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Political Equality and Epistemic Constraints on Voting

I. INTRODUCTION

The idea that voting procedures should be accessible to every citizen who wishes to participate is a fundamental principle of democracy. In recent years, however, this idea has been challenged. As part of a resurgent skepticism about the epistemic qualities of democracy, some political philosophers have argued that participation in voting practices should be made conditional, through specifically designed formal mechanisms or procedures, upon having a sufficient level of political competence. Call these mechanisms *epistemic constraints on voting* (ECV).

The idea of employing criteria of competence to restrict participation in voting practices is taken, by many, to be inherently incompatible with political equality. In this paper, my purpose is to challenge this common claim and to show how, once properly reframed, the idea of setting up ECV need not violate political equality in any normatively significant fashion. I intend to do so by suggesting that it is possible to construct a justification for ECV that overcomes at least two problems that egalitarians

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commonly associate with ECV: the disrespect problem and the hierarchy problem.

Such a justification, which provides an alternative to the standard instrumental one presented in the literature, appeals to non-instrumental reasons. More precisely, it appeals to the idea that, qua participants in a shared practice, voters stand to one another in a normative relation that obligates them to act in an epistemically responsible fashion and makes them reciprocally accountable for their conduct in this regard. Modest ECV are justifiable because they ensure that voting practices conform to this relation and to the requirement of epistemic responsibility that follows from it. Call this the *civic accountability justification for ECV*.

The paper is structured in two parts. The first part clarifies the scope and assumptions of the paper (1) and sketches the broad outline of the civic accountability justification for ECV (2), with a particular focus on explicating its distinctive non-instrumental commitments. The second part discusses how the civic accountability justification for ECV can overcome two prominent issues of political equality: the disrespect problem (3) and the hierarchy problem (4).

For what concerns the former, which rests on a commitment to pay proper respect for the political judgments of all citizens, I will argue that the civic accountability justification does not resort to the kind of considerations of competence—i.e., comparative assessments, competence rankings, educational qualifications, etc.—that can be plausibly regarded as disrespectful. As for what concerns the latter, which rests on a commitment to avoid hierarchical social relations, I will argue that the civic accountability justification for ECV is based precisely on the idea that participation in voting creates a new normative relation, one that commands an epistemically responsible conduct. Consequently, this relation counterbalances the concerns with relational equality that underlie the hierarchy problem in the first place. Moreover, since the civic accountability justification is not committed to instrumental optimality, it can support ECV that avoid the instantiation of social hierarchies.

II. POLITICAL EQUALITY, EPISTOCRACY AND EPISTEMIC CONSTRAINTS ON VOTING

Let me start by framing the issue at stake with more precision. This paper is concerned with the normative justifiability of what I define as epistemic constraints on voting (ECV). The term identifies any institutional

mechanism or procedure that serves the purpose of restricting participation in voting practices on the basis of a criterion of political competence. While it has become common practice to associate ECV with epistocracy, I will keep the two notions distinct. There are two reasons for this. First, while it is true that most arguments for epistocracy are formulated as arguments for ECV, the term “epistocracy” captures any political system in which the exercise of political authority is made formally conditional upon having a certain degree of expertise on politically relevant matters. Hence, it captures also political systems in which no voting whatsoever takes place, for instance because decision-making power is handed over to non-elected councils of experts.¹ Second, partly because of this association with epistocracy, many assume that ECV necessarily imply the disenfranchisement of politically incompetent citizens. For our purposes, it is important to anticipate that this need not be the case. ECV may take several forms and participation in voting can be constrained on grounds of competence without permanently depriving people of their right to vote.² For instance, participation in voting can be constrained on epistemic grounds by *hindering* incompetent participation. In the following pages, I will suggest a model that is consistent with this idea.

With this clarification in place, let me now turn to the task of defining the scope of the paper and clarify its framing. First, the main objective of this paper is to show that a common complaint raised against ECV—that they inherently violate a commitment to treat all members of the political community as equals—is not necessarily warranted. I will seek to accomplish this objective by outlining a justification for ECV that diverges from the instrumental one that is common in the literature. Call this proposed alternative *the civic accountability justification for ECV*. The civic accountability justification is not driven by the idea that ECV would improve the quality of political decisions, but rather from non-instrumental considerations pertaining to the kind of conduct that voters owe one another qua

1. Standard epistocrats seem unwilling to rule out the idea that voting could be done without altogether, at least if there is evidence that this could improve the quality of political decisions. See Jason Brennan, “Giving Epistocracy a Fair Hearing,” *Inquiry* 65, no. 1 (2022): 35–49; Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

2. A prominent example which partly inspired the present view can be found in Claudio López-Guerra, *Democracy and Disenfranchisement: The Morality of Electoral Exclusions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

participants in a shared institutional practice. Precisely because it is driven by different normative commitments, the civic accountability justification overcomes at least two problems of political equality commonly associated with the idea of ECV: the disrespect problem and the hierarchy problem. It should be therefore clear that the main objective of this paper is *not* that of offering a fully-fledged positive argument for ECV, but rather that of depicting a promising but defeasible argumentative strategy that might be undermined by considerations or objections other than those discussed in this paper.³

Second, we can look at the contrast between ECV and political equality from a variety of angles. For instance, we can look at it with an eye towards the consequences of implementing ECV under real world circumstances. On this account, ECV are objectionable on egalitarian grounds insofar as their implementation is likely to have undesirable consequences such as the increased marginalization of already vulnerable social groups. While concerns of this kind are justified and extremely serious, I take it that objections to ECV from political equality run at a deeper level. More precisely, I take them to be concerned with the *inherent* incompatibility between political equality and ECV. On this interpretation, the concern over the potential consequences of implementing ECV under real-world circumstances is secondary, because it is *the very idea* of constraining participation in voting by means of some competence criterion that is morally impermissible on grounds of equality. From this standpoint, the very idea of ECV embodies anti-egalitarian commitments and it does so regardless of how ECV are justified, arranged, or implemented.

My discussion in this paper will reflect the considerations just mentioned. I will assume that the concern for the inherent objectionability of ECV has lexical priority over the concern for their consequences. If my argument in this paper is successful, what I will have shown is that the idea of ECV is not inherently objectionable on egalitarian grounds because it can be supported in such a way as to avoid common concerns associated with political equality. Whether ECV should be implemented under real-world circumstances, how to do so and how to deal with their potentially troublesome consequences is a separate discussion that I do not

3. Most notably, I will not engage with potential epistemic objections. For examples see Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

undertake here. Taking it seriously would require a more extensive treatment of questions pertaining to background injustices as well as engaging, at least to a certain extent, in institutional engineering.

Third, my proposal of an alternative argument for ECV will be centered on considerations of reciprocal accountability and these will in turn draw on shared practices and the normative relation between participants that underpins them. An alternative starting point could be found in considerations related to political power. On views of this sort, voting entails the exercise of political power over others. This triggers an obligation of due care for their interests that offers an alternative basis for accountability. The reason why I do not pursue this alternative is that, notwithstanding their intuitive pull, considerations of power are, at least by themselves, less suited to exhibit how any individual act of voting acquires normative significance against the background of a collective decision-making process. This is not to say that power does not matter. The point is rather that the appeal to shared practices allows us to better visualize what I take to be a normatively crucial fact: that voting is a form of power that is exercised in the context of a *joint* endeavor that involves the agency of multiple individuals.⁴

Finally, throughout the pages of this paper, I will assume an epistemic account of voting. That is, I will assume that as part of their role within public decision-making procedures voters are called upon to exercise prerogatives that have a cognitive dimension. Moreover, I will assume that a proper exercise of these prerogatives is predicated upon discharging *at least* a basic set of epistemic responsibilities. I will not investigate why voting has such an epistemic dimension, as a wide variety of accounts support the assumption and provide outlines of what such a dimension may entail.⁵

4. For various readings of the shared character of political decision-making practices, see Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Emilee Booth Chapman, *Election Day: How We Vote and What It Means for Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022); R. J. Leland and Han van Wietmarschen, "Political Liberalism and Political Community," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2017): 142–67; Adam Lovett and Jake Zuehl, "The Possibility of Democratic Autonomy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 50, no. 4 (2022): 467–98; Anna Stilz, *Liberal Loyalty: Freedom, Obligation, and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). I thank an associate editor for drawing my attention to this issue.

5. For examples see Jason Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); David Estlund, "Democracy Without Preference," *Philosophical Review* 99, no.

III. THE CIVIC ACCOUNTABILITY JUSTIFICATION FOR EPISTEMIC CONSTRAINTS ON VOTING

In this section, I sketch the broad outline of the civic accountability justification for ECV. The civic accountability justification is driven by the idea that, as participants in a collective decision-making practice, voters stand to one another in a precise normative relation. This relation is characterized by mutual accountability with respect to the rules of conduct and practical constraints entailed by the practice. As part of this accountability relation voters owe it to each other to act in an epistemically responsible fashion. ECV are justified because they ensure that participation in voting conforms to this normative relation and to the ensuing requirements.

The view rests on a set of considerations that pertain to normatively significant shared practices in general, or at least to those that do not serve morally repugnant goals. Shared practices are constituted by a system of interconnected rules usually determined on the basis of the practice's function or goal. These rules act as practical constraints that coordinate and limit the agency of participants. Such constraints are typically specified via the definition of different roles, with prerogatives or specific tasks and powers associated with them. Crucial to the account is the idea that involvement in such a system of rules and role-based constraints places the participants in the practice in a special relation to one another. This relation rests on a pattern of mutual expectations and demands.⁶ Each participant P is expected to abide by the constraints specified by the

3 (1990): 397–423; Goodin and Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*. The epistemic conception of the role of voters I favor is supported by the assumption that voting practices serve a specific social function, namely that of determining which course of political action the polity should undertake. On this view, voters are meant to provide their best judgment concerning the issue at hand—what course of political action should be pursued—rather than express their political interests or preferences. This, in turn, triggers epistemic responsibilities such as that of developing an informed judgment, undertake a competent assessment of the options on the table, etc. I take this assumption about the function of voting practices to rest on the observation that, whatever else voting practices do or represent in democratic societies, the bottom line remains that they are processes aimed at settling which projects, agendas and objectives will be pursued by governing institutions. This account, which I take to be normative and yet sufficiently consistent with basic descriptive features of the practice of voting, is defended more elaborately in Michele Giavazzi, “The Epistemic Responsibilities of Voters: Towards an Assertion-Based Account,” *The Journal of Moral Philosophy* 20, no. 1–2 (2023): 111–31.

6. Sanford Goldberg, for instance, talks of practice-generated entitlements to expect something of someone else. See Sanford Goldberg, *To the Best of our Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 165–69. On this, see also Emanuela Ceva and Valeria Ottonelli,

practice and fulfill the responsibilities associated with their role. Correspondingly, each participant gains a specific standing with respect to each other's agency. Namely, the standing to refer to the pattern of mutual expectations and demands underpinning the shared practice as a benchmark on which basis they may be called to answer for their conduct. In other words, participants in a shared practice organized around a system of rules and role-based constraints are the subjects of a relation of reciprocal accountability whereby, on the basis of the practical constraints and responsibilities specified by the practice, they are reciprocally legitimized to assess each other's conduct, advance demands with respect to it, and take measures to see these demands fulfilled.⁷

Both the content and the stringency of the mutual expectations and reciprocal demands underpinning this relation will significantly depend on the practice under consideration, its function, its stakes and so forth. But that should not forbid us from seeking to provide a generic account of both these dimensions. In terms of content, whatever the nature of the practice, the values and demands associated with this normative relation

"Second-personal Authority and the Practice of Democracy," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 29, no. 4 (2021): 460–74.

7. This broad description of the features of accountability relations is consistent not only with contributions in moral and political philosophy but also with the minimal conceptual consensus that can be found in studies of accountability in the political sciences. While this literature focuses more prominently on the accountability of political representatives and office holders, it converges on the idea that accountability is a relational concept centered on the possibility and expectation of answerability of some agents to others. That is, it converges on the idea that accountability builds a link between some agents who hold relevant responsibilities and others who gain the legitimate standing to call them to answer for their conduct in some form or the other. For various conceptual analyses and definitions of accountability in this literature, see Mark Bovens "Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework," *European Law Journal* 13, no. 4 (2007): 447–68; Mark Bovens, Thomas Schillemans and Robert Goodin "Public Accountability," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, ed. Mark Bovens et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–20; Staffan I Lindberg "Mapping Accountability: Core Concept and Subtypes," *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 79, no. 2 (2013): 202–26; Richard Mulgan, *Holding Power to Account: Accountability in Modern Democracies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Mark Philp, "Delimiting Democratic Accountability," *Political Studies* 57 (2009): 28–53 and Mark Warren, "Accountability and Democracy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, ed. Mark Bovens et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 39–54. Let me anticipate that, within this literature, an important debate concerns whether the possibility of sanctioning instances of misconduct is essential to accountability relations in political settings. I will return on this later as I tackle the function of ECV as mechanisms that enforce accountability between voters.

will likely include a general commitment to take one's role seriously, uphold conduct that is in keeping with the practice's goal, avoid negligence and so forth. As for what concerns their stringency, it is worth noticing that, even on a relatively weak interpretation, this relation is not toothless. Take the case of a shared house that needs cleaning. If I involve myself in the shared endeavor of cleaning the house together with my housemates, this seems not only to place me under a generic duty to play my part, but to also entitle my housemates to claim, at the very least, that I put a reasonable effort in my cleaning. Should I instead act negligently, they will be in the legitimate position to *at least* draw attention to the misdoing and call me to answer for my behavior. I am, in other words, significantly accountable to them for my conduct and so are they to me.

Now, this relation and the responsibilities associated with it are not necessarily normatively binding. For them to acquire normative force, a few conditions must be in place. First, as we have already conceded, the shared practice must meet a threshold of moral acceptability. In addition, the relation must draw its normative force from sources or grounds that are external to the practice itself.⁸ The literature offers a few potential options in this regard. A standard line of argument locates the source in voluntary participation: insofar as participation in the practice is the result of a voluntary act, participants acquire a contractual or promissory obligation to discharge the responsibilities associated with their roles.⁹ Another common strategy appeals to the principle of fairness, which commands that all those who act within the boundaries of a shared endeavor do their fair share for its success.¹⁰ Another line of argument locates the sources of normativity in joint agency. From this standpoint, participation in a shared practice entails that an agent implicitly recognizes the goal of the practice as their own and thereby jointly commits, with the other participants, to fulfilling such goal. This generates a pattern of contralateral commitments between the participants and grants them the standing to call each other

8. Alan John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 16–24.

9. Alan John Simmons, *Justification and Legitimacy: Essays on Rights and Obligations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 94.

10. See Herbert L.A. Hart, "Are there any natural rights?" *The Philosophical Review* 64, no. 2 (1955): 175–91; George Klosko, "The Principle of Fairness and Political Obligation," *Ethics* 97, no. 2 (1987): 353–62; John Rawls, "Legal Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play" in *Law and Philosophy*, ed. Sydney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1964).

to answer with respect to the terms of the joint action, including the responsibilities determined by their roles.¹¹

This is not the place for an in-depth examination of the comparative strengths of these arguments, but it is worth spending a few words to show how they can account for the thought that co-participants in morally acceptable shared practices are bound by responsibilities with normative force rather than by mere expectations. For example, let us look at the case of housemates engaged in the shared endeavor of cleaning their house, and examine how the joint-agency line of thought would account for the normative force of their reciprocal responsibilities. On this view, cleaning the house represents a goal that any member of the household who joins in the endeavor implicitly commits to accomplish in concert with the others. This implicit commitment constrains their discretion and gives them reason to exclude any kind of conduct that is clearly inimical to the success of the joint endeavor, such as negligence or superficiality. Moreover, and crucially for the present account, a failure to do so does seem to represent a form of disregard that entitles the other housemates to hold the negligent cleaner to account for their conduct and to insist that they do a better job. As people who are involved in a shared endeavor, the housemates are not merely expected to do their part properly. They owe it to each other in virtue of the reciprocal commitment they undertook. The stringency of the reciprocal accountability that is thereby generated will be proportional to the importance of the goal or function of the practice but, and this is what matters, it will have a certain strength even in the context of a relatively unimportant case such as this one.

Suppose these considerations about participation in shared practices and its normative dimension hold. The implications for participation in voting should be clear. Assuming that voting is indeed a normatively significant practice that meets intuitive conditions of moral acceptability, then participation in voting creates a similar relation between those who take part in it. It qualifies voters as the subjects of an accountability relation whereby they are answerable to each other for their conduct and reciprocally legitimized to assess each other's conduct, advance demands with respect to it, and take measures to see these demands fulfilled. Again,

11. Margaret Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Abraham Sesshu Roth, "Shared Agency and Contralateral Commitments," *The Philosophical Review* 113, no. 3 (2004): 359–410.

the normative force of this relation can be explained in several terms. Following the previously mentioned example of joint agency, the explanation would be that participation in voting entails an implicit commitment to uphold a voting conduct that is not inimical or detrimental to the joint political decision-making process in which voters are involved.¹² On this view, upholding the responsibilities associated with the role of voters—which we assumed to have an epistemic dimension—would not be a mere expectation but rather something that voters owe to each other as part of a broader reciprocal commitment to do their part in the collective decision-making process, and do it properly. The stringency of this relation and of its associated responsibilities will have some boundaries and limitations, as I explain towards the end of this section. But given the important function that political decision-making practices play within a political society, its strength will likely be quite significant. Let me also add that, on this view, the crux of the matter is not the causal contribution or consequential relevance of any individual voting decision, but rather the extent to which the decision is made in a way that honors the normative commitments underpinning participation. Consequently, from this standpoint, the inconsequentiality of individual votes does not cancel the fact that a negligent or superficial exercise of voting powers would still represent a form of disregard towards one's responsibilities, and a failure to provide a normatively appropriate response to the demands entailed by being involved in a shared decision-making endeavor in concert with others.

Now, if these claims hold, they could serve as the basis for a *prima facie* defeasible justification for constraining participation in voting on epistemic grounds. On this account, the function of ECV would be to limit participation in public decision-making procedures to those citizens who uphold a proper epistemically responsible conduct in voting. Differently from arguments driven by the goal of maximizing the quality or epistemic correctness of political decisions, this argument relies on non-instrumental considerations. These considerations pertain to the special nature of the normative relation entailed by participation in a shared institutional practice and to the value of the responsibilities associated with it. On this account, ECV would be justified because (and only insofar as) they ensure that participants in voting uphold the kind of conduct that

12. I develop an account of voting as a form of joint agency in unpublished material.

such relation requires of them, regardless of further considerations about how this would impact political decisions and outcomes.

It is important to proceed with due care here. Even if voters were indeed in the normative relation I described, it could be argued that this does not necessarily justify the instantiation of ECV, as these may be understood as an enforcement of the normative terms of this relation. While I do recognize that this is an important concern, I think I can mitigate it by emphasizing some considerations that I take to be already implicit in the analysis I developed thus far. Central to the civic accountability justification is the thought that voters, qua co-participants in a shared endeavor or practice, owe it *to one another* to uphold an epistemically responsible conduct. They have, in other words, a so-called directed duty to one another to act as epistemically responsible contributor to collective political decisions. Now, if someone has a duty to φ , it is usually thought that those to whom the duty is owed acquire a corresponding right to call upon the relevant agent to φ .¹³ Duties premised on playing a part within a practice governed by certain internal norms, such as the ones emphasized on this account, are not different in this sense. They too seem to give rise to a corresponding right, enjoyed by those who are involved in the same system of norms, to insist on the performance of the relevant actions, and to do so with a certain peremptoriness. A certain forcefulness is thus already implicit in the very fact of being involved in a relation of reciprocal accountability premised on a common framework of norms with the duties, rights, and responsibilities that it specifies. Accountability relations entail that those who are bound by their terms may take some measures to see that the proper standards of conduct are upheld and thus they inevitably implicate at least a certain degree of enforceability. Much in the same way as no framework of reciprocal rights and responsibilities can effectively subsist unless there is a baseline of assurance that its terms will be met, the normative terms associated with the accountability relation I described so-far cannot act as an effectively binding benchmark without mechanisms in place that offer a similar safeguard.¹⁴ ECV may be understood as playing an analogous function in the

13. The correlation between rights and duties is a common topic in normative philosophy. For an excellent discussion, see Leif Wenar, "The Nature of Claim-Rights," *Ethics* 123, no. 2 (2013): 202–29.

14. This point echoes a Kantian and more broadly contractualist approach to the relationship between rights and duties and their enforcement. On this, see also Onora O'Neill,

context of voting, that of providing the assurance of an epistemically responsible conduct that all those who engage in the endeavor of making political decisions through voting are mutually entitled to in virtue of the normative relation that holds between them.¹⁵

Consequently, I take it that the real question is not whether there can be enforcement, a possibility entailed by the very presence of a relation of reciprocal accountability. The real question is *what kind of shape* the enforcement may legitimately acquire in the context of a shared practice like voting. And I think the normative commitments of the civic accountability justification should make us cautious about pursuing mechanisms that are too burdensome or that subject voters to an excessive scrutiny of their epistemic performance. Indeed, I think many proposals commonly associated with the idea of constraining participation in voting on epistemic grounds are incompatible with the present theory. If what justifies constraining participation is not maximizing the chances of “getting things right,” but rather ensuring that everyone who participates in voting upholds the epistemic conduct that they owe to other participants in virtue of the accountability relation that holds between them, only mechanisms that are consistent with this underlying logic will be justified. Whatever mechanism effectively constrains participation must therefore reflect the notion that voters are accountable for their epistemic conduct *to one another*, rather than to some external authority. Mechanisms whereby prospective voters are subjected to a “vertical” scrutiny of their epistemic capacities—for instance by having to pass a competency test administered by a group of experts or public officials—seem to depart from the logic of horizontal accountability that drives the present view.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to spell out a model of ECV that I do take to be consistent with the desiderata of the civic

Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 129–32; Stilz, Liberal Loyalty, 51–3; Wenar, “The Nature of Claim Rights,” 208–10.

15. Notice that the institutional mechanisms of this sort, aimed at securing a proper behavior from those who hold particularly significant responsibilities, are not that uncommon in various institutional domains. Just to give an example, in my role of teacher in a higher education institution, I am regularly required to undertake training aimed at raising my awareness on important issues, or at securing that I take seriously my pedagogical tasks, etc. Of course, the permissibility of these initiatives may hinge on their often-questionable ability to deliver on their aims. On this, see footnote 18.

accountability justification. Importantly, this is a *tentative* proposal which leaves room for different and perhaps better arrangements, provided they are consistent with the normative commitments of the theory. With this caveat in place, suppose that before voting and as part of the registration process, we compel *all* citizens who wish to take part in voting practices (regardless of their current level of education, income, status, etc.) to undertake a competence-enhancing training. If they participate, they vote—no further selection is required.¹⁶ To avoid relapsing in practices of vertical scrutiny we previously ruled out, the training could combine the provision of important but uncontroversial information about relevant political facts and general institutional rules with more interactive and dialogical practices in which prospective voters would be encouraged to refine their own ideas of justice and political judgments. The idea is, to put the same points differently, to make sure that the competence-enhancing training functions as an occasion to prompt prospective voters into a more careful exercise of their political decision-making capacities before they can cast their ballot, as a safeguard against an excessively unthoughtful or negligent epistemic conduct in voting. What practices would best serve such purposes is a complex question but, to give a few examples, as part of the training voters may be asked to participate in deliberative exercises, audit local debates, attend informative panels with political representatives or experts from across the political spectrum, engage in simulations of hypothetical voting scenarios, and so forth.¹⁷ Some issues about the content of the training sessions will be discussed later in the paper, as they have an important role to play in dealing with the disrespect problem. For the time being, the primary concern is with the broader point. On this view, the prerequisite for voting would not be that of passing any sort of test but rather that of accepting and undertaking the cost of a further preparation aimed at guaranteeing, within

16. This is not because what voters owe each other is just to make an attempt at becoming epistemically responsible participants. What they owe each other is to act as an epistemically responsible contributor. The point here is that any attempt at ascertaining, through more selective mechanisms, whether this has effectively happened, is not only unessential to accountability as we will see below but would also likely clash with the theory's commitment to avoid dynamics of vertical scrutiny.

17. Michele Giavazzi and Zsolt Kapelner, "The State's Duty to Foster Voter Competence," *Episteme* (2022): 9–10.

reason, an epistemically responsible conduct.¹⁸ Implementing an arrangement of this kind would obviously present several challenges, such as ensuring that people are provided with the time and resources to effectively attend the training, prevent politically motivated rent-seekers from exploiting the arrangement, and so forth. As anticipated in the previous section, how to correct for these and other potential problems is something that depends on all sorts of socio-economic and political considerations that I cannot address here. For the time being, however, the upshot is clear. The civic accountability justification can rest content with less exclusive forms of ECV.

Before concluding, let me address a final concern that relates precisely to the point just mentioned. Some may contend that more restrictive proposals may be consistent with the civic accountability justification in virtue of the *sanctioning* dynamics entailed by accountability relations, whereby those who are subject to the relation may legitimately hold each other to account through the possibility of repercussions for conduct that falls below the required standards. It could be argued that this may motivate, for example, the introduction of a competency tests at the end of my proposed training, with failure to demonstrate sufficient competence leading to disenfranchisement. However, I do not think that this is necessarily the case. While some sanctioning dynamics are to an extent inevitable in the context of the enforcement of accountability that ECV are meant to achieve—after all the idea is that voters are held to account by facing potential constraints on participation—we should not assume that they must take the shape that we have been accustomed to see in standard epistocratic theories. And that is because *not all kinds of sanctioning* dynamics are essential to accountability relations. The literature on political accountability can aid us in visualizing this important point.¹⁹ Within

18. Some may worry that participation in a competence-building training that implicates no further selection may not guarantee an epistemically responsible voting conduct. While I must admit that this is a risk, it is a risk inherent to any measure that seeks to secure accountability for voters' epistemic conduct without overstepping what accountability itself requires or maximizing epistemic efficiency. The hope is obviously that the competence-building training would be structured in such a way as to secure meaningful and engaged participation and thus effectively act as a valid proxy for epistemic responsibility. Recall also that the training is merely a proposal, and the account is open to different institutional mechanisms.

19. I am significantly indebted to an anonymous associate editor for this journal for an extensive discussion on these issues, and more broadly for drawing my attention to the

this literature, a distinction is often drawn between the possibility of sanctioning accountable agents for *failures to account*, and the possibility of sanctioning them *for the content* of their account. The key difference between the two is what triggers the possibility of sanctions. In the first case, sanctions are triggered by the refusal of an agent to respond for their actions or decisions to those whom an account is owed. They are triggered by a failure to acknowledge one's answerability, so to speak. In the latter case, sanctions are triggered by the quality of the account provided, by the quality of the performance itself. And while sanctioning dynamics of the first kind are essential to accountability relations, for without them there would be nothing that holds the relevant agents to account, sanctioning dynamics of the second kind are not. Indeed, there are reasons to think that they may even be detrimental to accountability relations, especially when accountable agents are called upon to exercise responsibilities that involve a significant degree of discretion and autonomy of judgment, such as in political settings. This has important implications for the mechanisms that are supposed to enforce accountability. For example, for a political representative to be truly accountable to their constituents, it is essential that there are mechanisms in place allowing constituents to sanction the representative's refusal to acknowledge their responsibilities and respond for their decisions, say in the form of a public hearing. What is not essential, and indeed likely detrimental, is the presence of mechanisms that empower the constituents to subject the representative to repercussions for the content of their decisions or actions.²⁰

literature on political accountability that allowed me to deal with them. For more detailed reconstructions of the difference between sanctions for failure to account and sanctions for the content of an account, see Philp, "Delimiting Democratic Accountability," 34–6 and Lindberg, "Mapping Accountability: Core Concept and Subtypes," 208–12.

20. For instance, suppose the representative is subjected to the threat of immediate recall whenever they make a decision whose content goes against the liking of their constituents. In a situation of this sort, whenever faced with difficult decisions, the representative's attention will be likely directed to the goal of avoiding the repercussions as opposed to the goal of actually and properly fulfilling their decision-making responsibilities. This point draws on concerns for the risks associated with accountability overloads, circumstances in which excessively stringent accountability mechanisms impose counterproductive burdens on accountable agents. Among the costs often associated with accountability overloads, we can mention the erosion of public trust, the loss of institutional integrity, the creation of excessive surveillance or needless bureaucratization, etc. For useful accounts of the costs and diminishing returns associated with excessively stringent accountability mechanisms in political settings,

Similar considerations can be drawn in the context of our discussion. What is essential to enforce accountability between voters is the presence of mechanisms that impose costs or repercussions in response to voters' failure to acknowledge their (epistemic) responsibilities and take seriously their answerability qua co-participants in a shared endeavor. The presence of mechanisms that impose costs or repercussions based on an examination of the content of their (epistemic) performance is instead not obviously required. Indeed, it is something that is likely to obstruct the normative commitments that we were seeking to instantiate. For example, it may lead voters to simply do what is necessary to "qualify" and divert them from the task of developing a meaningful and epistemically responsible judgment. So, while the function of ECV is undoubtedly that of holding voters to account by imposing potential limits on participation, the civic accountability justification supports mechanisms that reflect a different logic than that of standard epistocratic proposals. Namely, a logic in which the possibility of facing these limits arises in response to a failure to acknowledge and take seriously the normative demands imposed by participation rather than in response to the actual content of the performance.²¹ The proposal of requiring participation in a competence-enhancing training is consistent with this logic. On this model, ECV constrain the exercise of voting powers on epistemic grounds by *discouraging* a superficial and disengaged participation, rather than by subjecting citizens to a scrutiny process that potentially deprives them of the right to participate in voting practices.²²

see Mulgan, "Holding Power to Account," 236–40; Philp, "Delimiting Democratic Accountability," 38–43; Warren, "Accountability and Democracy," 43–5.

21. Of course, a lot here hinges on the idea that we should stop one step short of targeting the actual quality of voters' performance given that this is not necessitated by considerations of accountability. We cannot rule out the possibility that further considerations or argumentative premises may push us towards taking this further step. In such a case, more stringent ECV may turn out to be supported by the civic accountability justification. This would admittedly result in a more conflictual relationship with political equality. But what the implications of this more tense relationship would be is something that remains to be seen and we should not assume that political equality would trump the demands of accountability.

22. It could be argued that the civic accountability justification has the potential to justify compulsory voting. For example, the inclusion of further instrumental or epistemic premises may justify making participation in the training mandatory for all citizens. The extent to which the civic accountability justification is compatible with compulsory voting arrangements is something worth taking seriously and thus exploring with more caution elsewhere. I suspect that there is at least one major challenge that such an argument would need to

This completes the overview of the civic accountability justification for ECV. Again, it is worth reminding the reader that my goal is not to provide a fully developed argument but, rather, that of showing how an argumentative strategy that is visibly different from standard instrumentalist approaches would be able to avoid or withstand certain common egalitarian concerns. All this section sought to accomplish was providing the civic accountability justification with enough support to warrant treating it as a working hypothesis that is strong enough to be plausibly weighed against opposing egalitarian considerations.

IV. THE CIVIC ACCOUNTABILITY JUSTIFICATION AND THE DISRESPECT PROBLEM

Having sketched the main features of the civic accountability justification for ECV, I will now discuss how it overcomes some issues of political equality commonly associated with the proposal of instantiating ECV, starting with the *disrespect problem*. From this standpoint, ECV ought to be rejected because discriminating between the political judgments of citizens on the basis of a criterion of political competence violates a commitment to treat citizens with the equal respect that is due to them.

Notwithstanding important differences in its formulation, this concern figures prominently in several egalitarian accounts of democratic legitimacy.²³ On this view, arranging public decision-making institutions in a way that reflects a commitment to respect owed to people qua moral equals commands giving them equal decision-making powers in the form of a vote. What seems to be key is the idea that people are paid proper respect only if their political judgments are taken seriously. Respect requires that we recognize the value of people's capacity for moral

overcome. Namely, the options I suggested as candidates for grounding relations of civic accountability require at least a thin willingness clause to successfully give normative edge to the responsibilities associated with this relation. That is, they require at the very least that participants willingly perform an act, such as that of choosing to participate, that signals that they are taking on their role in the practice and thereby incurring the associated responsibilities. While I do not think that this hurdle is necessarily impossible to overcome, an argument in which participation in voting is made mandatory would face some further pressure in this regard. I thank an anonymous associate editor for directing my attention to this issue.

23. Among many, see Allen Buchanan, "Political Legitimacy and Democracy," *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002), 712; Thomas Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 51; Jeremy Waldron, *Law & Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 238–39.

reasoning by heeding their judgments concerning issues of value.²⁴ Judgments concerning public decision-making are no exception. Consequently, public decision-making institutions cannot truly reflect a commitment to equality if they start to disrespectfully scrutinize the political judgments of people. Public reason theorists share similar concerns. On some interpretations of the tenets of public reason, imposing a coercive rule over someone without any form of consideration for their judgment about that rule is an act of disrespect, in that we proceed as if the distinctive capacity for reason of this person has no value at all.²⁵

It is quite clear why ECV, in virtue of their attempt to constrain the exercise of political powers according to criteria of competence, are commonly understood as violating this commitment to respect. A political arrangement that imposes coercive political decisions through a procedure that is insensitive to the views and judgments of some people on grounds of their alleged incompetence would be an arrangement that fails to show proper consideration for their capacity for judgment, thereby *inherently* embodying the disrespectful idea that these people are not sources of valid judgments concerning how to administer our social and political coexistence.²⁶

In what remains of this section, I will argue that the civic accountability justification for ECV can overcome the disrespect problem. The civic accountability justification does not rely on disrespectful assumptions or assessments of differential competence, at least not according to the more plausible interpretation of these notions.

Let me explain this claim. Whether a certain decision-making procedure is objectionable on grounds of respect depends on the kind of justification that is offered in its support. If the justification makes appeal to disrespectful considerations, then, from this standpoint, the justification fails. Thus, the question is indeed whether the civic accountability justification for ECV makes a similarly impermissible move. At least if we frame what counts as a disrespectful consideration in a plausible way, I think it does not.

It is crucial, in this regard, to define with more precision the conditions under which appealing to competence is indeed inherently disrespectful.

24. Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality*, 18–27.

25. Charles Larmore, “The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 12 (1999): 607–8.

26. Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality*, 92–3.

What is taken as disrespectful does not seem to be the appeal to the normative significance of political competence as such. Rather, what is taken as disrespectful is the attempt at making competence-based *comparisons* between the epistemic capacities of citizens that allegedly underlies these appeals.²⁷ In other words, appeals to the significance of political competence are regarded as unacceptable because they are taken to legitimize a contemptuous attempt at measuring, singling-out or assessing which members of the political community qualify as politically competent and to discriminate between them on such basis.

We can agree that considerations of this kind do find space in some standard justifications for ECV.²⁸ On these accounts, proxies that range from empirical studies on the competence of average voters to assumptions based on scholarly education are employed to assess how citizens fare in terms of political competence relatively to one another and to distribute political decision-making powers on this basis. Those who raise the issue of disrespect perceive these attempts at submitting people to a direct scrutiny of their capacities as political decision-makers, and at allocating them along some ranking of competence, as contemptuous. If this narrowed-down interpretation is correct and considerations about differences in political competence among the citizenry are impermissible on grounds of disrespect insofar as they imply this comparative dimension, then my response is quite straightforward. The civic accountability justification for ECV *does not* rely on any disrespectful consideration of this kind and does not involve any attempt at a comparative scrutiny of the political competence of people.

The civic accountability justification for ECV is predicated upon the idea that, in the name of the relation of reciprocal accountability that underlies participation in shared institutional practices, every citizen who wishes to vote owes it to other participants to honor at least their most basic epistemic responsibilities. Beyond this, any further difference or consideration of relative political competence is not pertinent and plays no relevant justificatory role. Moreover, the requirement of acting in an epistemically responsible fashion applies to all citizens who wish to participate in voting, regardless of their current level of competence or

27. David Estlund, *Democratic Authority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

28. See Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 23–53. Quite famously, assumptions based on scholarly education appear in John Stuart Mill's, *Considerations on Representative Government*.

education. And it applies in the name of the normative relation mentioned above, not in the name of empowering the smartest elites. The point that I want to establish is that nothing in these considerations symbolizes the idea that those citizens who, as of now, happen to be less competent or less educated should be singled out as such and placed on the lower tiers of some imaginary competence ranking. Nor does it symbolize the idea that they are unworthy of having a say over political decisions. The premises of the civic accountability justification are not dependent on considerations such as whether people are currently competent, who among them is more likely to be competent and what the current differences between them in this regard are.

Recall that, on this view, the kind of ECV required to ensure accountability are meant to provide a safeguard against epistemically superficial or neglectful voting conduct without tracking voters' epistemic performance toutcourt. Insofar as the concern is about the potentially disrespectful message that such constraints might send or embody, this is a crucial difference. A mechanism that is designed to track epistemic performance toutcourt would indeed send a message like "you are not owed a say unless you belong to the smartest subset of the population," which is arguably a potentially contemptuous and humiliating message. But a mechanism designed to track an epistemically responsible conduct would send a very different message, such as "you are owed a say as long as you behave according to what your role as co-participant demands of you."

Obviously, a lot depends on how the exclusionary mechanisms are effectively arranged, and I shall return on this right below. But, again, recall the main example offered: make voting conditional upon undertaking a competence-enhancing training as part of the registration process. Under an arrangement of this kind, once a voter displays a commitment to discharge their epistemic responsibilities by attending the training, they are included in the decision-making process. There is no need to conduct a further selection, assessment, or scrutiny of their political competence. There is also no need to endorse any attempt at distinguishing who is more competent than whom or at placing voters on a competence ranking. An arrangement of this type, which is perfectly consistent with the premises of the civic accountability justification, would effectively constrain participation in voting on epistemic grounds without resorting to any comparative scrutiny of the political competence of ordinary citizens.

Now, it could be argued that these remarks do not strike at the heart of the problem. ECV are institutional mechanisms that, by definition, establish a criterion for determining who gets to vote and who does not. In the case of the civic accountability justification, the criterion is participation in a competence-enhancing training that is taken to be a proxy for an epistemically responsible conduct in voting. Such a criterion may be less strict than other alternatives but, the concern goes, it would nevertheless end up treating some people unequally. To deliver a competence-enhancing training, we will have to determine what kind of content prospective voters will be presented with. As soon as we include any politically controversial information or “knowledge” this will raise the reasonable complaints of those who deem such “knowledge” ideologically or politically biased and hence inapt to serve as a prerequisite for voting rights. If such complaints are simply ignored, the result would be a political decision-making system that, in making voting powers conditional upon a reasonably objectionable “standard of qualification” that favors certain political ideas over others, glosses over the political judgments of some citizens as if they were of lesser importance. This would yet again express a form of public disrespect towards them or, in any case, represent a form of unequal treatment.²⁹

This is a serious concern, and I must be clear on the extent to which I can truly address it here. Attempting to show that the civic accountability justification, in all of its premises, is a view beyond any qualified or reasonable objection and capable of fully satisfying liberal principles of political legitimacy would be, in the limited space I have, a hopeless task. It would require a thorough discussion of how the view relates to the fundamental tenets of political liberalism and public justification that it would be better to undertake elsewhere. What I can do here is, more modestly, show how the criteria for constraining participation preferred by the civic accountability justification are not blatantly skewed in favor of the political

29. See Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality*, 118–26; Estlund, *Democratic Authority*, 33–6; Gerald Gaus, *Justificatory Liberalism: An Essay on Epistemology and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 251–53. Strictly speaking, Estlund’s epistemic proceduralism admits significant differences in people’s capacity for moral and political judgment and is less concerned with disrespect. Nevertheless, Estlund rejects the appeal to competence comparisons precisely because they run against the qualified objections of some citizens. Estlund’s case against ECV is motivated also by further considerations but since some of these have an epistemic dimension, they fall outside the scope of this paper.

views of some people and hence do not disrespectfully fly in the face of the political disagreements that inhabit a pluralistic society.

The key is, again, the commitment of the view to ensure reciprocal civic accountability for one's epistemic conduct in voting rather than "correct decisions." The fact that such commitment favors constraints aimed at prompting people to refine their political judgments rather than a mechanism of scrutiny aimed at testing for an optimal epistemic performance not only motivates the proposal of a competence-enhancing training. It also has implications on how the training should be designed. While I recognize that it might be difficult to keep faith to this ambition in practice, theoretically speaking nothing in the view commits us to deliver the training through practices that pre-settle controversial political issues, violate political neutrality and favor the political views of some citizens. Recall how the civic accountability justification is open to—and indeed welcomes—the idea of including, in the competence-enhancing training suggested as ECV, interactive and dialogical practices. The core of some of the practices I mentioned as examples (deliberative exercises, local public debates, informative panels, etc.) is the exposure to, and discussion of, competing arguments in a properly moderated and engineered setting and not the consumption of politically controversial "knowledge." Those who are particularly concerned about neutrality between political disagreements may wish to see the training limit the provision of information to uncontroversial knowledge about the structure of the state or the functioning of public institutions and emphasize these practices instead. The result would be an arrangement in which voting is conditional upon meeting a criterion that does not implicate any substantive stance on which political views are preferable or correct. Rather, it implicates only a commitment to standards of conduct that seem already implicit in any acceptable political and civic ethos (i.e., engage in a meaningful discussion about politics before making up one's mind, try to develop an autonomous assessment of public disputes rather than a biased or ideological one, expose oneself to competing political arguments rather than dismiss them, etc.).

The broader point is that because the "horizontal" logic of the civic accountability justification has already ruled out the idea of constraining participation in voting simply by demanding that voters acquire a pre-determined bundle of information branded to them as "the correct views about X or Y," the account can make room for arrangements that are

compatible with neutrality between reasonable political views. Now, such a response works only insofar as we hold on to the assumptions that what voters would be required to do under such an arrangement has a value that no plausible political or civic ethos would find objectionable, and that the practices employed by the training would represent indeed a decent proxy for the normative benefits we are looking for.³⁰ Consequently, emphasizing how a competence-enhancing training may (and probably should) employ more interactive practices that are compatible with political pluralism rather than information-feeding would perhaps not solve the problem entirely. But at least I have shown how the account can avoid straightforward violations of neutrality between diverging political views and, with it, a blatantly unequal treatment of some citizens.³¹

V. THE CIVIC ACCOUNTABILITY JUSTIFICATION AND THE HIERARCHY PROBLEM

I will now turn to a second egalitarian concern typically associated with the idea of ECV: the *hierarchy problem*. From this standpoint, the issue with any arrangement that denies some citizens a say over political decisions on grounds of political incompetence is that this would instantiate an inequality in power and, with it, a hierarchical relationship in which these citizens are subjugated to the authority of their fellows.

The concern with hierarchy stems from a relational interpretation of the commitment to political equality. The key to uphold the ideal of equality, on this account, is conducting human relationships on equal terms. This commands, alongside equal concern or equal consideration

30. For instance, those who favor agonistic understandings of politics may question the first assumption and those who are skeptical of the value of political deliberation may question the second.

31. A further danger associated with the arrangements I envisioned is that voters may disrespect each other during the interactive exercises and discussions that constitute part of the training, for instance because more competent voters may treat their less competent fellows in patronizing or contemptuous ways. This is a risk inherent to a deliberative interaction of the sort envisioned here, even with good moderation in place. That said, it is important to keep in mind that avoiding these instances of potential disrespect is not crucial for the purposes of offering a philosophical justification of ECV that can overcome the respect problem. The requirement that a justification for ECV must meet is *not* that of avoiding all instances of disrespect at any given juncture within the dynamics of the institution, but rather that of avoiding that the *institution itself* expresses or embodies, in its structure and fundamental rules, a disrespectful attitude towards less politically competent citizens. I thank an anonymous associate editor for drawing my attention to this issue and prompt me to provide this important clarification.

for each other's interests, that the parties to the relationship have equal powers in shaping and determining how the relationship ought to be conducted. If this does not happen, the issue is not so much a lack of respect but rather the instantiation of a hierarchy, a relationship in which one party is subjugated to the ruling and authority of the other. Such a scenario seems especially dangerous in the domain of political relationships, as their terms are determined by coercive institutions and thus, differently from the terms of a personal relationship, cannot be revised at will.³²

The implications on political decision-making practices such as voting are quite clear. If we are to uphold relational equality and avoid social hierarchies, we ought to have equal powers in all those processes by which we determine, shape, and discuss the fundamental terms of our social and political coexistence.³³ No one ought to enjoy superior authority over these decisions. From this standpoint, competence-based restrictions on participation are to be rejected because they would submit people who end up excluded from voting to a relationship of subjugation to their "more competent" fellow citizens. A society that makes political decisions through ECV would be a society that is split, effectively, between rule-givers and rule-takers, with those who are denied a say forced to relate to those who were allowed to vote as their social superiors.³⁴

As anticipated, I think that the civic accountability justification can avoid this concern about ECV as well. I will offer two reasons in support of this claim. First, I will argue that, if it is correct that participation in voting instantiates a new normative relation that commands voters to discharge certain epistemic responsibilities and makes them reciprocally accountable for their conduct in this regard, this counterweighs the claims about relational equality that underlie the hierarchy concerns in the first place. Hence, the conclusions of the civic accountability justification for ECV can circumvent such concerns. Second, I will argue that the civic accountability justification for ECV imposes a very modest burden on the

32. The classic statement of relational egalitarianism is Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 287–337. For attempts at bringing this interpretation of equality to bear on democracy, see Niko Kolodny, "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014): 287–336, and Daniel Viehoff, "Democratic Equality and Political Authority," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014): 337–75.

33. Viehoff, "Democratic Equality and Political Authority," 364–5.

34. Kolodny, "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy," 294–5.

commitment to ensure an equal relationship or standing between citizens anyway, given that the ECV envisioned by the argument do not necessarily deprive citizens of the opportunity to vote and do not entail any form of permanent disenfranchisement. Thus, the objection that they would imply social hierarchies has no bite, at least theoretically.

Before getting into the details of my response, let me briefly comment on the general argumentative strategy that I want to pursue. I will not deny that there is value in relating to one another as equal citizens. I will argue that, in the context of voting, this value conflicts with another important normative consideration—the epistemic responsibilities associated with voting powers. The civic accountability justification seeks to strike a balance between these two values by means of ECV. In terms of structure, my attempt at overcoming the hierarchy problem is therefore not dissimilar to that of standard arguments in the literature. What is significantly different—and what I believe makes for a more convincing reply—is how this argumentative structure is articulated in terms of content. Differently from standard approaches, here the commitment to ensure a modicum of epistemic value draws its normative force from the value of our accountability relation as participants in shared institutional practices and from the responsibilities that such relation yields. Hence, the account appeals to considerations that not only are non-instrumental, but that belong to the same family of considerations (relationality, mutuality, reciprocity, etc.) that underlie the concerns about hierarchy in the first place. On this view, egalitarian considerations about how we should relate to one another as citizens in general come in tension with other non-instrumental considerations about how we should relate to one another as citizens who are engaged in a very specific practice that is underpinned by certain normative demands. Both pertain to important dimensions of our interaction as citizens and, as I will argue, we should not ignore one of these dimensions for the sake of the other.³⁵

With these specifics in place, let me explain the details of the response. The hierarchy-based rejection of ECV rests on the idea that relational equality is the central norm according to which our coexistence as members of the same political community should be regulated. But a great part of this coexistence takes place in the context of participation in institutional practices. If what was said in section two is plausible, there is

35. I thank Valeria Ottonelli and Corrado Fumagalli for endless discussions on this.

reason to think that as soon as our actions take place within the boundaries of these practices, other normative considerations emerge. In general, these normative considerations—whatever their grounds—pertain to the standards of conduct that participants in shared practices ought to abide by. When they act as participants in shared institutional practices, ordinary citizens stand in a relation whereby they owe it to each other to fulfill the responsibilities they have been entrusted with and are thus accountable to one another with respect to these standards. So even if relational equality matters in the context of our social and political coexistence, once we accept the idea that participation in shared institutional practices creates a new normative relation characterized by a distinctive pattern of mutual expectations and demands, then relational equality cannot be considered as *the only* relevant norm that regulates this coexistence. The requirements ensuing from the new normative relation are as much part of the norms that should regulate our social and political coexistence as relational equality is.

Recall the housemates case mentioned to explain the kind of reciprocal accountability that my theory relies upon. It might be true that members of the same household should relate to one another as equals. But living together entails having to make common decisions and having, sometimes, to engage in common endeavors. The reciprocal standing of the housemates is regulated by equality but also by the reciprocal demands that might emerge as a result of these common decisions and shared endeavors, demands whose normative stringency cannot be simply minimized or ignored. In other words, one normative dimension of their relation does not nullify the weight of the other. A similar reasoning applies in the context of our communal coexistence as citizens. It might be true that, as citizens, our standing to one another is regulated by norms of equality. But if our social and political coexistence involves further normative relations that yield further norms, such as the ones that stem from acting within shared institutional practices, it is by no means clear why considerations of equality should defeat these additional norms and their implications.

In the case of voting, a norm of equality might command an equal standing and equal powers over political decisions. But once we step in the context of the specific practice by which political decisions are reached, another set of normative considerations emerges. These considerations pertain to a specific dimension of our relation as citizens too, and

they command an epistemically responsible conduct in voting. Now, if we are committed to take seriously our relation as citizens in all its dimensions, then this commitment cuts both ways and we cannot remain indifferent to the demands that it involves in the context of shared institutional practices. Whatever sacrifice in terms of equality follows from this fact should not be understood as a denial of the value of relating as equals. Consequently, ECV should be understood as an attempt at balancing this value with the demands of a different and an equally important dimension of our civic interaction.

Now, those who are concerned about issues of hierarchy would probably be reluctant to accept these considerations. They might concede that we should not ignore one normative dimension of our interaction as citizens for the sake of the other. Yet they could argue that this is exactly what my view ends up doing. Even if it were true that participation in voting generates a new normative relation characterized by a pattern of mutual demands and (epistemic) responsibilities, ECV are not a legitimate response to this fact.³⁶ What we would obtain is not a balance between two normative dimensions of our civic relationship but rather the undermining of relational and social equality altogether, as some people would still be end up being subjected to political decisions over which they had no say.³⁷

This claim, however, does not seem convincing and leads us to the second prong of my reply. ECV can be plausibly deemed to inherently instantiate social hierarchies and undermine relational equality altogether only insofar as they either permanently or ongoingly exclude some citizens from the exercise of political power or impose unfair burdens on a specific subset of the population. In light of its distinctive features, the civic accountability justification can support arrangements that avoid both these pitfalls.

36. Daniel Viehoff, for instance, argues that valuing a relationship calls for excluding normative considerations that might undermine it or fail to sustain it. See Viehoff, "Democratic Equality and Political Authority," 359–61. For a similar point, see also Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Respect, Morality, and Accountability* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 256–7.

37. The coerciveness of political decisions could be seen as a reason for treating the case of voting differently. My understanding is that this would represent a weak reply: it could be argued that, precisely because the decisions we reach through voting are coercive, the responsibilities associated with voting ought not be side-lined.

Let us once again go back to the analogy between living together as citizens and living together as housemates. Suppose that the household must choose an energy provider. Suppose that they organize a few meetings to go over the various options. One of the housemates refuses to take part in the meetings and the others' response is to insist that they will not have a say over the final decision unless they take part in the meetings. The reason for this insistence rests on the idea that it is part of their responsibilities as a member of the household to put some effort into contributing to a responsible choice. The issue at stake is whether such insistence undermines relational equality within the household to the point of instantiating a hierarchy in which the reluctant housemate becomes a mere subject to the others' authority. I think there are good reasons to say that this is not the case. First, we are not in a situation in which the reluctant housemate is unfairly burdened with the requirement to attend the meetings whereas the others are excused. The requirement applies to all members of the household. Second, the reluctant housemate *has* the opportunity and the power to contribute to the decision. No one took that away. What is demanded of them in return for this power is just to live up to the responsibility that they have, as a member of the household, to take seriously and properly contribute to the shared endeavor in which the household is engaged.

The analogy is of course far from perfect but similar considerations can be translated to voting. To state that the ECV supported by the civic accountability justification would deprive citizens of the power to influence the outcome of a political decision would be to stretch things, at least if we assume that someone enjoys influence over a decision as long as the decision-making process is sensitive to their judgments.³⁸ The normative commitments of the civic accountability justification allow it to consistently favor arrangements that are not inherently insensitive to the judgment of a specific subset of the population nor imply the permanent or ongoing exclusion of some citizens from the exercise of political power. Requiring *all* citizens—and not just a subset of the population singled out in virtue of, say, their level of education—to undertake a training as part of the voting process does not effectively result in taking away their right to vote and hence their opportunity to influence the outcome of the decision-making procedure. It merely raises the cost of this opportunity.

38. Kolodny, "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy," 309.

The price for accessing decision-making powers is a commitment to live up to a responsibility that is built into the role of public decision-makers, a responsibility that we owe it to other participants to discharge.

Under several real-world circumstances, the risks associated with these increased costs on participation may be too steep in virtue of their potentially disempowering effects on vulnerable social groups. There are indeed reasons to be extremely cautious about this. Remember, however, that here I am conducting a more principled discussion. My point is that the civic accountability justification is a view that lends support to some modest epistemic constraints on participation in voting without appealing to inherently hierarchical considerations. The only condition that the civic accountability justification for ECV places on the exercise of voting powers is, in fact, the willingness to prepare for the task of influencing political decisions in a way that is conforming to the responsibilities associated with these powers. Such a condition—at least as long as it applies to all citizens regardless of their income, education or social background—implies no in-principle hierarchical consideration according to which some people should just subject themselves to the authority of their allegedly wiser fellows. As Niko Kolodny himself states, “if I have the same opportunity as you have to influence a decision, but choose not to take it, then there is no hierarchy or subordination between us, at least with respect to the making of that decision.”³⁹ If the principled point does apply, then how to make proper arrangements that prevent constraints on participation from exacerbating existing inequalities is a downstream question that I leave, for now, open.⁴⁰

Notice, finally, how there are potential opportunities associated with the view that I have put forward in this paper. Not only the view does not entail a loss of opportunity for influence. It is explicitly committed to the idea that the epistemic resources necessary for a meaningful exercise of voting powers should be made accessible to anyone who wishes to use

39. Kolodny, “Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy,” 309–10.

40. Various incentives could be employed to compensate for the obstacles that real world circumstances impose on vulnerable social groups. What kind of incentives would work best is something that needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis, but these could involve, to use an example suggested by an anonymous associate editor of this journal, financial incentives like the Ancient Greek practice of paying citizens to attend the democratic assembly or other forms of fiscal discounts.

them, at least as long as the burden of the responsibilities associated with these powers is accepted. The view, in other words, features an element of inclusivity that provides it with a potential advantage notwithstanding the concerns just mentioned.

VI. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to show that a non-instrumental justification driven by the value of civic accountability and epistemic responsibility in voting can avoid some issues of political equality commonly associated with the idea of constraining participation in voting on epistemic grounds. While the ultimate success and potential developments of the account are open to discussion, the remarks offered in this paper have hopefully shown that, contrary to a common tendency within the literature, the relationship between political equality and epistemic constraints on voting need not be understood in an overly conflictual fashion.

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTOR

Michele Giavazzi is a Lecturer at the University of Aberdeen and soon-to-be Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Munich. Michele's research focuses on democratic theory, the ethics of voting and political epistemology. He has previously studied and worked at the University of Warwick and at the University of Genoa.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author(s) declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.