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Political Commitment and the Value of Partisanship

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This article defends the value of partisanship for political commitment. It clarifies what political commitment is, how it resembles and differs from other forms of commitment, and under what conditions it can prosper. It argues that political commitment is sustained and enhanced when agents devoted to particular political projects form a lasting associative relation that coordinates future action both on behalf of their future selves and of similarly committed others. Partisanship contributes to the feasibility of such projects, and helps strengthen them from a motivational and epistemic perspective. Although partisanship is also often criticized for sacrificing individuals' independence of thought and action, if we value political commitment, this is a necessary trade-off.

PARTISANSHIP AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT

"If you want to commit yourself [. . .] what are you waiting for? Join the Communist party." The sentence is found in the opening paragraph of one of the most famous attempts to defend the idea of political commitment, Jean Paul Sartre's essay "What is literature?" Sartre, himself an icon of the committed intellectual, attributes these words to a character about whom nothing more is said except that he or she is "a young imbecile," similar to many others who "read quickly, badly, and pass judgment before they have understood" (Sartre 1949, 23).

Sartre's harsh words to his reader echo a familiar antipartisan critique. When political commitment is coupled with partisanship, independence of thought and action is sacrificed. Partisans are dangerous fools, they exacerbate confirmation bias and polarization, they constitute a threat to impartial deliberation, and they undermine the promotion of a suprapartisan civic good.

All that may well be the case. But political commitment is also essential to democratic political action, and partisanship is essential to sustain and enhance political commitment. Partisanship contributes to the feasibility of political projects, while also consolidating their epistemic basis and strengthening their motivational support. If we care about political commitment, rather than fearing partisanship for its undesirable effects, we should cultivate and cherish it. Or so I argue in this article.

The topic of partisanship has received renewed attention in the recent literature on democratic theory and practice (Bonotti and Bader 2014; Muirhead 2014; Rosenblum 2010; Urbinati 2014; White and Ypi 2010; 2011). Most of that literature emphasises the role of partisanship in expressing and channelling fundamental disagreements among citizens, contrasting it with alternative models of democratic decision-making (including civil society movements, deliberative polls or citizen juries). Politics without partisanship, so the argument goes, ends up depriving public life of an important vehicle through which fundamentally different opinions and views are made visible and compared to each other, contributing to a process of 'trial by discussion' that is in turn vital to nurture a democratic ethos among citizens.[1]

The concern with the detrimental effects of antipartisanship for democracy is an important one. Partisanship does indeed play a crucial role in the processes of political justification required for the legitimacy of any political system (White and Ypi 2011). Yet, as some critics have noted, this argument risks leaving us with only a defence of why a *system* of partisanship, understood as the regulated rivalry of different political parties within a pluralist system, matters. It does not seem to say much on why partisanship matters *per se*, over and above its role in an institutional setting where political antagonism is organized (for the critique and distinction see Aldrich 2009, p. 625).

My article provides a response to this challenge. The reason partisanship matters, over and above its virtues in a system of vigorous democratic contestation, is, I argue, because political commitment matters and because certain associative practices are essential to sustaining and nurturing it. To be politically committed means to care about the public good and actively seek to promote it, making one's efforts and ideas of social change part of a joint project shared with others. A society without political commitment is a society of perpetually disengaged or permanently disaffected citizens, where important decisions end up being taken by a handful of elites, where the collective will of the people is never clearly articulated, and where the perils of depoliticization stand very little chance of finding democratic remedy. Its opposite, a society that promotes the active exercise of political rights, and where people are rulers and not only ruled, comes much closer to the democratic ideal.

Partisanship, as Hans Kelsen nicely put it, is essential to link the *ideal* and the *real* conception of the people (Kelsen [1929] 2013, p. 38). The exercise of political rights, he argued, seems to presuppose a distinction between "the mindless masses who follow the lead of others" and "those who—in accordance with the idea

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[1] The expression "trial by discussion" comes from John Stuart Mill whose appreciation of the social function of antagonism is invoked in both Nancy Rosenblum's and Russell Muirhead excellent defense of parties (see especially Rosenblum 2010, 148–62, and Muirhead 2014, 99–110).

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of democracy—decisively influence the governmental process" (*ibid.*). This is also why partisanship, an associative practice that "brings like minded individuals together in order to secure them actual influence in shaping public affairs" is one of "real democracy's most important elements" (*ibid.*). Since the ongoing pursuit of particular political projects is essential to people ruling actively, as opposed to being mere recipients of the decisions of others, a form of association that supports and promotes political commitment is essential to democratic decision-making *as such*, over and above its virtues in a system of organized political contestation.

In what follows, partisanship is understood as an ongoing associative practice formed and sustained by groups of people that share a particular interpretation of the public good, including normative principles and aims articulating how power should be exercised and in what way political institutions should enable social cooperation (White and Ypi 2010, 384–5). I call these principles, aims, and policies concerning the public good shared political projects. Such shared projects are essential to mediate between the plurality of individual interpretations and conceptions of the good and the unity of the people as a legislating whole that usually forms the basis of the state (see also Kelsen [1929] 2013, p. 39). Partisan associations differ from more narrow interest groups because the shared projects structuring their commitment appeal to the good of the whole rather than that of only one subsection of the public, even when these projects are understood to clash with those of rival partisans or where what counts as public is itself subject to partisan dispute (White and Ypi 2011; see for the transnational dimension White 2014). Often such associative practices have at their center a recognised institution, the political party, which embodies these agents' collective will and gives it executive expression (Muirhead 2014; Rosenblum 2010; White and Ypi 2010). But the executive capacity of parties and their ability to institutionally channel citizens' collective will is only one (albeit very important) aspect of their relation to partisanship. In defending the relevance of partisanship for political commitment it would be reductive to focus on the role of recognized and currently well-established political parties.[2] In some cases, a party with which partisans identify has existed in the past but is no longer meaningful from an executive perspective. In other cases, the formal organization required to give institutional representation to agents' political commitment may only be there as an aspiration. Yet, as I explain in what follows, partisanship plays an important epistemic and motivational role, which is not easily performed by alternative political agents (for more discussion of the relation to other agents, see White and Ypi 2010). Partisanship, I argue, is a form of political friendship, a friendship required to sustain and enhance political commitment (see also Muirhead 2014, especially Chap. 5). Ideally, it has at its center a functioning party, understood as the formal institution that gives that commitment tangible expression but in no way should it be seen as limited to formal membership.

Before explaining the relation between partisanship and political commitment, some clarifications are in order. First, although my discussion of political commitment begins with the collective endorsement of shared projects on how political institutions should be organized, this article has very little, in fact nothing, to say about *which* projects deserve that endorsement. Doubtless there are a number of idiotic or dangerous political principles and aims, and we might wish them less rather than more collective political support. Although partisanship is often also taken to contribute to the process of illuminating the merits and deficiencies of principled alternatives, this is not my argument here.[3] I shall assume, instead, that we already have a sense of what is worth committing to politically, or at the very least that we know what is worth fighting against. And I shall limit my defense of partisanship to illustrating why once we know that, a certain form of associative practice is desirable to further that commitment. The particular ways through which we arrive at this knowledge (whether through political activity, normative deliberation, or, more likely, a combination of both) is beside the point made here (but for more discussion elsewhere, see Ypi 2011, Chaps. 2 and 7).

Second, political commitment is only one form of commitment. In defending the centrality of partisanship to political commitment, I do not mean to undermine other associations that might be just as important to sustain other worthwhile projects (e.g., families, churches, states, or an imagined cosmopolitan community). Often the fact that agents have multiple commitments, relate to each other in different social roles, and belong to multiple associations serves as a corrective to the beliefs and projects associated to particular commitments, and protects any particular set of them from becoming a source of bias and extreme polarization. They should therefore be supported and cherished. Likewise, if democratic institutions function as they should, an agreement on constitutional fundamentals, overlapping consent about basic norms essential to sustain political decision-making, and a sense of compromise in relevant institutional settings (including compromise with those one sharply disagrees with) are extremely important components of the political enterprise (White and Ypi 2016). They are especially important to channel contestation, establish a frame for toleration, draw the institutional limits of disagreement, and contain undesirable commitments that weaken a

[2] This point has been recognized even by authors defending the centrality of parties as necessary organizations within a constitutional system. As Hans Kelsen puts it, "these social organizations usually retain an amorphous character. They take the form of loose associations or, often, lack any legal form at all. Yet, a substantial part of the governmental process occurs within these parties: Like subterranean springs feeding a river, their impulses usually decisively influence the direction of the governmental process before it surfaces and is channeled into a common riverbed in the popular assembly or parliament" (Kelsen [1929] 2013, p. 38).

[3] Indeed, this was John Stuart Mill's defence of parties and is also what has attracted most attention in the recent theoretical literature on partisanship, including the contributions of this author (see also Rosenblum 2010 Muirhead 2014, White and Ypi 2011).

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civic ethos. Although, as I point out in what follows, trade-offs are necessary, nothing I say here is supposed to detract from the value of (suprapartisan) civic commitment. And although political commitment can (and often does) stand in the way of such civic commitment, it is important to understand what the tensions are and what we are sacrificing when the partisan spirit is sacrificed.

Third, in thinking about the relationship between parties and partisanship it may be useful to reflect on the analogy with a more familiar set of concepts: the state and the people. The state is what gives institutional expression to the collective will of a (political) people, but a (political) people may also survive the collapse of the state or be only imperfectly reflected in it. Likewise, a party, understood merely as an institution, is desirable to give executive expression to the collective will of partisans, but it would be too reductive to only focus on the organizational aspect of the relationship and lose sight of the politically contingent nature of that relation. A more plausible way to think about parties is as associations that sustain and advance political commitment. The question of what exact form that relationship takes and how it works in empirical circumstances is to an important extent politically contingent, and therefore also philosophically difficult to answer.

THE NATURE OF COMMITMENT

We are familiar with many different forms of commitment. Parents are usually committed to their children. Friends are committed to each other. Professionals are often committed to their workplace. Religious people are committed to their church. But what do all these different forms of commitment have in common?

Commitments can be understood as a species of intention (Calhoun 2009, 615; Frankfurt 2006, 16). They differ from self-interested preferences, impulses, and inclinations because of the way in which the agents who endorse such commitments view their contribution to their life plans: as projects that define who those agents are, in what relation they stand to others, and what kind of social roles they occupy. Commitments are species of intention that give agents reasons to act in particular ways, typically ways that allow them to create or remain involved in projects they have chosen (or in which they find themselves), even on the face of contingent inclinations or interests to no longer continue doing so (Gilbert 1999, 145).

One straightforward reason for why commitments matter is instrumental. Commitments contribute to the creation and maintenance of order in one's life, supporting the organization and coordination of activities over time. Human beings are reflexive and planning agents. Reflexivity allows them to take a step back from immediate desires and inclinations and assess from a more critical perspective their role and contribution to the overall structure of deliberation and actions (Frankfurt 1988, Chaps. 1 and 2). The ability to plan is what gives actions coherence and consistency, ensuring that agents do not deliberate on an *ad hoc* basis, continuously revisiting their beliefs and desires, but that they do so against a certain background of stability (Bratman 1987). Commitments are temporally extended intentions that support the creation and upholding of continuous connections between prior plans, ongoing activities, and future states of affairs (Bratman 2007, Chap. 1). They form part of those "conduct-controlling pro-attitudes" which "we are disposed to retain without reconsideration" because they help us make choices and deliberate concerning the future without having to revisit everything we have done in the past (Bratman 1987, 20). In circumstances where agents face obstacles to clear-sighted decision-making or have limited time at their disposal, commitments allow them to better coordinate action with their future selves and with other agents central to the execution of valuable projects.

Commitments are often also valued for their contribution to a life worth living (but see Calhoun 2009 for a critique). Failure to uphold one's commitments or a susceptibility to easily revise or substitute them is the subject of much social apprehension and literary drama. In Aleksander Pushkin's epic poem "Eugene Onegin," the main character, Onegin, is criticized for being driven to a life of "aimless wandering," "pursued by a vexatious restlessness" and "an urge for change." This attitude only lasts until, later in life, "travel, with its tedious motion" becomes, Pushkin says, an "unending" bore, making Onegin regret his failure to commit to Tatyana and to a settled life with her. Conversely, the ability to sustain one's commitments is typically associated with finding reasons to remind oneself of why a decision was made concerning a particular project, as well as renewing the grounds for upholding that decision, despite one's contingent contrary inclination. Indeed, to go back to Pushkin's example, when Tatyana rejects Onegin's offer of a life with her, she appeals to the value of her ongoing commitments in motivating her decision, despite her contrary inclination to remain faithful to them.[4]

The reason commitment is thought to contribute to a life worth living is the centrality of long-lasting plans to the pursuit of one's projects in a way that maintains authorship over one's life. Such authorship is vindicated if decisions and actions fit into an ongoing narrative of oneself, connecting the ideas and aspirations that currently guide one's life to those that are endorsed at a different point in time and that structure future expectations. This continuity may not always be straightforward or remain unchallenged. As circumstances change, new encounters and events might interfere with agents' priorities and lead them to question the temporally extended steps they have taken to organize and coordinate their life. In some cases, this will be desirable, in others perhaps not. If the latter is the case, to be committed implies to be prepared to endure epistemic or motivational changes that

[4] Here is what she says: "I love you (why should I pretend?) And yet, I am another's now, and should be faithful to my vow" (Pushkin 2003, Chap. 8). For a philosophical discussion of the relation between commitment and the value of settling, see Goodin 2012.

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might (provisionally) undermine the initial intention to pursue a particular project (Calhoun 2009, 618–22). This, as we shall see, is more effective in the presence of associative practices whose function is to sustain and enhance agents' commitments and that contribute to the preservation of order and authorship in their lives.

POLITICAL COMMITMENT

The idea of political commitment should also be intuitively familiar. Think of the biographies of activists like Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Ghandi, Vaclav Havel, or Martin Luther King Jr. The kinds of projects they committed to are different form the ones mentioned in the previous section. Political commitment is public rather than private and it is collective rather than individual. It involves a distinctive kind of activity, one where agents seek to shape and design political institutions in accordance with particular principles and aims. Political commitment is driven by a critical scrutiny of the exercise of power, and either the endorsement or the rejection of the reasons and structures that shape the institutional rules on the basis of which that power is exercised and reproduced. In the cases of Ghandi, Havel, Mandela, or Martin Luther King Jr., political commitment stems from a critique of the injustice and arbitrariness of the status quo and from an identification of alternative visions that aim to render the exercise of power justified. What characterizes their attitudes is the centrality to their lives of a long-term political project, inspired by a different vision of how institutions should operate. What makes that commitment radical is the fact that such agents are prepared to go through serious epistemic or motivational adversities to ensure that their projects endure and are realized. They are disposed to act in concert with others and to sacrifice their short-term interests on behalf of ideals of social change that will also serve future generations, even when the outcome of collective action does not immediately benefit them personally.

It is important to clarify that although we tend to applaud these radical cases of political commitment as exemplars of heroic sacrifice, in the eyes of many activists the degree of sacrifice that political commitment entails is not its most important aspect. Sacrifices are perceived as a necessary, and often unpleasant, implication of what matters in the first place: believing in a political project and sticking to what one believes. As Emmeline Pankhurst, one of the pioneers of the Suffragettes, puts it in her autobiography, "Those well-meaning friends who say that we have suffered these horrors of prison, of hunger strikes and forcible feeding, because we desired to martyrize ourselves for the cause, are absolutely and entirely mistaken. We never went to prison to be martyrs. [. . .] We went there in order that we might obtain the rights of citizenship. We were willing to break laws that we might force men to give us the right to make laws." (Pankhurst [1914] 2013, 92). The point of commitment is not to force committed agents to make sacrifices, rather being committed renders one more willing to accept such sacrifices in the name of the projects one pursues. The readiness to endure circumstantial and psychological adversities provides an illustration of what it means to be committed to a project; it is not what makes that commitment worthy of celebration in the first place. What matters to begin with are the reasons standing behind that political commitment and, as Pankhurst's quote illustrates, the relevance of authorship over one's life that is connected to their advancement.

I already mentioned earlier the importance of authorship in explaining why commitments contribute to a life worth living. Authorship in the realm of politics is allegedly equally important. It is often said that political rule can be considered legitimate only if those who are subjected to the coercive power of laws and institutions could also be considered their authors. This relation of power to collectively authorized rules is central to the ideal of democratic political justification (White and Ypi 2011). Political commitment enhances such authorship through agents' efforts to change political institutions so as to vindicate such efforts at reshaping them compatibly with particular political projects. Politically committed agents do not simply put up with rules and institutions that fail to live up to their ideals. They do not simply follow the lead of others, they practice active citizenship by seeking to reform or change institutions so as to see such ideals reflected in practice. This is how the urge for authorship is captured in the words of a young activist in Saul Alinsky's famous *Rules for Radicals*, when the attitude of passive acceptance of the existing system of rules is contrasted with a more active desire to reflect critically on that system and try to change it in conformity with one's ideals of justice. "I want to do something, to create, to be me, to 'do my own' thing, to live. [. . .] I don't want to be just a piece of data to be fed into a computer or a statistic in a public opinion poll, just a voter carrying a credit card" (Alinsky 1971, xv–xvi).

And yet, as many political activists also know, such efforts to shape a community's political life are more likely to be successful if they join likeminded others and pursue their political projects as part of a collective enterprise which ensures that their intentions persist over time, contributing to the feasibility of their projects and helping agents endure epistemic and motivational obstacles to their realization. To see why, we need to examine the relation between commitment and certain associative practices, the practices of partisanship, to which I turn next.

FRIENDSHIP AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT

That commitment in general is sustained through different associative practices may become clearer if we consider various examples of associations we are familiar with: families, churches, or clubs. Some of these associations are voluntary; they are created by agents to uphold particular commitments, say, of love in the case of marriage or a shared interest in reading in the case of the literary club. Others are involuntary: agents do not choose to be part of such associative practices

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but still find in them a source of identification which leads to the continued endorsement of the projects they embody (e.g., the associative relation of children to their parents). Such associations persist over time and sustain complex projects across a range of conditions and circumstances. They also tend to have a unique identity, an identity that emerges from the combination of properties of agents who are part of them and properties of their shared activity.

I suggested at the outset that one way to think about partisanship is as a form of political friendship. Partisanship is an associative practice whose purpose is to sustain and advance political commitment. People who are committed to specific political projects have an interest in continuously promoting such projects in coordination both with their future selves and with like-minded others. Partisanship is an associative relation established when the interest in such projects is shared with other people who (like friends) support each other in their pursuit. Participation in shared practices may come in degrees, ranging from those who identify with a particular political project and only loosely but continuously support the party that is best seen as furthering this project, to long-term members that discharge more stringent associative obligations (paying membership fees, attending meetings, volunteering, and so on).[5]

To understand why partisanship is a form of political friendship, we might look at the different ways in which the good of friendship is typically analyzed. Friendship, as Aristotle argues, is a form of reciprocal and mutually recognized attachment or affection (*philia*). It holds among those who share an interest in goods that are either pleasurable (friendship based on pleasure) or instrumentally useful (friendship based on utility) or conducive to virtue (friendship based on virtue) (Aristotle 2000, 1155a–b). As a form of friendship based on utility, partisanship has clear instrumental relevance to the pursuit of one's projects. Yet the good of partisan friendship is not exhausted by the instrumental role it plays in the promotion of independently endorsed political projects. Partisan associations grounded on political friendship do not simply enable partisans to promote their commitment but also to further and enhance it.

To see why, recall the importance of protecting agents from epistemic and motivational obstacles that stand in the way of their continuous advancement of desired political projects. When it comes to *political* commitment, partisan associations play a crucial role in allowing agents to create or maintain relationships whose purpose is to further develop their shared projects. First, partisanship is, like all other forms of political friendship, an associative practice characterized by the shared and mutually known commitment to a set of political principles and goals constitutive of partisans' shared activity. Second, partisans are aware not only of the part that they themselves play in sustaining such political projects but also of the existence of similarly committed others, each with a specific role to play in its development. Finally, the associative practice to which partisans belong is, has been, or aspires to be a collective agent expressive of their shared commitment and collective will.

In virtue of their participation to collective associative practices, partisans promote joint projects in a coordinated and continuous way. The formal and informal rules that shape that association give further unity to one's ends and place them in a structure of actions and deliberations that connects an agent's beliefs and intentions to those of similarly committed others. The associative structure to which partisans belong therefore reinforces individuals' understanding of their projects as worthy ones, even on the face of contingent epistemic and motivational obstacles to their realization. Through shared partisan activities, awareness of the worthiness of one's political commitment is not given in a mere abstract way but draws further confirmation from the day to day engagement with concrete others who contribute to that shared project with their knowledge and efforts.[6] As one well-known Civil Rights activist puts it in explaining her own need for partisan involvement: "I needed an anchor, a base, a mooring. I needed comrades with whom I could share a common ideology. I was tired of ephemeral ad-hoc groups that fell apart when faced with the slightest difficulty [. . .]. It wasn't that I was fearless, but I knew that to win, we had to fight [. . .]. I knew that this fight would have to be led by a group, a party with more permanence in its membership and structure and more substance in its ideology. And I needed to know and respect what I was doing" (Davis 1975, 187–8).

All this of course, is compatible with even very sharp disagreements among political friends. Indeed, precisely because such disagreements occur against the background of a similarity of conviction, arguments with one's political friends are often more sincere and frank than arguments with those who do not share one's political views (we often experience something very similar in arguments with family members). Partisan associations tend to be notoriously confrontational for precisely that reason. Yet so long as disagreements among political friends take place within a known commitment to shared political projects, the overall result is likely to encourage rather than stifle political participation. A number of empirical studies reveal that when people are in the company of others with whom they know that very little is shared, political disagreement is suppressed and expressions of dissent with the current state of affairs struggle to emerge.[7] Insofar as we value political commitment, the kind of apathy and

[5] It should be clear that, given the long-term nature of political projects and the degree of commitment required to sustain them, independents with fluctuating political sympathies are excluded. For more analysis of partisan associative obligations and the issue of degrees of affiliation, see White 2016 and White and Ypi 2016.

[6] My analysis here is indebted to an excellent defense of political friendship in Aristotle in Cooper 1977.

[7] Experiments with voluntary groups where diverse people are brought to interact tend to show a systematic preference for more practical tasks as opposed to principled discussion on controversial issues; see, for a more detailed discussion, Mutz 2006, Chap. 4; also Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002.

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political indifference that results from too heterogeneous political encounters will be a greater cause for concern than sharp arguments within partisan families. This is not to say that the extreme opposite, the lack of tolerance, and disposition to "hear the other side" that might result from people identifying too strongly with a particular political project is not at all worrying, a point to which I shall return at the end of the article (see Mutz 2006, Chap. 3 for an empirical discussion). Before that, it is important to consider in more detail the relation between partisanship and political commitment by focusing on three features: (i) the feasibility of desired political projects; (ii) the motivational benefits of partisanship; (iii) its epistemic role.

THE VALUE OF FEASIBILITY

One straightforward reason for why partisanship promotes political commitment is implicit in the analysis of the function of political parties in the empirical literature on the topic. The party as organization coordinates the beliefs and intentions of activists, articulates a collective will, and gives shape to an ongoing cross-temporal institution with which they identify and in which they invest their efforts and energies. The party in the electorate mediates between that collective structure and the public at large, for example by acting as a signalling device that provides information and visibility to help citizens orient themselves with respect to different political alternatives and programs (beyond the short-term profiles of individual politicians or contingent parliamentary groups). The party in government connects voters to elected representatives, organizes the legislature, and coordinates action across different local, national, or federal institutions (Goodin 2008). All these are important empirical dimensions of party activity. Their contribution to sustaining political commitment consists of supplying the institutional infrastructure that connects political projects to the day to day working of politics, enabling changes in legislation compatibly projects that represent, and articulating citizens' political will.

However, for a project to be considered feasible, it matters not only if agents have the ability to change a specific state of affairs but also if such agents have the ability to bring themselves in a position that allows that change to happen (Gilabert and Lawford-Smith 2012, 811; Jensen 2009). The contribution of partisanship in the latter case is crucial. The projects I believe in stand a much greater chance of being realized if I am not the only one who takes them seriously and if their promotion does not depend merely on the contingent circumstances of my life. If my plans and pursuits are coordinated with those of others who are similarly motivated, we form a collective agent that acts in our name to represent political projects in the public sphere, and seeks to change laws compatibly with that project. To take one familiar example, as an individual I may not be able to cause my state to adopt policies that favor global egalitarianism. But I can join others who are similarly motivated, organize collective activities that seek to raise awareness among fellow citizens about the relevance of certain principles, and try to change laws in a direction that is compatible with them. Although partisanship may not be able to guarantee that such transformations will eventually take place, it certainly facilitates agents putting themselves in a position where continuous attempts in that direction can be made.

All this is of course true in normal circumstances of democratic politics where parties are legally recognized political agents already providing a point of reference to different activist groups (including but not reduced to party members) and where they seem to provide a clear channel of mediation between government and citizens. But it is also the case when partisan groups are forced to operate outside the normal parliamentary contest either because the projects they are committed to are so demanding that they do not stand a chance of being represented in parliament or because they are not even recognized by specific governments. Even, or perhaps especially, the most utopian of projects needs partisanship to promote their feasibility.

One way to understand this point is in analogy with risk-pooling associative schemes. An effective way of managing risk with regard to uncertain projects is often considered to be forming alliances with others so that the negative effects of making particular investments can be offset through the contribution of members who join the same risk-management schemes. In this case, when particular members fail in their investments others can support bailing them out (and vice versa). Likewise, particular political projects, especially those that require greater sacrifices, might be more effectively managed collectively when time and energy can be pooled together so that the overall chances of the project remaining feasible do not decline with the decline in contingent levels of activity. That way shared political projects have a constant level of commitment behind them, even when particular individuals need to reduce their daily activity or step back to pursue other valuable projects for a time, ensuring their previous investment in such joint enterprise is not entirely futile. As one writer and activist shows, militancy can be a very demanding task: "Even under the best circumstances, belonging to a trade union, or to any advanced party, requires a series of uninterrupted sacrifices. Even a few pence given for the common cause represent a burden on the meager budget of the European worker, and many pence have to be disbursed every week. Frequent attendance at the meetings means a sacrifice, too. For us it may be a pleasure to spend a couple of hours at a meeting, but for men whose working day begins at five or six in the morning those hours have to be stolen from necessary rest (Kropotkin [1889] 1971, 278).

On the face of adverse circumstances, the collective endorsement and joint participation in shared partisan activities contributes to the resilience of political projects. Where institutional channels are deficient, upholding certain projects requires a higher degree of personal involvement, greater courage, more prudence, and increased emotional investment in what might appear like a hopeless political project. Partisanship is important because, such demanding projects

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are particularly vulnerable to being challenged when pursued in isolation from others and when they have to survive in difficult circumstances. If such demanding projects are placed in the context of a shared partisan association, the chances that they will remain feasible are greater over time.

Partisanship therefore contributes to feasibility in two ways. First, and most obviously, when partisan activity is connected to effective political parties, it makes political projects more likely to be realized by providing an institutional channel through which agents' principles and goals connect to relevant legislative and executive mechanisms through which the commitment of citizens can be translated in concrete political proposals that are democratically realized. But it also contributes to feasibility because of the way associative relations work even in the absence of formal parties. Shared partisan structures put individuals in a position to act in a way that makes more feasible demanding projects by supplying the associative resources necessary to sustain their commitment even in adverse circumstances. One argument for why this is the case relates to the collective benefits of risk pooling discussed in the previous paragraph. The other is a more familiar observation having to do with the value of collective motivation since, as Aristotle puts it, when people act with others their virtues tend to be amplified, and their passions stand corrected. To see the force of this latter argument we need to consider the motivational benefits of partisanship to which I turn in the following section.

THE MOTIVATIONAL BENEFITS OF PARTISANSHIP

Commitment in general, I emphasized, requires long-term planning that helps agents endure motivational and, as we shall see later, also epistemic, obstacles to the realization of their projects. Shared activities are crucial, not only in normal democratic circumstances but also in cases where the resources necessary to cope with adverse external effects are deficient or not uniformly spread, requiring a higher than usual degree of belief in the worth of one's pursuits. Consider one familiar example: the ANC's fight against apartheid in South Africa at the time in which it was considered a terrorist organization by several allegedly democratic states. Pursuing the antiapartheid project came at a high cost to its members' personal security and required significant sacrifices of their opportunity to have a stable life or devote themselves to alternative projects. In such circumstances, individual virtues of patience, persistence, courage, resolve to continue struggling for what one believed in, would have been constantly present only in the case of a few moral heroes (Mandela has often been heralded as one such hero). But for many others, the continuity and consistency required for such projects to be carried forward for longer stretches of time might have been more difficult to find. In the absence of widespread confirmation that a project is really worth committing to, the degree of motivation required to stick to an agent's initial intentions is higher and consequently also likely to be more challenged in adverse circumstances.

I began this article by quoting Sartre's sceptical remarks on partisanship. Later in his life, Sartre himself became increasingly more appreciative of the relation between partisanship and political commitment. Although he never officially joined the Communist party, he did more than once intervene in its defense, explaining that: "the party is a force of mediation between men" (Sartre 1953, 286). He understood well the motivational function of partisan associations when he claimed that the role of the party is "to break the isolation between people, to reconcile passions and interests, to unite hopes and efforts, and to maintain solidarity." *Today*, Sartre emphatically insisted, "the masses need the party" (Sartre 1953, 237).

Shared partisan activity helps overcome motivational obstacles in two ways, both of which can be clarified if we turn to our understanding of partisanship as a mode of political friendship. First, shared political practices enable agents to be continuously involved with the projects they care about and to do so in a way that brings them in contact with others who have similar beliefs and convictions. Observing commitment to a shared political project in one's political friends provides reassurance of the worth of one's own investment in that project, giving individuals an ongoing opportunity to interrogate their weaknesses or continue to believe in their strengths. Like with friendship in general, other partisans committed to shared practices provide a "mirror" for one's thoughts and actions, increasing an agent's ability to reflect on the principles she endorses, and strengthening the psychological disposition required to continue to uphold them.

This "mirror" view of friendship is championed by Aristotle when he argues that an agent "stands in the same relation to his friend as to himself (his friend being another self)" (Aristotle 2000, 1166a). It may also explain why, insofar as political friendship rests on similarities of belief in the value of specific political projects, comparisons with friends provide agents with important external resources to come to a better understanding of their own dispositions. Where there are similarities in the degree of motivation required to uphold political commitment, the comparison with friends who act differently within a background of shared values allows people to reflect critically on their own attitudes and to examine them in relation to others. If I am overtaken by fear of consequences or inclined to sacrifice my commitment to certain principles for short-term gains that do not contribute to the overall project, observing friends' action in similar circumstances gives me a chance to think about the merits of my own conduct and assess the need to change or preserve my motivation (for the mirror view of friendship with reference to Aristotle, see Sherman 1993, 98).

However, the "mirror" view of friendship only explains why, from an instrumental perspective, partisan practices allow agents to revisit or reshape the structure of their motivations by mirroring themselves in others and reflecting on their weaknesses and strengths. It is a self-centered perspective: insofar as I am aware of my

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own commitment, and insofar as I have the opportunity to observe and interact with others with similar commitment, such observation gives me more opportunity to reflect on my own dispositions and to benefit from their example than if I only had opportunity to observe myself.

To this we can add a second argument. In addition to acting as a mirror to each other, political friends share unique associative practices in which their commitment is not only sustained but, as highlighted earlier, also enhanced. Indeed, these shared activities not only consolidate their previous dispositions and attitudes but also develop new ones, including dispositions of loyalty to their friends, attachment to shared practices of political cooperation, solidarity for each other when their projects are challenged, a sense of collective responsibility for their shared pursuits, feelings of guilt when important opportunities are missed, or a sense of pride when issues they take to heart become more visible in the public sphere. By being part of a shared associative practice, partisans develop learning processes on which they can rely in the future when seeking to realize their political projects; their shared institutional memory provides a useful tool in reflecting about future political strategies and challenges and helps them cope with future unforeseen difficulties. Agents' motivations are shaped in the course of initiatives that mediate between independently held principles and goals and the day-to-day practices through which their political projects are continuously tested and refined. This collective "we" is an important source of motivation since agents do not have to start every day from scratch but become progressively more familiar with what it takes to see certain normative principles obtain public relevance. They can also assess better the obstacles one has to go through in seeking to link abstract principles to concrete political activity and find comfort in coping with such obstacles.

THE EPISTEMIC CONTRIBUTION OF PARTISANSHIP

Enduring political projects are continuously subjected to epistemic as well as motivational challenges. The principles and goals they involve are bound up with judgments about current states of affairs, the assessment of relevant social and political institutions, and expectations about future events that might impact agents' commitment. Indeed, knowledge that is central to the pursuit of shared political projects is importantly shaped by external evidence: as a result, agents might revise or update their beliefs integrating existing information with new information, or they might assess differently evidence that undermines their commitment. Call the partisan associates with whom one is involved in a similar kind of information processing epistemic trustees. What I want to argue in this section is that political deliberation with epistemic trustees (i.e., agents that have roughly similar beliefs and commitment) about the weight that should be given to new external information available, or about how one might need to update future plans in the light of that information, seems to play an important role to ensure the sustainability of shared political projects when epistemic challenges are at stake. If, as is often the case, any exposure to external evidence combines fact and interpretation, the source of new information and how much an agent trusts the interpretive frame in which it is placed play an incredibly important role in the credence one attaches to that new evidence and in how one organizes future plans around up-to-date information. The more similar my beliefs and values are to those of my political friends, the more likely I am to pursue actions that combine new information with prior values and beliefs therefore strengthening the epistemic reliability of the political projects I endorse.

To see why political commitment is sustained and enhanced when agents' views are shaped in the context of shared associative practices, consider two arguments. The first, and most clear one, has to do with the role that shared political activity plays in supplying evidence that is not readily available through normal channels of communication in circumstances of epistemic constraint. Such epistemic reliance on one's political friends is clearly present in many episodes of political mobilization, as happened, for example, with the famous Monday demonstrations in Leipzig prior to the fall of the Berlin wall.[8] Here, opposition activists relied heavily on networks of information sustained by their epistemic trustees in order to plan meetings, coordinate action, and share opinions and judgements with regard to future proposals and initiatives. The second, less immediately obvious, reason is when publicly available information needs to be processed in particular ways, i.e., ways that are relevant to upholding political commitment. This argument is also more controversial so worth discussing in some detail.

Consider the case of Rosa, a socialist activist living in Western Europe in November 1989. Suddenly, like many disaffected socialists who shared her very same commitment, she faces the question of whether to abandon her belief in socialism as a project for a better society or to preserve her ideal by revising components of it in the light of what she has learned from the collapse of the Eastern bloc. As many excellent documentaries filmed during the period of transformation of former communist parties into parties of the democratic left show, partisans found it valuable to participate in activities and events where fellow associates could discuss each other's views and try to arrive at a considered judgment about the nature of that transformation, which proportion of the socialist ideals they had endorsed should be adapted to new historical circumstances, and to what extent they had to be abandoned.[9] Such important decisions would have been more difficult to reach in conversation with people who were either direct political adversaries or politically apathetic citizens with no appreciation of the rationale behind their shared project. If their conviction in the

[8] See, for an empirical discussion, Lohmann 1994.

[9] See, for one example, Nanni Moretti (Director), *La Cosa*, DVD (Rome: Sacher Film, 1990).

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worth of a specific political project had to be revised, especially if the external evidence suggested that it had to be radically revised, it could not be revised lightly. If commitment is to be understood as a species of intention to endure epistemic and motivational challenges to projects one has adopted, deliberating with epistemic trustees about the ongoing significance of such shared projects is more likely to ensure that the evidence in support of change is properly examined before it can be conclusively endorsed.

Notice that I am not claiming here that epistemic trustees are important to identify the truth of the matter about the ongoing value of specific political projects. Recent research in political psychology suggests that partisan attitudes on political matters tend to make citizens more resistant to correction of information by alternative sources and even subject them to a range of misperceptions that nonpartisan citizens do not normally share (cf. Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Redlawsk 2002). If there is a truth of the matter to be found, it seems equally (and perhaps even more) persuasive to argue that exposure to disagreement, confrontation with people who endorse opposing views, and discursive challenge to one's position are more likely to contribute to the emergence of a more enlightened assessment. The epistemic demands to form relevant judgments on different political matters as an independent might be different from those necessary to guide political action on the side of committed citizens. Insofar as specific external (and sometimes counterveiling) evidence makes an impact on the development of a shared political project, epistemic trustees are crucial in processing information in a direction more supportive of political commitment given their similarities in background values, opinions, and beliefs. Precisely *because* arguing with one's political friends is more likely to consolidate one's previous opinions and beliefs and develop resistance to the tendency to revisit such commitment too lightly, taking part in associative practices through which one can find epistemic support compatible with one's political projects strengthens the ability to stick with previously held beliefs and values, despite evidence that would suggest the need to revisit them.

A well-known body of empirical literature documents the effects of informational cascades driven by deliberation with like-minded others, observing how individuals are more likely to shift views in a certain direction if they interact and deliberate with people driven by similar concerns.[10] Suppose I am a committed pacifist but my beliefs are challenged by external evidence suggesting that, sometimes, armed conflict can bring about a more durable peace. If I am uncertain about whether maintaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan will support the prodemocracy movement but my friend Joe is skeptical that it will, we will share our knowledge and evaluations and come to a more informed view in support of a peaceful approach to conflict. If Joe and I are against maintaining troops but our friend Susan is uncertain, deliberating with us will help her process information in a way that is relevant to our shared commitment; she will be reminded again of why she is a pacifist, will have further validation that her commitment is worth living up to, and will have a greater pool of epistemic resources to rely upon when defending her position with others who might have divergent views.

The tendency of friends (political and otherwise) to influence each other's evaluative outlooks is a well-observed phenomenon. Often, however, the presence of such cascade effects on information processing is considered a cause for concern. Deliberation with epistemic trustees is thought to lead to the polarization of opinion rather than an improvement in the quality of one's arguments (Sunstein 2000). In much recent political science literature, polarisation is perceived as an obstacle to responsible public decision-making and blamed for transforming institutional politics into a conflictual and divisive environment where partisan loyalties produce political bias (Fiorina et al. 2004; Mann and Ornstein 2006; see also Hetherington 2009 for a comprehensive review of the literature). But whether polarization is always a bad thing depends on the nature and value of one's commitment, and on whether there are good reasons for cultivating and seeking to protect and uphold specific political projects, despite epistemic challenges to their endorsement. It also depends on the relation between what I called political and civic commitment, the kinds of offices and positions politically committed agents occupy, how representative their views are, and how we strike the balance between the role of politically committed agents who believe in the pursuit of particular political projects, and the necessity of compromising with others one disagrees with for the sake of stability (on the issue of compromise see White and Ypi 2016).

Let me clarify this point further. Earlier I emphasized that the tendency of partisans to act like friends who influence each other, deliberate in common, and help interpret each others' beliefs and opinions, strengthens one's epistemic resilience to the challenge of desired political projects. One familiar problem with this argument is that the tendency of partisans to converge with each other or take more seriously their political friends' views could also become a source of bias and group fanaticism, increasing their insensitivity to other sources of information and contributing to the creation of "echo chambers" where activists refuse to take into account of arguments and opinions offered by proponents of radically different views (Sunstein 2009). But if we care about commitment, our critique of such tendencies to polarization must be more qualified. In some circumstances, group polarization of this kind will be essential to ensure that agents do not give up too easily on political projects they have thought worthy of endorsement.

Historically, polarization of precisely this sort has been crucial in many important episodes of political mobilization where processing information with one's

[10] For further discussion on informational cascades, see Bikhchandani et al. 1992 and for experimental evidence Anderson and Holt 1997.

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epistemic trustees has led to fundamental transformations of political institutions which we now believe were worth supporting: think about campaigns in favor of universal suffrage, the civil rights movement, or environmental activism (see, for a discussion, Ypi 2011). It is preferable to have had civil rights campaigners find epistemic support among their peers (even at the cost of some group polarization) than to have had them renounce their commitment subject to counterveiling pressure. But notice that defending the role of partisanship to sustain political commitment is different from saying which political commitments are worth sustaining. An argument in favor of the former is independent from an argument addressing the latter. I have not suggested here that the role of partisanship is to identify which political projects are worth pursuing or that we should promote partisanship even if we are uncertain about their value. But *if* there are political projects worth pursuing, partisanship will be an effective vehicle for sustaining and furthering them, crucially so on the face of epistemic pressure.

PROBLEMS WITH POLITICAL COMMITMENT

One might worry that the conception of political friendship on which my argument relies sacrifices partisans' independence of thought and action to the identity of a collective "we" necessary to sustain and enhance political commitment. The objection is hard to answer without conceding that *some* loss of independence is inevitable whenever there is commitment *in general*. Partisanship is not unique here. Most of the projects one decides to commit to often require sacrificing the ability to form plans that might be incompatible with their pursuit: being a parent, for example, often means that one is not in control of one's day as much as one might have been prior to having a child. However, *some* loss of independence may be acceptable when on balance we believe that these projects are worth committing to (consider the analogy with having children again). We are prepared to put up with some sacrifice to our independence because we believe that the benefits (to ourselves and others) outweigh the loss of some ability to pursue other options.

The same goes for political commitment. It would be naive to insist that those who share partisan practices enjoy the same degree of independence as they did prior to being part of them. Indeed, the benefits derived from such associative practices consist precisely in making available structures of cooperation that allow certain intentions to be preserved even on the face of obstacles and counterveiling inclinations. It is difficult for such associations to perform that role without to some extent creating new obligations for their members, and therefore without hindering the pursuit of alternative or incompatible ends: that they require us to do so is the very point of having them in the first place.

If we care about political commitment, the best way to promote it is to allow it to be shaped and further developed in associative practices where partisans can take advantage of the benefits of political friendship for the long-term pursuit of shared political projects. These associative structures ensure that political projects survive epistemic and motivational obstacles to the principles and goals they are linked to. One central feature of associations so understood is that they are nonfungible: agents come to value them not only for the instrumental role they play in supporting pre-existing commitments but also for the role that participating in such shared activities plays in enhancing these commitments. But here another objection might arise. If all we care about is political commitment, why lock it in nonfungible structures with particular identities that endure across time?

The answer is that the history of these associative practices plays a nontrivial role in explaining why they help agents survive epistemic and motivational obstacles to the realization of their projects. Precedents of interaction with fellow partisans, the shared symbolic language and system of values that they develop through continuous engagement with each other, the epistemic and psychological resources on which they rely in making future decisions, and the learning processes they jointly develop cannot be easily transferred to new sets of associative relations that start this process from scratch. Indeed that history of interaction is what gives participants in shared partisan practices the background knowledge and skills that presuppose a certain familiarity with the principles they are all committed to, some interpretation of these principles, and some measure of the constraints and challenges under which they have to operate in trying to realize them. Benefitting from long-term learning processes implies a specific, nonfungible, relation to an association with particular characteristics and a particular history (see also Ypi 2011, Chap. 6). Were such associations to be replaced, the epistemic and motivational benefits of the relations they embody would be either lost or significantly curtailed because such benefits accrue in virtue of that particular relation, and not another.

This is not to deny that agents often fundamentally change their beliefs or revise their commitment. Starting a new associative relation that sustains new projects when the current one fails should always be possible, and may often be desirable. But when that is the case, it is important to understand that these new associative relations form new plural subjects (Gilbert 2000; Helm 2008), the collective "we" in which one takes part through preceding particular interactions is dissolved and the relevant historical properties that help sustain one's previous commitment no longer subsist.

A third objection might be that even though associative structures are important to sustain and enhance political commitment, it is not clear why such associative structures have to take a partisan form rather than relying on loose political friendships that are not or do not seek to be institutionally channelled. To answer this challenge it is important to remember that the institutional profile of parties is only one feature explaining their role in sustaining political commitment. Parties should not be seen in opposition to alternative forms of channelling political activism (such as social

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movements) but in a continuum with them. Insofar as both parties and movements are committed to conceptions of the public good that appeal generally rather than serving only the interest of specific groups (White and Ypi 2016), both are effective vehicles for sustaining political commitment.

This is not to deny that institutional specificities matter enormously when it comes to establishing *how much* political commitment is sustained and enhanced in each of these cases. In some circumstances, partisan associations which never seek a share in government can preserve political commitment without great cost to fellow partisans. Here the necessity to compromise or give way to more general, stability-preserving civic commitments might be weaker. In other cases, especially in the cases of unjust or dysfunctional state institutions, movements might be forced to operate outside parliamentary circumstances and doing so will be more rather than less burdensome to their members. Even within different party configurations there might be different ways in which political commitment is promoted and affects the loyalty of associates. One might argue, for example, that there is a difference between smaller partisan groups with a clearer understanding of the political projects they serve, and large coalitions that appeal to a broader constituency with the risk that individual members end up feeling less represented. Addressing these differences and examining the relation between partisanship and political commitment in each of the more specific cases require a different kind of argument from the one offered here. What I have tried to emphasize is how, despite these differences in degree, political commitment is sustained and promoted in the presence of shared practices that develop a collective will which serves to integrate the beliefs and intentions of individual agents, and which supports and enhances the projects in which they are independently interested. Sometimes, the party as organization is necessary to provide such a shared associative framework. Yet the emphasis in this article was not so much on the party as an institution but on partisanship as a form of political friendship that develops around a known commitment which takes an associative form. The formal and informal properties of that practice supports the development of resilience to epistemic and motivational obstacles to desired political projects, even in cases where such practices do not converge to form a well-defined organization with a clear institutional profile.

This leads to a fourth objection: if what we are interested in is an aspirational community of principles and the associative practices underpinning it, why mention parties at all? This objection is critical in the light of much recent empirical literature documenting the failure of current parties to represent citizens or highlighting their inability to stand up for principled alternatives without being driven by short-term electoral concerns or influenced by media pressure. Yet the point I am trying to make in this article is normative. We know of no other associative practice in democracy whose purpose is to represent principled views of how power should be exercised and in what way social and political institutions should enable cooperation. We know of no other entity with a life that spans across many generations and that is irreducible to a concern with single-issue campaigns, trying to bring such disparate claims into a coherent body of rules, aspiring to connect to how power is exercised and mediating between the various branches of government. Of course, parties have many failures and they reflect the partisan associative relations that are central to my argument very imperfectly. But think about the analogy with families again. Marriage, civil unions, *de facto* partnerships are all associative relations considered essential for the cross-temporal support of certain commitments (e.g., of love). They can take many forms, ranging from the more formal to the ones that are only loosely structured. Yet participants in these practices have a clear sense of the obligations they entail, the expectations on which they rely, the role they play within such relations and the commitments they serve to promote. Of course, not all of them succeed in guaranteeing to fulfill their purpose: there are many bad marriages, many people change their mind about whether it is reasonable to believe in these joint projects, they fall in love with other people, and so on. But these empirical contingencies do not detract from the main observation: insofar as people still care about such commitments, certain associative practices are essential to their support and deserve the effort of investing and improving in them. A similar point can be made about partisan associative structures. To the extent that agents feel committed to certain shared political projects and believe that it is important to change institutions compatibly with them, partisan associative structures remain crucial in supporting and enhancing such commitments, regardless of what happens to them in the present.

We might worry at this point that partisanship isolates specific forms of interaction (i.e., specific modes of political friendship) hindering agents' capacity of engaging with other worthwhile associative projects. Of course, if one does choose to commit, and to the extent that one only has a limited amount of psychological and motivational resources available, the greater the commitment, the more likely it is that one will be less able to engage with other projects and pursuits. It is difficult to see how one avoids this without sacrificing the value of commitment in general: inevitably if I choose to commit to one set of friends or a partner, I might be neglecting other equally (or more) deserving individuals coming my way. If we think that this is a loss greater than the gains offered by being in a specific and nonfungible associative relation, we might have a problem with commitment in general, not with the associations through which commitment is sustained.

A final objection goes as follows. In this article I defended the relevance of partisanship to political commitment based on the virtues of political friendship in supporting and enhancing shared political projects. The shared projects I have described are all of a partisan kind: i.e., they reflect *particular* conceptions of the public good, and are advanced in the name of the whole rather than just one part (see also White and Ypi 2016). Still they are advanced in awareness that many others

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might disagree sharply with the principles and goals they involve (even if they are wrong in doing so). This seems to clash with the Aristotelian account of *philia* as a type of friendship that holds together an entire political community in a way that is independent and irreducible to partial conceptions of the good; indeed the point of appealing to political friendship is precisely to overcome the animosities between different subsections of the citizenry with potentially incompatible interests and goals.

It is true that Aristotle's argument is intended to apply to an entire political community and that such political community is characterized by an attempt to arrive at a shared understanding of what the good life requires. Yet if such homogeneous commitments can no longer be said to characterize complex modern societies, and if conceptions of the good are now more fragmented and difficult to reconcile than they were at the time of Aristotle, the role of associative practices that can mediate between the plurality of *individual* opinions and views and put them at the service of a search for the *public* good is perhaps even more important now. The ideal of active citizenship that is at the heart of democratic practices becomes more tangible by integrating the plurality of individual conceptions of the good in a process of democratic will formation guided by partisan political projects.[11] Such a process may well, insofar as it is taken seriously, sit uncomfortably with an apolitical form of civic commitment, constructed by bracketing partisan loyalties and requiring citizens to ignore sharp principled disagreements so that they can get along better with radically different others. I did not argue here that political commitment should trump all others, nor did I argue that civic commitments (such as those that appeal to overlapping consent on constitutional fundamentals or to the idea of fair play under the rule of law in optimal democratic circumstances) should be sacrificed to partisan fervor. But I did argue that if we care about political commitment, we should think more about the conditions under which it can flourish and take seriously the trade-offs it involves.

CONCLUSION

Political parties, wrote one of the greatest champions of partisan democracy almost two hundred years ago, "appear in a state where political life is free" (Bluntschli [1869] 2002, 1). They fail to appear where "indifference to public affairs prevails, or where the ruler forcefully suppresses every free demonstration of opinions by groups in the population." When such a vital tendency to associate in support of particular political projects is restricted, "this impetus withdraws from public life and flees into religious or ecclesiastical realms" or "it intensifies differences" (*ibid.*). Although my emphasis in this article has been less on parties and more on partisanship as the associative practice upon which parties rely, the claims I tried to make very much resonate with his arguments.

Of course, as this scholar also knew, and as the word itself suggests "the party is only a part of a bigger whole; it is never itself the whole thing." Indeed, were it to confuse itself with the whole, it would "overestimate its own importance, and would be unjustly arrogant towards all the other parts." Therefore a similar association can "fight the other parties, but it should not ignore them, nor should it usually seek to destroy them" (*ibid*, 76). It is also for this reason that the kind of partisan stance that one might adopt as an ordinary citizen contributing to the process of democratic exchange (if such process works as it should) must be tempered by the other commitments one endorses in different social roles.[12]

Political commitment is, of course, not the only commitment that matters. It has an important role to play in modern societies, where agents' plurality of conceptions of the good, the fragmentation of ethical communities, and the increasingly heterogeneous nature of democratic institutions means that the forms of solidarity on which citizens can rely are less grounded on allegiance to genetic political communities and more mediated by different conceptions of the public good and the principles and aims around which they are structured. The fact that individuals belong to multiple associations and have different sources of commitment should be cherished, for it allows agents to interrogate and integrate all these different commitments and might prevent any given set from becoming a source of bias. I have not suggested here that only political commitment matters or that one should pursue it at the expense of all others (including a suprapartisan form of civic commitment). What I argued is that if we care about political commitment, it may be useful to reflect on the kind of associative practices through which political commitment is promoted and enhanced.

We may never be sure which political projects are desirable and therefore choose political apathy over the enthusiastic endorsement of uncertain projects. We may be sure about what the right projects are, or know what we want to avoid, but resist joining lasting associative practices that develop nonfungible identities and attachments. Perhaps one shouldn't commit, even to the best of principles. Perhaps one should care less about *political* commitment. But if we both know and care, we will have to think about the trade-offs political commitment involves and also about how to further and enhance it. Where that is the case, partisanship, I hope to have shown, will provide an obvious remedy. At the very least, if someone suggests that remedy, one should think twice before considering them imbecile.

[11] For the importance of parties as mediating associations between the particularity of individual views and the universality of the state, see the interesting remarks in Heller [1928] (2000), 260–1. As Heller puts it, partisan associations remain fundamental mediating institutions in "that system for unifying wills that we call the democratic state [. . .]. (W)ithout such a system of mediations it is impossible to conceive democratically of the unity in the plurality of unmediated opposites" (*ibid*., 261).

[12] To understand this difference, consider, for example, the position of a judge who must remain impartial and nonpartisan in occupying that social role but can associate strongly with like-minded others in his capacity of ordinary citizen.

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