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## Review symposium: the democratic case for partisanship

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## **The Democratic Case for Partisanship**

Jonathan White and Lea Ypi

*The Meaning of Partisanship* is a book that restores the place of parties in political theory. It approaches partisan practices both from an external perspective, focused on their distinctive place in wider processes of democratic justification, and from an internal perspective, focused on the ethics of activism and its contribution to political commitment.

Our interlocutors rightly point out that our account is markedly different from other recent perspectives, most notably those of Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead.<sup>1</sup> Unlike their contributions, the argument of our book is a democratic rather than a liberal one. It interprets parties and the associative practices underpinning them as an essential component of the process by which political power can be endowed with legitimacy. Our account, of course, is not hostile to elements emphasised by these liberal alternatives. Like Muirhead for example, we acknowledge the role of partisan loyalty in supporting political commitment. And like Rosenblum, we emphasise the importance of partisanship in channelling political disagreement into forms of regulated rivalry. But while these alternative accounts take issue with an ideal of deliberation that seeks to develop shared standards of public reason-giving, partisanship for us is not only compatible with and constrained by these standards but also a practice that contributes to them.

In our account, parties differ from factions precisely in their ability to articulate principles and aims that meet deliberative criteria for reason-giving, i.e. general and reciprocal justifiability. For our liberal critics, this raises the question of the compatibility between such an ideal stance on justification (a commitment to reasons that can be shared or, in the case of partisanship, to principles and aims that claim to be generalizable and reciprocally justified) and the reality of sharp disagreement that pervades many aspects of political life. Muirhead's contribution in this journal proceeds from this contrast to develop two important lines of critique. In one, the demand for justification on which our defence of partisanship is grounded 'invites a diminution of (perhaps eradication of) disagreement' (p. XXX). In the other, this very same demand may "intensify disagreement, and make common decisions both elusive and contentious" (p. XXX). When the latter is the case, "deep, persistent disagreement might reign even when parties succeed in serving the philosophic cause of justification" (p. XXX).

There seems to be a tension between these two critiques. Either the demands for justification diminish or even eradicate disagreement, or they serve to exacerbate it. It is not

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenblum 2008 and Muirhead 2014.

clear that they can do both. The problem for the liberal account that Muirhead promotes is that whichever version of the critique one chooses, it undermines the case for a liberal defence of partisanship as much as a democratic one. Recall the liberal defence of partisanship as a form of regulated rivalry in the face of the necessity to avoid violence in politics. If one emphasises persistent disagreement, where does one find the agreed standard on which the ‘regulated’ part of ‘regulated rivalry’ depends? How does that standard get constructed? Public reason is surely an essential part of this, even in the minimal form it takes in the liberal account. On the other hand, if one emphasises the danger that through mere appeal to justification the benefits of disagreement are eradicated, one seems to collapse the distinction between an ideal of partisanship (however minimal) and the political reality of it. Yet this is a distinction to which even the less demanding accounts of partisanship must be committed, else they descend into a mere endorsement of *realpolitik*.

Muirhead acknowledges this point in distinguishing between two versions of legitimacy: a ‘philosophical’ one which emphasises the importance of the justification of power based on reasons that claim general acceptability, and a ‘sociological’ one that commands obedience even when particular decisions made by citizens are considered to be ‘disagreeable’. There is no reason, he suggests, to assume that the two overlap. But here one might wonder whether the contrast is not too sharp. The interesting and pertinent question is not whether there is a reliable overlap between the two but how one might conceptualise existing political practices so as to critically scrutinise their de facto (or sociological) legitimacy. Those who are interested in *democratic* agency are typically interested in *real* forms of collective self-rule, not their mere philosophical idealisation. At the same time, they emphasise that real political agency ought to be constrained by certain norms of argumentation so as to ward off descent into the kinds of selfish, asymmetric or manipulative forms of discourse that are conducive to abuses of power. The boundary between philosophical and sociological legitimacy-conferring practices is therefore more fluid than the contrast suggests. Our argument is that partisan agency, correctly understood, has the potential to contribute constructively to this process. This, in response to Muirhead’s question, is why it is crucial that partisans adhere to standards of political justification.

The book aims to defend partisanship both from the perspective of democratic values and from the perspective of those who might align themselves with a particular party. From this derives the twin focus on justification on the one hand and the epistemic and motivational empowerment of individuals on the other. A natural concern may be that the two dimensions are less consonant than we suggest. Muirhead plausibly asks whether this is

not the source of a tension in the book. Partisanship as a mode of public justification points, he suggests, to a potentially quite dry intellectual exercise, the preserve perhaps of an educated elite. To seek reasons that ‘all can accept’ is to adopt the stance of the philosopher. Partisanship on the other hand, as a mode in which individuals develop and refine their political commitments, points towards something more inclusive and involved. It is politics in the vernacular, combative and raw. ‘The two pull in opposing directions’ (Muirhead p.XXX).

Our understanding of partisan justification is not quite so esoteric. By emphasising the generalizability of partisan claims, we wanted to reassert the core of partisanship as a politics of *principle*, something more than the interest- and identity-politics it has too often come to be equated with. Partisanship is not about by-passing considerations of interest and identity in the name of universal reason, but seeking to embed them in a normative argument that explains which interests and identities are worth pursuing and why. Certainly, it is possible for debates on such questions to be had in a detached, philosophical register, technical in style and of narrow societal appeal. But the partisan way is to pursue them through political institutions and political activism. It is about enlisting adherents to a principled cause, one that can only prosper if couched in a popular idiom. The emergence of the Bernie Sanders Democrats, or the hundreds of thousands of citizens who recently joined the UK Labour party and propelled its gains in the June 2017 General Election, are just some examples of contemporary partisan projects that suggest a politics of principle need not be of merely elite interest. One should be wary of setting up a trade-off between political justification and activism.

Muirhead’s concern is not just that there may be a tension between justification and activism. His suggestion is that one is more important than the other, and that to approach them too even-handedly leads one to overlook partisanship’s true worth. Popular mobilisation is the real contribution of partisanship to democracy; seeking to balance this dimension with norms of justification, even if striking such a balance in real-world politics is just about conceivable, tilts the activity away from where its focus should be.

We are certainly not averse to emphasising partisanship’s capacity to draw ordinary people into politics. This is indeed an important feature – what we have called elsewhere its contribution to the *democratic ethos*<sup>2</sup> – and it is rooted in the good reasons individuals have to become partisans as these are discussed in the book. But one should be wary of decoupling the value of popular mobilisation from the normative standards that

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<sup>2</sup> White, Jonathan and Lea Ypi (2010), ‘Rethinking the Modern Prince: Partisanship and the Democratic Ethos’, *Political Studies* 58 (4), pp.809-28.

might regulate it. No-one needs to be reminded, in the age of Trump, that spectacular mobilisations can be achieved for the sake of political ends that scarcely look generalizable. Over the course of the 2016 US presidential election, Trump Republicans not only repeatedly addressed a constituency they defined amongst other things as white, but often did so with the clear suggestion that it should be privileged above others because its interests were ultimately the only ones to matter. The appeal is to a particularist group, pre-political in its composition, non-porous in its boundaries: either one belongs or one does not. This is what popular mobilisation divorced from standards of justification looks like. If one wants to defend party democracy, one needs to be clear on why Trump-like phenomena are so far removed from ethical partisanship.

Daniel Weinstock offers a different take on the contending arguments of the book. In his view, if there is a point of tension it is in the contribution of partisanship to democratic justification on the one hand and to the capacity of individuals to fulfil their ethical goals on the other. The conflict becomes apparent, he suggests, when one examines the different kinds of electoral system within which partisanship can arise. Following a consensus in comparative politics, he associates first-past-the-post (FPTP) systems with ‘big tent’ parties, united around very broad commitments and aimed at widespread public support, while proportional-representative systems allow the emergence of niche parties, more narrow and targeted in their appeal. The big-tent parties, Weinstock suggests, are the ones closest in spirit to partisanship as we describe it, as they seek programmes that can be justified to the many. Yet in order to fashion programmes with widespread appeal, their members must be willing to sacrifice much that is important to them personally. These parties are ‘sites of compromise’, indeed essentially ‘pre-electoral coalitions’. If there is something praiseworthy about them, it is exactly how they cultivate the spirit of compromise – not how they enable the realisation of ethical projects with which their members can readily identify. The concessions needed to form such parties inevitably put some distance between the projects of the group and the individual: intra-party compromise is thus central to the ethics of partisanship.

That the structure of the electoral system is a crucial real-world influence on the organisational forms of partisanship is a point we readily acknowledge. There is important work to be done on the normativity of electoral systems, a topic the book does not cover. Our intention was to develop a theory of partisanship independent of the context of existing institutions, in part so their reform and even transformation could be one aspect of its rationale. (This interest is clearest in the chapters on revolutionary and transnational

partisanship.) If one assumes institutions shape partisanship more than vice versa, one inevitably arrives at a rather domesticated vision of parties.

But granting that electoral systems matter, we would take issue with the characterisation of parties in FPTP systems as coalitions of diverse constituencies. This description bears the traces of the sociological reductionism the book is trying to get away from – an image of groups with predefined preferences, each seeking to negotiate the arrangement that best advances their prospects of power, each retaining their separate identities. We prefer to see large parties as groups of those who share some rough intuitions, but who engage in an ongoing project of working out the common political goals that can unify them. Unlike in the image of a coalition, their unity is forged in their joint activities – or revealed to be unattainable in the course of the same – rather than decided at the outset based on a strategic calculation. That rings true to us at any rate of the parties of the quintessential FPTP system at Westminster, both in their steady evolution as mass parties across the twentieth century, and in their more recent efforts to redefine themselves, not least in the light of Brexit.

What does that mean for compromise as an intra-party phenomenon and for the individual as a bearer of ethical commitments? Though one of our chapters explores intra-party compromise in the context of group obligations, the topic undoubtedly deserves further treatment. It is highly relevant to the *preservation* of party unity, once contending subgroups of opinion start to emerge over the course of its evolution. Weinstock is quite right to observe that intra-party disagreements can be as brutal as any. But to see compromise as central to the *formation* of parties, and to the individual's choice to align with one, again rather assumes clearly-defined preferences as the starting-point. If, as we suggest, the 'pre-partisan' individual starts out with looser intuitions, and the more defined positions emerge in the process of coordination (in line with our epistemic argument for partisanship), then it would be misleading to see them as embroiled in compromise from the get-go. They are still in the process of refining their views, and there is no strong contrast to be made between their personal projects and those of the collective. (This, one may add, is what makes *inter-party* compromise rather different: here the encounter is between agents who have already sought to define the political goals they stand for as part of the process of becoming a party.)

It is also worth noting that the parties that do relatively well in systems of proportional representation are not necessarily narrow in their intended constituency, and therefore no less conducive to justification around generalizable principles than those in FPTP systems. Green parties or far-left parties may be at least as principled in this sense as their 'big-tent' cousins, and they can influence the larger parties without necessarily forming

compromising coalitions with them. The size of the supporter base they draw is not the measure of their capacity to be partisan in the sense defended in the book.

Given this focus on the development of partisan attitudes and formative practices, rather than the organisational and institutional constraints in which they operate, one might argue, as Nadia Urbinati does, that the book is ultimately ‘not about parties, but rather partisanship as a political category and as a form of political judgment’ (p. XXX). On her account, partisanship ‘entails identification with one part and does not aim at the support of all the citizens or becoming identical with the whole’ (p. XXX). But this seems to us too strong a qualification. Partisanship is about the search for unity through a combination of contestation and deliberation. Of course, unity cannot be taken for granted, and the agreement of those who think differently on matters of common concern needs to be actively sought rather than presupposed. Their reasons have to be engaged in processes of justification rather than censored, dismissed or ignored. But no partisan is ever content with speaking only for the part and not the whole. To defend that view would be to discount the distinction between parties and factions that Urbinati also wants to endorse.

The idea that the partisan represents in practice just a part of the political community and yet, as a matter of principle, aspires to speak in the name of the whole may seem to point to an inescapable tension. As Urbinati sees it, this is tied with the recognition that partisanship aims at a condition that, if fully actualized, would render partisanship itself obsolete. And yet exactly this tension, Urbinati insists, should be seen as a productive one, at the heart of all attempts to preserve civic liberty in modern society. To seek to remove it by idealising agreement and unity would commit us to a condition whereby a part comes to dominate others, dogmatic and immune to self-doubt. Is this where our argument leads?

Urbinati is right to emphasise that our account differs from one where parties contribute to a political *modus vivendi* constrained by ‘a noble’, ‘constitutional’ ‘pact’ that ‘remains above partisanship as its condition and limitation’. But the notion of partisanship she puts forward as an alternative seems to lead to a reified conception of politics, whereby certain projects are removed from public scrutiny because, as she says, at ‘a certain point’ in history the decision is made to subject all partisan activity to the limitations derived from foundational legal principles and norms. To fix the limits to partisan activity in decisions that are made at a particular point in history removes history and tradition from human reach and turns them into an alien force able to command obedience for inscrutable reasons. If all one can do is subject oneself to traditional constitutional authority and never question it, regardless of how political circumstances might change over time, how do we encourage the kind of political activity that Urbinati grants is necessary to democratic legitimacy?

In our view, partisanship is tempered not by the sedimentation of the past in legal doctrine or the veneration of constitutional tradition, but by the respect for one's adversaries embedded in the commitment to certain standards of reason-giving and the ongoing attempt to make practice conform to such standards. Although the more specific application of these standards is undeniably informed by existing political tradition and legal texts, we also have an obligation to continuously problematise the latter in light of new political circumstances and the demands for inclusion raised by newly emerging subjects. In this way the process of political justification of which partisanship forms an essential part retains the potential to innovate and transform society in a fashion that preserves stability and acknowledges the ongoing concerns and commitments of other agents. This leads to a different kind of existential stance from the one Urbinati suggests, albeit not one immune to self-criticism. The partisan we have in mind need not constantly doubt the plausibility of her principles and aims, but can remain open to criticisms concerning how they are pursued, and aware that power struggles, ideological distortions or simply the contingency of events stand in the way of even the best political projects.

If one takes justification seriously as a practice, the authentic partisan must remain willing to engage with adversaries, be responsive to public scrutiny, and remain open to learning from her mistakes. Self-doubt need not entail existential questioning of one's strongest beliefs and principles. And self-assertion need not come in the form of a false self-assurance. The partisan draws strength from the collective resources that she finds in the co-pursuit of her principles with others, and encourages criticism by knowing that, as Urbinati emphasizes with Mill, even the best views need public adversaries in order to be thoroughly tested. This is why both the party as organization and partisanship as an outlook matter. And it is also why partisanship should not be reduced to a mere paradigm of political judgment. Partisanship is about embracing real collective agency in an attempt to construct a general will, as opposed to resigning oneself to being just a part in the exercise of the will of all.

When collective agency in this ideal form is brought centre-stage, doubt and certainty do not pull apart but rather support each other. Views are made stronger by being publicly scrutinized, criticism is required for self-correction, and self-correction is understood to be crucial to further collective emancipation.