have different levels of ability to organise themselves and push their views in the public sphere (Bohman 2001, p. 17). This latter position amounts to an affirmation of faith in a particular kind of agent, or set of agents: the networks and organisations that comprise global civil society. By nature, these agents are decentralised and diverse, and it is thus difficult if not impossible to make reliable claims about their effects. For the civil society proposal to be compelling, we would need strong empirical or a priori reasons to confidently predict that global civil society not only *can* act in this way, but *will* act in this way. Such an argument is unlikely to be possible using logical inference alone. And, at the very least, the empirical evidence on this subject falls well short of delivering the resounding evidence that its advocates require (Smith and Wiest 2005).

In recent work, proponents of the discursive model have evolved to include the possibility of direct citizen input, for example in the form of a deliberative global citizen’s assembly, as a complement (not replacement) for deliberation among discourses (Dryzek et al. 2011; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2024). This is important because advocates of discursive deliberation are not defending the position that *no* individuals should participate in the global public sphere. However, they do stop short of

advocating that individuals *in general* should have public participation rights and opportunities at the global level.

Two primary considerations are offered in favour of the discursive model. The first is that a diversity of “vantage points” is epistemically valuable in the process of critically evaluating different policy options. Since it is the *diversity* of viewpoints which is valuable to the process of systematically testing and criticising ideas, the discourse model proposes that ‘all relevant discourses should get represented, regardless of how many people subscribe to each’ (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 482). What matters, in other words, for rational policy-making is not the presence of individual perspectives, but of ideological discourses in public conversation. The second argument is that individuals hold multiple values, identities, and interests. As a result, individual representation using, say, elections, cannot represent the “whole” person. Instead the best that aggregative preference representation can do is to make a subset of an individual’s values and interests salient, and represent those. Discursive representation, by contrast, can include all of the discourses which individuals align themselves with, and thus can represent all aspects of an individual. Dryzek and Niemeyer accordingly understand discursive representation to ‘do a morally superior because more comprehensive job of representing persons’ (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 483).

The above constitute reasons in favour of discursive representation in general. The next step is to explain why discursive deliberation is particularly suited to *transnational* deliberation, since, as Dryzek and Niemeyer note, they ‘do not claim that representation of discourses is always preferable’ and stop short of advocating this in all public spheres. Given the merits of discursive representation, why not advocate it always and everywhere?

Dryzek and Niemeyer offer two primary reasons for the particular suitability of discursive deliberation at the supranational level. The first is that representative democracy in its conventional sense requires a bounded demos, because a definition of “the people” is ‘logically prior to contemplation of their representation’ (a position embodied by the slogan: ‘no demos, no democracy’) (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 484). This precondition, they suggest, does not obtain at the global level. Discursive representation, by contrast, does not require a bounded demos, because different discourses can construe “the people” in different ways; the constitution of the demos, in other words, can intelligibly be the subject of deliberation between different discourses (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 484). The second argument Dryzek and Niemeyer offer is one of feasibility: transnational representative democracy, they argue, faces a problem of scale—authentic deliberation is only possible in small fora. Discursive representation, by contrast, ‘offers a solution to this key problem of scale that confronts deliberative democracy’, because the number of significant discourses is much smaller than the number of representatives a global representative democracy would require, and indeed would be smaller than most national legislatures (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 485). Given the boundary and scale problems that confront the global public sphere, then, Dryzek and Niemeyer conclude that, at the global level, ‘representing discourses is actually more straightforward than representing persons’ (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 491).

It is not always clear if the discourses proposal is an argument for exclusively discursive representation at the global level, but there are arguments from proponents

of the discourse model which give this impression. Notably, Dryzek explicitly *contrasts* his model with the model of cosmopolitan democracy, which advocates for the democratisation of global politics through forms of individual representation:

the discursive emphasis has always been more feasible than the cosmopolitan project because the latter requires two steps: first the establishment of stronger system-level institutions, and second, their democratization. Transnational discursive democracy, in contrast, requires only one step: the democratization of existing discourse-related sources of order. (Dryzek 2006, p. 157)

Further, the arguments above suggest that discursive deliberation is not simply meant to add to other forms of democratic representation, but that the boundary and scale problems for deliberative democracy at the global level render conventional forms of democratic representation undesirable or infeasible. We should approach the position, then, not simply as the view that discursive representation is *permissible* alongside other forms of democratic representation at the global level, but as a distinctive account of what it means to realise deliberative democracy transnationally, one which clearly de-emphasises individual participation in the global public sphere.

Does this account succeed? Below, I argue not. To show this, I distinguish specific functions of a well-ordered public sphere in order to identify what, if any costs, there are to the discursive model. My claim is that the normative costs are significant. Some functions of the public sphere, we can accept, require only the airing of different perspectives, and thus could conceivably be fulfilled using a discursive model. One of the primary epistemic functions of the public sphere, for example, is to expose agents to new information, argumentation, and points of view (Spiekermann 2020, p. 57). This is the function Habermas highlights when he describes the public sphere as the space in which reasons and arguments regarding matters of public interest are exchanged (Habermas 1992, p. 37). This function could, at least in part, be discharged by the discursive model. Deliberation between discourses might also contribute to the aim of creating common knowledge, which obtains when something is not only generally known, but also all individuals know that it is generally known (Vanderschraaf 2023; Sillari 2008; Lewis 1969; Friedell 1969).⁶

There are, however several important functions of a public sphere which *cannot* be fulfilled by the discursive model. Let us begin with the epistemic functions of a public sphere. While deliberation between discourses can account for the presence of different ideological positions in public conversation, it overlooks another key epistemic contribution: testimony derived from individual experience. For many issues of public significance, understanding them, and understanding what to do about them, requires the interaction not only of different ideas, but of particular agents in the public sphere. One key example of this is the role of the public sphere in facilitating pub-

⁶Common knowledge is important in a whole range of cases of social cooperation—from the trivial (standing on the right of escalators on the London Underground to allow those walking to pass on the left) to the highly significant (assembling in large groups to protest human rights violations). The public sphere is well-suited to creating common knowledge because it is possible to not only make pronouncements that are heard by everyone, but also that all agents are able to observe others receiving the announcement (De Freitas et al. 2019).

lic understanding in cases of *experiential diversity*. Consider the example of public conversations about gender- and race-based systemic discrimination. Experience of gender-based discrimination, say, is unevenly distributed throughout the population, and so is knowledge about its effects—particularly at the micro-level. One effect, then, of public discourse around gender-based prejudice is to increase awareness of the nature and effects of systemic discrimination among those not in the marginalised groups, and who otherwise would not have first-hand access to the relevant information. Further, while those within marginalised groups may have personal experience of discrimination, it does not automatically follow that they will know the problem is caused by structural biases. Listening to others recount similar experiences in the public sphere combines personal experiences in a way that builds societal understanding of the nature of systemic discrimination. Experience may, over time, generate new discourses, but only if the public sphere is open to testimony in the first place. As a result, while the discursive model can account for certain epistemic features of public deliberation, it is not epistemically costless.

The limitations of Dryzek and Niemeyer's account are even starker when one considers non-epistemic values that the public sphere should realise. First and foremost, their model does not realise the value of open access to the public sphere.⁷ Consider again Habermas' statement regarding the public sphere: 'Access is guaranteed to all citizens' (Habermas 1974, p. 49). Consider also John Rawls's statement that 'if the public forum is to be free and open to all, and in continuous session, everyone should be able to make use of it' (Rawls 1999, Sect. 36). Domestically, a society that significantly proscribes or restricts its citizens' access to the public sphere would widely be considered to be unfree, even totalitarian.⁸ Yet the discourses proposal fails to realise this principle at the global level. Of course, it might be interjected at this point that proponents of the discursive model are aware of this, and are consciously choosing to reject the ideal of open access. What, if anything, then, is wrong with this move? Answering this question requires an explanation of why standard accounts of the public sphere specify opportunity for access as a regulative ideal.

The principle of universal access to the public sphere can itself be derived from the fundamental values of autonomy and equality. Democracy is standardly justified as the form of government most compatible with, or expressive of, individual autonomy. This is because it provides the conditions in which individuals can be co-authors of the rules under which they live.⁹ Deliberative conceptions of democracy

⁷ Spiekermann (2020, p. 57) includes the "principle of open access" as one of six "crucial principles" of the public sphere, stating the principle as 'each individual can enter and leave the public sphere as they choose'.

⁸ Indeed, empirical measures of the degree of "openness" in particular societies generally operationalise this characteristic by tracking access to the public sphere in one way or another, whether in terms of the presence or absence of restrictions on civil society, the way governments interact with civil society, opportunities for civic participation, and so on. See, for example, the Open Government Index of the World Justice Project, which is organised around four dimensions: 1. Publicised Laws and Government Data 2. Right to Information 3. Civic Participation 4. Complaint Mechanisms. See World Justice Project (2015).

⁹ There is a large literature on the complex relationship between democracy and freedom, but the core principle articulated here can be found in most defences of democracy. For a contemporary articulation of this argument, see, for example, Stilz (2009).

hold that democracy consists not only of electoral mechanisms, but also processes of ‘public argument and reasoning among equal citizens’ (Cohen 1989, p. 21). If democracy consists of both a vote and a voice, and if democracy is valuable because it respects individual autonomy, then it follows that the opportunity to participate in public deliberation is derivative of the value of autonomy.

Dryzek and Niemeyer attempt to address this concern, arguing that discursive representation respects autonomy as much as individual representation. This is a consequence of the multiple identities argument outlined above: more of the person can be represented on the discursive model than through electoral representation. They consider the response that respecting autonomy requires letting individuals ‘manage the demands of competing discourses him- or herself prior to seeking representation’, but conclude that ‘demanding this management prior to representation may paradoxically disrespect individual autonomy, if it requires the individual to repress some aspect of his- or herself’ (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 483). However, for the purposes of the argument in this paper, the relevant contrast is not between electoral representation and discursive representation, but about two ways of arranging public deliberation. No repression of part of one’s person is required in the public sphere—one can contribute in multiple ways and on multiple fronts to processes of public deliberation. So this autonomy-based argument does not succeed in mitigating the normative cost of foregoing the principle of open access to the public sphere.

The value of open access can also be justified on grounds of democratic equality. An implication of the equal standing of citizens is that everyone possesses the same rights to contribute to the shaping of public opinion. As Joshua Cohen puts it, in a deliberative democracy, ‘everyone with the deliberative capacities has equal standing at each stage of the deliberative process. Each can put issues on the agenda, propose solutions, and offer reasons in support of or in criticism of proposals’ (Cohen 1989, pp. 22–23). Democratic equality, of course, does not require equality of deliberative influence. Quite apart from being near-impossible to ensure in practice, this would not be normatively desirable, requiring radical intervention to muzzle influential speakers, and/or make prominent absurd or nonsensical contributors to public discussion who would otherwise have little influence. A public sphere in which all individuals were guaranteed the same level of influence would neither be free nor epistemically valuable.¹⁰ Democratic equality, though, does require equal rights to *participate* in public deliberation, which is precisely what the discourses proposal denies.

We see, then, that the discourses proposal is not normatively innocent. Below, I address the argument that, even if we accept these moral costs, considerations of feasibility at the global level render the discourses proposal the best available. But it is important to recognise first that the proposal is not without cost. Further, we have seen that proponents of the model have gone further than simply accepting these costs, and have attempted to offer positive arguments for why the discursive model is

¹⁰ Drastic *inequalities* of influence also appear troubling, particularly if such inequalities track socially salient characteristics such as nationality, race, socioeconomic status, or gender. In such cases, there may well be compelling arguments for, to give only one example, contribution limits or public funding for political campaigns. But just as drastic socioeconomic inequalities are not an argument for equality of distributive outcome, strict equality of deliberative influence is neither necessary nor desirable.

not only permissible, but may indeed be superior to other forms of democratic representation. Such arguments are unconvincing.

Before turning to the issue of feasibility, however, there is a further point to be made regarding the limitations of the discursive model. This is because there is an important further non-epistemic function that the discursive model is unable to fulfil, which we can term the ‘accountability function’. Aggregation procedures are often justified on the grounds that they subject powerful actors to accountability. Even here, the public sphere plays an important role, since electoral accountability is only possible if citizens have had an opportunity to form a political preference based on information provided to them in the public sphere. Crucially, however, there is a further form of accountability that is specific to the public sphere, one which arises out of the justificatory relationship in which public institutions stand in relation to their citizens. To see this, we can distinguish between different aspects of accountability. As a general definition, let us follow Bovens: ‘Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences’ (Bovens 2007, p. 450).¹¹

With regards to the first component of accountability, it is widely acknowledged within democratic theory that political institutions are expected to *explain* their decisions as they are making them, and to explain in terms that are, in some sense, public. While it is possible, and normal in certain circumstances for institutions to communicate directly with particular individuals or groups, the overwhelming majority of institutional justification is offered in the public sphere. This is true for reasons of practicality—as noted above public pronouncements are a uniquely effective way of creating “common knowledge” among citizens. But publicity of justification is also important for realising the value of transparency.

In this respect, the kind of accountability fostered by the public sphere complements electoral accountability in at least two ways. First, the public sphere does not depend for its operation on discrete moments of decision; public justification is by nature an ongoing, open-ended process.¹² Second, accountability in the public sphere is more fine-grained than electoral accountability: individual policy decisions can generally be justified and scrutinised in the public square, but seldom at the ballot box.¹³

The public sphere, then, provides an opportunity for institutions to speak in defence of their actions. Importantly, though, it is also the sphere in which other agents, including citizens themselves, can *talk back*. This is the second component of accountability that Bovens identifies. Some of the communicative processes thus generated can be conceptualised as the public sphere fulfilling its epistemic func-

¹¹ This definition broadly tracks Buchanan and Keohane’s (2006) description of accountability in the context of international relations as possessing three components: standards that those held accountable are expected to meet, information available to accountability holders, and the ability of accountability holders to impose sanctions.

¹² This is not to say that issues never enter or leave the public square, but that they generally enter and leave the public agenda much more gradually than they do legislative or executive agendas.

¹³ Even when elections become, in practice, “single issue” referenda this only happens at the expense of pushing every other issue off the electoral agenda. On this second point, see Steffek (2010, p. 55).

tions of testing arguments and ideas. But there is a particular type of reason-giving and reason-taking that characterises the relationship between institutions justifying their actions, and other agents responding to those reasons. This relationship allows institutions to modify decisions and change course, even if there is no imminent threat of their power being removed by an aggregative moment. It is this function of the public sphere that is most visible when, for example a government U-turns on a particular policy, despite there being no election imminent.¹⁴ At the global level, such accountability is arguably even more important, since the existing international architecture provides few options for electoral accountability. In the case of international organisations, the “judgement” passed by the public sphere constitutes one of the primary levers of external influence over their conduct. In this respect, the public sphere plays at least a partial role in the third component of accountability, through the reputational costs it is able to impose on powerful agents.

This conception of accountability challenges one widely held assumption in the literature on the public sphere. This is the assumption that the distribution of views expressed in the public sphere should be insensitive to the distribution of views in the population.¹⁵ The assumption proposes a strict division of labour between public discussion and aggregative procedures: the former makes information known and tests ideas, and the latter measures the distribution of views. While this division of labour is true as a general guide to the primary function of each form of democratic representation, the accountability function requires that the public sphere remain, in some limited respect, permeable to the influence of a ‘balance’ of public opinion. There are naturally limits to the legitimacy such accountability can provide, and (just like electoral accountability) it should not be considered epistemically infallible. There may well be situations—such as moral panics or McCarthyist “witch hunts”—in which justice demands that public institutions do not simply bend to the momentary majority in the court of public opinion. But the overall point to note is that while the public sphere is rightly seen as one leg of more general accountability relationships that combine electoral and discursive components, accountability in the public sphere has its own merits and justification, even when it is not coupled with electoral accountability.

The accountability function highlights that while the public sphere should not strive to achieve an accurate representation of the distribution of individual views, it equally should not be completely insensitive to the balance of public opinion. Crucially, this can only be reliably gauged if there are mechanisms by which individual views and preferences can be filtered into the public sphere. The discursive proposal, by contrast, explicitly builds in the constraint that all relevant discourses must always be kept in the public conversation, regardless of the number of adherents they hold.

¹⁴This is especially true under governance systems in which moments of aggregation are few and far between. General elections in the UK, for example, generally occur every four to five years, US Presidential elections occur every four years, German Federal elections every four years, and so on. This fact is true even of institutions governed by relatively short election cycles, such as the biennially elected US House of Representatives, which in the past two decades has passed an average of more than three hundred laws and several hundred further resolutions between elections (GovTrack 2025).

¹⁵Christiano and Spiekermann take this line. See Christiano (1996, pp. 258–259), and Spiekermann (2020, p. 62).

As Dryzek and Niemeyer put it, ‘proportionality [in the public sphere] may actually be undesirable’, given the risks of groupthink and undesirable voices being marginalised (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 482). Where discursive representation is combined with other forms of individual representation, this is not a problem. But relying on discursive deliberation exclusively would preclude the operation of this dimension of accountability.

Purely discursive representation, then, fails to satisfy all of the functions of a well-ordered public sphere. With this in mind, we can turn to the charge of infeasibility that Dryzek and Niemeyer level at deliberation procedures which include individuals at the global level. Is going further than discursive representation to include individual voices in the public sphere *unfeasible* at the global level, due to the problem of scale identified above? In that case, perhaps a purely discursive model, while imperfect, is the best we can do. In response, let us grant that the global level does present a problem of scale for theories of deliberation, and for this reason a significant proportion of global deliberation will likely involve representation, including discursive representation. Importantly, however, individual access to the global public sphere is not as unfeasible as Dryzek and Niemeyer suggest, because individual access implies only the *opportunity* of deliberative access; it does not require parity of deliberative influence between individuals.¹⁶ It is thus unclear where the infeasibility lies. Certainly, upholding rights of deliberative access would require the creation of new mechanisms by which individuals can access strong global publics, but this is neither conceptually difficult, nor would it require particularly drastic alterations to current institutional design. Individuals are generally considered to be owed access to domestic public spheres, regardless of the size of their nation-state. The mechanisms and nature of that access might vary significantly between states with small populations, and nations with hundreds of millions or more citizens. But individual access to the public sphere in a nation of approximately 1.4 billion (India) is not considered unfeasible and therefore meaningless; the onus is on the opponent of individual access to justify why moving from 1.4 billion to 8 billion (the global population) has passed a relevant feasibility threshold. At the global level, as in public spheres within most large nation-states, we can expect most individuals to exercise their right of deliberative access only sparingly, relying on representation most of the time. But it is the denial of the *opportunity* to enter the public sphere that constitutes the injustice.

Incommensurable Lifeworlds?

The discourses proposal, then, does not provide an adequate argument against the presumption of individual access to the public sphere. Before concluding, though, it is important to address one further argument, which can be understood as extending or reformulating the feasibility concerns that motivate the discourses proposal. Let us turn, then, to a second significant objection to individual participation in global deliberation, from Jürgen Habermas. For Habermas, full deliberation is only possible between those who inhabit a shared “lifeworld”—a shared set of experiences,

¹⁶ For an argument on why deep inequalities in access to the public sphere are wrong, see Bennett (2020).

understandings, and beliefs that determine how individuals interpret and act upon the world. While Habermas is open to the possibility that some aspects of lifeworlds may be shared across borders, for example among European nations, and also recognises that lifeworlds can evolve and “reorganize” over time to have transnational bases, he maintains that at the global level there is not currently the convergence between different lifeworlds that would be necessary for full deliberative communicative action to obtain (Habermas 2001, pp. 82–87):

Within the framework of a common political culture, negotiation partners have recourse to common value orientations and shared conceptions of justice, which make an understanding beyond instrumental-rational agreements possible. But on the international level this “thick” communicative embeddedness is missing. (Habermas 2001, p. 109)

It may be possible for, say, governmental representatives who have been socialised into the norms, structures, and languages of international life to deliberate, but not for the generality of the world’s population.¹⁷

The notion of a “lifeworld” is somewhat vague, but we can put flesh on its argumentative bones using an argument which purports to demonstrate the effects of *not* sharing one. Though David Miller does not use the language of a “lifeworld” himself, and does not advocate for the democratisation of global politics, we can extract from his work an argument about one important kind of deliberation that Habermas suggests is impossible across lifeworld boundaries: deliberation about justice (Miller 2010).

Miller argues that deciding what is fair requires deliberation together in a democratic forum, in which we decide what does and does not warrant compensation. Such deliberation requires us to be able to give and receive reasons from those who disagree with us. This presupposes a level of common ground which can only be found in national communities, not at the global level. We may be able to agree internationally on certain basic rights or needs, in which case we should ensure everyone enjoys such basic rights, but this level of consensus is much thinner than what is possible domestically (Fabre 2007, p. 108). Behind Miller’s claim is a communitarian intuition, of the kind theorised by Michael Walzer. Walzer argues that justice is constituted by shared social meanings—justice depends on how a given society values the various goods which can be distributed among its members. On this perspective, since justice is constituted by shared social or cultural meanings, democratic deliberation about values at the global level would be meaningless because there is no universal standard of justice for participants to aspire to. There is simply not enough convergence, runs the argument, on how to value different goods at the global level for the results of democratic deliberation to be accepted by everyone.

To assess these claims, we can first note that, even if presented as part of normative arguments for confining the locus of democratic deliberation to the nation-state, they ultimately rely on empirical presuppositions, and as such can be addressed on

¹⁷ For a defence of intergovernmental deliberation, see Bellamy (2019), especially pp. 79, 111 for the claim that deliberation involving citizens requires a shared language.

these terms. Consequently, an initial response to the Habermasian and Millerite claim is to identify empirical evidence that their presuppositions about cross-national non-convergence are incorrect. We can do this in two ways. First, we can consider explicit measures of “deliberativeness”. The deliberative democracy index provided by the V-Dem dataset includes a “deliberative component index” which averages a range of indicators, including the extent to which elites provide public justifications for their positions, whether these positions are justified in terms of the common good, and the extent to which non-elite groups discuss major policies in public associations such as the media or civil society associations. According to the index, the “world” has a *higher* predicted value of deliberativeness than the median nation-state, and is certainly not an outlier in being predicted a particularly low score on the index (Coppedge et al. 2019).¹⁸

Second, we can test the underlying assumption behind Miller’s and Habermas’s position, which is that there is less agreement on values and political preferences internationally as there is domestically. Again, this assumption is amenable to empirical analysis. Thomas Hale and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi analyse survey data to address precisely this question, comparing the distribution of political values internationally, with the distribution of values within countries. They analyse the survey data using a series of measures, including value polarisation (the standard deviation of survey responses), value cross-cuttingness (the extent to which survey responses were correlated across the domains of culture, economy, and environment), heterogeneity (extent to which members of the population are evenly divided between different views on a value), and policy dissatisfaction (the distance between an individual’s policy values and the “average” individual in each policy dimension, averaged across all policy domains). They also address the expected risk of persistent minorities, measuring the extent to which policy dissatisfaction is concentrated in certain segments of the population. Against the Millerite and Habermasian assumption, their findings are that the distribution of policy values internationally does not differ significantly from the distribution within countries; in other words, the world is about as diverse as the average country (Hale and Koenig-Archibugi 2019). Of course, there is significant disagreement globally, but the crucial finding is that the contours of agreement and disagreement are not significantly correlated with national boundaries. The degree of policy value diversity is no greater at the global level than within many countries considered to have (sufficiently) functional political public spheres. The key upshot, then, is that there is no empirical evidence that the extent of global diversity would create a barrier to realising the conditions for meaningful deliberation, contrary to the assumptions of Habermas and Miller.

Crucially, even if we are unconvinced by these empirical arguments, there is a more general conceptual point that can be made in reply to the Millerite and Habermasian position, which would apply not just to their specific arguments, but to other possible versions of the “incommensurable lifeworlds” thesis. The assumption of cross-national non-convergence is just that—an assumption, which cannot be established *a priori*. Even if we accept that it is *possible* that the kind of convergence necessary for

¹⁸For more detailed exposition of this objection to global democracy, see Koenig-Archibugi (2024, pp. 149–151).

democratic decision-making will be elusive at the global level, it would be unwarranted to say that this is a self-evident claim which requires no further investigation. Here is the key point: in the absence of a self-evident answer to this question, the only way to investigate the truth of this claim is to *instantiate cross-national deliberation*. Habermas's and Miller's claim is in this respect very bold: that supranational deliberation among individuals is impossible because, first, participants lack the shared basic orientation necessary for regulating common life, and second, that the absence of a shared community of fate at the global level means parties have no incentive to go beyond acting out of pure self-interest. Yet the bar for proving that lifeworlds or national cultures are so incommensurable as to make deliberation impossible is too high as to be decided *ex ante*; the burden of proof is on them, not their opponent. To put the point another way, it is impossible to tell whether people will talk past one another without letting them talk in the first place. But this is precisely what the global public sphere seeks to facilitate.

Conclusion

We have seen, then, that two prominent accounts which downplay or reject individual participation in global public discourse are unsuccessful. As a limited argument for the value of discursive deliberation alongside mechanisms for individual access to the global public sphere, the “discourses proposal” faces no criticism here. However, as a *replacement* for individual access, the proposal does not succeed. This is because the discursive model is unable to fulfil certain key functions of a well-ordered public sphere, particularly those pertaining to access and accountability. Further, the Habermasian claim that the “thick communicative embeddedness” necessary for authentic deliberation is lacking at the global level relies on questionable empirical presuppositions. We do not yet have reason to reject the widespread democratic assumption that individuals should be able to access processes of public deliberation, even at the global level.

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Competing interests The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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