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Democratic partisanship

From theoretical ideal to empirical standard

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of scholars have taken parties and partisanship as objects of normative theorizing. They posit partisanship as a fundamentally democratic practice and develop a model of what partisans can do at their best to contribute to liberal democracy. However, the standards the literature puts forth remain insufficiently specified to serve as empirical benchmarks. This article further conceptualizes this model of democratic partisanship and offers a theoretical framework within which to empirically evaluate the democratic merits of partisan discourses. It establishes a series of indicators for assessing the extent to which partisan discourse displays two main qualities: cohesiveness and respect for political pluralism. The paper then discusses the implications of using this theoretical framework as a basis for empirical studies, and shows how the model can thereby benefit both political scientists and theorists.

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Political parties are an ordinary object of contemporary criticism. They are commonly held responsible for many of the worrying tendencies that have characterized established democracies in past decades (Daalder 2002). Scholars have associated such seemingly contradictory trends as the disengagement of citizens from mass politics and the radicalization of citizens' political passions to the shortcomings of political parties. The vocabulary of 'cartel' parties, for instance, is widely used by political scientists to draw parallels between changes in the appeals and organization of political parties and their growing incapacity to mobilize citizens (Katz and Mair 2009; Mair 2003; Hay 2007). Following a similar logic, the polarization of political parties in the United States Congress has been associated on the one hand with growing citizen disengagement, and on the other with a similar polarization of the American electorate along partisan lines (Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Adam and Maier 2010).

Parties are being criticized precisely because they are pivotal agents of democratic government (for an overview, see Schattschneider 2009 [1942]; Sartori 1976; Kitschelt 2006). They are present and indispensable at every step of the electoral process, organizing and raising funds for campaigns, offering citizens platforms capable of aggregating their dispersed preferences, and translating electoral majorities into governing coalitions. They are also central agents of government in democratic polities, controlling the political agenda, forming majorities in Parliament to support the government in power, and keeping majorities in check when in opposition.

If parties fulfil such irreplaceable functions, this also implies that their failures will have consequences for the vitality of modern democracy (Goodin 2008). While a vast literature documents the democratic performance of political parties, party scholars have been reluctant to engage with contemporary democratic theory. This has resulted in a body of work that is generally under-theorized, and which tends to overlook some of the central affective and symbolic functions that parties perform (van Biezen and Saward 2008). This paper responds to these challenges with a model of democratic partisanship amenable to empirical study. My starting point is a recent body of democratic theory that takes partisanship as its main object, and from which I derive a number of standards for democratic partisanship. For the purpose of this article, I define *partisanship* as the routinized practices and discourses of the supporters, members and leaders of a particular party in support of a shared conception of the public good.² Partisanship is *democratic* when these routinized practices and discourses contribute to liberal democracy, understood as a system of limited representative government that ensures both popular self-rule

² As emphasized by White and Ypi, partisanship conceived as the "collective will of partisans" can exist without a party structure at its centre (White and Ypi 2016, 23). For the purpose of this article, I focus on those more easily identifiable communities that find an organizational expression and are thus tied together by party support, membership or leadership.

and respect for minority rights. The set of specific indicators that this article develops serves to empirically evaluate the democratic merits of partisan *discourse* more specifically.

In what follows, I will first discuss the lack of engagement of party studies with democratic theory, and how existing theories of partisanship are either insufficiently refined or insufficiently comprehensive to empirically evaluate the democratic merits of partisan discourses and practices on their basis. In the second part of this paper, I further conceptualize these theories and focus on two main characteristics that the literature ascribes to democratic forms of partisanship: *cohesiveness* and *respect for political pluralism*. Starting from these two general concepts, I derive a series of more specific indicators that can serve to evaluate the extent to which the *discourses* of real-world partisans meet these normative ideals. The last section of the paper illustrates how this theoretical framework can be applied in empirical studies of partisan discourse. I conclude with discussing what party studies can gain from using the set of indicators this article provides, and how this model of democratic partisanship opens avenues for future normative theorizing.

THE GAP BETWEEN PARTY STUDIES AND CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Studying the democratic performance of political parties

The vast literature documenting the democratic performance of political parties can be divided into four bodies of research. The first focuses on democratic consolidation in newly formed democracies, and assumes that party system institutionalization, and therefore the emergence of relatively regular patterns of partisan competition, is symptomatic of democratic health. Common indicators include decreases in electoral volatility and in the number of parties in competition (see for instance Sikk 2005; Casal Bértoa and Mair 2010). A second, related approach considers the ability of parties to draw on a well-defined and reliable electoral basis and their responsiveness to voter demands. Survey-based and electoral studies allow to analyse the socio-demographic and attitudinal traits of the electorates of different parties, and estimate the stability of parties' electoral bases over time (see for instance Kitschelt et al. 1999; Dalton et al. 1984). A third strand in the literature evaluates the democratic performance of parties on the basis of the support provided by citizens. In this instance, scholars use survey-based indicators that estimate citizens' trust in political parties, the strength of citizens' partisan identification, or quantitative data on party membership (see for instance Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Biezen and Poguntke 2014; Mair 2006). Finally, another branch of study focuses on the coherence of the programmatic content of party platforms, relying on elite surveys, expert surveys or process-tracing as a basis for assessment (see for instance Haughton and Fisher 2008; Kitschelt and Smyth 2002).

These accounts of contemporary partisanship are in essence normative: political scientists do not simply describe what *is*, but instead critically examine partisan practices in light of what they believe *ought to be*. As explained by Skinner, democracy is always an "evaluative-descriptive" term. To use this term is "not only to describe the state of affairs, but also (and *eo ipso*) to perform the speech-act of commending it" (Skinner 1973, 298). Despite this normative dimension, the party literature rarely engages with contemporary political theory, and normative democratic theory especially (for an overview, see van Biezen and Saward 2008; Allern and Pedersen 2007; Shapiro 2002; Katz 2006).³ Much of the empirical work on political parties relies instead on the minimalist theories of democracy that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, which claim to not employ normative standards (see for instance Downs 1957; Dahl 1956; Eckstein 1961; Schumpeter 1956 [1942]; for a critical overview, see Pateman 2007 [1970]; Skinner 1973). This results in a literature on political parties that presents itself as engaging with facts and description, rather than values and prescription (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006, 103).

There are several reasons why party studies would benefit from engaging with normative political theory. First, it would add academic rigor and transparency to this literature. Because the minimalist outlook on democracy is so widely endorsed, it constitutes most often an *implicit* theoretical framework that is not itself subject to falsification (Shapiro and Green 1994). As a result, the choice of indicators used to evaluate parties' democratic merits in these studies often lacks thorough justification. A more solid engagement with democratic theory would encourage political scientists to make explicit the reasons why they ascribe the adjective 'democratic' to the practices of political parties, or to their consequences.

Second, as further discussed in the conclusion to this paper, engaging with contemporary democratic theory would provide scholars of political parties with new avenues for political research. Minimalist democratic theory has shaped the ways in which parties have been studied: as institutions of the state and electoral machines rather than as intermediary institutions performing affective and symbolic functions within civil society (Kitschelt 2010; van Biezen and Saward 2008). With a framework where political parties are conceived "merely [as] coalitions of individuals seeking to control government", their values and policies serve first and foremost "to maximise their share of the popular vote, or to perhaps create a minimum winning coalition of parties" (Vassalo and Wilcox 2006, 414). By relying on such assumptions, party scholars deprive themselves of the means to formulate theoretically informed assessments of the extent to which parties uphold democratic standards *beyond* the fulfilment of minimal functions.

³ While some scholars of political parties, such as Peter Mair or Herbert Kitschelt, rely in their work on a firmer theoretical basis (see for instance Freeze and Kitschelt 2010; Mair 2013), very few explicitly build on contemporary developments in democratic theory (for an exception, see Allern and Pedersen 2007).

Theorizing the democratic merits of partisanship

In the past decade, a number of democratic theorists have taken an interest in the normative dimension of partisanship, thereby making a first step towards bridging the existing divide between contemporary democratic theory and party studies (White and Ypi 2010; Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2006; Bonotti 2012, 2014; White 2014; White and Ypi 2011; Muirhead 2014; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 2012; Rosenblum 2014; Wolkenstein 2016; White and Ypi 2016). This literature contrasts with minimalist theories of democracy which, albeit giving a strong role to parties, define them narrowly as coalitions of self-interested politicians competing to attract the vote of rational citizens (see for instance Downs 1957). It also differs from much of deliberative and Rawlsian political theory, which has until recently given a rather limited role to partisan organizations (van Biezen and Saward 2008). In contrast, this recent strand in democratic theory seeks to rehabilitate partisanship as a normative category, and thus to account for what 'good partisanship' entails in democratic societies.

Theorists of democratic partisanship define the nature and content of the responsibilities that partisans should exercise in their political functions, thereby providing implicit guidelines to appreciate their democratic contribution. These responsibilities can be grouped into two distinct categories. First, as intermediaries between citizens and the state, political parties should act as effective agents of political representation, and thus justify their normative ideals and policies in such a way that citizens can engage with them (White and Ypi 2010, 2011; 2016, 8-32; 55-101; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 104; Bonotti 2011, 20-22). Second, partisans in democratic societies are expected to defend their own convictions with respect to the principles of political pluralism. To this extent, they should renounce imposing their own viewpoint on society at large, and acknowledge the legitimacy of other, rival claims to representation in their own party system (Muirhead 2006, 22-25; Rosenblum 2008, 362-368; Bonotti 2011; White and Ypi 2016, 142-164).

These accounts are not only grounded in principles of political philosophy, but in an understanding of the role that parties have played in the history of established democracies.⁴ In the 19th and early 20th century, party systems socialized the citizens of the Western world into mass democracy, and contributed to structure the ways in which we still understand politics (Rokkan and Lipset 1967; Campbell et al. 1960). The gradual institutionalization of party systems throughout the modern era is also inseparable from the emergence of a pluralist worldview and the sidelining of monistic conceptions of the common good (Scarrow 2006; Daalder 2002; Sartori 1976). The theoretical literature on parties and partisanship thus seeks to highlight the potential

⁴More sparingly, some authors refer to the empirical study of partisanship in contemporary political science. For instance, in the third part of *On the side of Angels* Rosenblum relies on empirical data on the political engagement of self-declared independents and self-declared partisans to demonstrate the value of partisanship in civic life (Rosenblum 2008, 337-339).

of *actual* partisanship to contribute to liberal democracy. Both philosophical principles and historical insight serve to develop standards of what partisans can do at their best.

The purpose of these accounts is avowedly normative. In other words, the literature sets an ideal that real-world partisans can live up to, but also fail to uphold. Partisanship is thus a double-edged sword for democracy. Parties can exercise their power for the best, by engaging citizens and promoting political pluralism, or for the worst, by fuelling disengagement and the radicalization of political passions. These theories therefore form a basis to constructively criticize partisans' actual practices and discourses. Faced with the shortcomings of real-world partisans, we can stop dreaming of a democracy that would work without them. We are given the theoretical means to ask for "not less partisanship, but better partisanship" (Muirhead 2014, 109).⁵

Limitations of the existing theoretical literature for empirical studies

It is relevant in this context to examine empirically whether real-world partisans actually display these qualities. A political scientist would ask: How do we see partisan morality in action? What characteristics do the discourse and practices of a partisan that effectively acts as an intermediary between citizens and the state display? What distinguishes partisans who help advance the principle of political pluralism from those who do not? The purpose of the above-mentioned body of normative political theory, however, is not to provide such empirical standards but to justify the democratic value of partisanship. As a result, *democratic partisanship* is not conceptualized by these theorists in such a way that would allow for political scientists to evaluate the democratic merits of real-world partisans. More specifically, these theories present two main limitations as a basis for empirical study: they are *insufficiently refined* and *insufficiently comprehensive* to act as empirical benchmarks. I illustrate these points drawing on a number of more specific examples from the literature.

First, the principles of democratic partisanship present in the literature are most often insufficiently refined: an exercise in operationalization would be necessary to evaluate examples of partisan discourses and practices on their basis. Consider the points that White and Ypi make on the democratic merits of partisan political justification (White and Ypi 2011; 2016, 55-76). According to the authors, partisans are particularly well placed to perform the function of political justification so central to democratic deliberation for a number of reasons. First, unlike factions,

⁵ To insist on the need for better partisanship runs counter a large share of contemporary political theory and sociology which, confronted with the pathologies of contemporary partisanship, argue for of a new democratic model based on local and transnational participatory forms of political activism (Norris 2002, 1999; Della Porta and Rucht 2013; Della Porta and Tarrow 2004; Warren 2002; Fung 2012; Fung and Wright 2003). For a rebuttal of some of these arguments, and a defence of the idea that parties fulfil functions that social movements do not, see White and Ypi, 2010.

partisans address the political community as a whole and therefore offer reasons to citizens that should in principle be acceptable to all. Second, the circumstances of partisan political justification imply that partisan claims will be comparative, adversarial and public, three elements that are conducive to normatively robust forms of political justification. While the authors convincingly show the value of partisanship as a vehicle for political justification, these principles are as such insufficiently refined for political scientists to assess the presence or absence of democratic forms of partisanship on their basis. It is certainly possible to derive more specific criteria from these principles, but they would first need to be operationalized to act as benchmarks for partisan discourses and practices.

A similar point can be made concerning the question of respect for political pluralism, an aspect of democratic partisanship generally conceived as a *moral* disposition. According to Rosenblum, for instance, liberal democracy does not only depend on partisans complying with the rules of the political game, but instead requires their positive, "personal identification to the system of regulated rivalry", the exercise of a "political self-discipline (...) made moral habit" (Rosenblum 2008, 363, 125). This is, according to her, "the moral distinctiveness of Party ID" (Rosenblum 2008, 362). Yet what this means in terms of the political behaviour or discourse of specific partisans remains unspecified. She provides categorical answers for extreme cases, where the empirical evidence is sufficiently blatant, emphasizing for instance that "partisans do not look to liquidate, erase or permanently disorganize the opposition or represent them as public enemies" (Rosenblum 2008, 363). While this is a relevant *minimal* benchmark, it does not give us the means to evaluate a wealth of discourses and practices that may run counter to the principles of political pluralism without directly challenging democracy's minimal institutional framework.⁶ In other words, this standard is not fine-grained enough to formulate nuanced judgments on whether specific partisan practices or discourses are in line with democratic standards, and thus to make an empirical distinction between partisans with different levels of respect for political pluralism.

In both of these examples, the principles offered are also *insufficiently comprehensive* to allow for an adequate assessment of partisan practices and discourses. In other words, the principles of democratic partisanship are dispersed across the literature, with no single author offering a comprehensive series of principles that partisans should uphold to be considered as democratic. A theoretical model of democratic partisanship designed for the purpose of empirical study would need to go beyond the question of political justification, or endorsement of the principle of regulated rivalry, and encompass other dimensions of the normative ideal of partisanship. While some of these dimensions are discussed elsewhere in the writings of White

⁶ Bonotti establishes a similar, minimal benchmark that also raises these challenges (Bonotti 2012, 22; 2011, 20).

and Ypi on the one hand, and Rosenblum on the other, building a theoretical framework for the purpose of empirical study would require an aggregation of these dimensions in a single model.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING DEMOCRATIC PARTISANSHIP

This paper addresses these limitations by compiling the different attributes of democratic partisanship scattered across the literature within a single theoretical framework and specifying these attributes to make them amenable to empirical study. The framework thus provides students of political parties with a set of indicators anchored in normative democratic theory to assess the democratic merits of partisanship. By *partisanship* I understand the array of practices and discourses attached to party identification, membership, or leadership in support of a shared conception of the public good. The framework adopts a liberal conception of democracy, understood as a system of limited representative government that ensures both popular self-rule and respect for minority rights. The routinized practices and discourses of partisanship can be said to be *democratic* when they make a distinct contribution to both the *democratic* and the *liberal* dimensions of liberal democracy. The *democratic* dimension relates to the classic notion of popular self-rule, which requires engagement of citizens with, and participation in, the political process of representative government. The *liberal* dimension relates to the preservation of minority rights and political pluralism in an otherwise majoritarian system of political decision-making. The empirical standards I put forward are designed to evaluate at what point partisan *discourse* makes a contribution to these two dimensions of liberal democracy.

The relationship that this framework establishes between partisan discourse and liberal democracy rests on a number of prior assumptions. First, I assign a *creative* role to political representation in general, and to the representative claims of partisans more specifically. In line with new theories of representation, I conceive of political representation as an ongoing interaction between representatives and constituents (see for instance Saward 2009, 2010; Disch 2011; Dovi 2007; Urbinati 2006, 2000; Mansbridge 2003; Gutmann and Thompson 2010, 2012; Young 2000). In other words, partisans do not simply mirror the pre-existent and fixed political preferences of voters, as posited by principal-agent approaches to political representation. Rather, the process of representation is one in which the identities of both partisans and citizens are mutually and continuously constituted.⁷

Second, my approach is in line with a cultural institutionalist approach to democracy and democratic consolidation, according to which democratic norms should be deeply entrenched

⁷ A 'contextualist' turn in public opinion, political psychology and party studies is providing mounting empirical evidence that citizens opinions and representation do indeed shift according to the ways in which political parties frame issues (Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2004; Enyedi 2005; Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2015).

within society for a democratic regime to be sustained over time (Hall and Taylor 1996; Plattner and Diamond 1996; Miller, White, and Heywood 1997; Dryzek and Holmes 2002; Herman 2016). The compliance of elites and citizens to the rules of the democratic game is dependent not only on a well-designed system of institutional incentives, but on the fact that they have internalized these rules and are committed to them. This squares with a tradition in political philosophy that conceives of a democratic regime first and foremost as a *way of life* or *form of society* nourished by the ethical commitments of its members (Ryn 1978; Rosenblum 1989; Kateb 1981; Galston 2005, 2002; Lefort 1988; Rosenblum 1998). In this understanding, the commitment of citizens to the institutions of liberal democracy provides the essential foundation for their endurance.⁸

Starting from these assumptions, how parties choose to represent citizens in their discourse has consequences for the functioning of liberal democracy. If representation is a creative process, then the position of political parties in the public sphere—with privileged access to financial resources, media attention and state power—lends their discourse a considerable amount of influence on the contours of public deliberation. With liberal democracy conceived as a way of life, nourished by the ethical commitments of its members, that parties support such commitments within the broader public becomes crucial to the flourishing of democracy more generally. As further developed in the theoretical framework itself, the discourse of partisans will thus affect both the *democratic* and *liberal* dimensions of liberal democracy. First, partisan discourse will in part condition citizens' willingness to engage with political affairs, and thus more broadly, the extent to which liberal democracy approximates the ideal of popular self-rule. Second, it will influence the extent of citizens' support for the principles of minority rule and political pluralism.

This is not to say that a democratic form of partisan discourse is sufficient to constitute a liberal democracy. First, institutions that guarantee political and civil rights provide the necessary framework that may then be supported or undermined by partisan discourse. Second, the performative power of partisanship is necessarily exercised within certain limits: although partisans occupy a privileged position in the public sphere, representation remains a creative *dialogue*. Parties interpret and draw on the demands of citizens, while citizens in turn re-appropriate, reject or validate the representative claims of political parties. The boundaries of collective memory, for instance, will have a bearing on the claims that find a "cultural resonance" within a given population, and which partisans will adopt (Gamson 1992, 135; Saward 2010, 75-

⁸ As a point of contrast, the rational-institutionalist approach to democracy posits that well-designed institutions and political competition provide rational partisans with sufficient incentives to comply with the rules of the political game (Schmitter and Karl 1991; Przeworski 1999). The institutions of democracy understood in this minimal sense are thus to a large extent self-sustaining: they contain within themselves the conditions for their perpetuation, and are not dependent on the particular actors that occupy them.

77).⁹ To this extent, while partisan discourse contributes to the consolidation of democratic norms or to their weakening, it cannot create a democratic or an undemocratic society.

Third, the democratic contribution of partisan *discourse*, which the following theoretical framework serves to evaluate, does not operate in isolation from partisan *practice*, the other central component of partisanship. The mode of organization of political parties, their procedures of internal decision-making and the types of decisions effectively being made by political parties are all likely to set limits to the democratic contribution of partisans' discourses. Partisans may adopt the rhetoric of virtue but make decisions that contradict this rhetoric. A partisan discourse devised by political consultants may be normatively inferior to an identical partisan discourse resulting from a bottom-up process of internal deliberation. Further research will be needed to further develop standards for partisan practice, and establish how these relate to the democratic quality of partisan discourse.¹⁰

The theoretical framework is structured around the two main characteristics that the existing literature attributes to partisanship at its best. First, democratic partisanship is *cohesive*. A cohesive partisan discourse aggregates dispersed issues of political relevance into a normatively grounded, coherent program of government. Cohesive parties offer citizens reasons to engage with representative politics, and thus make a distinct contribution to the *democratic* dimension of liberal democracy. Second, democratic partisanship is *pluralist*. A pluralist partisan respects the fact that there exists a plurality of legitimate interpretations of what constitutes the common good, and that his own interpretation cannot impose itself on the polity as a whole. In displaying such respect for the principles of political pluralism, parties make a distinct contribution to the *liberal* dimension of liberal democracy.¹¹ In what follows, I establish the attributes of cohesive and pluralist partisanship in turn, show how these partisan qualities support different dimensions of liberal democracy, and detail indicators that can serve to evaluate

⁹ In fact, the extent to which partisans uphold democratic standards is likely to be influenced by a wealth of contextual factors: times of war or peace, the extent to which the agency of politicians is constrained by international organizations, public opinion on a given issue, the particular audience that a partisan addresses, etc. The theoretical framework offered here does not take into account these different factors, and establishes criteria to assert of the normative value of particular partisan discourses all else being equal. As emphasized in the conclusion of this paper, studying the weight of contextual factors on variations in the democratic merits of partisan discourse is one important avenue of empirical research. On the basis of this knowledge, further theoretical work could consider how contextual factors should enter into our assessment of the democratic merits of particular partisan discourses.

¹⁰ While it goes beyond the scope of this paper to offer standards to evaluate the democratic merits of both partisan discourse and practice, partisan practice is an expanding topic of normative enquiry within the theoretical literature (see for instance Wolkenstein 2016; Teorell 1999; White and Ypi 2016, 209-229; Wolkenstein 2015).

¹¹ This is not to suggest an absence of tensions between the qualities of democratic partisanship, and between the liberal and democratic dimensions of liberal democracy more broadly. As emphasized in the conclusion of this paper, whether partisan cohesiveness and partisan pluralism are complementary or antagonistic qualities of partisanship is an important question for both the empirical political sciences and for future theoretical work on democratic partisanship.

whether particular partisan discourses display these attributes.¹²

Cohesive partisanship: Sustaining the democratic dimension of liberal democracy

The literature on parties and partisanship offers reasons for why parties may be unique in their capacity to further the engagement of citizens with public life. Civic engagement is understood broadly here, as an affective orientation that disposes individuals towards feeling concern for the good of their political community and towards taking action in order to contribute to the common good (White and Ypi 2010, 809). While citizens delegate political responsibilities to representatives, the involvement of constituents in the political process is necessary to ensure that political leadership remains accountable. Democratic representation requires that constituents organize and discuss issues of political relevance in anticipation of upcoming moments of authorization, and discuss them again in recollection of these moments of authorization (Mansbridge 2003; Young 2000; Urbinati 2006). Only with the active participation of the represented can representative government claim to be "a form of people's self-rule" (Kateb 1981, 371).

Citizens engage with the political process when they hold normatively grounded convictions and identify with a group that shares these convictions. A citizen who believes in nothing or stands only for himself will not engage in politics (Rosenblum 2008, ch. 7). These conditions for political engagement, however, do not exist prior to the process of representation. As Muirhead emphasizes, "somewhere the variety of individuals sentiments, interests and convictions needs to be collected (...) (A) group large enough to claim democratic legitimacy does not exist spontaneously (...) It must be created" (Muirhead 2006, 719). The 'bilingualism' of political parties, with one foot in society and the other in the state, puts them in a privileged position to fulfil this creative role (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 103). As institutions of the state, parties have access to financial assets, media attention and political power that social movements, for instance, do not directly dispose of. As civil society organizations, parties use these resources to mobilize existing members, organize support and generate new sympathies.

¹² The theoretical framework is concerned with establishing empirical standards for the study of partisan discourse, not the intentions and motivations of partisans. In practice, these are likely to be mixed: rhetoric and strategy are consubstantial to the 'great game of politics', rendering any conception of democratic partisanship as 'pure virtue' unrealistic (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006). This should not distract from the fact that, as discussed above, a contradiction between the discourse and the practice of partisans would adversely affect the democratic contribution of a particular brand of partisanship.

They are in a position to create the terms of contest and thus the necessary conditions for public engagement and deliberation over rival conceptions of the common good.¹³

If parties are among those institutions better placed to generate the types of political convictions that push citizens to engage with public life, they do not necessarily make good use of their privileged position in the public sphere. The contemporary disaffection with representative politics in established and emerging democracies is enough to demonstrate that parties can fail to perform their function of mobilization (for detailed accounts, see Mair 2006; Hay 2007). Given that parties have a unique responsibility in generating political loyalties, it remains necessary to isolate the conditions under which they can effectively do so. The general argument made by contemporary theories of partisanship is that parties should display a form of *cohesiveness* in their claims to represent citizens, and thus campaign on the basis of a discourse that aggregates dispersed issues of political relevance into a normatively grounded, coherent program of government.¹⁴ In the following sections, I draw on normative political theory to isolate three attributes of partisan cohesiveness, and further operationalize indicators that could serve to evaluate whether partisan discourse meets these conditions.

Attribute A: Justifying political action according to a vision of the common good

The first characteristic of partisan cohesiveness is that political parties provide an account to the political community of the ends that justify the exercise of political power and of the principles that underlie such an exercise. It demands from parties that they stand for a distinct vision of the *common good*, rooting their approach to matters of common concern in rival interpretations of the meaning of fundamental principles such as equality or freedom. Partisanship at its best locates the particularistic appeals of given sectors of society in a broader understanding of the political world, coherently connecting its different aspects across time, space, and subject matter.

¹³ As specified below, these conceptions of the common good rest on different interpretation of fundamental principles such as liberty and equality. These specific interpretations are generally informed by more long-lasting traditions of political thought and specific comprehensive doctrines such as, for example, socialism or conservatism.

¹⁴ One could object to this definition of partisan cohesiveness on the ground that it excludes single-issue parties, such as the Australian HEMP (Help End Marijuana Prohibition) Party or the UK Animal Welfare Party that may sporadically serve to engage citizens that would not otherwise participate in politics. This, however, does not distract from the broader point made here. One of the values of democratic partisanship is to unite a community of citizens not only across different social spaces but also across time, grounding political commitment in the struggle of past generations and offering this struggle a political future (White 2015; White and Ypi 2016, 122-142). As further argued in this paper, such lasting political commitment to a vote-seeking organization will require cohesiveness, and therefore for partisans to connect a variety of issues together in a coherent narrative, and to offer citizens a program of government for its realization. The empirical evidence on single-issue parties supports this normative argument. On the one hand, the capacity for political mobilization of single-issue organizations is limited both in terms of the numbers mobilized and in terms of their ability to sustain this mobilization over time. On the other hand, as the historical evolution of Green parties show, single-issue parties generate greater and more lasting commitments when they evolve towards cohesive forms of partisanship and thus develop a broader program around a particular understanding of the common good.

That parties advance such understandings is central to furthering citizens' engagement with the political world. In the words of White and Ypi, parties at their best fulfil the 'normative' condition for political engagement: they provide citizens with the tools to formulate "a critical appraisal of their joint political institutions, (...) to form judgments on matters of common concern and to articulate such judgments in a way that could appeal to the understanding of all" (White and Ypi 2010, 811). By weaving individual concerns together in an overarching narrative, parties contribute to citizens making sense of their own grievances not as strictly personal dissatisfactions, but as issues of political relevance. In this sense, democratic partisanship creates a broader community of commitment, and thus opens the door to the exercise of collective political agency.

This attribute is also central because political action needs to be *justified* according to some principles citizens can, if not embrace as their own, at least accept as reasonable. Such acts of justification are necessary to ensure that coercive power is being exercised in a non-arbitrary fashion, and more generally, to safeguard the legitimacy of the decision-making process (Chambers 2010). This requires that parties make the rationale that motivates their policies explicit, or in other words, that they spell-out the values, interests and visions of the 'good society' their legislation intends to further (White and Ypi 2011; Bonotti 2014). Beyond the role normative principles play in legitimizing political action, a higher order of reasons is necessary for making party programs and policies intelligible to citizens and to win the support of constituents.

To evaluate the extent to which partisan discourse meets this normative condition for partisan cohesiveness, political scientists can focus on the extent to which partisans justify and account for specific programs or policies in terms of a specific idea of the common good. Two indicators can be considered here. First, partisans should express allegiance to a supra-partisan idea of the political community, which includes all social groups and political identities, yet transcends them.¹⁵ Partisans that display this normative attribute of cohesiveness communicate that their loyalty to the *demos* as a whole has precedence over their allegiance to particular groups of voters. Historically, the modern definition of the party emerged when it was distinguished from factionalism, with authors such as Edmund Burke seeing the former as aiming to further the "national interest" as a whole, and the latter as promoting the interests of particular

¹⁵ The relevant political community depends on the constituency that a particular partisan addresses. For a candidate to mayorship, for instance, this could be the citizens of his town.

groups in society (Burke 1990 [1770], 86; Sartori 2005 [1976], 3-4).¹⁶ Clientelist appeals on the basis of group belonging are, to this extent, at odds with cohesive partisanship.

Indicator 1: Cohesive partisans justify particular political decisions and policies by explaining how they benefit the political community at large. In practice, this involves that:

- Cohesive partisans designate as beneficiary of their political actions the relevant political community at large, for example 'the Republic', 'the people', 'Londoners', 'we Europeans', etc.

- When partisans address the needs of particular segments of the population ('workers', 'entrepreneurs', 'single mothers'), they explain how addressing these particular grievances furthers the well being of the relevant political community at large. For instance, a party could defend the interests of workers in the name of advancing the cause of a fairer society.

Second, to advance a certain vision of the common good, parties should refer to shared societal objectives and political values that transcend particular group interests and convictions. Two separate components of this shared space are particularly relevant here. First, partisans should insist on 'matters of common concern', issues that should be considered collectively because they result from social linkage. The health, education and security of citizens may be seen, for instance, as 'common goods', and are among the societal objectives that cohesive partisans wish to achieve regardless of their position on the political spectrum (Galston 2013). This normative attribute of cohesiveness also requires partisans to establish the relative importance of these objectives according to their particular conception of the common good.

Partisans should also refer to the fundamental principles that define the common good at large. Even agonistic theories of democracy, that give a central role to political contestation, recognize that democratic political communities entail a "certain amount of consensus" and more specifically, "a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy" (Mouffe 2000, 103). While some of these —justice, equality or freedom— are common to most democratic constitutional frameworks, their order and emphasis may differ from one to another. Cohesive partisans will take these principles as given and offer different interpretations of their meaning, relative importance and implications. These particular interpretations are generally grounded in

¹⁶ Separationist parties, for instance the Scottish National Party campaigning in favour of the independence of Scotland from the United Kingdom, are borderline cases. They speak for a particular group within the political community at large and, to this extent, contravene this aspect of cohesiveness. However, this stance is adopted not to defend special interests against the common good, but in the perspective of renegotiating the boundaries of the political community itself.

long-lasting traditions of thought and thus informed by comprehensive doctrines such as, for example, socialism or conservatism.

Indicator 2: Cohesive partisans justify their political actions by referring to broad societal objectives and fundamental values that they intend their actions to further. In practice, this entails that:

- Cohesive partisans make explicit how their actions and policies will address matters of common concern. For instance, a partisan may justify reforming a labour law as a solution for tackling unemployment.

- Cohesive partisans make explicit how their actions and policies contribute to advancing one or several of the fundamental principles that ground the political community. For instance, a conservative partisan may justify a law that diminishes the legal hurdles for economic competition in the name of furthering a certain interpretation of freedom as the absence of constraints.

Attribute B: Offering means for the realization of normative goals

The second attribute of a cohesive partisan discourse is that it provides citizens with the sense that normative goals can effectively be realized through the use of state power. Democratic partisanship gives meaning to both normative objectives and governmental practices by making their connection intelligible to citizens. It is by fulfilling what White and Ypi have termed the 'executive' condition for political engagement, and thus addressing particular grievances through policy-making, that parties demonstrate the practical relevance of their normative commitments (White and Ypi 2010, 817-8). In this process, parties demonstrate the possibility for citizens' normative goals to be realized through political action. This is all the more important that parties are the only political actors that dispose directly of the coercive power and taxing capacity of the state. While social movements may offer normative objectives, their limited financial and organizational resources curtail the scope of their actions, as they cannot enact direct changes in legislation.

To evaluate this second attribute of partisan cohesiveness, political scientists can first focus on the ways in which partisans talk about their own political agency. Cohesiveness entails that partisans will communicate that their actions have consequences and that they can make a difference, rather than insisting on their lack of choice or agency (Hay 2007, 66). In this last case, partisans give citizens little reason to believe that their normative goals can be realized and will likely breed resignation at best, animosity at worst.

Indicator 3: Cohesiveness entails that partisans demonstrate their ability to exercise their political agency in their discourse. In practice, this means that:

- *They present specific political actions as resulting from a political choice between alternatives that can be justified from a normative perspective (see Indicator 2).*
- *They refrain from presenting specific political actions as the only possible choice available to governments, for instance as a decision solely dictated by external factors.¹⁷*

A second requirement for partisans to display this attribute is that they clearly outline their programmatic orientations and specific policy proposals. Normative thinking without political practice is insufficient to engage citizens with the political process. One of the contributions of cohesive partisans will therefore be that they can explain *how* they intend to further their particular conception of the common good and thus provide citizens with a well-defined bundle of policies and measures.

Indicator 4: Cohesive partisans explain how they intend to further their particular conception of the common good with their actions in government. In practice this entails that:

- *When campaigning, cohesive partisans present a well-defined bundle of policies and measures that makes for a clear program of government. For instance, a conservative partisan who defends a negative conception of freedom will not solely vouch to liberalize the job market, but suggest a series of specific measures of liberalization.*
- *When in government, partisans show how their measures and policies will impact the political community in a way that furthers their specific conception of the common good. For instance, a conservative partisan may show how specific measures of market liberalization will impact society and the economy in a way that furthers his vision of the good society.*

Attribute C: Distinguishing normative goals and policies from those of opponents

Finally, for partisan discourse to be cohesive it should be differentiated from the discourse of opponents. In other words, parties need to offer citizens *distinct* normative goals and policy proposals. This is essential for citizens' engagement with the political process for several reasons. First, positioning with regard to a political 'other' is necessary for parties to assert their own commitments, and to mobilize citizens on their basis. This squares with the post-structuralist

¹⁷ To this extent, a highly constrained environment of policy-making is likely to adversely affect the cohesiveness of partisan claims and, further, the political engagement of citizens.

notion of a 'constitutive outside', according to which all forms of identity can only be constructed through differentiation (Mouffe 2000, 33). Partisan identities strong enough to mobilize civic passions are thus adversarial in nature: they define themselves not only with regard to what they are, but also with regard to how they diverge from other partisan identities. More generally, the attachment of voters to particular parties only makes sense where such differences exist and are asserted.

The most straightforward case to be made in favour of partisan differentiation is that it offers citizens a meaningful choice between political alternatives. This idea has been at the core of minimalist theories of democracy, which cast the free competition of political parties for citizens' votes as a defining feature of the democratic regime (Downs 1957; Schumpeter 1956 [1942]; Przeworski 1999). It also echoes the classic ideal of 'responsible party government', according to which citizens can only hold parties accountable if these spell-out clear alternatives of government (Schattschneider 2009 [1942]; American Political Science Association 1950; Mair 2013). Only when offered a plurality of options can voters find an alternative closer to their own interests and choose a different majority at the next elections if their expectations are disappointed.

From the perspective of studying partisan discourse, the extent to which partisans justify their claim to the exercise of political power in a *comparative* fashion is a good indicator for partisan differentiation. Partisans in government will be tempted to ignore the current opposition and focus only on their own program, while partisans in opposition will tend to criticize the government without making clear what policies and measures it would enact in its place. Both should instead adopt a comparative form of political justification, and show how their own conception of the common good and policies are preferable to the alternative suggested by opponents (White and Ypi 2011, 385; Hofstadter 1969, 4).

Indicator 5: Cohesive partisans justify their claims to political power in a comparative fashion. In practice, this entails that:

- In opposition, partisans not only criticize the policies and particular conception of the common good of the party in government, but also outline how their own conception of the common good differs and what their own party would do in place of their opponents.

- In government, partisans not only defend their own policies and conception of the common good, but outline in the process how these differ from those defended by past governments and the current opposition.

Pluralist partisanship: Sustaining the liberal dimension of liberal democracy

I now turn to the second main characteristic for democratic partisanship: respect for political pluralism. Respecting political pluralism means that the discourses of partisans will be aligned with the worldview according to which there may exist reasonable disagreement over the interpretation to be given to the common good, and over the means to reach it. Implicitly, this entails a recognition that "there is no single, univocal *summum bonum* that can be defined philosophically, let alone imposed politically" (Galston 2002, 30). Pluralist partisans defend their position, seeking to persuade others but never to impose their views. They argue for the superiority of their claims, but do not assert that these are the only legitimate claims that can be defended. With such attitudes, they accept that their party represents only part of the polity and thus pursue their particular goals "without threatening the fundamental values and institutions of the framework itself" (Sartori 1976, 16). This quality is central to a number of theories of partisanship (see for instance Muirhead 2006, 22-25; Rosenblum 2008, 362-368; Bonotti 2011).

This form of respect is necessary for partisans to support the *liberal* dimension of liberal democracy, and thus the preservation of the rule of law and minority rights in an otherwise majoritarian system of political decision-making. If pluralist partisanship is particularly important in this regard, it is precisely because parties are central actors of representative government with a unique position between civil society and the state. Their privileged access to coercive power, financial resources and media attention lends them a considerable amount of influence on the contours of public opinion and on the continued integrity of democratic institutions. When partisans mobilize citizens on the basis of monistic appeals or berate democratic procedures in their discourse, they also erode the norms that, as emphasised earlier in this article, sustain liberal democracy as a way of life (Ryn 1978; Mouffe 2000; Lefort 1988; Bevir and Rhodes 2010). In this case, democracy's formalized rules and procedures are also far more vulnerable and susceptible to being undermined (Herman 2016).

In the following sections, I draw on normative political theory to isolate three attributes of pluralist partisanship and explain why these particular traits contribute to sustaining the liberal dimension of liberal democracy. For each condition, I further operationalize indicators that can serve to evaluate whether particular partisan discourses are in line with a pluralist conception of the political community.

Attribute D: Treating opponents as moral agents

Pluralist partisanship first involves that partisans treat their political opponents as moral agents, and therefore as political actors that seek to advance the good of the political community.

Pluralist partisans see their opponents as committed to addressing widely accepted societal problems (i.e., sickness, poverty, crime) and the action of opponents as guided by a concern for fundamental principles such as freedom, equality and the preservation of democracy's 'procedural minimum' (Galston 2013). Their behaviour should reflect the idea that they share a goal with their adversaries, namely to better the political community, and that despite their divergences they have a common good to defend.

To disagree with opponents, yet see them as committed to the common good, is a fundamentally pluralist stance. It amounts to recognizing the absence of an authoritative and definitive interpretation of what constitutes the common good. As Gutmann and Thomson emphasize, to "treat (an opponent's) position as expressing a moral rather than a purely strategic, political or economic view" also involves to recognize that this position "is based on moral principles about which people may reasonably disagree" (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 82). In the face of a joint commitment to the common good, pluralist partisans attribute the persistence of political disagreements to different understandings of the fundamental principles that ground the political community, and of their practical implications.

Such forms of respect do not amount to a politically naive position according to which opponents would be perfectly virtuous agents devoid of personal or political interests. Professional partisans from all sides of the political spectrum will not only aim to further the common good, but will also have the ambition of advancing their political career. Pluralist partisans know that their opponents are partly motivated by self-interest, but do not limit their characterization of opposition to this trait. Partisans who respect their opponents assume instead that political adversaries have 'mixed-motives', and thus that they "act not only for their own political gain but also out of a desire to do what they think is right" (Gutmann and Thompson 2010).

When looking for empirical manifestations of such respectful attitudes, it would be too demanding to expect from partisans that they systematically and overtly acknowledge that their opponents are principled and oriented towards the common good. Partisans argue for the superiority of their own program, and criticize their opponents' platform. This is part and parcel of the partisan enterprise and, as outlined earlier, differentiation is a necessary condition for partisans to give citizens reasons to engage with politics. To evaluate empirically whether partisans treat opponents as moral agents, it is therefore more adequate to focus on the types of criticisms that pluralist partisans level against their adversaries. In the following paragraph I offer some guidelines to distinguish between pluralist and non-pluralist types of criticisms of opponents.

Pluralist partisans will first refrain from engaging in 'motive-cynicism' when criticizing opponents. By this, I mean that they do not raise doubts on the moral integrity of their opponents, or on the legitimacy of the reasons for their opponents' political actions (Gutmann and Thompson 2010, 1133). Partisans need not ignore that their opponents strategically target voters, and that a certain measure of corruption exists within most political organizations. But if the motives of those who engage with politics, including their own, are always mixed, then criticizing opponents by questioning the integrity of their motives is hypocritical and destructive to the political debate. By casting doubts on the reasons that motivate an opponent to say or do something, partisans are also questioning whether their opponents act out of concern for the common good.

Indicator 6: Pluralist partisans refrain from engaging in 'motive-cynicism' when they criticize political opponents, and thus from raising doubts on the integrity of political opponents in general, or on the reasons that motivate their opponents to do or say something in particular. In practice, this entails that:

- Pluralist partisans do not criticize the decisions of opponents on the basis that these are solely designed to advance their political interests. For instance, a partisan criticizing his opponents' decision to raise the minimum wage on the basis that it is motivated only by the desire to gain votes would be engaging in motive-cynicism.

- Pluralist partisans refrain from picturing the decisions of opponents as solely designed to advance their personal interests. For instance, a partisan criticizing his opponents' decision to lower taxes on wealthy incomes on the basis that it favours the economic interests of his own circle would be engaging in motive-cynicism.

- Pluralist partisans more broadly refrain from criticizing opponents on the basis that they are fundamentally immoral or uncommitted to the common good. For instance, a partisan who would take a corruption scandal involving members of his opposition as an opportunity to label his opposition as a whole as corrupt,¹⁸ or brand his opponents as being "against the nation", would be engaging in motive-cynicism.

Instead of criticizing the actions of opponents on the basis of their intentions, pluralist partisans will criticize opposing positions and policies on the basis of their own account of the common good. Pluralist partisans show how, in light of their own understanding of the fundamental principles that ground the community, certain decisions taken by their opponents may come to undermine widely accepted societal goods. Such forms of criticism remain compatible with a pluralist understanding of the political world. Democratic partisans understand

¹⁸ To this extent, a highly corrupt political environment is also likely to affect the pluralist quality of partisan discourse.

that there exists a plurality of legitimate interpretations of the meaning, hierarchy and implications of fundamental principles, while taking a stand for one such interpretation.

Indicator 7: Pluralist partisans will criticize their opponents' positions by highlighting their limitations with regard to advancing the common good. In practice, this entails that:

- Pluralist partisans will criticize the decisions of adversaries on the basis of their limitations in advancing widely shared societal objectives. For instance, a partisan criticizing his opponents' decision to raise the minimum wage may do so on the basis that it will stifle economic activity, and thus ultimately citizens' economic well-being.

- Pluralist partisans will use the hierarchy they establish between fundamental principles as a basis for criticizing the decisions of adversaries. For instance, a partisan criticizing his opponents' decision to lower taxes on high incomes may do so on the basis that it compromises the rectification of inequalities.

Attribute E: Accepting the partial and temporary nature of political claims

Partisans' respect for political pluralism should also trump their desire to see their particular views triumph and indefinitely occupy the place of political power. As argued by Lefort, the historical emergence of democracy stems from a moral revolution, "instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty" (Lefort 1988, 19). In democratic polities, the moral universe becomes characterized by a plurality of legitimate claims to the common good, and dissent is endorsed as a permanent and even beneficial characteristic of the polity.

Pluralist partisans therefore know that political disagreement over the *meaning and implications* of common principles is both ineliminable in a modern liberal democracy and central to its perpetuation. They do not question the fundamental moral indeterminacy of democracy and accept that power can only be occupied for a limited period of time. In other words, pluralist partisans "do not want or expect the elimination of political lines of division" precisely because they are committed to the "system of regulated rivalry that defines liberal democracy" (Rosenblum 2008, 364; 362). They fight, while accepting the impossibility of a final victory, without aiming for their struggle to end future contestation and bring about a permanent consensus.

One would especially expect from pluralist partisans that they refrain from engaging in *monistic* political appeals. In other words, partisans will not picture the common good as a unitary, immutable and uncontroversial notion that their party alone defends. Pluralist partisans do not, for instance, claim any "mastery of the foundations of society", and therefore argue that they alone

can defend the democratic political community and represent its fundamental principles (Mouffe 2000, 21). Both nationalist and far-left forms of populism—a form of political discourse in which the speaker claims to express the people's will as a unitary whole—are by this token incompatible with pluralist forms of partisanship. This would also be the case for certain forms of technocratic appeals that reduce politics to finding the right means to reach widely accepted societal goals.¹⁹

Indicator 8: Pluralist partisans do not engage in monistic political appeals. In practice, this entails that:

- Pluralist partisans refrain from claiming that their party alone can truly represent the political community. For instance, a partisan who claims that only his party can speak for the nation because it alone defends its values and traditions engages in a monistic political appeal.

- Pluralist partisans refrain from claiming that there exists a single way of reaching widely accepted societal goals. For instance, a partisan who pictures unemployment as a problem for which there is only one correct solution, the one which his own party advocates, would be engaging in a monistic political appeal.

Attribute F: Respecting the boundaries of the liberal democratic framework

Pluralist partisanship does not only involve a certain type of attitude towards political opponents, but also to accept acting within the boundaries of the liberal democratic framework. The fact that partisans consider the principles and institutions of liberal democracy as foundational for the political community at large is part and parcel of their respect for political pluralism. First, a partisan can only accept and respect his opponents if he himself adopts this broad understanding of the common good. Partisans who outright reject the foundations of the democratic political community have no reason to respect their opponents for upholding them. Second, when opponents themselves violate these foundational principles and institutions, they put the system's integrity at risk and thus *de facto* cease to be respectable adversaries. By undermining the vocabulary that pluralist partisans have in common to settle disputes, they effectively destroy the ground for civic trust and mutual understanding that is necessary for the unity and stability of democracy.

To this extent, we can expect from pluralist partisans that they show respect for the boundaries of the common good broadly understood, and therefore do not engage in appeals that

¹⁹ Muirhead uses the term "naive holism" to designate the attitudes of those partisans who argue that there exists a 'right' set of means to reach the common good, and that these can be established by turning to expertise and doing away with ideological considerations (Muirhead 2014, 145). Other theorists have underlined similarities in this respect between technocratic and populist appeals (Bickerton and Invernizzi 2015).

would undermine the widely accepted societal objectives, fundamental principles, and institutions of liberal democracy.

Indicator 9: Pluralist partisans express commitment to the political framework of liberal democracy in their claims to political representation. In practice this entails that:

- Pluralist partisans do not question the fundamental principles that constitute the common good in democratic societies. For instance, a pluralist partisan will not argue in favour of establishing different rights for certain categories of citizens, as this goes against the fundamental principle of citizens' equality before the law.

- Pluralist partisans do not question the legitimacy of democratic institutions or the outcome of democratic procedures in their discourse. For instance, a pluralist partisan will not question the necessity of an independent media or judiciary, or make statements that challenge the outcome of an election or the decision of a court.

[Table 1 about here].

APPLYING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RESEARCH DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

The following sections offer guidelines on the types of studies that are most likely to realize the potential of this theoretical framework as a basis for evaluating the democratic merits of partisanship within a given polity.²⁰ The first section considers issues of case selection and the second section tackles issues of data collection and analysis.

Case study selection

Studies that rely on discourse as their primary data seldom obey the criterion of the probability sample applied in quantitative research. As emphasized above, I define partisanship as the array of practices and discourses in support of a certain idea of the common good that are attached to party leadership, membership or identification. To put together a data-set of partisan discourse that relies on a representative sample of elites, members and supporters from all existing parties within a given party system would be a labour-intensive, if not wholly unrealistic, endeavour.²¹ A critical case logic of selection, in which a given case is studied for what it reveals of

²⁰ As emphasized above, a comprehensive understanding of the democratic merits of partisanship would require elaborating similar standards for the study of partisan practice and analysing these in parallel of partisan discourse.

²¹ See Gamson's failed attempt at producing a probability sample for his *Talking Politics* project that relied on focus-group methodology, despite considerable financial means and a total of 188 recruited participants (Gamson 1992, 189-190)

the wider context within which it is set, is more appropriate to applying this theoretical framework. The paragraphs below offer some guidelines for selecting these cases.

First, the discourse of party activists and leaders is a more adequate source of evidence for studying democratic partisanship as compared to the discourse of party supporters. The former arguably offer a more faithful image of the general programs that parties campaign on as compared to the discourse of lay voters. While party elites define the party platform, activists are in frequent contact with the discourse of their leaders, and will regularly seek information on their party's policies and ideas. Second, party activists and elites have clearer responsibilities in the party hierarchy and have a greater and more direct moral responsibility to uphold democratic standards than supporters (Bonotti 2012). Party activists are closely associated with the party's functions of intermediation, and are thus responsible for delivering the party's message in person to the citizenry at large and mobilizing voters on its basis (Poguntke 2002, 9; Crouch 2004, 70-71). The fact that party leaders exercise political power at the local or national level gives them additional influence on the polity as a whole, and renders it particularly important that they uphold democratic standards. Given that grass-roots may be more radical than party elites (May 1973), gathering data on both of these groups would allow a more nuanced understanding of the democratic merits of partisanship within a given party.

Second, there is a case to be made for studying in the first instance *mainstream* parties. Mainstream here is not defined in terms of political moderation, but in terms of the potential for a party to win Presidential or Parliamentary elections, form political majorities and head governmental coalitions. Parties that are major opposition forces and are in a position to access positions of political power would also be included in this definition.²² From a normative perspective, it is important that mainstream parties so-defined uphold democratic standards as they have a greater potential to directly affect the stability and quality of democracy. Not only can they hold the bulk of state power and affect policy-making directly, they also have easier access to traditional media, more developed networks and deeper roots in society, thereby giving them more important means to shape public opinion. The democratic quality of mainstream partisanship may also be considered as a 'median' for the party system as a whole. If basic democratic norms are being infringed at the very centre of the party system, where one would expect greater moderation, it is likely that these norms are also being infringed in more radical sectors of the polity. While studying the democratic merits of fringe parties may be interesting for other reasons, to find that they disregard basic democratic norms would tell us little about the extent to which partisans more generally upholds these standards.

²² Following this definition, the Front National in the April 2017 French Presidential elections would for example be considered a mainstream party.

Finally, there is a case for studying the democratic merits of partisan discourse on both sides of the political spectrum and thus for understanding specific expressions of partisanship within a broader context of political competition. Partisan identities are defined relationally: partisans respond to their opponents and need opposition to ground and justify their own identities. The particular dynamic that exists between mainstream parties is thus likely to affect the extent to which, and ways in which, partisans uphold democratic standards.

Methods of data collection and analysis

As for methodological considerations, the subjects studied should be influenced as little as possible by the premises of the theoretical framework itself. Directive interviews or surveys, for instance, that question partisans directly on the cohesiveness of their positions or their respect for political pluralism will produce biased evidence. Subjects will be tempted to pre-empt the results of a given study and calibrate their own answers to this effect (Steiner et al. 2004, 54; White 2011, 45). The discourse of partisans can instead be studied in the context of political exchanges with fellow partisans or adversaries. In the course of such interactions, partisans are likely to justify their own positions and the positions of their party, thus offering the researcher an opportunity to study partisan cohesiveness. They are also likely to talk about their opponents and the positions of their opponents, democratic institutions, or the general validity of their own claims, thus allowing for an analysis of partisan pluralism.

The study of the democratic merits of party member discourse, for instance, is particularly amenable to focus-group methodology, although methods of participant observation may also be appropriate. The local sections of parties are places of political sociability for grass-root activists generally accessible to researchers, and where the latter can organize general discussions about current political affairs among small groups of fellow party members. This provides an ideal setting to study how partisans share, express and construct political norms in common (Gamson 1992, 191-192; White 2011, 40-5). One could start by comparing group discussions organized in five to seven different local sections in the capital of a given country, where party members are closer to the centre of political power.

The study of party elite discourse does not lend itself as obviously to focus-group methodology. Not only are party elite circles less easily accessible, but researchers are also less likely to find strong pre-existing peer groups of partisans in party headquarters or parliamentary groups as compared to local sections. Party elites may also be more concerned with their public image, and their discourse more contrived in a group interview setting. One alternative is to focus on parliamentary debates among representatives, where party elites both defend their own viewpoint and criticize the position of their political adversaries. One could consider discussions

over economic policy on the one hand, and over social issues relating to minority rights on the other, and gather such data during two distinct parliamentary sessions. TV debates between candidates during election campaigns are also relevant, especially because they represent an important source of information for voters in many contemporary democracies.

Working with written transcripts of these discussions or debates and coding them with the help of text-analysis software can systematize the process of data analysis. Coding in qualitative analysis may be defined as the process by which codes, or key words, are associated with portions of text—a word, a sentence, or a paragraph—throughout the data (Saldaña 2013). The same codes are used repeatedly, and different codes applied simultaneously throughout the data set. Counting these occurrences and co-occurrences allows for the identification of recurrent patterns and themes, and to identify variations in these patterns across different groups of speakers. A coding scheme can be derived from the theoretical framework established above, with different codes being attributed to the arguments developed by partisans depending on where they fall on the indicators defined in this article. With a sufficient amount of data, this process would allow comparing and identifying variations in the democratic merits of partisan groups depending on their place in the party hierarchy, their political affiliation within a given party system, the country they are part of, the policy area under discussion, etc. This could be done by counting the occurrences of different codes, or associating these codes with different numerical values. Ultimately, this process also allows devising a scale of cohesiveness and pluralism along which different partisan groupings can be placed.²³

CONCLUSION: NEW PATHS FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND NORMATIVE THEORIZING

In the past decade, a number of authors have called for greater dialogue between the empirical study of politics and normative theorizing (van Biezen and Saward 2008; Allern and Pedersen 2007; Shapiro 2002; Katz 2006; Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006). This paper offers concrete guidelines to engage in such a dialogue, drawing on principles of normative political theory to provide the basis for an empirical evaluation of the democratic merits of partisan discourse. I will conclude by highlighting some of the avenues of research that this approach opens.

The democratic merits of partisan discourse can be studied in a variety of national contexts, within different types of political parties and at different levels of the party hierarchy. While above I offered guidelines to obtain an estimate of the democratic merits of partisan

²³ Devising such a scale would require establishing the relative weight of the indicators provided in this article, and whether certain indicators should be given priority over others in assessing of the cohesiveness and pluralism of a given partisan grouping.

discourse within a given polity, the universe of cases would ultimately depend on the research question chosen. One could for instance consider democratic partisanship as the dependent variable, and study how the position of partisans within the party hierarchy affects the democratic merits of their discourse. At present, we know little about the attitudes of party members as compared to those of party elites, and even less on how members reflect on and position themselves vis-à-vis the identity and strategies of their own party (for a review of the literature, see Heidar 2006; van Haute 2011; for some exceptions, see Weltman and Billig 2001; Marlière 2007; van Haute and Carty 2012). To compare patterns of partisan discourse across different levels of the party organization would also provide information concerning the ways in which elite discourse socializes the party's lower ranks into democratic norms.

The democratic merits of partisan discourse can also be studied across a variety of national contexts. This would open the way to uncovering the cultural and economic determinants of democratic forms of partisanship. As emphasized above, partisans adapt to the environment in which they evolve, and the extent to which they uphold democratic standards will be dependent on a wealth of contextual factors. One could hypothesize, for instance, that a political context in which policy-making is particularly constrained by external factors would lead to lower levels of cohesiveness of mainstream partisan discourse. A recent history of authoritarian rule may also polarize partisanship and negatively affect the respect of partisans for political pluralism. These types of hypotheses can be verified by coding partisan discourse in a number of country cases, and estimating the correlation between the democratic merits of partisanship and other relevant indicators such as, in these cases, levels of socio-economic constraints or the age of a democracy.

The democratic merits of partisan discourse could also be considered as an independent variable, and its effects on other dimensions of a given polity analysed. In this regard, the impact of partisan discourse on citizens' attitudes and behaviours is a particularly important area of study. Public opinion and political communication studies have focused on how representatives can encourage or discourage the political engagement of citizens, and affect public opinion more broadly (Evans and Tilley 2012; Ansolabehere et al. 1994; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Romer, Jamieson, and Cappella 2000; Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Chong and Druckman 2007; Enyedi 2005). With data on democratic partisanship, one could investigate how partisan cohesiveness is perceived by citizens and affect their participation in civic life. Conversely, one could study the effects of pluralist partisanship on public opinion, and the extent to which partisan discourse can serve to encourage or discourage the consolidation of pluralist norms within society at large.²⁴

²⁴ Such research would appear particularly relevant given that these norms have been found to be eroding in established democracies (Foa and Mounk 2016).

At a more fundamental level, studying empirical variations in the democratic merits of partisanship will offer evidence on the nature of partisanship itself. While political theorists have emphasized in recent years the important contribution that partisans can make to democratic life, there also exists a long tradition of suspicion towards the intransigent and divisive character of the partisan passion (Rosenblum 2008). Empirical studies can show whether the stringent standards of normative political theory are attainable by real-world partisans, or whether they constitute an unrealistic ideal. One question that would be particularly interesting to investigate in this regard is whether the qualities of partisan cohesiveness and partisan respect for political pluralism can effectively co-exist, or whether they are in fact in tension with one another.²⁵

To study the empirical reality of democratic partisanship will also create new opportunities for normative democratic theory. It will open the door, for instance, to building typologies of partisanship depending on where real-world partisan discourses fall in terms of cohesiveness and pluralism. More broadly, applying the theoretical framework put forth in this paper will help answer questions that are of direct relevance to theorists of democracy and partisanship. Is there a fundamental tension between the different dimensions of democratic partisanship and therefore, more broadly, between the democratic and liberal dimensions of liberal democracy? Under what conditions, if any, can partisanship reconcile strong cohesiveness and a strong respect for political pluralism, and thus be fully democratic? What trade-offs between these two dimensions can we accept from a normative perspective, and what are the consequences of these trade-offs for liberal democracy at large? As theorists of partisanship grounded their analysis in the role that political parties have played in the historical development of democracy, so they can further refine their work and expand its scope on the basis of contemporary studies of partisan discourse.

In a time when political parties are often made responsible for the deficits of contemporary liberal democracy, democratic partisanship should not remain an ideal that only concerns political theorists. This paper makes this ideal more amenable to empirical study and thus constitutes a step towards bridging the divide between normative theories of partisanship and empirical party studies. It conceptualizes an ideal of democratic partisanship that displays both programmatic cohesiveness and respect for political pluralism, according to which partisans are capable of offering citizens reasons to engage with the political process while safeguarding the integrity of the liberal democratic framework. By specifying the attributes that partisans should

²⁵ If these qualities go hand in hand, we would find a positive correlation between cohesiveness and pluralism, and partisans would tend to be either highly cohesive and pluralist, or weak in both their level of cohesiveness and pluralism. On the other hand, if there exists a tension between the cohesiveness of partisan claims and partisans' respect for political pluralism, we would rather observe a negative correlation between both qualities. Partisans displaying high levels of cohesiveness would also be weakly committed to pluralism, while the discourse of highly pluralist partisans would also be weakly cohesive. The relationship between cohesiveness and pluralism might not follow the same model under all conditions, and could be influenced by some of the factors mentioned above.

display to fulfil these democratic functions, this article provides a basis for both studying the extent to which real-world partisans meet democratic standards and further theorizing the unique contribution that parties can still make to contemporary democracy.

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