

THE SEMI-FUTURE DEMOCRACY

A LIBERAL THEORY OF
THE LONG-TERM VIEW

ANDRE SANTOS CAMPOS



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To Madalena and Margarida, my muses of the semi-future

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INTRODUCTION: FACING THE DEMOCRATIC TEMPORAL PUZZLE

The oldest surviving Greek law on stone, known as the Dreros inscription, shows how closely time and politics relate:

The city has thus decided; when a man has been *kosmos*, the same man shall not be *kosmos* again for ten years.¹

From the outset, collective decision-making is time-sensitive and time-affecting. The city's core values and foundations are shaped by time, and their protection requires ruling over time. The city decides to tame time to protect the very nature of collective decision-making from the passing of time. Democracy shares this need. Temporal constraints have prevailed in democracy since its earliest Athenian version, ranging from cyclical political offices to fixed time limits on speeches in assemblies and courts. Self-limitation and renovation in time are necessary features of democracy.

However, the Dreros inscription teaches not only by what it says, but also by what it is. Temporal limits to political offices are so important to the city's governance that they must be inscribed in stone. The rule that limits time is expected to endure. Democracies aim to govern for the future, and the appropriate way to do so is by deploying dates that carve out durations of time. On the one hand, democracies govern for the indefinite future; on the other, they

¹ Meiggs and Lewis 1969: 2–3.

are justified as a form of government because (and insofar as) they govern for a definite future.

More recently, this temporal ambiguity has been under severe pressure. Unprecedented technological advances and overly complex social and economic structures have increased the capacities of current societies, including those organised as democracies, to produce considerable amounts of value over the future. This gives rise in the present to problems regarding the far-off future. Some of these problems, such as the amount of public debt, youth unemployment and the funding for future pensions, can potentially create unjust and unstable conditions in future societies. But others are so urgent that not facing them in the present may impact political communities to the point of carrying ‘existential risk’,² climate change being the most visible. Any delay in meeting the long term is likely to miss a rapidly closing window to prevent catastrophic harm from falling upon future others. We face a paradox of temporal distance: the urgency of the long-term view.

Two questions arise from this pressure: should democracies care? And, if so, can they do anything about it? The first question does not seem complicated. Our intuitions suggest that we should care about the future because there are strong moral reasons for doing so, and democracies are not insensitive to moral values. This view has spawned an entire field of studies in political theory that combines generational timescapes³ with theories of justice, called ‘intergenerational justice’. The topic of intergenerational justice revolves chiefly around the relevant standards of justice and the contents of the duties that present generations may have vis-à-vis future generations. Additionally, since democracies govern for the indefinite future, it makes sense that they avoid self-destruction across long periods. Besides justice, then, political endurance also provides reasons for caring about the future.

The second question is more problematic, however. Since democracies govern for the indefinite future but only by imposing on themselves strict (and often short) time limits, is it possible (both in terms of feasibility and justification) for a democracy to seriously consider and even prioritise the distant future within the temporal confines that make it a democracy in the first place? We can call this difficulty *the democratic temporal puzzle*. Once the future is considered worthy of consideration in current political decision-making, this puzzle hangs over democracy like the sword of Damocles, forcing it to relinquish its averred

² Bostrom 2013; Ord 2020.

³ The notion of *timescape* was developed by Barbara Adam and refers to ‘a cluster of temporal features’ that encompass several dimensions (historical, social, economic, political, etc.) and standards of time, including time frames, temporality, timing, tempo, duration, sequence and temporal modalities (past, present, future): cf. Adam 2004: 143. This is the sense in which I employ the term throughout the book.

moral superiority in favour of other regimes less dependent on recurring time limits or to adopt the long-term view.

ALTERNATIVE RESPONSES: BENEVOLENT AUTHORITARIANISM AND
INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE

On 1 April 2016, China and the United States issued a joint statement confirming they would sign the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. On 4 August 2017, the newly elected US administration delivered an official notice to the United Nations (UN) stating its intention to withdraw from the Agreement. On 18 October of the same year, Chinese President Xi Jinping confirmed the decision to initiate the transition to ‘ecological civilisation’ at the opening of the Communist Party’s Congress. On 4 November 2019, the United States notified the UN Secretary-General of its withdrawal.

On 22 September 2020, Xi Jinping announced China’s commitment to being carbon neutral by 2060 during the UN Climate Ambition Summit. Later in the same year, the US presidential elections produced a new administration. One of the first acts of the newly elected president was to request the readmittance of the United States into the Paris Agreement, which it did in February 2021. Then, on 22 April 2021, the US president announced a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 50 per cent of 2005 levels by 2030.

This succession of events spanning a mere five years illustrates how the long-term ecological problem became the object of a new kind of cold war about hot global temperatures. China’s announcement to develop an environmental transition could be seen as part of a geopolitical consolidation strategy against the West, marking its stark contrast to the United States’ non-commitment to the Paris Agreement at the time. And the return of the United States to the Agreement in 2021 could be seen as an attempt to push back against China’s apparent willingness to use environmental goals as a way to regain international credibility. However, these events also illustrate another side of the democratic temporal puzzle: long-term commitments seem to depend on the vagaries of electoral politics just as much as on the contingencies of international relations. What a democratic administration says today about the long term is likely to fall apart after the next election – an ailment less frequent (or, at least, with longer intervals) in authoritarian regimes.

Assuming that doing nothing about problems so severe as the twenty-first-century Tophet that is climate change is not a reasonable option, two types of answers to the puzzle usually ensue. The first derives from non-liberal approaches to climate change ethics. According to this view, elected officials in contemporary democracies are trapped inside the electoral time horizon. They are unable structurally and culturally to prioritise strategies that do not bear fruit until they are sure to remain in office. Simply put, democracies are

ill-suited to tackle long-term problems. They have an inbuilt tendency towards the short term, making it impossible to sustain an argument from democracy that promotes long-term thinking and decision-making. This entails the painful choice of relinquishing democracy in favour of radical reforms or, as a last resort, of authoritarian eco-friendlier forms of government.⁴

Most futures studies do not usually take this answer seriously because the available data does not support it. Comparative studies show that authoritarian regimes display less concern for their citizens' interests regarding the future, especially when affected by high levels of patronage and corruption. Their performance tackling environmental-related issues is worse than that of democracies.⁵ In this light, what is needed is not a dismissal of democracy but a renewal of the structures that improve environmental performance and introduce ecological depth.⁶

This defence of democracy seems to rely entirely on output-oriented arguments within the scope of climate change. However, democracy's higher ground does not follow (solely) from its *results* (much less on only one area of policy-making) but from its *procedures*. Democracy may fare better than its competitors when it comes to obtaining results, but such results are not guaranteed, and, most importantly, they are not the cause of its legitimacy. Otherwise, democracy would become illegitimate whenever it did not produce the best results. The quality of the results cannot be detached from the quality of the procedures. Focusing on results alone to determine the best political regime makes the normative determination too dependent on contingencies. This also applies to green authoritarianism. The available data does show that authoritarian regimes do not fare well in long-term (climate-protective) projects. However, the data is not up to date. We still have not collected sufficient information concerning

⁴ Heilbroner 1991: 134; Ophuls and Boyan 1992; Shearman and Smith 2007; Beeson 2010; Randers 2012; Lovelock 2014: 119–20; Bell 2016; Rees 2018: 226–7; Mittiga 2022. This idea is hardly new in political theory. For instance, Machiavelli formulates it explicitly when he mentions in the *Discourses on Livy* that well-built republics should be prepared to welcome (provisional) dictators in times of urgency and that failure to do so leads to 'utter ruin' (Machiavelli 1996: 75).

⁵ Jamie McQuilkin (2016) and Roman Krznaric (2020) have worked on two indicator systems: the 'Intergenerational Solidarity Index' (ISI), which measures the future orientation of political systems, namely, of non-democracies and democracies; and the 'V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index', which measures the degree of democratisation of states. By superimposing both data sets, they identify the following patterns: 'of the 25 countries with the highest scores on the ISI, 21 of them – 84 per cent – are democracies . . . Out of all 60 democracies, 75 per cent are Long-Term Democracies, while out of all 62 autocracies, only 37 per cent are Long-Term Autocracies. The average intergenerational solidarity score for democracies is 60, while the average for autocracies is just 42' (Krznaric 2020: 172).

⁶ Cf. Jänicke 1996; Fiorino 2018: 113; Hanusch 2018; Laurent 2019.

the effectiveness of authoritarian regimes that embrace long-term environmental causes. Suppose China improves its performance indexes in ecological protection, following its assumption that it can be more effective than liberal democracies towards long-term projects once it commits to them.⁷ How is the argument from democratic effectiveness to hold then? Democracy's averred superiority over competing regimes cannot rely solely on output-oriented arguments, even if the available data continues to lean in its favour.

The second type of answer to the democratic temporal puzzle derives from intergenerational justice studies. Long-term problems stem from the capacity of the present to affect future generations negatively, which are powerless today to do anything about it. Fair treatment of future generations requires a reconciliation between democracy and the long-term view. This type of answer branches out into two positions. The first – let us call it ‘the long-termist view of intergenerational justice’ – proposes to reform or create institutions at the heart of democracy that are future-oriented or future-beneficial. The theoretical task at hand would be to privilege concerns with the long term while preserving democratic environments. The second position – let us call it ‘the short-termist view of intergenerational justice’ – accepts that privileging the short term is a necessary and unavoidable feature of democracies. Democracies have characteristics that promote short-term thinking and planning, which means that they share a bias in favour of present over future generations. Long-term problems must be tackled via mechanisms that eliminate, mitigate or compensate for wrongful short-termism. In this framework, we need to ensure that short-term actions and policies do not prioritise the interests of those near in time over those further off in time in such a way that they either violate responsibilities to persons of the future or endanger certain goods and ideals which have a value beyond their contribution to justice.⁸

THE DEMOCRATIC TEMPORAL PUZZLE'S STING: NORMATIVE, NOT FUNCTIONAL

There is something rather unsatisfying about both standard responses to the democratic temporal puzzle. Many proposals for improving future-friendly democratic governance build on the assumption that bringing the far-off future

⁷ Cf. Halper 2012; Gilley 2012; Kelleher and Kim 2014; Rees 2018: 226–7. For the claim that China is structurally better suited than democracies for implementing long-term green policies, see Bell 2016: 54.

⁸ Developments in both positions can be found in Campos 2018. Michael K. MacKenzie (2021a) has tried to push for what he takes to be a third position favouring the democratic long-term view while sidestepping issues of intergenerational justice. However, since his objective to strike a balance between ‘the legitimate concerns of the present and the potential interests of the future’ (p. 74) seems to be entirely grounded on the moral relevance in the present of such potential interests, his proposal inadvertently falls under the first position.

into present democracy is possible and needed. Each new proposal aims to be more effective than others at ensuring long-term governance, especially by motivating political actors to respond to long-term interests rather than to short-term preferences. The emphasis on incentives by such proposals follows mainly from the perception that the challenge directed at democracy is primarily of a practical and functional nature. Asking whether democracies *can* establish and implement policies that take the distant future into account relates to the tools and decisional mechanisms and structures (such as procedures, institutions, motivations, etc.) available to political actors in democratic environments to decide for the long term. If democracies do not have such mechanisms, they should acquire them.

However, the problem runs deeper. The democratic temporal puzzle's sting is as normative as it is functional. On the one hand, benevolent authoritarianism is not a viable option for Western societies. Liberal democracies are far more value-laden than other regimes: people living in them are not prepared to give them up; vast numbers of people not living in them crave to be able to do so. On the other hand, bringing the extended future into the present of representative democracies may challenge some of the normative elements that make democratic rule legitimate in the first place. Reconfiguring democratic structures that facilitate pragmatic decision-making in favour of the future runs the risk of destroying the very foundations on which the democratic edifice stands.

Such proposals often rely on the applicability to a non-overlapping future (i.e., a future moment in which all people alive overlap at no point in time with people alive today) of notions initially devised to explain the relations between contemporaries (e.g., rights, representation and equality). However, some of these notions may not be as temporally elastic as they seem. They can be at odds with some of democracies' basic elements when used as bridges for connecting the present and the distant future.

Scholars working in cross-generational perspectives often overlook this potential incompatibility. They simply assume that normative concepts are temporally elastic. This assumption, and the many proposals regarding the non-overlapping future that follow from it, is highly questionable, though. To see how this is so, a simple intuitive test suffices – I call it the 'backward-looking test'. We often forget that we are today past people's future people. Do all the normative concepts we employ regarding the non-overlapping future apply easily to people in the past regarding us? For instance, can we say we have claim-rights towards people of the Roman Empire long before we (and the very idea of individual or group rights) were born? That medieval landlords governed us or dominated us in some sense? That dictators of the past represented us when they spoke about their nation's future? That our forefathers acted in ways that harmed us or continue to harm us today? Most scholars working on intergenerational justice will likely be able to offer robust and persuasive arguments in

favour of affirmative responses to these questions. But the very fact that such affirmative responses are not intuitively shared and require justification already shows how questionable the assumption is. I see this often with my students when I submit them to the backward-looking test – responses in class are often divided even when they all seem to agree that we have moral duties towards future people and that democracies should do something about it as a result.

In light of this, long-termist approaches require further theoretical work that grounds democratic long-term governance without losing sight of the foundations of democracy that turn democratic rule into *legitimate rule*. The potential failure of fundamental concepts to stretch over long temporal distances might entail that solutions to long-term problems follow from demands of justice alone and that arguments from democracy dwindle in the face of severe problems related to the future. This is unacceptable to any democratic theorist. In the face of long-term problems, contemporary democracies must commit to the long-term view and establish a balance between those participating in representative democracies and those whose interests will be affected by today's decisions. The need for this commitment is the primary driving force behind this book.

FOCUSING ON LONG-TERM DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

Simon Caney suggests that 'harmful short-termism' should be countered by 'political institutions for the future', which are evaluated according to four criteria: effectiveness, moral legitimacy, political sustainability (i.e., preservation across time) and political accessibility (i.e., the likelihood of getting from the status quo to the new).⁹ The democratic temporal puzzle's normative sting focuses mainly on the second criterion. However, Caney talks about *moral* legitimacy, referring to substantive and procedural justice, as if there were no difference between (distributive and social) justice and *political* legitimacy.¹⁰ The theoretical spectrum of legitimacy typically extends beyond matters of justice, though.

From a political standpoint, legitimacy concerns the conditions under which recourse to coercion is justified qua political power. Legitimacy is then the quality of a political arrangement or institution to claim obedience from a set of political actors grounded on a particular normative element. Strictly in descriptive terms, political scientists associate the concept with the triad of ideal types of legitimate domination (charisma, tradition and legality) developed by Max Weber during the 1910s – political authority is legitimate when it is seen as 'just' or 'worthy' in the eyes of those who have claims to obedience and those

⁹ Caney 2016: 140–2.

¹⁰ Allen Buchanan forcefully ties legitimacy to justice, maintaining that only justice is sufficiently robust to legitimate a state: Buchanan 2003: 247.

who have to obey.¹¹ In democracies, however, the normative element of legitimacy is key. The benchmark of justification extends beyond the mere fact of subjective perception of legitimacy to encompass robust objective reasons for obeying a power structure, whether such reasons are grounded on fairness, the common good, membership, prudence, natural duties, Samaritanism, religious naturalism or some form of consent.¹²

Standard theories of legitimacy often apply their adopted moral benchmarks to liberal democracies without special consideration for temporal elements. This silent presumption is ungrounded, however. A mere glance at the most debated theories in the literature about the normative criteria of legitimate authority shows that they refer unevenly to time. Fairness, common good principles and community membership seem inextricably linked to the past as benefits can be received only by already existing authorities, and one can only become a member of previously existing communities that already have their own conception of the common good. Prudence is fixated upon the future, albeit it falls short of justifying specific political and constitutional arrangements and instead justifies only persons and procedures. Theories of natural duty (such as Rawls' duty to uphold just institutions), Samaritanism, religious naturalism, and hypothetical and normative consent build on timeless conceptions of legitimacy. And actual consent, whether explicit or tacit, seems strictly presentist.

Current debates on political legitimacy can be interpreted as endeavours to find the right balance between different theories. This explains the proliferation of theories that combine principles cherrypicked from diverse sources – a multi-principle approach.¹³ The same endeavours can be regarded as balancing different temporal modes. For instance, whereas contractualists and liberal-egalitarians provide methods and instruments for justifying forms of democracy that are dependent on tenseless kinds of rational choice, conservatives, libertarians, communitarians and deliberative democrats accuse them of failing to acknowledge the role played by history and dialogical decision-making across time.¹⁴ In this framework, the move to separate the authority of history from problems of legitimacy is associated with a preference for timeless principles. Their application method is a top-down approach – ‘vertical time-binding’.¹⁵

However, such atemporal theories fail to be sufficiently attentive to the specificity of each decision-making authority. Whether a regime is democratic or autocratic, participatory or technocratic, representative or epistocratic, should matter for establishing the principles that make a *de facto* authority a genuine

¹¹ Weber 1978: 213.

¹² For surveys of these theories, see, for instance, Horton 1992; Knowles 2010; Wendt 2018.

¹³ Wolff 2000; Klosko 2005.

¹⁴ Cf. Lane 2000.

¹⁵ I draw this expression from Mueller 2016: 97–127.

de jure authority. In democracies, this specificity is unmistakable: legitimacy cannot follow simply from a top-down movement if it is supposed to ground an authority that describes itself as government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people. Within the liberal tradition, individuals have a constitutive role regarding legitimate authority – legitimacy needs to be acquired in a bottom-up movement. This means that, even though consent theories are liable to criticism on the grounds of generality, as many people claim the right not to express consent, whether explicit or tacit, consent remains a necessary feature of democracy. It may not be an exclusive and sufficient criterion of legitimacy¹⁶ – but it is a necessary and primary criterion of democratic legitimacy.

One of the consequences brought forward by the democratic temporal puzzle is that the element of justification in democratic rule is time-sensitive and time-bound – democracies constantly appeal to some form of consent, acceptance or acceptability to project the image of legitimate governance.¹⁷ But is the justification of democratic rule that follows from it necessarily cross-temporal? Can democracies govern for the future, via ‘political institutions for the future’, in a way that privileges (or treats on equal footing) future people over present people, and still be called a legitimate government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people? This is problematic for intergenerational justice proposals that fall short of considering whether the exercise of coercion or power over present persons at the service of justice towards future (especially non-overlapping) generations, particularly in cases involving trade-offs between the present and the future, is legitimate or not.

If not, such future-oriented coercion over present people (or, because it is unjustified coercion, violence) might even become a case of ‘harmful long-termism’, as

¹⁶ Cf. especially Raz 1994: 355–69. However, consent’s insufficiency as a criterion of democratic legitimacy (requiring the primacy of moral values such as individual autonomy) does not overrule its value in the constitution of democratic authority. Consenting to be governed by some authority expresses a commitment to that authority’s ability to govern in a way that incorporates moral values respectful of individual autonomy. For a somewhat similar view, see Applbaum 2019, for whom the government of a nation-state rules its citizens legitimately only if it realises and protects their freedom over time and offers the conditions for them to be constituent members of its operation as a group agent.

¹⁷ Consent, acceptance, and acceptability are concepts that do not necessarily coincide, and it is debatable on which of them democratic legitimacy might depend: cf. Wendt 2016. The impossibility of dismissing any one of them entirely from questions of political legitimacy (more specifically, questions pertaining to the justification of coercion that aims at solving what Bernard Williams called ‘the first political question’, that is, the securing of order, protection, safety and the conditions of cooperation) is, nevertheless, endorsed both by political realists who prioritise legitimacy over other political values (e.g., Williams 2005; Geuss 2008; Rossi 2012; Sleat 2013; Waldron 2013; Larmore 2020) and by political moralists who are not insensitive to legitimation demands (e.g., Rawls 1993: 136–7).

it is harmful to present persons. In addition, if legitimacy concerns the justification of democratic decision-making, and justice is about distributing or relating certain goods, it is at least conceivable that certain forms of rule can be unjust while democratically legitimate, and vice versa. A law or policy may be permissibly and justifiably enforceable (in the sense that democratic provenance can bestow a minimum justifiable enforceability on a law or policy) if it was decided by a proper democratic procedure, even if that law or policy is somewhat unjust.¹⁸ The emphasis on legitimacy highlights a potential devaluation of the significance of justice-focused approaches to long-term problems, especially in democratic contexts.¹⁹ To overcome this difficulty, what is wanting is a perception of democratic legitimacy that extends beyond the mere short term and provides a viable solution to the democratic temporal puzzle – the semi-future temporal order provides such a novel time perception.

THE SEMI-FUTURE TEMPORAL ORDER

The battleground where the democratic defence of the long-term view must occur is far more complex than the world in which (structurally short-termist) democracies duel (structurally long-termist) authoritarian regimes for geopolitical supremacy. The ‘new-cold-war-about-hot-global-temperatures’ analogy I mentioned earlier relies on a polarised perspective of current world politics that can be useful to frame the distinctive way each regime is more or less bound to shorter time horizons, but which also clouds any genuine ambition to understand the threats faced by contemporary democracies. The truth is that the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism has become increasingly blurred in practice.

Scholars have discussed the crisis of democracy for decades, distinguishing between flawed democracies, anocracies and hybrid regimes. These categories usually cover countries that have not successfully transitioned from authoritarian

¹⁸ If the decision is gravely unjust, however, democratic legitimacy in this sense of focusing on provenance rather than content may not be sufficient to justify enforceability. Among others, see, for instance, Rawls 1993: 428; Estlund 2008; Kolodny 2014; Viehoff 2014. The problem does not necessarily need to be framed in terms of legitimacy versus justice, however, but also in terms of justice of procedures versus justice of decisions. That is what Philip Pettit (2015: 11) does when he distinguishes between ‘political justice’ and ‘social justice’, the former coinciding with what is usually called legitimacy. However, as Stemplowska and Swift (2018: 5) well point out, this ‘still leaves conceptual space between the justice of a decision-making procedure and the justice of the content of its outcomes . . . [a]nd it raises the question of how the two kinds of justice relate to each other when it comes to assessing the normative status of particular decisions’. Hence, our preference for preserving the legitimacy–justice distinction.

¹⁹ In this sense, see Gosseries 2023: 150–65, one of the few authors within the field of intergenerational studies, along with Beckman 2013, who takes questions of legitimacy seriously.

to democratic regimes and remain outside the Western context. However, a novel trend seems to be on the rise: the inclusion of Western consolidated democracies within these categories – a growing process of autocratisation consisting of a gradual drift of democracies away from their liberal foundations. After decades of paying attention to processes of democratisation that came in waves, the reversed processes of autocratisation in the post-war period are today at the centre of the academic debate on democratic theory.

The situation is dire for liberal democracy. Increasing social problems of the present, ranging from inequality issues to migration flows, economic crises, poverty, pandemics, war, high unemployment rates, identity clashes, terrorism, climate-related catastrophes, etc., have been drivers of a global decline in liberal democracy. Projections show that autocracies are home to 72 per cent of the world's population and that only 13 per cent live in liberal democratic societies today.²⁰ The last thing liberal democracies need now is the urgency of the long-term view.

This state of affairs can be neglected neither by democratic theory nor by intergenerational justice studies: arguments from fairness (and the corresponding effectiveness) towards future generations must be compatible with arguments from fairness (and the corresponding effectiveness) towards present generations. The danger is twofold. Privileging the long term without keeping in mind the need for a constant defence of democratic arrangements and values might ultimately prove to be the death knell of liberal democracy. Inversely, privileging liberal democratic arrangements as they are today without keeping in mind their need to adopt the long-term view might ultimately prove to be the death knell of a valuable form of civilisation for future generations.

The difficult task for political theorists is to develop the conceptual and normative work that advances democracy's capacities to govern for the future while sustaining liberal democracy as the best form of government for the present. Other forms of democratic procedure and organisation, such as deliberative democracy, may be valuable tools for introducing long-term considerations into policymaking. Many of their mechanisms are compatible with representative democracy and even desirable for its improvement and openness. However, when presented as alternatives to current democracies' status quo, their tempo tends to be in contrast to the urgency factor of the long-term view. Representative liberal democracies are certainly not the only political contexts for future-regarding collective action – but they seem better equipped in light of urgency and facilitated implementation factors, not to mention their familiarity with less disputed legitimacy standards. Democratic theorists attentive to the relevance of

²⁰ See V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index report for 2023: Papada et al. 2023. For a less bleak picture, see Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report for 2023: Freedom House 2023.

the long term should not be easily dismissive of representative liberal democracies despite the theoretical difficulties involved.

The Semi-Future Democracy embraces this task head-on. It provides a solution to the democratic temporal puzzle by showing that the core values and principles of liberal democracies offer cogent grounds for long-term thinking and decision-making insofar as they are perceived and practised as inherently multitemporal. The adjective ‘presentist’ has a distinctive meaning here. The present of democratic time is a complex collection of intertwined structures and institutions, each following its own rhythm and pursuing its own time horizon. In liberal democracies, the present cannot be singled out as a moment providential to itself within a linear series of moments throughout history. Instead, it is a temporal scheme in which memories about the past and expectations about the future exist with a truth value equivalent to everything that is accepted as the present. This perception significantly impacts the normative temporal grounds of liberal democracies, especially with regard to decision-making, which is always about the future. This novel form of time perception, I call ‘the semi-future’.

The underlying thesis of the semi-future temporal order is that some truth conditions about interests pertaining to persons of the present are necessarily the same in substance as the truth conditions that will hold throughout the future. If a motto could be attached to the semi-future, it would undoubtedly be the words Schiller attributes to General Albrecht von Wallenstein in his 1799 play *The Death of Wallenstein*: ‘in today already walks tomorrow’ (*in dem Heute wandelt schon das Morgen*).²¹ People alive today have objective interests regarding the future, specifically regarding the civil and political conditions they will enjoy. The semi-future democracy hinges chiefly on the political inclusion of all kinds of objective interests in the future through representation, especially by developing responsiveness and accountability mechanisms within extant models of government action. This inclusion is all-encompassing. People of all ages are said to be holders of objective interests in the future, and the further one is to the horizon of one’s life expectancy at birth, the richer the content of such objective interests in the future. Democratic governance proves possible and legitimate for extended time horizons, even if inapplicable directly to non-overlapping future generations.

This explanation is still somewhat obscure at this point, but I hope everything will be made clear from Chapter 3 onwards. In the semi-future temporal order, there is no legitimate way of bringing the future into the present in democratic decision-making except by recognising that the future is, in some sense, already an integral part of the present.

²¹ Schiller 1962: 531.

 THE VIEW FROM LIBERALISM

The temptation to favour the long term while preserving democracy by giving up on its liberal foundations is powerful. Non-liberal electoral democracies and electoral autocracies are already the most common regime types worldwide, and they seem to face fewer structural obstacles in the projection and implementation of longer time horizons than liberal democracies. *The Semi-Future Democracy* adopts a different approach, however.

This liberal starting point for promoting the long-term view might seem counter-intuitive. On the one hand, liberalism is not an easily definable category. No homogeneous set of essential properties makes up the label, and its meaning changes considerably across time and space. On the other hand, the emblematic mainframe of short-termist politics is illustrated precisely by liberal democracies and their emphasis on the rule of law. Adopting as a remedy the same practice that seemed to cause the illness in the first place runs contrary to common sense.²² Why, then, continue ‘the liberal story’?²³

Despite the array of meanings and the corresponding difficulty in crafting a precise definition of liberalism, it is still possible to narrate the liberal story if we accept the existence of a cluster of minimum commitments shared by those to which variations of the term ‘liberal’ apply and the fact that it constitutes a practice before being a typical ideology. A theory can be called ‘liberal’ if it falls under the broad conceptual umbrella provided by this ancestry and practice, even if different beliefs, attitudes and creeds coexist under the umbrella. Along the lines of such ancestry, there are at least four reasons why it is worth insisting on the view from liberalism: a moral reason about the priority of liberty; a methodological reason attached to individualism; an epistemic reason expressive of fallibilism; and a pragmatic reason that builds on the status quo of the historically available political regimes without relying on utopia to promote the long term.²⁴

The first reason is *moral* and refers to the *priority of liberty*. The openness to relinquish liberalism to favour the long term seems to imply a possible

²² Michael Kates (2015) calls this insistence ‘the bootstrap objection’, according to which (democratic) institutions designed to mitigate democratic myopia are subjected to the very myopia they are determined to mitigate in the first place. Karsten Klint Jensen (2015) calls it ‘the Münchhausen problem of motivation’. Both Kates and Jensen focus exclusively on institutional arrangements and political motivation, leaving untouched the question of principles.

²³ I borrow this expression from Harari 2018: 3.

²⁴ Recently, Francis Fukuyama (2022: 5–17) provided three different justifications for liberalism: pluralism in diverse societies; commitment to autonomy and equal dignity; and economic and technological success. I prefer to highlight different components of liberalism because of their connection with time. Recent defences of liberalism have completely neglected the importance of the temporal aspects of the liberal story, Fukuyama included.

incompatibility between governing for the future and preserving the freedom of contemporaries to choose their conceptions of the good and ways of life. The assumption seems to be that, to prevent individuals from engaging exclusively in harmful practices of short-termism, their freedom to choose such practices without being sufficiently attentive to the effects they might engender on the liberty of individuals in the future is justified in being limited. This assumption implies that governments can invoke some discretionarily established perception of what still does not exist to constrain the liberty of persons alive today. If there is anything history has taught us, it is that leaving the door open for adversaries of liberty to enter at any time is bound to have bad results. Eventually, they will come in – even more so if the door is wide open.

The semi-future democracy uses the incompatibility between long-term governance and the priority of liberty merely as a hypothesis to be tested rather than as an assumption one can readily acknowledge. Hopefully, at the end of the book, it will be possible to ascertain that the long-term view can be implemented in current democracies without losing sight of the fundamental liberal principles according to which collective arrangements should be organised in such a way that each person has the opportunity to form, revise and practice any reasonable conception of the good on equal terms with other persons, provided no direct harm is done to others.²⁵ Giving up on liberty and on the mid-level commitments that are grounded on the liberal principle of liberty among equals, such as majority rule and the right to political participation, seems too high a price to pay in favour of the future – especially if it offers no guarantees that the future will not have to pay the same (or even a higher) price.

²⁵ By accepting the priority of liberty to pursue reasonable conceptions of the good, I am not necessarily privileging liberal neutrality (the idea that the state should be governed by principles based primarily on justice and should not promote a particular conception of the good) over liberal perfectionism (the idea that the state acts fairly by promoting a liberal conception of the good in its policies, such as the promotion of a lifestyle that makes individual autonomy the primary value of human life). Despite what a significant amount of the literature on the subject seems to imply, I believe the opposition between neutrality and perfectionism is not evident in the liberal framework. For example, it is conceivable to demand neutrality of aims and intentions on the part of the state as the most efficient means of promoting a liberal conception of the good. Since both neutrality and perfectionism come in different versions, moderate versions of each might tend towards convergence: see Greenawalt 2003; for the opposite view, see Arneson 2014. Many of the arguments I develop concerning the nature of the polity in a semi-future democracy fit into this (conceivable) convergence between liberal neutrality and liberal perfectionism. What I decidedly reject by prioritising liberty is any kind of illiberal perfectionism. To put it differently, the liberal starting point solely admits forms of coercive perfectionism that are limited to non-essential political issues and fall outside the scope of what John Rawls called the basic structure of society. A coercive perfectionism that implies a violation of fundamental civil and political rights and of the underlying value of liberty has no place in this setting.

The second reason is both moral and *methodological*: the *emphasis on the individual* as the unit of legitimacy formation in democracies. In the liberal setting, liberty means primarily individual freedom. Individualism is often the scapegoat of short-termism. Individuals have short life spans, which means that, aside from the biological constraints to favour their offspring, they have few incentives to act for the benefit of a future in which they will no longer live. Their interests qua individuals are temporally limited, so they seem to fracture rather than expand time.²⁶ Thus, the widespread reception of the generational scheme,²⁷ of humanity's perspective,²⁸ and the allurements of communitarian approaches to justify cross-temporal governance and fairness. As community members rather than 'unencumbered selves', individuals share 'lifetime transcending interests',²⁹ and the idea of the common good predominant in each community necessarily stretches out towards time horizons that seem too long to individuals. This argument provides good reasons for democracies to strategise for the long run, and the semi-future framework is prepared to have room for it and accommodate communitarian preferences. However, it also seems to be an easy way out of the difficulties inherent in the temporally situated priority of liberty.

Democratic theorists working on futures studies should not regard the priority of individual liberty lightly. Taking the individual as a starting point entails considering that every person counts, and counts equally, and more than the aggregate to which that person belongs. This is an important feature when discussing the future. When we look at projections about future weather-related events, for instance, we read that 1.4 billion people could be displaced by 2060, rising to 2 billion by 2100.³⁰ Given the magnitude of such numbers, these projections sound like data produced by disaster studies. When we talk about something that probably occurs to billions of people, it seems like another million or so does not make that much (moral) difference. It is easy to lose track of the individual value and suffering involved in such numbers. Individualism overcomes this risk by attributing a privileged moral position to each person.

In this light, the concept of 'generation' does not seem suitable for approaching democratic long-term governance. On the one hand, population replacement is continuous, and there is no non-artificial way of conceiving of succeeding generations. Birth cohorts (groups of people born at a specific point in time, such as

²⁶ Cf. Deneen 2018: 72–7.

²⁷ White 2017.

²⁸ The perspective of the consequentialist terms in which longtermism is developed: cf., for instance, MacAskill 2022.

²⁹ Thompson 2009.

³⁰ Environmental Justice Foundation 2017. Other projections offer different (no less terrifying) numbers for 2050. For the World Bank, 140 million could be displaced by then (World Bank 2018); for the UN's International Organization for Migration, 200 million (International Organization for Migration 2008).

Baby Boomers or Millennials) and age groups (groups of people at a particular stage of their lives, such as under 21 and + 65) are unsatisfactory specifications of generations since they follow from disputable and arbitrary criteria, namely, the precise point or segment in time that categorises a cohort or the exact number of time units (years, days, etc.) that establishes an age group. Additionally, there is no single concept of 'same generation'. Families can have a partial temporal order because filiation is transitive (before the descendants, after the forebears), but this hardly applies to collective sets of different filiations. On the other hand, even if there were operational concepts of 'succeeding generations' and of 'same generation', applying the term 'generation' to the future would be too ambiguous. The expression 'future generations' can refer either to those who are not yet born, to those who have been born but are not yet citizens, or used simply as synonymous with an age cohort or an age group (e.g., the young). Such ambiguity and uncertainty make bringing specific generations into the centre stage of politics more challenging and tend to dilute the individual within this imprecise whole. It is preferable, then, to drop the focus on generations and intergenerational relations across time, whether overlapping or non-overlapping, and distinguish instead between the short term and the long term, between *members* of present generations (individuals alive today) and *members* of future generations (individuals yet unborn).

The third reason for standing by the liberal story is *epistemic*. One of the core tenets of liberalism is 'openness to doubt' or 'reliance on fallibilism'.³¹ The claim that an entity in a democratic environment is always right could be true in a liberal setting only if it referred to an ideal standard in light of which the actors of a reasonably pluralist world would undoubtedly settle on liberal justice and rights if they acted empirically as a whole. Political liberalism's starting point is the opposite: actors and decision-makers are right only until proven wrong, and everybody is liable to be proven wrong at any time concerning any subject – democracy is a system of 'institutionalized uncertainty'.³²

When dealing with long time horizons, the dimension of uncertainty inherent in the liberal decision-making process grows exponentially. The more the potential effects of actions and policies of the present stretch over the future, the more political actors need to embrace uncertainty and develop strategies for preventing inaction due to uncertainty. The upshot is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to long-term governance issues within the liberal framework.

A fourth reason for adopting the liberal framework is *pragmatic*. At the institutional level, liberal democracy is the standard expression of consolidated

³¹ Keane 2009: 103; Gopnik 2019: 26. For the view that liberal corrigibility is 'meliorist', see Gray 1986: x. The main classical source is ch. two of Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*: Mill 1991b: 19–35.

³² Przeworsky 1991: 13.

and fully-fledged conceptions of democracy in the West. In authoritarian countries, aspirations about transitions to democracy characteristically have the image of liberal democracy on the horizon. Liberal democracies are the only political regime heretofore structured in a way that incorporates the elements that people have come to recognise as ideal in functional democracies, namely, free, fair and transparent elections; the protection of human rights such as freedom of speech and association; the active participation of citizens in public life; accountability and separation of powers; and the rule of law.³³ Liberal democracy provides the factual substratum from which to construct a reflection on democratic long-term governance.

This aspect proves crucial for *The Semi-Future Democracy*. Instead of offering life-saving suggestions, tools, institutions, policies or strategies, it aims to reflect on the fundamental values and principles of liberal democracy to ascertain whether they can function as a solid ground on which to conduct legitimate long-term democratic governance. With this task in mind, it offers no more than a toolbox from which others can collect items for favouring the long term without giving up on democracy. Only the view from liberalism provides adequate conditions for doing so.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Can the liberal setting engender a sufficiently robust philosophical groundwork that establishes a durable and inspiring foundation for the long-term view and contributes to solving the democratic temporal puzzle?

The Semi-Future Democracy pursues the hypothesis that the long term is within reach of liberal democracies and concludes in the affirmative. The book is divided into two parts. Part I provides an overview of the complex nature of the democratic temporal puzzle and demonstrates how most proposals in favour of the non-overlapping future conflict with some of the core values and instruments of liberal democracy. This setting provides the starting point for constructing a novel notion of temporal democratic governance.

Chapter 1 shows that the commonplace view of liberal democracies as inherently ill-suited to deal with the long term is based on a misconception about the nature of democratic time. While it is true that democratic frameworks facilitate, privilege and reinforce short-term thinking, contemporary democracies incorporate various principles and institutions that have extended time horizons. Understanding democratic time in terms of multitemporality will provide the conceptual backdrop against which to set the balance between short-term and long-term decision-making, thereby leaving room for an argument from democracy that promotes the long term. The conclusion reinforces

³³ I follow roughly the basic elements of democracy defined by Diamond 2004.

the view that multitemporality is a necessary feature of liberal democracies that affects how they are hard-wired to deal with long-term problems.

Chapter 2 reveals that some of the basic tenets of representative liberal democracies (rights, representation, consent and egalitarian majority rule) are incompatible with including non-overlapping members of future generations in current democratic decision-making. The first section sheds light on the connection between legitimacy and the non-overlapping future – why it applies, why it matters and how we can try to establish it. However, the following four sections show a legitimacy gap in the inclusion of future people in current democracies based on four key concepts in democratic theory. The second section claims that the language of rights travels badly to future persons. Since liberal democracies are based on people in the present having rights, this poses a problem to cross-temporal defences of democracy when present interests protected by rights must be weighed against future interests not protected by rights in cases of apparent trade-offs. The third section applies the constructivist turn of political representation in current democratic procedures to cross-temporal contexts and concludes that the future hardly falls within the category of the represented. The fourth focuses on the impossibility of dismissing some form of actuality of consent for determining democratic legitimacy. Since future generations cannot express actual consent, this generates asymmetry problems in long-term governance. The final section focuses on the egalitarian plateau of rule by the people in aggregative contexts to show that future persons cannot be treated as equals in regimes that depend on the principle of majority rule to a certain extent.

The chapter ends with what seems like an obvious reminder: rights, representation, consent and majority rule are backed up by (and constitute) such robust moral reasons for democratic governance (such as the ideal of self-government grounded on political equality and democratic control) that democracy can hardly be dismissed on normative grounds. Part I ends aporetically, thus laying the ground for a novel theory of the long-term view.

Part II describes the foundations of the semi-future democratic polity, which expresses liberal democracy's embedded multitemporality. Chapter 3 construes the notion of the semi-future. Futures studies characteristically adopt a linear perception of time that encompasses the past, the present and the future in a unidirectional flow. This commonplace perception of time is likely to spawn a method of thinking about the long term that compares two arbitrarily chosen snapshots of the same course of time when dealing with the non-overlapping future: the comparative temporal snapshot method. The chapter shows that this method is inadequate and should be replaced by the semi-future, which conceives of a present moment t_1 and a future moment t_2 not as different times comparable as if they were different worlds, but as different stages of the same world with shared truth conditions. This allows statements about the present

pertaining to the future to hold true at both moments. After explaining how this works, the chapter applies the semi-future to interests and ascertains the existence of objective interests in the future shared by all members of the demos. Disregarding such interests in representative democracy generates a new legitimacy gap. Democracies need then to bring such interests into the political arena not only to improve the effectiveness conditions of strategising for the future but also for legitimacy and accountability reasons. By doing so, the very characteristics of this inclusion not only stretch the time horizons of democracy but are also likely to benefit the far-off future. The chapter ends with an explanation of how this form of time perception can still be beneficial to future generations.

Chapter 4 carries the semi-future temporal order into the representative democratic process. Without losing sight of the challenges posed by the constructivist turn in democratic representation, it focuses on the importance of responsiveness to interests as the paradigmatic criterion for assessing the quality of representative democracy while aiming to avoid paternalist forms of rule about the future. The argument depends on two theses: the virtual representation thesis, which allows the inclusion, in the class of the represented, of members of the demos who, for epistemic reasons related mainly to young age, either do not have preferences or are unable to express them politically, even in ideal conditions of communicability; and the temporal justification thesis, which focuses on the order of justification by establishing that a political decision is admittedly representative if it is made by a democratic authority that justifies the decision-making process and the decision reached in light solely of the represented's interests, in a dynamic, continuous and adaptive reason-giving procedure of communication between the representatives and the represented.

This still falls short of being a theory of democratic legitimacy, however, since it lacks the element of accountability. Chapter 5 deals with accountability and the need to introduce sufficiently robust drivers and incentive structures into the semi-future framework that can compete with the already extant (and potent) drivers of short-termism. Accountability in the semi-future representation has two forms of expression: responsibility and reflexivity. Responsibility is a kind of morally charged answerability towards someone about something, involving constraints to action and restrictions from acting. Reflexivity refers to an arrangement of interdependent institutions that answer to one another in different qualities and degrees in such a way that involves not only oversight but also the empowerment of citizens in official representative action as a result of oversight.

Chapter 6 introduces the structural and action-guiding principles that inform semi-future policymaking. Liberal democracies consolidate mechanisms for managing uncertainty, but when the latter is too dense to penetrate effortlessly,

as occurs in cases related to the long term, such mechanisms need to be reinforced without overlooking their justifiability. Cross-temporal governance is then described as a combination of three levels of operation: one that fosters public networking between the main political actors and those social entities capable of providing valuable input for long-term friendly decision-making; one in which semi-future-framed procedural path dependence is implemented in collective decision-making; and a third level, expressed in growing degrees of enforceability, that takes the semi-future temporal order into the international sphere. Once this combination is in place, it is possible to specify how the different time-related interests of members of the demos become aligned with the policies to be pursued in a semi-future democracy, namely, via the ‘multitemporal public consumption approach’, which involves a multifaceted notion of infrastructure and capital. In the end, even if the semi-future framework does not leave room for one-size-fits-all solutions to cross-temporal problems, the most favourable contexts for semi-future policymaking come to light.

CLARIFYING THE ENDS

The typical argument in futures studies concerning democracies’ relations to distant time horizons seems to run as follows: (1) current democracies are primarily short-termist; (2) short-termism tends to be harmful in the long run; (3) we have duties of justice not to harm people who will live in the future, including people who have not been born yet; therefore, (4) we have robust moral reasons to try to prevent harmful short-termism, and, in order to do so, we have either to (5) reconfigure democracies in a way that prevents their short-termism from being harmful in the long run, for instance, by establishing institutions for the future or by including future people in current democratic procedures, or to (6) give up on democracy and adopt a long-term friendlier regime, at least until the urgency of the long-term view lasts.

The Semi-Future Democracy distances itself from this argument in several respects. In the pages that follow, I aim to reject claim (6) as a necessary and acceptable derivation from (3) and (4); to disprove, in Chapter 1, statement (1); to show, in Chapter 2, that statement (5) faces severe legitimacy constraints; to reformulate statement (4) in an affirmative way that focuses on the political (rather than merely the moral) dimension, that is, as a promotion of long-termism that not only does not cause harm to people in the future but also takes their future existence into account in democratic procedures.

I accept statements (2) and (3) as plausible in the context of intergenerational justice and as challenging to liberal democracies, even if they hinge on a notion of harm that might be debatable in non-overlapping contexts that matter to legitimacy issues. For instance, Axel Gosseries maintains that Mill’s harm principle, rather than grounding a moral duty not to harm others, is a principle establishing a requirement of state coercion, and hence a principle

of legitimacy, not of justice³⁴ – and if there are reasons for believing that we cannot harm people who have not been born yet, for instance, in light of arguments such as the non-identity problem,³⁵ statements such as (3) lack normative robustness and persuasiveness. However, for the purposes of assessing the democratic legitimacy of long-term politics, there are still solid reasons for at least accepting the plausibility of statements like (2) and (3).

The first is that duties of justice towards the future do not have to be framed necessarily in person-affecting and non-overlapping terms but can just as reasonably be framed in group-affecting and overlapping terms. Current democracies have the potential to impact the lives of people in the future in a way that might make their future lives not worth living at all, regardless of their unknown identities today. That alone provides sufficient motivation for caring morally about the future. In addition, statement (3) can also be interpreted in a way that includes among the class of future people those whose identity is not yet known but can still be known within the lifetime of those alive in the present. The second reason is that, even though a harm principle such as Mill's is indeed primarily about legitimacy, it is not exclusively about it. Instead, it is a *substantive* principle of legitimacy, one that qualifies the provenance of democratic decisions as legitimate, but which contains a certain moral content for generating such qualification. The liberal setting does not depend exclusively on negative concepts of liberty that establish limits to state intervention, but is representative in that it embraces the function of trying to satisfy politically relevant interests that extend far beyond the expectation of 'not being harmed by another'. A third reason is that not all notions of harm are person-affecting and comparative-to-counterfactual in a way that makes them subject to criticism levelled by the non-identity problem. Other notions of harm, such as a comparative-to-norm notion of harm, seem to be immune to such criticisms, and democratic theory cannot simply neglect them. Moreover, duties of justice do not have to focus exclusively on (the prevention and reparation of) harm. They can also focus on the satisfaction of interests, needs or preferences.

³⁴ Gosseries 2023: 28. Gosseries adopts what he calls 'the severance approach', which separates harming from wronging in questions pertaining to non-overlapping intergenerational justice.

³⁵ The non-identity problem was developed by authors such as Thomas Schwartz (1978), Robert Merrihew Adams (1979), Gregory Kavka (1981), and especially Derek Parfit (1984: 351–79). According to Parfit's version, which particular future persons will exist is dependent on when their procreation takes place; even if we could suppose that following certain actions or policies would make future persons worse off, the people born as a result of these actions or policies would not have been born at all if an alternative action or policy had been adopted; therefore, assuming they have lives worth living, they are not harmed by those actions or policies. Since present persons' allegedly harmful actions or policies will also influence the identity of future persons, there is a sense in which future persons could not meaningfully be said to be harmed, and even less wronged.

Ultimately, the problem revealed by statements (2) and (3) may simply come down to the question of doing the right thing.

Still, knowing the right thing to do constitutes an argument from justice, not necessarily from legitimacy. *The Semi-Future Democracy* develops an argument from democracy in favour of distant time horizons that meets the legitimacy and accountability criteria of representative liberal systems. This means that it builds a notion of multitemporal democracy that is at odds with the standard view of democracy as inherently short-termist. But it also identifies severe legitimacy and accountability gaps in proposals to *include* the future in current democratic representative procedures. The most democracies can (and perhaps should) do in favour of people who will live in the distant future, then, is to *attend* to their future interests and rights, which does not seem a sufficiently robust desideratum in cases of trade-offs against the satisfaction of present interests and rights that are indeed included in democratic procedures. The way to overcome this difficulty is by reconfiguring the notion of representative democracy in multitemporal terms.

The Semi-Future Democracy is primarily an exercise in highlighting the (as-yet neglected) role of multitemporality in what became known as the representative turn in democratic theory that began in the late 1990s.³⁶ The book's starting point is that, far from being ineradicably coupled with immediatism and reduced to electoral governance, representation enables the democratic process in terms that allow for a variety of time horizons that are not necessarily available to participatory and deliberative forms of democracy. Representation is the opposite of neither participation nor deliberation – rather, it helps sustain both. Representative democracy's specificity derives from the circularity between citizens and polity, society and state, opinion and will that its responsiveness and accountability mechanisms set up. This circularity is forward-looking within both short and long time frames.³⁷ Representative democracy is then not simply answerable rule³⁸ but self-rule across time.

This privileging of representation and legitimacy for the democratic long-term view explains why the book shows no particular concern with providing a survey of the various (constitutional, institutional or regulatory) efforts that have been made over recent decades within democracies to address long-term problems,³⁹ even though some of those efforts and proposals do pop up now

³⁶ Plotke 1997; Ankersmit 2002; Mansbridge 2003; Urbinati 2006; Vieira and Runciman 2008; Saward 2010; Disch 2011.

³⁷ In the words of Nadia Urbinati, democratic representative action 'entails a complex process of unifying-and-disconnecting citizens by projecting them into a future-oriented perspective' (Urbinati 2006: 228).

³⁸ The view that representative democracy boils down to answerable rule alone originated in Manin 1997.

³⁹ This colossal workload has been taken on successfully by Boston 2016 and Rose 2016.

and then throughout the text as contingent elements of the main argument. *The Semi-Future Democracy* is concerned chiefly with casting light on the normative grounds of such efforts.

Ambitious readers will likely find this focus unsatisfactory. How can we neglect the problems of incentives and implementation? They will believe that we must also think carefully about how political incentives can be realigned in democratic systems to give political actors real incentives to think about the future when making decisions today.

This is a sensible concern. Nevertheless, the semi-future framework does not necessarily isolate legitimacy issues from problems of political sustainability and incentives – quite the opposite. Many proposals in futures studies engage in thought experiments of institutional design that establish the conditions for political actors to have the proper incentives to decide for the long run. Still, they often lack sufficient talk of incentives for political actors to engage in such institutional design in the first place and for preserving the designed institutions throughout time. We must discuss the incentives to establish and preserve institutions that create the incentives to think in the long run. These prior incentives must arise from and/or be weighed against the strong incentives for thinking in the short term. This is the bulk of the work on incentives that *The Semi-future Democracy* does.

The incentives embedded in the semi-future democracy's proposals do not boil down solely to moral reasons to favour the future but also to improve the present state of democracy and realise the moral principles on which it stands. If empowerment of political agents, robust accountability and recognised legitimacy of institutions can be regarded as sufficient incentives for political action, the democratisation proposed here seems based on more solid incentives than isolated moral arguments in favour of the future. Also, because it is primarily an exercise in non-ideal theory, the semi-future democracy seems to be less exposed to phenomena such as deep disagreement and party polarisation (as institutions requiring super-majorities and coalitions would face) since many of them can be implemented by legislative action decided by simple majorities and entail less disruption across the multi-party spectrum.

Exercises in ideal theory focused on non-overlapping future generations are not necessarily at odds with the semi-future democracy. Those that pass the litmus tests of political legitimacy in contemporary democracies are viable alternatives in the semi-future context. We need then to inquire whether such tests are based on criteria that can extend far into the future. If they do not, proposals for incentivising the long term may suffer from severe legitimacy gaps. The challenge is not just to think of ways that make political actors have the proper incentives to promote the long term – we also need to consider if doing so poses problems of legitimacy, that is, whether democratic institutions are legitimately entitled to do so, and, correspondingly, whether present

citizens have an obligation to obey future-oriented governance that conflicts with their subjective interests and preferences. As Chapter 2 shows, sometimes political actors under liberal democracies are not legitimised to govern for the non-overlapping future in ways that overrule the present, even if they have the best incentives in the world to promote the long term. A normative temporal sting underlies the quest for long-term incentives in democratic arrangements.

The Semi-Future Democracy's topic of choice is future-oriented democratic legitimacy and accountability – whether it is possible, what its capabilities and limits are, and how it is to be understood and eventually put into practice. Without this prior theoretical work, we risk either that new future-friendly proposals are discarded promptly as illegitimate (closer to benevolent dictatorships than to democratically fair and accountable democracies) or that the pressing need for good long-term governance, because so difficult to achieve in democratic environments, might lead political actors to forget how important it is to safeguard democracy. Such risks are real and cannot be overlooked. Democracy is as frail as it is precious. Indeed, so precious that it is one of the most valuable legacies that future generations can inherit from us.

PART I

DEMOCRACY AND THE LONG-TERM VIEW

MULTITEMPORAL DEMOCRACY: THE BALANCE BETWEEN THE SHORT TERM AND THE LONG TERM

The tendency of political systems and actors to focus on the short term stems from a multitude of drivers, including epistemic, economic, cultural and social causes. In democratic environments, the propensity to prioritise the temporally proximate over the temporally distant is additionally a consequence of the fact that democracy is government *pro tempore*.¹ Democracies rely on time-sensitive criteria of legitimacy (such as some form of consent existing and operating within a specific temporal location) and they contain time-sensitive institutions that function as resources for and constraints on actors in decision-making, such as temporal rules that bind the actions of political institutions, temporal strategies for handling these constraints, and temporal discourses for justifying such strategies.²

The upshot of this short-termist tendency is that government *pro tempore* often hinders the possibility of governing for the long term. In contemporary electoral democracies, this is more evident. Even if gifted with special abilities of insight and forethought, elected officials are usually trapped inside the electoral timescape, and they are rarely able to prioritise strategies that do not bear fruit until they are sure to remain in office.

¹ Linz 1998.

² For a survey of these institutions, see Schedler and Santiso 1998.

Democracies are then open to accusations of ‘time inconsistency’,³ ‘short-sighted selfishness’,⁴ ‘harmful short-termism’,⁵ ‘presentism’,⁶ ‘presentist bias’,⁷ ‘democratic myopia’⁸ and ‘poor anticipatory governance’.⁹ Democracies as power regimes become then ‘tyrannies of the contemporary’.¹⁰ The inbuilt democratic tendency towards the short term makes it difficult (or even impossible¹¹) to sustain an argument from democracy that promotes long-term thinking and decision-making. When faced with problems and challenges related to the far-off future, this conception of democracy sets up a dilemma between doing nothing and responding based on reasons other than (necessarily) democratic ones, such as arguments from fairness, from survival and from cross-temporal utility.

This chapter shows that the commonplace view of liberal democracies as inherently ill-suited to deal with the long term is based on a misconception. What we call *democratic time* is a complex collection of interrelated political structures, each operating at its own rhythm and within its specific temporal range. Understanding democratic time in terms of multitemporality is key to achieving an equilibrium between short-term and long-term decision-making in democratic arrangements.

This chapter has three sections. The first two sections provide a tentative definition of the short term and an account of the several drivers of short-term thinking, some of which are specific to democracy. This preliminary framework

³ Offe 2015: 42.

⁴ Piketty 2016: 103.

⁵ Guldi and Armitage 2014; Caney 2016.

⁶ Rubenfeld 2001; Thompson 2010; Streeck 2014: 14. On ‘presentism’ as an overwhelmingly present-minded approach to history and historiography, see Hartog 2015. A caveat must be entered here, however, in lieu of a discussion that will be made clear in the following chapters. The expressions ‘short term’ and ‘long term’, strictly speaking, refer exclusively to the future. Concerns with the immediacy of present moments or with ‘the Now’, as Ernst Bloch (1986: 287) calls it, are not, by definition, short-termist. Short-termism is conceptually distinct from presentism (Boston 2016: 6–7), at least if we interpret the latter in terms of a privileged focus on the instant that cuts the present off at both ends, that severs the present from history, as Jed Rubenfeld (2001) and Dennis Thompson (2010) seem to do. But presentism is not necessarily an ideology of the ‘tyranny of the now’ (Krznaric 2020: 5) or of the ‘only-Now’. Jon Elster (1993), for instance, refers to presentism as a form of ‘non-past-ism’ solely. I conceive of presentism in a dissimilar manner which leaves room for the past and the future, and so I admit that, albeit different, presentism and short-termism may on occasion overlap.

⁷ Boston 2016: xxvii.

⁸ MacKenzie 2021a; Smith 2021.

⁹ Guston 2013.

¹⁰ Gardiner 2011: 143–209.

¹¹ Beckman 2013.

establishes that democracies do tend towards the short term, which correlatively imposes inescapable restrictions on their capacity to engage in long-term decision-making. However, the third section identifies the possibility of long-term thinking within democratic arrangements and lists a series of institutions that already exist in democracies and that purposively aim at (and are in the service of) the long term. The conclusion reinforces the view that multitemporality is a necessary feature of liberal democracies that encloses and affects their ability to deal with long-term problems.

THE SHORT TERM AND SHORT-TERMISM

Relativity pervades all aspects of the philosophy of time. Timescapes are relative, and more so about the future. They differ depending on the temporal context and the adopted perception of time. A political pundit talking about the long term typically thinks of the next five to ten years. A stockbroker forecasting what is likely to occur over twelve months from now would not generally take him/herself to be deciding for the short term. A climate change expert warns of a long term likely to happen in the following decades. An astronomer relates to the future in terms of millions of years. Even political theorists think of the long term quite differently, depending on the historical period they write from – whereas Machiavelli considered the long term to have ‘a year or more’, someone like Roman Krznaric nowadays considers the long term to have a minimum of 100 years.¹²

The intricate variety of institutions that constitute contemporary democracies makes it difficult to speak of a clear-cut political threshold separating the short from the long term. Strictly speaking, if one considers the effects of any decisions or actions of the present, and the possibility of a butterfly effect, there might be no such thing as a short-term issue.¹³ Nevertheless, democratic time is multiform. The notion that democracies are biased towards the short term hinges on a conception of the short term that is not innately democratic but rather an external timescape (moral, economic, environmental, etc.) that applies either to a specific feature of democracy or to a bird’s-eye view of democratic systems. For example, elected officials cannot turn off (or even down) ‘the constant audible ticking of the electoral clock’¹⁴ and are consistently trapped within the loop of budgetary cycles. The result is that they operate on a two- to five-year time range. From the viewpoint of timescapes that extend further into the indefinite future, this two- to five-year time range is necessarily short term. But this means neither that deciding for periods beyond that range

¹² Machiavelli 1996: 76; Krznaric 2020: 14.

¹³ MacKenzie 2021b.

¹⁴ Goetz 2014: 386.

is the same as adopting a long-term view nor that respecting such a range is a short-term requirement. The definition of temporal ranges as short term or long term derives from the nature of the temporal standard that applies to a given actor, object or situation. A national curriculum policy designed solely for the next six years is not long-termist in light of the wonted duration of a student's educational path. A statute establishing that a court has three years to decide on a precautionary action (for instance, whether the coal-fired power station currently under construction is illegal and whether the construction site should be embargoed) can hardly be considered short-termist.

Deciding on whether a time range is short or long term requires comparative reasoning by means of the threefold relation between a present moment t_1 , a future moment t_2 , and the temporal timescape that provides the context for the connection between t_1 and t_2 . Since timescapes differ depending on the agent and the perception of time they privilege,¹⁵ the distance between moments t_1 and t_2 may be qualified either as short term or long term even if it remains objectively the same. The difficulty with establishing an argument from democracy that is sufficiently responsive to problems related to an extended future (such as climate change) is that the typical timescapes of democratic governance are less ambitious than other timescapes (e.g., moral, generational, environmental, etc.) that contextualise the relation between a present moment t_1 and the future moment t_2 . In this threefold relation (between t_1 , t_2 and the applicable timescape), the difference between timescapes is primarily a difference between time horizons.

The horizon is the furthest distance across land or water that you can see from where you stand, where the sky seems to meet the earth. It exists only relative to your position. The temporal horizon shares the same features. It is relative to your position in time and functions as the furthest you can foresee or target. In some instances, this horizon is established beforehand and functions as a boundary – for example, in the case of voting age limits, age-of-consent laws, limited terms in office, minimum years of residence for citizenship applications and mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines. But oftentimes the horizon is indeterminate,

¹⁵ Different perceptions of time, involving different dimensions or agents, call upon different timescapes. For instance, historical and political time can be regarded as durational (Cohen 2018), atomistic (Han 2017), cyclical (Pocock 2009: 78), generational (White 2017), a Nietzschean-like loop (Nehamas 1980), etc. The specific standards, fluxes and primary agents expressed by each perception of time affects the way that events can be understood historically and politically: see Zerubavel 1982; Aminzade 1992; Adam 2013. My starting point here is that different political systems express different timescapes and that complex political systems, such as contemporary democracies, express a variety of timescapes. Hence, there are several kinds of political time depending on the predominant perception of time in play and on the complexity involved – tyrannical time is different from democratic time, single-person decision-making is different from collegial decision-making, etc.

as when a participant in a decision-making process cannot anticipate the exact moment at which the decision being made will produce effects.

A temporal range is then short term if, starting at the moment t_1 , an arbitrary moment t_2 (say, one in which the effects of decisions or actions of t_1 will be assessed) extends beyond the pre-envisioned time horizon. The same temporal range is long term if t_2 is closer to t_1 than the adopted time horizon. This threefold relation is a way of measuring temporal distance, even if the relative nature of the process thwarts the possibility of establishing clear-cut calendrical definitions of the short term and the long term. Roughly speaking, the short term equates to proximity in time, the long term to remoteness in time, always from the perspective of t_1 and in view of the horizon in sight.

The culture of short-termism that permeates everyday life falls under the purview of this threefold relation. The regnant sense of urgency and haste that seems typical of twenty-first-century societies follows from endeavours to narrow the gap between t_1 and t_2 in light of shorter time horizons. The short term consists of eliminating or shortening the temporal distance, that is, of time compression.

Short-termism is the expression of time compression. Insofar as it functions as a measure of temporal distance, it is descriptive. Insofar as it promotes time compression by establishing proximate time horizons as ends to be pursued, it is normative. In this latter sense, a time horizon close to t_1 is interpreted as a telos that requires the suppression of all mediating moments between t_1 and t_2 . Short-termism prescribes the convergence of t_1 , t_2 and the corresponding time horizon into a single moment – the moment of the ‘glance of the eye’ (*Augenblick*).¹⁶ The effects of urgent actions or decisions are required to be temporally as close as possible to the present moment t_1 . The flow of time seems then to flatten into a continuous present.

The time compression promoted by short-termism results from two methods that are often cumulative. The first is speed. The industrial revolution turned time into a commodity, creating strong incentives for acceleration and time compression. If the time units of the clock are assigned a specific value, they become relevant components of production costs. The less time it takes to build something, the less costly it is.¹⁷ The digital age is the outcome of the

¹⁶ The term *Augenblick*, in the sense of the instant actualised literally ‘in the blink of an eye’, referred to a key aspect of Heidegger’s conception of the present as authentic *Dasein* in his *Being and Time*: Heidegger 2010: 313, 323. The term, borrowed from Kierkegaard, describes a ‘decisive moment’ in time that is both fleeting yet momentarily eventful. It can be approached as a translation of the Greek *kairos*, the ‘fitting moment’ for a word in rhetorical exercises or the ‘appropriate time’ for deciding a policy or issuing a judgement, which depended on the here-and-now and extended towards the future.

¹⁷ The contribution of speed and time-compression for the creation of commodified (labour) time is a critical aspect of Marx’s insights on industrialism: cf. Marx 1973: 140; 1976: 774.

technological development of time compression. The rapid exchange of people, goods and information dilutes distances across space and time, making everything seem simultaneous, in a sort of ‘global present’.¹⁸ Just as faster means of transport and communication contribute to making the world global, a single locus, bringing point A (say, New York City) *closer* to point B (say, Tokyo) in space and thereby making the world smaller than it was before, they also shrink time into a series of fewer and closer moments that are experienced as ‘immediacy’ (non-mediation).¹⁹

Acceleration has a positive value insofar as it reduces distance, thereby disabling remoteness as a cause for exclusion. However, when combined with the culture of short-termism, it becomes liable to criticism. The so-called present-day tyranny of speed and acceleration that permeates all aspects of life (public, private, intimate) and brings about the continuous obsolescence, expiration and instability of experience derives from this combination.²⁰ Speed is more a symptom than a cause of short-termism, however, and the two instances should be distinguished conceptually. Speed relates to the rhythm, the pace, of duration as it flows from t_1 to t_2 , rather than the position of t_2 with regard to t_1 and a specific time horizon. Speed is an instrument in the service of time compression, the means to achieve the end imposed by normative short-termism: that of converging the future and the present. Failure to distinguish between speed and short-termism generates conceptions of the long-term view that are dependent on de-acceleration and slowness, strategies that reject the potential creative and inclusive value of speed.²¹

The second method of overcoming mediation between a present moment t_1 and a future moment t_2 is attributing different values to different moments

¹⁸ Adam 2004: 120.

¹⁹ Samuel Scheffler sees a contrast between phenomena of globalisation and what he calls, drawing on T. S. Eliot’s appreciation of classical literature, ‘provincialism of time’ or ‘temporal parochialism’: Scheffler 2018: 1–12. The reason is that Scheffler understands globalisation in terms of cosmopolitan indicators, as a widening of spatial horizons, and hence the contrast between ‘global’ (spatial) and ‘parochial’ (temporal) seems to make sense. Scheffler, however, is oblivious to the role that velocity plays in globalisation processes as a means of reducing distance and of thinking of ‘the globe’ in parochial terms. In this latter sense, not only is there no contrast, there is even a corresponding relation.

²⁰ Paul Virilio calls this omnipresence of speed ‘dromology’: Virilio 1986. On the impact of acceleration on modern culture, see also French 2001; Scheurman 2004; Rosa 2015; Scheurman and Rosa 2009.

²¹ The emphasis on slowness as strategy is shared by Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard, to whom only the de-acceleration of events allows them to crystallise in history: Virilio 1986; Baudrillard 1994: 1–2. The association between slowness and the long term has classical roots, specifically in Suetonius’ formula *festina lenis* (haste slowly), in the sense of ‘responding to urgency now without cutting corners, without avoiding the mediating moments’. For the opposite view that speed is not a necessary feature of short-termism, see Schedler and Santiso 1998; Han 2017.

asymmetrically. The method consists in undervaluing the mediating moments to such a degree that only moments t_1 and t_2 seem to count as actual events in time. Everything else in between is deprived of meaning in time – it is literally ‘meaningless’ and, consequently, a non-event. This method gives the impression that time is a collection of fundamentally disconnected dots or episodes, a duration that hops rather than flows. The perception that remains severs all possible links between a single moment and the past and the future – it is a perception of temporality as fractured time.²²

THE DETERMINANTS OF SHORT-TERMISM

The long-term view’s appeal often hinges on the assumption that one’s position in time is as irrelevant from a moral perspective as one’s position in space.²³ A different moral assumption favouring the long-term view takes temporal positioning seriously but privileges distance as an attribute of value – the theory of ‘strong longtermism’.²⁴ From either perspective, proximate time horizons that neglect the potentially negative effects of today’s actions on those living beyond those time horizons are morally objectionable and should be replaced with broader time horizons. All that is required from a moral standpoint is the cognitive ability to respond to long-term threats and to be motivated by reasons that justify giving up the attractiveness of the immediate.

However, such promotion of distant time horizons is hampered by the recognition of a tendency towards the short term. If there is such a tendency, the long-term view, although not impossible, seems counter-intuitive since it involves resisting and frustrating the default preference for proximate time horizons. This hypothesis does not necessarily weaken the moral robustness of arguments in favour of the long-term view. Still, it does impose a sense of direction on them insofar as any defence of the long term must begin with a case against the short term or with an acknowledgement that proximate time horizons are often irremovable – and, consequently, that arguments in favour of the long run must come to terms and perhaps make use of proximate time horizons.

That we have a tendency to favour the short term is an intuitive notion. The determinants of proximate time horizons are myriad and wide-ranging – they are mostly epistemic, preference-related, axiological, conjunctural and institutional.²⁵

²² Deneen 2018: 73–4.

²³ In favour of moral temporal neutrality, see Brink 2011; Caney 2014; Dougherty 2015; Greene and Sullivan 2015.

²⁴ For longtermism (unhyphenated) as the set of moral theories (typically, albeit not necessarily, connected with the effective altruism movement) that either privilege the far-off future or claim that those who live at future times matter just as much, morally, as those who live today, see, mostly, Greaves and MacAskill 2019; Beckstead 2019; MacAskill 2022.

²⁵ For different typologies, see Caney 2016; González-Ricoy and Gosseries 2016; MacKenzie 2016; Krznaric 2020; Smith 2021.

Epistemic Determinants

The belief that humans are hard-wired to prefer the immediate to the distant is widespread. For centuries, philosophers have maintained that the roots of short-term thinking lie deep in human nature, in an anthropological bias towards the near.

The difference between proximate and distant time horizons is reflected in two distinctions paramount to the modern worldview: the contrast between reason and desire, and between pleasure and pain. The former applies to temporality, as rationality is assumed to be universal and timeless, whereas desire is parochial and short-sighted. And the latter affects temporality insofar as pleasure and aversion to pain are strong incentives to immediate action. Such sharp contrasts are debatable in the context of contemporary neurosciences, cognitive psychology and behavioural economics. Still, they lay the groundwork for a useful typology of the epistemic determinants of short-termism: *rational, cognitive, motivational and emotional*.

The *rational* determinant relates to prediction. Within distant time horizons, uncertainty concerning future states of affairs ensues. Predictability assuages this uncertainty, but the far-off future is difficult to predict: we have no grounds on which to reasonably infer that typical forecasting methods are suitable for very distant time horizons since their accuracy can hardly be assessed within decision-relevant time frames; moreover, plausible predictions motivate present actions, the long-term effects of which are likely to frustrate those predictions (as often occurs, for instance, in opinion polls). This applies equally to both descriptive and moral (or evaluative) uncertainty.²⁶ Ultimately, in the very long term, the past of the future still lies in the future. When uncertainty about the future is this high, it seems rational to discount the expected value of what is temporally distant. When present actors and decision-makers (political or otherwise) are uncertain about the possible effects of an action or policy due to a lack of information about causal mechanisms, the existence and interests of future people, the future state of the world, and the preservation of current values, institutions and commitments, the expected value of these actions or policies decreases relative to actions or policies the effects of which materialise within proximate time horizons. The shortening of the time horizon is an attempt to reduce uncertainty about the future and is likely to engender attentional asymmetries.

The *cognitive* processing of information that prompts motivated reasoning about the future can be rational in the sense that it relies on science-based

²⁶ On the distinction, see MacAskill, Bykvist and Ord 2020.

calculations, but it can also unfold via heuristics that are recurrently afflicted by biases. Heuristics (mental shortcuts) and biases are cognitive determinants of short-termism whenever they function as limitations to thinking in terms of distant time horizons. Examples of such limitations abound. For instance, humans seem more inclined to grasp and respond to immediate alterations in their perception of reality than to a slow onset of low-grade but incremental changes to that same reality. This inclination is a form of ‘change blindness’²⁷ that makes humans somewhat insensitive to ‘creeping problems’ such as climate change and biodiversity loss.²⁸ Another example is ‘the availability heuristic’, a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to a given person’s mind when evaluating a particular course of action or decision rather than on information acquired from abstract, general scientific trends.²⁹ Under the availability heuristic, decision-makers economise on their information by turning their attention to more reliable sources rather than speculating about the uncertain future. Vividness becomes important in decision-making: if the future is less vivid, people will respond more strongly to palpable risks and weigh their judgements pending more recent information, thereby narrowing time horizons.

Cognitive errors influence *motivated* reasoning. Individuals are likely to be motivated more easily with regard to what is temporally proximate. The availability heuristic provides a good illustration. If people rely on what they recall from the near past rather than making a cognitive effort to think about future effects, they are less prone to make predictions about the distant future and instead merely perform actions that have worked in the recent past. Availability elicits a tendency to be motivated by experiencing problems rather than by abstract data and projections. However, motivations and incentives to privilege proximate time horizons do not derive just from cognitive mistakes. Pleasure-seeking and pain-averting behaviour also displays a tendency to privilege the near, as occurs, for example, when people prefer a minor pleasure sooner to a greater pleasure later, and a greater pain later to a minor pain sooner. Hedonistic conceptions of self-interest are tolerant of impatience and promote time compression. The same occurs when individual identity is intrinsically connected to membership of a group. If group identity encourages proximate time horizons (e.g., the professional class of stockbrokers), individual behaviour is

²⁷ Simons and Levin 1997.

²⁸ On ‘creeping environmental problems’, see Glantz 1999; on ‘creeping normality’, see Diamond 2005. For the importance of change blindness to climate change, see Gifford 2011; Marshall 2015.

²⁹ Kahneman 2011: 129–45; Jacobs 2016: 48.

more likely to express short-term thinking because individual actors are motivated to convey the group's general traits.

Lastly, the difference between temporally proximate and more distanced motivated reasoning is often framed in terms of 'hot' and 'cold' cognition. The former is reactive to context and a stimulus to an emotional response; the latter involves critical analysis and deliberation.³⁰ This terminology is a more nuanced version of modernity's distinction between passions (or emotions) and reason. The emphasis on *emotions* in decision-making affects temporal ranges. Not only are emotions prompted by the contingent situations faced by individual agents, but they tend to be time-compressing. Once the catalyst for emotion is dispelled, the emotion ceases accordingly. Because emotions are fleeting, they must be continuously instantiated if they are to persist – for instance, by reproducing and re-enacting the conditions that aroused them in the first place. A log burns quickly, but a series of burning logs creates an enduring fire.

Preference-related Determinants

A central aspect of contemporary utility theory focuses on maximising welfare (or well-being or happiness), especially in the form of desires or preferences. Whether innate or shaped by environmental conditions, preferences are indications of value attribution and play a decisive role in decision-making. Preferences have been studied from various angles, including economics, decision theory, psychology and philosophy, but they are consistently regarded as being expressive of a good in the context of welfare, chiefly when they are satisfied. In this sense, welfare equates to or correlates with preference satisfaction.

It is generally assumed that people act rationally when they act on the basis of their preferences. This produces an ethos of preference satisfaction that has consequences for temporality as it favours the short term. The relation between preference satisfaction and proximate time horizons does not derive from the nature of the preferences in themselves since individuals can have preferences for shorter or longer time horizons. I may now prefer to eat cake rather than fruit, just as I may now prefer to live in the house that I will begin building tomorrow rather than the house I live in today. Nor does the same relation derive from the predominance of irrational over rational preferences since not all preferences are necessarily framed by the ethos of preference satisfaction. For instance, it is highly disputed whether those preferences I would not have after ideal deliberation fall under the purview of the ethos of preference satisfaction.³¹

The relation between preference satisfaction and the short term derives instead from the emphasis on satisfaction. Since individuals have a shorter and

³⁰ On the difference between 'hot and cold cognition', see Kunda 1990.

³¹ In this sense, see Parfit 1984: 118.

more uncertain life span than communities or species, the need for satisfaction seems less extended in time, and therefore more urgent. Consequently, satisfaction promotes time compression. Hedonism, one of the forms of preference satisfaction, provides an excellent example. The actual nature of the desire has value only insofar as it leads to pleasure. A desire that is satisfied now is better than a desire yet to be satisfied in the future because the former produces pleasure, whereas the latter does not. Correlatively, once the preference is satisfied, it ceases to cause pleasure, and so new preferences arise, which explains why ensuing pleasures tend to be ephemeral.

The culture of preference satisfaction provides fertile ground for market economies and vice versa. Consuming is more pressing than discounting because it produces more added value. Consumption satisfies preferences and allows more preferences to arise that need to be satisfied through more consumption. As preferences multiply in kind and quantity, the market structure expands proportionately – economic growth depends on this ever-expanding interchange between demand and supply. Consumerism, the culture of increasing consumption, is the cultural framework of the balance between consumers, who want their preferences to be satisfied, and suppliers, who satisfy and stimulate those preferences. Since suppliers gain added value the more preferences there are, they are motivated to engage in more or less aggressive or person-oriented commercial and marketing strategies that either frame old preferences or help to create new ones. Behavioural economics takes preferences seriously because they play a crucial role in shaping and stabilising markets, which are then biased towards proximate time horizons. A worldview in which the ethos of preference satisfaction is widespread is, therefore, a considerable determinant of short-termism.

Axiological Determinants

Economists believe that agents are sensitive to the passing of time when attributing value. Proximate time horizons are valued highly compared with distant time horizons. Value is condensed as time is compressed. Conversely, value is dispersed as time horizons extend. Agents tend to discount the future in economic decisions, adopting what is known as ‘pure time preference’.

Time preference consists of the valuation placed on receiving a good at an earlier date compared with acquiring it later.³² High discount rates express a significant decrease in the value of a good between the present moment t_1 and a future moment t_2 . Time preference, however, involves a multitude of discount

³² I call time preference an *axiological* determinant of short-termism simply because it consists in value attribution. In this capacity, it is strictly an economic driver of short-term thinking. Applying time preference and discount rates to the intrinsic value of actual persons creates serious moral problems: on this matter, see Parfit 1984: 485–6; Bostrom 2011; Ord 2020: 253–8.

functions insofar as the time horizons relevant to the evaluation differ regarding states of affairs, objects and agents. For instance, individuals usually apply high discount rates to their consumption while simultaneously applying low discount rates to the welfare of others; they may apply high discount rates to goods that satisfy immediate necessities, such as food and housing, while simultaneously applying low discount rates to services aimed at the long term, such as education; and they may apply a high discount rate to an object at one point in their lives while applying a low discount rate to that same object years later.

Economists use time preference mechanisms to describe and explain what they regard as a fact of decision-making behaviour in market economies: people care less about the future than they do about the present. However, time preference is more than an explanatory device of short-termist behaviour. It is also a driver of short-termism when prominent in decisions about long-term projects in the form of social discount rates. The use of high social discount rates implies that agents are less prone to invest today in acquiring future benefits or in guarding themselves against future costs. In unregulated markets, the generalised practice of tolerating and pushing for high social discount rates for projects with a long-term impact, such as building a new factory or constructing a new highway, produces economic incentives to engage in short-term decision-making.³³ Conversely, if low social discount rates turn out to be the factor that determines whether an investment is bad business and justifies dismissing projects that produce benefits over extended time horizons, the calculation of time preference will be a deterrent to long-term thinking.

Conjunctural Determinants

Certain contexts pose challenges to individuals that must be faced within almost immediate time horizons. Failure to respond promptly carries serious risks. The challenges posed by the context are typically the product of abrupt changes to the environment surrounding individuals. These changes are not necessary features of the environment per se, which is why they appear contingent. However, the response they spark in individuals is not contingent at all. From the viewpoint of individuals, time compression is closely connected to necessity. The response is indispensable because it is the only available means of overcoming the contextual challenge, and it is inevitable as it requires no further justification other than the challenge itself. Conjunctural time compression is the realm of genuine urgency.

Individuals experience this call of the immediate when they face extreme life-threatening situations, such as when someone attacks them or when they are in a serious accident. Self-defence and healthcare are then emergency responses framed by proximate time horizons. The stakes are high if the narrow tempo-

³³ Arrow et al. 2013; Freeman and Groom 2016.

ral aspect is neglected. But individuals are also subject to conjunctural time compression when the context forces them to the immediate or when they are deprived of the means to sustain themselves in the context. For instance, labourers pressed to accelerate production without increasing the costs are required to devalue their clock labour time and narrow their productive time horizons. And unemployment prevents individuals from engaging with distant time horizons since unemployed people tend to take one day at a time.

Societies are also subject to conjunctural determinants of short-termism. Phenomena such as pandemics, street mobilisation and terrorism compress time by calling for social responses that focus entirely on life's necessities, such as health, security and the bare essentials. These responses are attention magnets, enhancing and centralising top-down forms of collective decision-making. This is the mainstream sense of emergency politics, which consists of the provisional suspension of the standard validity of the rule of law, a suspension justified by the pressing handling of the conjunctural determinant that ceases the moment the relevant time-compressing challenges have been dealt with.³⁴ The outbreak of a viral pandemic, as the coronavirus crisis showed, justifies the suspension of ordinary rules and the implementation of emergency politics only until the pandemic is no longer a threat to societies – for instance, when safe vaccination thresholds have been reached, herd immunity has been acquired, and mortality rates associated with the virus are tolerable.

Conjunctural determinants of short-termism are momentary in the same way that emotions are, however. The changes to the environment that make the context challenging and time compressing can be reproduced indefinitely. The idea of 'crisis' associated with conjunctural short-termism requires rapid responses that never seem to solve the crisis in the first place. When they do, they never seem to be immune to novel changes to the environment that bring about further 'crises'. The widespread inflation of the terminology of crisis is also short-termist and helps to constitute a sort of 'permanent state of emergency' involving accelerated reform processes, the hurried creation of political institutions and social roles, and a more refined and selective suspension regime.³⁵

Institutional (and Specifically Democratic) Determinants

Political institutions face more distant time horizons than humans simply because they are not subject to natural deterioration across time and can then look further into the future. The many laws and policies they issue about time, such as blue laws, curfews, the 40-hour work-week, statutes of limitations, the compulsory school year, visas and daylight savings time, can shape new

³⁴ Cf. Scheuerman 2006; Honig 2009; Feldman 2010.

³⁵ Greene 2018; White 2019.

temporalities, establish the rhythms of life and create time horizons that are impervious to distance. They seem like the best means for humans to enlarge their temporal scope and influence the long term. From this perspective, political institutions are often thought to exist because they are structurally more far-sighted, purposive and instrumental than individuals when engendering long-term benefits.

However, institutions make decisions because they are managed by individuals who operate as their officials and who make decisions in their name – officials subject to the short-term drivers discussed above. The individuals who occupy these institutions may be motivated by short time horizons and pass these motivations on to the institutions they run. Also, their preferences may change over time as institutions remain stable. Furthermore, certain forms of institutional arrangement are more prone to reduce time horizons rather than enlarge them. Institutions may have multiple or unanticipated effects. Moreover, given that uncertainty about the future does not stem from the amount of time per se but from the wavering dynamics that can play out in that time, less adaptive and resilient institutions are likely to curtail their time horizons in order to increase their capacity to shape the future in an intended way. And officials are eventually replaced over time, and a new generation may inherit institutions that reflect previous officials' preferences rather than their own.³⁶

This set of characteristics is common to all political regimes. However, the fact that democracy is government *pro tempore* operating with time horizons that function in cycles as instruments of management, limitation and legitimacy suggests that several potential sources of short-termism are more far-reaching in democratic arrangements. Democracy's reliance on recurring deadlines is explained by various considerations. Deadlines that recur are intrinsically connected with the idea of a process – they carve out durations of time and mark them as significant while also dispersing power over the greatest number of points in time.³⁷ Elections and reapportionment on a periodical basis are the most significant marks of such recurring deadlines, and thus fundamental marks of liberal democracy. Failure to respect such deadlines and to evade term limits is often perceived as a way of delegitimising democracy and of implementing authoritarian regimes³⁸ (even if under the guise of democratic frameworks) because democracies employ durations of time as proxies for (legitimacy acquired by) consent.

Elective cycles thus seem paramount to democracy, but they also shorten the time horizons of democratic institutions, at several levels:

³⁶ In this paragraph, I draw mostly on Pierson 2004.

³⁷ See Cohen 2018: 45–61.

³⁸ Infrequent elections is one of the standard ways of making democracy illiberal and/or authoritarian: Versteeg et al. 2020. The classical view of liberal democracy regards infrequent elections as proof of lack of legitimacy: see Dahl 2013: 12–14.

- (i) The protection of impersonal rule often requires norms that enforce limited numbers of successive terms and the prohibition of certain actions at the end of a term.
- (ii) Officials exercise power for a limited period, after which they must either stand for re-election and reapportionment or retire from office. They are subject to strong incentives to privilege their constituencies and to adopt policies that will have noticeable net benefits over the course of a small number of electoral cycles³⁹ while also avoiding policies that have near-term costs and longer-term benefits.⁴⁰
- (iii) Officials are usually responsive to groups that contribute (financially or by vote) to keeping them in office and are thus sensitive to the influence of special interest groups that are not particularly concerned with long-term impacts, such as transnational economic actors.⁴¹
- (iv) Epistemic drivers of short-termism affect officials just as much as voters, who may express short-sighted preferences and misconceptions about the common good and how elected officials should behave.⁴²
- (v) Electorates are continuously changing since some people die while others reach the age of majority, thereby changing the preferences of franchise members, and officials' responsiveness changes accordingly, thus making it difficult to develop policies indefinitely into the future based on responsiveness alone.
- (vi) The fact that officials are replaced regularly and for short periods produces reinforced time inconsistency insofar as one official implements one action that is then overruled by his or her successor.
- (vii) Officials are often subject to the impact of short-term performance indicators and audit timetables or budget cycles.

³⁹ The idea that democratic policymaking is short-termist because politicians are intent on increasing their re-election chances can be found especially in Nordhaus 1975 and Rogoff 1990, who developed the political business cycle theory, as well as in Garrì 2010. Gersbach 2004 shares the view that re-election alone is insufficient to motivate politicians to long-term projects, so he suggests adding incentive contracts (such as increased remuneration in the second term if certain long-term-oriented policies are adopted in the first term) to extend decision-making time horizons. The claim that democratic long-term governance is legitimate and effective if based entirely on economic incentives given to elected politicians seems, however, questionable, to say the least.

⁴⁰ Cf. Kavka and Warren 1983.

⁴¹ Tufte 1978; Shearman and Smith 2007; Boston and Lempp 2011. Graham Smith, unlike what I do here, distinguishes between the electoral cycle and responsiveness to entrenched interests as drivers of what he calls 'democratic myopia' (Smith 2021: 15–17).

⁴² See Jacobs and Matthews 2012; MacKenzie 2016.

- (viii) Institutions, due to excessive instability or a track record of under-performance, often lack the means to implement long-term policies even when officials are adequately informed about distant horizons and properly motivated to act on such information.

The collection of short-term drivers specific to democratic environments has a wider variety of forms and justifications compared with other regimes. This can be problematic because, if there is a distinctive kind of democratic short-termism that proves inescapable, there is a strong possibility that democracy may stand in the way of the resolution of long-term problems. We should not jump to conclusions, however. It is critical to assess first whether democracies already include institutional determinants for the employment of more distant time horizons. As it turns out, they do.

DEMOCRATIC LONG-TERMISM

Despite the multitude of short-term drivers, humans do possess an acute ability to think and plan for the long run. Our minds are the stage of a permanent tug of war about time between (strong) drivers of short-termism and the (less strong) capacity to think long.⁴³ Democratic settings, and their temporal horizons, are not much different. Proximate time horizons, no matter how close they are to the actual moment of decision, are still horizons. They refer to the future. Democratic institutional frameworks do not block the capacity to look to the future since these consist primarily in political arrangements that decide for the future. There is no conceptual inconsistency between democracy and futures orientations. Just because one is compelled to look down does not mean that one is myopic.

Nevertheless, the future relates to the present in a double sense: it seems to be capable of both being affected by and affecting the present. In the latter case, futures orientations evoke how the future may affect the present; for instance, by inspiring anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope or representations of destiny.⁴⁴ In the former case, futures orientations are inherently political, and they involve various efforts to shape the future, such as planning, preparation and invention.⁴⁵

Democracies are not alien to such efforts. Promoting and implementing distant time horizons is a challenge for democracies, but strategising is not impos-

⁴³ I borrow this interesting analogy from Krznaric 2020: 11–15, who claims that our cognitive tendencies to short-term thinking follow from our ‘marshmallow brains’, whereas our cognitive capacities to think in the long term follow from our ‘acorn brains’.

⁴⁴ These are the six main futures orientations listed by Bryant and Knight 2019.

⁴⁵ These are the cornerstones of UNESCO’s Futures Literacy activities, in line with Riel Miller’s work on ‘futures literacy’: cf. Miller 2011.

sible for them. When attempting to meet such a challenge, the first impulse is to reconfigure the electoral timescape by extending the time horizons of electoral cycles. Certain authors believe that longer election cycles would reduce perverse short-term elective incentives – elected officials and voters alike should have the opportunity to observe the results of policies before new elections take place. Longer election cycles would improve the quality of accountability and promote a long-term view.⁴⁶

This argument, although appealing, faces several problems. The first, which is not particularly thorny but still somewhat uncomfortable, especially in republican regimes, is that re-election situations would stem the reasonable rotation period for those in office. The re-election of a president in a seven-year term system, for instance, would amount to fourteen consecutive years with the same person in office, a practice that seems to be at odds with current preferences for more frequent opportunities to remove those in office. Limiting permanence in office to a single term in order to solve this problem would in all likelihood create entirely new problems, for instance, by not allowing elected officials to face *a posteriori* public scrutiny of their past behaviour (thus diminishing accountability levels).⁴⁷ The second, far more severe, problem with having longer election cycles is that they would neither halt nor smother the electoral clock's regular ticking. Politicians must contend with the proliferation of elections throughout the electoral timescape, at the national level and at the local, regional and associative (e.g., primaries) levels. The results of local, regional and associative elections often impact national policies directly, and the reverse is also true. Longer election cycles would not prevent elected politicians from engaging in a permanent state of campaigning.

The second typical suggestion to free democracies from the tyranny of short-termism is to ensure that legislatures coexist peacefully with institutions that pursue extended time horizons. Democracies contain non-elected decision-making institutions, such as courts, agencies and central banks, operating at some remove from elected officials and not subject to the same timescapes as legislatures. The fact that they lack electoral support and justification is not necessarily an argument against their democratic character insofar as they relate to the legislature in a balanced way. But even elected institutions are far from sharing the same time horizons and often move to different rhythms.

⁴⁶ Cf. Linz 1998; Dal Bó and Rossi 2011.

⁴⁷ In addition, it would not diminish what Albert Hirschman has coined 'the rage of *vouloir conclure*', the haste in implementing the finishing touches of policies that are still not close to their final stages (Hirschman 1965: 313–16). The same phenomenon has been detected recently in the activities of CEOs with long-term employment contracts and of scientists applying for periodical research grants. For the former, see Cziraki and Groen-Xu 2020; for the latter, see Groen-Xu et al. 2021.

This complex temporal structure with a multidimensional dynamic indicates an inbuilt capacity to adopt the short-term view and surpass it when necessary. Elected governments are not thwarted structurally from serving as suitable tools for positively shaping the distant future. The instruments already available to liberal democracies for pursuing distant time horizons are diverse.

Commitment Devices

One of the specificities of short-termism is temporal inconsistency. A person's preferences at moment t_1 may diverge substantially from her or his preferences at t_2 . An electorate may give an overwhelming majority to one party at t_1 and an overwhelming majority to the opposing party at t_2 . A people may condone slavery at t_1 and promote egalitarianism at t_2 . The multitude, strength and complexity of short-term drivers reinforce this perception.

However, that does not mean that past actions, intentions, preferences and decisions do not have a relevant impact on the present insofar as they establish a status quo and promote more or less robust forms of path dependence. Democracies do contain structural instruments that encourage time consistency, namely, by highlighting the value and nature of commitment. Commitments play a crucial role in liberal democracies because they trace the origins of binding elements to a neutral sphere of personal choice – one participates in the making and re-instantiation of what binds one in the first place by committing to it. The simple act of committing (explicitly or tacitly) to a given decisional route is already expressive of a normative arrangement at work within a more or less extended time horizon.⁴⁸

Democracies have devices that promote and implement the commitment to the indefinite future. Such devices aim to channel decision-makers towards particular courses of action, thereby affecting the intertemporal payoff structure and helping to mitigate problems arising from fluctuating motives or countervailing external influences. They provide reasons to embrace courses of action adopted in the past – reasons that may seem sufficiently appealing and persuasive to future decision-makers. Even if they fail to limit the future discretion of officials, they are at least capable of motivating future decision-makers to exercise self-restraint. They inspire path dependence by setting up cross-temporal forms of the status quo.

Commitment devices come in various kinds and range from hard to soft forms.⁴⁹ Constitutional provisions designed to limit future decision-makers' actions or induce them to pay more attention to future affairs stand at one end

⁴⁸ In this sense, see Margaret Gilbert's influential thesis that 'joint commitments' are in themselves constitutive of 'demand-rights': Gilbert 2018.

⁴⁹ In this paragraph, I draw mostly on Boston 2016: 239–84.

of the spectrum. They oblige the political community to undertake forward-thinking and strategising on a regular basis and in a reasonably comprehensive and systematic manner. Other examples of hard commitments are legislation issued under those future-oriented constitutional provisions, as well as international treaties and covenants aimed at far-off time horizons, such as climate change agreements emerging from the UN Climate Change Conferences (COP). Less influential commitment devices include establishing institutions with long-term missions, setting policy targets and goals, incorporating specific rules, procedures or requirements into legislation, negotiating multiparty agreements on long-term policy issues, and designing programmes in ways that make them difficult and costly to alter. The result is not necessarily a steadfast promotion of the long term. Still, such commitment devices generate continuous political incentives to yield particular regard to distant time horizons already established in the past.

Multiple Institutional Time Horizons

The idea that the judicial, legislative and executive powers have different relations to time has become commonplace. Court judgments identify and apply legal commitments that the community should be judged to have made to each member in light of facts that occurred in the past. The legislature is to make new or amended public commitments for the future. The executive's role is to carry out those commitments, both as defined by the legislature and as adjudged enforceable by the courts, and to do what is here and now, in the present, required to protect the community's common good.⁵⁰

However, the equation of judicial–legislative–executive powers with past–future–present relations is more complex than this straightforward distribution implies. Each branch of government contains decision-making mechanisms that are cross-temporal. Courts settle disputes that originated in the past, but they neither rely entirely on scientific investigation of actual past events nor simply echo the law as it was laid down in the past. Instead, the events on which their decisions are based play a role in the procedure as they are seen as relevant within the judicial proceedings. Judicial fact construction is determined by adjudication – it is neither out there in the real world nor pre-established in legal rules.⁵¹ Many of these facts are institutional and intrinsically cross-temporal, such as statutes of limitations, testaments, futures contracts and futures options. Furthermore, judicial rulings, regardless of whether they are discretionary, consist in the creation of particular norms that bind for the future and that reveal a choice for the legal system's future by establishing (or helping to establish) precedents. In practice, judicial rulings connect the past and the future by issuing

⁵⁰ Finnis 2016.

⁵¹ Cf. Chowdhuri 2020.

ex post adjustments to legal rules and principles that are normatively ex ante.⁵² They are present decisions about the future that are constrained by something in the past. In this framework, judicial decisions can look far into the past and into the future. Courts may impose reparations for injuries suffered centuries earlier, as in lawsuits concerning reparations for slavery; a life sentence binds for decades; even a ruling obliging someone to perform community service for three months can bind an entire community indefinitely if it establishes precedent. Judicial time horizons are multiple, and they depend on individual cases and on the content of the law in force.

Legislators are also limited and encouraged to operate cross-temporally, albeit differently. Legislatures are entitled to issue norms and push for policies that are not subject to expiration dates and remain valid indefinitely. The generality of their decisions seems to entitle them to think in terms of distant time horizons. Still, legislatures feel the pull of the past and the present. For instance, parliaments can revise constitutions but tend to follow constitution-making procedures within the confines of the constitution already in force. Furthermore, legislators follow the pace of the electoral metronome. The demands of re-election require them to be sensitive to their constituents' interests and preferences, in an interchange of bias and motivations for short-term thinking common to constituents and legislators. Legislative time horizons are also multiple. They depend mainly on the current composition of the house(s) and on the social perception of urgency shared by constituents about specific public affairs.

Executive bodies are more present-minded. Their connection to the past occurs more subtly, via parliaments, and they are supposed to administer, in the here and now, the general norms and policies defined by legislatures. But they operate similarly in a cross-temporal range. Administrations often decide on projects with long-term impacts, such as building infrastructure, devising educational policies, and adopting strategies for exploiting natural resources or for collective achievements such as a space race. They also tend to be highly bureaucratic, determined by a series of procedures designed to guarantee impersonal rule and prevent corruption, thereby extending the decision-making time frame. Although narrower, their time horizons are also multiple, dependent on how they respond to legislatures, constituents and the state of the world.

Diachronic Separation of Powers

Besides having multiple and adjustable time horizons in and between themselves, different powers operate at different temporalities that often intersect. The contingent overlapping of different temporalities allows time horizons to

⁵² Cf. Hutton 2009.

contract or expand accordingly. Three levels of temporality dictate this distinction: *rhythm*, *temporal alignment* and *outsourcing*.

First, different sets of problems and states of affairs require decision-making procedures with different temporal ranges. Some problems are pressing insofar as they have immediate, severe costs if left unattended, and they call for speedy decisions; other problems allow for the distribution of costs and benefits over time and call for strategic planning. Knowing which problems fall into which category is part of what Alan M. Jacobs called ‘the politics of when’.⁵³ Haste may be a virtue in some cases and a vice in others; the same with protraction. Ideally, all informed decision-making is in want of solitary deliberation, fact gathering, opinion sharing and negotiation. However, time must sometimes be compressed to prevent the immediacy of high costs and burdens. For instance, if governments fail to respond promptly to a dangerous pandemic that is likely to wipe out a large segment of the population, no strategic planning at the time is likely to be effective.

The principle of the separation of powers provides an institutional framework for distinguishing the adequate pace desideratum: executive bodies seem better fit to respond promptly, parliaments more suitable for defining strategy. However, the desideratum is determined not by the quality of the institutions but by the nature of the problems at hand. The temporal imbalance occurs when strategic decisions are made with haste and when urgent decisions take too long, regardless of which power (executive or legislative) makes them. Elective institutions have the incentive to delay costs, which is why democratic decision-making procedures are enriched rather than impoverished by the contribution of institutions that have the incentive to pay the costs upfront. Finding the right pace for the corresponding problem is part of the art of good government – success in doing so helps to enlarge time horizons.

Second, different degrees of term synchronisation within and among (electoral or non-electoral) institutions have a different impact on political temporalities. With regard to intra-institutional temporal alignment, some parliaments establish their entire composition in a single electoral cycle, whereas others keep changing their composition partly across several electoral cycles; some courts nominate judges for different terms in bulk, whereas others nominate judges for life and one at a time. This variation has effects on temporal horizons. Even though the principle of impersonal rule in a liberal democracy is preserved with less temporal alignment, institutions seem better able to broaden their temporal horizons when they are better aligned. The same phenomenon occurs with inter-institutional synchronisation. Differences between parliamentary and presidential systems, between unitary and federal systems, are also expressed in the degree to which terms and time

⁵³ Jacobs 2011: 3.

budgets are synchronised across institutions. Westminster-type parliamentary systems seem more aligned in the sense that the legislature and the executive are elected simultaneously, whereas federal parliamentary or federal presidential systems are less aligned. Increased desynchronisation favours conflictual party cohabitation and escalates the risk of gridlock in divided and pluralist governments, thereby affecting the adequate pace desideratum and hindering the application of distant time horizons.⁵⁴ Conversely, increased synchronisation provides a framework for more appropriate distributions of judicious timescapes between different powers, allowing room to acknowledge more distant time horizons.

Third, whether members of the executive, legislative or judicial branches, decision-makers often lack specific information and must rely on the knowledge of various kinds of expert. They require technical information on topics such as technology, demographic data, poverty and employment rates, levels of debt, lending practices, public health issues, environmental impact, etc., all provided by external agents (universities, administrative institutes, NGOs, think-tanks, private foundations, etc.) that give recommendations (and are often delegated with decision-making powers) at a non-present-minded pace about problems related to distant time horizons.⁵⁵

Democratic Consolidation and Societal Stability

Planning for the long term is almost impossible when there is widespread uncertainty and anxiety about the current day. This common-sensical consideration bears not only on policy issues but also on political structures. Conversely, it makes sense to argue that political stability offers conditions that are more conducive to long-term thinking.

Political stability comes in a variety of forms. The first is the continuity of formal institutions: the absence of more or less abrupt experiences of political transformation, such as regime change or transition from conflict. If institutions are predominantly transitional (with regard to governance and justice), they will likely disappear or lose their justification once the transition has been completed. Such institutions are, in essence, unequipped to decide for the long term. The consolidation of specific institutions precludes the actual political regime from being merely conjunctural.

Other forms of stability involve successful strategies to deter excessive political fragmentation or acutely antagonistic polarisation. One such form is the formation of majoritarian governments, which are less liable to gridlock and more easily subject to cyclical forms of accountability than inter-party cabinets. Another is the encouragement and furtherance of coordination mechanisms

⁵⁴ Cf. Riescher 1994; Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2009; and especially Shugart 1995.

⁵⁵ Thatcher and Stone-Sweet 2002; Yowell 2018: 100–1.

across the multiparty spectrum whenever elections fail to produce majoritarian governments – in other words, the preclusion of (exceedingly meaningful) polarisation. One of the examples of the temporal inconsistency ensuing from polarisation is the fact that deep disagreement on matters of specific policy is often side-stepped by combining manifold laws and policies into grand omnibus appropriations bills, which tend to incorporate decisions on areas of intervention that call for different time horizons. Since omnibus spending bills are negotiated annually, the time horizon of their entire content is often enclosed in short periods. Coalitions, confidence-and-supply deals and parliamentary agreements on specific policy matters are illustrations of alternative mechanisms that might avert the short-termist effects of polarisation, even if such mechanisms are likely to remain fractious due to the persistence of unsurmountable sources of disagreement concerning certain values and policies between the component parties. Still, they can be useful tools for preventing multiple veto points, assuaging deep ideological divisions across the community and the political spectrum, and increasing trust in governments – all of which seem like necessary conditions for developing strategies that counter the effects of conjunctural short-termism.

Another form of political stability derives from the proper consummation of terms and appointments. Suppose elected presidents were impeached or parliaments dissolved on a regular basis, and legislators only seldom completed the terms to which they were elected. In that case, the constant rearrangement of offices and chairs would hardly favour long-term planning.

All these forms of stability help to consolidate democratic environments and benefit from the procedural regularity that is distinctive of the rule of law. Regularity is already suggestive of consolidation. Consider, for instance, the importance of regular meeting schedules across various institutions, which provide a temporal grid into which much decision-making must be made to fit. They help to mobilise political actors, set the basic rhythm for the work of institutions, and constrain the discretionary use of time, especially in parliaments and executive bodies. Meeting schedules inscribe a sort of institutional routine that favours procedural predictability and often contributes to overcoming desynchronisation problems.⁵⁶

The result of a stable and consolidated democratic governance structure is that conjunctural short-termism is not embedded in the essence of democracy. Nevertheless, this view of democratic consolidation falls short of being an arrangement that necessarily produces long-term decision-making. Democratic consolidation and societal stability are long-termist solely in the weakest sense of inhibiting structural forms of short-termism.

⁵⁶ See Ekengren 2002; Jerneck 2000; Goetz and Sahling 2009: 188–9.

Distinctive Long-term Policymaking

The wide-ranging and diverse nature of democratic governance comprises an even more complex relation between more or less proximate time horizons. Specific policy issues require alternatives that suit the requirements of particular contexts, which are temporally manifold.

On the one hand, governments often decide on policies that, while purposively designed for the short term, require some form of long-term planning. For example, government budgets typically have short time frames but anticipate revenues and proposed spending for upcoming periods. As economic policy instruments, they express a planned approach to government activities, and they cannot be drafted without considering savings rates and the amount of debt and accumulation incurred or yet to incur. States often finance their short-term activities by auctioning debt with maturities that extend over decades, such as twenty or thirty years. The funding covers the current budgetary execution but aims to minimise direct and indirect costs across time and guarantee a balanced distribution of the various annual budgets. Another example of purposively short-term policymaking that calls for long-term planning is commercial concession agreements, which consist of a government's granting rights, land or property to private entities for a certain period. The concession allows private entities to explore a public good commercially on the condition that it provides a service that benefits the public. This may include exploiting a quarry, running a hospital, maintaining a highway, operating an air route, providing educational curricula, etc. It is not uncommon for such agreements to remain in force (without renewal) for long periods, sometimes decades.

On the other hand, the fact that governments often decide on issues that produce (anticipated) benefits in the less proximate future justifies the incorporation of distinctive long-term planning into their policymaking. This situation is different from the typical long-term decision-making procedure. For example, a government may decide to build a hospital that takes many years to complete – the cost is upfront, and the benefits will extend to the future. But the driver of the decision is a short-termist analysis: today, this community faces the problem of insufficient health care services. In other situations, the problem does not exist today but is likely to come forth in the future and requires current anticipatory mechanisms. For instance, ensuring adequate funding and strategising for specific preventive social policy measures, such as prisoner reintegration, urban planning and social security pension schemes, requires some demographic forecasting. Phenomena such as demographic ageing (characterised by low fertility rates and increased life expectancy) and mortality forecasting are paramount to such distinctive long-term policymaking and must be expressed in statistical tools that allow for the estimation of age-, sex-, country- and cause-based

variables that channel the available responses of political agents to expected demographic transformations.

The foremost example of policies directly related to long-term problems relates to environmental protection and stewardship. The very idea of sustainable development, devised to face issues such as climate change and the loss of biodiversity, illustrates governments' capacity for long-term problem-solving. Long-term actions and policies of this sort relate to adaptation, mitigation or loss and damage responses, and they permeate disparate fields of intervention such as creating financial deterring mechanisms (e.g., carbon taxes), establishing conditions for further research, building climate-resilient infrastructure, financing and developing technology for the storage of greenhouse gases, and resorting to geoengineering programs.

CONCLUSION

The category of short-termism has a limited explanatory range in democratic environments. Since different political systems are often characterised by different timescapes, and since complex political systems, such as contemporary democracies, have several institutions with different (more or less extended) time horizons, democratic time can hardly be qualified straightforwardly as short term.

Still, democratic environments rely on and enhance the tendency to favour proximate time horizons. This is what makes the argument from democracy so problematic when dealing with future-related problems such as climate change. The impact of norms, policies and actions adopted today and prompted by proximate time horizons is likely to extend well beyond those horizons. From a moral perspective, there is a strong argument in favour of the long-term view, and political systems should adapt to the requirements that stem from it.

But how are we to take into consideration, in liberal democracies, the interests of those yet unborn who are to feel the impacts in the long run of today's government actions? Is it possible to make a case for the *inclusion* of the (non-overlapping) future in current liberal democracies? Chapter 2 explores this difficulty.

BRINGING THE FUTURE INTO THE PRESENT: THE LEGITIMACY GAP IN NON-OVERLAPPING CONTEXTS

Liberal democracies today have the power to bring about conditions that are likely to affect the lives of those who are yet to be born. The moral challenge that pervades democratic theory and intergenerational studies is to align political incentives with the interests or welfare of persons who will live in the future without having to sacrifice the basic tenets of liberal democracy. The most direct and robust way to ground such an alignment is from the viewpoint of an argument from democracy, that is, by claiming that the less proximate future can and should be *included* in current democratic decision-making procedures, and not simply mentioned or taken into account when deciding on any policy the effects of which extend throughout time. Proposals for inclusion of the future are myriad, and they may involve the implementation of long-term forms of governance, franchise reform and exercises in institutional design.

Some of these proposals aim to include persons yet unborn in today's democratic procedures. Others seek not so much to include future persons as to develop institutional constraints that would safeguard their interests in the future. In either case, the question seems to be how to generate sufficient incentives to prevent democracy's harmful short-termism. The problem runs deeper, however. The inclusion of members of future generations in democratic practices and the priority (or mere weighing) of their interests in cases involving trade-offs with people alive in the present seem to bring forward legitimacy issues. This should come as no surprise, as some conceptual and argumentative instruments used predominantly in liberal democratic theory were not originally conceived

for cross-temporal relations. But does this mean that they are not temporally elastic, at least in a sense that allows us to side-step legitimacy concerns about governance oriented to future people?

This chapter provides an overview of four of those fundamental concepts and values of modern liberal democracies that seem to conflict with the inclusion of the future (more specifically, the future in which no persons overlap with the present) in current democratic procedures. The first section clarifies what should be understood as democratic legitimacy in cases involving the non-overlapping future. The second claims that the language of rights travels badly (if at all) to future persons or generations. The third applies the constructivist turn of political representation in current democratic procedures to cross-temporal contexts and concludes that the future hardly falls within the category of the represented. The fourth focuses on the impossibility of dismissing some form of actuality of consent for determining democratic legitimacy. The final section focuses on the egalitarian plateau of rule by the people to show that future persons cannot be treated entirely as equals in regimes that depend on the principle of majority rule to a certain extent.

THE TWO SENSES OF FUTURE-ORIENTED DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

Duties of justice towards the future are concerned mostly with the quality of the outcomes of whatever decisions or actions are made today, whereas questions of legitimacy are mostly about the quality of the conditions or procedures by which decisions or actions are made today. This distinction is not clear-cut, however. For instance, political scientists often distinguish between input, output and throughput legitimacy, where input judges legitimacy by reference to citizens' influence, output judges legitimacy by reference to the benefits of whatever results from government action, and throughput judges legitimacy in terms of the accountability and transparency of government processes that involve the consultation of citizens.¹ Other notions of legitimacy are even more multifaceted. Arthur I. Applbaum maintains that, in order to enjoy a right to rule, a democratic government must satisfy the principles of liberty, equality and agency, where the latter requires that the government constitute a self-governing group agent responsive to the reasons that apply to its citizens.² And Fabienne Peter holds an epistemic accountability conception of political legitimacy that combines epistemic considerations with responsiveness to political will.³

One characteristic that seems to pervade all notions of legitimacy, though, and which is not necessarily present in most conceptions of justice, is that any extant exercise of power by one entity over another must be in some sense

¹ See Schmidt 2013, who draws on concepts developed by Fritz W. Scharpf in the 1970s.

² Applbaum 2019: 150–6.

³ Peter 2020.

justified (or justifiable) by the one who exercises that power vis-à-vis the one who is subject to the power being exercised. Only through this justification can the entity which exercises power have a claim to being obeyed (and to enforce this claim), and the entity that is subject to power have the concomitant duty to obey. The absence of such a justification entails that the power relation boils down to mere coercion or violence – that authority, if it exists at all, is merely *de facto*, not *de jure* or *political*. Now, democracy is a government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people – the justification of power that combines the ‘of-by-for’ trypic involves primarily the inclusion and participation of those subject to power at some stage of the procedures by which power is exercised, which means democratic legitimacy is first and foremost akin to what political scientists call input legitimacy.

The notion that ‘the ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty, or supreme controlling power in the last resort, is vested in the entire aggregate of the community’,⁴ according to Stuart Mill’s judicious phrasing, requires criteria in light of which it is possible to ascertain who is to count as a member of the aggregate of the community. Without such criteria, the aggregate remains forever undetermined, and the power vested in it forever abstract. The delimitation of democratic government depends not only on whose benefit power is to be exercised but chiefly on who is to be included in government. If inclusion is taken out of the equation, there is no government *by* the people. And, without the latter, the ideal of self-government remains unfulfilled.

From the outset, this poses a significant challenge to the non-overlapping future, as people whose lives are somewhere beyond a distant time horizon are today voiceless and toothless since they cannot vote, campaign, lobby, protest, choose or dismiss the decision-makers out of office. This difficulty only makes sense, however, if we accept that there are power relations in current democracies concerning the future that can be qualified as legitimate or illegitimate. For instance, if democracy is the *government* of the people, by the people, for the people, and we consider that it is not conceptually possible to *govern* people in the future, then nothing that current democracies decide for the distant future can be termed legitimate or illegitimate towards future people, as none of those decisions are government *of* the future. Ultimately, this view would entail that any talk of democratic legitimacy towards the non-overlapping future is meaningless and should be abandoned.⁵

Nonetheless, there are at least two ways through which democratic legitimacy with regard to the long term (including the non-overlapping future) not only makes sense but is paramount to the quality of democracy assessed today. The first concerns the relations between present democracies and future people.

⁴ Mill 1991a: 214.

⁵ This particularity of future-oriented legitimacy is pointed out by Gosseries 2023: 156–60.

Are they of such a nature that can ultimately qualify as either legitimate or illegitimate? Is there democratic legitimacy (or illegitimacy) towards the future?

The literature on futures studies often approaches this question from the viewpoint of standard responses to the so-called democratic boundary problem, about how to ascertain the domain (where and towards whom), the scope (which issues) and the membership (who should be entitled to participate) of democratic decision-making.⁶ Responses to the boundary problem are usually of two kinds, both consonant with liberal aspirations for autonomy and self-determination. In the first, a regime qualifies as democratic when those who are either affected, coerced or ruled by collective political decisions have an equal say in the collective decision-making procedures. Since affectedness, coercion or subjection are regarded *prima facie* as violations of personal autonomy and self-determination within democratic environments, entitlement to participation in democratic decision-making becomes then the privileged way of preserving such values. This first kind of response is termed ‘the all-affected principle’.

Different ways of interpreting the concept of ‘relevantly affected’ lead to two different formulations of the principle that are often regarded as rivals. One is the ‘all-affected-interests principle’, according to which entitlements to participation stem from any interests affected across time. The other is the ‘all-subjected principle’, which attributes to anyone either legally bound (subjected to law) or coerced (subjected to coercion) by a bounded demos the right to participate in the procedures that impose those boundaries. Thus, a person is relevantly affected if she or he is subject to a particular democratic decision or the actions of a particular democratic authority, where being subjected is understood as being bound by the decision (i.e., that the decision requires some action or omission) or being exposed to coercion based on the decision (i.e., that being the object of a credible threat of the deployment of force one should not comply with the decision). The ‘all-subjected principle’ has then two formulations: the ‘all-subjected-to-coercion principle’ and the ‘all-subjected-to-law principle’.

The second kind of response to the boundary problem comes as a reaction to the more well-received all-affected principle. Many authors regard the all-affected principle as a mere criterion for the formation of decision-making groups that are not sufficiently sensitive to the broad spectrum of core values that constitute the demos in liberal contexts. We need then to establish more precise value-laden criteria for ensuring demoi are composed in such a way that is attentive to the conditions of democracy and assertive of the value of democracy, including all the substantive values and principles it aims to serve. This kind of response constitutes what we can term ‘the substantive-democratic principle’. Authors who endorse variations of this principle are sceptical about the viability of the all-affected principle for assessing the quality of democratic environments.

⁶ Miller 2020.

They emphasise, instead, criteria of inclusion based on nationality,⁷ citizenship and solidarity,⁸ universal moral status⁹ and relational equality.¹⁰

Scepticism about the applicability of legitimacy tests to the relations between present democracies and future people should follow from the belief that people in the future do not fall under *any* of these standard responses to the boundary problem, thereby making it impossible to govern the non-overlapping future. If we believe that people in the future are not subject to today's laws, then the all-subjected-to-law principle does not apply to the non-overlapping future, and there is no democratic governance of the future that triggers the 'of-by-for' formula of legitimacy. If we believe today's governments cannot exert force upon people in the future to make them act (or not act) in a certain way and enforce upon them laws, policies or other political decisions, then the all-subjected-to-coercion principle does not apply, and there is no democratic governance of the future that triggers the 'of-by-for' formula of legitimacy. If we believe people in the future can be potentially affected by decisions made today and we lack a sufficiently robust definition of affectedness, anything whatsoever can be said to be affected by anything indefinitely in a butterfly effect, and affectedness becomes too broad a criterion to assess *demoi* – ultimately, this entails there is no democratic governance of the future that triggers the 'of-by-for' formula of legitimacy solely in light of the all-affected-interests principle. If we believe that substantive evaluations of relations make sense of extant relations only, thus implying that the quality of democratic environments can be assessed only once a democratic environment already exists, then the substantive-democratic principle does not seem to clarify whether there is such a thing as a democratic governance of the future in the first place. And if there is no democratic governance of the future (or no way of knowing it), there is no object upon which to submit legitimacy tests, and the 'of-by-for' formula of legitimacy cannot be triggered.

This sceptic position, which could entail that nothing that democratic governments do today could be deemed illegitimate towards the future, does not have much bite, though, even if we believe that future people fail all the standard principles of inclusion that purport to answer the boundary problem. The reason is that the 'of-by-for' formula of legitimacy does not aim directly at answering problems of inclusion or of delimitation of *demoi*, but about qualifying the coercive actions of entities that claim to have (or be) a sufficient reason for being obeyed – legitimacy tests are evaluations of power structures and relations.

Notwithstanding, different conceptions of power will apply different criteria to the relations between present democratic governments and future people. Some

⁷ Miller 2020.

⁸ Song 2012.

⁹ Koenig-Archibugi and List 2010.

¹⁰ Bengtson 2022.

authors maintain that power requires direct communication between those who exercise coercion and the coerced by means of threats to inflict harm;¹¹ others that all that is needed is that someone is prevented from acting in a certain way by the actions of another, whether directly or not;¹² others that power obtains systematically;¹³ others that power arises when someone is in a position to carry out their will despite resistance;¹⁴ others that power consists in the capacity to produce and prevent change¹⁵ or in getting others to do something that they would not otherwise do;¹⁶ others that power is also normative insofar as it consists of the ability to change a normative condition in others;¹⁷ and others that power requires success in decision-making, managing the political agenda and manipulating the wishes of others.¹⁸ Some of these criteria will apply to future people, some will not. Nonetheless, whatever the case, all conceptions of power will come to terms with the perception that current democratic governments have the capacity today to exercise force in a way that will undoubtedly impact significantly on the conditions that future people will have to solve what Bernard Williams termed ‘the first political question’, that is, the securing of order, protection, safety and the conditions of cooperation.¹⁹ Political entities today can create difficult-to-dismiss commitment devices that extend into the future, they can establish solid path dependencies (e.g., in urban planning and infrastructure), and choose the number and kind of resources that will be at the immediate disposal of future people – it seems odd to not consider such discretion and ability to set the preconditions for answering ‘the first political question’ as an exercise of power, the effects of which will eventually fall on people yet unborn in a way that frames and determines their decisions concerning that ‘first question’, and who, in turn, do not have such discretion and ability with regard to past people.²⁰ The distribution

¹¹ Hayek 1960: 133–4, 142; Miller 2010. Their emphasis is on the notion of ‘coercion’, not power, but I presume, for the sake of argument, that they would agree coercion to be a kind of power.

¹² Abizadeh 2008, also focusing on coercion.

¹³ Valentini 2011: 137.

¹⁴ Weber 1978: 53.

¹⁵ May 1972: 1999.

¹⁶ Dahl 1957: 202; Larmore 2020: 155.

¹⁷ Raz 2022: 162–78.

¹⁸ Lukes 2005.

¹⁹ Williams 2005: 3–4. According to Williams, and other political realists, the way power structures respond to the first political question is the primary object of inquiry of theories of legitimacy.

²⁰ If we accept that power travels across time, then the non-overlapping intergenerational framework displays an asymmetry of power: Campos 2018: 2. Whether this power asymmetry is wrongful in a sense that forces us to consider it as intergenerational domination (Karnein 2023) or exploitation (Mulkeen 2023) is a question I leave unanswered, as it is not necessary to conclude in favour of the viability of legitimacy tests.

of power between different agents for answering ‘the first political question’ is what ultimately calls for legitimacy tests in the first place. Even if this power is not exercised directly over people in the future,²¹ it provides minimum ground for applying legitimacy tests towards the future.

However, even if such a minimum ground were not obtained, legitimacy concerns about future-oriented democratic governance would still arise. The reason is that there is a second way through which democratic legitimacy with regard to the long term matters – one that concerns not the relations between present democracies and future people, but between present people and their present democratic governments when they govern for the long term. Such relations can indeed be qualified as either legitimate or illegitimate, especially when taking the interests of the unborn into account becomes so paramount in decision-making that these interests are weighed against the present interests of those alive today (as suggested by the overwhelming majority of institutional design proposals advanced by studies in intergenerational justice) in a way that does not necessarily garnish the latter’s support. The legitimation demand in such cases is possible and unavoidable. The question is whether such relations can pass the test of the ‘of-by-for’ formula of democratic legitimacy.

The following sections provide four reasons why future people originate a legitimacy gap in light of the ‘of-by-for’ formula. All four are problematic for the inclusion of future people and/or their interests (i.e., not inclusion per se, but due consideration and weighing) in democratic governance whenever such inclusion is not grounded on a view of the ‘of-by-for’ formula that relies primarily on present people. And all four apply equally to both senses of legitimacy regarding long-term governance – legitimacy towards the future and legitimacy of future-oriented present government. They concern the concepts of rights, representation, consent and majority rule.

THE RIGHTS OF FUTURE PERSONS

One of the main reasons for bringing the distant future into the decision-making procedures of the present is the assumption that future people have moral value and that, consequently, they have genuine claims or rights vis-à-vis people living in the present. Decisions or actions potentially harmful to persons who will live in the distant future are, therefore, decisions and actions that violate their

²¹ As I formulate it, the inquiry into the existence of power structures that frame and determine the way power relations pertaining to ‘the first political question’ will exist in the future is different from the all-subjected-to-coercion principle, as the latter applies to all forms of coercion exerted by an entity *A* over an entity *B*, whereas the former pertains to any collective arrangement of discretionary action that influences decisively how others are (or will be) able to respond to ‘the first political question’. In this sense, the scope of the all-subjected-to-coercion principle is broader and more demanding than the inquiry into the possibility of power extending across time.

rights. If such rights are conceived within the human rights framework, the correlative duties we have today towards members of future generations are even more robust.²² The safeguarding of rights and the recognition that all individual rights-holders should be treated with equal concern and respect – two fundamental principles of liberal democratic frameworks²³ – provide then sufficient justification for the inclusion of future persons in today’s political processes.

Rights-holding by future persons is a compelling argument for including future people in current democratic procedures, as individual rights are the fundamental normative grounds of liberal democracies. However, is such a thing even possible, both from a conceptual and a normative point of view, and on equal terms with rights-holding by people living in the present? If so, the inclusion of future people does not pose legitimacy issues. If not, however, any possible trade-offs arising from benefiting future people to the detriment of present people might be interpreted as conflicts between interests actually protected by rights and interests not protected by rights – conflicts which, in the end, might entail violating the rights of people in the present, and hence problems of legitimacy. An inquiry into whether future persons can have rights in the first place is therefore paramount.

The Nature of Future Rights

A Hohfeldian-like rights-based approach to the relations between non-necessarily-overlapping generations presupposes that a specific duty can be binding at a different moment in time than its correlative right insofar as time creates a distance between moral agents and the persons affected by their actions (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1

This view is puzzling, though. The duty *O* existing at the moment t_1 in the present correlates with right *R*, existing at the moment t_2 in the future. At t_1 , *O* is present and actual, whereas *R* is future and possible; but at t_2 , *R* is present and actual. How can this be? Is *R* the same right at t_1 and t_2 , albeit with different properties? Or is *R* a scattered object in time with regard to *O*, just as certain objects can be scattered in space and yet maintain some unity?²⁴

²² In defence of this view, see Bos 2016; Düwell 2016; Philips 2016.

²³ For the view that the principles of equal concern and respect are the moral grounds of any democratic political order, see Dworkin 1978: 177–83; Dworkin 1985: 181–204.

²⁴ Suppose I am wearing the trousers from my grey suit but have left the suit’s jacket at home. The metaphysical puzzle is: where is my grey suit? Is it still *one* object?

In light of such difficulties, many authors have offered compelling reasons against attributing rights to future persons who do not overlap with present generations. The ‘non-existence’ argument states that future persons cannot have rights because they do not exist;²⁵ the ‘no-satisfaction’ argument maintains that future persons cannot have rights to resources that do not exist at the time of their existence because such rights could not be satisfied; the non-identity problem poses a challenge for any view on which members of present generations would have duties to future persons whose existence and identity are contingent on present decisions, but whose lives would be unavoidably flawed in some way.²⁶

In order to escape the language of rights and preserve the validity of moral desiderata towards the future, these authors have followed two alternative strategies. The first strategy is to replace rights with impersonal principles and adopt duty-based accounts of morality instead.²⁷ Moral principles establish that something is wrong either in view of impersonal effects or because it contradicts the agents’ reasons, attitudes or intentions²⁸ – they are sufficient determinants of the moral consideration of the far-off future. Authors of the second strategy preserve rights-language but remove the future from the equation. Moral intergenerational relations depend then on the rights of living people, whether they are adults with present interests in future states of affairs,²⁹ our children or other children born in our lifetime,³⁰ any presently existing person,³¹ or any member of temporally neighbouring generations that will at least at some point in the future have a chance of overlapping.³² Both strategies involve strange presuppositions, however. The first uses a depersonalised ethics to favour (indirectly) the interests of persons, even if they live only in the future. And the second purports to solve moral problems about the future by focusing exclusively on the present.

Notwithstanding, the fact remains that specific institutions and practical proposals aimed at defending the interests and rights of future persons are already in play, including the tendency to upgrade such rights to constitutional rights. The insistence on the rights-based approach, even in liberal democratic settings, is understandable and very tempting. Rights-language seems more axiologically-charged than duty-based moral views, thereby attributing more

²⁵ De George 1981; Macklin 1981; Beckerman 2006.

²⁶ Schwartz 1978; Adams 1979; Kavka 1981; Parfit 1984.

²⁷ Parfit 2017; Brock 1995: 272–5; Buchanan et al. 2000; Page 2006; Sanklecha 2017.

²⁸ Wasserman 2005.

²⁹ Mazor 2010.

³⁰ Vanderheiden 2006; Gheaus 2016.

³¹ Delattre 1972.

³² Gosseries 2008.

substantial reasons to present responsibilities towards the future – it provides a shift away from standard aggregative cost-benefit analyses, a morally robust basis for policy, and, in some cases, it profits from existing legal structures.

However, those who claim that future persons have rights perceive the nature of correlativity between rights and duties differently. Whereas some express a *present-rights-of-future-persons* view, others express a *future-rights-of-future-persons* view.³³ The present-rights-of-future-persons view requires that present duties with present bearers are correlative with present rights with future holders. Those who adopt this viewpoint might even admit that it is a necessary condition for a right to be violated that someone holding that right exists. Still, they refuse to acknowledge that the present non-existence of particular future persons prevents the attribution of rights.³⁴ In contrast, the future-rights-of-future-persons view requires that present duties with present bearers correlate with future rights with future holders. Each perspective is subject to different problems worthy of further examination, ultimately proving to be fatal: problems of correlativity and identity, problems involving the removal of personal identity from the language of rights, and problems of infringement.

Problems of Correlativity and Identity

Suppose a person B has a present duty O to a future person A who holds the correlative claim-right R, and that the duty-bearer (B) and the right-holder (A) are never contemporaries (Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2

According to the present-rights-of-future-persons view, R exists at t_1 and t_2 . The difference between both moments is the right-holder's existence at t_2 , which

³³ I borrow these expressions from Gosseries 2008.

³⁴ There are characteristically two ways to sustain this claim. The first is the 'concessional view', which states that rights exist presently without a bearer because they correlate with present duties, and its present existence is contingent on the future existence of some person who will then be the rights-holder, which does not imply that the future person is the present rights-holder: see Elliot 1989; Schlossberger 2008: 216–33. The second is the 'constitutive view', according to which a certain course of action might involve the creation of rights that would probably be violated in the future. The morally wrongful act generates a new right that might be violated eventually: see Sterba 1980; Woodward 1986; Smolkin 1999: 195–6.

was merely conditional at t_1 . According to the future-rights-of-future-persons view, however, R at t_1 is not the same right held by A at t_2 . O's correlative at t_1 is a normative entitlement of future persons *qua* future persons. R at t_2 is, however, a right of a present person. Its holder, its binding force, its means of satisfaction, and its effects are different from the correlative of O at t_1 . The non-existence argument thus poses problems of correlativity that challenge the present-rights-of-future-persons view since O's correlative at t_1 and R at t_2 are not the same entitlement.

But the non-identity problem also poses severe problems of correlativity. Its main challenge to the present-rights-of-future-persons and the future-rights-of-future-persons views consists in questioning the violation of the rights of a future person, given that it would involve the person's non-existence and consequently the right's non-existence. The argument relies on the assumptions that (i) there will be persons in the future, (ii) those persons will be rights-holders, and (iii) some of their rights bind us today. These assumptions are descriptive of the state of affairs at t_2 from the viewpoint of the state of affairs at t_1 . For such rights to be binding, whether such states of affairs are true at t_2 is irrelevant. But they must have truth value at t_1 because that is what binds members of present generations to those rights. At t_1 , if there are rights of future persons, these assumptions must be necessarily true.

The identity of right-holder A at t_1 is a future contingent. At t_1 , in world W, there is an infinite number of possible future worlds containing an indeterminate number of individuals who are likely to be right-holders at t_2 (Figure 2.3).

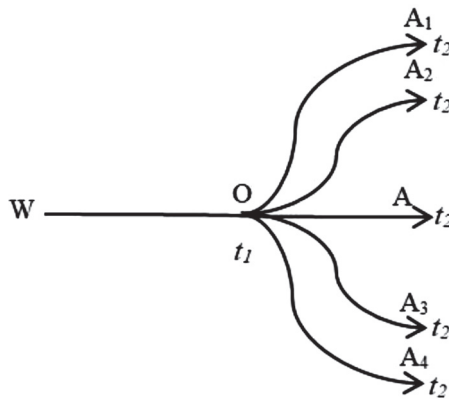


Figure 2.3

From the viewpoint of t_1 , A, A_1 , A_2 , A_3 and A_4 are not equally future persons. Only one of these possible persons at t_1 will live at t_2 , as the future of world W

in which t_1 is actual. The remaining possible persons are only ‘hypothetically actual’, or ‘furable persons’.³⁵ With regard to the future, there are three kinds of persons:

- (i) *Furable persons*, that is, all persons whose existence at t_2 is merely possible at t_1 ;
- (ii) *Future persons*, that is, the furable persons at t_1 who will exist at t_2 ; and
- (iii) *Particular persons in the future*, that is, the actual persons that live at t_2 .

The right-holder who exists at t_2 , A, is a particular person, but at t_1 particular persons existing at t_2 are unidentifiable. The same happens with future persons. Whatever the answer to discerning the truth of future contingents, a statement issued at t_1 that identifies a future person cannot be true.

A rights-approach should deal more accurately with the rights of *furable* persons since those are the only ones that are identifiable at t_1 . Rights-talk about *future* persons at t_1 typically relies on the assumption that there will be persons at t_2 and that their identity is irrelevant at t_1 . However, this is highly problematic, as rights-talk about the future concerns furable persons. This entails acknowledging that at t_1 there are rights that will never materialise, given that not all furable persons will become actual persons. The difficulty in ascertaining at t_1 which of the furable persons is the future person who will be a particular person at t_2 puts all furable persons on an equal footing. At t_1 , all (furable) rights are contingent. It is equally possible at t_1 that the furable person A_1 will exist and that she or he will not exist. A duty O exists, therefore, at t_1 not simply towards a future person, but towards furable persons assessed at t_1 , and this duty correlates equally with the rights of A, A_1 , A_2 , A_3 and A_4 . Since only one of these furable persons is the future person of world W, there seem to be duties at t_1 correlating with the rights of persons who will never exist. The fact that, at t_1 , all the rights in the future belong to furable persons invalidates references to future persons’ rights at t_1 .

Taking Personal Identity Out of the Equation

Disconnecting personal identity from rights overcomes the problem of furable rights-holders. This can be achieved, for instance, by detaching human identities from the concept of a person. Personhood becomes strictly normative,

³⁵ ‘Hypothetically actual’ is Luís de Molina’s characterisation of what he calls *futurabilia*, the future contingents, in his *Concordia liberi arbitrii*, from 1588. According to Bertrand de Jouvenel’s definition, ‘a furable is a *futurum* that appears to the mind as a possible descendant from the present state of affairs’: Jouvenel 1967: 18.

independent of actual flesh-and-blood individuals. Rights are then attributed to types, of which particular future persons will be mere tokens.³⁶

Person-types are general persons, that is, a group of possible persons, one (or more, but not all) of whom will be actual. This raises a new problem: what is the nature of the right of a person-type without a particular instantiation, that is, a person-type to which there is still no token? It is not a deontic power except potentially, so it is neither a Hohfeldian claim nor a liberty nor a power. Still, its correlative duty must bind present bearers regardless of tokens – that is what makes it a right in the first place. It is not a future right because what is future is the token, not the type; so, it must be a present right without holders.

Several legal experiences use rights-terminology to describe entitlements without holders. For instance, a will in favour of an unborn person, an abandoned ticket to tomorrow night's theatre show, a bearer bond not physically held by anyone, an intestate succession that is still to be accepted. In such cases, the formula RabX ('A has a right to X against B') is valid but non-performative, either because A is an empty quantifier (a type without tokens) or because A is an absolute quantifier (the class of all futurible tokens). Conversely, a duty to X on account of A may be performative if rendered into a non-relational formula such as ObX, to which A is the background justification of the duty rather than its addressee. The existence of this duty does not imply necessarily that A has a right to X against B – it could be that nobody, or that some third party, has the right. O is here a two-point operator referring to the connection between a subject and an action, not to the connection between two normative subjects. Rights-terminology seems then more metaphorical than otherwise. Its usage makes sense to justify why X must be normatively protected, given that X is expected to become the object of rights in the future. But that still falls short of allowing X to be the object of an actual right in the present. Similarly, the person-type in the present-rights-of-future-persons view is not the source of X for B, even if it is a strong reason for why such a duty should exist.

Non-individualist theorists of rights avoid the problems of types-without-tokens by focusing on group rights: those who have rights are not future persons, but future generations.³⁷ However, there are two problems with this perspective. First, group rights (held by future generations) do not carry the same moral and political weight as individual rights (held by present persons) – the latter can be fundamental rights with political salience, not the former. Second, this emphasis on group rights also faces problems of correlativity. From a present-rights-of-future-*generations* view, generational rights are grounded on the fact that they assemble a set of prospective interests of future generations *qua* future

³⁶ In this sense, see Fieser 1992; Herstein 2009.

³⁷ Weiss 1990; Kramer 2001; Brännmark 2016; Schuessler 2016: 91–2.

generations. The future as future is never actual. The rights that generations in the future will have cannot correlate with present duties since the correlatives of the latter (*qua* future) can never be satisfied towards any actual generations. And from a future-rights-of-future-generations view, if such future rights are to be binding on present generations, they already have to exist as strong correlatives of those duties in the present – which, of course, they do not because they are *future* rights.

Problems of Infringement

How can rights held by persons in the future be violated? At the outset, rights violations seem to depend on the notion of harm adopted. Narrow person-affecting principles stating that an action is wrong only if it harms and that it harms if it brings about a state of affairs that makes someone worse off³⁸ will require a comparison between an actual state of affairs and an alternative state of affairs in which there is no harmful action or policy. Contrarily, threshold conceptions of harm determine wrongness not by comparing a person's current condition with that in which he or she would otherwise have been if not for the allegedly harmful action but rather with how he or she ought to be regardless of the harm done.³⁹ However, this distinction is unclear in the rights language about the non-overlapping future.

Suppose there is a person at t_2 holding an actual right R2 against B at t_1 for the performance of non-X, in which X is a set of policies promoting the depletion of available resources. How is R2 violated? The relation between R2 and O can give rise to the following scenarios:

- (1) B follows the prohibition of depletion at t_1 , and at t_2 no resources are depleted.
- (2) B does not follow the prohibition of depletion at t_1 , and at t_2 resources are depleted.
- (3) B follows the prohibition of depletion at t_1 , yet at t_2 resources are depleted.
- (4) B does not follow the prohibition of depletion at t_1 , yet at t_2 no resources are depleted.

Whereas (1) describes the scenario in which R2 is fulfilled, (2) describes the scenario in which R2 is violated since depletion at t_2 is the outcome of not complying with O at t_1 . The main problem lies with (3) and (4): which constitutes a violation of R2? That is, which describes a situation in which A is harmed by B?

³⁸ Parfit 1987: 396.

³⁹ Hanser 1990; Harman 2004; Rivera-Lopez 2009.

According to the threshold conception of harm, the ideal situation is described by (1). A is harmed if she or he is left in a condition different from (1) as a result of the violation of O. As it happens, neither (3) nor (4) are descriptive of such a condition: (4) expresses the same outcome to A as (1), even if O is not followed, and (3) expresses a different outcome to A but which does not follow from the violation of O. However, both statements seem to contradict the whole purpose of attributing R2 to A against B, for (3) describes a situation in which what is supposed to be protected at t_2 is actually damaged, whereas (4) describes a situation in which the blatant violation of O~X seems disrespectful of that which is protected by R2. Furthermore, it is at least odd to claim either that A has been harmed by B because A exists at a time in which resources are depleted even though B followed the prohibition of depletion to the utmost or that A has been harmed by B's violation of the prohibition of depletion, even though A lives at a time in which resources are not depleted at all.

The rights-approach to the person-affecting principle, in contrast, compares the condition of A in (3) and (4) with A's condition in the cases in which what seems wrong about (3) and (4) does not happen, that is, the cases in which R2 is fulfilled as described in (1). In this sense, there is no difference whatsoever between both conceptions of harm given that the ideal situation expected by the threshold view is the fulfilment of R2, which for the person-affecting view is the actual non-affecting of R2. However, the person-affecting principle compares the actual situation of A with all other alternative situations of A rather than just comparing it with (1). This makes it possible to establish a scale of protected values, according to which A is worse off at (2) than at (3); also, A is worse off at (3) than at (4); and in (2), (3) and (4) A is always worse off than at (1). Borderline cases such as those of (3) and (4) can therefore be overcome: except for (1), all other situations may be descriptive of a violation of R2 within the context of counterfactuals.

The person-affecting approach seems more effective in identifying violations of persons' rights at t_2 . However, either conception of harm involves the rights of A at t_2 , which are actual rights of actual persons; strictly at t_1 , and at t_1 alone, there is no available definition of harm being done to A, and not even (1) can be stated truly at t_1 . The violation of rights such as R2 depends upon there being present rights against past persons (a focus on the moral state of affairs at t_1), rather than there being present duties to future persons (a focus on the moral state of affairs at t_1). The discussion of the infringements of rights at t_2 is not a debate on the rights of future persons per se.

The upshot of the three kinds of problem identified above is that future persons do not seem to have any individual rights at all binding in the present. However, an ambitious future-friendly reader might still inquire: so what? Is it really necessary to establish that future people (who do not yet exist) have rights (now) in order to justify acting in ways that take into consideration

their potential interests? The answer is not straightforward. There can be ways of justifying moral responsibilities towards the future that affect the way liberal democracies are justified in governing – for instance, based on impersonal duties towards the future or on moral entitlements that fall short of rights, such as expectancies.⁴⁰ Future people’s rights are then not absolutely necessary for establishing the democratic long-term view. However, democracies are based on the fact that people in the present do have rights. That much *is necessary*. So, how can we avoid weighing the normative status of future people’s interests, which are not necessarily encapsulated by rights, with those present interests that are necessarily encapsulated by rights in cases of apparent trade-offs between both? The absence of rights held by future people today may prove, at the very least, challenging to any democratic privileging of the long term.

REPRESENTING THE FUTURE

Another notion that is somewhat problematic when talking about the inclusion of future people in current demoi and their decision-making procedures is that of representation. Most of the proposals for including the less proximate future in democratic procedures rely on representation,⁴¹ as future people are voiceless and toothless in the present and require some kind of representative action to acquire a voice and a bite in the political arena. But is such a thing even possible from a conceptual and normative perspective?

⁴⁰ The latter strategy is developed by the author in Campos 2024.

⁴¹ Proposals for including the less proximate future in democratic procedures are myriad. At the risk of oversimplification, we can divide them into three categories: *democratic long-term governance*, *franchise reform* and *institutional design*. Proposals concerning *democratic long-term governance* extend the capacities that liberal democracies already have for thinking in the long run, mainly by introducing structural mechanisms that motivate political actors towards extended time horizons or that insulate decision-makers from short-term political pressures (for a survey, see Boston 2016). Proposals for *franchise reform* focus on the nature and quality of the constituency, for instance, by enlarging the franchise to young adults who would function as proxies for future generations (Ringen 1997; Wall 2014), by removing the voting rights of older voters (Stewart 1970; Parijs 1998) or placing greater weight on the votes of younger generations (Lecce 2009; O’Neill 2022). Proposals for *institutional design* are more ambitious. They either establish far-off future-oriented institutions or reform current institutions to make them distant-future-beneficial. Examples range from ombudspersons for future generations (Weiss 1992; Slaughter 1994; Agius and Busuttill 2008; Göpel 2012; Beckman and Uggla 2016) to special legislative chambers for the future (Stein 1998; Read 2012; Bovenkerk 2015; Caney 2016; MacKenzie 2016), including parliamentary quotas for future generations (Kavka and Warren 1983; Ekeli 2005), for experts on environmental issues (Dobson 1996) or for younger representatives as proxies for future persons (Bidadanure 2016), as well as futures councils or assemblies (Leggewie and Nanz 2019).

The traditional notion of representation, which involves authorisation and accountability,⁴² already offers a significant obstacle to representing the future insofar as yet unborn persons can neither hold distant-future-oriented institutions accountable nor authorise their decisions in a timely fashion. However, for most of the authors bringing up representation in contexts involving the non-overlapping distant future, such obstacles are more procedural than conceptual insofar as representative claims consist primarily in making someone's voice heard – a voice to which the represented parties can be idealised to have adhered if they could express themselves. In such cases, a sympathetic validation by the relevant proto-constituency at some reasonable future time,⁴³ authenticity⁴⁴ or surrogate accountability⁴⁵ seem like better criteria for determining representation than actual authorisation. Representatives of future generations then are those political actors that bring into the arena of democratic politics the relevant interests of people who will live in the future. They are responsive to the contents of such interests as regarded from today's perspective.

Such accounts treat representation solely in the sense in which someone *acts for* someone in the capacity of a representative. However, a new sense of representation has recently been brought forth by the so-called 'constructivist-representative turn' in democratic theory. This trend suggests that there is 'no constituency prior to representation, no people who form an original unity they then delegate onto the derivative representative'⁴⁶ within the framework of representative democracies. Unlike the standard account of representation adopted mainly by empirical political studies, in light of which constituents have pre-existent baseline unadulterated preferences later to be voiced by (newly constituted) representatives, the constructivist account includes both a *standing-in* and a *portrayal-as* relation. This double dimension is constitutive as it provides the conditions for bringing about the entities participating in representative processes, as well as their political interests, preferences and sense of identity. Representation is not simply constitutive of the representatives that somehow impersonate and make the represented present – it also generates the identity of the represented *qua* political agents. Representatives do not merely transmit (and are responsive to) their constituents' pre-existing preferences. Instead, they bring a constituency

⁴² Pitkin 1967: 38–59.

⁴³ Rehfeld 2006.

⁴⁴ Saward 2009.

⁴⁵ Rubenstein 2007.

⁴⁶ Young 1997: 359. For articulated expositions of this 'turn', which dates to the writings of Hobbes, Burke, Carl Schmitt, Eric Voegelin, Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, see, for instance, Plotke 1997; Ankersmit 2002; Mansbridge 2003; Urbinati 2006; Vieira and Runciman 2008; Saward 2010; Disch 2011; Severs 2012; Wilde 2013; Näsström 2015; Kuiper 2016.

and the corresponding interests into being.⁴⁷ Representation serves then as a way of rendering the demos politically present to decision-makers (and even to its members), without which democracy cannot operate.

A first look at the constructivist framework might make it seem that the interests of future persons can be made representable today in the representative act of constituting the demos. No need for responsiveness to interests that are not already there – the very claim to a representation of the future creates those (future) interests in the present. This view is not bereft of problems, though. The constructivist turn focuses not on inclusion in an already-existing people but on the formation of the demos itself. A representative claims that someone has affected interests, and this initiates a constitutive moment. But if this claim is to be made legitimate within a democratic setting, the constitution of the demos can be completed only once that claim is either authorised or contested. Otherwise, the class of the represented that comes about in the first constitutive moment hardly deserves the qualification of a demos – there can be representation, but it certainly falls short of *democratic* representation. In the case of future persons, this posterior moment of authorisation or contestation never occurs. People in the future may eventually consent to representative claims about them made in the past, but they can do so only when they become people in the present, never *qua* future people. Will not this entail that democratic forms of representation of future people are utterly impossible?

There are at least four sets of problems with the representation of future people in the light of the constructivist turn: the metaphysical problem of portraying-the-future-as-present; problems related to democratic values such as rights-holding, responsiveness and equality; accountability issues; and problems concerning proxies and surrogates.

The Metaphysical Problem of Portraying-the-Future-as-Present

Formalistic accounts of representation in cross-temporal contexts rely on there being such a thing as interests that will be held by persons in the future and whose existence is independent of the representative process – interests that

⁴⁷ Disch 2011. Representative claims inevitably take place in a field that is already made up of a plurality of political discourses and representative relations. The constructivists' point is not that the subjects of representation are constructed from scratch by representative claims, but that they gradually acquire new contents and meanings through their repeated articulation: cf. Devenney 2019. Representation does not take place over what was previously a ground zero of political discourses and of claims to representation and rule. However, such prior discourses and claims do not yet constitute a full representative relation in the sense of giving rise to a demos that is capable of justifying and establishing a unitary power structure (e.g., a state), that is, of deciding. Interests held by people who are still not represented are not necessarily pre-political, but they only acquire the status of politically salient interests within decision-making procedures once the representative relation is established.

only need to be embodied in a language expressed by those who claim to represent them in the present. The quality of representation is measured by the congruence between (possible future) interests and the claims to representative action. Such accounts of representation seem to treat representation solely in the sense that someone *acts for* someone as a representative.

However, the act of representing involves more than one function. One is ‘standing in for another’, whereby one is present in decision-making via the presence of another, even if one is absent.⁴⁸ The normative side of this function consists in ‘acting on behalf of another’, in the sense of acting on the claims and duties of the other.⁴⁹ Another function is ‘acting for the sake of another’, in the sense that the representative relation is attached to a specific good or end that relates to the represented exclusively – an ‘in-order-to-do-*x*’ requirement where *x* is a value regarded as so by the represented or because of the represented (the *for-the-people* part of the ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’ formula). Yet another function of representation is ‘portraying-another-as’, in the sense that representation creates the role of the representative vis-à-vis other persons *and* the actual persons *qua* represented. A representative action is then not a simple dyadic relation of acting-for-another whereby *X* represents *Y*, but a triadic relation of portraying-something-for-somebody whereby *X* represents *Y* as *Z*.⁵⁰ The triadic relation of portrayal produces several consequences that affect the stand-in relation. For example, debates on women’s representation revolve around who gets to speak for women and how women’s interests and gender differences are constituted and rendered politically salient. In this light, representation is both expressive and constitutive. It does not merely amplify a voice that was not being heard but creates it anew in the political arena.

When direct authorisation is possible, the constitutive moment of this triadic relation of representation coincides with the attestation of consent or repudiation, which generates a status conferred by institutionally sanctioned processes (e.g., elections) or by an event emerging from specific democratic-like contexts. Without such an attestation, a claim to representation is not expressive of genuine representation at all. With it, though, representatives and

⁴⁸ Carl Schmitt called this ambiguity a *complexio oppositorum* insofar as it consists in something being present (the represented) without being present: Schmitt 1961: 69. The opposition is relevant at the ontological level albeit merely apparent conceptually, since the absence which is the condition of the presence and the (re)presence that follows from it do not have the same metaphysical status – the former is literal and ontological, whereas the latter is fictitious and conventional.

⁴⁹ Cf. Edlich and Vandieken 2022.

⁵⁰ Fossen 2019. The stand-in and the portrayal-as dimensions of representation are what German state-theory referred to as *Vertretung* (representation as acting-for) and *Darstellung* (representation as standing-for). On the various meanings of representation, see Hofman 2013; Sintomer 2013; Göhler 2014.

represented are, from that moment on, mutually bound in a normative relation whereby the former have duties towards the latter.

However, when direct authorisation is not possible, the constitutive moment is unclear. Future generations cannot give timely consent, even *a posteriori*, to officials acting in the present, supposedly in their name. If that is the case, when does the constitutive relation arise? Someone claiming to act for future generations today must also be portraying them today *qua* future if the representative claim is indeed expressive of a genuine representative relation. With regard to non-overlapping generations, representation at t_1 exists only if the constitutive moment of representation somehow coincides with the moment in which the claim to representation is made: t_1 .

For the constructivist turn, the interests of future persons are not ‘out there’ at t_1 , waiting to be grasped and apprehended. Instead, they are ‘constituted’ by the officials that would occupy representative-of-the-future institutions. At the outset, this would not seem particularly problematic to a constructivist notion of future representation since there appears to be no difference between representing future persons and actual persons in the present. In both instances, the traditional view of representation in terms of responsiveness, that is, in terms of congruence between the pre-given interests of the represented and the acts of representatives, never really occurs. To whose interests are the representatives supposed to respond in the representative action if no interests exist before they actually represent them?

In an X-represents-Y-as-Z conception of representation, insofar as representatives (the X) are representatives only because they stand in for another entity (the Y, often called ‘the referent’), their very existence and actions are responsive to the members of that entity. But insofar as representatives contribute to the (re)configuration of the members of that entity (who then become Z), they also help to frame, channel and shape the underlying interests and preferences to which they are supposed to be responsive in the first place. They are responsive to the interests and preferences of members of Z, not Y. According to this line of reasoning, either responsiveness is utterly impossible or, since the status of Z is born in the present, and that is the status that matters in the current representative relation, it would make no difference at all whether the referent Y exists in the present or not. The upshot is that the representative relation does not seem hindered by whether the referent (the Y: for instance, future people) has any ontological substratum at t_1 . The metaphysical dispute regarding the (in)existence of future persons at t_1 would have little to do with the function of the referent in representational relations.⁵¹ At t_1 , the referent would be better

⁵¹ Certain constructivists regard this conclusion as problematic and make the idea of the referent dependent on a certain kind of materiality: Saward 2012: 125–6. For the notion that the existence of something beyond representation is irrelevant to constructivism since it suggests that what is represented is prior to and independent of representation, see Thompson 2012; Decreus 2013.

understood as a grammatical function of claims to representation – it would exist as logically presupposed, although it could be chronologically anticipated or prefigured in the claim to future representation.

Notwithstanding, such straightforward compatibility between the constitutive stand-in relation and the representation of future persons does not bear more detailed scrutiny. If the actual existence of the referent Y is considered irrelevant for representation, then all the elements of the X-represents-Y-as-Z relation can be fully normative – mere social facts or roles. In that case, though, what is the origin of Y as a referent at t_1 ? Constructivists establish that both X and Z arise from the representative relation at t_1 . But this cannot be stated of the referent Y for two reasons. First, Y would then be simultaneous to X and Z, not logically prior or presupposed. Second, if all the elements of the X-represents-Y-as-Z relation emerged equally from the act of constitutive representation, why establish a triadic relation in the first place rather than simply having (a newly constituted) X represent (a newly constituted) Y? The very justification of the triadic relation would fade away.

To counter this problem, less moderate constructivists may claim that the referent Y exists at t_1 independently of the representative relation merely as presupposed or presumed. But this hypothesis is not bereft of far-reaching problems. In this scenario, the referent Y owes its existence at t_1 to the application of a constitutive presumption rule, the formulation of which would contain a statement such as: ‘For the purposes of an X-represents-Y-as-Z relation, characteristics ABC give rise to Y’. The problem with this rule is that the definition of characteristics ABC seems entirely arbitrary without some underlying substratum. In such a discretionary act of voicing, anything can be included in the so-called representative process because there seem to be no limits to what would-be representatives can claim to be acting for. In addition, the rule’s binding force appears to depend mainly on would-be representatives making claims to representation since those who get to determine the actual contents of ABC are those who intend to assume the role of X in the representative relation. However, if they are not representatives yet, they have no legitimate grounds to take on that role before the fact. In this case, the presupposition of future persons at t_1 seems nothing but an *ab ovo* creation in the present by those who claim to be representatives, as if they became bound to an entity which they feign out of thin air and which cannot exercise its claim-rights towards them.

The actual existence of the referent – actual people alive at t_1 – contributes to the attribution of a substantive limit to the indefinite arbitrariness of the characteristics of referent Y. This limit is ontological and moral. The mere fact that Y refers to living human persons already narrows the possibilities of including anything whatsoever in representative relations. For the purposes of democratic representation, there is a significant difference between flesh-and-bone human persons and fictional human-like characters.

Problems Related to Democratic Values

Three additional arguments support the inconsistency of the portrayal-as relation with the representation of future persons, and they all relate to three values often used to assess the quality of democratic arrangements: rights-holding, responsiveness and equality.

The first follows from recognising that representation is a normative relation. Formally, this is the main distinction between authority and representation, between claiming that an official has a right to rule and claiming that the official has a right to rule on behalf of someone. In the first instance, some criterion (consent, service, community-membership, moral obligations, fair play, gratitude) triggers the right to rule; in the second instance, the representative action triggers a duty to rule in a certain way. In representation, the representative is a duty-bearer vis-à-vis the represented, who, in turn, are right-holders vis-à-vis their representatives. In an X-represents-Y-as-Z relation, the constitutive moment is a normative transformation whereby Y becomes Z, that is, whereby Y acquires a new right that they did not have before. The conversion from Y to Z is the acquisition of a new status of right-holding – a right towards X. However, this right is not held by Z but by Y as Z. In the normative relation of representation, Z is neither conceptually nor performatively autonomous with regard to Y because the right towards X – the right to be represented, not necessarily in the sense of having one’s will-or-interests voiced in the public arena, but chiefly in the sense of being recognised as a bearer of a (potential or actual) will-or-interest that must be taken into account in the representative action – must be exercisable in some level. Since future persons can hardly attain the status of right-holders for various reasons that follow from their present non-existence, they can scarcely acquire the status of Z.

Second, a version of representation that does without material referents (such as future persons) seems incompatible with responsiveness. Otherwise, it would fall into a circular argument – representatives would be responsive to interests that exist only because they contributed to their existence via representative action. Supporters of the constructivist turn tend to frown upon responsiveness as an element of representation, so the present non-existence of future persons would not seem particularly objectionable. Nevertheless, the constructivist turn does not have to be incompatible with responsiveness necessarily with regard to existent persons. The endless circularity between X and Z can be halted by thinking of representation genuinely as a triadic relation with an ontological referent. The independent existence of Y as an underlying bearer of the status of Z makes all the difference. The right constituted by the representative action is a right held by Y as Z. Correlatively, the duty constituted by the representative action is a duty held by X towards Y as Z. There is no circularity if the interests characteristic of Z are regarded as interests that Y have as members of Z. Ultimately, the existence of Y is always

prior to the representative action. The fact that the ensuing interests of Z are justified by and imputed to Y helps to preserve a relationship of responsiveness that is key for assessing the quality of liberal democracies.⁵² If Y is non-existent, however, as in the case of future persons in the present, there seems to be no end to the problem of circularity except by excluding responsiveness from democratic representation.

Third, if the constructivist conception of representation allowed future persons to enter the representative relation, the political arena would undergo severe problems of inequality of treatment between the represented because some representatives would represent extant right-holders (actual Y-persons) while others would represent non-existent right-holders (exclusively Z-persons). In the latter case, accountability would be either wanting or redirected towards entities outside the representative relation between X and Z. Conceptually, shifting accountability to third parties constitutes a somewhat arbitrary form of representation since anything can be deemed representable in those terms, as capable of incorporating the category of Y. But it is also an inadequate form of representation normatively. Without direct accountability between the representatives and the represented, the latter would be utterly powerless in the would-be representative relation, especially in contrast to those other represented more capable of influencing the action of representatives. The importance of this imbalance of power is not to be overlooked in democratic frameworks. The powerlessness of future persons would be in contrast to the power afforded to present citizens by the very process of representation – a condition at odds with democratic egalitarianism.

Accountability Problems

The fact that representation is constitutive of the represented and their interests poses severe challenges to democratic accountability concerning the distant future. At t_1 , the interests of future persons are ‘created’ by the officials that would occupy distant-future-oriented-or-beneficial institutions. This raises *epistemic, motivational and ownership* problems of accountability.

⁵² The normative foundations of liberal democracy comprehend a connection between responsiveness and responsibility that takes the form of accountability: cf. Mair 2013: 60–5; Goetz 2014. Furthermore, responsiveness tends to increase the effectiveness of government action by raising the levels of trust that citizens have in their governments: cf. Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn 2000; Simonsen and Robbins 2003; Hetherington 2005. However, responsiveness does not have to be to *actual* public opinion (i.e., citizens’ raw preferences). It can be responsiveness to *considered* public opinion. Still, it must be responsiveness to *considered* public opinion of *actual* citizens. For an analysis of the divide between conceptions of responsiveness endorsed by empirical and normative democratic theories, see mainly Sabl 2015.

The *epistemic* factor relates to the difficulty in promoting rational discounting of future impacts due to a lack of information about distant time frames. When political actors are uncertain about the future state of the world or future people's preferences, the expected value of their actions and policies decreases. Over longer timelines, uncertainty is even higher, leading to more significant discounting. Such discounting could be reduced by augmenting high-quality information about the future, for instance, by admitting as representatives of the future only experts in fields of study involving long-term causal mechanisms, such as climate experts.

However, even in the case of expertise about the future, the relevant information for a genuine representative process is still wanting. Forecasting about the distant future always involves a substantial level of uncertainty due to the (possible) future intervention of causal mechanisms yet to be forecast. But even if experts could predict all the relevant long-term causal impacts of actions and policies adopted in the present, they could hardly predict the future interests and (moral) preferences of persons who will be alive in the future. At best, they could presume that the interests and preferences of future persons will coincide with the moral picture that present experts make today of what ideal future persons would be like. The experts' decisions concerning discounting would rely more on their current knowledge about what is (currently seen as) best for the future rather than on the expectation that future persons may come to endorse later, after-the-fact, the decisions that experts would make in their name today. This sounds more akin to the trustee paradigm or epistocracy than to representation, given that future persons cannot cast a vote, communicate or convey their interests, preferences and values to their previously appointed so-called representatives. Since one of the reasons that political inclusion is so valued in democracies is epistemic insofar as increased involvement and plurality of inputs are likely to enhance the quality of decision-making, this critical element is not available in proposals involving the representation of the future.

The *motivational* factor must also be taken into account. It is neither impossible nor infrequent to design incentive structures to encourage long-term decision-making in democratic institutions. The proposals concerning democratic long-term governance and policymaking are myriad. However, designing the political environment to counteract short-term motivational factors is not a sufficient guarantee that representatives of future persons will not adopt pragmatic-inspired short-term strategies or pursue a different (future-unfriendly) agenda while in office, especially if they are left unchecked and unresponsive. Constitutional democracies favour the separation of powers and the accountability of government officials towards the governed in view of averting situations of personal-agenda setting or corruption. Designers of distant-future-oriented-or-beneficial institutions often acknowledge this danger and choose to diminish the power of such institutions and emphasise their

symbolic role instead. But this solution would lead to a weak inclusion of the future in democratic decision-making, especially when these institutions (supposedly representative of future interests) conflict with institutions backed up by present majorities (representative, in fact, of present interests). In cases of conflict between long-term and short-term institutions – the former intent on representing the future, the latter representing current citizens – democratic arguments in favour of long-term institutions are hard to come by precisely because the short-term institutions are checked, forced and strongly motivated to pursue an agenda to which they committed beforehand.

A third aspect of accountability relates to *ownership*. Hobbes' original taxonomy identified representation with the dramaturgical action of playing another's part, but he also employed the concept as synonymous with the legal institutes of ownership and authorisation. Representing the words and actions of another person presupposed some sort of consensual agreement (a warrant, licence or commission) whereby the actor (the representative) comes to act by the authority of the author (the represented). In authorising a representative to act in his or her name, the author also agrees to 'own' whatever actions are performed in his or her name, in the sense of taking responsibility for the representative's actions, 'no lesse than if he had made [them] himselfe'.⁵³ Representation involves the triad of authorisation, authorship and ownership: when a representative acts on one's authority, one owns whatever the representative does and is bound by its consequences.

Within this frame of reference, the demos comprises all those who become authors and owners of the very constitutional arrangement within which representation occurs. The interests and rights embedded in this process, which is the process by which both the represented and the representatives come about via representation, are those in light of which their holders are to relate to a specific political arrangement and commit to the consequences of establishing and preserving such arrangement.

The represented should then be in a position to own the political arrangement in the Hobbesian sense. Ownership requires institutions and their decisions to be made public and in correspondence to people's objective interests in being represented in a specific constitutional arrangement – but mostly, it requires members of the demos to eschew (or at least to participate in a process the end of which is to eschew) such institutions and their decisions if such publicity and correspondence are not effective. Contestability is paramount in the representative relation as the expression of constituent power. When the represented cannot object nor assent to an alternative to what is being done on their behalf, they can secure representation only by passing (systemically protected) judgement on the actions

⁵³ Hobbes 1996: 112.

of representatives and proposing alternative representations of the demos they constitute. This, of course, cannot be done by future persons, who do not exist in the present. They are incapable of owning the democratic process in this sense.

Even if it were conceptually possible, the inclusion of future generations in democratic procedures would lessen the legitimation role of accountability. On the one hand, privileging the distant long term would imply undervaluing the accountability relations between elected officials and their constituents in the sense that the interests and preferences of the actual addressees of government (actual constituents) would have to be weighed against the interests of the future addressees of government (potential constituents). On the other hand, even if future persons could be included politically in the present, they would lack power mechanisms to bind the actions of representatives – they cannot vote, campaign, lobby, protest, choose or dismiss the decision-makers out of office. Their voice would stem exclusively from the voice of would-be representatives, who would be unresponsive to the future. Representation would sound then as an ideological cloak hiding the fact that would-be representatives of the future would act like unaccountable (even if contingently benevolent) institutions of the present.

Proxies and Surrogate Representation

People endorsing a less demanding perspective on representation might claim at this point that we are making too much of what democratic representation is generally about. They might say that representatives in democracies act all the time in the interests of people who are not members of the demos, such as people in other countries or foreigners living in their own state. Why should future people's interests not be taken into consideration in representative action, then, not in a direct normative relation based on authorisation, but in an indirect way based on proxies or surrogacy?

From a pragmatic perspective, this argument is appealing. However, it also faces some serious difficulties.

In the case of proxies, there are two main difficulties. The first is to identify who will be considered an adequate proxy for future people. Some may identify environmentalists,⁵⁴ others members of younger age groups whose interests might encapsulate the interests of the yet unborn⁵⁵ – the rationale for the former is that experts on areas that will affect future people the most should stand for them today, the rationale for the latter is that younger citizens have a special relation with less proximate time horizons. Both options, however, undervalue the fact that proxies count double in aggregative frameworks (they

⁵⁴ Dobson 1996; Ekeli 2005.

⁵⁵ Bidadanure 2016.

count for themselves and for those for whom they stand as proxies), which is problematic from the viewpoint of democratic equality. But even if this were not a problem, a second difficulty arises when considering proxies in non-overlapping contexts. Proxies who supposedly become representatives because they share specific characteristics with future persons or who advocate interests that may be coincidental with the interests of future persons may be able to play the role of Y in a portrayal-as relation. However, they hardly have a normative relation that triggers accountability. The resemblance of characteristics or interests is closer to ‘descriptive representation’,⁵⁶ that is, representativeness (the act of mirroring). The concepts of representation and representativeness should be distinguished, as they have different functions. A school council, for instance, can have a relation of representativeness with several groups of persons involved in the school’s activities (teachers, students, parents, employees, members of the community, etc.) even though it does not necessarily represent the school, either as such or vis-à-vis third parties. Representativeness can exist without representation and vice versa. Proxy representation in this sense seems to mischaracterise what is distinctive about political representation, namely, the fact that it includes in decision-making processes the interests of the represented rather than similar interests. Representatives are not supposed to be stakeholders themselves, nor are they expected necessarily to share personal characteristics or interests with those they represent.

Similar problems arise in the case of surrogates in the non-overlapping context. According to Jane Mansbridge:

Surrogate representation is representation by a representative with whom one has no electoral relationship – that is, a representative in another district . . . [T]he legislators act to promote their surrogate constituencies’ perspectives and interests for various reasons internal to their own convictions, consciences, and identities.⁵⁷

What Jane Mansbridge describes here is commonplace in the actions of politicians who are representatives. But she seems to go too far in making two assumptions that are not conceptually clear: that this common practice is inherent in the very representative activity and that the represented in a normative representative relation are (only) those who contribute to electing a representative.

With regard to the first assumption, we should be suspicious of the idea that simply taking someone’s interests into account in a democratic context is a sufficiently strong criterion to say that there is representative action. The functions of representation – standing for another, acting on behalf of another, portraying

⁵⁶ Pitkin 1967: 60–91.

⁵⁷ Mansbridge 2003: 522, 524. See also Saward 2009; Rose 2016.

another and acting for another's sake – follow from a normative relation between the representatives and the represented whereby the former are obliged to act in a certain way towards the latter merely due to the very nature of the process by which the (represented) demos comes about. When engaged in decision-making procedures, representatives may encounter serious moral reasons to take into consideration the interests of people outside the representative relation (e.g., not only citizens registered in other districts but also people whose human rights are being violated in a foreign country, resident non-nationals and even future people), but those moral reasons are not sufficient to trigger inclusion in the representative relation, which necessarily combines all four functions of representation. Those reasons may be relevant for reaching decisions in representative action since liberal democracies are not insensitive to matters of justice. However, such reasons are neither embedded in the representative action itself nor do they override the obligation to prioritise the interests of the represented (those with whom representatives hold a primary promissory relation) from the viewpoint of an argument from democracy.

In addition, regarding the second assumption, electoral relationships are necessarily included in the broader category of representative relations, but not all representative relations are electoral relationships. This follows directly from the portrayal-as function of representation. In democratic frameworks, certain representatives are elected by members of the franchise structured into electoral districts, but they represent the demos. Now, the franchise is not necessarily the same as the demos. The demos holds constituent power – when it establishes and authorises officials, it is usually called a constituency; when those officials stand in an X-portrays-Y-as-Z relation, it is called the represented. Those who participate in the franchise automatically acquire the status of being represented in the operation of representative government, but that does not mean that representative government only represents franchise members. In other words, what Mansbridge often describes as surrogate representation (e.g., a gay senator from Massachusetts representing gay people in other parts of the United States) may be justified as part of the very function of democratic (promissory) representation.

All in all, proxies and surrogates are an imperfect form of inclusion. The typical reasons for valuing political inclusion are not available in the representative action of proxies and surrogates: actual civil and political rights are not respected since future persons have no rights in the first place; the epistemic ambition that inclusion enhances the quality of decision-making is also not met because future persons do not participate in actual decision-making procedures; the fact that democratic inclusion offers the possibility of holding officials to account is absent as well concerning future persons. The inadequacy of proxies and surrogates as drivers of inclusion is evident in the supposition that no actual citizen granted a right to political participation would prefer

to waiver such a right in favour of a proxy or a surrogate. Suppose a system where each person can waive her or his right to vote and to engage in any political action and instead allow for someone else to cast her or his vote and act on their behalf, someone that person could not choose, with whom she or he could not communicate or convey their preferences and values, someone who claimed to be their voice but who was not accountable to them. Would such a choice appear reasonable to that person, and, more importantly still, would such a system remain deserving of the epithet ‘democratic’? An affirmative answer seems counter-intuitive.

The upshot is that the absence of a plausible account or representation in the non-overlapping context forces us to acknowledge that the representation of future people is not a useful conceptual tool for valuing their interests in current democratic practices, and we should renounce employing it.

THE ACTUALITY OF CONSENT

The scope of political legitimacy typically encompasses principles for the justification of power that relate differently to time. Gratitude and community membership seem inextricably linked to the past, prudence is fixated upon the future and theories of natural duty, Samaritanism, the common good, and political naturalism build on atemporal conceptions of legitimacy. In itself, none of these theories grounds future-oriented governance sufficiently. Theories that privilege the past and the present justify authority as a right to rule the now, whereas theories that privilege timeless principles justify authority as a right to rule in general. Even from a multi-principle approach to legitimacy that encompasses different time frames, no specific set of such theories seems robust enough to justify a right to govern specifically the future and for the (distant and non-overlapping) future.⁵⁸

This difficulty increases when we look at the specific demands of *democratic* legitimacy. The idea that democracy is government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people, brings forth different dimensions of legitimacy. Government *of* the people requires members of the demos to *own* the very operation of government in the sense of having the capacity to validate, contest or repudiate whatever actions are done in their name. Government *by* the people relates legitimacy to procedures more than outcomes: claims about democratic legitimacy entail that the permissibility of enforceable decisions is conditioned by the intrinsic properties of the procedures through which they are made, properties which include open participation by (or justification towards) the members of

⁵⁸ Correlatively, there seems to be no specific cross-temporal theory of political obligation grounding democratic governance of (and for) the distant future. Even attempts to extend fundamental political concepts to a non-overlapping long-termist agenda omit discussion of the grounds of political obligation. See, for instance, Barrett and Schmidt 2022.

the people itself or the tendency of these procedures to generate certain kinds of outcome.⁵⁹ And government *for* the people requires that enforceable decisions are grounded on reasons that relate to interests either held by or imputed to the members of the people, that is, the best interests of the people constitute the fundamental reason for having to obey government decisions in the first place. The admixture of these dimensions highlights the indispensability of *consent* for *democratic* legitimacy – either in the form of exercising ownership (*of* the people), of participating in decision-making (*by* the people), or of being a necessary (albeit not sufficient) reason for political obligation (*for* the people).

In liberal democracies, legitimacy must be acquired primarily (even if not exclusively) in a bottom-up movement. ‘Consent of the governed’ is a necessary feature of democracy. This link between legitimacy and consent introduces a novel timescape into normative political theory. Different forms of consent (explicit, tacit, hypothetical and quasi-consent) have different implications for political time. Some involve a once-and-for-all kind of original consent, others an ongoing exercise of consent in a linear manner, others a periodic renovation of consent, and others a detachment from the contingencies of time. In this sense, consent theories can also be called multitemporal, as no single form of consent seems sufficient to justify an entire democratic decision-making structure.⁶⁰

One of the consequences of envisaging consent in multitemporal terms is that democratic legitimacy is neither tenseless nor dissipated in the immediate. As a bottom-up form of time-bindingness, consent plays a vital role in legitimising democratic institutions that exercise power in the face of more or less extended time horizons. However, the multitemporality of consent requires one of its necessary forms to be presentist. *Ongoing* forms of consent – understood as the consent of those who are actually governed – are always needed to complete the link between consent and legitimacy. Ongoing consent can be explicit or tacit. It is explicit in two ways. The first is periodic or quasi-consent, chiefly via elections. The second is when habits of obedience are constitutive facts of a constitutional government structure, as seen in Bentham and Austin. The habit requires a connection between the present and the past whereby the former reproduces the latter – the fact that such reproduction is ongoing is what makes the habit binding in the present.

Ongoing consent can also be tacit in two respects. The first consists in the efficacy of norms and commands issued by *de facto* authorities, as *ex post* consent.⁶¹ The second is presumed consent, which depends on a lack of explicit

⁵⁹ Hershovitz 2003: 212; Beckman 2019: 413–14.

⁶⁰ For further developments, see Campos 2021.

⁶¹ On how legal efficacy can have a normative dimension, see Campos 2016.

dissent. Silence (lack of dissent) is the relevant fact of consent, but it counts as consent only because it activates a presumption rule that imposes consent as the default position. This presumption rule is binding because it follows from a prior convention in the form of original consent established in the past. This also holds for periodic consent, which requires ongoing consent between durational thresholds.

In either case, failure to meet any minimum threshold of ongoing consent generates a legitimacy gap in democratic environments – and the ‘ongoing’ feature can be understood as privileging the actual, that is, as presentist. Democratic legitimacy does not boil down to moral acceptability, whether the latter takes the form of substantive or procedural justice. In democratic frameworks, legitimacy relies also on factual acceptability. Suppose a future-oriented or future-beneficial institution passes a litmus test of intergenerational justice but falls short of generating sufficient factual support in the present. It seems counter-intuitive to consider that it is democratically legitimate, even if it is morally just.

This poses a significant challenge to consent’s purported task of justifying non-overlapping cross-temporal democratic governance. Future generations cannot express consent. This is obvious in the case of actual consent, whether explicit or tacit. If consent is understood as pre-authorisation of authority or action, acquiring consent from future people is impossible. Conversely, *a posteriori* consent acquired at a future moment t_2 is not consent at all at the present moment t_1 . This generates problems of asymmetry in long-term governance between those who can exercise consent and those who cannot.

There are usually two strategies to overcome this asymmetry, but they both seem to fall short. One strategy is to pursue ‘future-oriented consent’, whereby governments can legitimately govern for the future insofar as they make decisions and implement policies that future people ‘will come to welcome’.⁶² Officials regulate their decisions on behalf of the free, informed and rational choice of future people, choosing the option at t_1 that is likely to be endorsed by those living at t_2 who will have the cognitive capacities to reflect on the officials’ decision at t_1 . The expectation that those living in t_2 , on whose behalf the decision is made at t_1 , will endorse the contents of that decision seems a sufficient justification for overcoming the absence of mechanisms for eliciting actual free, informed and rational consent – it functions as a second-best option when compared with actual consent, but it still elicits sufficient consent.

The problem with this strategy is that future-oriented consent is still actual present consent, not a form of future consent. At t_1 , the consent that will be elicited by future people at t_2 is not a fact, only a prediction. It is the prediction envisioned

⁶² See Dworkin 1983: 28.

by present people that functions as consent. Rather than being explicit or tacit, consent at t_1 is presumed. Present decision-makers endorse the following rule:

The future-oriented presumed consent rule: if people living in the future were called to provide free, informed and rational input to decisions X made today that will impact on them, they would consent to X .

This is a counterfactual rule. Consent at t_1 follows from the application of the rule, not from individual-centred consent. Consequently, consent is not what attributes binding force to a principle or a rule aimed at governing the future; it is instead the result of a prior rule's binding force. This rule, the future-oriented presumed consent rule, is binding at t_1 either for substantive reasons (e.g., moral entitlements of future persons) or because people living at t_1 elicit actual consent to the rule's contents. In the end, the source of consent is not cross-temporal at all.

Michael Otsuka tries to bypass this view by suggesting an account of inter-generational legitimacy based on a form of future-oriented consent akin to tacit consent. Since those who opt out of the laws can do so easily in egalitarian societies, we can infer tacit consent from each generation living in the land.⁶³ However, this will not do for future generations. Even though both forms of consent (tacit and future-oriented) rely on applying a presumption rule, future-oriented consent differs from tacit consent insofar as the presumption cannot be removed. In tacit consent, subjects are presumed to give consent in the absence of an explicit act of dissent, whatever that may be (e.g., leaving the country, rejecting inheritance laws, voting against the status quo, etc.) – once dissent is explicit, the presumption falls. In future-oriented consent, however, subjects are presumed to give consent without ever having the possibility of dissenting. When future people at t_2 do not consent explicitly to decisions made at t_1 (on their behalf or for their supposed benefit) that impact on them at t_2 , the presumption rule binding at that moment is the tacit consent rule, not the future-oriented consent one.

A second, slightly different, strategy from future-oriented consent consists in shifting the focus from actual to hypothetical consent. Justifications grounded on hypothetical consent appeal to conjectures about what a reasonable person would consent to under certain idealised circumstances. It is a common method of employing consent to justify principles of justice or principles of intersubjective morality more generally because it concentrates on the quality of the *reasons* that people can access to give consent, not on the issue of whether they give consent or not, as a matter of fact. In the words of Jeremy Waldron, in hypothetical consent, 'we shift our emphasis away from the will and focus on the reasons that

⁶³ Otsuka 2003: 95–105.

people might have for exercising their will in one way rather than another'.⁶⁴ The world of hypotheticals differs from the world of actuality. Hypothetical consent privileges what people would have good reason to give consent to – what they would accept in optimal circumstances. Because of these features, hypothetical consent seems necessarily tenseless. Future people matter neither as people living in the future nor as futurable persons of the present but as idealised versions of rational consent-givers living at an unspecified moment in time.

At a high level of idealisation, hypothetical consent would give minimal weight to the actual values, interests and preferences that people might have. This would open the path to including future persons within the broad category of idealised persons that count for hypothetical consent.⁶⁵ However, much like future-oriented consent, hypothetical consent is also determined in the application of a counterfactual rule.

The hypothetical consent rule: if reasonable persons, unable to provide actual input now, were called to provide free, informed and rational input to decisions X made today that are likely to impact on them, they would consent to X.

In this case, hypothetical consent becomes actual at t_1 , not as explicit or tacit consent but as presumed consent. The presumption refers to an idealised set of subjects placed in an idealised set of circumstances with reference to specific kinds of decision-making but applies in the here and now. The contrast between the generality of the laws and the particularity of decisions, between *nomos* and *kairos* (the 'fitting moment' for a word in rhetorical exercises or the 'appropriate time' for deciding a policy or issuing a judgement), which is typical of democratic environments since their classical Greek origins, expresses a difference between temporal dimensions in political contexts. For the purposes of democratic legitimacy, time matters. The very fact that hypothetical consent can only be determined due to a presently binding presumption rule attests to this claim. The presumption rule, in turn, is binding not so much because it passes a moral litmus test that would ultimately surpass consent and reduce it to an empty qualifier of legitimacy (since the normative force of the argument would be carried by the moral theory that justifies the usage of consent rather than by a consent theory per se), but because it is accepted in the present, that is, because there is some form of *actual* consent that makes the presumption

⁶⁴ Waldron 1987: 144.

⁶⁵ Morten Fibieger Byskov and Keith Hyams talk about a 'hypothetical acceptance criterion' of legitimacy to refer to a form of representation in which it could easily be expected 'that future generations would approve if they were able to do so': Byskov and Hyams 2022. This formulation seems more akin to future-oriented consent than hypothetical consent, however.

rule binding (and legitimate to a certain degree) in the present – at least, if the presumption rule is supposed to remain part of a viable consent theory of legitimacy. Since future persons cannot participate in the present in such a form of actual consent, they can hardly be considered consent-givers for the purposes of assessing legitimate democratic government.

A multi-principled approach to democratic legitimacy may still claim that consent is not necessary to justify legitimate governance of the future. Consent may ground government by the people, and some other principle (such as Samaritanism or cross-temporal common good) may ground government for future people. But this will hardly solve the difficulty. In democratic theory, consent takes priority over other principles of justification. Added principles are cumulative. They can ground legitimate authority for future governance but only insofar as they do not counter exercises of authority legitimised primarily by consent. In cases of trade-offs between the living and the yet unborn, in which policies favouring the interests of the living are grounded by consent and policies favouring the interests of the yet unborn are grounded on some other principle, the present still prevails.

MAJORITY RULE AND INTERGENERATIONAL EQUALITY

In aggregative conceptions of democracies, the practice of majority rule as the most direct means of actualising the ideal of self-government is typically attached to the ideal of equal participation in self-government. However, democracy's commitment to majority rule and equality does not fare well in the non-overlapping intergenerational context. When a decision is to be made under majority rule, preserving equality while counting inputs of a demos that encompasses both living people and those yet unborn seems tremendously difficult, if not utterly impossible.

To show this difficulty, we need first to understand the nature of the link between majority rule and equality in a representative democracy. Second, we must explore the implications to this link of the potential inclusion of future people in democratic decision-making, either through the all-affected-interests or the all-subjected principle. The result will be a breakdown of some of the basic tenets of democracy understood as government by the people.

The Link between Majority Rule and Democratic Equality

The institution of majority-empowered representative government is distinctive of democracy insofar as the majority's authority derives from the link between the power to participate in government (e.g., through voting) and the principle of equal concern and respect.⁶⁶ Even if we consider, following authors such

⁶⁶ On this point, I endorse the standard majoritarian argument developed by Waldron 1999: 113–14.

as Ronald Dworkin and Stephen Macedo,⁶⁷ that the fundamental principle of democracy is political equality and that majority rule is simply one among a variety of decision rules that might help to advance the project of collective self-rule based on political equality, the fact remains that the best available means of converting the plurality of equal inputs into one single collective decision is majority rule. This is true especially of aggregative frameworks, albeit also of the final stage of deliberation in purely deliberative systems. This notion does not have to entail that counter-majoritarian government is necessarily undemocratic, especially when overriding majority rule is the only road to safeguarding key democratic values, such as political equality.⁶⁸ However, it does mean that majority rule (and the recognition of its validity) is intuitively the default way of reaching *one* decision that can be accepted by all those who participated in its making as theirs. The principle of majority rule seems then the utmost expression of the ideal of self-government, whereas equality of access to the procedures of self-government is the expression of the liberal ideal of autonomy.

Equality requires equal recognition of the entitlements all participants have within the procedures of self-government and equal attentiveness to the fundamental interests of all who participate in those procedures. To treat others as political equals within this collective decision-making framework is mostly to treat them with equal concern and respect. Equal concern implies that each participant's fundamental interests are worthy of the same consideration and that each is entitled to an equal share of the benefits and partakes an equal share of the burdens deriving from membership of the demos. Equal respect means that each person capable of participating in a collective process of self-government is entitled to have her or his judgement regarded with the consideration accorded to the judgement of any other person equally capable of participating in the same process of self-government.

On the other hand, majority rule, in the sense that it derives from (and is at the service of) the ideal of self-government, is not necessarily the same as rule by the majority. For instance, the procedure for assessing majorities must be accepted unanimously by all participants; some level of discretion is often afforded to officials when making decisions credited to the whole; majoritarian decisions are not usually sufficiently authoritative to countervail substantive elements that ground their pre-eminence in the first place; and majority rule is

⁶⁷ Dworkin 2011: 385–92; Macedo 2010.

⁶⁸ But, even then, counter-majoritarian government is often supported by procedural rules that rely on majority rule, for instance, when a supreme court's decision is reached by establishing the opinion that gathers the support of the majority of judges, or when the source of the rule that allows for counter-majoritarian government is grounded on some sort of majoritarian-based procedure (e.g., a constitutional rule approved by a constitutional assembly).

not exclusive to liberal democracies since it can be found in illiberal democracies and certain institutions of authoritarian regimes (e.g., collective courts of law in autocracies).

Majority rule in the liberal context is sufficiently justified insofar as the following conditions are met for genuine government *by* the people to occur:

- (i) numbers concerning support for implemented institutions and decisions are not irrelevant for those institutions and decisions to acquire binding force;⁶⁹
- (ii) some level of consent and participation by the governed must occur (those concerning which majorities are to be assessed);
- (iii) majoritarian decisions function as presumed proxies for decisions credited to the collective;
- (iv) majorities are assessed in a way that is compatible with equality.

Within this frame of reference, liberal democracy is committed to majority rule and equality insofar as it is a political arrangement that requires:

- (i) the value of self-determination;
- (ii) by a demos, the membership of which meets criteria of inclusion that must be,
 - (a) neither fundamentally value-neutral (insensitive to the moral standing of the actual or potential members) nor fundamentally value-breakers (explicitly rejecting to recognize the moral standing of some actual or potential members), and
 - (b) that attribute access to participation in some stage of government decision-making (that is what makes it government *by* a people rather than merely government *for* a people).

This applies whether democracy is regarded simply in aggregative terms or in terms encompassing deliberative and participatory forms of democracy.

For assessing whether majority rule functions according to the principles of political equality, we require criteria of membership of the demos regarding which majorities are to be assessed. In cases involving the non-overlapping future, we must inquire into the possibility of there being criteria of membership

⁶⁹ Some authors even claim that numbers matter so relevantly for majority rule that they are important elements in assessing an individual's voting power, depending on the individual being a member of a majority (more voting power) or a minority (less voting power): Abizadeh 2021. This stronger claim is questionable, though: see Ingham and Kolodny 2023. We do not need to commit to it to accept that numbers play a part in justifying bindingness.

of the demos that are inherently cross-temporal. Special attention should be paid, then, to the implications of including future people via the all-affected-interests principle and the two versions of the all-subjected principle.⁷⁰

Implications of Inclusion Based on the All-Affected-Interests Principle

A first reading of the all-affected-interests principle seems favourable to including the distant future in present democracies.⁷¹ Since present democratic policymaking is likely to affect the lives of the yet unborn,⁷² applying the principle will entail the illegitimacy of short-term policy decisions potentially harmful to future persons because many of those included in the demos are neither called nor taken into consideration in the decision-making procedures – they have no equal say in those policies.⁷³

However, a cross-temporal application of the all-affected-interests principle seems at odds with the egalitarian plateau on which majority rule in liberal democracy must stand. Besides the difficulties already mentioned concerning the representation of present and future people on equal terms, two additional difficulties arise in the non-overlapping context.

The first is *the overinclusion difficulty*.⁷⁴ Suppose we can anticipate that future generations will outnumber us by thousands or millions to one and that, of all the people we might affect with our actions, the overwhelming majority is yet to come. If we included all those future persons in the current demos by applying the all-affected-interests principle, present democratic majorities, no matter how overwhelming, would be minorities when regarded in the long run.⁷⁵ The indefinite extension of the future across several generations would likely provide a supermajority to those yet unborn. No present government would ever be supported by a present majority. And, given the uncertainty surrounding the numbers and the identity of future persons, the supermajority would quickly turn into an infinitely crushing majority if the operation of inclusion referred to merely potential in addition to genuinely future persons.

⁷⁰ The reason for leaving the substantive-democratic principle aside in this discussion is that most criticisms levelled against the all-affected-interests and the all-subjected principles relate to exclusion based on territorial elements of democratic governance (e.g., border control, migration, global demos, etc.), not on temporal divisions. With regard to the yet unborn and non-overlapping cross-temporal contexts, it is easier to focus on affectedness and subjection than on (originally territorial) criteria that, once met, allow for the inclusion of people who can participate directly in decision-making procedures (which, of course, is not the case with members of future generations).

⁷¹ See, for instance, Arrhenius 2022.

⁷² For an explicit rejection of this claim, though, see Tännsjö 2007.

⁷³ Cf. Tremmel 2021.

⁷⁴ Fraser 2005: 83; Goodin 2007: 55.

⁷⁵ Cf. Attfield 2003: 130.

Current suggestions for bypassing the over-inclusion difficulty do not preserve the link between majority rule and equality to a satisfying degree. For instance, the notion that there should be special seats in parliaments for spokespersons of future generations, such as environmentalists,⁷⁶ hardly overcomes the difficulty. Majority rule still prevails in parliamentary decision-making, but a minority is now given the function, within that procedure, of representing, *qua* minority, what is assessed as a majority, thus trampling the principle of equality that grounds proportional representation. Another suggestion maintaining that long-term decisions should be made according to sub-majority rules,⁷⁷ thus giving up on majority rule now and then, also falls short of overcoming the over-inclusion difficulty. The implementation and bindingness of sub-majority rules require constitutional amendments that must be approved and supported continuously in accordance with majority rules. In most constitutions, the latter are actually supermajority rules – in this case, the supermajority of present people, not future people, which would result either in the non-inclusion or in the unequal treatment of future persons in the democratic procedure.

One further suggestion for bypassing the over-inclusion difficulty seems more appealing and challenging: attributing differential voting weights to people placed differently in time. Following recent defences of the differential voting procedures,⁷⁸ it asserts that treating people on equal terms does not have to entail the ‘one person, one vote’ principle for assessing majority rule. Given that different people have different stakes in different policy areas, the all-affected-interests principle would require people to have their votes counted proportionately to their affected interests. Thus, people in the present could have their votes counted differently from future people.

However, this will hardly overcome the over-inclusion difficulty for two reasons: one moral, the other epistemic. The moral reason derives from the understanding that equal moral status is relevant for determining the value of voting (even if political participation could boil down to voting alone, which, in a sound liberal democracy, is hardly the case). In light of a stringent application of the all-affected-interests principle, there seems to be no *prima facie* necessary incompatibility between equal moral standing and differential voting weights, provided that unequal votes are based not on the fact of unequal intrinsic worth but solely and entirely on interests being affected to a different extent. However, this compatibility seems both groundless and rare.

⁷⁶ Kavka and Warren 1983; Dobson 1996.

⁷⁷ More specifically, rules granting minorities composed of one-third of the legislators the right to delay or call for referenda whenever decisions to be made are foresighted as harmful in the long run: see Ekeli 2009.

⁷⁸ Brighthouse and Fleurbaey 2010; Bengtson 2020.

It is groundless because it assumes that affectancy and stakes are sufficiently justified, as a criterion of vote weighing, in taking priority over mere subjection to the collective decision or mere membership of the decisional community to account for voting weights (for instance, grounded on some value that would fall short of sufficiently grounding other criteria of vote assessment, such as subjection and membership) – a doubtful assumption to make without prior discussion. For instance, Andreas Bengtson and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen state persuasively that the all-affected-interests principle does not seem sufficiently grounded by values such as interest protection, self-determination, welfare, equal relations or fairness.⁷⁹ Why not consider, then, that the value of voting is primarily (even if not exclusively) proportional not to stakes but to the moral status of personhood, which is indeed grounded on interest protection, self-determination, welfare, equal relations and fairness?

And it is rare because preserving it seems close to impossible. If persons have equal moral worth, the only way to guarantee that people whose votes are counted less than others would not acquire (with such a devaluation) a lesser moral status in relation to others would be to determine exactly and precisely, for every decision-making procedure, the different stakes involved for all participants. In certain differential voting schemes, such as in corporations (in which votes correspond to the percentage of equity) or in some private associations (in which votes correspond to seniority), the stakes are objectively and easily determined by financial terms or membership years. But in the moral realm, the stakes correspond to the negative (and/or positive) effects of decisions on human welfare or flourishing. Since different decisions impact persons differently, each voter will have their votes counted differently for every decision in which she or he will partake. This generates two problems: one is that the moral principle can be observed not by moral conduct but by technical operations of stakes assessment (the general moral equality depends on the effectiveness of specific proportionality), which ultimately lays the ground for turning democracy into a mere procedural mechanism of an epistocracy exercised by the calculators of stakes; the other is that the moral value of the procedure allows no room for error in the technical assessment. The continuity of equal moral standing depends on the variability of the differential. One single mismatch (or even suspicion of mismatch) in calculating the stakes for everyone involved and for each particular decision can generate inequality of moral standing in the entire voting procedure. Voters (and especially the calculators of stakes, whomever they turn out to be, and regardless of the methods, algorithms and criteria of computation they would apply, generally accepted or not) would be walking on thin (moral) ice in each decision involving differential voting weights.

⁷⁹ Bengtson and Lippert-Rasmussen 2021.

This leads to the second (epistemic) reason for dismissing the differential voting scheme from the cross-temporal context. How does one weigh the (positive or negative) stakes of future people in a sufficiently precise way to establish a reasonably acceptable disproportion between voting weights (between people in the present and future people)? The epistemic difficulties can hardly guarantee a minimum level of acceptability of the disproportion at the moment of voting, when the majority decision-making process is supposed to occur. Unless, of course, the disproportion is always favourable to those participating actively in the procedure, in which case majorities are assessed not by stakes but primarily by the qualities of the persons involved (e.g., whether already born or yet unborn), the result of which will hardly differ from not including future people in the process of majority rule in the first place.

The second difficulty concerning the combination of the all-affected-interests principle and majority rule (let us call it *the political judgement difficulty*) is that the link between majority rule and equal respect, albeit fundamental, only extends so far. In majority rule, the qualitative difference between voting inputs, which reveal the individuals' choices, and the outputs of voting procedures, which aggregate the multiple pieces of individual input and turn them into a collective outcome, should not be overestimated. In democracies, people do not vote to give the authorities a social substratum that they can use to implement their views about the common good. Instead, people vote to express their judgements about the common good, and they do not expect that someone else can determine that the common good is what results from the aggregation of ordinarily ranked preferences. In majority rule, voting inputs are genuine political judgements, not mere expressions of preferences or interests.

Consequently, there is no apparent qualitative discrepancy between the inputs of a voting procedure and its output. The judgements of individual voters comprise the set of considerations that bear on the matter to be voted on, much like the majority's actual judgement. It follows, on the one hand, that the majority is not necessarily right simply because it is the majority. More or less support for a position does not add anything to the substantive issue upon which political judgement is required. An election's fate lies ultimately in the statistical accident of more individuals casting the ballot one way or another. The outcome is not produced by considering whose views are accurate or more compelling – what prevails is the simple arithmetic of choices.

But it also follows that political judgement imputed to a majority must be expressed in the input stage of voting procedures to become extant. Since it is the final count of votes for and against that determines the public choice, not the intellectual dignity of the (actual or prospective) citizens, majority rule embodies previously declared forms of the common good. This connection rules out articulations of the common good that are merely presumed or represented (or, rather, presented) in counterfactual voting inputs, as if future persons were

called upon to participate in an election that would take place today. Otherwise, actual individual political judgement would carry the same weight in majority rule as the (more or less creative) assessment of possible preferences and interests still inexpressive (and, therefore, unaccounted) of political judgement. A qualitative voting input about the common good would then count as a blank cheque given to the authorities resulting from the statistical outcome of the voting procedures. Majority rule would likely boil down to a general acceptance of an elected government with arbitrary powers to decide on any content of the common good – an image more characteristic of elective elitism than of democracy.

The upshot of the combination of the over-inclusion and political judgement difficulties is that future persons cannot be included on equal terms in political processes that equate democratic self-determination with some form of majority rule.

Implications of Inclusion Based on the All-Subjected Principle

Let us now suppose that there is sufficient justification for thinking that the dead hand of the past subjected the present and, hence, that present people can subject future people either by law or coercion. Arguments levelled against the possibility of applying the all-subjected principle cross-temporally⁸⁰ are then overcome, and we can consider that future generations are indeed bearers of legal obligations, that they can be sanctioned, that they will be shaped by current rules of recognition in the Hartian sense, and that they can be subject to present de facto authorities.⁸¹ Still, even in this case in which we accept that the all-subjected principle triggers the inclusion of future people in current democracies, an additional difficulty arises concerning the connection between majority rule and equality.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Otsuka 2003: 132–3; Beckman 2013; Gosseries 2021; Kolodny 2023: 325.

⁸¹ I personally do not think that this is the case, as a reasonable cross-temporal application of the all-subjected principle requires a sufficiently robust conception of legal efficacy that is yet to be developed (even by legal theorists). The addressees of legal norms and policies are those towards whom there are claims to obedience, the practice of which determines the efficacy of the same legal norms and policies. Even if efficacy is not necessarily the source of legal validity and actual binding force, the non-efficacy of a system, by and large, is generally accepted as sufficient reason for considering that the norms and policies that comprise the legal system lose their binding force. Since efficacy is the practice of obedience (or of responding to disobedience), and future people, by definition, are unable to engage in that practice at the moment of subjection, they cannot be considered legally bound – unless, of course, efficacy is understood as something more than the practice of obedience or of responding to disobedience, in which case further theoretical developments on the topic are wanting. However, for assessing how the all-subjected principle severs the link between majority rule and equality cross-temporally, we do not need to reject it *prima facie*.

Equality in democratic decision-making is the opportunity for direct or indirect participation (as *political* equality) in such a way that is commensurate between members of the demos against each other and against their self-authorised rules and laws (as political *bindingness*). The connection between political equality and political bindingness can be assessed in light of three general criteria for determining who is equally governed by the common laws and should have an equal say in making those laws:

- (i) interdependency among those who form the democratic community;
- (ii) equal stakes at decisions being made;⁸²
- (iii) equality before the authorised power structures and their laws.⁸³

All three criteria fall seriously short in the non-overlapping context. First, interdependency seems utterly non-existent. People of different periods do not influence each other bidirectionally, much less in a way that makes them mutually dependent.⁸⁴ There is very little that future persons can do to affect persons living in the present. Until the day that time travel overcomes the margins of science fiction, it is impossible, from the same point in space, for future persons living at a distant, non-overlapping future moment t_2 to significantly affect the lives of persons living at the present moment t_1 . It is true that relations between contemporaries are often not relations of interdependency, as some persons carry more power than others, and this does not undermine the ideal of equality. In fact, this absence of interdependency between political agents is the most paradigm circumstance where egalitarian decision-making is extremely valuable. Still, the difference between contemporaries and non-contemporaries in this respect follows from applying the ‘ought implies can’ principle. Whereas the absence of interdependency between contemporaries can be corrected by aiming at equality, the same cannot be stated of relations between non-contemporaries. No ‘corrective’ mechanism can change non-reciprocity between present and future persons to become reciprocity in such a way as to make the present dependent on the future on terms equal to how the future is dependent on the present.

Second, persons living in the present and persons who will live in the future do not have roughly equal stakes in decisions being made today. Suppose that the satisfaction of all or nearly all of what Thomas Christiano calls the fundamental interests of one person are connected with the satisfaction of all or

⁸² For the interdependency and the equal stakes criteria, see Christiano 2008: 80.

⁸³ Anderson 1999; Erman 2014: 63.

⁸⁴ For the (opposite) argument that present and future people are able to cooperate, see Karnein 2022. Interdependency, though, requires that future people cooperate today with present people and that the latter somehow depend on this cooperation – these are far more demanding desiderata than Karnein is able to justify, however.

nearly all of the fundamental interests of every other person.⁸⁵ A fundamental interest is satisfied to the extent that the fundamental interests of others are also satisfied – those who have those interests share the stakes equally. Future persons will undoubtedly have such interests: as the persons that they will be at t_2 , they will have the interests to be free from cognitive biases, to be at home in the world, and to be treated as a person with equal moral standing among their fellow citizens.⁸⁶ However, this hardly entails that they have equal stakes at the decision-making present moment t_1 .

On the one hand, there are epistemic difficulties concerning stakes measurement. Different decisions generate different sorts of impact, the measure of which varies depending on the method adopted for assessing impacts. If a butterfly-effect method is applied to all decisions, everybody will likely have stakes in any matter. Since this method conceives of decisions as having a multiplying effect, the more distant in time, the higher the stakes for people in the future. Bottom line: stakes are not equal. If, instead, a direct-effect method is applied to decisions, then the further time horizons extend into the future, the more likely it is that the effects assessed at the moment t_2 will be caused by decisions made in the interval between t_1 and t_2 , and thus that people closer to t_1 have higher stakes in decisions being made at t_1 . Bottom line: people at t_1 and t_2 also do not have equal stakes in decisions at t_1 .

On the other hand, at t_1 , stakes hardly seem equal across long stretches of time. There is a substantive difference between the statement ‘At t_1 , future persons will have fundamental interests’ and the statement ‘At t_1 , future persons have fundamental interests’. At t_1 , fundamental interests can be ascribed to persons living at t_1 and to futurible persons, not future persons – future persons only exist at t_1 as futurible persons. The distinction is crucial because it shows that, at t_1 , future persons do not share the same descriptive relational properties that justify equality as persons in the present. This is also partly why some relational egalitarians find establishing social relations with future people impossible.⁸⁷ Since many futurible persons will not become actual persons in the future, their fundamental interests at t_1 are indistinguishable from those held by actual persons who will live at t_2 . The infinite number and variety of futurible persons at t_1 imply that all actions undertaken and decisions made at t_1 are likely to frustrate all the fundamental interests ascribed to them since not all futurible persons will become future persons (assuming, of course, that the fundamental interests of each futurible person are supposed to be connected with the satisfaction of all or nearly all of the fundamental interests of every

⁸⁵ Christiano 2008: 60.

⁸⁶ Christiano 2008: 60–3.

⁸⁷ Lippert-Rasmussen 2018: 123–4; Quong 2018; Bidadanure 2021.

other futurible person). This would make cross-temporal equality unattainable, conceptually and in practice. The gist of this argument is that, in order to preserve the viability of equality as a normative ideal, the only fundamental interests that exist as actual at t_1 are those shared by persons living at t_1 . Actions of the present that are biased against any subset of future persons or which will force them to live according to the principles of the present rather than their own preferred principles, strictly speaking, do not frustrate their fundamental interests at t_1 , but only (possibly) at t_2 . This makes it troublesome to claim that they share equal stakes at t_1 , the moment when equality or inequality can be ascertained in current decision-making procedures.⁸⁸

Third, political subjection is not shared equally across time. Certain institutions seem ‘over-generational’ inasmuch as the provision of essential goods (such as social order, a system of law, climate regulation, etc.) is a condition *sine qua non* for the emergence of fundamental interests in any given period of a democratic community. Insofar as such institutions endure and remain formally and substantively the same at t_1 and t_2 , the systematic subjection over time to the same authorised political power seems to be on equal terms. However, the assessment of shared institutions can take place only at t_2 . With regard to the inclusion of future persons in the present, that is, to the recognition of political equality at t_1 (the moment of decision-making) between members living both at t_1 and t_2 , institutional endurance and prospective efficacy are nothing but presuppositions. At t_1 , political and legislative stability can hardly be taken for granted. Historical contingency plays a vital role in shaping and consolidating cross-temporal institutions. Retroactive criminal laws, for instance, are deemed unjust because the time of political subjection seems relevant to moral judgement, even if retroactivity treats the actions of all the addressees of the same legal system across time as equals.

The combination of these arguments entails that a stringent application of either the all-affected-interests or the all-subjected principles, resulting in the inclusion of future people in democratic procedures, will lead either to a

⁸⁸ An additional aspect that hinders the consideration that, at t_1 , present and future persons share equal stakes in current decision-making relates to typical cognitive mechanisms of valuation, especially the ‘endowment effect’ – the fact that people place a higher value on a good that they own than on an identical good that they do not own: cf. Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler 1990. In light of the endowment effect, loss aversion would place a higher value on the stakes of present persons than on the potential frustration of acquisition of future persons. The endowment effect is a cognitive bias, though, not a moral argument, so it breeds more darkness than it dispels concerning the justification of unequal stakes between present and future persons. Still, it does provide an explanatory framework for a default position of inequality of stakes that cannot be neglected when referring to egalitarianism in present-future relationships.

breakdown of majority rule or of equality in majority rule. Rather than being ‘undemocratic that the vast number of future people are entirely disenfranchised’,⁸⁹ their enfranchisement generates a legitimacy gap in the democratic procedures themselves. Neither principle aligns with democracy’s commitment to the link between equality and majority rule.

CONCLUSION

In light of the magnitude of the problems that are likely to ensue in an extended time horizon due to the action or inaction of present generations, proposals for including the future in political processes have grown exponentially in the past few years, ranging from suggestions about how to institute democratic forms of long-term governance and policymaking to franchise reform and more or less creative exercises of institutional design. Many of these proposals are likely to be confronted by critical tests of coordination, polarisation, institutional incentives, effectiveness and feasibility, but also of legitimacy.

Inevitably, the goals that some of these proposals set out to achieve are too many and too demanding. They are expected to be fair towards the far-off future, aligned with the fundamental principles of democracy, and in accordance with high standards of governance such as transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation and responsiveness.⁹⁰ As it turns out, some of the basic tenets of representative liberal democracies – individual rights, representation, consent, egalitarian majority rule – are incompatible with the inclusion of future persons in current representative democratic decision-making. This makes it difficult to preserve a viable argument from democracy while making a moral case in favour of the non-overlapping future.

Such a conclusion is very troubling. Conceptions of justice are relevant in current democratic contexts because liberal democratic institutions are inherently sensitive to arguments of justice, including those that focus on members of future generations. Still, the basic tenets of representative liberal democracies are backed up by (and constitute) such robust moral reasons that democracy can hardly be dismissed on normative grounds. This means that non-overlapping moral theories favouring the future do not seem sufficiently robust to bind current democracies to the long-term view.⁹¹ Whenever acting justly to future persons endangers the moral foundations of democratic

⁸⁹ Barrett and Schmidt 2022: 24.

⁹⁰ These are the attributes of ‘good governance’, as defined by the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commission.

⁹¹ For an example of relevant moral reasons binding democracies to future-beneficial action but which are not solid enough to withstand potential conflicts with democracies’ responsibilities towards present citizens (more specifically, based on moral entitlements I call ‘expectancies’), see Campos 2024.

procedures and curtails consent-related requirements of accountability, legitimacy trumps intergenerational justice. In cases of conflict, which are likely to spawn in political settings concerning collective decision-making with strong impacts on the long term, arguments from intergenerational justice yield before arguments from democracy, even from a moral point of view. Arguments from intergenerational fairness provide sufficient normative reasons for democratic actors to care about members of future generations. However, they fall short of providing appropriately robust normative grounds for effectively implementing distant time horizons within democratic governance.

A novel justification is wanting for democratic governments to look ahead to the future from the viewpoint of a (moral) argument from democracy.

PART II

THE SEMI-FUTURE POLITY

THE SEMI-FUTURE TEMPORAL ORDER: A NOVEL FORM OF PRESENTISM

The magnitude of problems that current persons leave to their descendants conveys a grim picture of their fate, climate change being the most visible. Doing nothing to counter, prevent or mitigate what a minimum exercise of forethought determines as potentially harmful to those who are unable to defend themselves today precisely because they have not been born yet is likely to raise goosebumps in any morally sensitive person – or at least in any person with a capacity to conceive of people who are likely to live in the future as persons. And the call for action rings now.

The fact that the direct inclusion of future persons in current democratic procedures generates legitimacy problems does not necessarily overrule the important normative role of responsibilities towards the future within democratic environments. Legitimacy discourses in liberal democracies are characteristically sensitive to moral values, principles and reasoning. There is no clear-cut distinction in non-overlapping temporal contexts between justice-seeking arguments in favour of future persons and democracy-seeking arguments in favour of the quality of current democracies.¹ Both types of arguments are morally grounded and multitemporal.

¹ For explicit endorsements of the clear-cut distinction, see Beckman 2013 (from whom I draw the expressions ‘justice-seeking’ and ‘democracy-seeking arguments’) and MacKenzie 2021a: 59–85. The former gives up on the possibility of an argument from democracy that favours future generations; the latter gives up on the political relevance of intergenerational

This future-regarding responsibility can come in a variety of ways, including ecological (e.g., climate change), economic (e.g., public debt) and bioethical challenges (e.g., antibiotics overuse). These challenges raise questions of inter-generational distributive justice since they concern the distribution of burdens and benefits between people over time, more specifically, the basket of capital and goods (not only physical but also technological, institutional, environmental, cultural, relational) that can be used or passed on to subsequent generations.² In morally sensitive political contexts such as liberal democracies, this cross-temporal responsibility is likely to be political as well, especially in the sense of focusing on political institutions and asking what current political environments can or should do with regard to the future.

The problem specific to democracies is then to determine whether such a responsibility exists and, if so, the extent to which it remains pending in current democracies without conflicting with other responsibilities that are necessarily attached to representative government. The *moral challenge* pending on democracies asks: why worry about future generations?³ But the *cross-temporal democratic challenge* asks mainly: can democracies worry about the future without failing to prioritise responsibility towards present generations?

The following chapters provide a tentative affirmative answer to this question by introducing a novel perception of democratic time called ‘the semi-future’ and by considering how it fits into the liberal framework. But what exactly is a semi-future temporal order, and how can it be distinguished from other social models of time perception? Most importantly, why is it fitting to a liberal democratic arrangement?

FROM THE SEPARATION OF TIMES TO POLYTEMPORALITY

Debates about the future usually adopt a linear perception of time that encompasses the past, the present and the future in a unidirectional flow that seems irreversible and unrepeatable. Along the same line, time can be homogeneous from a metaphysical viewpoint, even if it is perceived as a threefold partition.

justice debates. They both seem indifferent to the fact that democracies’ commitments to standards such as human rights, equal concern and respect, and individual liberty are necessary substantive components of democracy, which suggests that the conflict between democracy’s reliance on presentism and cross-temporal justice demands is played out primarily at the moral level, as a conflict between different kinds of *moral* entitlements.

² I leave questions of intergenerational social justice aside, as relational egalitarianism (the view that, as a matter of justice, people ought to stand in egalitarian rather than hierarchical social relations) is often accused of being ill-equipped to deal with non-overlapping cases due to the difficulty in establishing that non-contemporaries have social relations. However, there might be a case to be made in favour of intergenerational social justice if relational egalitarians are willing to redefine the margins of what they regard as ‘social relations’. Further discussion in the literature in this respect is still wanting and is likely to develop in the near future.

³ Cf. Scheffler 2018.

Every moment indented in the chronological flow can assume the role of past, present or future, depending on the temporal perspective of the agent who indents the moment.⁴ This view mirrors John M. E. McTaggart's well-known A-series of time. When the moment is identified as present, all previous moments are in the past and all succeeding moments are in the future.⁵

When separating times into past, present and future, the three periods never overlap. Each moment identified as the present along the temporal line is affected by the past just as it affects the future. To those for whom reality boils down to what exists in the present alone, each moment seems to harness the potential to develop whatever efforts are available to shape the future. A present moment t_1 relates to the future by comparing an actual moment with a non-actual future moment t_2 . By contrast, for those who regard existence as independent of the perception of the chronological flow, such as eternalists,⁶ relating the present to the distant future consists of connecting two different kinds of existence rather than comparing a state of affairs that exists with a state of affairs that does not.

This perception of time grounds a method of thinking about the long term that compares two arbitrary snapshots of the same course of time. We can call it *the comparative temporal snapshot method* (CTS), whereby a snapshot of a present moment t_1 is compared with a snapshot of a future moment t_2 . We find traces of the CTS method in most discussions about non-overlapping generations – for instance, when we talk of direct moral duties to future persons (a snapshot of t_1 picturing duty-bearers compared with a snapshot of t_2 picturing rights-holders), of harming future persons (a snapshot of t_1 picturing actions compared with a snapshot of t_2 picturing people harmed by those actions), or of establishing institutions that govern future persons (a snapshot of t_1 picturing political institutions compared with a snapshot of t_2 picturing people ruled by those political institutions). A practical example of the CTS method is the Future Design movement that took place in Japan, in which a mini-public was divided into two groups, and one group was asked to analyse the issue as usual, while the other was asked to imagine itself in the position of people who would be living in fifty years.⁷ The point to retain about the CTS

⁴ The arrow of time can then be said to run forwards in the direction of the future from a detached viewpoint, or backwards from the viewpoint of the situated agent, as each thing is, for him or her, first part of the future, then part of the present and then past. We owe this double directionality of time to Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions*: Augustine 2016.

⁵ McTaggart 1927: 9.

⁶ According to eternalism, objects exist tenselessly; that is, they exist at the times they do in the same manner that objects existing at this moment do. Time separates events in such a way that even though each moment is present from its own viewpoint, no moment is absolutely present. Future persons exist and are no less real or actual because they are future persons.

⁷ Cf. Smith 2021: 113.

method is that concerns about affecting future persons who exist at a future moment t_2 are normatively relevant at the present moment t_1 . The relationship between t_1 and t_2 typifies a present-future kind of temporal order.

This is why McTaggart's A-series seems more useful for practical philosophy than his B-series. The B-series also involves a separation of times – not between past, present and future, but between 'earlier than' and 'later than'. The A-series determines temporal positions as transitory, whereas the B-series determines them as permanent.⁸ In the B-series, however, there is no necessary flow between events that exist on the same temporal line, such that they can all be said to exist equally in relation to some other event. Eternalists can adjust the B-series to the context of intergenerational justice,⁹ but it is seldom employed in practical reasoning about the long term because it prevents moment t_1 from having a normative basis that justifies any action or inaction at t_1 aimed at impacting (and impacting in a certain way) on an event t_2 in the same timeline. This intended impact seems to depend on the flow of (the perception of) reality along the chronological line in the terms described by the A-series, like a wave travelling indefinitely on its way to a coast it will never reach.

The CTS method relies on the assumption that:

- (i) there will be persons at the future time t_2 ;
- (ii) these persons are likely to be affected by actions, norms and policies enacted at the present time t_1 ; and
- (iii) these persons fall under the purview of a normative criterion for moral consideration or political inclusion binding at t_1 .

This assumption describes the state of affairs at t_2 from the viewpoint of t_1 . The political challenge here is to justify favouring (or even privileging) at t_1 what exists solely at t_2 . The strategies developed in futures studies to advance some form of democratic long-termism typically try to establish a normative standard at t_1 in light of which the interests or rights or persons existing at t_2 (but not necessarily at t_1) will be relevant, in the sense of being sufficient grounds for presently binding duties, at t_1 . The standard established at t_1 applies to people existing at t_1 because members of t_2 are considered to already fall under the purview of the same standard at t_1 . The normative standard shared by persons at t_1 and persons at t_2 is primarily moral and can be more easily justified by their shared participation in a group likely to persist along lengthy stretches of the temporal chain – for instance, humanity, communities and generations. This explains the temptation to replace the liberal priority of the individual with a form of communitarianism so as to expand the democratic time frame. Most importantly, it explains why

⁸ McTaggart 1927: 10–31.

⁹ Griffith 2017.

the debate about problems related to the far-off future is approached overwhelmingly from the viewpoint of the generational timescape.

However, the present-future temporal order can be problematic when applied to democracies. We have at least four reasons to be suspicious of the threefold separation of times.

The first is contextual temporalism, which derives from the distinction between the metaphysics of the future and the perception of the future. Both involve different types of questions in the philosophy of time. Regardless of the nature of time, inquiry into which belongs to the general metaphysics of time, philosophies of time perception can accommodate a plethora of criteria for time assessment. Such criteria can measure time by motion or by perspective. In the first case, the criteria relate to direction and orientation (e.g., cyclical, linear, circular, etc.) as well as rhythm. In the second case, the criteria are perspectival and agent-related.¹⁰ Their adoption is not arbitrary but relates to the subject, the object and the context of perception. Time is measured differently for individuals, societies, species and the cosmos. It is measured and produced differently in specific contexts that end up originating different kinds of time – clock time, historical time, natural time, dream time, psychological time, artistic time, literary time, scientific time, political time, cultural time, labour time, commercial time, divine time. Since the same agent can occupy different contexts at the same moment t_1 , just as different agents can occupy the same context at the same moment t_1 , the distinctiveness of the perception of t_1 involves multiple temporal dimensions.

This sensitivity to context is crucial when the context is inherently multi-temporal, as occurs in democracies. As we saw in Chapter 1, democratic time involves plural and multiform temporalities based on different institutional roles, power capabilities, decision-making procedures, subjective experiences, strategic coordination activities and obstacles, and cognitive maps.¹¹ Part of the challenge of consolidating specific types of democracy consists in synchronising different meanings attributed to time and organising political activities and plans according to a multilayered temporal schedule. Any moment t_1 in a democracy is likely to belong as much to the present as it does to the past and the future – the latter not as actuality to come but as actual potentiality existing entirely at t_1 . From the viewpoint of any t_1 in a genuinely democratic framework, the separation of times is far from clear-cut.

The second reason is that the threefold separation of times is too closely connected to the idea of succeeding generations, as if one entire group of persons departs as another arrives on the scene. The method of comparing snapshots of

¹⁰ On the distinction between time theories focused on motion and time theories focused on perspective, see Adam 2004: 22–70.

¹¹ See also Schmitter and Santiso 1998. On temporal maps, see mostly Gell 1992.

moments occupied by persons or groups of persons who never overlap along the temporal line fails to accommodate the fact that democratic decision-making involves manifold time horizons, some more proximate than others. In democracies, the short and long term go hand in hand. The comparison of t_1 and t_2 can involve a long-term view from the perspective of someone at t_1 , but it can also be regarded as a connection between t_1 and a continuously produced series of short-term decisions that contributes to actualising t_2 . The first kind of comparison depicts t_1 as capable of impacting t_2 in a gigantic (direct) step. By contrast, the second kind depicts t_1 as capable of impacting a proximate moment that will impact other moments that will ultimately impact t_2 , in a series of small steps.

The separation of times into past, present and future encompasses only the first kind of comparison, and, in this sense, reproduces the idea of successive generations – a framework too abstract to be suitable for democratic politics. Population replacement is a continuous process that both affects and is affected by political decision-making. In democratic environments, where it is impossible to dismiss the prominence of the short term, the long-term view that, at t_1 , is bound to envision and influence t_2 must make room for both kinds of comparison. Failure to do so is likely to generate indeterminacy about generation membership.

For instance, for theories of intergenerational relations that distinguish between three generations – G1 (the past), G2 (the present) and G3 (the future) – the line between them (the frontier between simultaneity and non-simultaneity) may not be easily drawn. This may carry serious normative implications. Should a foetus likely to be born tomorrow be considered a member of G3 on equal terms with persons who will be born in 100 years? Or is that foetus a rights-holder of G2 with a special status? Similarly, theories that distinguish between G1, G2 and G3 in a way that overlaps at least two lead to other indeterminacy issues. Is a baby born today a member of G2 or G3? Can the baby be a member of both? Is she or he mainly a duty-bearer or a rights-holder in the intergenerational context? Due to indeterminacy, the idea of succeeding generations is not helpful in political contexts with short-term and long-term time horizons.¹²

The third reason for rejecting the inadequacy of the threefold separation of times to democracies is its reliance on fallible prediction. Indeterminacy also affects the accuracy of the forecasting of t_2 . The method of comparing snapshots of the present with snapshots of the future depends on the accuracy of the state of affairs at t_2 described from the viewpoint of the state of affairs at t_1 . The

¹² The inadequacy of generational schemes when it comes to social contexts has already been highlighted by the physicist Carlo Rovelli precisely due to problems of indeterminacy. Families can have a partial temporal order because filiation is transitive (before the descendants, after the forebears), but this hardly applies to collective sets of different filiations: see Rovelli 2018: 41–3.

prediction of t_2 at t_1 depends on the truth conditions established for predictions at t_1 , even if we cannot assume that those same conditions will apply at t_2 . This method has normative implications when we are dealing with long time horizons. For instance, it is difficult to ascertain at t_1 how protected interests held by persons at t_2 might be violated. Suppose we assume that persons at t_2 have an interest in ensuring that some resource x that is available at t_1 will not be depleted as a result of the actions of members of t_1 and that this interest justifies imposing a duty of non-depletion regarding x at t_1 . The problem is that there is no necessary connection between following or breaking the duty at t_1 and the actual state of affairs in which x is either preserved or depleted at t_2 . If members of t_1 do not abide by the prohibition against depletion at t_1 , it may well be that x will be depleted at t_2 , but it is just as conceivable that x could end up being depleted at t_2 even if members of t_1 abide by the prohibition against depletion at t_1 . In such cases, it is impossible to assess at t_1 how the interests of members of t_2 are under threat. Since predicting what will occur at t_2 often depends on the prior prediction, at t_1 , of variables that are not yet available at t_1 , the snapshot of t_2 does not seem sufficiently probable at t_1 to justify pressing normative elements in the present.

Finally, the fourth reason is that the CTS method is often oblivious to the impact of certain empirical factors on normative considerations – for instance, the number of people alive at t_2 , as opposed to the bare presupposition that people will be alive at t_2 that were not alive at t_1 . This can also be troublesome. Changes regarding the number of community members (including the possibility of entire communities disappearing, new ones emerging, and of human extinction as an effect of human action) can be reasons to shape the content of normative considerations regarding the long term in a certain way.

We can find one of the best examples of this connection between demographic changes and normative elements in what has come to be known as ‘the repugnant conclusion’. Following a simple aggregative standard, for any possible population in which members have a high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence would be better even though its members have lives that are barely worth living.¹³ Scepticism about the possibility of a satisfactory population ethics may lead one to embrace this line of reasoning.¹⁴ This endeavour seems counter-intuitive, however. We can circumvent the repugnant conclusion by rejecting aggregative standards in favour of a preferred capital and welfare distribution pattern. Aggregative standards can still be preserved, though, if additional criteria for measuring and counting welfare are considered. The principle of optimisation could balance

¹³ Cf. Parfit 1987.

¹⁴ See Tännsjö 2002.

proportionality with aggregation so that the measured value varies with the number of already existing lives – for instance, by increasing value when the number of lives is smaller.¹⁵

One thing that can be inferred from debates on the repugnant conclusion is that normative considerations on intergenerational non-overlapping relations are unlikely to be applied to same-number-of-people situations in practice. This has significant consequences for norms like prohibitions against dissavings, given that leaving equal resources to succeeding generations that could be twice as numerous entails increasing the number of available resources. In addition, it involves widening the scope of cross-temporal relations beyond the mere exercise of thought experiments about the future since actual empirical data need to be taken into account when setting the right standards. Whereas tenseless theories of justice are compatible with same-number-of-people choices, legitimacy mechanisms dependent on some form of actual consent cannot be oblivious to the empirical data available during decision-making, including data about the possibility of different-number-of-people choices.

This set of reasons constitutes sufficient grounds for thinking that democratic time is hardly compatible with the threefold separation of times. In democracies, McTaggart's A-series provides an inadequate picture of the proper method for deciding about longer time horizons and should be replaced with a multilayered view of institutional time(s) – something akin to what Bruno Latour called 'polytemporality'.¹⁶

THE SEMI-FUTURE TEMPORAL ORDER:
A NEW CONCEPTION OF PRESENTISM

In the present-future temporal order, an objective asymmetry between the past and the future arises from the viewpoint of any moment t_1 that is singled out as the present. Because it has already happened, the past is determined and settled, whereas the future seems indeterminate and unsettled. If the future is open at t_1 , then t_2 can be influenced or caused by whatever is decided and pursued at t_1 .

In philosophies of time, this intuitive idea is the source of two questions that appear to be connected. The first concerns statements about aspects of the future that are presently unsettled – future-contingent statements – and the issue of whether they are true or false. The second focuses on whether the openness of the future consists in the fact that what exists is insufficient to determine the truth value of future-contingent statements and, thus, whether the future being open is a matter of ontology. The traditional answer to both

¹⁵ See Hurka 1983; Ng 1989; Sider 1991.

¹⁶ Latour 1993: 74–5.

questions is Aristotelian in origin. It maintains that future-contingent statements are neither true nor false since the openness of the future is indeed a matter of ontology. Thus, it is impossible to establish truth or falsity with regard to future-contingent statements based solely on what exists. Other views, perhaps better associated with William of Ockham, argue instead that the openness of the future consists in the fact that what exists is insufficient to determine the truth value of only some future-contingent statements and that the latter possess a determinate truth value – such statements are therefore ambivalent even on an ontological account of the open future.¹⁷

Following the CTS method, the future regarded from t_1 is indeed an open future, wherein present actions may produce future and different outcomes, all reasonably possible. What we call the future consists of those worlds, from the infinite set of possible worlds at t_1 , that can reasonably be expected to become actual. Time is then perceived as branching (rather than leading linearly) into the future at any given time t . The open future is the tense dimension of possibilism, a form of non-determinism in accordance with a metaphysics of modality characterised in terms of individuals existing across a specified range of possible worlds. When present actions affect future people, the CTS method requires that we consider the possible people who might later be actual. Present people can choose different possible actions and compare their possible outcomes; this is what justifies praise and regret because there is always something else that could have been done instead. Possibilism opposes modal realism, the view that all possible worlds exist and that our world is just one possible way for a world to be actual (i.e., whenever such-and-such might be the case, there is some world where such-and-such is the case).¹⁸ Instead, possibilism requires that future worlds remain possible in the present and that at least one will become actual, which is different from saying that nothing that is merely possible cannot exist or that possible worlds are already actual in their own way.

The CTS method stands somewhere between the Aristotelian and the Ockhamist answers. It relies on there being, at t_1 , possible future worlds in which particular individuals may or may not exist depending on present actions or policies. The comparative function between an actual world at t_1 and counterfactual worlds at t_2 (from the viewpoint of t_1) relies on possible worlds semantics. In this sense, the CTS method implies a narrow form of *modal actualism*. Certain predicates are true of individuals in worlds in which those individuals do not exist; that is, properties can appropriately be predicated of a non-existent at a time or world. This means there are different senses of existence depending on

¹⁷ In this paragraph, I draw mostly on Loss 2019a.

¹⁸ For modal realism, which reformulates Diodorus Cronus' classic Master Argument, see mostly Lewis 1986.

whether an individual belongs to an actual necessary world or a possible future world. Whatever is solely in the future is non-existent unless regarded as a present and actual possibility.¹⁹

In this context, contingent statements have different truth values at different times. The present-future temporal order, characterised by a solid commitment to possibilism, categorises as future each moment t throughout the linear set of all intervals beginning at t_1 but not including t_1 itself. The actuality of t_1 is grounded in reality. Thus, all statements about t_1 proffered at t_1 are subject to truth conditions that seem more robust than statements about moments succeeding t_1 and proffered at t_1 . The comparison between two distant temporal snapshots (a present moment t_1 and a future moment t_2) involves uneven kinds of truth conditions since tensed truths are expected to have a minimum supervenience base (that which actually exists).²⁰

The multitemporal dimension of democratic time, however, suggests that such a discrepancy between the truth values of t_1 and of all succeeding moments falls short of echoing the manifold time horizons already in play at t_1 . The present-future temporal order should then be replaced by a temporal order focused more on the succession of and continuous overlap between occupants of different times, one in which the truth values at t_1 coincide to a minimum extent with the truth values expected at succeeding intervals, ultimately including t_2 .

This novel kind of temporal order no longer requires a comparison between the present and the future but rather a *semi-future conception of the present*²¹ comprising the set of all sortable temporal intervals beginning at t_1 and including t_1 itself, as though the present were the first moment of the future. In the present-future temporal order, the truth values of x at the moment t_1 are irrelevant to the truth, at t_1 , of the exclusively future versions of everything that follows. In the semi-future temporal order, however, there are some x 's that, if true at t_1 , will continue to be so after t_1 . The truth value of x at t_1 depends on x continuing to be equally true at all succeeding intervals, including eventually t_2 . The upshot is that not all statements about the future are future-contingent statements. Instead, some statements about the present contain predicates about

¹⁹ Cf. Parfit 2011: 467–9.

²⁰ Cf. Loss 2019b.

²¹ I borrow the notion of the semi-future from Lewis 1973: 105. David Lewis is neither an Aristotelian nor an Ockhamist about the open future since he provides a non-ontological account of how and why the future remains unsettled. I do not follow Lewis entirely in this respect. However, that is not particularly important here since my intention is simply to explore the political potential of the semi-future temporal order rather than to engage in deep theoretical discussions concerning the nature of time.

the future, which in turn share the truth conditions of the present, grounded in some uncontested notion of actuality.

The semi-future is thus a form of presentism with a robust supervenience base for tensed truths about the future. It differs from the CTS method insofar as it conceives of t_1 and t_2 not as different times that can be compared as if they were different worlds – the world of present actuality A and the future counterpart world B – but as different stages of one and the same world with shared truth conditions. The semi-future is the temporal order between hard presentism (the view that only the present exists) and eternalism (the view that things exist equally regardless of whether they are past, present or future). On the one hand, it allows for claims about the future, the truth values of which are grounded in the present; on the other hand, it affords actuality mainly to what exists in the present, a view that is far from being as counter-intuitive as eternalism and that conforms well to typical democratic legitimacy standards such as consent and accountability.

The truth values of statements about the future in the semi-future temporal order depend on how predicates about existents express a temporal dimension. For instance, consider two different statements:

- (A) Ellen is six years old.
- (B) Ellen is a child.

Both statements are true at moment t_1 if, at t_1 , Ellen meets the actual conditions for existing in line with the predicates included in those statements. The truth value of the statements at t_1 depends, then, on the correspondence between the contents of the statements at t_1 and the fact that: (i) Ellen exists at t_1 ; (ii) Ellen was born on a day between the sixth and seventh year of an accepted calendar counting backwards from t_1 ; and (iii) the concept of childhood adopted by the cultural and social context in which the statements are issued includes six-year-olds. The difference between both statements is that one contains predicates about the future from the viewpoint of a semi-future temporal order. Statement (A) is true of the present in light of information about the past. In order to assess whether it is true at t_1 , all that is needed is the fact that Ellen exists at t_1 and the belief at t_1 that Ellen was born on a day between the sixth and seventh year of an accepted calendar counting backwards from t_1 . Statement (B), however, says something different: it predicates that Ellen exists at t_1 , that she is believed to have been born on a day that falls under the purview of the adopted concept of childhood, and that she is not an adult. Since the notion of childhood correlates with the notion of adulthood, and since both are conceived of in linear and succeeding terms, statement (B) predicates something of Ellen at t_1 that concerns Ellen's future: that at t_1 she

is an actual child and a potential adult, a status she will likely achieve only at some indeterminate interval after t_1 . Her childhood status at t_1 is inherently temporary at t_1 .²² When (and if) Ellen does become an adult at some future moment t_2 , her recently acquired status will be determined by the truth conditions of t_2 ; from the viewpoint of t_1 , however, statement (B) about t_1 already contains a true predicate of t_2 , namely, that a living Ellen at t_2 is an adult.

The semi-future temporal order is not an ontological theory of time but rather a reconfiguration of the epistemic landscape in which we can grasp the actuality of the present. It carves out an epistemic window through which each human person can be viewed as the complex relation between their actual self and their embodiment of pure possibility. There is much past and future in the present, to echo Saint Augustine, for whom there were ‘three times: the present respecting things past, the present respecting things present, and the present respecting things future’.²³ Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological theory of time-consciousness (rather than time-ontology) can also function as an illustration of this stretching of the present: without retention of the past and anticipation (in his words, ‘protention’) of the future, memory and basic cognitive activities like reading would not even be possible.²⁴

The semi-future temporal order offers a framework for perceiving time in social and political contexts, suggesting that ‘presentism’ does not have to equate to short-termism.²⁵ The present is multitemporal in that an event does not merely occur in the present but also actualises true predicates about the future.²⁶

This novel perspective on temporal orders brings to light a difficult question, however: how does the semi-future temporal order affect statements in the present about the future in political terms besides undermining the CTS method?

²² ‘Inherently temporary’ is not to be confused with ‘necessarily temporary’. Ellen could die at the age of seven, which would mean she only exists as a child. Childhood is inherently temporary insofar as it can be conceived only in reference to a correlative that is future-directed with regard to those to whom it is attributed – this is the full implication of the notion of ‘inherence’. The future-directedness of childhood at t_1 pertains solely to what exists at t_1 . Nevertheless, it is important to note that it is not Ellen herself who is inherently temporary at t_1 but only the concept of childhood she fulfils at t_1 . Ellen is not a momentary stage of her own identity at t_1 or at t_2 . Her identity as Ellen is a trans-time sum of stages in which she is Ellen. She falls short of embodying such a totality at each of these stages, but each stage contains true predicates about (past and future) stages of Ellen.

²³ Augustine 2016: 230–1.

²⁴ Husserl 1964: 110.

²⁵ This equation is the starting point of most criticisms levelled against presentism in political theory: see, for instance, Thompson 2010, and especially Rubenfeld 2001.

²⁶ Burges and Elias 2016: 4.

THE SEMI-FUTURE'S APPEAL TO INTEREST

The idea that events are contextualised by different timescapes coexisting in a more or less synchronised way seems to be the most suitable explanatory device for the temporality of complex entities. This idea has already gained ground in the natural sciences. In biology, living organisms thrive insofar as they synchronise internal clocks of several kinds – molecular, neuronal, chemical, hormonal – each of them more or less in tune with the others.²⁷ In physics, the theory of relativity has led to the striking conclusion that there is no such thing as an objective present moment or course of time. Instead, there is a different time for every point in space. Each space has its own time. There is thus no single time in vast spaces – objectively, ‘times are legion’.²⁸

This notion has recently been applied to contemporary humanities and social sciences. In the context of historical studies, two attempts to abandon the idea of the single, overarching coherence of time in a continuous flow stand out in particular. The first was Fernand Braudel’s endeavours to argue for the importance of multiple times and of the *longue durée* as a preferable methodological approach to historical social sciences. Braudel’s model comprised three temporalities: first, the *longue durée*, the longest conceivable historical temporality; second, cyclical time or the conjuncture; third, the event or the short term. Together, these temporalities constituted a framework for examining temporally complex historical phenomena.²⁹ The second attempt was Reinhart Koselleck’s development of presentism. Arguing that time was not linear, he propounded that there were multiple historical times within the same moment, layer upon layer, pressed together. The concept of *Zeitschichten* (layers or sediments of time) was supposed to capture this multitemporal balance.³⁰

Surprisingly, political theory has yet to explore alternatives to the present-future temporal order. This is particularly noteworthy within the framework of futures studies. What is wanting is a sufficiently robust view of ‘polytemporality’ that incorporates responsibilities towards the future without compromising the basic tenets of liberal democracy. The semi-future temporal order provides such a view if we focus on the truth conditions of statements about *interests*.

The reasons for giving interests centre stage in the semi-future temporal order in democratic environments are myriad.³¹ First, issues such as what interests

²⁷ See Golombek, Bussi and Agostino 2014: 369.

²⁸ Rovelli 2018: 16–17.

²⁹ See mostly Braudel 1958.

³⁰ Koselleck 2000: 9; 2018: 4.

³¹ In the context of future ethics and climate ethics/law, many authors prefer to focus on ‘needs’ instead of ‘interests’: see Page 2006; Gough 2015; Tremmel 2009: 96–100. The reasons that follow explain why the semi-future temporal order should privilege interests instead of basic needs.

consist of, whose interests are affected by certain political authorities, and what persons or procedures are capable of identifying interests have historically been at the very core of political debates. The concept of interest became a site of contestation among competing languages and registers about legitimacy, which makes interests a fitting topic for a conceptual approach to democracy.

Second, interests have recently gained prominence as the most comprehensive means of grounding robust normative entitlements such as rights, especially *vis-à-vis* the will. In the context of rights, interest theorists regard the function of rights as one of protecting significant interests, whereas will theorists regard rights as zones of freedom to be granted only to those able to exercise the powers to waive or to seek the enforcement of the relevant claims. Interest theorists and will theorists alike endeavour to provide the best possible account of rights and of what their function should be. Both seem to acknowledge, at least implicitly, that the truth about rights lies somewhere in between. Interest theorists are better prepared to meet will theorists halfway insofar as they can incorporate the will into their views. They maintain that the will may be an important sign of interest³² and that a higher-order interest in freedom is satisfied only when the will is satisfied.³³ But even if interests cannot fully incorporate the will, they can at least play a leading role in grounding rights, for instance, as elements in a complex admixture of interest-or-will, in light of which a duty towards someone arises if it favours their interest-or-will. Interests are more easily accessible when attributing rights to those who are unable (temporarily or permanently) to have or express their own will, such as unconscious persons and infants. The priority of interests over the will allows for broader inclusion in the political realm.

Third, interests are normative elements that are more readily available for assessing membership of a political community, especially when establishing the identity and competencies of the legitimate political authority of that community. The ‘all-affected principle’ is characteristically invoked as a yardstick for access to democratic rule since it states that ‘everyone who is affected by the decisions of a government should have a right to participate in that government’.³⁴ A fundamental condition for inclusion in representative processes is thus being ‘affected’ by the decisions enacted by the representatives. However, it is often quite challenging to determine who is ‘affected’ by public norms and policies in a relevant way. The particular conception of ‘affected’ that one embraces ultimately leads to different conclusions about who counts as ‘affected’ – for instance, whether being ‘affected’ implies a necessary causal relation or only probabilistic reasoning; what kinds of values or subjective features are relevant for ascertaining whether one has been significantly affected by a collective decision; whether all stakeholders are equally

³² MacCormick 1976: 315.

³³ Sumner 1987: 47.

³⁴ Dahl 1970: 64

relevant or only those who share high stakes in a decision, etc. The principle seems to be ‘a potential source of ambiguities’³⁵ that offers a ‘diffuse galaxy of uncountable possibilities’.³⁶ Since, in its general outlines, it seems too vague to be of much help, its role in specifying who can participate in government action needs to be narrowed down. Interests emerge as the main instrument for interpreting the criterion of ‘being affected’, thus recasting the yardstick as an ‘all-affected-interests principle’.

Fourth, in democratic representation, interests are often regarded as the referent that prompts (or is expected to prompt) responsiveness by elected representatives, specifically if responsiveness is regarded as a yardstick for measuring the quality of democratic representation. In this sense, many democratic theorists would agree with David Plotke that interests are the ‘starting point in a democratic view of representation’.³⁷ Since the liberal framework on which current democracies are grounded relies on the model of representative government, it is only reasonable that the semi-future temporal order applied to representative democracies also accepts interests as its starting point.

Fifth, different uses of interests imply different temporalities. Since interests can be ascribed to entities with different timespans and different time horizons, they tend to absorb the corresponding temporal dimensions, even in political contexts. Interests can then be understood as a locus of self-regarding rational calculation by human individuals or as lifetime-transcending inclinations or values imputed to entire communities. In the first instance, interests seem trapped within the timespan of human individuals, as private interests; in the second, interests take on a general dimension and are regarded as the sum of large numbers of private interests or as actual public interests held by a cross-temporal political community. Discussions on what kind of long-term policy seems more legitimate and capable of producing effective results often revolve around the commensurate time horizon of the relevant concept of interest. For instance, long-term planning about forestation (or the prevention of deforestation) can lead either to the view that the interests of private landowners stretch beyond their short-term bias and can be in accordance with (and somehow constitutive of) the cross-temporal general interest or to a more sceptical view about private ownership’s cross-temporality and to a corresponding defence of public ownership of everything that has long-term value as the very content of public interest.³⁸ The upshot is that the concept of interest in theoretical political

³⁵ Rubio-Marín 1998: 56.

³⁶ Dahl 1970: 66.

³⁷ Plotke 1997: 32.

³⁸ For an interesting historical case study of the contestation surrounding the concept of an interest, focused on French parliamentary debates on forestation in the period from 1830 to 1850, see Nordblad 2017.

discussions has been subject to both synchronic contestation and diachronic change and has thus remained central to identifying how to incorporate the long-term view into political decision-making.

In the liberal worldview, interests figure prominently as individual-centred. In this respect, they are more easily synonymous with self-interest. The notion of an interest is associated *prima facie* with a short timespan since it connects to the expected timespan of the individual holder – the self. The path leading away from the tendency to discount the long-term future thus seems to be hindered, rather than facilitated, by the concept of an interest. It seems natural, then, to either avoid the concept altogether or adopt an approach that prioritises the interests of collective entities (communities, generations, families, etc.) with longer timespans than individuals.

The semi-future temporal order dodges this bullet by allowing considerations about interests to be both presentist and long-termist. Statements about interests referring to a future moment t_2 can be true at t_1 while remaining true at any given interval between t_1 and t_2 . No actual prediction of what t_2 will look like is needed. All that is required is an acknowledgement that interests at t_1 concerning expected states of affairs at t_2 are sufficient grounds for entitlements at t_1 . In the political realm, the semi-future translates to interests (and rights) held by actual persons at t_1 . Correlative norms and policies will protect those persons' interests (and rights) at t_1 and at any succeeding moment in which they continue to exist. These interests are not short-term insofar as statements about them are necessarily true both at t_1 and at succeeding intervals, perhaps even including the far-off t_2 .

CROSS-TEMPORAL OBJECTIVE INTERESTS

According to the (prevalent) correspondence theory of truth, statements about interests held by actual people may be true or false. Correspondence theories claim that the truth or falsity of a statement is determined by how it relates to the world and whether it accurately describes an actual state of affairs. Correspondence theories also relate to an intuitive conception of truth conditions and their possible practical relevance. In this approach, the most widespread sense in which statements about interests can be considered subject to truth conditions obtains when the contents of interests correspond to what people actually want, need or believe is best for them. The statement will be false if it maintains of a person A that she or he has an interest in x and yet neither wants, needs nor believes that x is best for her or him; conversely, the statement will be true if it maintains that A has an interest in x and the person actually wants, needs, or believes x is best for her or him.

This familiar way of assessing the truth or falsity of statements about interests makes them indistinguishable from preferences or subjective inclinations. This is the sense most commonly adopted in democracies, for instance, whenever voting

is routinely considered an expression of people's preferences and interests or when the quality of representation is assessed in terms of degrees of congruence, that is, insofar as it reflects, through government action, what people actually want or expect of their government. This particular notion of interest is temporally volatile. What people want or believe today may not be what they want or believe tomorrow. There is no way to ascertain whether this volition or belief at time t_1 is the same as any volition or belief that will also be held at t_2 , or whether what one wants or prefers today is wanted or preferred because one will want it or prefer it tomorrow. Such a notion of interest is not the most fitting for the semi-future temporal order.

However, correspondence theories of truth can be employed in evaluating the truth or falsity of statements about interests differently – in a way that preserves truth conditions throughout various moments in time. This strategy involves a notion of interest that does not depend on the subjective whims of the bearer but that has some level of objectivity insofar as it is attached to the value of an individual person. We can then distinguish between *subjective interests* (or preferences) and *objective interests*. According to this latter notion, 'having interests' differs from 'having needs' or 'wanting something'. To have interests in this sense is to have objective reasons to want something. To have an interest in some x is to have a reason, all things considered, to want that x . The truth values of statements about persons' having an interest in x in this semi-future version depend not on whether the interested parties actually want or need x , but on whether such statements express justifications that those interest-holders would endorse in ideal conditions of reasonableness and information. This applies to interests at both t_1 and t_2 , even when an interest in x at t_1 refers to a state of affairs at t_2 .

The interest attached to the value a person A enjoys is constituted by the reasons for favouring or disfavouring a state of affairs related to A for the sake of A .³⁹ In simple cases, where someone's will or preferences constitute a reason for one to act, one has a reason to act for that person's sake. This seems to be the rationale behind the general understanding of responsiveness in the context of political representation. Suppose I am a representative of person A , and that I have a reason to promote x simply because person A would prefer that x . Suppose further that the role of A 's preference is not incidental: it is not the case, for example, that the preference is a reason because it is a sign for or means of achieving something else. The reason boils down to nothing more than the consideration that A would prefer that x . Then, in general, I have a reason to promote x for A 's sake, and x can be said to have an A -related value.

³⁹ For an analysis of the possible meanings of 'for sake of' in the context of personal value, see mostly Rønnow-Rasmussen 2015. Alternatives to the phrase can be found in Anderson 1993: 19–20 ('with due regard for'); Darwall 2002: 14 ('on [someone's] behalf').

With regard to objective interests, the content of x is not necessarily equivalent or opposed to the actual will and preferences expressed by interest-holders. Instead, it preserves a certain measure of independence from them. Volitions and preferences may be suitable means of accessing the *subjective interests or preferences* of individual persons at any given moment (and, consequently, of providing data concerning what it means to act for their sake substantively). Still, they seem insufficient to determine objective interests, and this is for various reasons. For instance, subjective preferences at t_1 may not coincide (and may even conflict) with the contents of objective interests due to epistemic immaturity or because preferences are induced by some external framing or nudging that obstructs or silences reasons for the best preferences. Some people may lack the means to adequately voice their genuine preferences, as occurs in cases of idiomatic difficulties or extreme poverty. Ultimately, the objective interest is related to a person, but it is not subjective in the sense that it is what a person values, takes to be valuable or wants. Often, the fact that A values or wants x makes this state of affairs valuable to that person and for her or his sake, as a matter of substantive fact, but this is not necessarily the case. On some occasions, the fact that A values or wants x is irrelevant or is outweighed by other reasons to act for A 's sake, as occurs if A is an infant and x would harm her or him.

Such an objective interest related to an individual person is not necessarily what satisfies that person's preference. A person's preference is what she considers good for her or him, whereas the objective interest relates to what is good because of her or him. At any given moment, a person's preference is what she or he has the most reason to want; an objective interest related to that person is what some other person has reason to want for her or his sake.⁴⁰

This independence of objective interests from subjective interests (or preferences) suggests that the contents of both kinds of interest are also independent of one another as they do not necessarily coincide. Objective interests relate to the conditions for being fully respected as a moral person. Certain states of affairs seem so fundamental to individuals' lives that they can easily qualify as necessary conditions for such respect. Access to basic goods that sustain life

⁴⁰ The idea that preferences and interests are to be distinguished can already be found in Plotke 1997; Mansbridge 2003: 517–20. Mansbridge understands interests specifically as 'enlightened preferences', that is, as encompassing 'identity-constituting[,] ideal-regarding commitments as well as material needs' (Mansbridge 2003: 517). However, even if objective interests can accommodate these characteristics, they should be understood as independent from preferences. In this sense, this stronger separation is more akin to the distinction Charles Larmore makes between 'seeing a reason' and 'having a reason' (a reason consisting in the way certain facts count in favour of possibilities of thought and action a person has, although sometimes one is not in a position to see them): Larmore 2008: 47–64.

and provide a minimum enjoyment of freedom and well-being seem obvious candidates for such states of affairs. John Rawls calls these ‘primary goods’, that is, ‘things that every rational man is presumed to want’.⁴¹ They are so fundamental that a person’s moral value is violated when she is detached from them.⁴² It makes sense to claim then that they constitute objective interests for those persons.

Objective interests are particularly fitting for the semi-future temporal order because, unlike preferences, they are inherently cross-temporal in two respects.

First, the cross-temporality of objective interests has *lifespan durability*. The individual person’s moral value remains constant throughout their lifetime. And a lifetime, the collection of days and years between a baby shower and a funeral, is conceptually cross-temporal. The threat of basic deprivation is largely ageless and non-comparative. Regardless of their age, all individual persons need food and clean water, clothing and shelter, health care, education, and access to institutions whose function is to safeguard people from considerable vulnerability and demeaning treatment – and to the degree that is respectful of their autonomy as persons and that liberates them from the tyranny of the immediate ‘now’. They need that without which they can never be recognised as free individuals.

The emphasis on lifespan durability takes a temporal perspective on one individual’s interests as limited to that individual’s lifespan – a sort of temporal individualism.⁴³ From the viewpoint of theories of justice that employ the generational timescape, temporal individualism might seem too narrow a conception of interest and should be replaced by a broader conception according to which our personal identity extends beyond our biological boundaries to encompass the concern for both past and future generations – interests purporting to be objective would then necessarily have a diachronic dimension.⁴⁴ We should not be too rash in judging temporal individualism, however. The

⁴¹ Rawls 1971: 54–5. Social primary goods would be rights, liberties, opportunities, income and wealth; there are also natural primary goods, such as health and intelligence, but they are not directly under social or political control.

⁴² Somewhat similar specifications of the primary goods that make up the core values of democracy can be found in Philip Pettit’s ‘freedom from non-domination’ (Pettit 1997: 80–92) and in Thomas Christiano’s ‘fundamental interest in being at home in the world’ (Christiano 2008: 61–2). The notion of objective interests in the future is different from these specifications in that it emphasises the temporal aspect while being more ‘ecumenical’, that is, independent of a fully worked-out theory of moral personhood (and, therefore, acceptable under any plausible specification of the primary goods for the democratic ideal).

⁴³ For criticism of this view, equating it with short-term thinking, see O’Neill 1993: 35–42; Scheffler 2021.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Heyd 1992.

notion that individuals have interests in preserving their forefathers' memory and in what happens after their lifetime seems sufficiently intuitive, but it is not necessarily at odds with temporal individualism. Such interests can still be regarded as concerning different moments in time that individuals have in their actual lifespan. The advantage of temporal individualism, as opposed to generation-based conceptions of interests, is that it always preserves the actuality of the supervenience base of interests. These interests are *objective* because they pertain to something in the world, the existence of which can be observed and testified from an impartial perspective – and this existence is ultimately what justifies resorting to a correspondence-like theory of truth. Still, they are interests whose content has room for concern for several timescapes and temporalities, even though extending (backwards or forwards) beyond the interest-holder's lifetime.

In addition, lifespan durability implies constancy. The content of objective interests in sufficient primary goods can be ascertained for any person at any given moment he or she is alive. A complete lives view that measures, at the time of death, whether the aggregate of one's lifetime rose above the sufficiency threshold⁴⁵ fails to capture what an individual person's moral status requires for their sake while she or he is indeed a moral person. Otherwise, it would be impossible to ascertain what should be done for the sake of person *A* at any moment of their lifetime, given that no one can know ahead of time just when that person will die. Constancy, however, should not be mistaken for sameness. Objective interests in particular states of affairs that rise above a certain threshold relate to the same minimum threshold throughout a lifetime. However, the means required to satisfy those interests vary depending on how close to the threshold a person is at different moments of their life. Certain ages are more liable to vulnerability, which ultimately means that age groups have unequal requirements among the temporal line concerning the satisfaction of their objective interests. Older people and infants, for instance, may require more primary goods than healthy adults to meet the threshold they all share equally.

Second, the cross-temporality of objective interests has a *futures tendency*. A person *A* has an interest in having free access to primary goods at any given moment of her or his life. If that person has reasons to want them now, she or he necessarily has reasons to want them in the future. Per such reasons, what induces a person to want them now is also that which will induce her or him to want them in the future as well. The truth conditions of statements regarding these objective interests are the same along the temporal line at which the person is (or is expected to remain) alive. The interests at t_1 are interests in: (i) obtaining a state of affairs at t_1 that guarantees access to all the primary

⁴⁵ On the notion of a complete life as a time unit par excellence for comparing the aggregate welfare of members of different generations, see McKerlie 1989; Temkin 1993: 252.

goods and institutions that are necessary conditions for respecting one's moral status as a person; and in (ii) preserving the same state of affairs throughout all of the future moments in which one is expected to remain an interest-holder, including, eventually, t_2 . In this latter sense, they are *objective interests in the future* (i.e., interests of the present *regarding* the future).

The contents of such objective interests relate to a qualitative moral threshold: the access to goods that allow the full exercise of civil and political rights on equal terms. This threshold is both general and presentist. It is general because it is attached to the very notion of an autonomous person, and therefore apparently consistent throughout time and never very low (as opposed to thresholds merely dependent on welfare). The cross-temporal generality prevents thresholds such as those contained in the repugnant conclusion from being acceptable in the semi-future framework. And it is presentist because the specification of the actual means, institutions and entitlements that comprise this minimum access for any conceivable autonomous person is determined by the means, institutions and entitlements at the disposal of the autonomous persons living in the present. If adult citizens in the present enjoy a level of access to the full exercise of civil and political rights that is commensurate with the general baseline that is attached to the value of a moral person, it is this (present) baseline that is part of the content of objective interests in the future. If the current baseline is lower than what is attached to the value of a moral person, then the baseline that forms the content of objective interests in the future must be raised (in the present and for the future).

This sufficientarian-like perspective may seem troublesome. On the one hand, it does not seem sufficientarian enough. Because objective interests are actual, future people who are believed to be living at a non-overlapping future moment t_2 below the currently practised threshold have no claims to priority with regard to persons living at t_1 , whether the latter are below or above the threshold. They may have claims of attentiveness or due consideration (based on grounds such as expectancies)⁴⁶ but not priority. This view makes it hard to maintain a one-time or multi-threshold account of intergenerational sufficientarianism: benefits to people above a high threshold in one generation do not seem to be outweighed by benefits to people below a low threshold in another non-overlapping generation since (i) the actuality versus potentiality aspect of the different generations matters to determine priorities, and (ii) the thresholds at t_1 and t_2 do not vary much since they all hinge on a valid conception of moral personhood.

On the other hand, this perspective does not seem sufficientarian at all. Objective interests in the future rely on a threshold – a threshold that applies

⁴⁶ Cf. Campos 2024.

equally to the members of all generations alive at t_1 . This very compromise may seem objectionable. Why not assume, in a less demanding way, that people have an objective interest in being able to manage resources and engage in collective decision-making to at least the same extent as past generations, in a novel version of the Lockean principle that grants a right to appropriate land ‘where there is enough, and as good left in common for others’?⁴⁷ Or why not assume, in a more demanding way, that people have objective interests in everything that improves their present situation, including primary but also secondary (and tertiary, etc.) goods?

The answer derives from most of what has been said. On the one hand, the Lockean proviso is inadequate for determining objective interests in the future if the starting point of the analysis is a past condition in which resources and goods were so scarce that people did not have the freedom or capacity to extend the time horizons of their decision-making activities, that is, to consider their future as an integral part of their moral personality at any given moment. On the other hand, amelioration vis-à-vis the past is also a poor determinant of objective interests in the future. Interest-holders will always prefer to be better off than they are in the present, regardless of the value they (and others) afford to their (and others’) states of affairs. However, the objectivity of objective interests lies not in the actuality of preferences for more and better but rather in the formal character of individual personhood.

‘For the sake of’ refers to a moral status rather than a factual or desired state of affairs. The emphasis on primary goods is justified by the equivalence of such goods with the necessary conditions for claiming that a person’s moral status is not being disrespected as such. The contents of objective interests are, in a sense, non-relational because they are independent of the particular circumstances of other individual persons at any time t_1 or before t_1 . One’s objective interests are continuously directed at meeting an ideal threshold below which one’s status as a moral person is necessarily disregarded. Still, this ideal does not have to be detached from and insensitive to actual temporal contingencies insofar as it is conceived as the threshold constituted by the rights, freedoms and resources recognised in a given moment in time as inherent in the notion of moral personhood and universalisable – that is, valuable at any moment as what should be held and enjoyed by all living moral persons regardless of whatever is actually held and enjoyed by those best-off or worse-off in that moment.

DEMOCRATISING OBJECTIVE INTERESTS IN THE FUTURE

A particularity of objective interests in the future is that they are present interests (about future states of affairs) that remain intact across any temporal line. Their contents refer to future moments like t_2 , yet they are grounded in actuality.

⁴⁷ Locke 1988: 288.

For this reason, they are recognisable in all persons alive at t_1 who have a reasonable expectation of living for a more or less extended and unspecified period after t_1 – this is what makes them grounded in actuality at all times.

Expectations about how much time each person has to live in the future will inevitably be uncertain. However, uncertainty is not synonymous with unlimitedness. Temporal context provides such limits. Biblical characters aside, an eighty-year-old's chances of living an additional sixty years are close to none, given the human biological clock; an enslaved ancient Egyptian's chances of living to a hundred were slim, to say the least; a child in medieval Europe could hardly aspire to live the same number of years as an average child in Europe today. For the purposes of assessing the temporal limits of present objective interests in the future, such uncertain limitedness should suffice. But if we really need an exact threshold estimated at each moment t_1 , the average life expectancy at birth for every cohort provides a reasonable number.

The acknowledgement of objective interests in the future held by actual persons alive at any time t_1 has significant consequences, some of which are primarily political. First, these interests are shared by all persons in a community, and since they are objective interests related to the value of persons, they do not necessarily depend on epistemic competencies for expressing preferences. The fact that they are present interests held by actual persons makes them representable in political contexts as if they were present preferences expressed by actual epistemically competent persons. In democracies, such interests contribute to outlining an argument for greater inclusion. If objective interests can be represented, there is no reason why they should not be taken into account in representative decision-making procedures. The interests that form the substratum of responsiveness in a sound representative democracy are no longer simply the preferences expressed by voters but rather a broader spectrum of interests, including objective interests about the present and the future held by all members of the community, from the youngest to the oldest. Representation is as much 'standing in for another' as it is 'acting for the sake of another'.

Second, the presence of objective interests in representative democracy does not seem to make room for any special privileging of either the present or the future in decision-making. From the viewpoint of the set of reasons that justify acting (or not acting) for the sake of someone, objective interests about the present carry the same weight as objective interests about the future. They are both equally representable and deserving of regard in the representative decision-making arena. The upshot is that the future does not take precedence in democratic decision-making in a way that dismisses present persons' interests in actions or policies that concern them today. Similarly, the present does not take precedence in democratic decision-making in a way that justifies, for instance, a level of consumption likely to be unsustainable throughout the lifetimes of those who are consuming today. The equilibrium between saving

and consuming follows from attentiveness to both kinds of objective temporal interests (regarding the present and regarding the future).

Third, this equilibrium is reached not so much by putting all of a person's objective interests on the same footing, but by putting all the objective interests of members of the same community on the same footing. People have different objective interests in the present and in the future, depending on their age. Older people seem to have more reason to discount the future and to value the present than younger people. And younger people expect to remain alive for more future intervals after t_1 than older people. Whether or not they share preferences about the present or the future (sometimes they do, but they often do not), younger and older people have dissimilar objective interests in the present regarding the present and dissimilar objective interests in the present regarding the future simply because some expect to live longer after time t_1 than others. Balancing different objective interests in representation diminishes the risk of discrimination against specific population segments in political processes due to ageism. The present interests in the present of members of older cohorts have relevant political weight, but the present interests in the future of members of younger cohorts are justified in claiming an equally relevant political weight. This leads to a meaningful reconfiguration of current liberal democracies: recognising the political agency of the community's youngest members.

The young (especially children and teenagers, but also young adults) have value in the present *qua* individual persons. Their interests as persons coincide with that which is most valuable about a person and are thus objective interests in the present. The values of life, well-being, self-development and self-determination fit precisely into this description. The relevant interests justifying normative protection are those that significantly impact the chances and opportunities related to such values. Such normative claims turn on protection negatively by prohibiting what undermines those interests and positively by imposing the conditions for fulfilling them. Therefore, some interests can be imputed to persons who lack the minimum epistemic conditions for understanding or formulating them as long as they can be objectively justified. Basic interests such as physical integrity and access to a minimum level of resources, for instance, are shared by all human persons, regardless of age.

Children, however – a category used here in broad enough terms to encompass all those who have been born but have yet to reach adulthood – also have value in the present *qua* children. This capacity justifies specific normative protection, which two (not necessarily competing) conceptions of childhood can justify. According to the first (substantive) conception, what justifies protection is the intrinsic value of childhood as an independent stage of human life that comes with unique experiences, capabilities and priorities.⁴⁸ This conception

⁴⁸ Brennan 2014; Gheaus 2015; Macleod 2010.

underplays the temporal element of childhood. Children's rights are then categories of rights that are attributable to anyone who has certain characteristics that require special protection, whether those characteristics are valued negatively (e.g., vulnerability) or positively (e.g., specific goods such as playfulness, curiosity, exploration, spontaneity and 'innocence'). The assessment of these characteristics is biased in favour of the present over the future as they need to be held by persons existing at t_1 to qualify as conditions for a specific case of rights-holding.

The second conception of childhood is developmental rather than substantive. In line with this conception, what justifies protection is children's distinctive relation to time. Like adults, they have objective interests in the future, such as fulfilling their life expectancy at birth. However, they have specific interests in the present about the future that differ from the interests of adults. More specifically, they have an interest at t_1 in becoming fully-fledged citizens and participants in lawmaking. The objective interest at t_1 concerning t_2 involves a qualitative transformation of the normative status of the interest-holder. This expectation about a future change of normative status constitutes a special kind of objective interest in the future. Such interests justify protection via some normative instrument y at t_1 that is binding on representative officials. Observance of y then constitutes a temporal strategy for taking children's interests in the long run into account. At any given moment, attentiveness to their objective interests in the future implies a need to consider the impact of actions, norms and policies on the remaining duration of the lives of existing children.⁴⁹

To say that children have value in the present *qua* children in a developmental sense is to say that they have present interests in acquiring a status in the future that allows them to hold and exercise their rights and duties fully – that is, present interests in future states of affairs that concern them directly. For instance, they have an interest in ensuring that their present capacity to hold rights develops into a future capacity to exercise those rights. Their interests at t_1 encompass many present possibilities (such as additional rights-bearing and duty-following) to be realised only in a set of intervals between t_1 and t_2 . These interests are often regarded in terms of 'anticipatory autonomy rights'⁵⁰ or 'developmental rights',⁵¹ that is, rights attributed to a person in view of the adult she or he will become. The protection of such rights ensures that, once she or he is an adult, the child will be in a position to exercise their citizenship rights to the maximal (or at least to a very significant) degree. Both the sub-

⁴⁹ Such interests and needs underlie the principle included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) to the effect that a primary consideration in public policies affecting children should be 'the best interests of the child' (Art. 3(I)).

⁵⁰ Feinberg 1980.

⁵¹ Eekelaar 1986.

stantive and the developmental conceptions of childhood are non-competing in this semi-future framework because representatives can be under an obligation to protect these developmental rights while also being obliged to protect children's substantive rights.

The special kinds of interest in the future are objective interests that matter politically, just like any other objective interests held by members of the same community. In the case of children, these interests add to the objective interests children already have because they are persons and because they are children (substantively). The Aristotelian notion that children are potential adults is different from the semi-future consideration of cross-temporal objective interests held by children insofar as the latter, unlike the former, coheres with and requires a notion of childhood that encompasses moral personality, the substantive and the developmental dimensions. All three kinds of interest provide sufficient grounds for political representation. The fact that they are largely neglected in contemporary liberal democracies helps to explain the low levels of political motivation for defining long-term strategies.⁵² Conversely, their inclusion legitimises the expansion of decision-making time horizons in representative democracies. The democratisation of objective interests in the future entails recognising that the young are members of the community and that they are more than miniature adults.

THE POLITICAL VALUE OF THE BLANK PAGE

The value attributed to interests in the future at any time t_1 is necessarily unbalanced if we weigh those interests against expectations concerning how long actuality lasts. Simply put, some people seem to have more future in their present than others. The insertion of time into the equation of moral relevance concerning democratic representation requires some aspect of quantifiability.

Certain deontologists might take issue with this requirement. A person is an end in itself, regardless of age. The number of years lived or of years expected to be lived should make no difference to how governments have the legitimacy

⁵² One possible explanation for why the young have been consistently excluded from political procedures and not recognised as fully-fledged community members is both sociological and evolutionary. One of the greatest accomplishments of the twentieth century is the outstanding decrease in child mortality rates. Baby Boomers and the following generations were the first members of the human species for whom the death of a child was an exception rather than a rule. Prior to the 1950s, the moral underestimation of the status of children could be seen as an evolutionary defence mechanism that allowed parents to cope with loss without hindering their willingness to increase their progeny – if one wanted to leave descendants, one had to expect that some of one's children would likely die before reaching adulthood. Recent success in ensuring that childhood is no more vulnerable to death than adulthood has created the conditions (even biologically) to reconsider the time-sensitive moral status of children.

to exercise authority over people. Notwithstanding, even if we accept this stance piecemeal, preserving absolute time neutrality in democracies seems an almost impossible ideal to achieve. As the Dreros inscription suggests, democracies are structurally time-based and time-bound – decision-making in democratic environments is hindered from adopting a temporally neutral standpoint. Democratic time necessarily involves an element of commensurability insofar as durational time can function as a quantitative proxy for individual persons' distinctive qualities. Because it uses the elements of clock and calendar time, it seems neutral and universal. Without durational time as a proxy, qualitative judgements would have to be made each time to exercise certain rights and enforce certain duties. In fact, however, democratic time is not neutral: temporal thresholds create boundaries that afford different moral statuses to different persons – those in time have one status, those out of time another. The gist is that treating everybody as atemporal subjects violates the very moral equality that temporal neutrality aims to protect whenever the time of similarly situated persons is not treated as having similar value.⁵³ When there is a violation of the equal treatment of citizens regarding the time factor, persons are not being treated as ends in themselves on equal terms.

Temporal commensurability seems inescapable in democracies. Still, it must be used *cum grano salis* in the semi-future framework, under the threat that privileging special kinds of objective interests in the future can quickly turn into a justification for discriminating against older cohorts. Two main reasons justify this caution in the semi-future framework. The first is that different people can have different conceptions of the weight or value of the same quantity (of life years, for instance). Suppose we had the choice to add one life year to someone else in the world who would die after that year. Suppose also that we could either add one life year to an eighty-year-old or deliver a baby into the world who would only survive for one year. Should we believe that the same life year is just as good for both persons? Given a choice between these two options, there is something inherently perverse about choosing to bring someone into the world who will be deprived of the developmental dimension of childhood from the outset – a child who does not seem to be fully a child from the moment of birth since that child is denied objective interests in the future. Her or his life year results in a negative sum: one year minus the multitude of future years that she or he will be prevented from living. The same does not hold for the eighty-year-old. Her or his extra life year genuinely adds more actuality into the world and thus seems to count for more.

The second reason is that cross-temporality is not easily quantifiable. Like all instances of cross-temporality, the transition from childhood to adulthood is not clear-cut. This aspect of indeterminacy contributes to the difficulty in

⁵³ This conclusion was first introduced by Cohen 2018.

quantifying special kinds of objective interests in the future (as life years, for instance). Viewing these units as life years on an equal footing with life years already lived places us on thin moral ice. Suppose government intervention in some policy areas can reduce life-threatening risks by weighing costs and benefits rationally. If the basis of analysis takes into consideration the temporal particularities of those affected (including the complex admixture of objective interests held by children) and is quantifiable in life years, the cost–benefit analysis will likely afford more weight to saving the young than saving the old insofar as the life years assessed are not those actually lived but those most likely to be lived by whoever is alive at the time the government decision is carried out. This privileging of the young could be problematic as there is no guarantee that the expected life years will actually be lived out. Placing expected time on equal terms with actual lived time can generate serious fairness problems towards older community members. The level of uncertainty involved in cost–benefit analyses based on life years is one argument for using moral personhood as a unit of analysis. Rather than focusing on expected life years, the analysis would then be grounded in something more anchored in actuality, such as the number of lives saved, the sufficient well-being of the lives saved, or the number of lives saved among those worst off.

Nevertheless, despite these two reasons for handling temporal commensurability with caution and especially for rejecting future life years as a standard in moral decision-making, time inevitably infiltrates the assessment of personal value in political systems.⁵⁴ Democracies typically circumvent the conflict between actuality and predictability by resorting to age limits counted from the time of birth as proxies for determining the beginning of the normative status associated with full citizenship, thereby overcoming the unclear epistemic transition artificially. They often still reflect the unclear nature of the transition from childhood to adulthood, however, by establishing different thresholds for different aspects of adulthood, such as the age of majority, the age of sexual consent, and the age at which one can get married, leave school, drink, drive, vote, smoke, gamble, etc. What is distinctive about these thresholds is that they do not simply establish a boundary around the domain of adulthood, separating those moral equals who are inside from those who remain outside while

⁵⁴ Lives are often saved or lost depending on the number of life years in question. Suppose that six people are experiencing respiratory failure and only two respirators are available (a situation faced by many doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic). Decisions about how to allocate resources to patients will reasonably be based on their likelihood of survival after treatment, often based on age. Even in such cases, however, medical decisions will be based on an evaluation of the state of the patient's immune system, which is partly determined by the number of years they have already lived. Expected life years following treatment do not play a relevant part in the medical decision-making process.

waiting to enter. Instead, the thresholds function as boundaries separating two distinct normative realms – and the one that does not equate with adulthood bears the distinctive mark of a forward-looking perception of time.

Within this frame of reference, childhood is not reduced to a countdown towards a specific moment in the future. The temporary character of childhood inherent in the developmental conception is not the mere ‘not-yet’ of a normative condition promised and expected. It is something more than that. It is the actuality of a specific normative condition that is defined in terms of what it will be empowered to do in the future.

Childhood in democracies is temporary in a double sense. It is temporary because it has an expiration date – in the background, there is always the ticking of a countdown to the different age limits that allow entry into the normative status associated with adulthood. Precisely because of this, it is temporary because its present consists of looking towards the future – in the background, there is always the ticking of the ‘counting up’ of the duration of the power to what is yet to be. In this double sense, a young person’s life seems more valuable than an adult’s: in addition to the value of being a person, she or he also has the value of the blank page. A cost–benefit analysis of lives saved cannot be blind to the fact that a young person’s life combines what she or he is in their current life and the blank page of open possibilities that she or he embodies in their youth.

The semi-future is the perception, in democratic contexts, of the entirety of objective interests, including those shaped by relations with time to come. It expresses the value of the blank page in political decision-making and highlights the need to afford political weight to long-term thinking.

THE NON-OVERLAPPING FUTURE IN THE SEMI-FUTURE TEMPORAL ORDER

In the semi-future temporal order, each moment t_1 is a sort of mirror reflection of moments to come. However, insofar as it depends on objective interests held by actual persons, the range of moments to come reflected in any single moment t_1 is limited. For each individual alive at t_1 , truth conditions in the semi-future framework remain the same in all intervals between t_1 and any other moment t_2 at which the individual ceases to be an actual person. Beyond that moment t_2 , when all people alive at t_1 are no longer alive, the truth conditions pertaining to objective interests cease to exist at t_1 . The semi-future has a limited temporal range.

Normative elements grounded on the semi-future temporal order can hardly be called long term in the sense of encompassing the far-off future. What distinguishes the semi-future from the present-future temporal order is that its foundations are entirely actual – based on actual living people at any time t_1 . The semi-future seems best suited to relations between overlapping age groups than between non-overlapping generations. So, the question remains: can the rationale behind the semi-future temporal order be pertinent to solving long-term problems involving non-overlapping generations?

The answer is yes, but we must dig deeper to understand how. The semi-future is a theory of time perception employed to understand the nature of democratic time. It poses no significant obstacles to thinking that there are moral reasons to govern in a way that is at least attentive to the (future) interests that future people will have. The requirement to treat people with the respect they deserve extends beyond the scope of the demos. Anybody (or any entity) who is recognised as having the moral status of personhood has a legitimate moral entitlement towards those who can act in ways that affect the underlying conditions of such a status. Suppose future persons, even *qua* future, qualify in the present sufficiently as persons. In that case, they have in the present a moral standing that grounds certain limits on how the demos decides on any issue, the effects of which extend into the indefinite future. Future people (especially those who will qualify as members of the current demos that extends into the indefinite future) should then be treated with the concern and respect owed to all persons not included in the demos. Temporally overlapping and unaffected non-nationals, for instance, are not that different from non-overlapping future persons – democracies are bound by (moral and international legal) requirements to treat them in a way commensurate with their moral status. In addition, future people are not just people in the moral sense. Many of those yet unborn are expected to come to live in certain democratic relations. They are future members of the demos. This at least establishes the obligation to govern in a way that is not destructive of the conditions by which would-be citizens might eventually access their full citizenship status.

This is an argument from intergenerational justice that is compatible with the semi-future version of democratic time, but which integrates neither the very idea of democratic time nor the corresponding normative implications. We still need to establish an argument from democracy that fits into the semi-future framework and makes it capable of looking far into the future if we are to consider it a liberal theory of the long-term view that also matters to non-overlapping cases.

As it happens, the semi-future contains two features that may be beneficial in the (very) long run. The first is *transtemporality*. At the intervals between t_1 and the moment t_2 , when the last survivor of t_1 ceases to exist, more people are born. For those intervals, t_1' , t_1'' , t_1''' , etc., new-born persons have objective interests in the future just like those born at t_1 , except that they extend further into the future. Ultimately, people born at intervals closer to t_2 will have objective interests in the future that extend beyond t_2 , which then becomes a new moment t_1 , and so on. Transtemporality focuses on individuals' relations to time, not on privileging entities with longer lifespans in the political arena, such as communities or generations. The semi-future's transtemporality is fully compatible with liberal individualism and demographic fluctuations across different cultures and societies.

Because it relies on *objective* interests, transtemporality hinges on the presence of members of a democratic community. Membership provides sufficient reason to take all (newly constituted) objective interests in the future into consideration at any interval between t_1 and t_2 . There is no need to reinforce such reasons with additional ties between people, such as bloodlines or biological descendants, even if the semi-future temporal order coheres with the priority afforded to genetic proximity by biological evolutionary theory. Evolution seems to prevent us from transcending the basic drive to privilege our own genome preservation. We can care deeply about those closest to us, but that empathy rarely extends beyond our line of sight. Our own (overlapping) kin – children and grandchildren – seem to matter more to us than the idea of our great-grandchildren. It is easier to justify provisions for the future based on present states of affairs, such as parents' inclination to provide for the welfare of their progeny. Even if parents think more highly of their children than of subsequent generations, the passing of intervals turns their children into parents with children of their own who share the same inclination.⁵⁵ Evolutionary theory's transtemporality functions much like the semi-future's transtemporality. By the time future moment t_2 has passed, the result of the semi-future's transtemporality would seem to be as beneficial to the long term as it would be if future utilities were discounted directly at t_1 in favour of t_2 .

The fact that the semi-future's transtemporality coheres with evolutionary theory's transtemporality (although it hinges on objective interests) is a key aspect to keep in mind because it disconnects the semi-future from the typical moral arguments in favour of the far-off future. We can usually distinguish two ways of spelling out the idea that we ought to care about the interests of future generations: a direct argument, according to which the present generation acquires duties towards non-overlapping future generations; and an indirect (or zipper) argument, according to which the present generation acquires duties concerning future generations indirectly, via direct duties towards the following (overlapping) generation.⁵⁶ The latter relies mainly on biological connections – the underlying rationale being that, because we ought to care about the interests

⁵⁵ The inclination to favour one's own children as the most robust argument for long-term decision-making is a focus that emerges chiefly from Kenneth J. Arrow's criticism of Rawls' approach to intergenerational justice: cf. Arrow 1973.

⁵⁶ Zipper-arguments draw on generational overlap to establish obligations of justice regarding future generations. The zipper approach is best explained by Axel Gosseries, who maintains that 'obligations to remote future generations can be dealt with through the prism of our obligations towards the generation that directly follows us' (Gosseries 2001: 296). Examples of the argument at work can be found mostly in Howarth 1992; Vanderheiden 2006; Mazor 2010; Gheaus 2016; Cripps 2017; Bos 2016. Such arguments are also often called 'the chain of duties' or 'transgenerational intertwinement': for criticisms, see Unruh 2021; Menga 2023. For further developments, see Meijers 2023.

of our children, we ought to care about the interests of future generations more generally. Transtemporality prevents the semi-future from constituting a direct argument in liberal democracies. At first glance, it seems to resonate with an indirect argument in favour of future generations since it appeals to the interests of already existing people (their interests in having adequate life prospects). Nevertheless, the semi-future's transtemporality falls short of being an indirect moral argument for protecting members of non-overlapping generations.

First, the semi-future does not impose specific normative responsibilities on adults regarding children, as the G1–G2 connection that ultimately favours G3 seems to imply (assuming that G1, G2 and G3 refer to consecutive generations and the lifetimes of G1 and G3 do not overlap). Instead, the appeal to the inclusion of objective interests in the future in democratic procedures constitutes a normative requirement of justification on the part of the entire democratic order to decide in due time and for the future. As objective interests held by members of the democratic community, such interests in the future are integral parts of any substantive criteria of democratic authority.

Second, the transtemporal connection inherent in the semi-future is not biological but political. The contents of objective interests in the future relate to a particular normative status in the future by those very persons who have legitimate expectations of becoming (or continuing to be) full citizens in the future. Strictly speaking, such interests do not necessarily include having the resources necessary to raise children in the future and provide more children with enough resources to raise their own children, and so on, *ad infinitum*. For instance, children's objective interests in the semi-future framework are about the full scope of citizenship attached to adulthood, not necessarily about parenthood. For this reason, the semi-future does not depend on the validity of a normative connection between G1 and an overlapping G2.

Third, unlike indirect arguments in favour of future generations, the semi-future avoids the risk of achieving the right result for the wrong reasons. Tim Mulgan offers the following scenario, which he believes provides a death blow to indirect (or zipper) arguments:

Suppose G1 has the power to create an undetectable threat to G3, such that G2 will never know of the existence of this threat. Any moral theory adopting the principle that 'ought implies can' will say that G2 have no obligations with respect to this threat, either to disarm it or to compensate G3 for its effects. Accordingly, the construction of the bomb has no impact on the obligations of G2 . . . If we are relying on the zipper argument, G1 cannot have any moral reason not to construct such a bomb.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Mulgan 2006: 32.

Mulgan's scenario unfolds from the starting point that indirect arguments in moral relations between non-overlapping generations cannot explain why G1's behaviour is impermissible because it has bad effects on G3. The far-off future presumption is that it is wrong to impose threats on future people *because* it is bad if they suffer as a result. Instead, the semi-future framework builds on a different starting point by not recognising the relevance of moral connections between non-overlapping generations for the legitimacy of democratic decision-making.

The semi-future responds differently to Mulgan's scenario than the typical indirect argument. The main reasons not to construct the bomb that will explode in G3's lifetime refer to how such a decision affects G2, for instance, by concealing information that is morally relevant to the members of G2's eventual relationship between members of G2 and members of G3 and by affecting the set of circumstances in which members of G2 share objective interests with members of G3. The objective interests that matter politically at any interval after t_1 are all the objective interests of the members of the generations alive at those intervals. So, members of G2 at t_1 have interests in the future of enjoying at t_2 objective interests in the present that are expressed politically on equal terms with G3's objective interests in the future at t_2 . This overlap at t_2 reproduces the relations between G1 and G2 at t_1 . However, in this scenario, the most distinctive feature of the semi-future temporal order is that the moral reasons for not constructing the bomb apply equally to G1 and G2 at t_1 . In a semi-future democratic framework, G1 does not make decisions that affect G2; instead, all democratic decisions are legitimate only if imputed equally to G1 and G2, including those that will eventually become harmful only to members of G3.

The second feature of the semi-future that may ultimately be beneficial in the very long run is *similarity*. Since semi-future interests are objective rather than mere preferences, volitions or whims, they constitute reasons for acting for the sake of some person P merely in view of P 's location in (and relation to) time. This objective basis, from which the semi-future emerges, seems sufficiently solid across different times extending into the far-off future. From the viewpoint of t_1 , people who are expected to be alive at any far-off future moment t_2 are then likely to come to have objective interests similar to the interests of those who are alive at t_1 .⁵⁸

Similarity does not establish a representative relation but extends the outreach of extant representative relations across time. Suppose that child A is

⁵⁸ For a direct application of 'for the sake of' to future generations without the need for similarity, in a sense more akin to Kant's 'treating people as ends in themselves', see Luzzatto 2022, ch. 4. Unlike the semi-future order, Luzzatto does not ground 'for-the-sake-of' arguments on actual objectivity, but rather equates actuality and potentiality in her notion of objectivity.

born at t_1 . Her or his present objective interests include securing the means to develop the capacity to exercise her or his rights at any given interval between t_1 and, for instance, moment t_2 , at which he or she will celebrate their eighteenth birthday. These interests are politically relevant at t_1 . If another child B is born in the interval immediately preceding t_2 , B 's then present interests will be similar to A 's interests at t_1 , even if A at t_2 no longer shares the contents of the interests she or he had at t_1 (e.g., she or he no longer has interests in developing the capacity to exercise their rights, but in having the means to exercise their rights). By way of the democratic inclusion, at t_1 , of A 's objective interests in the future, B 's similar interests (as well as those held by anybody yet unborn into the indefinite future) might be taken into account in political processes at t_1 by mimesis. From the viewpoint of t_1 , the expected interests of future people at any future time t_2 regarding the conditions for exercising political and civil rights equally across time will mirror the actual interests of present people at t_1 .

Similarity should not be confused with sameness nor with encapsulation. On the one hand, the interests at t_1 do not have the same status: A 's is an actual interest, B 's will be an interest that is expected, at t_1 , to not differ, at t_2 , from A 's interest at t_1 . Mimesis means B 's interest is always subsequent to A 's, not an actual interest at t_1 , only an interest by imitation. This does not mean that all of B 's interests are expected to be similar to A 's. The actual contents of A 's interests at t_1 may differ from the contents of B 's interests at t_2 , for instance, when it comes to how the minimum conditions of civil and political participation are to be met (when the threshold is set at different heights at different times). In such instances, a conflict of interests may arise between them, although only apparent at t_1 because the contents that B 's interests will actually have at t_2 are irrelevant for the purposes of assessing political agency at t_1 . What is similar, though, and remains so throughout time, is the formal correspondence of objective interests in the future with minimum conditions of moral personhood. This is the similarity that matters for the semi-future temporal order.

On the other hand, similarity does not imply that present interests contain 'the encapsulated interests of future generations', the notion developed by Robert E. Goodin according to which B 's interests are encapsulated within A 's if that in which B has an interest is in A 's interest as well.⁵⁹ The idea of 'encapsulation' seems to imply that B 's interests are already politically relevant at t_1 because they are an integral part of A 's interests, as if A 's interests could count double. This is not the case when talking of objective interests, though. Objective interests

⁵⁹ Goodin 1996.

in the future are interests that hold throughout time as an integral part of the moral status of persons for the sake of which political institutions are justified in acting – they are interests that trigger acting for the sake of the holder and the holder alone.

In practical terms, Goodin's model is as mistrustful of the representation of future persons as the semi-future temporal order because it seems to rely on the coincidence of the contents of interests shared by present and future persons, thus dismissing from representation all future interests that seem to involve trade-offs between the present and the future. In the semi-future framework, *B* has no right to political participation at t_1 – *B* is not, at t_1 , a member of the demos. However, the objective interests that will be held by those living at t_2 will be similar to the objective interests held by people at t_1 . This argument may help to justify actions and policies today that are attentive to the interests of people who will live very far in the future, even if they are not made or established for that specific purpose, but only to protect the (similar) objective interests of people who live in the present.

(INTRODUCTORY) CONCLUSION

The semi-future temporal order is a form of time perception. It relies on certain notions about the nature of time, such as linearity, movement, the actuality of the present, etc., but only insofar as they follow from the most commonplace beliefs about time and because they are presumed in most collective decision-making contexts about the future. Such reliance is justified by practical reasons alone. Beyond this superficial commitment to these notions of time, the semi-future has nothing to say about the nature of time.

As a form of time perception, the semi-future introduces a temporal scheme in which considerations about the future have a truth value equivalent to everything accepted as present in the here and now. This perception significantly impacts the normative temporal grounds of liberal democracies, which are predominantly driven by legitimacy criteria, incentives and institutional structures to function within the confines of proximate time horizons. This is why the semi-future should be taken seriously: it establishes a social mechanism regarding the perception of time in specific political contexts that are typically regarded as inclusive and cross-temporal.

To the extent that it is nothing more than a novel perception of the most widespread notions concerning the nature of time, the semi-future builds on those notions. It is neither a reconfiguration of social theories of time nor a groundbreaking theory of democracy. Strictly speaking, it adds nothing new to the extant justificatory and descriptive elements characteristic of democracies. Just as it builds on commonplace notions of time, it also builds on commonplace conceptions of liberal democracy that resort to durational time. It is a new way of looking at an existing picture – neither a palimpsest, an amendment nor a brushstroke on a

blank canvas. As a reordering of existent presuppositions about democratic time, it conflicts neither with the structural values and institutions embedded in liberal democracies nor with the typical short-term-friendly cognitive heuristics employed in democratic decision-making, such as the default effect, the status quo bias, the endorsement effect, anchoring and the availability bias.

Still, the semi-future involves the arduous task of understanding how far the time horizons of liberal democracies can extend without breaking the very political fabric they are expanding. Within this frame of reference, it is both challenging and ambitious insofar as it penetrates the content of the legitimacy standards of liberal representative democracies – it aims to be expressed in legitimacy criteria embedded in liberal frameworks, criteria that genuinely incorporate time considerations. Consequently, the semi-future is neither merely a temporal order that provides reasons for advocating certain kinds of long-term policy nor an ideology that can be embraced by certain parties hustling in the political arena, whether on the left or the right. Rather, it is a justification of the normative status of the long term in liberal democracy.

This justification hinges on the political inclusion of objective interests in the future through representation, especially by developing responsiveness and accountability mechanisms within existing representation models. This proposal may initially sound counter-intuitive, given that justification often depends on epistemic forms of actuality (such as consent), and that responsiveness (mostly to preferences) is usually regarded as an explanatory device for short-term decisions. The following chapters show that there is nothing counter-intuitive about the semi-future in liberal settings by exploring the implications of the political value of objective interests in the future.

SEMI-FUTURE REPRESENTATION: JUSTIFYING RESPONSIVENESS TO OBJECTIVE INTERESTS IN THE FUTURE

Government of the people, by the people, for the people is democratic when all three dimensions are met. In the context of representation, this means that representatives must stand in for the people, embody the people in an X-portrays-Y-as-Z relation and act for the sake of the people. The first two constitute the representative relation; the third helps to assess the quality of representation.

Government for the people that is also government by the people requires a minimum connection between the contents of the political decisions being made and the interests of those to which such decisions are addressed. Democratic representation aiming at the long term cannot dismiss this connection.

In recent work, I have suggested a way of reconfiguring the franchise so that representatives are motivated to being attentive primarily to interests pertaining to the future – more specifically, by enlarging the franchise to younger citizens and by dividing electoral circles not only territorially but also per age groups. Temporal electoral circles would elect their specific representatives who would work alongside representatives elected by geographical electoral circles (or districts). The former would then have the electoral-related incentives to promote legislation and policies that took the constituents' relation with time seriously.¹ However, this arrangement, albeit potentially inducive of responsiveness to time-related interests, still relies heavily on electoral stimuli, that is, on responsiveness to interests expressed

¹ Campos 2023a.

at *that* moment, as subjective interests. It falls short, then, of bringing actual objective interests in the future into the representative relation. Due to the time cycles of election and re-election, representative officials are likely to be responsive to the individual preferences displayed by voters rather than to the objective, cross-temporal interests that pertain to them and that constitute the substance of the democratic semi-future temporal order. These preferences are not necessarily revealing of specific connections with the long term. Instead, they are presumably more akin to the beliefs and inclinations that the voters develop with regard to their needs at different electoral moments. From the viewpoint of the electoral clock alone, temporal electoral circles may be appropriate for pushing time-related matters into the political arena via the mechanism of responsiveness, but are insufficient to guarantee the inclusion in representative procedures of the objective interests in the future that pertain to them. The close relationship between elections and responsiveness leads to a generalised belief that being responsive to preferences (which are likely to be short term) is key to electoral success.

To govern for the people, it is not just necessary that representatives of government by the people voice the interests and concerns of those who actively participate in the representative relation, for instance, by voting. First, because the demos is broader than the franchise. It encompasses all those who share constituent power and who can integrate the representative relation *qua* represented, even if not all meet the criteria for becoming members of the franchise. Second, merely voicing the (active) franchise leaves out a significant portion of the demos *qua* represented. Not only is such a stand-in relation oblivious to the members of the demos who do not vote, but it also falls short of questioning whether resonating franchise preferences equates with acting for the sake of their holders. Hence, the connection between interests pertaining to the represented and the contents of the actions of representatives needs to be unpacked.

The quality of democratic representation in this sense is typically assessed in terms of responsiveness. This poses two significant problems for the semi-future temporal order. On the one hand, in light of the so-called constructivist turn of political representation, how is responsiveness even possible if a represented's interests only ensue formally with representation? On the other hand, how are representatives to be responsive to objective interests in the future held by members of the class of the represented on equal terms with subjective interests in the present held by members of the franchise?

In this chapter, I aim to provide a solution that preserves the normative aspect of responsiveness within the constructivist camp. The answer depends on two theses: the virtual representation thesis, which allows the inclusion, in the class of the represented, of members of the semi-future demos who, for epistemic reasons related mainly to young age, either do not have preferences or are unable to express them politically; and the temporal justification thesis,

which focuses on the order of justification by establishing that a political decision is admittedly representative if it is made by a democratic authority that justifies the decision-making process and the decision reached in light solely of the represented's interests. In the end, it should remain clear that representing objective interests in the future can be responsive and is not a paternalistic form of representation.

NO SEMI-FUTURE WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

Conceptually, there is no necessary connection between democracy and representation. Instead of being assumed, the relation between these concepts should be considered as intrinsically problematic. With the advance, especially from the nineteenth century onwards, of a conception of democracy coincidental with the progressive implementation of universal suffrage, representation came to be understood mainly as an instrument for connecting the demos and the government. The expression 'representative democracy' described a regime in which citizens freely elected their leaders and in which there was a clear separation between representatives and the represented, the former being endowed with the discretion to make decisions that bind the whole. Of the two concepts in the expression, democracy superseded representation in such a way that representation was nothing more than a (less than optimal) device for preserving social relations grounded on some form of consent and for articulating acceptable aspirations for freedom and equality. This framework sheds light on why the seeming difficulty of meeting such aspirations and promoting political participation and citizen engagement in a way that bypasses hierarchical political structures can be depicted as a 'crisis' of representative government² that leads to a political model of 'post-representation'.³

The semi-future framework builds on a different assumption, however. Representation is not a mere appendage to democracy. Instead, it lies at the very heart of democratic politics. Representation is the vehicle par excellence whereby societies, regarded as groups of individuals, try to construct a collective identity and a common will, both of which need to be represented in order for the whole to cease being an abstraction and to become a genuine polity that decides and acts as a whole. The capacity to rule, order, bargain and induce supposes, on the part of any aggregate, that it represents itself as a single body, not only from an ideological, symbolic and iconographic point of view but chiefly in terms of political rule legitimately conducted by, in the name of, and in the interest of the (members of the) demos. The multitemporal range of democratic rule entails, then, that representation is not only a possible but a necessary element of the semi-future democracy.

² Ankersmit 2002: 91–132; Norris 1999; Dalton 2004; Hay 2007.

³ Feher 2007: 15; Vieira and Runciman 2008: 154.

Recent insights on the need for a reconfiguration of representation in and beyond liberal democratic structures have undoubtedly infused new vigour into modern conceptualisations of representation. As they seek to increase inclusion in collective decision-making procedures, they seem compatible with similar aspirations inherent in the semi-future democracy.

Representatives in the semi-future democracy are, first and foremost, those who effectively and legitimately combine the acting-for and the portrayal-as relations involved in the emergence of the semi-future demos, that is, elected and non-elected representatives who hold offices in the service of the semi-future demos (not just of specific sets of voters). The semi-future notion of representation necessarily encompasses a dialectics of authorisation, consent and accountability that does not have the luxury of dismissing the available structures of representative action that liberal democracies already provide. The semi-future is built on the foundations of existing liberal democracies to improve the quality of the democratic procedures they already contain for extended time horizons. There is no need to bypass such procedures.

The appeal to additional or more complex notions of representation beyond formal structures, such as non-electoral forms of representation, is only comprehensible as emerging from a catastrophic failure of standard representation models to resonate with people's genuine interests. In light of this assumption, a substantive connection of content between the representatives' actions and the actual interests of the represented takes priority over any formal and procedural connection of authorisation between the represented and the representatives when assessing the nature and the value of representative democracy. However, this view is far from satisfactory, and this is for a multitude of reasons.

First, claims for representation that develop without prior consent formation depend on intricate *a posteriori* forms of consent that are often difficult to ascertain or obtain, which means that accountability is even less manifest in non-electoral attempts at representation. Second, judgements about claims for representation are diverse and often involve high levels of discretion about what constitutes a group's identity or attachments. Some (self-appointed) representatives may purport to voice the genuine interests of people by interpreting their actual subjective interests, while others aim at voicing the subjective interests the represented would have if they enjoyed a more suitable epistemic environment. Some may seek to voice the objective interests of the represented without paying any regard to people's actual subjective interests and preferences, while others may seek to find an equilibrium between both sets of interests. The absence of self-evident and exclusively content-related criteria for ascertaining how and when the substantive connection between representation and interests occurs seems to require an additional (non-exclusively content-related) means of assessing representation. Third, non-electoral forms of representation may comprise too many actors claiming to represent the same members at the same

time, including advocacy groups, the media, interest groups, and actors who are both internal and external to the institutional polity, thereby making it difficult for members of the demos to pinpoint exactly how and through which voices they are made present in the political arena. Fourth, claims to represent particular members of the demos based on the fact that they are recognised as having certain characteristics produces the unwelcome effect of narrowing the citizenship status they enjoy as members of the demos to those particular characteristics, which seem even more restricted than the category of being a represented member of the demos. Fifth, if there is a way to improve the quality of standard representative action to make it more likely to resonate with people's objective interests, such alternative forms of representation seem to boil down to a function of counter-power and play no positive role in shaping collective norms and policies concerning the long term.⁴

In the semi-future democracy, substantive representation (to use Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde's terminology) – the authenticity of expression of people's objective interests in the future in some claims to representation or in certain features of the representative – is not a sufficient proxy for authorisation. The focus on congruence as an authorisation mechanism reduces the connection between the representatives and the represented to one of (descriptive) fit. The semi-future demos depends on a dimension of consent formation (formal representation, to use Böckenförde's terminology again) that is not determined exclusively by substantive claims to mirror the objective interests of members of the demos.⁵

Still, this does not tell us much concerning what is distinctive about semi-future representation compared with standard, formal representation. Nevertheless, it must have something. Otherwise, there would be no problems concerning the

⁴ Social actors can (and should) voice the interests of members of the demos in the semi-future framework of formal and substantive representation, but this constitutes neither acting for, representing nor counter-power. It is instead a form of inclusion and collaboration in the collective decision-making procedures that take place within the official representation of liberal democracy. The semi-future structure of representation suggests that multiple monitoring bodies and practices of accountability can help to bring together the practices of social actors (e.g., leaders of social movements, spokespersons of NGOs, academics, think tanks, expert panels on long-term related matters, etc.) and the judgement of the represented, and that the legitimacy of such practices emerges mainly from their discursive interactions.

⁵ The semi-future representation falls outside the dichotomy between selection and sanction models of representation. According to a sanction model, representatives are expected to accurately track the subjective interests of their constituents or else face the sanction of not being re-elected; within a selection model, constituents choose representatives with features and views that mirror or are aligned to their own so that the representatives have self-motivated reasons to pursue the constituents' subjective interests. For the distinction, see chiefly Mansbridge 2009; Pettit 2010.

implementation of the long-term view in contemporary liberal democracies. Common sense suggests that this something is a resonance (or authenticity) of objective interests in the future within the formal mechanisms of democratic representation. Just as authenticity is insufficient for establishing semi-future representation, mere authorisation (e.g., through elections) seems equally insufficient. This should come as no surprise. A generalised questioning of how we organise ourselves in a multitemporal context requires a transformation of the usual dynamics of democratic politics. The governance of multitemporality is expected to face the challenges of the pull of multiplicity and power disaggregation in civil society, of the globalised and complex economy that escapes (by abstraction, speed and interconnectedness) states' capacities to regulate it, all the while striking a balance between the different time horizons and rhythms of various political and social agents. How else can they meet such high expectations without making the substantive link between representatives and the represented more robust?

Semi-future representation thus involves an admixture of formal and substantive elements. There is nothing particularly original about this viewpoint. The common element pervading all of the above conceptions of representation is mimesis. The complete absence of similarity between the representative and the represented – between what one is and what the other is, between what one wants and what the other wants – is equivalent to a distancing that turns the represented once more into an absentee, thereby establishing the arbitrary power of an elite, perhaps leading to oligarchy or tyranny.

Semi-future representation, however, concerns present interests in something that still does not exist by definition – and, within a constructivist conception of representation, interests that only exist in the present when some kind of representation is already underway. How can representation be a more or less linear projection of what is represented without falling into deeper levels of ambiguity?

PROBLEMATIZING RESPONSIVENESS

Representative governments come into existence when an entity with a claim to authority *acts for* someone in the capacity of a representative and *portrays* some object, inclusive of that someone, *as* something else. The acting-for and the portrayal-as relations are merely formal – once established, they shape representative governments regardless of how representation is exercised. However, liberal democracies require an additional element in representative government: a substantive connection between the acting-for and the portrayal-as relations. The precise content of this connection is somewhat uncertain. However, it consists roughly of the idea that representative governments arise in democracies only when an entity with a claim to authority acts for someone *in a certain way* – more specifically, in a way that pertains to the interests or reasons of the represented (not the representative).

This substantive element is paramount to the acquisition of authority by the entity that purports to be representative. Without it, there is no democratic authority – perhaps only the weak claim that authority can exist *de facto*. In order to be a genuine democratic authority, a representative government is expected (or even bound) to conduct itself in a manner that is not insensitive to the interests and reasons of the members of the demos that it helps to portray in the first place. A straightforward disconnect between citizens’ interests and the contents of the laws and policies to which they are subject is hardly consistent with the democratic ideal of self-government. Some level of responsiveness is inherent in the very idea of representative government in a liberal democracy. Responsiveness is embedded in the notion of (representative) democratic legitimacy.

Nonetheless, ‘responsiveness’ is an ambiguous term. Responding to something or someone seems to require the capacity to react to a pre-existent (something or someone) – responsiveness is therefore dependent on, and secondary to, a given referent. What is the nature of this referent? If responsiveness is interpreted as requiring a one-way causal influence between the referent and the representative, operating as a one-way conveyor belt that converts pre-given preferences into actions or policies, it conflicts with the semi-future temporal order in at least two respects.

First, within the constructivist perspective, asserting the priority and pre-emptive force of the represented seems straightforwardly problematic in chronological terms because the unidirectionality of responsiveness requires that the represented be unambiguously prior – that those who are to become members of the demos via representation already hold, ahead of representation, the individual preferences and subjective interests that will pertain to them as represented, the content of which will subsequently bind or channel the actions of representatives.

Second, the referent not only grounds responsiveness but also contains the expectation of responsiveness, as if it needed responsiveness to qualify as a referent fully. The mere existence of the referent puts pressure on responsiveness to be as proximate in time to the referent as possible so as to avoid the interim period when the referent remains in a sort of limbo, as a referent that does not qualify fully as a referent. The reactive feature of responsiveness is thus typically associated with subjective rather than objective interests – thus, with immediacy, not with the long-term view. The United States’ twists and turns around the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change mitigation, adaptation and finance offer a convincing analogy. The Paris Agreement’s long-term goal is to keep the rise in mean global temperature below 2°C (3.6°F) above pre-industrial levels and ultimately to reach net-zero emissions of greenhouse gases in the second half of the twenty-first century. The Obama administration signed the agreement, the Trump administration withdrew from it, and the Biden administration was readmitted into it, all within four years. The three

decisions were responsive to the expectations of the constituencies of the different administrations. The long-term goals and planning seemed dependent on responsiveness to short-term expectations, which suggests a severe difficulty in connecting responsiveness directly with the long term.

Despite these difficulties, the semi-future temporal order can be compatible with conceptions of democratic legitimacy that call for responsiveness to interests pertaining to the long term by following two cumulative itineraries: the *virtual representation thesis* and the *temporal justification thesis*.

THE VIRTUAL REPRESENTATION THESIS

The virtual representation thesis circumvents the fact that responsiveness tends to centre on voters' preferences by including in the class of the represented members of the demos who, for epistemic reasons related mainly to their young age, either do not have preferences or, if they do, cannot express them (even in ideal conditions of communicability) in ways that are sufficiently comprehensible to matter politically. Members of the demos who fall short of meeting the criteria for becoming members of the franchise are still interest-holders, and these interests are the locus and target of representation. Since they do not have relevant individual preferences, representation centres on their objective interests, which include the semi-future dimension.⁶

The device used by the virtual representation thesis is not at odds with the constructivist view of representation insofar as objective interests are neither pre-existent to nor framed by representative action. They come to light in the acting-for and the portrayal-as relations simultaneously. What integrates such individuals into the demos is the same representative relation that brings about the political clout of their objective interests in the future. Since they have no preferences for the purposes of political representation, the representative action can simply refer to their objective interests, which means that such representation is not under the direct pressure of short-termist responsiveness.

The expression 'virtual representation' derives from Edmund Burke's endeavours to legitimise claims for representative action by parliamentarians with regard to citizens residing in provinces that were excluded from standard electoral procedures. For Burke, representative action can connect those who claim to act for certain people who did not elect them and the very people in whose name they act. Burke's argument is not that a member of parliament represents the whole nation or demos, but that groups or communities whose

⁶ Insofar as she understands virtual representation as nothing more than a justification for representatives to self-appoint themselves without any need for consent on the part of the represented, Hélène Landemore understands virtual representation solely as exclusion, not as inclusion, claiming that it is a 'notion with a notoriously undemocratic lineage': Landemore 2020: 81. The semi-future temporal order employs representation, though, as an instrument of inclusion.

members do not belong to an electorate are still represented in parliament via the representation of those who are members of the electorate.⁷ All that is required is a correspondence between the public action and the interests the public action aims to serve. Burke's virtual representation is different from surrogate representation. Rather than having officials simply claiming to represent citizens who are either disenfranchised or from another electoral district, the resonance of interests in Burke's virtual representation is based mostly on finding the morally right solutions, on objective rather than subjective interests, and on ideas of the common good.⁸

Virtual representation can accommodate objective interests in the future because there is a level of correspondence between such interests held by members of the demos who are not enfranchised and the interests held by members of the demos who are enfranchised. Burke conceives of this correspondence in terms of substantive coincidence. The similarity in content between the preferences presumed or expressed by enfranchised citizens and disenfranchised citizens is the ultimate justification for equal representation. However, the level of correspondence in the semi-future temporal order cannot be substantive in this sense since the main reason for resorting to the objective interests of people who are disenfranchised because of their age is precisely the fact that the latter do not have politically relevant individual preferences. Instead, similarity is to be understood not as referring to contents but to status. The representation of objective interests in the future held by members of the demos who are not yet members of the franchise operates *as if* such interests were individual preferences capable of being expressed in ideal (context- and agent-related) conditions of communicability. That is why the representation of such interests can be called *virtual*. Hence, the objective interests of disenfranchised citizens coincide in status with individual preferences expressed by voters, and they can be liable to the same kind of responsiveness.⁹

⁷ Burke 1887: 89.

⁸ Pitkin 1967: 174. For a somewhat similar notion based on moral status, on rationality rather than will, see Gutmann and Thompson 1996, who introduce the notion of 'moral constituents'.

⁹ I am committed here neither to the view that responsiveness must reflect the individual preferences and subjective interests that people genuinely have, nor to the view that officials must respond to what they believe are people's individual preferences or to what people's preferences would be in ideal circumstances of information and communicability. I prefer to leave such implications unanswered. Overreliance on people's actual beliefs and preferences to sustain responsiveness as an element of legitimacy in representative democracies can be quite troublesome if we acknowledge that preferences are often framed and shaped by different strategies of information and disinformation originating in representatives. When I mention preferences and subjective interests, I am merely invoking the importance of attending (or at least of not disregarding) in democracies to the content of people's actual expressions concerning the composition and actions of government officials (e.g., elections and other participatory instruments).

The virtual representation thesis adds to the standard conception of democratic legitimacy. Elections are necessary, albeit insufficient, to ground genuine democratic representation that purports to be legitimate *qua* multitemporal. Since not all members of the demos *qua* represented are members of the franchise, elected officials are only partially authorised to govern in a liberal democracy. Decision-making bodies engaged in the operation of democratic representative government are required to refine their grounds of legitimacy by acting for all members of the artificial entity they portray in a way that is responsive to the interests that pertain to such members in the political arena under conditions of equal concern and respect. This means that the virtual representation of objective interests in the future is a desideratum of democratic legitimacy that extends beyond mere authorisation. Failure to be responsive to such interests delegitimises representative government, even if an elected government is consistently and comprehensibly responsive to the main subjective interests of all voters.

I say ‘even if’ because such a prospect is likely to be impossible if responsiveness is understood in terms of politically reflecting a preference (in which a preference is converted into representative action) in light of the difficulties inherent in the aggregation of preferences in social choice theory, such as ‘Condorcet’s paradox’, ‘Arrow’s impossibility theorem’ and ‘the discursive dilemma’: even though individual preferences (and reflective decisions) can be consistent, the aggregation of different preferences (and reflective decisions) may run into collective inconsistency. It should be clear by now, however, that responsiveness in the semi-future representation is not a mirroring in this sense – it is mostly attentiveness with equality and respect, that is, the prohibition of disregard when deliberating about or justifying any decision that is imputable to a representative decision-making body.

Objective interests in the future thus incorporate and bind representative action in the semi-future temporal order. Its normative status as a desideratum of democratic legitimacy that postulates acting for the sake of those who have such objective interests matches, in practice, the application of what is commonly known as ‘the principle of the best interests of the child’, which was initially defined by the goals of protecting children’s physical and psychological well-being¹⁰ but has become a fully-fledged right since the institution of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹¹ The principle of the best interests of the child consists of three essential elements: ‘best interests’, ‘a primary consideration’ and ‘the child’. The three elements are defined in conjunction: a child’s

¹⁰ Goldstein, Freud and Solnit 1973.

¹¹ Article 3 of the convention states: ‘In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’.

best interests are those interests pertaining to the child that depend on the adopted conception of childhood and are more worthy of consideration. Even though there is little consensus about what criteria constitute a child's best interests or how these criteria should be applied,¹² the concept of the child's best interests has as its primary purpose the protection and welfare of children rather than their agency.¹³

The scope of applicability of this principle calls for formal processes and strict procedural safeguards in assessing and determining the child's welfare in light of their vulnerability. An example of such efforts is the notion of 'child-friendly justice', which refers to existing judicial systems and court proceedings (as well as to all officials who deal with children amidst judicial proceedings, such as police, social and mental health services, etc.), by aiming to make them age-appropriate, adapted to and focused on the particular needs and rights of children.¹⁴ The underlying rationale is to ensure that children's best interests are privileged whenever a child is involved in any judicial proceeding. This requires protecting children on account of their vulnerability, regardless of additional duties and responsibilities incumbent on parents and guardians. In fact, state institutions are often obliged to provide adequate legal representation to children seeking to file a suit against any entity that harms their best interests, including the state itself and their parents or guardians.

Insofar as the principle provides a child-centric perspective suitable for guiding decision-making within a broad range of contexts, it may function as a standard in analogy with the virtual representation thesis by broadening its scope beyond mere judicial proceedings and by encompassing considerations about content other than welfare. For instance, there is no reason why the principle could not be used to guide the legislative and executive branches of state authority. If states are to incorporate child-beneficial principles into their legal systems' rules of adjudication, they must often do so by enacting legislation that favours child-friendly conditions to be upheld during judicial proceedings. The reason for doing so does not lie outside the representative relation itself. Instead, it is the fact that those best interests are included in the class of the represented that justifies, first and foremost, a reorganisation of state institutions and functions to make them child-friendly.

Furthermore, because the notion of 'best interests' is inherently linked to the notion of childhood one adopts, children's developmental features would seem as crucial as their vulnerability. This admixture has temporal consequences – the semi-future temporal order requires a conception of childhood that involves

¹² See, for instance, Kelly 1997.

¹³ Liebel 2018: 605.

¹⁴ Council of Europe 2015.

a special relationship with the future. This applies equally to welfare and political participation. On the one hand, welfare is also a question of a person's ability to live their life in a way that is meaningful to them, a life that has value to her or him, not just in the present moment but throughout all the moments she or he can reasonably expect to live. On the other hand, children have a semi-future right to political participation that comprises an expectation that the minimum conditions for exercising the civil and political rights attached to the membership of a demos will be met in the future. Virtual representation is achieved in a democracy by acting politically and justifying decisions for the sake of the cross-temporal objective interests held by certain members of the represented, as if guided by a principle of the child's best interests.

THE TEMPORAL JUSTIFICATION THESIS

The temporal justification thesis offers an alternative to the widespread view that responsiveness boils down to mirroring voters' preferences by reversing the orientation of responsive representative action. Rather than conceiving responsiveness in terms of political clout through a conveyor belt on which the raw material of preferences is transformed into collective political action, the temporal justification thesis focuses on the order of justification required of action that legitimately purports to be representative. The justification desideratum establishes that a political decision is representative if it is made by a democratic authority that justifies the decision-making process and the actual decision solely in light of the interests of the represented. It applies equally to all members of the demos and all representatives alike.

The justification desideratum does not employ responsiveness as an *a posteriori* reversal of the causal influence of preferences on political decisions, as a sort of test to the qualities of the sequential process of mirroring previous preferences whereby representatives try to persuade citizens that their cloning skills have been successful. Instead, the starting point of justification is not the preference but the decision-making process itself. Ultimately, any decision-making process is also a reason-giving process, which is justificatory when it directly pertains to citizens' interests. The decision reached by a democratic decision-making body is sufficiently representative if it enables citizens to better recognise and comply with its content by providing (or being supported by) reasons that pertain to citizens' interests directly. Any decision made in the context of democratic representation is binding only to the extent that it provides and is supported by reasons that pertain directly to citizens' interests and that are sufficiently robust to make the decision's content adequate and acceptable precisely in light of such reasons. When officials cite reasons that they think are inadequate, even from the viewpoint of the person to whom they are presented, there is no genuine justification – only an attempt at persuasion. Justification does not involve simply giving others reasons they will (or are likely to) accept;

it involves advancing reasons that any agent (representative and represented alike) will accept as good.¹⁵

The fact that justification follows the opposite direction of political influence allows justification to play a part in shaping preferences concerning the matter of the decision – for instance, by disseminating among the represented reasons that are liable to function as drivers or motivators of authorisation and compliance. Justification in no way implies that the genuine preferences of the represented are ontologically or genealogically independent of practices of representation, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of constructivist representation.

The upshot of the precedence of the decision-making process with regard to interests that trigger responsiveness is what the constructivist conception of representation continuously underscores: that the interests to which representatives are supposed to be responsive cannot be subjective; for, if representatives shape citizens' preferences, those preferences cannot provide an independent benchmark for evaluating representatives' actions. For someone like Jane Mansbridge, voting is retrospective, and representation is anticipatory of people's future preferences rather than a voicing of past preferences. The congruence between policy preferences and votes is not the result of dyadic communication but systemic, relying on the functioning of the entire representative process. There is, thus, no responsiveness – only anticipation.¹⁶ And for Lisa Disch, there is no bedrock, whether unadulterated preferences or enlightened interests, on which to ground a decision since phenomena such as elite cueing, framing and other modes of influence are preconditions for democratic competence. The absence of the bedrock entails the absence of something to be responsive to.¹⁷ Constructivists thus feel free to dismiss responsiveness altogether and look elsewhere for accurate standards of representation, for instance, in the spirit in which representation is performed,¹⁸ in its capacity to empower the constituency¹⁹ or in the qualities of the broader system in which representation takes place.²⁰

Most constructivists, however, fail to notice that there are other kinds of interests to which representatives can be responsive at the start of the justification process, namely, objective interests, that is, certain kinds of interests pertaining to the represented. Such interests are still prior to the decision-making process insofar as they constitute the reasons for justification in the first place – the represented are prior in the sense that it is their interests, not those of the representatives or any other entities, that are fundamentally at stake in

¹⁵ Cf. Gaus 1996: 139.

¹⁶ Mansbridge 2003: 515–18.

¹⁷ Disch 2011.

¹⁸ Saward 2010; Näsström 2015.

¹⁹ Montanaro 2012.

²⁰ Disch 2011; Kuyper 2016.

representative action. Objective interests are the bedrock from which to begin the responsiveness dynamic. They are neither unadulterated preferences nor enlightened interests because they trigger action for the sake of them rather than on behalf of them. They are not preconditions for democratic competence but the fundamental conditions of democratic membership. They are not anticipated interpretations of future preferences but actual interests in the present about the future, which can be reflected upon and interpreted.

The semi-future temporal order applies to interests by highlighting their objective temporal dimension. One's position in time affects what one has sufficient reason to expect about the future for one's own sake. Attentiveness to objective interests in justification cannot neglect the cross-temporal features they reveal. Enhanced by the time element, the justification desideratum for democracy becomes a temporal justification thesis.

The temporal justification thesis helps to define the terms in which representatives' actions can be evaluated in a temporal context. Representatives and represented alike can appeal at any time to the temporal dimensions of objective interests pertaining to the represented when justifying or criticising the representatives' decisions. The representatives' decisions are solely justified if they are performed for the sake of the civil and political status of the represented across time. Correlatively, the represented are entitled to a justification of the representatives' actions in terms of their own interests concerning their civil and political status across time. The absence of responsiveness in this temporal justificatory sense entails that one cannot call someone a representative without raising normative expectations about concern for the future in any decision-making process.

However, such normative expectations in semi-future representation face a significant challenge since objective interests in the future are distributed unevenly between overlapping members of the demos. Citizens have different interests in the future depending on their position in time, and the young seem to have stronger ties to the future than the old. What happens to the temporal justification thesis when the objective interests of some seem to conflict with the objective interests of others? Should priority be given to the objective interests of those who are able to endorse political judgement following the justification process? Should priority be given to the objective interests of those whose objective interests in the future are more extended? Or are representatives expected to be oblivious to differences in citizens' relations to the future and treat all objective interests equally, simply following majority rule after aggregating objective interests? In this case, is justification dependent on momentary demographic structures and (forecasted and effectual) demographic fluctuations, on the assumption that younger societies will objectively privilege the future and aged societies will privilege the present?

An excellent example of such tension is the relation between anthropogenic greenhouse gases and the emission of aerosols that form a thick smog over

many cities while also blocking out incoming solar radiation and temporarily cooling the planet. In this case, measures to improve air quality conflict with measures to tackle global warming.²¹ Given the slow onset of the effects of climate change on the quality of people's lives, those whose objective interests in the future do not encompass extended time horizons are likely to prioritise and support policies that fight pollution immediately. In contrast, those with strong expectations of being affected by climate change in the future will be more likely to support policies that aim not only to reduce the harmful effects of aerosols but also to diminish the levels of greenhouse gas emissions.²² How, then, are representatives in the semi-future temporal order supposed to be responsive under the temporal justification thesis?

The answer to the challenge is far from straightforward. On the one hand, even though the temporal justification thesis emphasises the importance of epistemic communication and therefore privileges the objective interests of those whose preferences can be expressed critically or in support of representatives' determination of objective interests, the combination of the two theses (the virtual representation thesis and the temporal justification thesis) entails that objective interests should be considered on an equal footing – that is, as if all objective interests had been expressed as subjective interests to which responsiveness is due. On the other hand, the mere aggregation of political judgements and the subsequent application of majority rule also seems unsuited, given that the justification thesis is inherently cross-temporal (i.e., it encompasses a variety of time horizons). The upshot of cross-temporality is that justification is not just a justification to those capable of understanding it at the time the justifiable decision is issued or (supposedly) observed. Justification is more than mere compliance-inducing persuasion. It is a rational justification vis-à-vis those who are capable of understanding it not only today but in ideal conditions of understanding and communication. The decision must be both justified to members of the franchise and justifiable to members of the demos.

The difficulty inherent in the challenge posed by the temporal justification thesis is that responsiveness must be equally sensitive to the objective interests in the future of all members (which is different from saying that it must mirror and necessarily decide in favour of the majority of objective interests). This requirement of *equal consideration* decreases the likelihood that the choice between privileging the short term and privileging the long term will depend

²¹ Some research shows that cleaning up aerosols, predominantly sulphate, may add half a degree to global warming, with an impact that adds to that of greenhouse gas warming: Samset et al. 2018.

²² Paul Crutzen calls this problematic choice among damaging policies to tackle even more damaging policies a 'Catch-22': Crutzen 2006.

(excessively) on the contingencies of demographic fluctuations.²³ What matters is that the decision or policy be justified to any epistemically competent citizen placed at any interval in which that citizen is subject to such a decision or policy (and to its consequences) in the company of contemporaries that are likely to live at different intervals of the duration of that decision or policy. The temporal justification thesis can then be helpful in cases such as the conflict between aerosols and greenhouse gas emissions. Privileging aerosol reduction without tackling the effects that such a reduction will have on global warming is as unjustified as privileging the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change without being attentive to the impact of such policies on the air quality in the present.

RESPONSIVENESS AND OBJECTIVITY: AVOIDING PATERNALISM

The idea that semi-future representation depends on responsiveness to objective interests in the future raises an additional problem within a liberal framework, where interests (or the interpretation thereof) often conflict. The problem relates to conflicts between officials' judgements about objective interests and citizens' judgements about their own interests. Suppose an official judges that responsiveness to the objective interest *x* of citizen *B* requires limiting the latter's short-term consumption, whereas citizen *B* judges that her or his best interests are satisfied by some immediate consumption. What kind of judgement pertaining to *B*'s interests will prevail in a test of appropriate responsiveness?

The answer is not straightforward. On the one hand, if the representative's political judgement prevails on the grounds that objective interests trump (expressions of) subjective interests, we are likely inserting paternalistic aspects into the semi-future insofar as the representative action involves the substitution of *B*'s

²³ In practice, demographic structures do not seem to affect how policies favour certain age groups. Countries with older populations, such as Sweden, contain a series of policies with a slight bias in favour of the elderly. Countries with comparatively younger populations, such as Poland, contain several policies biased in favour of the elderly: cf. Vanhuysse 2013. Nevertheless, I use the word 'excessively' here because it is impossible for inclusive political regimes such as the semi-future democracy to be utterly unresponsive to the actual preferences of citizens regarding politics and policies, admitting that certain citizens belonging to a certain age group are more prone to privilege certain types of policies because they belong to that age group (e.g., younger cohorts are more likely to concern themselves with education and environmental issues, the elderly with pensions and pension schemes). In this sense, demographic structures are an important element of any democracy, and the semi-future democratic polity does not have the luxury of disregarding how (actual or prospective) demographic fluctuations affect the quality of democracy. The semi-future democracy should thus develop mechanisms that prevent the basic underlying demos from being overly young (e.g., where younger cohorts surpass all other cohorts in number) or overly aged (e.g. where older cohorts surpass all other cohorts in number).

judgement for that of the official's, undertaken on the grounds that, compared with *B*'s judgement about her or his own interests, the official's judgement is epistemically, practically and morally superior to *B*'s.²⁴ This substitution is unacceptable in contexts where the right to be self-determining in major life decisions is inviolate. Paternalism is not necessarily illiberal when applied to members of the demos who are temporarily incapable of having or expressing political judgement. However, with regard to competent citizens endowed with a sphere of self-determination which others must respect – a respect that constitutes the substantive foundations of the basic structure of any society – paternalism seems incompatible with democratic government.

The very thought that representatives are supposed to act on behalf of someone in a way that is determined entirely by their judgement of what it means to act cross-temporally for the sake of that someone will then sound more akin to an illiberal principle or to a form of perfectionism whereby only a policy centred on the common good – and not a politics that pretends to be neutral among the various conceptions of the good available in a society – can provide an appropriate environment for self-determination. This poses a problem to the semi-future democracy. It seems odd, perhaps even self-defeating, to worry about legitimacy gaps when representing far-off future persons who are precluded from expressing their consent and then adopt a view of the representation of epistemically competent and living citizens that bypasses people's beliefs about what is (the) good for them and what gives value to their lives.²⁵ Even if they fall short of being sufficient conditions for meeting someone's well-being or fulfilling someone's all-things-and-times-considered interests, people's beliefs, volitions, preferences and corresponding judgements concerning their content are not easily dismissible when ascertaining their well-being and interests.²⁶

On the other hand, if the political judgement of the represented prevails simply because expressed preferences trump any external judgement about one's

²⁴ I adopt the criteria of paternalism listed in Dworkin 1983, and especially in Shiffrin 2000: 218.

²⁵ For the 'self-defeating argument' according to which any form of political perfectionism violates the 'endorsement constraint' in a democracy, see Dworkin 2000: 211–36.

²⁶ In a somewhat similar sense, see Parfit 1984: 493–501; Raz 1986: 288–320. A possible consequence of the shortage of responsiveness to the constituents' preferences and of non-existent or unsatisfactory justification is the loss of trust between political actors in democratic environments and the subsequent inefficiency of democratic decision-making, which in turn can bring about what Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk have called 'democratic deconsolidation': Foa and Mounk 2016; 2017. If democratic regimes prove to be incapable of solving some of the problems that deeply affect the governed, such as those relating to inequality, security, the protection of human rights and well-being, and the promotion of economic growth, then the possibility of trusting those who promise such results but who lack concern for democratic procedures becomes an almost irresistible temptation. See also Fukuyama 2015.

objective interests, there seems to be no need to resort to objective interests at all with regard to epistemically competent members of the demos. In this case, whenever the minimum conditions for the adequate communication of preferences are established (e.g., free, non-fraudulent and informed elections), responsiveness and the long-term view cannot be reconciled with regard to members of the franchise. More democracy, in the sense of increased citizen participation (e.g., in recurrent elections), would then entail greater liability to short-term preferences insofar as the voices of those who can speak for themselves would be louder than the voices of those who can only speak through those who exercise political judgement about their interests. The semi-future democracy boils down, then, to a set of principles of fairness concerning the treatment of the young, which is a relatively weak version of democratic long-termism, perhaps enlivened by a naiveté often emblematic of academic political theorists.

When it comes to resisting the vertigo of paternalist government action while also promoting the long-term view and remaining sensitive to people's judgement about the nature of the interests that pertain to them and that justify the very existence of representative government in the first place, the answer will likely lie between these two extremes. The admixture of the virtual representation thesis and the temporal justification thesis leaves sufficient room for conceiving representation in the semi-future temporal order as an equilibrium between responsiveness to objective interests and responsiveness to preferences.

Such a balance entails that the semi-future representation hinges on three dimensions:

- (i) objectivity
- (ii) impartiality
- (iii) proximity.²⁷

One of the merits of the temporal justification thesis is the priority it affords to *objectivity* – the objectivity of interests that activate responsiveness and the objectivity of the procedures and reasons that are followed and introduced throughout the course of justification. The success of justification depends on the robustness of the reasons afforded to the represented about the content of their interests, understood here as ‘their best interests’ in a temporal context involving multiple time horizons. Successful justification is obtained when the decision is the most suitable for addressing the best-in-a-multiple-temporal-context interests of the represented.

²⁷ This tryptic of semi-future representation resembles Pierre Rosanvallon's three standards of democratic legitimacy, namely, impartiality, reflexivity and proximity: Rosanvallon 2011. Unlike Rosanvallon, however, my initial frame of reference continues to be responsiveness, not necessarily what he understands by reflexivity, which I consider a special form of accountability. I will, therefore, address it in the following chapter.

The very idea of ‘best-in-a-multiple-temporal-context interests’ is also objective insofar as it relies neither on the interpretations and judgements that the represented hold concerning what is best for them, nor on the interpretations and judgements that the representatives hold concerning what the represented interpret or judge their best interests to be, nor on the interpretations and judgements that representatives hold concerning what is best for the represented *tout court*. Instead, neither the representatives nor the represented have the last word about how interests should be portrayed. The content of the objective interests, the specification of the best course of action for the sake of the interest-bearer, follows from a dynamic exchange of input and output between representatives and the represented concerning interests that pertain to the represented, an exchange whereby the absence of objection, open criticism and the reformulation of decisions form an ongoing procedure of representation via justificatory responsiveness.

Responsiveness, so construed, roughly means orienting representatives’ actions towards the interests of the represented according to the former’s best judgement of what is best for the latter cross-temporally while acknowledging that judgement is fallible and that representative action must leave room for the contestation of such judgement and be adaptable to the reasonable claims and expectations of the represented.²⁸ Hence, openness to criticism and readiness to change are the other side of the coin of justification – the content of the objective interests of the represented results from this dynamic, ongoing exchange. An official who claims to act on behalf of members of the demos while remaining oblivious to their input and failing to countenance questions or concerns about those interests in a multiple-horizon temporal context does not seem to be sufficiently responsive in light of the temporal justification thesis. The reason is that, by insulating him/herself from criticism, the decision-making official misses the point of representative action, which is to act on behalf of the represented while acting for their sake, not to act on the official’s (authentic or mistaken) view of the interests of the represented. Objectivity requires an exchange of reasons between the representatives and the represented, in which subjective interests also play a part. Justification without elections and other forms of citizen participation is thus not objective at all.

This kind of objectivity contributes to establishing minimum conditions of *impartiality* and *proximity*. These two dimensions of representation may seem

²⁸ In this particular sense, the temporal justification thesis is akin to Joseph Raz’s normal justification thesis: justification relates to what should be done in a way that is not necessarily determined by subjective judgements about what should be done. This is consistent with stating that decisions are legitimately authoritative if they bring about what should be done in light of sufficiently justified beliefs about what should be done. Cf. Raz 2006. Justification is then just as much a fact-based as it is a belief-based conception of political legitimacy: see Peter 2020.

contradictory at first, but they are not. In the semi-future democracy, politically relevant interests ascribed to the represented count to how representation takes place, and count equally. The reason they count equally is that they are all equally objective. The easiest way for interests to trigger responsiveness is by increasing the levels of participation in the representative relation – the more people are directly involved in electing and shaping their representatives' actions, the more likely that their interests are factored in political decisions. Broad inclusion and responsiveness can promote minimum consideration, as interests are expressed in the political arena from a partial viewpoint. But this is not the end of the line. All the politically relevant objective interests must be considered, not only those held by active participants; most importantly, all such interests are to be given equal consideration, regardless of the partial viewpoint expressed. For this to be achieved, decision-makers must ensure the procedure that leads them towards a decision imputed to the whole is *impartial* all the way through. Impartiality, here, is the opposite of favouritism. It refers to how government, the public sector, and the general administration treat those who participate in the representative process with the status of the represented. Its function is to prevent responsiveness from being unevenly balanced or corrupted within the decision-making procedure. The non-partial viewpoint is the setting where partial viewpoints can be shared and expressed – it is the evaluative criterion not of the outcome or decision (the contents of which can reproduce the contents of interests expressed by partial representatives), but of the means for generating the best outcomes.

The same connection with objectivity applies to the *proximity* between officials and the citizenry as a basic tenet of responsiveness. Those who are able to express judgements about their interests that matter cross-temporally are entitled to demand of representatives that any political judgement about objective interests in the future that pertain to them remain open to criticism (requiring further and more robust justification) and adaptable to change at all times. And those who cannot express judgements about their interests are entitled to demand of representatives that their objective interests count as if they were determined in the process of exchange between the representatives' judgements and their expressions of preferences. Political judgement about objective interests in the future must be responsive to people's actual positions in time and to their thoughts and beliefs about those positions. Representatives are required to be attentive to people's input by minimising the possible distance between representatives and the represented, by narrowing the gap between political elites and citizens, of which liberal democracy is consistently accused.

(TRANSITIONAL) CONCLUSION

The gist of this collection of arguments is that there is a substantive referential moment in semi-future democratic representation, a normative moment that can

be traced back to the following three core ideas: (i) representation as action in the interest (and for the sake) of others, more specifically, of members of the demos; (ii) representation as a willingness to respond to interests pertaining to the members of the demos, that is, as awareness and attentiveness to time-sensitive and time-related interests that orient representatives in decision-making processes; (iii) representation as a dialectical and ongoing communicative process between representatives and the represented in the sense of determining, in justifiable and justified action, the genuine objective interests that pertain to all members of the demos in their different relations to the future. Therefore, semi-future representation is neither simply supported by formal authorisation criteria and events nor at the service of a priori notions of ought. Instead, it contains a temporal dimension of substantive responsiveness that aligns representatives with the represented when making decisions that balance several (more or less extended) time horizons.²⁹

²⁹ This substantive representative connection establishes what Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde called ‘the chain of legitimacy’ (*Legitimationskette*): for political decisions to carry legitimacy in a representative democracy, they ultimately need to trace back to the people. Cf. Böckenförde 1991: 302; 2004. In this sense, representation is ‘authentic’ in Michael Saward’s sense of the term (Saward 2009), but not to the extent that it functions as an equivalent to authorisation with regard to non-elected would-be representatives. Substantive representation builds on formal representation in the semi-future framework and cannot exist without it.

SEMI-FUTURE ACCOUNTABILITY: THE WAYS OF RESPONSIBILITY AND REFLEXIVITY TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Semi-future representation understood as responsiveness binds democratic representative action to a (multi)time-sensitive normative dimension. Failure to live up to such normative expectations about representation is likely to produce intergenerational unfairness and, most importantly, to make the edifice of democratic authority lose the grounds of legitimacy on which it stands. The virtual representation and the temporal justification theses constitute the evaluative yardsticks in light of which the long term is regarded as binding to political actors.

Suppose we (myself, the reader, the political activist, the politician, the average citizen, etc.) all agree on the soundness of such theses applied to the liberal democratic framework. We all claim publicly that such theses make sense and that officials should act in accordance with their contents in representative actions. Nevertheless, once election day comes, people continue to vote for the same parties, whose elected officials continue to be responsive to their interpretations of their voters' (short-termist) preferences. The ticking of the electoral clock remains audible and louder than the formulations of the semi-future responsiveness. At the end of the day, the long-term view afforded by the semi-future temporal order remains on paper alone. The question remains: how can the semi-future representation become more than a mere moral criterion in the light of which the actions of representatives are evaluated in the abstract, and infiltrate the political arena of power struggle and negotiation where decision-making takes place every day?

In this scenario, semi-future responsiveness provides a necessary, albeit insufficient, normative dimension to representation. It needs to be reinforced with the constraint of accountability to become firmly binding on political actors. Accountability is what establishes the conditions under which the semi-future temporal order (i) constrains representatives with a force and robustness that allows sanctioning the non-observance of the semi-future responsiveness; (ii) remains democratic throughout by guaranteeing that the represented retain ownership of the representative process by their freedom to exercise contestation at all times; and (iii) is a sufficient driver and motivator of political action to such an extent that it competes in influence and clout (over citizens and representatives alike) with the drivers and motivators of short-term thinking so embedded in the dynamics of the electoral calendar.

Accountability in semi-future representation has two forms of expression: responsibility and reflexivity. The two following sections develop these two notions. In the first, responsibility is introduced as a kind of morally charged answerability towards someone about something, involving both constraints to action and restrictions from acting. It can be divided into four main kinds: moral, constitutional, juridical and political in the strict sense. The second section refers to reflexivity¹ as an arrangement of interdependent institutions that answer to one another in different qualities and different degrees in such a way that involves not only oversight but also the empowerment of citizens in official representative action as a result of oversight. This section concludes with the example of an already existing institution that can be reshaped so as to foster the conditions of reflexivity: the semi-future ombudsperson, endowed with capacities to mediate between the public and the formal democratic institutions concerning long-term related issues.

SEMI-FUTURE POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

An appeal to responsibility in representation may sound odd as a motivator that has to compete with the often-conflicting pull of self-interest, which is felt with considerable force in the realm of responsiveness. In all probability, such oddness will convert into scepticism if this appeal centres on one's 'sense of responsibility'. If the only weapon we have available to empower, in the political arena, the need for responsiveness to objective interests in the future is the personal virtue (we expect) of representatives, the semi-future representation is likely to be frustrated in practice. Indeed, there are exceptions. However, liberal democracies cannot afford the luxury of waiting for a Bismarck who introduces a long-term old-age social security programme, a Woodrow Wilson who proposes to transform the seemingly anarchic international order into a

¹ Cf. Rosanvallon 2011.

moral and legalistic one, or a Franklin D. Roosevelt who shapes a New Deal for upcoming generations. Statesmanship is as difficult to achieve as it is to find – even more so in consolidated democracies.

Responsibility takes on numerous shapes in politics, however. In the semi-future framework, responsibility is an integral part of representation that operates in four layers of stipulation across different areas and provides different incentive forms. The four layers combined turn political responsibility into a weightier motivator of actors across the democratic spectrum. Political responsibility is then *moral*, *constitutional*, *juridical* and *political in the strict sense*.

Moral Responsibility

Moral responsibility is political whenever it can be ascertained of political actors, especially officials and representatives. It pertains chiefly to the correctness of certain reactive stances, such as praise and blame, with regard to actions concerning which there is a reasonable expectation nourished by moral values pending on the agent. To say that an agent is responsible for an action in this sense is to say that the agent might be called by any minimally interested party to answer for (i.e., to provide explanations or justifications about) the contents and effects of the action, and that it might be appropriate to adopt a certain reactive attitude towards the agent because of her/his action. This kind of responsibility is characteristic of liberal democracies since all epistemically competent agents living in such morally sensitive environments are required to respect the fundamental values that shape those environments in the first place – representatives are no exception.² Principles of fairness towards individuals with genuine moral entitlements are sufficient grounds for political responsibility, especially when they pertain directly to members of the demos.

This constitutes a positive kind of responsibility insofar as it offers reasons for people to act, and to act in a certain way – a way consonant with the moral values underlying the most comprehensive conception of justice recognised as pursuable and binding within a specific political society. In the semi-future

² Enthusiasts of classical or neo-Machiavellianism are likely to take issue on this matter, given that the core of political *virtù* is independent of moral values and boils down to effectiveness in preserving political power and public order. My point here is that you can still be a Machiavellian about *virtù* in politics and yet accept that officials are bound to certain moral elements insofar as those elements are part of the foundations of the society to which the political rule exercising *virtù* applies. Now, this is precisely the case in liberal democracies, where it makes sense to balance demands for efficiency in terms of the coordination of collective life with demands of justice in terms of the treatment given and due to each person within the scope of that collective life. For a view of Machiavelli's *virtù* as a dialectical tool that conjoins (moral) virtue with vice in order to maintain the common good, see Vatter 2021.

representation, the time-sensitive interests of members of the demos are inherent in their rights to civil and political participation, which means they call for moral responsibility in the political realm.

However, two characteristics stand out in this positive role of moral responsibility. The first is that it does not refer exclusively to officials and representatives. It permeates all actors who participate or are taken into account in any stage of the political decision-making process attributed to the polity as a whole. This includes the members of the demos, each and every one of them co-authors (albeit perhaps in distinct degrees) of the collective decision. But it might also include the demos itself as the entity to which the final decision is imputed. This is a somewhat sensitive topic worthy of further reflection, not only by moral theory but also by political theory. The boundaries of collective responsibility to 'structural injustice', that is, to crimes and atrocities committed by members of the same political community in the past in the name of the community, are yet to be defined with precision, especially in a liberal framework that prioritises personal autonomy and frees individuals from having to answer for the actions of their forebears, be they slavers, Nazis, dictators, misogynists or Adam himself. Insofar as it constitutes a forward-looking social perception of time and has little to say about intergenerational justice towards past generations, the semi-future framework does not grant a satisfactory conceptual apparatus for solving this issue. What the semi-future democracy emphasises, though, is that moral responsibility concerning the future applies to both parties of the representative relation and is as much required of representatives as of the represented.

If this perspective on shared (not necessarily equal) responsibilities is correct, it makes no sense to interpret the relation between representatives and the represented in the simplified terms of an opposition between an elite and the people, between those who know what should be done and refrain from doing it and those who, while also knowing what should be done, demand it of those who have the power to do it and stubbornly (or authoritatively) refrain from doing it. This seeming antagonism contributes to a state of affairs in which representatives and the represented disclaim any responsibility regarding the future, as each attributes inaction about the long term to the others' resistance. Mistrust works here both ways. The representatives' mistrust of citizens' capacities to decide on what is best for them across different time horizons is matched by the arrogance of voters who expect their representatives to be nothing but a conveyor belt of their (presumably, morally superior) aspirations. The broad scope of moral responsibility in representation entails rebuilding trust between representatives and the represented concerning the future in a way that involves all the actors of the semi-future body politic.

The second characteristic of the positive dimension of moral responsibility is that it seems somewhat fragile in democratic politics since reactive attitudes

to actions involving respect for moral entitlements will tend to be strictly moral. Praise and blame are bestowed depending on the success of responsibility for morally framed actions. This seems practical in motivating political actors only to the extent that praise and blame generate political clout, for instance, by increasing prestige and reputation, revealing trustworthiness, and calling the attention of potential supporters and voters. In this latter sense, however, moral responsibility is only a means to an end and is likely to be quickly discarded or circumvented if officials and representatives believe they can achieve the same ends by resorting to means that do not involve the levels of exigency and inquiry that moral responsibility requires.

Constitutional Responsibility

A way to reinforce moral responsibility and secure responsiveness in the semi-future representation is by referring to *constitutional responsibility*, the second layer of political responsibility, which consists chiefly of the threat officials and representatives face of being removed from office in case of failure to meet a minimum threshold of expectations regarding their activities. Unlike its moral counterpart, constitutional responsibility applies only to officials and is primarily negative insofar as it establishes limits to government action and bestows a form of blame (not praise) that is expressed solely by disempowerment through removal from office.

Semi-future representation calls for a solid networked structure of institutional vigilance that implements constitutional responsibility as the most effective means of motivating officials and representatives to act in a way responsive to their constituents' objective interests in the future. Assuming that the preservation of office and of the corresponding powers and authority status are sufficient drivers for political actors to engage in certain procedures and to promote certain decision-making routes, the ongoing threat of loss in case of failure to meet the requirements of the semi-future temporal order is an essential contribution to the enforcement of the long-term view.

This level of accountability is more evident in cyclical elections. Officials and their parties are answerable to their constituents. Elections should be seen as a mechanism not only for the choice of representatives and general policies but also for the possible removal of current representatives from office. This is what ultimately makes it a better fit for the semi-future than other methods for establishing the representative relation, such as sortition. All elected representatives in the semi-future democracy are removable by elections, which means constituents always have an ultimate say regarding how they value the future. Candidates who wish to be re-elected will necessarily be sensitive to this value.

However, constituents are as likely to prefer the short term as their representatives. Elections are a necessary, albeit an insufficient, form of constitutional

responsibility. Semi-future representation is favoured the more the constitutional structure under which it unfolds subjects officials to a variety of sources of scrutiny, all of which are legitimised to hold the threat of (at least initiating the procedure leading to) removal from office in defence of the responsiveness to objective interests in the future. Members of parliament are accountable in this sense to members of the franchise, with their parties providing a useful mediating filter of answerability;³ members of the executive are accountable to the parliament or the highest-ranking authority of the state (a president or a constitutional monarch), preferably in such a way that allows the removal of specific ministers who grossly fail to meet expectations without having to topple the entire executive; members of administrative bodies entrusted with tasks and duties with repercussions in the long term are accountable to the parliament and/or the executive; heads of state and government are accountable to the courts and the franchise (or, in the case of monarchs, to the representative body par excellence, mainly the parliament).⁴

The upshot is that for every official in charge of the operation of government, there is a constitutional ‘safety valve’ that allows his or her removal in case of failure to perform the duties inherent in semi-future representation. The safety valve, however, is screwed more or less tightly depending on the officials in question. Elected officials and direct representatives of the demos should have a looser valve – more liable to scrutiny and more exposed to threats of removal. Non-elected officials in charge of overseeing the observance of constitutional provisions (e.g., courts) should, on the contrary, have a much tighter valve – the independence of watchdog institutions hinges mainly on the immunity the members of such institutions have towards those they watch, especially with regard to the preservation of their office and the procurement of pay.

However, even in looser situations, the safety valve is often not considered a viable option in the promotion of responsiveness for myriad reasons that range from malfunctioning institutions to political corruption, elite protection, clientelism, status quo bias, the priority of non-disruptive political traditions

³ Despite frequent (and often truthful) accusations that they aim to control democratic institutions, political parties are entrusted with an important role when assessing constitutional responsibility. Even if they should not have the authority to remove officials from office, thereby overruling the franchise, they can at least scrutinise the officials elected through their lists as regards their behaviour vis-à-vis the semi-future, and ultimately withdraw political trust from their office. Their advantage over the franchise is that their oversight is continuous, whereas voters are called to pronounce judgement cyclically. An alternative to this disparity might be the accrument of recall elections, despite its potential for promoting short-termism if used recurrently: cf. Welp and Whitehead 2020.

⁴ For the role of supreme courts as guardians of the semi-future temporal order, see Campos 2023b.

above substance, etc. In such instances, constitutional responsibility is insufficient to guarantee either the implementation of the semi-future responsiveness or the citizens' confidence in the quality of representation. This explains the increasingly prevalent propensity to fall back on a third (reinforcing) layer of responsibility.

Juridical Responsibility

Juridical responsibility is an extension of constitutional responsibility, requiring political officials to comply with rules and principles, the gross violation of which entails not mere removal from office but a liability to criminal, civil or disciplinary sanctions even after (a forced or ordinary) removal from office. This kind of responsibility is contingent on the illicit behaviour of officials measured according to the principles of the rule of law and with respect for criminal or civil procedures, but taking into account the incidence of this behaviour in the exercise of public powers.

Since officials and representatives occupy an institutional role characterised by a functional bond to observe certain constitutional duties and to pursue specific tasks, the fulfilment of which often entails deciding on issues that make some people worse off than they were before, a certain level of legal immunity attached to those institutional roles is a reasonable component of any democratic constitutional framework. The soundness of a democratic decision-making process leads to decisions imputed to the political community as a whole, not to the individuals who occupy the decision-making bodies. For this reason, a consolidated democracy should conceive of juridical responsibility only as an exceptional addition to constitutional responsibility in cases of intolerably grave violations of duty or when constitutional responsibility is not functioning the way it is expected to function. In this latter case, the lack of effective forms of responsibility within the constitutional system ultimately leads to pressure on the judicial system to assume the role that institutions are unable to play since citizens turn by default to the courts to try and hold those in power to account, that is, to exercise a monitoring task for which courts are not particularly suitable institutions.

Juridical responsibility is an exacerbated negative form of answerability insofar as it involves the threat of punishing office-holders with personal loss (of patrimony, reputation and ultimately freedom) rather than simply with the public loss of office. It intimidates officials in the background of their political activities as an atom bomb ready to be launched when all other levels of responsibility fall short. For this reason, it should be used *cum grano salis*. If the threat is too significant, the burden of office is likely to become unbearable, thus making the already difficult task of recruiting competent representatives even more difficult. Juridical responsibility has room in the semi-future democracy, albeit a relatively limited one.

Political Responsibility in the Strict Sense

Rather than depending, for the most part, on legality to induce representatives to become responsive to objective interests in the future, responsibility in semi-future representation is mainly *political responsibility in the strict sense*. Officials and representatives embrace political responsibility in the strict sense when they take on a specific set of duties, goals and tasks within collective decision-making, the contents of which are not arbitrary but rather determined by logically prior and axiologically fundamental normative status that *demand* something that is supposed to be met or *answered*. They occupy a sphere of normative incumbencies vis-à-vis someone else and pertaining to someone else; that is, their authority is always under the (possibility of) direction of those whom they serve in the first place and to whom they must answer at all times – that is what it means to say that political officials embrace responsibilities.

Unlike constitutional responsibility, political responsibility in the strict sense has the advantage of not depending on the architectural contingency of the constitutional structure of each state: it refers to the dynamics of politics and is therefore applicable instantly to representation in any liberal democracy without having to enact new legislation or initiate an elaborate redesign of the constitution.

In addition to this quality, political responsibility in the strict sense combines the negative and the positive dimensions of the previous layers of political responsibility. It involves a negative form of answerability, or what Iris Marion Young called ‘a liability model of responsibility’,⁵ since it can be a reason of appeal in the political arena to punish or revitalise representatives for failure or insufficient implementation of responsiveness. From this viewpoint, political responsibility is a mechanism that focuses on the political disvalue of the actions of the holders of political power, which can be distinguished from constitutional and juridical kinds of responsibility insofar as it has nothing to do with the concepts of guilt, wilful misconduct or negligence, nor does it involve the compulsory removal from office or legal sanctions. For instance, a cabinet minister who has powers of direction, superintendence and guardianship may not be disciplinary or criminally responsible for wrong decisions, failures in services or the illegal behaviour of the bodies, employees or agents of her or his ministry, but this will not eventually prevent the minister from having to answer for malfunctions verified in these same services. Her or his liability to blame for inadequate responsiveness to objective interests in the future provides reasons in the political arena for immediate action of a certain kind under

⁵ Cf. Young 2004; 2011. Nevertheless, Young categorises this model of responsibility only to assert its inadequacy to her treatment of ‘structural injustice’ issues.

threat of withdrawal of political support (by a party, a community, the fellow members of the decision-making body, the head of state, the voters, etc.) or of (a future) compulsory removal from office. A censure motion (which must be distinguished from a motion of no confidence since it does not automatically or necessarily lead to the removal of someone from office) is the typical example of political responsibility in the strict sense in action, and semi-future representation should be prepared to make ample use of it.

Political responsibility in the strict sense also has a positive form of answerability. Officials and representatives are said to have certain responsibilities solely by virtue of their social roles or positions⁶ and, as a result, are expected to carry out activities in a politically appropriate way (i.e., in a way consonant with the politically relevant moral responsibility for each context and, especially, in response to the substantive and objective interests of their constituents in the future) and aim for certain outcomes. This sort of responsibility consists in the actualisation in everyday democratic politics of the expectation of responsiveness to interests relating to different time horizons: it is the normative requirement to stand for the semi-future in political action.

This positive form of political responsibility in the strict sense expresses some level of political influence in two respects. The first is that, unlike other kinds of political responsibility, it is more forward-looking than backward-looking. Answerability pertains here to a series of processes that might continue to generate undesired outcomes unless they are changed to reinforce responsiveness to objective interests in the future. The point here is to enjoin those who participate through their actions in the process of collective action to change it in a way that favours responsiveness to objective interests in the future. Thus, political responsibility in the strict sense has a direct connection with the temporal justification thesis. Because justification is a desideratum that requires a continuous reason-giving activity, liability for past actions has less value since the representative action has still not reached its terminus; because justification requires political decisions to be adaptive to more robust kinds of political judgement, political responsibility in the strict sense centres more on future improvements than on past wrongs. The upshot is that all those who intervene in the process of justification by demanding representatives to improve the communication of their decisions' underlying reasons over time

⁶ This positive dimension is more akin to Young's 'social connection model of responsibility': see Young 2004: 119. For a recent criticism of Young's social connection model, see Goodin and Barry 2021. However, the bulk of the criticism does not apply to the semi-future political responsibility in the strict sense due to the latter's admixture of negative and positive dimensions.

and to make their decision-making processes more transparent⁷ are capable of exerting political pressure about the future.

Secondly, political responsibility in the strict sense offers conditions for political clout concerning the long term insofar as it introduces a variety of actors in the call for accountability. Citizens, voters, political parties, journalists, social media, NGOs, associations, and civil and local communities all play a role in requiring a certain kind of time-sensitive action from officials and representatives. This sort of forward-looking responsibility depends on enlisting several actors with different interests and preferred time horizons in collective decision-making, albeit in various degrees and stages. The watchdog function consisting of complaints and concerns about implementing the long-term view in response to objective interests in the future is dispersed among many players capable of pressuring representatives to build a governance culture sensitive to the semi-future.

Ultimately, political responsibility in the strict sense implies overcoming the excessive focus on individuals and leaders that other kinds of responsibility entail; that is, it implies bypassing a way of doing politics that is reduced to a competition between candidates, their programmes, their good or bad intentions or their personal virtues, all the while disregarding the systemic conditions in which democratic politics take place. This kind of responsibility is not as focused on modifying individual behaviours (of the representatives or the represented) as it is on appropriately reconfiguring the interaction between the representatives and the represented in a way that introduces responsiveness to objective interests in the future inside the very operation of representative government.

SEMI-FUTURE POLITICAL REFLEXIVITY

The combination of the virtual representation and the temporal justification theses is challenging to the general trust in authorisation and consent as the linchpins of legitimacy in liberal democracies. The virtual representation thesis allows representatives to develop political judgement about the interests of citizens who are epistemically incompetent to have or express their own judgements about their best interests; the temporal justification thesis allows representatives to develop political judgement about the interests of epistemically competent

⁷ Transparency is not necessarily synonymous with ‘full disclosure’. The demand for full disclosure has the potential to paralyse public action on some issues, thereby undermining the effectiveness of democratic government. In addition to public policymaking conducted out on the open, democratic governance also requires some sphere of negotiation, typically carried out behind the scenes. In such instances, legitimacy depends more on accountability regarding outcomes than regarding the disclosure of proceedings: on the distinction, see Patil, Vieider and Tetlock 2014.

citizens that seems to be independent of the actual judgements citizens develop about their best interests.

The challenge is twofold. On the one hand, given that the virtual representation pertains to objective interests in the future, the contents of which are to be determined in reference to the interest-holders' position in time, the fact that some members of the demos have a unique relation to the future as opposed to others seems to open the door to privileging virtual representation over actual representation in the semi-future framework. The range of discretion by representatives seems then to increase exponentially, and in such a way that is less dependent on the scrutiny of the represented who can participate in authorisation and consent procedures such as the ones following from the temporal justification thesis.

On the other hand, from the viewpoint of the liberal foundations of authority and power, the mere inclusion in democratic representation of objective interests shared by all members of the demos seems nightmarishly remindful of what Karl Popper called 'the paradox of democracy': that a majority rule may ultimately decide to transfer all power to an absolute minority.⁸ The two theses of semi-future responsiveness combined allow representatives to fill in the gaps of unspecified interests (unspecified because not exclusively determined by the preferences and political judgements of the represented), a situation which once more affords officials a significant supply of discretion when laying out a citizen's objective interests. The very existence of such discretion endangers the core idea of liberal democracy by undervaluing actual expressions of consent as key aspects of democratic legitimacy.⁹

Responsiveness to objective interests cannot be left unchecked. Popper's formulation of the negative justification of the democratic principle is paramount in the semi-future temporal order. Semi-future representation is not concerned solely with who can rule in the name of whom, but also with how decision-making bodies can be organised in such a way that representatives are prevented from imposing their subjective judgements about the good or about what they regard as the citizens' best interests, especially when they are epistemically unfit to justify such subjective judgements adequately or when their poor judgement ends up causing damage. The vindication of democracy in negative terms is intended to emphasise that part of the essence of liberal democracy consists in the structuring of mechanisms for the selection of rulers and for the practical limitation of power, aiming to create, develop and protect

⁸ Popper 2013: 118.

⁹ This distrust of discretion in representative action is typical even of classical notions of representation. Hannah Pitkin, for instance, when discussing the mandate-independence controversy, maintained that representatives were neither trustees who must follow their own judgement nor delegates who must reflect the represented's views: Pitkin 1967: 156–67.

adequate and effective political institutions without the temptations of benevolent dictatorship.

Semi-future representation is as positive in its prescriptions as it is negative in avoiding drifts towards authoritarianism. It comprises a dimension of reflexivity whereby a complex system of checks and balances by institutions following distinctive timescapes and facing different time horizons and by citizens participating actively in the critique of government implements a semi-future principle of accountability.

Beyond the Principal–Agent Approach: Institutional Ownership

The basic tenet of reflexivity is an arrangement of positive and negative checks and balances that forces representatives to be responsive to the semi-future, watches their observance, and allows for some punishable reaction in the event of non-observance. No genuine accountability occurs without a network of democratic institutions in charge of watching and compelling other democratic institutions to be attentive to the semi-future while also being compelled and watched by other democratic institutions to be equally attentive. For this to become a reality, the semi-future political order requires the institutional ownership of decision-making.

Institutional ownership of the semi-future entails conceiving accountability in a way that, while considering the importance of conventional mechanisms of electoral answerability for preserving democratic legitimacy, also surpasses it. The traditional view of accountability, the so-called ‘principal–agent approach’, relies heavily on the periodic renewal of mandates by the same officials or the same parties, based on pre-established chains of authorisation and delegation. The unit of analysis is the principal, the individual who holds a normative claim against the agent and who controls regularly whether the latter’s actions conform to the contents of the claim. Principals typically define recruitment, control incentives, and specify objectives and possible policies. Institutions are their instruments. In settings with a hierarchical centre of authority, with settled policies and routine situations, where the external control of actors is not only possible but dominant, this view of accountability seems useful as a legitimacy mechanism requiring short cycles of oversight, at least in theory.

In practice, however, democracies prove far too sophisticated for such an approach. First, party machines and electoral candidates are highly effective in framing and influencing the preferences and votes of their constituents, who are supposed to frame and influence the judgements and decisions of their representatives, thereby inverting the expected direction of power and depreciating (or even belittling) the role of accountability.¹⁰ Second, the impersonal politics

¹⁰ Principal–agent approaches diagnose accountability deficits when agents fail to reproduce the principals’ expectations. Accountability problems, however, may also be caused by ‘forum drift’ rather than by ‘agency drift’: cf. Schillemans and Busuioc 2014.

of bureaucracy and the monopoly of the public spotlight by political leaders who absorb media attention often narrow the scope of the principal's vigilant eye, leaving other officials in a blind spot. It becomes rather challenging in such instances to conclude who should be held to account. Third, principals often require officials who take office to adopt vague compromises and mandates that are difficult for them to interpret, implement and enforce. Moreover, even when they do understand the intricacy of what they are expected to do, they are often not provided with the resources that match their tasks and responsibilities. Fourth, the primacy of periodic voter vigilance has proven to be inadequate to evaluate representative action concerning unpredictable variables, unfamiliar situations and unsettled policies, all characteristic of every major area of decision-making involving the long term. Periodicity in accountability neglects the fact that democratic institutions are typically not created with a single ordering principle; they are instead installed at different times, compelled by different circumstances and experiences, often for contrary purposes among themselves, and with different time horizons in view.¹¹

For these reasons, the traditional scheme of checks and balances monopolised by the principal-agent approach is necessary, albeit insufficient, for accountability in the context of semi-future representation. It is necessary because the institutional ownership of accountability procedures provides the most powerful incentives to political action of a certain kind by shaping an interchangeable dynamic of answerability inside the binding framework of constitutional and juridical responsibility, with their corresponding sanctions, such as removal from office and personal liability. This formal branching of state power helps to ensure the resilience of semi-future responsiveness by embedding the processes that make up the semi-future framework in multiple institutions. The absence of this element carries the risk that the objective interests in the future, whatever they may be, do not translate into clear policy impact or are not taken seriously. Without such a formal institutional anchor, which holds the design of the semi-future framework over time and ensures its long-term viability, the semi-future will never be able to equal in robustness and persuasion the incentives officials have for deciding strictly in view of the short term.

Despite its necessity, however, the traditional scheme is also insufficient due to the complexity of contemporary democratic politics. Reflexivity requires that answerability is part of the very process by which semi-future responsiveness takes place and cannot be entirely limited by the time frames, the agendas, the vicissitudes of contingent historical circumstances, or the competence of the (holders of the) constitutionally determined branches of government. Semi-future representation involves continuous responsiveness, which means accountability demands

¹¹ Cf. Orren and Skowronek 2004: 112.

are recurrent, and accountability processes are likely to involve contestation and the mobilisation of several political actors. The principal–agent approach must then be supplemented with a novel approach, more institution-focused and less vertical in the relation between the representatives and the represented.¹²

The institutional approach builds on the assumption that accountability can combine a variety of institutional arrangements. Citizens are more than just voters. They are right-holders, community members, professionals, political activists, etc. All such normative and social roles sway political action. Furthermore, there is control of representatives and by representatives. Voters can exercise scrutiny periodically, and legislative and judicial bodies can embody the authority to continue to exercise scrutiny daily, but there are also independent auditors and regulators, ombudspersons and external experts, not to mention less formal vigilance mechanisms such as NGOs, credit-rating agencies, watchdog journalism, epistemic communities. Unlike what the principal–agent approach suggests, democratic accountability can and should involve the broadest possible field of justification.

In this light, public debate and political contestation are inherent in the justification processes required by semi-future representation. Rather than presuming the prior existence of an immovable equilibrium between institutions, the starting points of this approach are the ambiguities and tensions embedded in democratic politics. The diversity of actors' appeals to different audiences and normative standards, opens new channels of accountability, and holds to account not only those who formally act on behalf of the demos but also those who affect the democratic quality of the polity and society. Reflexivity resembles a networked model with independent bodies exercising non-hierarchical forms of vigilance, each with clear roles and responsibilities, in charge of supporting and contesting government and public policy early adopters.¹³

Elections, annual reports, auditing, inspections, routine scrutiny, public hearings, citizenship interpellation – all contribute to forming a patchwork of different groups of justification, explanation and criticism, as well as to shaping and

¹² On this topic, I follow mostly Johan P. Olsen, who develops the 'institutional approach' to accountability: Olsen 2017. My contribution here consists simply in pointing out the temporally sensitive character of the 'institutional approach', which Olsen fails to consider.

¹³ The notion of reflexivity adopted here is different from Lisa Disch's use of the term as a measure of the degree to which a political system renders itself contestable by mobilising challenges and objections from the represented through a 'system of interlocking sites of opinion formation and decision making': Disch 2011: 113. As I understand it, reflexivity is much more than this: it is one of the elements of representation that adds to and coheres with both responsiveness and the principal–agent approach in order to orient collective decision-making towards the objective interests of the represented. The emphasis on contestation rather than acquiescence, which remains unclear in Disch's account, is justified here by this priority of responsiveness in the semi-future representation. Similarly, cf. Fossen 2019.

reshaping the polity in a way that is sensitive to the objective interests in the future shared across the demos. Without the complementarity of the principal–agent and the institutional approaches, no responsiveness or responsibility concerning the semi-future acquires momentum in the political arena.

Mediating Political Reflexivity: The Example of the Ombudsperson

Depending on the context, different kinds of institutions can contribute to higher levels of coordination between the different dimensions of reflexivity. One institution that seems particularly suited for this task is the *ombudsperson* – a constitutionally framed entity that communicates with all relevant political and social actors, remains vigilant of the branches of government without being a branch of government, and is legitimated not only via its nomination and accountability procedures vis-à-vis elected parliaments but also via its direct and daily connection with members of the demos. An entity, in short, capable of orienting, filtering, and promoting the semi-future agenda in the operation of government and the corresponding legal system.

Ombudspersons come in myriad models. They can be instrumental to parliaments, as occurs in Scandinavian countries and in Ireland, where the ombudsperson is elected by parliament for a mandate that corresponds to the period of the legislature and remains in office only as long as it has the confidence of the main representative body. They can originate in governments while staying dependent on parliaments, as occurs in the case of the UK’s parliamentary commissioner for administration, where the ombudsperson constitutes a *longa manus* of the executive on public administration by exercising another form of internal control beyond the traditional mechanisms of hierarchy and superintendence. According to this model, citizens have only conditional access to the ombudsperson since they will have to submit complaints to a member of parliament who, after due assessment, forwards them to the ombudsperson – the ombudsperson only investigates complaints that members of parliament decide to send to its offices.

Both models have the advantage of being sufficiently legitimated by means of a strong connection with the legislative branch. The other side of this coin is that parliamentary legitimacy has strings attached – namely, insufficient independence to perform a watchdog function towards all the branches of government. If the legislative branch, probably the most subservient to the tyranny of electoral calendars, is not checked and admonished to adopt the long-term view, the likelihood that democratic institutions can legitimately extend their time horizons diminishes considerably. Semi-future reflexivity requires then a third model, one in which the ombudsperson, although designated by parliament, has the nature of an independent state organ.

The specific characteristics of this model consist in the parliamentary election of the ombudsperson, in the irremovability of the incumbent in the absence

of an objective, weighty and legally determined reason, in its independence from government branches and political parties, and in the duration of its term, which should be longer than a parliamentary legislature.¹⁴ The ombudsperson is a state institution whose occupying official is voted by parliament but who, nevertheless, acts independently of the legislative power from the moment of its designation. Still, the ombudsperson remains within the orbit of the parliament; that is, it does not become an auxiliary executive or judiciary branch, nor is it left adrift in the state constellation of institutions precisely due to its general watchdog function. The most visible expressions of this more substantial relation between the ombudsperson and the parliament are the typical obligation to present an annual report to the parliament and the possibility of participating in parliamentary committee meetings whenever matters within the ombudsperson's area of competence are considered.¹⁵

The vigilant defence of semi-future representation fits perfectly within the main tasks of this model of the ombudsperson. It should be noted, however, that an ombudsperson in charge of standing up for the semi-future must not be confused with an ombudsperson for future generations.¹⁶ In the semi-future framework, the ombudsperson mediates the political bodies of the present and the constituency of the present, thereby preserving its basis of legitimacy. Since a democratically elected parliament appoints it, formal accountability obtains. This formal relation could also be established with regard to ombudspersons for future generations, though, and that is precisely what happened in the case of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. As a distinctively political institution, however, the ombudsperson for the semi-future also obtains substantive accountability insofar as it is mainly at the service of the current members of the demos, functioning as a facilitator for the full expression of their objective interests. The ombudsperson can and should, therefore, build popular support and recognition, much like the process of responsiveness to objective interests in the future, which can subsequently be turned into political clout. Through this combination of formal and substantive accountability relations,

¹⁴ Besides irremovability, independence is gained by the establishment of a single and time-limited term. The possibility of renewal of the office may constitute, in the abstract, a reason that hinders the actions of the incumbent during any of the renewable terms since the possibility of non-renewal may be regarded as a tacit form of removal from office. In such circumstances, parliamentary majorities may be said to have the power to require of the ombudsperson a kind of political (constitutional) responsibility, which would make the ombudsperson accountable to the body which it is supposed to control in the first place.

¹⁵ Countries such as Austria, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Greece, Portugal and the Netherlands provide illustrations for the implementation of this model.

¹⁶ In the likes of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales or of ombudspersons proposed by Weiss 1992; Slaughter 1994; Agius and Busuttill 1998; Göpel 2012; Beckman and Ugglä 2016.

the semi-future ombudsperson circumvents the legitimacy gaps of the typical proposals for ombudspersons for future generations.

The ombudsperson performs quality control of the responsiveness of government branches to the citizens' objective interests in the future, with particular emphasis on younger citizens precisely because they cannot be members of the franchise and are unable to participate directly in the justification processes of democratic representation. The only way to ensure that representatives are accountable to the entire demos, including those citizens who are not members of the franchise, is by instituting a mediating body that stands for objective interests not expressed in electoral moments. The ombudsperson functions then as a sort of proxy for the young with objective interests in the future vis-à-vis the (young's) representatives.

In this capacity, the ombudsperson promotes agendas, admonishes failures, pressures the production of policymaking, empowers certain forms of reflection on the long term, gives voice to political judgement about the future by serving as mediation and filter to the justification process between the representatives and the represented, filling in the (epistemic) blanks when necessary. Within this set of tasks, the ombudsperson cannot be a fourth branch of government, and it is neither an 'authority' in the legal sense of the term since it does not produce binding decisions,¹⁷ nor an 'administrative' entity given that its competencies refer preferentially to the state's central decision-making bodies and not to the public administration by and large. Its position is optimal between the represented and state bodies: it appears as an instrument of state surveillance and control, latched onto the constituency and civil society, all the while endowed with the capacity to counter any attempts to privatise the decision-making process.

The ombudsperson is *receptive* to the initiatives of citizens whenever they (intend to) react to the representation of officials; *dependent* on the representative body par excellence for its designation; in turn, it *promotes* contact between social institutions capable of adding information and valuable input to collective decision-making and justification processes related to the long term (e.g., NGOs, watchdog journalists, expert panels on sensitive long-term topics, spontaneously or legally created mini-publics), and the constituency and the

¹⁷ The ombudsperson is, however, an authority in the Roman sense of the term, as *auctoritas*. In classical Rome, the distinction between moral authority (*auctoritas*) and constituted power (*potestas*) had both social and legal relevance. *Auctoritas* was the influence that derives from personal respect and virtue without having the legal force of power. The division of roles between the *auctoritas* of augurs, jurists and senators, on the one hand, and the *potestas* of magistrates and the paterfamilias, on the other, contributed on equal terms to preserving the integrity of the political structure by and large: cf. Domingo Oslé 1999.

government branches; it *has the initiative* to make recommendations, performance reports, audits, at any time, to any of the branches of government, as well as to administrative authorities such as central banks or specific market regulators; it *lays the groundwork* for a cyclical dialogue between the political and social actors with regard to the long term.

The variety of such tasks means that the ombudsperson exercises power, albeit only a soft form of power. The ombudsperson strives to ensure that public entities conform to norms and policies in force, such as constitutional dispositions, laws, regulations and relevant international treaties. More importantly, the ombudsperson serves as the stage and the microphone at the disposal of citizens vis-à-vis other public institutions, especially to problems with the potential to have far-reaching effects across time. It may undertake several types of proactive action, such as *ex officio* investigations, information campaigns and reactive enquiries related to the reception of citizens' complaints. And there is no reason why it should not also take the initiative to recommend legislative action whenever required and introduce new public debates.

The ombudsperson's effectiveness depends on its ability to act in a versatile manner. Its functions must encompass the possibility of undertaking different courses of action vis-à-vis other state agents while also upholding the objective interests in the future of constituents outside of the state; for instance, by setting up communications networks and building alliances in order to enlist popular opinion in support of the interests that the ombudsperson is set to defend. Such non-formal tasks might contribute to having more members of the franchise endorse similar interests publicly, thereby reinforcing the principle of semi-future representation at the level of government action.

By standing in the middle of political and social actors, the ombudsperson is in a privileged position to coordinate competing sources of normativity about the long term without reducing them to the unity of the state, even if one of the ombudsperson's main tasks is to refer different interests to the representative bodies. This coordination capacity is imperative in light of the growing difficulties in centralising and monopolising the incredible amounts of information regarding the different time horizons that democratic politics affects. The specific fallibilism of the modern liberal context, exacerbated in the context of big data, prevents the world from being governed by a state body, a central committee, a team of experts and technocrats, a search engine or an intricate algorithm, simply because their structure to process information and to act on it is not predisposed to deal with the abundance of elements, values, data and intelligence distributed across contemporary democratic societies.

These difficulties show that even the coordination process itself is impossible to centralise. The ombudsperson must be capable of attracting and disseminating the contribution of experts to the dialogue between representatives and the represented. It might then be a good idea to have the ombudsperson surround

itself with a permanent consultive panel composed of experts designated by the ombudsperson concerning the different areas of intervention across longer timespans, and involving a close link with academia, economic agents, companies and corporations, civil associations and workers' representatives.

The ombudsperson is the institution that mediates reflexivity within the context of accountability between representatives and the represented. It is not a representative itself. Ultimately, the purpose of the ombudsperson is to facilitate the decision-making and the justification procedures of a sound semi-future democracy – it is a facilitator and a custodian of the representative relation within representation itself. Its broad competencies include short-termist and long-termist interests, problems and challenges. In other words, the ombudsperson is *also* a semi-future ombudsperson, capable of privileging the long term but not at the service solely of the long-term view.

CONCLUSION

A theory of semi-future democracy is a meditation on how the democratic state can become more democratic, more multitemporal, more legitimated in stretching the temporal horizons of its decision-making procedures. It does not depend on the dismantling of the state, the institutions of which remain the anchor of legitimacy and of the fair balance of forces in the polyarchy that often seems to characterise the experience of contemporary democratic societies – not to mention the fact that the state is one of the main characters in the narrative of the genealogy of the demos.

It follows from this assumption that the institutional approach to accountability cannot be interpreted in a way that downplays the importance of state institutions as the main agents under the spotlight of accountability. Under the semi-future framework, reflexivity promotes responsiveness and responsibility within a context of coordination between traditional accountability mechanisms' verticality and the institutional approach's multiple horizontalities. The implementation of novel and more complex forms of accountability requiring the participation of more and new agents in decision and justification processes, especially when developed and owned by political institutions, should in no way give rise to such a dispersed form of accountability that ultimately becomes faceless. The main asset of the principal-agent approach is its readiness to put a name and a face to answerability, without which there can be no effective forms of constitutional or juridical responsibility. This asset is to be not only preserved but made consistent with the institutional approach.

Such coordination is facilitated by an institutional arrangement that promotes and protects it. In the available literature, it is possible to find a variety of such ownership arrangements, especially those that assimilate characteristics of horizontality and verticality, such as networked models of accountability with designated leadership, perhaps assigned on a rotating basis. Long-term

promoting procedures can thus be led by institutions not necessarily endowed with constitutional status but equipped with greater flexibility and societal adaptiveness, such as planning councils, think tanks, futures commissions, strategic design teams, planning agencies and scientific foresight units. The liberal foundations of semi-future democracy are sufficiently far-reaching about constitutional design to allow different models to be experimented with and to work more or less efficiently depending on the contexts of implementation, including the specificity of the political community and the timing and the tempo of each institutional arrangement. What matters is preserving the right balance between the several layers of accountability in democratic environments.

SEMI-FUTURE POLICYMAKING: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LONG-TERM DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Fallibility and contestability lie at the heart of the liberal project. There is no undisputed knowledge, design or practice that cannot be called into question. The known is constantly besieged by the unknown, in a dynamic that makes democracy a locus of doubt and conflict just as much as of confidence and consensus. As democratic power abstains from transcendent justifications, it relies on a continuous debate about its legitimacy grounds. The democratic arrangement results from the acceptance and institutionalisation of this conflict that ranges across the political, moral, economic, social and legal spheres. Uncertainty, rather than mere absence of meaning, clusters the potential for the plurality of meaning – it is the visible facet in democracies of the pull of opposing options and choices, of multiple alternatives for a single course of action, of open criticism and contestation.

About the future, uncertainty is even denser. The farther one looks, the more one is liable to error. The semi-future democracy embraces the fatality of uncertainty without falling back on scepticism regarding extended time horizons. It is naturally distrustful of presentist solutions to problems focused exceedingly on the ‘now’ and equally suspicious of magic recipes to save the world and future generations. The underlying decision-making structure of the semi-future arrangement consists of principles of long-term governance consistent with legitimacy in the present. Such principles operate as guidelines for managing uncertainty in policymaking regarding the future without losing track of the epistemic and legitimacy yardsticks that matter at the moment of decision-making.

The keyword here is adaptation. Democracy is sufficiently consolidated when it can articulate its actors, institutions, procedures, policies and norms to correct the potential deformity of what follows from its decisions. This capacity is open-ended. The semi-future democracy performs this articulation at the temporal level. It aims to coordinate the plurality of temporal dimensions involved in the complex interchange of democratic institutions, much like a maestro who conducts different musicians at different times with different tempos to generate a continuous and harmonious (synchronised) whole. Semi-future policymaking depends on the conditions for time-related uncertainty management in democratic governance.

This chapter introduces the structural and action-guiding principles that inform semi-future policymaking within this framework. The first section deals with cross-temporal governance at three levels of operation: one that fosters public networking between political actors and those social entities capable of providing valuable input for long-term friendly decision-making; another in which semi-future-framed procedural path dependence is implemented in collective decision-making; and a third level that carries the semi-future temporal order into the international sphere. Section two specifies how the different time-related interests of members of the semi-future demos become aligned with the policies to be pursued in a semi-future democracy, namely, via the ‘multitemporal public consumption approach’, which involves a multifaceted notion of infrastructure and capital developed throughout section three.

CROSS-TEMPORAL GOVERNANCE

Making decisions the effects of which loom over extended periods requires forms of governance supported by high levels of knowledge, especially about how those effects (many of them far-off and creeping) are consonant with the responsiveness expected of democratic decision-makers. This knowledge is often not fully available at the time the decision-making procedures must come to a halt. Policymaking regarding the long term, then, needs evaluative criteria for decision-making with incomplete knowledge. Semi-future policymaking involves an ongoing debate about how much ignorance we can afford, how we can reduce it and what kind of risks it is appropriate to accept.

Fallibility functions not simply as a presupposition of the liberal framework – its recognition is embedded in the very procedures by which decision-making about the future unfolds. Per this recognition, all policy proposals concerning extended time horizons boil down to work hypotheses needing constant testing and evaluation in light of the objective interests that ground them at each moment of their implementation. The likelihood that proposals for action about the future fail to respond to problems yet to emerge is high. The corresponding decision-making procedures should incorporate mechanisms that remain vigilant against error. Each endorsement of a (possible) solution to a

long-term problem is valid only insofar as it envisages a contingency plan or alternative path if it turns out to become a shadow solution.

Due to this certain presence of uncertainty about the future, governance in a semi-future arrangement is then:

- (i) ongoing;
- (ii) open to the highest levels of (voluntary and non-coerced) input possible (the more input, the more information is made available);
- (iii) suspicious of technocrats who narrow the scope of truth conditions when they claim to know the (only) right thing to do;
- (iv) adjustable to changes in the information available about the connection between decisions and objective interests in the future; and
- (v) cardinally attentive to multiple temporal dimensions.

This kind of governance depends on an arrangement that affords the conditions to manage the high levels of uncertainty involved in the balanced inclusion of the various temporally contextualised interests that comprise the semi-future demos. Such an arrangement emerges from an institutional design that encourages long-term motivated decision-making, protects present interests in the future, develops efficient forecasting devices, and promotes equal consideration for all members of overlapping generations.¹ Nevertheless, institutional devices have limited strength in reducing the temporal myopia of democratic politics whenever they are not accompanied by a political culture that values and promotes the future. The towering achievement of any democracy that legitimately governs cross-temporally is the balanced admixture of political incentives at the individual, collective and institutional levels to adopt a broader temporal perspective in everyday considerations and practices. In the semi-future framework, such a balance can be expressed in three dimensions: *public networking*, *procedural path dependence* and *international dialogue*.

Public Networking

If they are to be adequately responsive to objective interests in the future on equal terms with subjective interests expressed by members of the franchise, decisions undertaken by legislators and policymakers need to be sufficiently informed. Responsiveness is reactive to certain information, either regarding preferences or (possibly changeable) states of affairs extending towards less proximate time horizons. The sources of this information cannot be the policymakers themselves but rather other actors, either directly involved in the representative process (e.g., citizens) or operating as ancillary participants of decision-making (e.g.,

¹ An appropriate term for this aspiration is ‘anticipatory governance’: see Fuerth and Faber 2012. For democratic environments, it is more suitable than ‘the politics of posterity’, an expression introduced by Adam and Groves 2007: 115.

social and civil associations, corporations, academia, professional classes, etc.). The more information that is available, the more likely the decision becomes consonant with interests whose contents can be accessed only via such information. For this reason, the institutional structure of semi-future democratic governance must be naturally receptive to inputs provided by a multitude of different political actors. The institutional ownership of the decision-making process is far from being an institutional monopoly.

However, plural sources of information in increasingly attentive and inclusive democracies quickly become mere noise, the effects of which turn out to be indistinguishable from silence. Instead of decreasing uncertainty, too much information tends to generate doubt and confusion. Even if officials and representatives in charge of governance could all meet the demanding requisites for being a philosopher-king in an ideal Platonic-like society, their processing of information and the subsequent application thereof to political reasoning and judgement would be stemmed rather than facilitated by excessive input. The semi-future policymaking gains from introducing a mediating institution that filters information to and from policymakers, primarily in relation with citizens and secondarily with civil society institutions and associations. The semi-future ombudsperson can take on this role.

As stated at the end of the previous chapter, the semi-future ombudsperson is a mediator between several political agents that is also capable of attracting and congregating the relevant input of social and civil institutions with political relevance. This mediating role can have an epistemic dimension. The ombudsperson's greatest challenge is the transformation of large amounts of data about interests requiring responsiveness into knowledge, namely, by operating a quantitative reduction of the information available to representatives and a qualitative reduction of the complexity of that same information. This can be achieved by establishing a consultive supporting panel endowed with partisan independence, proper technical and financial resources, multidisciplinary competencies, and experience in peer-reviewing and in being peer-reviewed. The ombudsperson nominates members of the panel, and their offices are assigned on a rotating basis, depending not necessarily on temporal cycles but on the issue in question, the relevant (affecting and affected) interests, the expected impacts, and the potential risk and unpredictability inherent in the process to be reported. The consultive panel is an extension of the ombudsperson, who is responsible and accountable for all its actions, guidelines, recommendations and initiatives. Ultimately, the semi-future ombudsperson filters information by accomplishing two tasks: it instructs representatives regarding the voice and objective circumstances of citizens from various age groups, and it helps to overcome the representatives' ineptitudes and cognitive management difficulties caused by excessive information.

The ombudsperson is the central axis of a public networking apparatus that provides input about more or less extended time frames and horizons to

representatives and policymakers. Civil and social institutions such as NGOs, universities, corporations, etc., can offer relevant contributions to semi-future policymaking by resorting to the ombudsperson, which offers legitimate and accountable access to the political decision-making process itself. The ombudsperson is the first blocking force to the tyranny of the short term. There is, however, a second and more potent blocking force: active citizenship.

In liberal democracies, apathy and passive acquiescence are powerful motivators during times that do not seem intolerably grave. The freedom and comfort provided by the private sphere become the default rule that steals away the time each citizen may have to devote to the public sphere. Citizen participation can easily boil down to occasional dissent against the default rule when something feels wrong or to a routine casting of a ballot every four or five years. This state of affairs encourages policymakers to become less attentive to external input and rely solely on their interpretations of what seems best (hopefully, to the governed). The levels of scrutiny diminish, and transparency stops being a fundamental desideratum of democratic policymaking. On the contrary, the semi-future democracy is functional when the public sphere is sufficiently informed by input, the vast majority of which can only be afforded voluntarily by the members of the semi-future demos. The realisation of the semi-future in democratic arrangements depends on turning participation in public affairs into the default rule.²

The way to achieve this transformation is by implementing strategies that enable additional citizen participation in the civic space, either as a consequence of state membership or beyond state membership. In the first case, possibilities include the opening of channels between citizens and their representatives or political parties (e.g., mandatory periodical instances of local and national dialogue, digital applications that allow easy and even effortless communication between the represented and officials), different sorts of deliberative citizen practices (e.g., deliberative polls, participatory budgeting, referendums, advisory mini-publics,³ online deliberative town halls⁴), free, continuous and straightforward access to the ombudsperson, legal consultancy and support for

² Diversity and sheer numbers can be more useful to the quality of the outcomes of political decision-making than ability: Landemore 2012. However, this does not have to entail that the semi-future is a form of democratic epistocracy in the sense that the aggregation of citizens' dispersed knowledge always leads to better outcomes than rule by the few. Broader direct participation is the best but not necessarily the only way to increase input. For instance, political influence can also be indirect (e.g., delegated) and passive (e.g., structural or cultural); Fung 2013: 254–9. Additionally, mere input is likely to generate excessive noise, which can be cleared only by sound procedures and specified ability.

³ For the potential uses of mini-publics beyond the micro-decisional stage, including macro-oriented empowered, contestatory, vigilant and anticipatory uses, see Niemeyer 2014; Smith 2021: 93–114.

⁴ Cf. Neblo, Esterling and Lazer 2018.

incrementing public litigation, and any other mechanism that is likely to generate responsiveness by representatives of actual and considered public opinion. Such strategies aim to ensure that state membership generates political clout in the representative process. In the second case, strategies aim at carrying out the semi-future in areas outside the representative process. Possibilities range from prioritising communication in the public sphere between policymakers and civil society institutions that incorporate participatory mechanisms of decision-making (e.g., neighbourhood associations, firms and corporations co-managed by shareholders and workers, inclusive-friendly universities) to fiscal incentives that further citizen participation, the promotion of political practices and principles that value mobilisation, the privileging of secure ICT (information and communications technology) that boosts civic participation and repels misinformation, the development of media education and digital literacy programmes, compulsory periodical hearings with youth forums, etc.

In both instances, within and beyond state membership, public networking is always multitemporal insofar as it encompasses constituents with objective interests in different time horizons. It makes sense that the particular strategies adopted for maximising democratic input in the semi-future framework are customised to the temporal circumstances of those involved, either old or young. For instance, a general focus on ICT instruments will likely exclude members of older cohorts from participating. In contrast, excessive reliance on franchise membership is likely to silence the young. The semi-future democracy performs a balance between objective interests in the future, and they must all find expression in collective decision-making procedures that culminate in representation. With regard to the young, policymaking should be embedded with considerations of their specificities, including their economic, cultural and educational contexts. The reason is straightforward: attentiveness to the interests of a demographic group whose members are either unable epistemically to understand their own preferences, opinions and judgements or bereft of the most appropriate (and effective) means of expression and organisation that requires overt awareness of the identities and cultures prevalent within that group.

Procedural Path Dependence

The status quo bias can be long-term friendly if demands to be as attentive to the long term as to the short term in policymaking are recognised and practised as the standard rule. Two types of instruments can be implemented to facilitate this recognition: heuristics and commitment devices.

The first should be handled carefully in liberal contexts. Framing is an important driver and determinant of the decision that is to be made. How one presents options and alternative courses of action shapes the choice procedure that subtly privileges one alternative over others. The way problems and possible

solutions are framed influences political action heavily. The topic of choice architecture that leaves individual freedom open yet constrains it by the method of presentation of alternatives is arguably a decisive factor in decision-making. In a world where ICT and social media depend on algorithms, the function of which is framing according to non-necessarily transparent criteria (and, when transparent, not necessarily coincidental with the interests of the represented), liberals must face the challenge posed by this apparently unavoidable shadow paternalism.⁵ If framing cannot simply be abolished, at least liberals should be able to appeal constantly to some democratic accountability by framers, especially with regard to alternatives and choices that produce a relevant impact in the public sphere in distant time horizons.

Despite being a direct challenge to individual liberty, there is no definitive reason why framing could not be used to shape decision-making by officials and representatives just as it is used to tunnel the choices of individuals and consumers. The use of long-term friendly heuristics to present information about objective interests in the future can facilitate the selective attention of policymakers. Through schematisation and mental shortcuts, convoluted sets of information and big data are replaced by opportunities to provide sufficient consideration to certain possibilities, such as policies beneficial to objective interests in the future held by the youngest members of the demos. Such procedures help to make highly complex elements intelligible and prioritise what could otherwise be neglected due to comprehension difficulties. Political simplifications of this sort emphasise the provisional and revisable aspects of decisions made by representatives while avoiding the temptation to seek absolute consistency between extant information and the contents of the decisions – a consistency that, even if possible to achieve, would generate an endless decision-making process. Heuristics allow the potential paralysis of the long-term friendly political decision to be overcome. They lay the ground for a satisfactory, albeit not optimal, level of information and intelligibility about distant time horizons.

The function of such heuristics is to require a short amount of cognitive effort on the part of decision-makers willing to support and implement long-term friendly policies that are sufficiently responsive to objective interests in the future. This could involve establishing longer budget cycles (e.g., two or three years rather than just one); implementing intergenerationally equitable policy assessment tools; the automatic allocation of a high percentage of resources for investments and savings in each budgetary cycle; the legal requirement to publicise a report on the predicted long-term costs and benefits of each and every decision above a certain financial threshold; the duty by the ombudsperson to

⁵ I find the expression ‘shadow paternalism’ more accurate than ‘laissez-faire activism’ (Colander and Kupers 2014) or ‘libertarian paternalism’ (Sunstein 2014).

always prioritise information related to distant time horizons and affecting of objective interests in the future, etc.

These heuristics serve other purposes besides mere cognitive aid. They also function as shadow paternalism over potential forms of shadow paternalism – a sort of bottom-up paternalism. By framing alternative courses of action to policymakers in a way that tunnels decision-making towards long-term friendly policies, distant time horizons are likely to be welded into the default rule. As an after-effect, the public is protected from short-term framing (i.e., from having access to information delivered by private corporations that shape their preferences in favour of the ‘now’ and subsequently determine a corrupt notion of the common good) insofar as policymakers are induced into being attentive to the temporal conditions whereby additional framing takes place – and legislating accordingly. This kind of bottom-up heuristics ends up using framing as a way of preventing potentially harmful framing.

The second way of facilitating long-term friendly path dependence is by promoting commitment devices, that is, political instruments that help to ensure that individuals, institutions and governments preserve the determination to act according to the ends and courses of action once expressed as long-term friendly.⁶ The underlying idea is to influence or limit future behaviour in such a way that obstructs competing pressures to abandon the pre-established long-term friendly goals. Commitment devices help to aggravate the opportunity costs of opportunistic behaviour. Strategies such as creating and strengthening institutions that give voice to objective interests in the future (e.g., the semi-future ombudsperson); negotiating broad agreements on policies and programmes that are locked in and become less susceptible to change in the future;⁷ limiting government discretion in areas that are likely to generate long-term effects – they all fit into the category of reasonable commitment devices in semi-future policymaking. Most importantly, they provide a legal tracking record of collective aims and goals favouring political stability, as train tracks laid out in front of a political community and leading into the distant horizon.

International Dialogue

The semi-future democracy materialises in societies whose political structures can be singled out within specific confines – spatial, cultural, historical and legal. Hence, the closest, albeit not exclusive, identification of the semi-future framework with the state form. One country can become a semi-future democracy regardless of what happens in other countries. However, domestic semi-future

⁶ On the variety, nature and serviceability of commitment devices see, for instance, Brocas, Carrillo and Dewatripont 2004; Bryan, Karlan and Nelson 2010; Reeves 2015.

⁷ On the need to make new policies more salient and supported by the most influential groups in order to guarantee their sustainability across time, see mostly Patashnik 2008.

policymaking is neither immune nor blind to the international context. A proper (and successful) responsiveness to objective interests in the future is often not within the possibilities of the representative bodies of the state. Instead, it requires concerted action at a regional, international or perhaps even global level. Attempts at confronting climate change are the most visible aspect of this need for the spatial enlargement of the temporal dimension of democratic policymaking. No matter what one country can do on its own to mitigate the effects of climate change and to adapt to further changes, it is destined to fail if it acts single-handedly.

In the face of problems such as climate change, which traverse both time and space, the semi-future democracy confronts a puzzle: it fails to become genuinely semi-future without a long-termist international sphere, which in turn falls far short of being semi-future and democratic. On the one hand, global solutions to global problems are portrayed paradigmatically as a tragedy of the commons played out between states that purport to represent their citizens' (short-termist) interests in perpetuity. Each state prefers the outcome generated by everyone cooperating towards a common goal over the outcome generated by no one cooperating, yet each also prefers to free-ride on the actions of others when it has the power to decide whether or not it will cooperate whatever the others do. Since the international sphere lacks an institutional framework capable of foreclosing the option of free-riding for all states (e.g., by introducing commonly recognised enforceable sanctions), the tragedy of the commons paradigm seems to endure as long as there is no effective global governance system. The challenge is that without a robust international sphere that overrides the political power of semi-future democracies, the latter cannot be fully semi-future as democracies at all. On the other hand, even if the international sphere could act as one without a common system of governance (e.g., by instating a community of equals cooperating with shared values and goals), the fact remains that the geopolitical world is not composed predominantly of democracies, and much less of liberal democracies, and even less of semi-future democracies.

Suggestions for overcoming the stalemate of the international sphere to cross-temporal issues, and consequently for exerting pressure on governments to develop long-term friendly policies, usually consist of empowering international organisations as more capable of intergenerational stewardships than national governments (e.g., establishing a global constitutional convention,⁸ a High Commissioner for Future Generations within the UN,⁹ or a new supranational body with competencies to manage global public goods).¹⁰ The side-effect of such

⁸ Gardiner 2019.

⁹ Ward 2012.

¹⁰ Cf. Boston 2016: 171.

suggestions is the disempowerment of the most genuine and direct representative relation, namely, of state and parochial forms of representative democracy. Naiveté about the capacity of national governments to find solutions to common problems without stronger external (higher) pressure seems to be at the same level as naiveté about the capacities of supranational organisations to become democratic. The problem for semi-future policymaking in democratic environments remains: how can liberal democracy take the first steps in developing a semi-future policy that requires the cooperation of actors who are not necessarily democratic and who understand their role in the global sphere as one of momentary competition with others, while remaining entirely consistent with its democratic ideals and values?

My answer unfolds in three stages, with increasing levels of enforceability. The first is the promotion, by example and diplomacy, of the semi-future democratic framework. The semi-future becomes then an exercise in ‘soft power’, in ‘getting others to want what you want’,¹¹ in building the conditions for a long-term friendly normative dimension between states – a kind of international semi-future soft law. This requires advocating the binding force of more extended time frames and horizons in international relations, as well as consistent behaviour revealing the states’ commitments to the long run. Such coherence between state discourse, commitment and action regarding the long term, even if sometimes apparently detrimental to the state’s interests in the short term, allows the state to have a particular morally persuasive position in the eyes of other states. A state is not likely to be successful in furthering its long-term interests without the capacity to convince others to adopt certain goals and implement the corresponding policies simply through the power of persuasion and moral status. Semi-future soft law that results from this exercise in long-term friendly soft power then becomes a tool of ‘compromise over time’ and ‘at a point in time’,¹² flexible enough to allow communication between different types of state, and paradigmatic of a form of government more worthy of emulation than contestation.

This latter aspect of promotion should not be undervalued. If each national government comes to terms with a concept of representation in the international sphere that is necessarily cross-temporal, each will eventually contribute to global solutions when defending the national interest. There is no need for voluntary coordination of efforts to produce global long-term benefits. Such benefits occur spontaneously between states that adopt the democratic semi-future framework when serving their constituents’ interests. The more the semi-future democracy spreads across the world, the more objective interests in the future are attended globally, even if not necessarily between nations (internationally).

¹¹ Nye 2002: 9.

¹² I draw these expressions directly from Abbott and Snidal 2000: 444–6.

The second stage aims to establish the semi-future realm into legal cooperation between states, that is, to advance a semi-future international hard law. Suggestions for incrementing long-term path dependence in international organisations such as the UN, the World Bank, or the ICJ, as well as for building up the importance of necessarily long-termist organisations such as the IPCC, all fall into this broad category. Even if such organisations often lack the power to enforce international norms and hinder powerful states from pursuing short-term interests, they at least provide a legal framework that helps to shape a long-term friendly international legal consciousness. In certain instances, the international regime functions not only to constrain states but to create the impetus for certain kinds of action in the first place – making robust international organisations more inclusive of interests in the long run is likely to cause states to acknowledge and develop interests in distant time horizons they might not otherwise have had.

However, the ambition to reform international organisations seems overly ambitious. History has shown that it takes a firm shake in the most powerful nations to alter power structures in international relations. Common creeping problems hardly motivate reform of the status quo, especially when the latter encompasses so many different countries. One way to bypass this difficulty is for a few states (such as those which are liberal democracies) to advocate, prepare and enact semi-future co-development treaties among themselves while remaining receptive to other states joining them under the condition that they agree to abide by the rules for long-term goals and policies initially established.¹³ Semi-future policymaking at the domestic level depends on forming long-term friendly alliances in various areas, such as climate change, fiscal policy, free exchange of capital and information, education, healthcare and security. A co-development treaty qualifies as semi-future if it is responsive primarily to the objective interests in the future of the contracting parties' represented.

Semi-future co-development treaties divulged as open to new signatories can also function as arenas for genuine communication about the long term between states. Such an environment offers the conditions to overcome some of the hurdles of common problems so prevalent in the international sphere since it allows states to benefit from a broader context of interaction – for instance, by realising that they have reasons to cooperate over a variety of matters of mutual concern, some more short-termist, others more long-termist. International dialogue as the standard rule helps to bring the semi-future into the wide-ranging table of international policymaking.

Still, dialogue is fruitless if it does not generate action. Hence, a third stage of the semi-future international policymaking needs to integrate the semi-future right to political participation into international human rights practice.

¹³ For a strong defence of co-development treaties of this sort, see Piketty 2020: 1022–5.

The right to political participation is acknowledged in the International Bill of Human Rights, specifically in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and certain regional human rights charters. However, inclusion in the International Bill of Human Rights is often not considered a sufficient reason for inclusion in a purported ‘master list’ of human rights endowed with hard enforceability.

Debates about the nature of human rights usually oppose two factions: the moral and the political conception. The traditional moral approach (often called ‘naturalistic’ or ‘orthodox’ account) conceives of human rights as basic entitlements that people have simply by virtue of being human. On the other hand, the political approach identifies human rights with those legal rights recognised as binding within a contemporary international and institutionalised practice. The distinction often suffers from oversimplification, among other reasons because neither approach can afford the luxury of being insensitive to current international human rights practice and of not trying to offer a critical or justifying account of the elements contained in that practice. Both approaches share the assumption that there is such a thing as an international practice of human rights out there, the empirical existence of which is independent of whether one adopts the moral or the political conception of human rights. On the whole, both approaches are at one regarding the view that human rights depend necessarily (albeit not sufficiently, for the moral conception) on normative practices at the international level to justify certain kinds of reaction. Human rights involve: (i) a practice,¹⁴ (ii) normative requirements inherent in that practice, and (iii) the primary applicability of such normative requirements to states (iv) in matters of international concern. Human rights are then normative requirements aimed at a specific group of addressees, the content of which is determined by a generalised practice that occurs primarily at the international level.

The emphasis on practice is connected to the relevance of infringement. Certain kinds of moral rights impose duties on governments and other agents – that is what makes them normatively relevant. However, such a status attracts international concern chiefly when those rights are recognised as triggering the normative justification of a response at the international level. In other words, human rights are mostly those normative instances that provide sufficient justification for *interference* in the affairs of sovereign states.

Proponents of a ‘master list’ of human rights claim that only those rights recognised in the International Bill of Human Rights, which provide sufficient justification for substantial interference, qualify as genuine human rights. Such rights can be used as critical devices vis-à-vis the remaining rights inherent in

¹⁴ Or a variety of practices, according to Andrea Sangiovanni’s ‘broad view’: Sangiovanni 2017: 177–206.

the list produced by the practice. For some authors, the list of human rights should be minimised as much as possible because interference in the affairs of sovereign states is strictly military. The list would encompass very few rights – those which protect life, liberty and property, for instance.¹⁵ For others, since interference can unfold by means other than military, such as economic sanctions, embargos, political isolation, etc., the list of human rights covers different categories of rights: civil and political, economic and sociocultural, environmental, etc.¹⁶ Proponents of this view have different understandings of the extent of the reasons for interference provided by human rights. On the one hand, not all actions exceeding the limits of state legitimacy are sufficiently persuasive to justify robust intervention.¹⁷ On the other hand, human rights are said to provide reasons not only for interference but also for the guidance of practical judgements about matters of international concern.¹⁸

My contention is that the semi-future right to political participation, understood as a human right to being represented politically across time with equal concern and respect, should be considered an integral element of any list of human rights that justify robust interference in the affairs of states who commit gross violations of their citizens' objective interests in the future. The areas where such violations can unfold are myriad, ranging from security to environmental issues. Sometimes, however, the areas seem simpler to specify. For example, states that openly reject implementing policies that mitigate the effects of climate change and instead invest heavily in further carbon emissions are strong candidates for being liable to interference on such grounds.

Nevertheless, using the semi-future framework as a broad category for justifying interventions in foreign governments can be highly problematic and should be used *cum grano salis*. Interventions (or debates about interventions) in the affairs of other states justified by deviations from human rights practice often aspire to at least have the appearance of sanction-applying facts. In the absence of a standardised sanction-applying global system, this connection is not immediately conspicuous. It often seems to depend on the (good)will of those interested in appointing themselves as sanction-applying actors. The failure to establish this connection between 'interventions justified by violations of the practice' and 'sanction-applying actions' ends up giving grounds to some of the main criticisms levelled against human rights doctrines, such as the ambiguity of the claim to the universalism of human rights standards coupled with the colonialist-like imposition of such standards on diverse parts of the world.¹⁹

¹⁵ Rawls 1971: 65.

¹⁶ Raz 2010; Beitz 2009: 117–21.

¹⁷ Cf. Raz 2010: 330–2.

¹⁸ Cf. Beitz 2009: 101.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Rancière 2004: 307–9; Žižek 2005; Douzinas 2007; Balibar 2013.

Interference with the affairs of states must then be plural, effective, properly justified, and supported by a strong commitment of several states that engage in the international dialogue about the semi-future, all the while ensuring that present people's human rights worthy of robust protection by the international community are never infringed by the intervention triggered by the violation of the semi-future human rights to political participation.

THE MULTITEMPORAL PUBLIC CONSUMPTION APPROACH

Some forms of institutional architecture and mechanisms of cross-temporal governance seem more suitable for implementing the semi-future temporal order into democratic environments than others, even though there is no ready-made and once-and-for-all ideal model of the semi-future democracy that applies equally across all times and social contexts since uncertainty is the substance of cross-temporal politics. Suitability is a quality ascribed to the best means of responding to objective interests in the future. Semi-future policymaking is therefore offered a variety of options and alternatives, the appropriateness of which is determined by respect for objective interests in the future. Norms and policies emerging from the representative process should aim at effectiveness and robust justification vis-à-vis their addressees in light of such responsiveness criteria.

When converting the contents of objective interests in the future into actual policies, policymakers are bound to a particular normative frame of reference that forces them to balance different interests at every step of the decision-making process. This contextual aspect is crucial in cases where intertemporal trade-offs are likely to occur. Many public policies whose main benefits are to be allocated in the long term generate some short-term positive effects for adult members of the constituency. One typical way to promote long-term governance, then, is to identify and implement only policies that provide benefits both in the present and for the future. The so-called 'green technological revolution' seems to be such a case. It is long-term beneficial because it will help mitigate the effects of climate change for the future, and it is short-term beneficial because it does not require any severe sacrifices for present persons in light of the business and social opportunities it reveals. Acceptable long-term policies such as these would then depend on win-win scenarios in which members of present generations are never made worse off.

However, there are some instances in which the available policies most consonant with responsiveness and attentiveness to objective interests in the future seem to imply sacrificing short-term benefits to generate long-term gains, for example, because their provision may require a significant tax increase or a cutback in other policies providing short-term benefits. In those cases, the rationale behind the promotion of such policies in the semi-future framework can be neither the fact that it makes present people better off (because most

members of the demos will in fact be worse off) nor the aspiration to actualise in the present the moral entitlements of future generations (because the responsiveness that triggers such policies is rooted in present objective interests in the future rather than in interests held by future people). It must be something different, such as governance principles specific to the semi-future framework.

The typical endeavour to overcome intertemporal trade-offs involves demanding sacrifices of present people in order to benefit future people. The identification of such sacrifices results from developing cost–benefit analyses (CBAs) using a comparative temporal snapshot method (CTS): costs (larger than benefits) are quantified with regard to one snapshot of the present, while benefits (larger than costs) are quantified with regard to one (comparable) snapshot of a future moment. Discount rates of several sorts, especially social discount rates (SDRs) for implementing policies with long-term effects, depend on comparing the values afforded to both snapshots. These rates express the threshold until which some measure of intertemporal trade-off remains acceptable in the present. This explains why debates about long-term policymaking are often so focused on the nature and value of discount rates. Ultimately, intergenerational equality would entail the impossibility of discounting the future at all; conversely, intergenerational inequality would entail either maximum short-termism or high pure time preference rates (or, at least, pure time preference rates as far apart from 0 as possible). Cross-temporal governance boils down frequently to establishing the criteria that allow giving an exact number to SDRs that remains acceptable (or, at least, not overly contestable) to policymakers across the current political spectrum and to stakeholders existing at the present moment.

The semi-future's incompatibility with the CTS method provides sufficient reason to suspect that it is also incompatible with economic CBAs of this sort. The CBA relies on snapshots subject to very different truth conditions. The state of affairs at t_2 involves such high levels of uncertainty that no accurate determination of the damages or benefits that will actually accrue at t_2 is possible. The epistemic contrast between the CBA at t_1 and t_2 seems too high to be adopted piecemeal by policymakers. For example, the SDR calculates the value of a far-off moment t_2 by applying a rate of pure time preference (which expresses the extent to which the present is prioritised relative to the future), a risk parameter and the expected growth rate of future per-capita consumption. This is problematic for the semi-future insofar as:

- (i) SDRs used as long-term risk-neutral rates of interest (e.g., credit markets interest rates, which incorporate the opportunity costs of investing in future projects) typically result from individual market decisions rather than from democratic processes that assess the acceptability of one specific value of pure time or utility discount rates over another. Present individuals' decisions on consumption and investment do not

necessarily reflect political judgements on the (present and objective) value of the future – their limited lifespans and ability to process information without bias induce hyperbolic discounting and a tendency towards risk-aversion in decision-making. However, the interests in the future that matter in the semi-future framework are objective and should not be unduly constrained by such market-fuelled biases. It is the task of the semi-future democratic representatives to respond adequately to such objective interests.

- (ii) Options to accept larger damages in the future over smaller costs today lead to different conclusions about time preference when those likely to suffer the damages are different persons from those who suffer the costs, and even more so when those who are to suffer the damages are persons with whom those who suffer the costs have special personal relations, such as their children. It may be rational for individuals who think only of themselves to defer higher costs for later simply because there is a chance they may not live long enough to face these costs due to their limited lifespans. However, not only are individuals often led to make economic decisions based on non-self-centred interests (e.g., because they are members of families and their economic agency unfolds at the service of their family members), but it is also true that political decisions are ascribed to collective entities that do not partake of the same limited lifespans as individuals, thereby making over-discounting irrational for them.
- (iii) High levels of uncertainty about the future, such as macroeconomic variables, may ultimately justify the belief that anything whatsoever can happen in the future that changes the expected outcome at t_2 of any policy adopted at t_1 . This also entails high levels of risk if both systematic and non-systematic risks are taken into account in SDRs. The cognitive bias of loss aversion is therefore triggered in favour of lowering costs at t_1 whenever risks seem high. Additionally, at t_1 , all calculations about risk are based on estimates of whether what is known at t_1 can eventually happen between t_1 and t_2 – no accurate measure of the probability of the unknown at t_1 can be made concerning t_2 .
- (iv) Expected growth rates included in SDRs are usually based on GDP and economic goods and services consumption. Such standards do not encompass the substantive interests in the future that current members of the demos have, involving civil and political rights, welfare and lifestyle, that is, non-necessarily economic goods or services, much less how members of t_2 will enjoy and value such non-economic goods and services. Actually, if the expected consumption of economic goods and services causes consumption of non-economic goods and

services to decrease, the expected growth rates are likely to be over-estimated. GDP as the only index of growth hinders the possibility of measuring growth from the viewpoint of interests that find expression in non-economic goods and services and which can be included in the contents of objective interests in the future.

The gist is that CBAs connected with the CTS method do not convey an adequate picture of the semi-future. Intertemporal trade-offs of the kind that seem to involve high costs today for bringing about benefits in a more or less distant tomorrow need to be reinterpreted in the semi-future temporal order.

The complexity of the task of putting a value on cross-temporality is daunting. Objective interests in the future have a present value concerning the value of the future. They can be benefited and harmed at t_1 simply by deciding on issues based on a CBA that disregards their value at t_1 and at all intervals following t_1 . For instance, in a semi-future framework where t_1 is the present moment and t_2 the future moment when those being born at t_1 will become adults, expected benefits at t_2 cannot count simply as benefits at t_2 – they have to count as benefits also at t_1 regarding those who, at t_1 , have interests in a specific state of affairs at t_2 that require some level of responsiveness at t_1 . Still, the benefits at t_2 are different from those at t_1 because they respond to different interests: at t_1 , benefits relate to objective interests in the future; at t_2 , benefits relate to interests of future persons in their (contemporary) welfare. Putting an exact number on such benefits without arbitrariness seems impossible, which means policymakers cannot decide exclusively based on economically determined technicalities (such as the SDR) but must treat the latter as one more layer of information that helps them ascertain how to specify the contents of objective interests in the future.²⁰ One way to draw near this distinctively political target is by adopting the *multitemporal public consumption approach*.

²⁰ SDRs thus lose their status of decisive standards for choosing one possible long-term policy over another, but they are still to be considered when assessing the contents of objective interests in the future. The reason is that democracies depend on present-sensitive legitimacy grounds, and so their very decision-making requires some level of cross-temporal discounting. This rationale applies also to pure time preferences embedded in SDRs, which should be as close to 0 as possible due to the political relevance of objective interests in the future, but always above 0 when deciding for the very long term *in democratic contexts*. The UK government's Stern Review of the economics of climate change shares this conclusion by adopting a pure time preference of 0.1 per cent, although the report's drafters build on entirely different (and somewhat questionable) premises: they justify this choice by maintaining that the probability of existence of future human civilisations should be taken into consideration in SDRs and is roughly 0.1 per cent per annum: Stern 2007. For economic criticism of this choice, see Nordhaus 2007; for ethical criticism, see Gardiner 2011: 276–79. I find it rather

The basic economic activities concerning the allocation of resources (mostly, after production) are consumption and capital formation by means of saving or investment. All three have different relations to time. Consumption relates to allocating or spending resources that yield utility in the present moment. In contrast, saving and investment relate to what is done to the remaining resources regarding the future, either by mere accumulation or by current spending with the expectation of future gains. The distinction between both kind of decisions about the future is not sharp-cut. John Rawls, for instance, who developed the idea of a just savings principle for the benefit of future generations, includes in his notion of saving the idea of investing in machinery and education.²¹ Alan Jacobs, who advances strategies for adopting an investment approach in democratic politics, included in his notion of public investment the withholding of resources for the benefit of future generations.²²

Rawls and Jacobs' proposals to benefit the future for reasons of fairness or optimal governance establish limits to the spending of available resources in the present. Their starting point is how much can be demanded of present generations not to consume, either for concerns about the proximate future or directly for the benefit of future generations. The withholding of consumption (i.e., the refusal to generate an added utility now) for the future is regarded as a cost in the present – a sacrifice. The reasoning seems to unfold from the default idea that present generations are factually willing and free to spend all the available resources and that they must be prevented from doing so by substantive and normative (moral and political) elements related to the future. This kind of reasoning is a variant of the CTS method. It assumes that time flows linearly from the present to the future, that duration is iterated from one generation to the next, and that decisions regarding consumption or the withholding of consumption at the present moment t_1 should be framed by how present generations value the state of affairs of a future moment t_2 .

In the semi-future temporal order, decisions about public resources that have an unequal impact in the long term depend on responsiveness to objective interests in the future that are politically relevant today. That means saving and investment can be a form of spending that generates utility in light of current objective

odd that discussions about time preference continue to boil down to economic and ethical rather than *political* terms – simply put, certain political regimes and orders imply the necessary existence of pure time preferences of a certain magnitude (e.g., very low, in the case of semi-future democracies when deciding for time horizons that extend beyond the objective interests in the future held by extant constituents). The economic and ethical frameworks of policymaking do not overrule the fact that deciding on policy is primarily a *political* activity within specifically (and often morally grounded) power structures.

²¹ Rawls 1971: 252.

²² Jacobs 2011: 17–18.

interests in the future. Consequently, in the semi-future framework, different forms of capital formation can be regarded as alternative forms of consumption. In a multitemporal approach to public consumption, spending is responsive to different interests in the present: the consumption of extant resources that generate immediate utility, the consumption in the present of resources that generate financial security regarding future resources, and the consumption of resources that satisfy present expectations regarding future utility.

All three forms of consumption spend resources responsive to different present interests held by current demos members. The idea that certain limits in favour of saving and investment should be established morally or politically to interrupt the potentially infinite tendency for consumption is replaced by a new approach to establish criteria for prioritising and balancing different forms of consumption. Principles such as the just savings principle and the long-term investment approach need not be grounded on the moral entitlements of future persons alone – they follow from the optimisation of multitemporal democratic governance. In this light, costs calculated at t_1 about investments whose benefits are to be obtained only at t_2 are not necessarily sacrifices that present generations make in favour of the future. Instead, they are costs related to the consumption of different goods for the benefit of people in the present. Thus, saving and investment requirements in the semi-future framework do not follow immediately from intergenerational justice accounts. They are requirements of democratic representation more than they are of justice or overall utility. Table 9.1 helps to ascertain the differences between the multitemporal public consumption approach and an intergenerational principle such as Rawls' just savings rate.²³

²³ According to Rawls, the veil of ignorance in the original position prevents contracting parties from knowing to which generation they will belong. This should lead them to determine a 'just savings rate'. Intergenerational relations change according to different stages of social development. In an accumulation stage, present generations are bound by a savings principle to the extent that it is necessary to enable subsequent generations to stay above a minimum threshold of justice. The savings principle would include preserving the gains of culture and civilisation, maintaining fair institutions, and putting aside a suitable amount of investment in order to guarantee a sustainable and just basic structure over time: Rawls 1971: 254. In a later stage of stability, where fair institutions are sufficiently established, the savings principle is substituted by an obligation to leave to future generations at least the equivalent of what present generations received from the previous generation: Rawls 1971: 257. However, Rawls admits that the veil of ignorance could also reasonably lead to some sort of intergenerational buck-passing, which is why he later put forward an additional constraint on the original position, according to which the parties should choose a savings principle which they would want previous generations to have followed: Rawls 1993: 274.

Just Savings Principle	Multitemporal Public Consumption Approach
Does not differentiate between saving and investment (all reallocations of goods from the present to the future fall under the category of <i>savings</i>).	Immediate consumption, saving and investment are different forms of consumption in response to different time-related interests.
Intergenerational (it applies to generations that do not necessarily overlap).	Semi-future (a presentist account of cross-temporality).
Relies entirely on hypothetical consent.	Is sensitive to the legitimising capability of actual consent.
It is mostly moral.	It is mostly democratic.
Contracting parties in the original position are representatives.	Actual individuals' interests count equally and directly as triggers for responsiveness.
Justice depends on the success of the accumulation stage.	Applies to every moment of democratic representation.
Combines with a priority principle at the accumulation stage and with the difference principle at the maintenance stage.	Balances interests with different time horizons without any special priority unwarranted by responsiveness.

Table 9.1

Semi-future policymaking requires a balance between different forms of consumption that correspond and respond to different present interests, some of them immediate interests in satisfying basic needs, others objective interests in the future. The multitemporal public consumption approach determines that immediate interests and preferences are harmed when saving and investments take place without attending to the basic needs of the current population, thereby violating current people's fundamental rights. But it also determines that objective interests in the future are harmed whenever policies are disproportionately more responsive to short-term interests than long-term interests, for instance, by consuming immediate goods and services without attending to future impacts and by refraining from spending today on future-optimal assets.

SEMI-FUTURE INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPITAL

One of the consequences of the multitemporal public consumption approach is that decisions on collective courses of action, strategies, legislation and policies are justified as responsive to different kinds of interests. In a semi-future democracy, where transparency and wide-ranging input are paramount decision-making factors, this consequence contains a normative dimension. The public

justification of collective enterprises encompasses not only the publicity of the connection between decisions on policies and the corresponding interests in play, but also of the connection between sources of financing and the allocation of funds. The invisibility of the concrete purposes behind each policy and the destination of collected taxes certainly does not contribute to strengthening the representative relationship or to boosting trust between political actors about the need to extend time horizons in collective decision-making. Indicating as precisely as possible to what percentage of which building or road or social action a part of the tax citizens pay is destined can increase the personal utility of collective efforts and encourage their acceptance and accountability.

However, the connection between preferred policies and the interests to which they are supposed to be responsive requires more than publicity. The temporal dimension of the interests suggests that some policies are more suitable than others and that some sources of finance are more suitable to certain policies than others, depending on their similar relations with time. In the threefold classification of public consumption as immediate, saving and investment introduced by the multitemporal public consumption approach, immediate consumption seems responsive to urgent needs and preferences, saving seems responsive to interests in preserving capacities for risk management, and investment seems responsive to present interests in the future.²⁴ It makes sense, then, that all budget cycles are sufficiently attentive to such interests by including relevant rates of spending, saving and investment (e.g., of GDP in the case of national policymaking) consistent with demographic fluctuations and the different age groups. Deviations from this attentiveness are deficiencies in the representative process.

Investments in projects (i) for future gains that do not constitute basic needs, and (ii) that deviate funds from investments in projects that satisfy objective interests in the future are then violations of the responsiveness requirement embedded in the multitemporal public consumption approach. Investment in the future consumption of resources that contradicts objective interests in the future has no room in the semi-future framework.²⁵ The same can be said of excessive saving in times of extreme scarcity, of immediate consumption of

²⁴ The semi-future version of public investment is therefore closer to Alan Jacobs' focus on the dedication of present resources to mechanisms of intertemporal transfer (Jacobs 2011: 17–20) than to the traditional version expressed by national accounting systems, which focuses on a close link between investment and capital creation.

²⁵ A good example of the mismatch between investment and objective interests in the future occurs when public funds are spent on projects that aim to secure in the future the consumption of goods and services that are scantily beneficial in the present but largely harmful for the future. In 2021, at a time in which carbon emissions need to be cut down to mitigate the already creeping effects of climate change, investment in coal-fired power stations, either in the form of subsidies or tax exemptions or novel constructions is a clear

non-basic goods and services without investment, and of the allocation of all resources to spending and investment.

Due to such a temporally related substantive connection, different forms of consumption are more fitting to certain kinds of infrastructure and sources of income than others. Different relevant interests in the representative relation encompass different notions of infrastructure and capital. Thus, different facets of objective interests in the future require appropriate forms of investment. Consider, for instance, children's objective interests in the future about the full enjoyment of their civil and political rights. How children are to reach such full enjoyment depends on strategising, and education is clearly one of the areas on which such strategies can focus. Education is fertile ground for the semi-future temporal order and investment. However, investment in education comes in a variety of forms that are responsive to different facets of the interests held by children: in buildings, machinery and digital platforms suitable for their presence and learning; in educational programmes that afford them adequate societal environments for learning; in the improvement of the working conditions of teachers and of their formation. In such cases, investment applies to a broad category of infrastructure that encompasses physical and material capital, as well as social, cultural and human capital. They are all infrastructure for the purposes of long-term investment because they are called for by the temporally related dimension of objective interests in the future.

This dimension determines the semi-future notion of infrastructure. The means related specifically to future gains that satisfy present interests in the future fall under the purview of investment-worthy infrastructure – the temporal factor determines the notion of infrastructure and the corresponding field of investment.²⁶ A teacher's salary, for instance, is investment within this framework, not spending on immediate consumption goods. A senior citizen's pension is mostly consumption to satisfy immediate needs, not investment. Both kinds of spending require responsiveness by semi-future democratic officials, albeit within different categories of spending justified by different kinds of interests.

violation of the multitemporal public consumption approach. However, the maintenance of currently existing coal-fired stations that supply energy for the satisfaction of urgent and fundamental needs or as operational backup for the green energy transition fall under the category of immediate consumption.

²⁶ Much of the discussion surrounding the Build Back Better agenda pushed forward by the US Biden administration in 2021 depended on the notion of infrastructure adopted for the purposes of long-term investments. Conservative views equate infrastructure with basic physical immobile capital goods, such as transportation systems, communication networks, sewage, water and electric systems, and with expenses on such immobile capital goods, such as government office machinery: Dornbusch, Fischer and Startz 2008: 344. More liberal views broaden the scope of infrastructure to social policies and programmes ranging from education to healthcare, housing and environmental issues: Boix 1998; Hemerijck 2017.

A similar correspondence occurs between the contents of interests to which public policies are expected to be responsive in the semi-future temporal order and the sources of financing. The funding of semi-future policymaking strikes a balance among diverse and complementary instruments that are justified with regard to the nature of the interests to which the financed policies are supposed to be responsive. Certain forms of financing are more justified with regard to investment than others, whereas different sources of financing are more justified with regard to immediate consumption than others.

Public debt, which involves repaying loans and the corresponding interest rates over a course of time with more or less extended maturities, is more suitable to fund policies that satisfy present interests in the (future) time of such maturities. The upshot is that public debt should not have maturities that extend further than the contents of the objective interests in the future held by the youngest members of the demos and that debt should not be incurred or created for the spending of immediate consumption. Also, income taxes, which are imposed in respect of the income or profits earned in the present by taxpayers, either from stocking capital or from labour, do not seem suitable for financing public expenditure on investment in areas supposedly responsive to interests in the future. Instead, income taxes seem the most efficient and justified means of financing immediate public consumption. In addition, taxation about the future, for the purposes of saving or investment, should focus mainly on wealth and property, not income. On the one hand, the creation and preservation of infrastructure that generates the most benefits over the future are reasonably connected with the gains derived from the usage, fruition and possession of current infrastructure and non-circulating capital goods and technology (such as buildings, industrial production units, equipment for general use, electronic platforms, distance trading, computer applications, etc.). On the other hand, wealth is a measure of the taxpayer's ability to contribute to public expenditure that is more durable and less manipulable than income (especially if it encompasses financial assets and not merely real estate) and is often the result of a social process which depends largely on extant public infrastructures such as legal, fiscal and educational systems.

With regard to funding, the multitemporal public consumption approach's main requirement is the adequacy of different taxes and debt to the different interests that need to be satisfied in a semi-future democracy. More than establishing taxes as a reaction to an ideal (e.g., social equality, fiscal equity, privileging people experiencing poverty, etc.) and then debating how to distribute the resultant funds to policies aimed at satisfying those ideals, the multitemporal public consumption approach compels representatives first to identify the variety of interests at stake in a semi-future democracy, then to debate and decide on the best way to satisfy those interests, and only afterwards to establish the temporally-fitting sources of funding for each of the interest-satisfaction strategies.

CONCLUSION

Whether laid out in official reports or carefully devised by academics, political and economic advisers or think tanks, proposals for implementing long-term friendly policies often seem faultless. They identify different sectors of the economy and the society on which it is urgent to act for the benefit of the future, including transport, ecology, digitisation, renewable energies, agriculture, healthcare, education, science and technology, urban organisation, industrial conversion, etc. By focusing on these areas, specialists feel competent enough to suggest strategies for preventing the future from being harmed by the present.

However, this setting is often problematic. On the one hand, it seems unlikely that such proposals are immune to the over-confidence effect, the cognitive bias that people generally incur by having levels of confidence in their judgements reliably greater than the levels of accuracy of those same judgements. On the other hand, multifarious proposals of this sort seem to presume that all sectors can be improved peacefully at the same time, in perfect coordination. This assumption is dubious in democratic contexts. Even if there was a national consensus on the ends to be achieved in a collective strategising endeavour, the different sectors of intervention characteristically display problems with different time frames (some more urgent, others requiring longer-lasting responses, etc.), and each is exposed to resistance and internal conflicts that impose different rhythms of (re)construction.

The semi-future temporal order provides a conceptual and normative frame of reference for legitimate and accountable long-term policymaking in liberal democracies. However, its starting point is the impossibility of solving conflict definitively in liberal democracies, both in the present between members of different age groups and especially throughout the future between members of different non-overlapping generations. The semi-future democracy is a transformative space of conflict and reconciliation, of decision and revision, of striving for the best up ahead without losing sight of the worst here and now. Indeed, due to how their implementation relates to time, some policies seem more advisable than others in light of objective interests in the future. Semi-future policymaking should be attentive to how they could be promoted and implemented. Lowering the fiscal burden on the younger citizens, investing in the education, skilling and re-skilling of entire *demos* (not just to prepare younger citizens for the expected increase in variety and mobility in job markets of the future, but also because educational investment is a towering cause of economic growth), subsidising firms that simultaneously increase employment for young workers and labour protection for older workers, linking retirement ages to life expectancy and good health, eliminating government subsidies and tax reliefs to the production and consumption of goods and services that exploit natural resources without advancing ways to mitigate the damages resulting from such exploitation, investing in reforestation, incentivising green technology,

etc.²⁷ – all these policies seem consonant with the principles expressed by the semi-future democracy.

Nevertheless, the open and manifold structure of representative democracy in the semi-future temporal order, the adoption of the multitemporal public consumption approach and of the corresponding broad notions of infrastructure and capital appeal to a continuous questioning of the adequacy of concrete policies to the objective interests in the future that lie at the heart of every semi-future demos. The optimal exercise of cross-temporal governance is an ongoing and arduous task.

²⁷ For most of these proposals, see Shafik 2021.

EPILOGUE: FUTURE-ORIENTED DEMOCRATIC THEORY

The literary critic Northrop Frye tells the story of a doctor friend caught in a blizzard while crossing the Arctic tundra with an Inuit guide. Unaware of his whereabouts, the doctor shouted, ‘We’re lost’. The Inuit guide looked at him and replied: ‘We are not lost. We’re here’.¹ Liberal democracies exhibit the same sense of situatedness regarding time that the Inuit guide experienced regarding space. They are never lost because they are always ‘now’. The problem with this perception is that the locus of democracies in time covers more than just ‘now’. Their powers, competencies and responsibilities stretch towards the future in their present, albeit never to the point of breaking anchor from the ‘now’. *The Semi-Future Democracy* is an attempt to correct the misplaced perception of democratic time by introducing a novel way of theorising the long-term view within representative democracies.

Some readers might suspect that we are running the risk of overcompensating in our attempts to keep liberal democracies alive in the face of the future and that ultimately, ‘we could save democracy and destroy the world’.² But this alternative between saving democracy and saving the world is true only if we consider it from a short-termist (mis)conception of democracy. Within the semi-future framework, there is no all-or-nothing choice between the two, but rather a technical and conceptual alignment.

¹ Frye 1977: 27.

² Runciman 2019: 217–18.

The semi-future proposal is not aimed simply at appealing to decision-makers to more carefully consider the temporal diversity that already exists in democratic publics, including the longer-term interests of those who are not yet members of the voting public. Instead, it maintains that any viable democratic theory must take temporal diversity seriously. Democratic theories that neglect such diversity fail to include sufficient guarantors of legitimacy; decision-makers who disregard temporal diversity fall short of being legitimate political decision-makers. The latter's incentive for adopting the semi-future temporal order is the same as they have for acquiring legitimate political authority in democratic arrangements.

Simply put, a democracy that does not take the future into consideration within the confines of the present's interests in the future is a failed democracy. All democracies must be future-oriented in order to be present democracies.

The literature on intergenerational justice often discusses the need for 'F-institutions', which can be identified as being (i) future-oriented, (ii) future-beneficial or (iii) commitment devices. Such F-institutions are to be added to current democracies in order to take the non-overlapping future and unborn generations seriously in current democratic procedures. The semi-future temporal order reshapes this view. Strictly speaking, all political institutions are future-oriented. They decide for the future – some for the short term, some for the medium and the long term. For instance, a parliament can legislate for the next fiscal year, but it can also produce constitutional amendments that are expected to endure for a long time; a court of law can issue a decision based on the past that binds someone for the future (e.g., an eighteen-year-old citizen convicted to life imprisonment for murder); an executive body can issue a decision to build infrastructure that is likely to function for several decades. All such cases are future-oriented, and some involve strong commitment devices, but none is necessarily grounded on concern for future generations.

This detail is particularly relevant as the case for (non-overlapping) F-institutions is often based on reasons for assuaging harmful short-termism. But why should we look for the grounds of forward-looking democratic governance in the future rather than in the present – in what we wish democracy to avoid instead of in what democracies are today? Why not think of reasons for establishing F-institutions that follow primarily from actual positive (non-reactive) principles of cross-temporality? For instance, we could think of commitment devices that develop long-term policymaking based on requirements for improving the welfare of today's young citizens when they are to reach old age. Why shouldn't that count as an F-institution? And why would it have to be based solely on assuaging or preventing the wrongful effects of short-term thinking? Why not conceive of a decision-making framework that is multitemporal (i.e., inclusive of necessary short-term thinking and required long-term thinking) rather than primarily short-termist? The semi-future framework does precisely that.

This new take on presentism – a ‘zipper argument’ developed within the confines of democratic theory – is not much of a theory of intergenerational justice, even if it leaves room for considering that members of future generations have reasonable moral entitlements towards people in the present. This is true. Suppose policy x is very likely to improve the conditions of people who will live forty years from now but also likely to worsen the conditions of people who will live eighty years from now (e.g., redesigning pension schemes in a way that will favour today’s young in the future but that is likely to fail in light of demographic projections for the next hundred years). According to the semi-future framework, there is no genuinely democratic reason not to implement this policy. It might even be the case that implementing this policy is what semi-future representation requires. However, it also happens that objective interests in the future are complex – they can be expressed as present interests in future welfare, but also as present interests in future capacities to determine how to meet the requirements of semi-future representation. So, it might be reasonable to implement policy x in a way that allows people forty years from today to conduct semi-future representation in a way that does not fail to take into account the objective interests in the future of people who will live during the next forty years. There are many futures in democracies’ present. This should be enough to connect an argument from democratic long-term governance with issues concerning non-overlapping intergenerational justice.

The point is never to lose the grounds of actual democratic legitimacy when looking far into the future. *The Semi-Future Democracy*’s success depends on its capacity to provide adequate tools for genuine and legitimate democratic long-term governance. ‘Success’ is a dangerous word when referring to any political theory, and I employ it cautiously. Michael Freedman maintains that political thinking recurrently fails because it does not deliver what it set out to do. In his view, insofar as it consists in constructing prescriptive visions of society that aspire to normative status and aims to make a difference in the ways political processes are conducted, political theory is doomed to failure. At the macro level, he says, comprehensive political theories are typically timeless and contrast with futures trajectories. They neglect path dependence in favour of future-path determination.³ In his own words: ‘contingent control over time leads to non-contingent failure in political thinking’.⁴

The Semi-Future Democracy stems from an endeavour to avoid such a degree of catastrophic failure. It is not comprehensive since it does not provide a specific normative background that leaves no room for further corrections, criticism or additions. It is sensitive to path dependence by building on the

³ Freedman 2009.

⁴ Freedman 2009: 146.

status quo of current democracies. It does not aim at completeness but at establishing the conditions for debates about what works best in each democratic setting for favouring the long term without endangering the liberal democratic core. The formula for legitimacy and governance that it suggests is not necessarily timeless or enduring but only a reconfiguration of the temporal political environment of liberal democracies. It contributes to the debates about contested and underspecified concepts of democratic theory without needing to resort to avant-garde and external concepts. And it provides a theory of justification rather than a coercive normative theory.

Unlike Freedman, I regard the task of political thinking as focused primarily on foundations, as multidimensional (with arguments laid out in different degrees of importance, involving *nomos* and *kairos*, the macro and the micro), as admitting multiple methodologies (e.g., prescription versus justification), and as multitemporal (including timeless principles and temporally parochial theories). Ultimately, political theory is also actualised as a literary genre, in which works are characteristically drawn up by a single author who must come to terms with the fact that his/her efforts are part of a kaleidoscopic and multivocal field of discussion, at times traditional and at times coeval, but always open.

The Semi-Future Democracy aims at success only within this frame of reference. By 'success', I mean nothing but the consistency of the fundamental principles of liberal democracies with the long-term view. Nothing more. Or, at the very least, something less: to have writers on futures studies develop novel conceptual, argumentative and institutional tools that establish proper incentives for the long term without ever losing sight of legitimacy issues.

Implementing the semi-future in democratic governance remains a possibility for those willing to take on the burden – a heavy burden indeed, requiring more than the mere endorsement of future-friendly rhetoric, casting a ballot on partisan sympathies, or keener ethical awareness in everyday life. It requires political commitment and engagement about the future – and urgently. The Horatian precept that one should 'seize the day, put minimum trust on tomorrow' (*carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*) is to be read not as an adage of presentism, but as a motto for the semi-future: trust today, not tomorrow, to seize what is to come, as the time for the future is now.

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