Democratic Alarmism: Coherent Notion or Contradiction in Terms?

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# Introduction

Political leaders are alarmist when they exaggerate or confabulate serious threats to the commonweal. Leaders typically engage in alarmism – which I will be treating as synonymous with “fearmongering” and “scaremongering” – to elicit fear in the public and thereby modulate its behavior and beliefs. For instance, a government might inflate the risks associated with climate change to sway public opinion and secure a mandate for ecological policy reforms. A raft of theorists from across the political spectrum take alarmism to be a *necessary* feature of any functioning democracy, that is, necessary for the preservation and wellbeing of the polity. This is somewhat surprising given that alarmism appears to be starkly undemocratic, specifically insofar as it contravenes the principle of collective self-determination. Alarmism prima facie violates this principle because it involves deception and emotional manipulation. People cannot be said to be choosing for themselves when they deliberate under the influence of panic and misinformation. John Mearsheimer (2011, 55) has gone so far as to describe the practice as “antidemocratic at its core.” But if alarmism is politically necessary, then this would imply a deep tension between the basic value commitments that condition democracy and the real political practice of regimes that self-identify as democratic. Yet almost none of the democratic theorists who posit alarmism as a necessity acknowledge this tension, let alone explore how it might be resolved.[[1]](#footnote-1) The following study therefore examines the conflict between alarmism and democracy, and then sketches how in some cases we might be able to pacify this antagonism. I reject Mearsheimer’s claim that alarmism is intrinsically undemocratic, arguing instead that under certain conditions the practice can be rendered broadly consistent with a democratic commitment to collective self-determination.

I begin by drawing some relevant distinctions between different types of alarmism (Section 2). This clarifies the specific form of alarmism which I will be arguing has democratic potential. In Section 3, I then outline why many commentators consider alarmism to be a political necessity. In Section 4, I assess the arguments in favor of Mearsheimer’s view that political alarmism is *inherently* undemocratic. These boil down to the objection that deception and emotional manipulation – both of which are integral to alarmism – apparently contravene the democratic principle of collective self-determination. In the final section (Section 5), however, I argue that if the right forms of community consent are obtained, alarmism does not necessarily violate the principle of collective self-determination. This section also considers the institutional pathways by which this consent might be garnered. Since the required institutions, though not currently in place, seem to be perfectly feasible, I conclude that democratic alarmism is a coherent notion.

# What is Alarmism? Some Preliminary Distinctions

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines an “alarmist” as someone “characterized by a tendency to exaggerate potential dangers”. For our purposes, it is worth expanding upon this definition, first off because the OED does not specify that alarmist exaggeration – or what is technically called “threat inflation” – can take a variety of distinct forms. For instance, it can involve presenting a given threat as more severe than the well-informed alarmist takes to be truly the case. In this way, a political leader might warn the public that a virus spreading through the population has a mortality rate of 5% when they believe the correct figure to be closer to 1%. But the exaggeration might also consist in presenting a given threat as closer in space or time than the alarmist politician believes to be the case. For instance, they might present an approaching army as geographically nearer than they believe it to actually be, or they might claim that particular consequences of global warming are likely to arise sooner than expert advice has led them to believe. Another form this exaggeration might take is probabilistic. An alarmist political agent might lead citizens to believe that a worst-case scenario is more likely than the available information indicates, or they might present a merely *possible* scenario as *inevitable* unless certain policy changes are pushed through at short notice. This kind of exaggeration often takes the form of simply warning people that they’re exposed to the risk of a worst-case scenario without mentioning the relative likelihood of milder scenarios. As Carl Sunstein (2002, 43–47) has shown, if a worst-case scenario is sufficiently shocking, people tend to massively overestimate its likelihood in comparison to milder competing scenarios. This is one dimension of what he calls “alarmist bias.”

What the OED definition also fails to specify is that alarmism frequently involvesthreat *invention* (and not just inflation). For example, a political leader might actively seek out a military conflict with the express intention of spreading fear, as Mao did during the First Taiwan Straight Crisis (Christensen 1996). We might call this type of invention *threat* *engineering*. Alternatively, political leaders might confabulate imaginary threats, for example by encouraging the public to fear divine punishment and hell, even when those leaders do not themselves buy into these articles of faith (we will return to this example in the following section). We can call this *threat confabulation*.

A distinction also needs to be drawn between what I will be referring to as *malign* and *benign* alarmism. Malign alarmism occurs when a political agent leverages invented or inflated threats with an eye to manipulating citizens into endorsing policies that empower the political agent at the expense of the national interest. Benignalarmism, by contrast, describes situations in which leaders inflate risks with the sincere intention of neutralizing a serious threat to the commonweal. This distinction hinges on a difference in political agents’ *intentions.* As it stands, in practice it is difficult to ascertain whether a politician’s use of alarmism is ever truly benign. Their intentions might be confused, or their ostensibly benign use of alarmism might be unconsciously motivated by a desire for self-empowerment. I would be inclined to see these as instances of malign alarmism facilitated by self-deception. What I will be suggesting in Section 5, however, is that there is an institutional mechanism by which we might obtain a strong indication of whether a given political leader’s use of alarmism is *genuinely* benign. Nonetheless, though this will radically reduce the grey area between malign and benign alarmism, it will not eradicate it, and borderline cases will inevitably crop up. Fortunately, not a great deal hangs on our resolving such borderline cases. For the purposes of this paper, all that needs to be demonstrated is that genuinely benign cases of alarmism can *often* be identified and rendered consistent with the principle of collective self-determination.

To clarify, then, in this paper I will be arguing that a benign form of threat inflation can, under certain conditions, be rendered broadly compatible with the democratic principle of collective self-determination. However, I am expressly not defending the claim that malign alarmism, or either form of threat invention, can be considered democratic. Regarding this far more controversial thesis, I will remain agnostic.

# The Necessity of Alarmism

The idea that alarmism represents an indelible feature of political practice can be traced as far back as Aristotle. In his *Politics* (1991, 5.8.1308a25–29), Aristotle insists that “the ruler who has a care of the constitution should invent terrors, and bring distant dangers near.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In his view, when citizens fear a foreign enemy, they tend to be more loyal (to the constitution) and less liable to corruption and dissent, irrespective of whether or not their fear is well-grounded. According to Aristotle, only when a population perceives an imminent and severe danger are its members sufficiently disposed to behave in a pro-social manner. The underlying rationale for this belief is that citizens need to be collectively faced with an existential threat before they will acknowledge the need for solidarity and view anti-social egoistic behavior as destructively self-undermining. Under such conditions, individuals are more likely to affirm cooperation as the most effective means of maximizing their wellbeing. In situations of perceived safety, however, they are usually too myopically egoistic to see that cooperation and compliance – in other words, *dovish* behavior – are in their best interests (since an excess of hawkish behavior leads to social disintegration). As such, on this view, leaders should benignly inflate and invent foreign threats to promote dovishness, which in turn benefits the public good.

Livy on the other hand takes a different tack. He commends Numa, the second king of Rome, for realizing that although a collective fear of foreign enemies can check a nation’s seditious impulses, this benefit comes at too high a cost since it renders the citizenry belligerent and in doing so harmfully brutalizes them. Numa therefore sought to substitute *martial* fear of foreign enemies with a *religious* fear of divine wrath. According to Livy, the latter constitutes a far more civilized means of achieving the same goal – to wit, maintaining a loyal and orderly populace. Since Numa “could not get through to their [his subjects’] minds without inventing some miraculous story,” he confabulated the fearsome myths he required to do so (Livy 2006, 1.19, 30). In his *Discourses on Livy* (1996, 1.11, 35), Machiavelli reprises this position, arguing that where “fear of God fails, it must be either that the kingdom comes to ruin or that it is sustained by fear of a prince, which supplies the defect of religion.” He submits that princes should therefore “favor and magnify” any myths that foment these fears, “*even though they judge them false*” (1.12, 37; emphasis mine).

A comprehensive intellectual history of alarmism would need to include a host of further thinkers (most obviously perhaps, Hobbes and Schmitt). But Aristotle, Livy and Machiavelli give us a representative view of the kind of justification which historical thinkers are wont to use when framing alarmism as a political necessity. As we will now see, while many present-day political theorists echo these historical precedents by likewise construing alarmism as indispensable, they do so for markedly different reasons.

## 3.1. The Realist View

At present, the foremost advocates of alarmism are to be found among conservative realists working in the field of international relations (IR). Within this group, Thomas Christensen and John Mearsheimer particularly stand out. According to Mearsheimer (2011, 55),

Leaders engage in fearmongering when they think they recognize a serious threat to national security that the public does not see, and that the public cannot be made to appreciate with straightforward and honest discourse. They reason that the only way to mobilize their citizens to do the right thing is to deceive them for their own good.

Whereas Aristotle, Livy and Machiavelli maintain that the proper function of alarmism is to ensure that citizens are kept in a *permanent* state of fear, Mearsheimer, like most contemporary theorists, only endorses alarmism as a *temporary* measure for fending off equally temporary threats. What is more, where for Aristotle, Livy and Machiavelli the pressing threat that people are unable to appreciate, and which justifies alarmism, is that of *endogenous* social disintegration, for Mearsheimer the real threat is usually of an external military nature (all the historical examples of justified alarmism he cites are thus martial in kind). For Mearsheimer, the problem is not that people are ordinarily too hawkish, but rather, that they are too prone to ignorance, apathy, or cowardice, particularly in the face of serious collective dangers – and even more so when those dangers are temporally or spatially distant. He further contends that this unflattering portrait of the typical citizen is common to theorists on both the right and the left (Mearsheimer 2011, 88–9; however, cf. Jacobsen 2017). The danger, then, is that left to their own devices, people will only mobilize against these very real external threats when the horse has already bolted. Politicians are therefore duty-bound to galvanize citizens in a timely fashion, and they can only do so by magnifying the threat at hand, or in Aristotle’s terms, by “bring[ing] distant dangers near.” This inflation offsets the natural lag in the citizenry’s responsiveness.

Mearsheimer, however, conspicuously overlooks the extent to which alarmism is misused by malign political leaders seeking to empower themselves with little regard for the public welfare. In his own words (2011, 55), “leaders do it [fearmonger] because they think it is in the national interest, not for personal gain.” But there is ample evidence that political leaders frequently use alarmism to stifle opposition and consolidate their powerbase (see Jacobsen 2017; Robin 2004; Sunstein 2005, 83; Forst 2008, 323). In terms of the distinctions drawn in Section 2, Mearsheimer mistakenly assumes that all alarmism is *benign* alarmism, and therefore neglects its malign counterpart.

Christensen, by contrast, gives a more balanced view, acknowledging that in many instances, threats are inflated, engineered, or confabulated by those in power as a means of promoting their own interests, with complete disregard for the public good. Some leaders exploit the fact that when citizens perceive an imminent foreign or domestic threat, they are more inclined to support incumbent leaders – a tendency that Christensen (1996, 15) unequivocally criticizes. Certain forms of “scapegoating,” “diversionary conflict,” and the “rally ′round the flag effect” fall into this category of malign alarmism.

Whereas Mearsheimer contends that the principal purpose of alarmism is to mobilize people for aggressive *foreign* policies, for Christensen its chief function is to mobilize people for *domestic*, economic policies – “such as long-term investment in domestic industrialization” (Christensen 1996, 7) – which in the long-term enhance a nation’s standing in the geopolitical arena. However, Christensen is at bottom concerned about the deleterious loss of security that slipping down the international pecking order can entail for a nation; hence the need to maintain national security is in his view still the ultimate justification for alarmism.

Like Mearsheimer, Christensen (16) maintains that “leaders might have difficulty convincing the public to make significant sacrifices for international security efforts, even if those efforts are in the public’s own long-term interest.” To persuade the public to make the sacrifices needed to ensure their long-term interests, Christensen believes that leaders may “create or prolong small international crises in order to exaggerate the immediacy of international threats facing the nation” (17). That said, he acknowledges that alarmism is also prone to trigger excessive knee-jerk reactions in the population. Such overreactions often lead to the wasteful overinvestment of resources to combat what is for all intents and purposes a paper tiger, that is, a *pseudo*-threat. For Christensen, this dynamic is exemplified by the “American intervention in Vietnam and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan” (14). Echoing this concern, a slew of risk theorists claim that alarmism more often than not leads to detrimental overinvestment, diverting resources away from constructive domestic policies, as well as from the fight against real threats (Mueller 2005; Sunstein 2005, 127; Glassner 2009, xxiv). For these theorists, alarmism is therefore generally best avoided. Christensen, though, claims that such wasteful overreaction only occurs in a minority of cases. Indeed, he contends that on balance the mobilization instigated by benign alarmism tends to yield socially salubrious results.

Further recalling Mearsheimer, Christensen (1996, 19) claims that alarmism is necessary because the average citizen is politically shortsighted, and as such is unable to appreciate the need to invest in long-term security policies, especially when this cuts into “personal short-term income or funding for other government programs – such as entitlements, hiring of police, and improvement of public works – that make the immediate environment more secure.” He sees this as particularly problematic “in countries with a poor and uneducated population.” Accordingly, both democratic and autocratic leaders who wish to protect the citizenry need to inflate or invent threats to the national interest.

Both Christensen and Mearsheimer see it as exceptionally necessary for *democratic* governments to engage in alarmism as compared with other regime types (e.g., autocracies). According to Mearsheimer (2011, 59) this is because “leaders are more beholden to public opinion in democratic states.” And Christensen (1996, 47) implies much the same when he states that democratic governments “require legislative support for military and foreign aid packages that dictatorships do not.” In their view, democratic leaders often need a public mandate ­– or at least the approval of other democratic representatives – to secure the finance and make the legislative changes they believe are required to avert severe threats, and alarmist rhetoric is an especially effective tool for achieving this end. Autocratic leaders, however, are free of such obstacles, since they can introduce new legislation, and restructure the national budget as they see fit.

## 3.2. The Liberal View

At the liberal end of the political spectrum, we again find theorists positing alarmism as a political necessity, though their endorsement of this practice is far more reserved than that of the IR realists just discussed. Martha Nussbaum (e.g., 2018) and Cass Sunstein (e.g., 2005) complain that poorly grounded fears are far too prevalent in present-day politics, and that citizens are all too often irrationally fearful of vanishingly unlikely risks. In this condition of fear, electorates are apt to hastily give up their liberties for the sake of survival, and to curtail the rights of any ethnic minorities that might have been unjustly blamed for the alleged risk. In making these observations, Sunstein and Nussbaum join a multitude of liberal critics lambasting the so-called “politics of fear.” Some of these critics take the kind of observations made by Nussbaum and Sunstein as sufficient grounds for altogether proscribing the use of fear as a political tool (e.g., Robin 2004). Others, though, contend that fear *can* legitimately be used by political leaders provided its use is based on, and commensurate with, an accurate understanding of the severity and probability of the risk at issue (Beck 1992; Furedi 2005; Nussbaum 2018; Sunstein 2005; Svenson 2008). Sunstein and Nussbaum are perhaps the foremost proponents of this position. As Nussbaum (2018, 212) puts it, “democracy surely involves some fear, and fear can be a useful guide in many areas of democratic life, when the underlying facts are right”. But how can fear be a useful guide exactly? Since Nussbaum cites Sunstein in this connection, we should briefly consider what he has to say vis-à-vis political fear and alarmism.

In Sunstein’s view, the goal is not to eradicate fear-inspiring rhetoric – or what social psychologists refer to as “fear appeals” – from political life, but rather to ensure that people’s fears are proportionate to the actual risks they face. What Sunstein highlights, though, is that giving citizens a correct description of the probabilities in play usually does not instill them with an appropriate degree of fear. When people are informed of horrific but very low-probability risks – for example, of a plane crash – they tend to ignore the low probability and focus on the horrific outcome, leading to a disproportionate degree of fear (recall the alarmist bias already described in Section 2). On the other hand, when people are given accurate information concerning a distant, but nonetheless severe and high-probability risk – for example, the risk of serious disease arising from poor diet – they typically *underreact* and experience a degree of fear out of kilter with the real magnitude of danger. These cognitively hardwired vices of excess and deficiency are what Sunstein refers to as “probability neglect” (2005, 122–125).

The human disposition to neglect probability when assessing risk generates an ethical dilemma. Providing individuals with epistemically accurate information does not elicit the appropriate degree of fear since people are predisposed to focus on specific aspects of the information in a way that distorts the facts of the matter. If a political agent has a duty to protect the citizenry from real dangers, and they can only do so by instilling them with a degree of fear commensurate with the real risks, then the agent is required to contravene their competing duty to accurately inform the citizenry. Consequently, where underreaction is likely, leaders may need to be alarmist, presenting people with an inflated picture of the risk looming in the distance. In Sunstein’s paternalistic view (2005, 125), this would involve presenting the public with “worst-case scenarios, or dramatic images of harm.” Chiming with the realists, he contends that in circumstances such as these, inflation can “help to mobilize people formerly suffering from torpor and indifference. The same cognitive processes that produce excessive fear can counteract insufficient fear” (Sunstein 2005, 210). So, if a government is charged with protecting people from serious dangers, it will sometimes be obliged to disseminate an inflated picture of certain risks.

Despite Nussbaum’s demand for fact-based fear, she herself concedes that where the abovementioned dilemma arises, the protective duty of the state takes precedence. In these circumstances, exaggeration, or what she calls “hype,” is sometimes justified:

If a fear is well grounded and balanced, and yet there is a danger that people will ignore the problem and fail to act, some hype can be warranted, as when a politician trying to get citizens to evacuate calls an oncoming hurricane a “monster storm.” (Nussbaum 2018, 60)

For Nussbaum, so long as the political agent is acting benignly and on the basis of factual evidence, a moderate degree of deception is permissible. Note that whereas IR theorists conceive foreign threats to national security as the chief danger meriting alarmism, when liberals seek to justify threat inflation they prefer to focus on natural disasters and public health crises.

On the liberal side, the final theorist we should consider is Anthony Giddens (2002, 30), who argues that “paradoxically, scaremongering may be necessary to reduce risks we face – yet if it is successful, it appears as just that, scaremongering.” What Giddens means is that if benign alarmism is effective, to the uninformed it can retrospectively appear to have been unnecessary, and possibly even malign. He cites the example of the AIDS crisis, when governments in the developed world engaged in extensive alarmism to contain the epidemic. This campaign being broadly successful, people then accused these governments of having unjustly exaggerated what was never a serious threat in the first place. But as Giddens remarks, “we know from its [AIDS’] continuing global spread, [that] they [governments] were – and are – entirely right to do so [i.e., to resort to alarmism]” (30). The more successful a legitimate case of alarmism is, the less legitimate it will appear to the electorate in hindsight. Giddens’ observation indicates why it is that successful cases of alarmism are often not salient, and hence why people are liable to underestimate the political necessity of alarmism. For Giddens, alarmism is therefore not just a precondition of collective wellbeing, but its indispensability is frequently obscured from view. We will be returning to this point in the following section.

The claim that scaremongering is necessary – which we have now seen a range of theorists advancing – is controversial, and critics of fear-based politics pointedly object to this empirical claim (see e.g., Robin 2004; Jacobsen 2017). Although there appears to be strong justification for considering alarmism a political necessity in certain exceptional circumstances, here is not the place to settle this thorny empirical dispute. Fortunately, we need not resolve this disagreement, since our question is rather, *if* one affirms alarmism as a political necessity (as we’ve seen many do), can one coherently claim to be an advocate of democracy? Or is there something inherently contradictory in this position? As proponents of democratic politics, Mearsheimer, Nussbaum, Sunstein and Giddens (among others mentioned in this section) are all implicated in this question.

# The Apparent Incompatibility of Alarmism and Democracy

Among those who posit alarmism as a political necessity, only Mearsheimer and Sunstein discuss the potential conflict this generates with the conditioning principles of democracy. In addressing this tension, however, they arrive at contrary conclusions. On the one side, Mearsheimer (2011, 55) argues that it’s a matter of hard contradiction: “Fearmongering, which is a straightforward top-down form of behavior, is antidemocratic at its core.” This would imply that eventhe most benign forms of alarmism are intrinsically undemocratic (though he nonetheless maintains that a functioning democracy *can* accommodate restrained alarmism [Mearsheimer 2011, chap. 8]). On the other side, Sunstein (2005, 125) contends that under certain conditions alarmism is perfectly legitimate, even when viewed from an ideal democratic perspective (though his defense of this claim is unfortunately brief).

In this section, I want to assess the two principal arguments in favor of conceiving alarmism as an essentially *un*democratic practice: first, that alarmism undemocratically elicits fear; and second, that it’s undemocratically *deceptive*. The problem is that both fear appeals and deception similarly appear to contravene the democratic principle of collective self-determination. This principle stipulates that political power should lie in the hands of the citizenry, insofar as they should give themselves the laws under which they live. I take the principle of collective self-determination to be an uncontroversially core tenet of democracy, one encapsulated in Lincoln’s oft-cited description of US democracy as “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln 1989, 536).

## Democracy and Fear

So why might evoking fear violate the principle of collective self-determination? The most obvious reason one might have for thinking this runs as follows: Fear, in appealing to people’s emotions, seems to hamstring their capacity for rational decision-making, leaving them unable to make considered political judgments (Nussbaum 2018, 44–51). According to this view, when people panic, they rarely make sensible decisions, and instead follow their immediate impulses, or figures of authority, without due critical reflection. The choices they make under such conditions therefore cannot be considered properly *their own*, and therefore fail to qualify as autonomous. From this standpoint, fear and panic could be said to negate the conditions of deliberation necessary for genuine democracy. The appeal to fear involved in alarmist rhetoric is on this view a form of illicit manipulation and coercion.

In bioethics this was for a long time the go-to argument against using fear appeals to motivate healthier behavior in the citizenry (for an overview, see Bayer and Fairchild 2016, 393–5). But some persuasive counterarguments have been ranged against this position. Robert Goodin (1989, 583), for instance, argues that health professionals cannot simply communicate information about serious health risks in a dispassionate “scientific” manner. Recalling the dilemma mentioned in Section 3.2, Goodin maintains that while such information might enable vulnerable individuals to repeat the facts and probabilities in play, it tends to leave them unable to fully comprehend the gravity of the various risks they face. For such comprehension, says Goodin, people need to grasp the danger *in their gut*, so to speak, which can only be achieved by arousing their sense of fear (see also Dworkin 1972, 79; Bayer and Fairchild 2016). Only when people have an *emotionally* proportionate grasp of the relevant risks can they be said to have a proper understanding of the range of life choices available to them. In a counter-intuitive manner, fear might therefore *enhance* autonomy insofar as it enriches people’s understanding of their available options and the consequences associated with those options.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As mentioned above, Sunstein points out that fear appeals often lead to probability neglect and therefore to the over- or under-estimation of the probabilities that apply to certain risks. However, in some cases he believes democratic governments are completely justified in misleading people by inflating threats. This is because, in his view, inflation is sometimes required to counterbalance the efforts of other interested parties who use emotional appeals to make people *underestimate* certain seriousrisks. We might think of big tobacco, for example, playing down the health risks associated with smoking by appealing to people’s desire for freedom and beauty: “Tobacco companies and others who want people to run risks, for economic or other purposes, try to engage people’s emotions. So long as free speech is respected, government should be permitted to meet fire with fire” (Sunstein 2005, 125).[[4]](#footnote-4) This use of fear would appear to neutralize the autonomy-undermining emotional appeals made by interest groups. Since this would grant citizens a more balanced view of various emotionally charged options, it would arguably improve citizen autonomy.

But this solution faces a serious objection. If fear appeals are indeed to enhance autonomy, as Goodin and Sunstein suggest they can, they should not incite unconstrained existential terror, since this would plainly negate the conditions of autonomous deliberation. Any given fear appeal therefore ought to be *moderate*. Unfortunately, however, the dangers that typically merit political alarmism are significantly less amenable to moderation than the public health issues discussed by Goodin and Sunstein. Political alarmism presents the electorate with severe, and usually existential, threats that require the immediate suppression of competing political concerns. Should people be informed that a foreign army is about to invade, or a deadly pandemic is tearing through the nation, it is likely that they are going to feel the need to prioritize social solidarity and the maintenance of the status quo over and against any desire they might have for, say, social justice. As such, fear appeals that present citizens with life-or-death ultimata can radically narrow the range of political options on offer to them in a way that concerns about long-term public health risks do not.

For an individual to be considered autonomous, they need to enjoy a sufficiently wide range of choices. They cannot be said to autonomously choose a given course of action if it is the *only* reasonable option available to them, which is often exactly what happens when they are faced with scenarios in which their way of life, or their life *tout court*, is placed in jeopardy. As Joseph Raz (1986, 376) argues, for a choice to be considered autonomous,

For most of the time the choice should not be dominated by the need to protect the life one has. A choice is dominated by that need if all options except one will make the continuation of the life one has rather unlikely.

As such, when people are made to fear for their lives – as they often are in cases of political alarmism – it seems they cannot be considered autonomous. Presenting people with a life-threatening collective risk to offset another party’s attempt to understate that risk is less like fighting fire with fire (as Sunstein suggests) and more like taking a gun to a fist fight. The life-and-death scenario is likely to drown out any competing interests. Mike Hulme (2019, 24) has criticized those who frame climate change as an emergency on precisely these grounds. As he sees it, emergency framing constricts the political agenda, and “risks marginalizing a wider set of justice and well-being concerns.” Again, this objection hinges on the idea that radical fear appeals infringe collective autonomy. So, while the use of moderate fear appeals in combatting public health risks may very well enhance autonomy, this kind of moderation seems to be foreclosed to *politically* alarmist fear appeals. The question, then, is whether this radical species of fear appeal can be reconciled with democratic autonomy. Before we address this question, however, let us first consider the apparent incompatibility of democracy with the *deceptive* aspect of political alarmism.

## Democracy and Deception

The second key reason for assuming alarmism to be incompatible with collective self-determination is that it involves *deception*. Since the infancy of democratic politics in ancient Greece, deception and democracy have been viewed as mutually incompatible. In the words of Demosthenes (2000, 19.184; quoted in Schofield 2006, 295): “the greatest wrong anyone can do you is telling lies. How can people whose political system is based on words carry on their affairs safely if those words are not true?” Mearsheimer (2011, 84) adds flesh to this argument, writing that “widespread lying makes it difficult for citizens in a democracy to make informed choices when they vote on issues and candidates, simply because there is a good chance that they are basing their decisions on false information.” Since deception undermines citizens’ capacity for self-determination, and exposes them to manipulation by political elites, it would appear to violate the principle of collective autonomy. Given that alarmism necessarily involves deception, it would likewiseseem to contravene this fundamental democratic principle. This appears to be Mearsheimer’s chief reason for construing alarmism as “a straightforward top–down form of behavior.”

Another reason we might assume that deception undermines collective autonomy is that it erodes political *trust*. As William Galston (2012, 141) neatly puts it: “Democratic governance needs trust. When trust disappears, democracy collapses into a politics of suspicion” (see also Jacobsen 2017, 77). For democratic autonomy to function, a critical mass of vertical trust needs to be sustained between citizens and their leaders. If citizens suspect their representatives of lying, this is likely to “alienate the public to the point where it loses faith in democratic government and is willing to countenance some form of authoritarian rule” (Mearsheimer 2011, 85). The key point with respect to collective self-determination is that when citizens lose trust in their representatives, they cease to feel that their will is being realized by their government, and accordingly disengage from the normal democratic procedures through which their collective will is meant to be made manifest.

Both deception and radical fear appeals therefore appear to flout the principle of collective self-determination. From this point of view, even when alarmism is benign, it would still be paternalistic in a profoundly undemocratic fashion. In the following section, however, I take issue with this perspective, and contend that democratic governments *can* engage in alarmism while nonetheless upholding the principle of collective self-determination.

# Possible Solutions: Consent and Consultation

One solution to this predicament can be found in the liberal democratic literature dealing with emergency politics. Some theorists – e.g., Karl Loewenstein – claim that in situations of acute emergency, fundamental democratic rights may be temporarily derogated for the purpose of maintaining liberal democratic order in the long run.[[5]](#footnote-5) For defenders of this position, a government’s long-term commitment to liberal democratic values legitimizes their short-term violation of fundamental liberal democratic principles. In this light, we might want to say that the violations of the principle of collective self-determination that accompany alarmism are nonetheless coherent with this principle so long as they are enacted with the express intention of maximally honoring it *in the long run*. Let us call this the *emergency solution.*

While this solution is by no means repugnant, it should nevertheless be reserved as a last resort. If we can render necessary alarmism consistently democratic, as I will now argue that we can, then there is no need to accept it as an essentially undemocratic precondition of real democratic life. To settle for the emergency solution would be to admit tensions into democratic practice that are, with some conscious effort, largely resolvable.

In seeking to make alarmism dovetail with a commitment to democratic autonomy, an apt point of departure is to ask whether *consent* might offer a solution. Presumably, if the citizenry consented to being alarmed by its political leaders, then those leaders could make use of alarmism without contravening the principle of collective self-determination. But what form, or forms, would that consent need to take? In the remainder of this section, I argue that a combination of tacit ex-post, and explicit ex-ante consent could feasibly serve this purpose. This, it should be underscored, is not the only solution, nor is it presented as a perfectly complete solution; rather, it is a sketch of one possible way that alarmism might be rendered acceptably democratic.

## Democratic Representation, Accountability and Tacit, Ex-Post Consent

Where a polity’s wellbeing, or even existence, is seriously endangered, it seems reasonable to assume that members of that polity would hypothetically consent to the suspension of certain fundamental democratic rights if they believed that doing so would significantly help their leaders neutralize the threat at hand. The short-term suspension of core democratic norms would under these conditions be an expression of, or at least align with, the autonomous will of the electorate. This would arguably render said suspensions sufficiently democratic. Gerald Dworkin (1972, 77) maintains that consensual paternalism of this sort – which he calls “*justified* paternalism” – does not genuinely compromise autonomy. For Dworkin it is sufficient for such consent to be *hypothetical*, meaning that paternalism merely needs to track the rational interests of the demos. On this basis, we might suppose that if the citizenry hypothetically consented to threat inflation, then such inflation would qualify as justified paternalism, which would leave the principle of collective self-determination intact.

Sunstein (2005, 125) appeals to a similar argument when he claims the following:

A skeptic might think that the use of worst-case scenarios, or dramatic images of harm, consists of unacceptable manipulation. But so long as the government is democratically accountable and attempting to discourage people from running genuinely serious risks, there should be no objection in principle.

Sunstein’s point is that if a government is democratically accountable, then the electorate can *refuse* consent after the fact, namely, by voting the offending political agents out of office. Conversely, if members of the electorate are aware that they’ve been influenced by alarmist rhetoric, but nonetheless do *not* vote against the incumbent government, they would be giving their tacit, ex-post consent to that particular instance of alarmism. In addition to this kind of accountability, Sunstein stipulates a further requirement of democratically legitimate alarmism. He submits that alarmist political agents must also sincerely believe themselves to be engaging in *benign* alarmism, that is, “attempting to discourage people from running genuinely serious risks”.

While Sunstein is primarily referring to alarmism in the context of public health risks, he implies that this justification can be extended to all forms of political alarmism. On his account, a given case of alarmism would be democratically legitimate a) if it is motivated by a genuine intention to protect people from serious risk (i.e., it’s *benign*); and b) if there is accountability at the ballot box, which generates tacit ex-post consent. But there is reason to believe that from an ideal democratic perspective, these two criteria leave a lot to be desired.

The problem with (a) is that what constitutes a risk serious enough to warrant alarmism is very much moot (Jacobson 2017). We might take the debate in climate communication concerning emergency framing (which was briefly discussed in the previous subsection) as a case in point. Even experts are divided as to whether alarmism – particularly the presentation of worst-case scenarios – is justified as a means of motivating people to adopt more sustainable behaviors and thereby avert climate catastrophe (for an overview of this debate, see Hulme 2009, chap. 7; 2019; Painter 2019). One argument is that members of any polity face a constant but shifting array of risks, and the relative severity of these risks is subjectively determined and depends heavily on the socio-economic standing of the citizen in question. For example, compared with wealthier demographics, those living in poverty face a much higher risk of destitution, in addition to the risks associated with man-made climate change. Environmental scientists and activists have complained that politicians often prioritize the risks associated with the climate crisis in a manner that sidelines competing threats associated with poverty and attenuated social justice, which are often most pressing for the worst-off strata of society (Hulme 2019; Nordhaus 2019).

The problem with (a) is therefore that which risks qualify as “genuinely serious risks” will usually be hotly contested. If leaders rely on the tacit ex-post consent that derives from accountability, then when they engage in alarmism they merely have to hope that what *they* consider to be a serious collective risk is aligned with the actual interests and beliefs of the electorate, which is far from guaranteed. As we saw in Section 2, political leaders can easily deceive themselves into thinking that they are acting on benign intentions and working to protect the interests of the wider public, when they may in fact be promoting their personal interests at the expense of the commonweal. Consequently, (a) suffers from a degree of indeterminacy that, under normal conditions, makes it an extremely weak indicator of democratic legitimacy.

Political agents are in a similar position when it comes to figuring out what constitutes a “proportionate” degree of alarmism. Indeed, bioethicists have remarked that different individuals have significantly divergent conceptions of what constitutes “proportionate” alarmism with regard to a given threat (Bayer and Fairchild 2016), a problem that Sunstein neglects. The fact that a political agent is acting in good faith is not sufficient to ensure that their alarmist response is in any way harmonious with what the demos considers to be “proportionate.”

One might be tempted to rejoin that when a community democratically elects its political leaders, it authorizes those leaders to determine the meaning of ambiguous notions such as “serious risk,” and “proportionate response.” In other words, perhaps the demos gives ex-ante approval to whatever interpretation its leaders happen to settle on. However, the empirical fact is that citizens often perceive alarmism as an abuse of power, one that oversteps a government’s mandate. When members of the electorate cast their vote, they are therefore clearly not giving their representatives a free hand in interpreting ambiguous notions of this sort. The current importance of accountability (as stressed by Sunstein) is a plain indication that the electoral process does not ratify leaders’ interpretations of these notions in advance. There are multiple possible reasons why electorates are prone to disapprove of their leaders’ use of alarmism. As Giddens observes, successful and necessary alarmism often appears superfluous in retrospect. Another possible reason, though, relates to the socio-economic cleavages that separate democratic electorates from their political representatives. As we have seen, what constitutes a “serious risk” is in part determined by one’s socio-economic status. Democratic politicians, however, tend to be drawn from wealthier and better-educated socio-economic demographics than those whom they represent (Best 2007), and there are often significant differences between the policy preferences of electorates and their leaders.[[6]](#footnote-6) As such, we might expect a disconnect between how the citizenry and their elected representatives construe justified alarmism. A more direct form of consent – one obtained from the community itself, and not through its elected representatives – would therefore be ideal if we wish to close this gap.

Before we assess the possibility of obtaining such direct consent, we should first examine the viability of (b) – accountability at the ballot box. Mearsheimer (2011, 58) highlights the way in which even benign politicians are inclined to conceal their use of alarmism, and how even if the electorate does eventually discover that their leaders have inflated threats, this typically occurs long after they’ve been voted out of office. Given that effective instances of alarmism often retrospectively appear unnecessary and therefore illegitimate, it makes perfect sense that politicians would actively avoid being held accountable for their use of alarmism, especially while still in office. Since political leaders – even in democracies – are effective at this, the kind of accountability to which Sunstein appeals simply cannot be relied upon in practice.

But the main problem with relying on accountability in the manner suggested by Sunstein is that it leaves benign political leaders who feel themselves forced to resort to alarmism with no way of doing so with a firmly grounded sense of legitimacy. Such well-intentioned politicians would always be left second guessing whether or not the public hypothetically consent to their use of alarmism – and because of the indeterminacy that accompanies (a), this remains a fraught piece of guesswork. Leaders would simply have to act in the hope that downstream the electorate grants them tacit ex-post consent at the ballot box.

While accountability and tacit ex-post consent certainly contribute to the democratic legitimacy of alarmism, they remain insufficient taken on their own. Sunstein’s criteria leave benign political leaders in constant danger of falling prey to self-deception and engaging in illegitimate alarmism, since they can only find out further down the line whether they indeed acted with the blessing of the electorate. This is why, if possible, accountability needs to be reinforced with an explicit form of ex-ante consent.

## Community Consultation and Explicit, Ex-Ante Consent

Anyone seeking explicit ex-ante consent for alarmism first needs to overcome some formidable obstacles. The most comprehensive form such consent could take would be a plebiscite with compulsory voting. Leaving aside the moral questions that apply to compulsory voting, a plebiscite would be an infeasible tool for legitimating alarmism. In the first place, these procedures take time to organize, time that is usually unavailable when politicians feel the urgent need to engage in threat inflation. It takes time to sufficiently inform the electorate of what is at stake; and it takes time to ballot and count their votes. By the time the views of the public have been sounded, the point of no return may already have passed, and the threat become all but inevitable.

This may not strictly apply to slow burning threats, such as the climate crisis, which might logistically permit plebiscites of this sort. But even regarding such creeping emergencies, one still could not design a plebiscite that could effectively secure consent for alarmism. The reason for this is that an individual cannot sensibly consent to being deceived on a particular issue, since they would then be aware of the forthcoming deception, which would consequently be rendered ineffective. And this would certainly apply in the case of alarmism. If the population had consented to the inflation of a given threat, they would later know that this threat was being inflated, which would divest the inflation of its motivating force. Let us call this the problem of *consensual deception*.

Bioethicists studying the use of fear appeals in public health contexts have long since grappled with this quandary. Rossi and Yudel (2012, 200), for instance, observe that “explicit consent given on an individual basis would be impossible”. They suggest a viable alternative, however, arguing that “some sort of ‘community consent’ to a particular risk or health message could be obtained (albeit approximately and incompletely) by proxy through community representatives” (see also Bayer and Fairchild 2016, 395).

There is no reason why this bioethical proposal could not be extended to the broader issue of political alarmism. A carefully selected sample of the community – a cross-section that proportionally reflects the demographic diversity of the electorate, in a manner that governments typically do not – could be informed by a panel of experts about the details of a particular collective threat. Were this sample to explicitly consent to a certain degree of alarmism, its judgement could be taken as representative of the electorate’s will.[[7]](#footnote-7) Carrying out this kind of opinion poll would roughly ensure that a government’s alarmist response to a given threat is consonant with the community’s considered policy preferences. But since only a small sample of the community would be involved, and they could be required to sign non-disclosure agreements, the deceptive aspect of the alarmist messaging would retain its motivational force, which would resolve the consensual deception problem. Democratic transparency could be maintained by informing the public of the *procedure*, but not the content, of these consultations, though this content could be disclosed once the threat has passed.

The bioethical solution recommends that such consultation be made on a case-by-case basis, which is to say as and when an apparently grave threat comes into politicians’ view. However, again due to time constraints, this kind of consultation might not be feasible in the face of pressing dangers. To cover such instances, though, another type of community consultation could be employed to ascertain what the public considers legitimate alarmism. I will now briefly sketch how this might be carried out, and to spotlight some of the obstacles such an enterprise might encounter.

The most suitable way to carry out the required community consultation would be to organize mini-publics – e.g., a citizens’ assembly – that would take place at regular intervals and be tasked with determining the electorate’s considered opinions concerning the use of alarmism. Again, a statistically representative sample of the electorate would be briefed by a balanced range of experts as to the potential uses and abuses of threat inflation, and then presented with a range of scenarios that potentially warrant alarmism. Members of the mini-public would be asked which of the respective scenarios they believe call for alarmism, and in what degree. The mini-public would also be responsible for ensuring that alarmism is used sparingly, so that populations don’t become exhausted or desensitized by this type of political stimulus.[[8]](#footnote-8) These deliberative inquiries could then be used to formulate general guidelines for political practice. Were political leaders to conform to these guidelines when appealing to alarmist rhetoric, and later be able to demonstrate how they’d done so, their claims to democratic legitimacy would be far more robust. As Smith and Setälä (2018, 306) remark, the “deliberative characteristics [of mini-publics] lend them a valuable role in enhancing the democratic legitimacy of the political decision-making process.” What is more, this would serve to shore up democratic trust, since the public would be less inclined to view alarmism as a malign violation of the principle of collective self-determination and more like justified paternalism. Given that there would be direct, explicit, ex-ante consent (albeit partial), the principle of collective self-determination would no longer be significantly infringed by the political use of threat inflation. The recommendations obtained from these two types of mini-public ­– i.e., one mini-public focused on specific extant threats, and another focused on formulating general guidelines – would also generate a clear set of criteria against which political actors could be held accountable. In this way, such consultation would not only provide direct, explicit, ex-ante consent, but would also facilitate democratic accountability, and with that, the process of obtaining tacit, ex-post consent.

Community consultation, however, is no silver bullet. The deliberative mechanism just outlined would be vulnerable to abuse, either by politicians bent on engaging in malign alarmism, or by those who think they can engage in benign alarmism without heeding the counsel of the proposed mini-publics. As Smith and Satäla (2018, 307) emphasize, theorists need to acknowledge “the power that public authorities have to be selective (either strategically or inadvertently) in both establishing mini-publics and adopting their recommendations.” Mini-publics dealing with alarmism would be susceptible to such deviance. Nonetheless, even in such cases, they would establish a rough set of criteria against which such intentional deviance could be identified *as* intentional deviance. They would do this by providing an explicit indication of the considered opinion of the public regarding alarmism. Politicians deciding to go their own way would either have to openly reject these recommendations or pay lip service to them in a way that would likely be unconvincing and identifiable, revealing these politicians to be actively antagonistic to the public’s considered interests, and therefore *not* genuinely benign. Further, having such explicit recommendations would make it far harder for politicians to fall prey to the kinds of self-deception described above (see sections 2 and 5.1). On the other hand, were politicians to consciously align their use of alarmism with the advice of these mini-publics, this would demonstrate – both to themselves and the general public – that their use of alarmism was genuinely benign. Indeed, perhaps the principal advantage of community consultation would be that it would endow politicians who feel obliged to engage in benign alarmism with a viable means of fortifying their claim to legitimacy. As such, mini-publics could give some well-needed sharpness to the otherwise fuzzy boundary between benign and malign alarmism.

Although politicians have been known to ignore, distort or cherry pick the recommendations of mini-publics to suit their the political agendas (see Smith 2009, 93; Hendriks 2006; Beauvais and Warren 2018, 905), there are also well-documented success stories (Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Beauvais and Warren 2018). While manipulation is certainly possible, Edana Beauvais and Mark Warren demonstrate that many of the flaws that typically vex mini-publics are contingent and can be remedied through improved institutional design. They make a case study of a citizens’ assembly set up by the Vancouver City Council to address a complex set of urban planning issues. By hiring an independent firm to design and administer the assembly, the City Council ensured “the process remained at arm’s length from both elected decision makers and city planners” (Beauvais and Warren 2018, 905). And to prevent political agents from distorting or cherry picking the mini-public’s recommendations to fit their agendas, the City Council reconvened the assembly to ratify the Council’s final plans. Over 91% of assembly members, and 56% of community members, were satisfied with the way in which the mini-public’s recommendations had been incorporated into the Council’s plans. There is also substantial empirical evidence indicating that members of the wider public are inclined to recognize the impact of advisory mini-publics as democratically legitimate (Boulianne 2018; Pow et al. 2020; Warren and Gastil 2015). It is therefore reasonable to suppose that with the correct institutional design, mini-publics could be used to generate guidelines that would meaningfully shape politicians’ use of alarmist rhetoric, and that this could be done in a way that passed the bar of democratic legitimacy.

# Conclusion

It should now be clear that alarmism can, under certain conditions, be considered compatible with the democratic principle of collective self-determination. To achieve this, governments need to obtain a combination of tacit, ex-post consent (in the form of accountability) *and* direct, explicit, ex-ante consent (obtained through community consultation). This latter form of consent would not be *completely* direct and explicit, however, since only an unelected fraction of the community would be consenting on behalf of the whole. This is therefore not a watertight solution, and there would remain a modicum of tension between alarmism and the democratic principle of collective self-determination. But it would serviceably maintain a sense of legitimacy and trust between the electorate and their benignly alarmist representatives. This resolves the issue outlined in Sections 3 and 4, where we found that a wide range of democratic theorists affirm the necessity of threat inflation but fail to convincingly explain how political leaders can benignly alarm their citizens without contravening the fundamental democratic principle of collective self-determination. The challenge of designing concrete institutions fit for this purpose falls beyond the scope of this study, which has instead pursued the more modest goal of demonstrating that such institutions are in theory *feasible*.

This has obvious ramifications for the campaign against climate change. Above all, it casts doubt on the claim that climate alarmism should be avoided on account of its inherent incompatibility with liberal democratic autonomy (as suggested in Hulme 2019). The potential need and justification for employing alarmism to avert specific climate-related threats should not be overlooked. Applying the insights of the present study to environmental policymaking represents an important avenue for further research.

This said, many, if not most instances of alarmism remain decidedly illegitimate from a democratic point of view. The negative aim of this study, however, has been to show that we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater and prohibit alarmism *tout court*, nor do we need to admit alarmism as an undemocratic safeguard of the democratic ethos (à la the emergency solution). The disadvantage of the all-or-nothing approach is that in simply rejecting or accepting alarmism it obscures the possibility of rendering it *as democratic as possible*.

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1. Sunstein (2005) is an exception, though he makes short shrift of the issue. His position is analyzed in Sections 3 and 4 of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an excellent overview of the ancient understanding of fear as a precondition of political cohesion, see Kapust 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a similar, but also importantly different vein, political psychologists have persuasively argued that fear in fact leads individuals to seek out information, and to process that information in a way that breaks with ingrained heuristics and partisan habits. As such, fear might be said to enhance, as opposed to impair, individuals’ deliberative capacities (see e.g., Marcus et al. 2019). However, political psychologists have also found that fear *demobilizes* citizens (by rendering them passive and risk-averse) (Wagner and Morisi 2019). To the extent that fear attenuates political participation, it would therefore still appear to contravene the principle of collective self-determination. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McQueen (2021, 158) and Bayer and Fairchild (2016, 395) advance similar arguments. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is particularly prominent in Karl Loewenstein’s conception of “militant democracy.” Loewenstein (1937, 432) is specifically concerned with the emergency of incipient fascism: “If democracy believes in the superiority of its absolute values over the opportunistic platitudes of fascism . . . every possible effort must be made to rescue it, even at the risk and cost of violating fundamental principles.” For other comparable positions, see Gross and Ní Aoláin (2004, chap. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For evidence of this in European democracies, see Rosset and Stecker 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although many democratic theorists maintain that such mini-publics can function as legitimate representatives of the wider demos (e.g., Fishkin 2009, 33–32; Dahl 1989, 340; Guerrero 2014, 158–9), there is a dissenting minority who reject this view, arguing that since participants are unelected, they lack the authorization to speak on behalf of the electorate (e.g., Lafont 2020, chap. 4). Empirical studies support the more optimistic view, insofar as they show that the wider public tend to recognize mini-publics as legitimately representative (Boulianne 2018; Pow et al. 2020; Warren and Gastil 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The overuse of alarmism can lead to a variety of pernicious consequences. According to Patterson et al. (2021, 844), excessive alarmism can be “emotionally draining and create exhaustion.” Such overuse can potentially overwhelm and paralyze citizens, counterproductively leaving them *less* able to combat the risk at hand. What is more, recalling the fable of the boy who cried wolf, repeatedly inflating threats can damage trust in communicating organizations (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009, 362–3). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)