

Weakness of Political Will

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Abstract:

In this paper I provide a preliminary account of weakness of political will (political *akrasia*). My aim is to use theories from the weakness of will literature as a guide to develop a model of the same phenomenon as it occurs in collective agents. Though the account will parallel the traditional view of weakness of will in individuals, weakness of *political* will is a distinctly political concept that will apply to group agents such as governments, institutional actors, and other political collectives. I further argue that blaming inaction by collective political agents on a “lack of political will” should be understood as blaming a kind of akratic break within the deliberative process, leading to an inability of the collective agent to capitalize on existing group attitudes in order to translate them into policy or legislation. My primary example throughout will be U.S. political inaction with respect to the climate crisis.

Nations often fail to act in accordance with their best interests. In most cases, there is no great mystery behind this – collective action is difficult and complicated, and there are many tradeoffs and resource constraints that limit what kind of action is possible for governments and institutions to accomplish. In some cases, though, the failures are puzzling. In such cases, it appears *literally possible* for a government or other political institution to take action, and yet it fails to do so, even when such actions would seem to be desirable and perhaps even morally obligatory. Consider climate change: even as many nations suffer dire consequences in the form of increasingly intense weather-related natural disasters, many of those same nations repeatedly fail to commit themselves to policies or legislation that would meaningfully address the crisis. The puzzling feature of this kind of case is that the failure in question seems to be the result of a *motivational* or *volitional* limitation. Failures occur not because of any material or resource limitation, but because the governing collective cannot will itself to realize the set of actions that would bring about a desirable state of affairs.

Yet in spite of a well-developed philosophical literature on the concept of *akrasia* or weakness of will as it appears in individual agents, there exist relatively few accounts of the same phenomena in collective political agents such as governments.^{1,2,3} And while claims about insufficient ‘political will’ are often used to explain a lack of action on a variety of political issues, the term itself is imprecise, and it is unclear what commentators actually mean when they employ the concept. In this paper, therefore, my aim is to provide a preliminary account of weakness of political will (political *akrasia*). In doing so, I will also articulate and argue for a more expansive concept of political will, in order to better account for the many different points at which a political agent might suffer a breakdown of that will.

1. Group Agency, Political Collectives

Thus far I have not defined the term “political agent.” You might wonder why we should think of groups like nations, political institutions, etc., as agents in their own right. We certainly talk about such groups as though they have agency, or at least the ability to act and bear responsibility. Even the term ‘political will’ seems to imply that such political actors have “wills” that might behave in much the same way our individual wills do. But perhaps such talk is merely a manner of speech, and what we really mean to say about groups is that they are just amalgamations of the wills and actions of their constituent group members. In other words, group “agency” may just reduce fully to the

¹ Some consider *akrasia* and weakness of will to be distinct concepts. For simplicity’s sake, I use the terms interchangeably.

² Notable exceptions include discussions of collective *akrasia* in: Pettit, “*Akrasia, Collective and Individual*,” 68-96; List & Pettit, *Group Agency*, ch. 9.

³ Interestingly, there has been some work on other kinds of motivational issues that inhibit our ability to address the climate crisis, for example in Michael Doan’s work on complacency and motivational vice in the face of climate change. Doan argues that complacency is a form of “motivational inertia” where agents are “caught up in patterns of behavior that expressed settled expectations of self-sufficiency.” See, Doan, “Climate Change and Complacency,” 11. Complacency and weakness of will are, by that definition, distinct concepts. But it seems plausible to me that they have a kind of “family resemblance” in that both are related to motivation and can do similar work of offering an explanatory analysis of failures to act in the case of climate change. In the political case, however, I think weakness of will looks like a more plausible explanation for *collective* failure to act, or inaction of group agents.

combined agency of individual members of the group. If this is the case, then it would seem that group weakness of will might just be explainable by reference to weakness of will in the individuals members that constitute the group. Those who are skeptical of talk about group agency or collective agents may therefore find the concept of weakness of political will hard to buy.

However, I think it is fairly clear that there *are* group agents in their own right, where this agency exists over and above, and is not reducible to, the agency of constituent group members; and further, that such agents can experience a kind of phenomenon similar in type to that of weak-willed individuals. But more needs to be said about what exactly this agency consists in, and what kinds of political entities count as agents in their own right, in order to make sense of the term “political agent.”

Consider the following distinction. Sometimes there are collections of people who happen to be together but are not unified in any sense. These are what Christian List and Philip Pettit refer to as “mere collections.”⁴ Other times there are what Virginia Held calls “random collection of individuals,”⁵ or collections of individuals who may appear unified in the sense that they act together in some instance, but they are not a part of an identifiable group that could be considered a “group agent.”⁶

One thing that distinguishes cases of group agency from these cases of mere small-scale shared agency among collections of individuals is the fact that these larger group agents appear to persist through time even as the individual agents that constitute the group may change or even turn over completely. Even though all groups are made up of individual agents, groups such as

⁴ List & Pettit, *Group Agency*, 31.

⁵ Similarly, Larry May refers to these groups as “loosely structured groups.” This can also be distinguished from groups that have what Scott Shapiro calls “massively shared agency,” or those involving the agency of many participants but which cannot be understood as a “group agent” in their own right. See, May, “Collective Inaction and Shared Responsibility,” 269; Shapiro, “Massively Shared Agency,” 257-293.

⁶ Held, “Can a Random Collection of Individuals be Morally Responsible?” 471.

companies, universities, committees, etc. seem to have a kind of “corporate identity”⁷ that transcends individual membership. Consider, for example, the Supreme Court of the United States. The Supreme Court’s membership has changed completely over the history of the United States; but the court’s identity as the Supreme Court has remained the same. Though the existence of these groups may be dependent on the participation of individual members in the group, the group is not identical to those members. Just as a lump of clay “is not identical to the statue, but it is the material of which the statue is made,” the current members of the Supreme Court “are not identical to the Supreme Court, but they are the people out of whom the Supreme Court is made.”⁸

Another feature of these kinds of “corporate” agents that makes them distinct from smaller-scale cases of shared agency is that, though they may operate through their members, their operations appear to be distinct from the actions of any individual members. As Held explains, an organized group agent is distinguishable not just by “certain characteristics that delimit its membership from other persons, but especially by its possession of a decision method for acting.”⁹ Group agents of this kind might have certain goals or aims. Further, they may also, through various procedures, arrive at judgments about how to best achieve those aims. They may even have methods of reviewing or updating those aims, along with their judgments about how to achieve them.¹⁰ All of this might be true without any individual constituent member or set of members sharing those aims, or arriving at those judgments.

In order to better illustrate this, consider Philip Pettit’s “Discursive Dilemma” as an example of a case where a group’s attitudes come apart from the attitudes of individual constituent members. Pettit asks us to imagine a company that takes up the question of whether to use the money

⁷ Pettit, “Responsibility Incorporated,” 172.

⁸ Epstein, *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*, 142.

⁹ Held, “Can a Random Collection of Individuals be Morally Responsible,” 471.

¹⁰ Pettit, “Responsibility Incorporated,” 172.

originally intended to be a pay-raise to instead introduce a set of workplace safety measures against some danger. He also asks us to suppose that the employees are going to make the decision on the basis of three considerations:¹¹ whether the danger is serious, whether the safety measure will be effective, and whether the pay sacrifice is bearable. Employees A, B, and C each deliberate on the particular premises (serious danger, effective measure, bearable loss), and then vote for a particular conclusion on the basis of their deliberation on those premises; only if the employees think the answer is “yes” to each premise will they reason in favor of the pay sacrifice. The following diagram is modeled off of the one Pettit provides to show this:¹²

	Is there serious danger?	Will the safety measure be effective?	Would the pay sacrifice constitute a bearable loss?	Should we accept the pay sacrifice?
A	Yes	No	Yes	No
B	No	Yes	Yes	No
C	Yes	Yes	No	No

The group might deliberate through what Pettit calls a “conclusion-centered” option (which takes into consideration only each group member’s final conclusion about the pay sacrifice), or through what he refers to as a “premise-centered” option (which takes into consideration their conclusions about each of the three premises). If they deliberate through the former, then the result will be against the pay-sacrifice, as each individual member has each concluded against the pay sacrifice. But if they deliberate instead through the latter, for example if there was a chairperson who took a vote

¹¹ Pettit notes that they might do this because of “prior resolution.” Once the group sets out its rules for decision-making, in effect those rules *become* the group deliberative faculty.
¹² Pettit, “Groups With Minds of Their Own,” 171.

on each of the premises, then the result might be in favor of the pay sacrifice, as there are more positive responses under each premise than there are negative.¹³

If they arrive through their standard process of decision-making at the latter conclusion, then the group will decide in favor of the pay sacrifice in spite of the fact that no individual member of the group decided (on their own) in favor of the pay sacrifice. Thus the group deliberative processes can come apart from the individual deliberative conclusions of constituent group members. Particularly when group deliberative processes are complicated, extended, and involve multiple factors, the deliberative faculty that results in action for the group can be distinct from the ones involved in the rational deliberative process for any particular individual, or even all of the individuals involved in the group.

Groups that have these features – the ability to persist through time regardless of membership changes, and a decision making procedure that produces attitudes or judgments not directly attributable to any particular member or set of members – can be understood as group agents in their own right.¹⁴ As I use the term in this paper, a political agent must be an instance of this kind of group in order to be capable of acting, and to be therefore capable of suffering from weakness of will that prevents it from completing the action that accords with its better judgment.

But what sorts of groups in our actual world count as political agents? Some instances of political collectives are more clearly identified as group agents than others. For example, the Supreme Court is a political collective that persists through membership changes and whose attitudes are not directly reducible to the attitudes of each court member, given its formal decision-making procedures. The same is true for entities such as political parties, the United States Senate,

¹³ Pettit, “Groups With Minds of Their Own,” 171.

¹⁴ Given certain views about group agency, these two criteria may not be completely independent of one another. For example, Tracy Isaacs notes that “the more structure a collective has, the easier it is to dissociate its identity from any particular cohort of group members.” Isaacs, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*, 24.

the United States Government as a whole, etc. What is more controversial is whether “the people” in aggregate, where that refers to the individual residents and constituent members of a state, constitute a group agent. Furthermore, whether or not “the United States” itself can count as a group agent is not obvious, though we frequently talk about it as though it is.

For the purposes of simplicity, in this paper I will limit the term “political agent” to refer to just these collectives that have a readily identifiable decision-making procedure and member-independent identity.¹⁵ When I refer to “the United States,” then, this is really just a way of referring to its governing collective. For reasons that will become clear later in the next section, I think that our conception of the governing collective in this case will need to be broadened to include not just specific aspects of a government, but the system of governmental and institutional actions that ultimately affect the production of policy and legislation. For example, the Supreme Court is itself a political agent in virtue of it acting in the political sphere (through its role in protecting or overturning legislation based on the legal criteria). It is also a subgroup (constituent member) of the larger political agent, the United States government. We can therefore analyze the ways in which the Supreme Court could itself be weak-willed; alternatively, we could also analyze the ways in which (even through proper internal functioning) the Supreme Court might play a role in the United States being weak-willed, given its status as an individual constituent member of the larger group agent.¹⁶

¹⁵ Isaacs differentiates between “organizations” on the one hand, and “goal-oriented collectives” on the other. I think it is likely that most political agents will turn out to be organizations under this definition, but because both types of groups can be said to have a “collective intentional structure that gives rise to collective intention and action,” it would also be fine for my argument if some turn out to be goal-oriented collectives, as opposed to organizations. Isaacs, *Moral Responsibility in Collective Contexts*, 27.

¹⁶ Similarly, on a narrow view of political parties, where “the Republican Party” is understood as something like the Republican national committee, political parties will also count as a political agent. The Republican Party has a member-independent identity (it persists through time regardless of changes in membership), and it has both formal and informal rules for decision-making within the political sphere. For example, it has formal decision-making procedures for nominations to political positions at various levels of government, but it also has informal decision-making procedures for influencing policy. It has a constitutive aim, which is something like: to coordinate the beliefs and behavior of (generally speaking) ideologically aligned individual agents in order to promote a particular political agenda. But on a more general or broad picture of the Republican Party, for example if it were understood as a kind of collection of all the individuals in the United States who hold certain political beliefs and vote a particular way, then it would not count as a political agent since such a collection would not have a clear set of aims or a decision-making procedure.

The general idea is that a political collective is a group agent with a member-independent identity that acts in the political sphere, through a decision-making procedure, often (but not always) to produce, evaluate, or otherwise impact policy and legislation.¹⁷

2. Clarifying the Concepts

To begin with, I want to distinguish between two ways of talking about the will. The distinction is basically this: sometimes we talk about “the will” as a kind of general power or capacity, while other times we talk about “a will” to do something in particular. These two understandings are not mutually exclusive, provided that “the will” and “a will” are meant to apply to different concepts. An agent’s having “a will” to stand up and walk around has to do with (perhaps controversially) a motivational attitude of theirs, such as a desire or intention. But the idea of “the will” of that agent is more broad – it has to do with the agent’s general ability or capacity to translate motivational attitudes (like a desire or intention to stand up, beliefs about reasons to stand up, etc.) into action (standing up).

The idea of *political will*, at least as the term is used in the media, is slightly ambiguous between these two concepts. Political will could reasonably be understood, for example, as something like a desire or wish for action on an issue in the public sphere, often in the form of policy or legislation. This is the view of political will that perhaps matches most clearly the way it is used by many politicians and news outlets when they claim there is a lack of “political will” to address climate change, for example. The problem is not that the requisite material resources and

¹⁷ This definition of what constitutes a political agent is meant to include the production of policy and legislation as a sufficient condition, but not a necessary one. Entities like “the Supreme Court” do not directly produce legislation (although of course they are indirectly involved in evaluating the legality of certain legislation and either overturning or protecting it), but they still count as political agents.

political avenues for action on the issue do not exist – rather, the problem is one of a lack of *desire* for action.

But equating political will towards some issue with a mere desire regarding that issue cannot be quite right. At least in the case of individuals, it is clear that a will cannot be understood as a desire alone, since individuals can desire all sorts of things that they make no effort to bring about. A will towards some action implies not just desire, but also a decision or judgment in favor of that action. Presumably, the same is true of collective agents. Further, in the context of collective agents, and political ones in particular, it is not obvious what would constitute a collective desire. For example, one option is that the desire is identical to popularity among “the people” (“the electorate” within democratic entities).¹⁸ The people’s aggregated desires could perhaps be informally understood as their will if, were they to be aggregated, the collective desires of the people form a simple majority in favor of some policy action. But it might also be formed through a more formalized process if the desires are in fact aggregated, for example through a vote or other procedure.

However, the mere fact of majority support for policy action on some issue (whether informal or not) does not appear to be sufficient for there to be political will that results in action on that issue. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center report, a majority of Americans believe that the United States is doing too little to reduce the effects of climate change.¹⁹ But that support alone has not (at least at the time of the survey) been sufficient to realize action in the form of policies or legislation aimed at significantly reducing the effects of climate change. Thus, the idea that *a* political will towards addressing an issue is somehow reducible to the aggregate desires of the people alone (or the electorate, citizens, residents, etc.) regarding that issue does not seem plausible. A better

¹⁸ This view is similar to Rousseau’s conception of the “general will,” understood as the collective will of all citizens, although Rousseau’s theory of the general will is obviously much more complex.

¹⁹ Funk & Hefferon, “U.S. Public Views on Climate and Energy.”

candidate might be something like a joint intention. But understanding the political will to address some issue as being constituted by a joint intention among “the people” will not work, because the kinds of groups that are capable of action are those who meet a certain set of criteria in order to qualify as a group agent, and “the people” do not fit this criteria.

One upshot of the preceding discussion is that the difficulty in determining what constitutes a particular political will to act is due in part to the fact that a political agent like the United States is a complex amalgamation of policymakers and institutions. To say that the United States lacks the political will to address climate change, even as a majority of individual constituent members (including policymaking members) may individually desire action to address climate change (or even specific policy proposals to do so), suggests that a broader understanding of the governing collective involved is necessary, one that includes the sub-groups of relevant policymakers along with institutional players like the Supreme Court, and other institutions with decision-making procedures.

With this broader understanding of the United States in mind, a return to the other way of understanding “the will” seems appropriate. In other words, it leads us back to a consideration of the way an entity like the United States government processes the relevant inputs (including constituent and policymaker desires and intentions, among other things) to produce an output in the form of action. In what follows I will therefore mostly talk about the will of political agents in a kind of old-fashioned way that may come apart from the concept of “willing” or “intending” as typically discussed in both the literature on individuals and on joint intention.

We can therefore understand “the will” of political agents as a power that political collectives have to move themselves to act, where that action often (but not always) comes in the form of things like the creation or evaluation of policy and legislation. Political will governs the process of trying to bring about a change to the political status quo. In most instances, this process involves deliberation among at least some members of the political collective, and results in something like an

intention to act. This intention is not itself identical to the will; rather, the system itself is the will, and the intention to act (which may or may not actually result in action) is a product of this system. Further, any intention that results is not always reducible to the intentions of particular constituent group members, or even the aggregate intentions of all the group members. Political will is as a kind of *inertia* towards change, which is governed by the system through which the collective wills itself into new forms.

Because political will can therefore be understood more generally as the process by which governments and institutions decide on and attempt to bring about action, a characterization of the will of a particular political agent depends on the governing and institutional structure of that political agent. In other words, the process by which a direct democracy moves itself to act will be distinct from the process by which a military dictatorship may move itself to act. There may be commonalities that can be generalized into an account of the will of political agents broadly construed, but for now I will focus on the will of democratic agents, using the United States as a specific example.²⁰

3. Weakness of Will and Practical Reason

On the most common characterization of *akrasia*, or weakness of will, as it appears in individuals, an agent's will is weak if that agent intentionally acts counter to their own better judgment.²¹ In other words, the agent believes there to be another course of action available to them that would best accord with their considered judgment; they simply do not take that course of action. The weak-willed agent acts intentionally in the sense that they have *some* reason for doing what they ultimately

²⁰ I focus on the United States as an example because it is the system of government and history of climate policy that I am most familiar with. However, it is clear that focusing solely on one government is a limitation of this paper. Future work would benefit from expanding the analysis to other countries beyond the United States as well as to other political agents that are not countries.

²¹ See, Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?" 21-42.

choose to do. They just do not perform the action that they take themselves to have more or most reason to do.

With respect to *group* weakness of will specifically, some theorists have argued that group *akrasia* can arise because of conflicts between the rationality of individual group members acting in light of their own interests as individuals, and the rationality of the group decision-making apparatus. For example, using a version of the discursive dilemma, Pettit shows that groups can be either responsive to the views of individual members, or collectively rational (depending on their organization and deliberative process), but not both.²² Pettit and List argue that it is because of this discrepancy between individual judgments and group judgments that group *akrasia* is possible—because “individuals face conflicts between acting for the group and acting for themselves.”²³

Conflicts between individual beliefs and group rationality can thus lead to one kind of akratic break. We can re-describe this conflict along the same lines used to describe the discursive dilemma’s conflicting conclusion-oriented and premise-oriented forms of deliberation. If the individuals are acting for themselves or making judgments as individuals, then they will be making an inference (“no pay sacrifice”) on the basis of one set of premises. The group will collectively make an inference (“yes pay sacrifice”) on the basis of a different set of premises. Both the individuals *qua* individual, and the collective *qua* group agent, are operating on reasons and can be acting rationally. If the decision about what to do is reached based on the inference derived from individual members’ judgments, then the group may not act in accordance with the evaluative conclusions drawn as a collective. This is one plausible way that group *akrasia* may arise.

But Pettit and List’s view is too narrow to account for the variety of ways group *akrasia* can arise. Assuming that the only way that group *akrasia* might arise is through a divide between group

²² Pettit, “Akrasia, Collective and Individual,” 68-96

²³ List & Pettit, *Group Agency*, 200.

rationality and the views of constituent members locates the akratic break not in the group agent itself, but only in the *connection* between group and individual members. But, thinking back to the reasons Pettit's discursive dilemma gives us for talking about collective group deliberation more generally, why not think the group *itself* can suffer from internal akratic breaks? In other words, group *akrasia* does not just occur when there is conflict between individual rationality and group rationality; but it might also occur from an *internal* failure of collective rationality or breakdown of will. In the remaining sections of this paper, I aim to provide an account of exactly how this might occur.

4. A More Robust Account of Weakness of Political Will

When an agent engages in practical reasoning or deliberation, that agent is engaged in reasoning about *what they ought to do*. But within the process of reasoning about what one ought to do, distinctions can be drawn between the steps involved: for example, between the formation of intentional states on the one hand, and the application of these intentional states on the other.²⁴ This can help us see why Pettit and List's account is too narrow to explain all cases of group *akrasia* (and therefore political *akrasia*). Pettit and List argue that group *akrasia* arises because of a tension between acting on the interests of individual group members, or the collective (as derived through the collective decision-making procedure). In this kind of case, individual members would be forming different intentional states than the collective as a whole would.

But there may be other points within a collective agent's deliberation about what it ought to do beyond the formation of intentional states where an agent might be irrational, such as in the production of beliefs or attitudes, the production of desires, or in the practical reasoning from motivational attitudes to a conclusion about what one ought to do. Theories that do not distinguish

²⁴ Heath, "Practical Irrationality and the Structure of Decision Theory," 251-273.

between the rationality of the content of an agent's motivational attitudes, the rationality of the agent's judgment about what would be best in light of those motivational attitudes, and their subsequent decision about what to do in light of that judgment, cannot adequately capture all of the ways in which an agent may experience a breakdown of will.

The more expansive account of weakness of will from Amelie Rorty, on the other hand, offers insights into the way these distinctions come to bear in the case of collective agents.²⁵

According to Rorty's view, we can distinguish among at least five different factors relevant to an agent acting. These are:

- (1) An agent's general beliefs about appropriate human aims.
- (2) An agent's commitment to actualize or realize those aims (in other words, to instantiate them in action).
- (3) An agent's interpretation of a particular situation.
- (4) An agent's forming the intention to act.
- (5) An agent's acting according to their decision.

An agent can therefore suffer from an "akratic break" when the connection between any one or more of these factors breaks down in some way.²⁶

In much the same way, a political agent's power or capacity to move itself to act through a system of practical deliberation is subject to many constraints that may cause a breakdown of will somewhere along the process. Such breakdowns might occur at various points in the process of trying to act, including: in the formation of something like a collective desire or intention among the people or particular sub-groups of people (such as the Senate); in deliberation by relevant sub-groups or among the collective as a whole regarding competing proposals and courses of action; in

²⁵ Rorty, "Where Does the Akratic Break Take Place?" 333-346.

²⁶ For example, the first kind of break, which she calls *akrasia of direction or aim*, occurs between an agent's general beliefs about what is good (their "general principles and ends") and their commitment to using those evaluations to guide their actions. In such cases, the agent simply fails or refuses to commit to following what they judge to be best. This failure or refusal is itself a breaking down of the will. Similarly, an agent might experience *akrasia of interpretation* (a break between their general principles or aims, and their interpretation of the particular situation that they are in), *akrasia of irrationality* (a break between their personal evaluation or interpretation of a situation, and their forming an intention or decision to act), or *akrasia of character* (a break between their decision and their behavioral actions). Rorty, "Where Does the Akratic Break Take Place?" 335.

the actual attempt to act by (for example) passing legislation or enforcing a policy; etc. In what follows, I will categorize these failures according to the location of the break within the process of practical deliberation, using Rorty's analysis of individual *akrasia* as a model for understanding these breaks in the case of political agents.

But because the process by which political agents come to act is different in some relevant ways from the way an individual might come to act, any account of the kinds of akratic breaks experienced by political agents must attend to these distinctions. For example, it is not obvious that political collectives can have beliefs in the same way that individuals can; it is therefore not clear whether political collectives can experience weakness of will due to a break between their general beliefs about appropriate collective aims, and their commitment to instantiating those aims by acting.²⁷ For this and other reasons, we can modify Rorty's original analysis and recharacterize the factors relevant to a political agent's acting as follows:

- (1*) The political agent's constitutive aims.
- (2*) The political agent's commitment to realizing those aims.
- (3*) The political agent's option set.
- (4*) The political agent's judgment or formation of a formal intention to act.
- (5*) The political agent's acting according to their judgment or decision.

We can subsequently identify at least four points at which a collective political agent can experience breakdowns of will. These are:

- a. Failure of commitment: A break between the political agent's constitutive aims and its commitment to realizing those aims.
- b. Failure of rationality: A break between the political agent's commitment to realizing its constitutive aims, and its interpretation of the circumstances or option set.
- c. True *akrasia*: A break between the political agent's judgment about what it ought to do, and its decision to act on that judgment.
- d. Failure to follow through: A break between a political agent's decision about what to do, and its actually bringing about its intended action.

²⁷ There are many theorists who argue that groups can have beliefs or belief-like states, however: see for example, Gilbert, "Modelling Collective Belief," 185-204; Tuomela, "Group beliefs," 285-318; Lackey, "What is Justified Group Belief?" 185-208. Though I take the opposite position for simplicity's sake, the account of collective political *akrasia* could easily be modified to accommodate a more robust view of group belief.

Though slightly modified, these are very similar to Rorty's original characterization of the breaks as they occur in individual agents. This should not be surprising given the analogy between individual agents and collective ones; their process of deliberation will be distinct, but should follow roughly the same format. In the following sub-sections, I will further explain these breakdowns of will, using the United States's weakness of will with respect to climate change as an example throughout.²⁸

4.1 Failures of Commitment:

Collective political agents have particular constitutive aims, some of which may be formally demarcated in a literal constitution, but many of which may not be. A collective agent may fail to commit itself to realizing those aims.²⁹ One reason this might occur is that the agent fails to properly grasp its own constitutive aims; in other words, political agents might be mistaken about the constitutive aims they take themselves to have (or not have). But another, perhaps more common reason that a failure of commitment might occur, is that the political agent is radically conflicted between two courses of action, one of which accords with their constitutive aims and one of which may not.

To see how, first consider how this might arise in an individual. An individual agent may be unable to commit themselves to act in accordance with their general aims as a result of radically

²⁸ While my primary example is United States inaction on climate change, it should be noted that this theory of weakness of political will is not meant to apply solely to inaction on climate change. Climate change simply happens to be a particularly interesting and compelling example, especially given the frequent tendency of the media and politicians to blame inaction on "a lack of political will."

²⁹ Though the group primarily under consideration in these examples (the United States government) will have constitutive aims that are identifiable in virtue of the literal United States Constitution (for example, "establish Justice," "insure domestic Tranquility," etc. are directly stated in the preamble of the Constitution), this is not the case for every political entity. Further, we can derive the aims of the specific sub-groups of the United States government by appealing to these larger aims. Given its shared role in helping to bring about things like "establish Justice," we can say that the United States Senate has similar or subsidiary aims, which may be tailored in specific ways given the rules and powers that the group itself has. In cases where political groups do not have a literal constitution with aims specifically spelled out, we can still derive constitutive aims by thinking about the reason or purpose for which that collective has been formed. A base kind of constitutive aim for many kinds of democratic political groups, for example, might be to coordinate behavior and settle disagreements. Ultimately my goal here is not to argue for one set of constitutive aims for each kind of political group but to show how these might plausibly be understood.

conflicting desires or beliefs – they may be frozen or indecisive in the face of proposals for action that are mutually exclusive. In such cases, the agent takes the reasons for either proposal to be sufficiently motivating, yet they are still indecisive and ultimately unable to act given the conflicting nature of the proposals.

Similarly, group agents can experience this kind of radical internal conflict through political polarization as the attitudes of individual members or sub-groups move to become more extreme. When members or sub-groups move in opposing or different directions, this can serve as a constraint on the overall group agent's ability to make decisions and bring about action. Polarization may even occur as an inevitable byproduct of the deliberative processes of the group itself.³⁰ The group's representative attitudes and intentions may move towards a more extreme version of its initial tendencies as a result of confirmation bias and the creation of echo chambers in group reasoning; but individual members or sub-groups may also polarize away from one another as a result of similar mechanisms, resulting in radical conflict within a larger political agent. As individual members or sub-groups become increasingly polarized through the normal course of group practical deliberation, factions may shift (rationally) towards opposing poles. While one might assume that differing opinions would lead to compromise, increasingly radical internal conflict has the same effect on group agents as it does on a single individual agent – it constrains the group's ability to act at all. Thus, much like individuals can become frozen in the face of conflicting desires (resulting in a failure to act on either desire), so too can groups default to “no action” as a result of internal polarization.

This internal conflict may occur within several different kinds of subgroups of political agents. At the individual level, constituents and individual policymakers may be sufficiently polarized

³⁰ Cass Sunstein, for example, argues that group polarization is the “conventional consequence” of deliberation within groups. Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization.”

such that they are unable to form a commitment in the form of aggregate desire or intention for action that would accord best with the overall collective agent's constitutive aims. For example, assume that one constitutive aim of a deliberative democratic government is to provide for equal representation in decision-making procedures. Individual constituent group members may have radically conflicting views about whether this aim is best accomplished through legislation that expands and protects voting rights, or through legislation that makes voting more difficult in the name of preventing voter fraud. Even if individual constituent group members agree about the nature of the group's overall constitutive aim, they may come to view mutually exclusive proposals as the correct means for realizing that constitutive aim. The collective fails to commit itself to realizing its aims when the result of this radical internal conflict is a failure to commit on the basis of *either* proposal, leading to a breakdown of will.

At the party level, political agents with competing political sub-groups that are at least somewhat on equal footing (most liberal democratic agents) are particularly susceptible to polarization. The two-party structure of the United States, for example, is such that competition between parties is polarizing and self-reinforcing. The use of the filibuster and other veto points by a polarized, radically conflicted congress, has resulted in a reduction of the "legislative productivity of congress as a whole."³¹ Further, because translating majority support into action requires major legislation, which cannot always pass on the strength of one side alone, a joint desire among a majority of the internal branches of the United States (for example, the House and the President) may sometimes not be enough for the system to result in action.

The result of polarization within the United States government as a political entity is not, therefore, more extreme outcomes in terms of policy or legislation, but either a failure to act entirely,

³¹ Lee, "How Party Polarization Affects Governance," 261-282.

or policy “drift” in the form of unguided policy change.³² This kind of inability to act is not obviously a result of the larger group agent’s being practically irrational. Internally, the system of deliberation is functioning as it is set up to do. Intense competition for institutional control incentivizes sub-group members to postpone decisions and leave major legislation for later in order to avoid controversy in the lead-up to the next election.³³ The process of deliberation and internal party functioning are themselves operating rationally; the problem is that this process of deliberation results in increasingly radical internal conflict, with sub-group members on both sides offering reasons for mutually exclusive proposals for action. The United States, as a collective, is effectively frozen in the face of this radical internal conflict, unable to bring itself to act on either set of reasons to bring about either proposal.

Nowhere is this more clear than with respect to major climate change legislation in the United States. Intense competition between Republican and Democratic sub-groups disincentivizes the kind of cooperation required to produce major legislation while reinforcing increasingly polarized attitudes towards policy proposals. The Republican Party thus has reason to be against certain legislative proposals even as other United States sub-group members (the Democratic Party, the Executive Branch, etc.) have reasons in favor of those same proposals. The resulting internal conflict, while itself produced through rational deliberation, ultimately causes the United States as a whole to fail to act rationally in the face of the impending climate crisis, as “a government that cannot respond to emerging challenges such as global climate change puts its citizens and the broader world at increased risk.”³⁴ A political agent that does not protect its constituent members is failing to act in its own best interests. When this occurs because of polarization and radical internal

³² Lee, “How Party Polarization Affects Governance,” 262.

³³ Lee, “How Party Polarization Affects Governance,” 276.

³⁴ Lee, “How Party Polarization Affects Governance,” 274.

conflict, the agent fails because it is too conflicted to commit itself to bringing about that which is in its best interest or accords best with its constitutive aims.

4.2 Failures of Rationality:

Political agents may experience a break between their commitment to enacting policy or legislation that would align with their constitutive aims (both formal and informal), and their interpretation of the situation they are in and the possible options they have. The break can be understood in one of two ways. First, a political agent might simply be mistaken about the circumstances in which it finds itself, and therefore be mistaken about the set of policy or legislative options available to it. Second, a political agent may correctly countenance the circumstances in which it finds itself, but fail to reason appropriately about which available courses of action would best accord with its constitutive aims.

The latter case is simply a mistake of instrumental rationality. In the former case, a political agent may come to regard as infeasible the various policy proposals that would best accord with its constitutive aims. One way this might occur is when political agents experience adaptive preferences. Adaptive preference change occurs when an agent adapts their preferences to the feasible option set. In other words, adaptive preferences “typically take the form of down-grading the inaccessible options.”³⁵ Adaptive preferences are a purely causal, non-conscious “mechanism for dissonance reduction that operates on the preferences by which options are graded;” they serve to make us satisfied with our feasible option set.³⁶

Consider again the case of climate change. On the basis of current analysis, the United States (among other nations) needs to cut nearly all of its current emissions in order to stave off the worst

³⁵ Elster, *Sour Grapes*, 120.

³⁶ Elster, *Sour Grapes*, 124.

of climate change. A recent special report on climate change from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that we have reached almost 1°C of warming above pre-industrial levels. While the effects of global warming are already being seen across the globe, the report details that remaining below 1.5°C of total warming is critical; remaining below 1.5°C of warming rather than below 2°C could mean an enormous difference for preventing or mitigating the absolute worst effects of global warming. The special report stresses that while there are pathways that would keep warming at or below 1.5°C, such pathways “require rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, [...] infrastructure (including transport and buildings), and industrial systems.” Further, these transitions are “unprecedented” in scale, and would imply “deep emissions reductions in all sectors, a wide portfolio of mitigation options and a significant upscaling of investment in those options.”³⁷ Basically, most of the world needs to take nothing short of drastic action, and the United States is no exception.

While the physical resources and pathways exist for the United States to take such action, it suffers a breakdown of will attributable to a disconnect between its commitment to realizing its constitutive aims, and its adapted preference towards climate policy that is politically feasible but will not bring about the kinds of drastic change that would actually accord with its best interests. For example, the most ambitious general climate plan yet (the Green New Deal) was voted down in the Senate in what was essentially a political stunt.³⁸ Even top democrats had been openly critical of the plan. The chances of congress passing the sweeping emissions reductions, de-carbonization rules, and electrification efforts required to truly enable the United States to do its part to keep the world below 1.5°C of warming are almost non-existent. Instead, many recent policy proposals have

³⁷ IPCC, “*Global Warming of 1.5°C: IPCC Special Report on Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-Industrial Levels in Context of Strengthening Response to Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty.*”

³⁸ Green, “Democrats to move on from Green New Deal.”

focused on smaller, more achievable goals. Some proposals have even shifted the goalposts, aiming the United States at targets that would help keep warming below 2°C or 3°C, as opposed to just 1.5°C.

These shifts in policy and legislative goals show the way that political agents can experience adaptive preferences in a way that constrains what they see themselves as able to do. In dropping their pursuit of a comprehensive climate action plan aimed at helping to keep the world below 1.5°C in favor of “more realistic” smaller policies that may get the United States on track to help keep emissions below 2°C, United States policy preferences have adapted to the political infeasibility of more sweeping and radical climate change mitigation. The United States would not have preferred 2°C of warming if the political option set included keeping warming below 1.5°C. But given that the political option set barely includes 2°C, its preferences have adapted.

The main upshot is that these adapted preferences are a kind of response by political agents to perceived political infeasibility. The agent suffers a failure in the reasoning between facts about their political circumstances, the way those facts come to bear on the policy and legislative options available to it, and the way in which these relate to its constitutive aims. In other words, there is a breakdown within the rational connection between an agent's grasp of its aims and its assessment of how it can best fulfill those aims.

4.3 True Akrasia

Political collectives may also suffer a breakdown of will when there is a divide between their judgment about what would be best, and the formation of an appropriate intention to act in virtue of that judgment. In other words, even if the governing collective reasons correctly from its motivational attitudes and interpretation of its option set to a judgment about what it ought to do, the collective may still fail to form a commitment to act on that judgment in certain cases. This is

because an agent engaged in rational deliberation will ultimately come to two distinct conclusions: a judgment about what would be best, and a decision about what to do in light of that judgment.

Thus, even when a political agent arrives at a judgment about which of its available policy options would be best, it remains an open question as to whether the agent will act in such a way that accords with that judgment.

In the case of larger democratic political agents, for example, many such entities have built in veto points that serve to constrain the majority, which means that even if the agent judges (as measured through majority agreement) that a particular policy or legislative proposal would be best, the political agent is subject to minority constraints that may prevent it from following through on that course of action, thus constituting a breakdown of political will. In writing about the failure to address inequality in America, for example, Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz note that the United States political system has many electorally generated and constitutionally embedded veto players, where a veto player is an individual or collective whose agreement is necessary for a policy decision.³⁹ For example, the Senate and the House both function as veto players for the United States. Because the consent or approval of a veto player is necessary for some policy to move forward, the existence of (more) veto players will make it more difficult to “alter the political status quo.”⁴⁰ Many political agents have at least two formal veto players that effectively serve as structural limitations on the motivation of political agents, thereby constraining their ability to act.

Further, there are other “constitutionally embedded features” of democratic political agents that can constrain the will of the majority. In the United States, for example, every state in the union has an equal vote in the Senate, regardless of population, and the Senate has more power than the

³⁹ Stepan and Linz, “Comparative Perspectives on Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in the United States,” 841-856.

⁴⁰ Stepan and Linz, “Comparative Perspectives,” 844.

House in spite of being “malapportioned.”⁴¹ So even if a majority attitude exists towards realizing a specific set of actions through legislation, these features of the political agent serve to undermine its own will by allowing for strong minority constraint on what alterations can be made to the status quo. Further, as Stepan and Linz point out, while “all of these majority-constraining features are constitutionally embedded and could, in theory, be changed by amendments supported by exceptional majorities of citizens,” the United States’s constitutional structure “enables minorities to block such amendments with comparative ease.”⁴²

While Stepan and Linz are discussing inequality-inducing (or equality limiting) features of the United States, it is easy to see how their arguments can be generalized to show how such features might constrain the nation’s will to act in other areas as well. Even strong public support and a majority of the constituent sub-groups of the government being in favor of acting on something like climate change will not guarantee action given the structure and nature of the United States as a political agent. Veto points and other constitutionally or procedurally embedded features of the system of deliberation therefore serve as one important type of constraint on the will of political agents. In the cases where veto points are used by the minority to ultimately prevent legislative or policy action on some issue (thereby preserving the status quo), even when there is a clear majority of policymakers and constituent support for that legislation, the political agent is unable to move itself to act according to its best judgment.

4.4 Failures to Follow Through:

Finally, political agents may also be weak-willed because of their inability to follow through on even the formal commitments they make. In other words, the propensity of political agents to revise their

⁴¹ Stepan and Linz, “Comparative Perspectives,” 845.

⁴² Stepan and Linz, “Comparative Perspectives,” 846.

policy decisions prematurely can also constrain their will. This coincides with Richard Holton's view that the "central cases of weakness of will are best characterized not as cases in which people act against their better judgment, but as cases in which they fail to act on their intentions."⁴³ Weakness of will, on this account, is something more like failing to be resolute enough; it arises when "agents are too ready to reconsider their intentions."⁴⁴ Of course there might be cases where we reconsider our intentions because we realize they were ill-judged or that new circumstances now make them inappropriate, and these are clearly not instances of weakness of will. Rather, weakness of will is a kind of "unreasonable" revision of our intentions in response to the pressure of contrary inclinations.

Political agents frequently experience revision with respect to their intentions. In some cases these revisions may occur through the agent's typical process of practical deliberation, but the result may still be unreasonable. For example, democratic political agents experience changes in their internal structure at fairly short intervals due to electorally generated shifts in power, which constrain the ability of such agents to follow through on their policy decisions without major revisions. In 2015 the Obama administration signed the United States on to the Paris Agreement through executive action. The Paris Agreement was set up to only take effect when at least fifty-five nations representing at least fifty-five percent of global emissions had formally joined – that finally happened in October of 2016, and so the agreement went into force in November. Less than one year later, newly elected President Donald Trump announced that the United States would formally withdraw from the agreement as soon as it legally could (which would be four years from the signing date). In 2019, the United States submitted formal notice of intention to withdraw. And now, of course, the

⁴³ Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 70.

⁴⁴ Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting*, 71.

United States has re-entered the agreement after another electorally generated shift in its internal makeup.

The problem here is that the agent *failed to be resolute* in its intentions, thus leading to a breakdown of will towards climate policy. Political entities are particularly susceptible to this kind of breakdown because many of them often undergo radical changes in composition every few years due to elections and shifts in public opinion. And the effect of these changes in composition with respect to climate policy, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental regulations more generally is clear. According to analysis from a recent New York Times article, the United States under the Trump administration “officially reversed, revoked, or otherwise rolled back” over eighty environmental rules and regulations.⁴⁵ In particular, under the Trump administration, the Environmental Protection Agency “weakened Obama-era limits on planet-warming carbon dioxide emissions from power plants and from cars and trucks [...] At the same time, the Interior Department worked to open up more land for oil and gas leasing.”⁴⁶ The article warns that that these rollbacks will significantly increase emissions over the next decade, among other things.

The United States as a political entity fails in these cases because it goes back on its original intentions too easily.⁴⁷ The problem here is that the political agent *failed to be resolute* in its intentions, thus leading to a kind of motivational failure in bringing about action on climate change. The agent is unable to capitalize on existing inertia even when formal votes are cast in favor of realizing particular policy outcomes. Environmental regulations or emissions restrictions that are only in

⁴⁵ Popovich et. al., “The Trump Administration Rolled Back More Than 100 Environmental Rules. Here’s the Full List.”

⁴⁶ Popovich et. al., “The Trump Administration is Reversing More Than 100 Environmental Rules. Here’s the Full List”

⁴⁷ One objection that has been raised to this point is that, in fact, there are just two different agents here – that the transition between administrations marks a transition to a new agent. I find this fairly implausible, however, since the agent in question is still the United States, even if the administration’s personnel makeup is different. It seems perfectly reasonable to think that agents can change even large pieces of their internal makeup and yet still be the same agent.

effect for a few years are not effective in bringing about their intended outcome; a political agent that is too quick to roll these back or revise them cannot produce tangible effects.

This, however, raises an interesting question about weakness of will that arises within political agents due to a failure to be resolute. In some cases, agents revise their intentions for good reasons – in other words, they might revise their intentions because their original intentions were misguided, harmful, or malformed. If political agents try to institute policies that are difficult to roll back, that may actually be a bad thing in the case of policies that are harmful. Further, in the case of electorally generated shifts in power, where these power shifts occur in ways that align with the political agent's general aims and processes, it might appear that a revision of intentions could in fact be reasonable. And an agent that revises its intentions for good reason is not suffering weakness of will, but simply changing its mind on the basis of some justification.

This all depends on what we regard as an *unreasonable* revision of intentions. Here, thinking back to the extent to which an agent's intentions or judgments are appropriately or rationally tied to their constitutive aims is helpful. If an agent revises their intentions in such a way that prevents them from taking the course of action that would best accord with their judgments about how to bring about their constitutive aims, then their revision is unreasonable. In the case of United States climate policy, failing to address climate change is not in the best interest of the United States; thus if the United States rolls back its climate policies and legislation for no other legitimate reason (for example if the United States realized its constitutive aims would be better realized through a different set of policies), then it is acting unreasonably, and exhibiting weakness of will.

5. Implications and objections

These examples highlight four distinct kinds of weakness of political will, which are categorized according to where they take place within a political collective's deliberative process. The examples

are not themselves fully exhaustive with respect to the phenomena that collective agents may demonstrate when experiencing weakness of will. But all failures of will on the part of the collective should be analyzable according to the preceding account, which provides a taxonomy of these failures based on how (or really when) they arise within the process of deliberation.

The broadness of this theory of weakness of political will raises a potential worry, however. You might wonder why we should think that weakness of will is to blame in these cases of failure, as opposed to some other explanation.⁴⁸ After all, the process of making changes to the political status quo is extremely complicated; what value does the concept of weakness of political will add to the explanation of why attempting to make these changes sometimes goes awry? Social scientists have put forward a number alternative explanations for failures of collective action, which primarily involve game theoretic accounts like prisoner's dilemmas. Why not think one of these can better account for what is truly going on in cases of a "lack of political will"?

To begin with, it is not clear to me that the exact phenomenon that game theoretic analyses are often directed at are all that similar to the one I am trying to explain. But even assuming that it is the same phenomenon, recent discussions about the role of game theory and prisoner's dilemma modeling in economic analyses have brought into question the idea that game theoretic models actually offer explanations at all. Some philosophers have argued that modeling human co-operation by using a prisoner's dilemma cannot offer true explanations of field phenomena because such models are overly simplified and idealized.⁴⁹ In part, this is because modeling a collective action problem as a prisoner's dilemma requires that we assume the agents involved are perfectly rational players with perfect information, who go on to make rational choices. We can see this, for example, in Stephen Gardiner's description of the collective approach to climate change as a tragedy of the

⁴⁸ Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

⁴⁹ Northcott & Alexandrova, "Prisoner's Dilemma doesn't explain much," 64-84.

commons. One premise of Gardiner's argument states that "when each agent has the power to decide whether or not she will restrict her pollution, each (rationally) prefers not to do so, whatever the others do."⁵⁰ This kind of assumption is a necessary feature of most game theoretic models in order to explain the failure to address climate change by the global community.

But as many theorists have pointed out, it also oversimplifies the picture of any particular country's preference set. According to Matthew Kopec, for example, the assumption "is only guaranteed to be true if states value economic output in a strictly positive way," but "nations seem to care about many things besides merely increasing their economic output."⁵¹ Similarly, Peter Wood notes that the game theoretic model assumes that countries have clear preferences, which are usually based on aggregate welfare of the countries citizens. But "in reality, different citizens have greatly different preferences, and the decision making is based on a political process,"⁵² which complicates the overly idealized picture of a country's preferences in such a way that game theoretic analyses cannot account for. Finally, consider the following from Linn Hammergren:

"Recent experience in the United States with proposals on a national health plan, NAFTA, and tax reform are relevant in suggesting how information overload, intentionally distorted messages, uncertainty, emotional reactions, and conflicting secondary interests make it difficult for public and elites to discuss their way to an acceptable solution to what all perceive as a problem. This is not to say that policy making is irrational, but rather that a strictly rational model oversimplifies the situation of both individual and collective actors."

Even in the case where many (perhaps even the majority of) individual constituent group members are in agreement that there is some problem that needs to be addressed, this is no guarantee that the group can easily arrive at a kind of simplified preference set regarding possible solutions.

Even on a less complex picture of collective action among individual agents, evidence from behavioral economics suggests that agents do not operate perfectly rationally nor do they always

⁵⁰ Gardiner, "A perfect moral storm: Climate change, intergenerational ethics and the problem of moral corruption," 400.

⁵¹ Kopec, "Game theory and the self-fulfilling climate tragedy," 10.

⁵² Wood, "Climate change and game theory," 154.

avoid cooperation even when it is seemingly in their interests to do so, which means analyzing these cases according to game theory will not necessarily help us predict (or explain) the choices agents make. It seems wrong to assume it would be more helpful in cases where the preferences and decision-making processes are even more complex, as in the case of group agents like countries or political institutions.

Thus, the standard game theoretic accounts from social scientists cannot provide us with the resources necessary to understand the particular kind of phenomenon I am interested in. When we think about why we often fail to bring about changes to the status quo, even when it would be in our interest to do so, surely a part of the failure can be attributed to malformed preferences or purely economic interests. But as Hammergren notes, part of the explanation is also “found in the difficulties of translating a general desire or even a specific plan into a concrete series of actions, each of whose parts must also be “willed” into effect.”⁵³ This reference to the difficulties of “willing” a plan into action is telling. Even when there exists a general desire, or even a generally supported plan of action, there remains some missing piece that limits the motivational capacity of the collective. My contention, then, is that the philosophy of action and moral psychology literatures contain the resource necessary for us to analyze this missing piece, or to explain what is really going wrong when collective agents seem to suffer these kinds of motivational failures.

There are two additional implications worth discussing here. The first is that identifying the exact way in which a collective experiences a failure of will can help determine possible solutions or preventative strategies. Agents may take on various strategies to prevent themselves from suffering from weakness of will in the future; these can take the form of precommitments or binds, but also changes in internal structure when necessary. But an agent that suffers weakness of political will due to a failure of rationality will have different sorts of precommitment strategies than one that suffers

⁵³ Hammergren, “Political Will,” 8.

weakness of will due to true *akrasia*. An agent that frequently suffers from weakness of will due to failures of commitment, for example, may need to change its incentives structure to avoid running into the kinds of weakness of will pointed out by Pettit and List, which occur due to tensions between individual members and the collective reasoning apparatus. On the other hand, an agent frequently failing to change the status quo because of true *akrasia* may need to amend its internal deliberative process to get rid of certain veto points (like the filibuster) in order to truly precommit itself to avoiding the weak-willed option.

This brings us to the second implication, which is that many of the failures of will experienced by collective agents are a result of internal features of those agents themselves. At least in the case of liberal democratic agents, many features that lead to their weakness of will are literally constitutionally embedded into their structural makeup. In effect, they are a feature of the way these systems are set up, as opposed to a bug. Further, the propensity of democratic political agents to experience these as constraints on their motivational capacities is not obviously a negative. The power that a group agent such as the United States has is vast, and the desires and attitudes of the whole and of sub-group members have changed drastically over time. In some cases, it may even be a good thing that it is hard for the United States to will itself to act, as it may prevent the United States from acting rashly or in ways that ultimately are not in its considered best interests.

On the other hand, these motivational constraints serve as a kind of drag on the inertia of change, often inhibiting the agent from willing itself into new and more just forms. The United States deliberates, sometimes even forming intentions or resolutions to act, and yet still cannot bring itself to alter a political status quo in which many people continue to suffer injustice, oppression,

poverty, etc. Further, as Lee pointed out, the agent is unable to act in the face of impending crises, leaving constituent citizens vulnerable to the risks of things like climate change.⁵⁴

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