Citizens' Complicity in State Action: Exploring the Limits

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In this time of resurgent right-wing nationalism and authoritarianism, hundreds of millions of democratic citizens around the world now find themselves subject to profoundly unjust governments. In the United States and India alone, over 1.5 billion people are represented by elected officials who have taken a litany of flagrantly unjust actions, including targeting vulnerable minorities, stoking racial and religious resentments, and scuttling efforts to mitigate climate change.

In this context, the question of citizens' complicity in their government's injustices presents itself with fresh urgency. In the United States, many citizens are still trying to come to grips with the Trump administration's flurry of cruel, corrupt, and irrational initiatives, and wondering what they can do about it. In discussions of this question since Trump took office, two strong intuitions have often found expression. The first is that citizens who do nothing in moments like these will bear some responsibility for the consequences. The second is that, as democratic citizens, we are something more than just bystanders to our state's actions. We are implicated.

One of the many virtues of Shmuel Nili's recent book *Beyond the Law's Reach?* is that it helps us think more deeply about some of these questions.[1] Nili's book contributes to a long-standing discussion of the ways affluent democracies have aggravated global injustices. Climate change is the most obvious context for this accusation today, but it is hardly the only one. Economists, philosophers, and political theorists have long drawn attention to the global harms caused by

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domestic agricultural subsidies, by the sale of deadly weapons systems abroad, and by the perpetuation of intellectual property laws that inhibit the flow of lifesaving drugs and medical technologies to the global poor—among many other examples. In *Beyond the Law's Reach?* Nili extends this analysis in new directions. He focuses on injustices that unfold in the "shadow of violence"—that is, in societies where people lack basic security and stand continually at the mercy of violent gangs, criminal cartels, or brutal political regimes.

Nili explores the ways in which affluent democracies aggravate such violence. From the War on Drugs in the United States, to permissive banking regulations that facilitate money laundering, to the International Criminal Court's prosecutorial decisions, he shows how policy choices made by affluent democracies help empower violent actors abroad. Nili argues that these "democratic entanglements" create distinctive problems for our prevailing theories of justice. Part of the issue is that affluent democracies hold very little power to promote positive institutional change in countries marked by pervasive violence and insecurity. And yet institutional change has typically been the overriding aim in theoretical debates over global justice. Nili argues that these difficult cases should compel us to rethink both the immediate aims of global policy reform and the theoretical architecture used to justify it.

In this essay, I draw on Nili's analysis to explore a different question: Who exactly is responsible for the cross-border harms he describes? And more specifically, to what extent do the citizens of affluent democracies share responsibility for them? Nili argues that liberal democracies can be understood as collective agents that bear responsibility for their unjust actions. He maintains, furthermore, that this responsibility arises partly from considerations of "moral integrity": Liberal democracies do wrong when they violate their own constitutive moral principles, which are embodied in their constitutions and their basic institutional structures. Nili does not, however, ask how culpability for such wrongdoing should be "distributed" among the members of liberal-democratic polities. Do public officials bear sole responsibility, or does it spill over onto citizens, too?

I have argued elsewhere that democratic citizens are, in many cases, complicit in the injustices committed by their governments. The term "complicit," as I am using it here, connotes moral culpability: To assert that an agent is complicit in injustice is thus to assert that they are culpable or blameworthy. In some contexts, it makes sense to hold an agent responsible for remediating an injustice even when they are

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not culpable. Bystanders who witness an assault, for example, typically bear some responsibility for helping the injured victim or at least calling 911. Anna Stilz has called this remedial responsibility "task-responsibility" to distinguish it from moral culpability. "Task-responsibility," she writes, "involves assigning duties to people to repair a particular situation, even when they did not cause the outcome and cannot be blamed for it."[2] Some theorists have argued that citizens' responsibility for their government's injustices is best understood in these terms, as a matter of task-responsibility.[3] In this essay, I leave this question aside and focus strictly on the question of moral culpability. In other words, I ask whether—and to what extent—citizens are blameworthy for the injustices explored in *Beyond the Law's Reach?*

The cases Nili explores in his book are instructive in this context because they can help us explore the limits of citizens' complicity. Democratic theorists tend to agree that any plausible theory of civic obligation should avoid imposing unreasonable burdens on citizens, which would either be impossible or too costly for them to manage.[4] The cases Nili considers in *Beyond the Law's Reach?* are helpful because they are relatively obscure: Most citizens are not aware of them, and even fairly informed citizens—say, daily readers of the *New York Times*—probably know little to nothing about them. This is especially true in our current moment, when even highly vigilant, engaged citizens are feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of reckless and immoral initiatives emanating from the White House. Many of the cases Nili discusses, furthermore, are difficult to understand without technical knowledge—including, for example, knowledge of the inner workings of banking regulation and oversight. Asking citizens to keep track of these injustices—not to mention to take action against them—would be asking a lot.

As I explore these challenges, I will focus on one of Nili's cases in particular. Major banks in affluent nations—including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, and others—routinely handle money for some of the world's most corrupt kleptocrats who are stealing from their country's public coffers. Many of these kleptocrats preside over harshly repressive governments that brutalize their subjects. These corrupt rulers have strong incentives to hide their loot in secure bank accounts, where they are shielded by the rule of law and by guarantees of client confidentiality, and where they have "access to top-flight investment managers."[5] And leading Western banks routinely accommodate them. One scholar observes that the world's "largest, best-known banks" have been "up to their eyeballs in facilitating massive amounts of tax evasion, capital flight,

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and kleptocracy."[6] Their willingness to handle kleptocrats' stolen fortunes facilitates grievous injustices: it makes large-scale theft—and the impoverishment and oppression of vulnerable populations—more secure and profitable than it would otherwise be. For simplicity's sake, I will call the injustices perpetrated by these kleptocrats, with the help of Western banks, "kleptocratic harms."

Although private banks are the leading accomplices in these cases, Nili observes that their actions clearly implicate Western governments too, because these governments are responsible for regulating the banks that operate in their territories. In fact, most liberal democracies have laws on the books that are designed to prevent banks from supporting foreign kleptocrats. The main problem, Nili points out, is the lack of consistent enforcement: Too often, politicians and regulators look the other way. Nili gives a number of reasons for this failure, including the power of private banking lobbies and the pervasive incidence of "regulatory capture." He also notes that public officials in affluent democracies are hesitant to impose harsh penalties on "systemically important" banks because of the possible economic repercussions.[7] This latter failure speaks to a larger problem: in allowing massive consolidation in their financial sectors, liberal-democratic governments have in effect created powerful entities that are capable of both corrupting the law and operating above it. Assuming these descriptions are accurate, it seems clear that the public officials responsible for regulating these banks are culpable for kleptocratic harms.

When Are Citizens Complicit?

This brings me to my main question: How much of this blame—if any—is borne by citizens? To get a handle on this question, we need a broader theory of civic complicity. The best I can do here is to outline, in very broad brushstrokes, the account that I have offered elsewhere. I have argued we share blame for an unjust collective action carried out by others when: (1) we make a causal contribution to this collective action; (2) we contribute to it freely and knowingly;* (3) injustice is among the foreseeable consequences of the collective action in question; and (4) injustice occurs.[8]

Let us test this account first using a fairly easy case:

*Later in this section, I will discuss an important exception to the second condition.

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Trump Supporter: Donald Trump runs for president as an avowed climate denialist, promising to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord, impede the transition to clean energy, and accelerate the consumption of fossil fuels. Trump Supporter casts her vote for Donald Trump. Trump then follows through on these campaign promises, which exacerbate the harms that climate change inflicts on the global poor.

In this case, it seems very likely that Trump Supporter would be blameworthy. Her vote constitutes a causal contribution to Trump's victory.[9] She casts her vote freely, knowing that she is contributing to a collective effort to elect Trump as president. His subsequent actions are entirely foreseeable in light of his campaign promises, and so are the resulting harms: the damaging effects of climate change are a matter of broad consensus among scientists, policy experts, and mainstream journalists and pundits. I should clarify that the relevant threshold here is *reasonable* foreseeability: It is reasonable to expect citizens to foresee harms that are widely and repeatedly discussed in mainstream media outlets. Even if the Trump Supporter did not intend these harms—or was wholly unaware of them—she could rightly be accused of epistemic negligence and thus held culpable. Some Trump voters might be able to deflect blame altogether by showing, for example, that they were subject to comprehensive manipulation and deception. But it seems unlikely that most Trump voters could make this case persuasively, given that they have access—with just a few keystrokes—to a wide range of credible independent news sources. They live in the United States, after all, not North Korea.

To be clear, my view is that *most* of the blame for Trump's unjust climate obstructionism falls on Trump himself, on his inner circle of enablers and advisors, on the Republican lawmakers who refuse to curb his reckless behavior, and on the major funders and allies that helped return him to power. Many elected Democrats also bear some of the blame because of the fecklessness of their opposition. It would seem obtuse—not to mention cruel—to heap most of the blame on the shoulders of ordinary voters, especially on voters without college degrees who have been inundated by right-wing propaganda and misinformation. Instead, I am simply denying that these voters are morally blameless. Their share of the blame may be relatively small, but it is not nonexistent. I think this view has broad intuitive appeal: In democratic societies, it is not uncommon for citizens to hold one another morally responsible for empowering bad leaders who go on to take (predictably) unjust actions. Indeed, this sentiment has been fairly ubiquitous among left-leaning Americans since Trump took office in January 2025.

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In my view, citizens' complicity extends beyond these relatively easy cases. To see why, let us now consider a slightly more difficult case:

> *Trump Hater*: Trump Hater despises Donald Trump and sees him as a profoundly immoral man with corrupt and unjust policy priorities. She also believes deeply in the importance of mitigating climate change as a matter of justice. She does not vote in the 2024 election because she lives in Vermont and doubts that her vote will make a difference—and anyway, she is busy on election day and wants to avoid the hassle of waiting in line at the polling booth. She is deeply dismayed by the result of the election, and in the ensuing months, she remains disengaged from public life, focusing instead on private matters that she finds less depressing.

Compared to Trump Supporter, Trump Hater has a stronger claim to moral innocence. After all, she did not contribute causally to Trump's electoral victory. And yet, on closer inspection, Trump Hater still lends causal support to the administration's actions. After all, voting is not the only causal intervention we make in political life. We pay taxes; we obey the laws; and we willingly accept state benefits. In all of these ways, we enable our government to continue functioning (albeit in a very small way). Political scientists have often observed that governments depend, for their efficacy and their continued existence, on these patterns of everyday compliance. When enough citizens or subjects withhold such compliance, regimes tend to collapse.[10]

So, even though Trump Hater did not vote for Trump, it looks like she is still *going along* with his administration and even lending support to it. How might she respond to this charge? One obvious response is to invoke the second condition outlined above and point out that her compliance is not freely given. After all, citizens who pay taxes and obey the law do so under threat of coercion. Meanwhile, the refusal to accept state benefits is often either impossible (when considering security benefits, for example) or very costly. A closer look, however, reveals the limits of this response. Like most citizens of liberal democracies, Trump Hater has a range of options besides noncompliance and mute compliance. Since she enjoys ample opportunity to speak, vote, organize, and join political movements, she can take action against Trump and his unjust climate policies. She can do so, moreover, without taking unreasonable risks or incurring unreasonable costs.

My own view—elaborated in more detail elsewhere—is that in such cases, coercion alone is not enough to exonerate citizens from complicity in state injustice. The force of this view derives partly from an underlying intuition: If we are being forced to contribute to an injustice, we have a heightened obligation to

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try to stop it or mitigate it. If we have the opportunity (at little cost to ourselves) to throw our causal weight, so to speak, against the injustice, we have an overriding obligation to do so. If we do not, then our attempt to deflect blame fails. Trump Hater would, in essence, be saying: "Don't blame me, I had no choice. My support for Trump's climate malfeasance was obtained under threat of coercion. And although I had every opportunity to speak out (and take action) against this malfeasance, I did not think it would make a difference, and anyway I am busy and it would have been inconvenient." These latter arguments might be adequate coming from a bystander, but they are manifestly inadequate coming from someone who is lending causal support to injustice.

Other theorists have reached a similar conclusion from different theoretical premises. In a 2023 article, for example, Anna Stilz argues that democratic citizens *authorize* their politicians to act on their behalf when they accept the legitimacy of democratic procedures. In her view, this authorization leaves citizens morally culpable for the injustices committed by their political leaders—even leaders they did not vote for—unless citizens take some deliberate action to "sever the agency relationship."[11] The actions she has in mind include voting, protesting, and otherwise expressing dissent from the unjust policies and the leaders who initiate them. She would thus agree with my assessment of Trump Hater: "The fact that democratic citizens could dissent, though they do not," writes Stilz, "allows us to attribute them some culpability in association with their government's wrongful decisions. The citizenry's duty not to wrongfully harm foreigners is not a duty they can simply 'offload' onto their state officials."[12]

Assuming this argument is correct, it raises a number of further questions. *How much* must citizens do to avoid complicity in injustice? Could Trump Hater have avoided complicity in Trump's climate policies, for instance, merely by casting a ballot for Kamala Harris in November 2024? Or would other, subsequent actions have been required as well? Both Stilz and I maintain that voting alone would not have been enough. After all, voting is a blunt instrument. There were many reasons to vote against Trump in the 2024 election, and most of them had nothing to do with climate change. A voter who cast her ballot for Harris—say, because she disapproved of Trump's narcissism and corruption—could, without contradiction, approve of Trump's climate policies. Indeed, given the low cost of dissent in the United States, it is not unreasonable for the Trump administration to see mute compliance as an expression of tacit support—or at least grudging tolerance—for its actions. Stilz makes a similar argument. Voting, she argues, "does not clearly condemn or reject

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any specific law, policy, or decision."[13] Citizens who wish to withdraw their complicity in Trump's climate malfeasance, then, must do something more.

The Duty to Take Political Action

What more must they do? It is tempting to argue that they must take action against the Trump administration's climate policies specifically: by protesting, writing to their congressional representatives, urging state-level officials to resist them, and so on. The problem with this argument is that it seems to place very high demands on citizens. The Trump administration's injustices comprise a vast and tangled web that is continually spreading into new areas of American law and policy. This administration also inherited a litany of unjust policies from previous administrations, both Republican and Democratic. Banking regulations that facilitate kleptocracy are a case in point. Asking citizens to take action against *all* of these unjust policies—or even to be sufficiently aware of them all—seems impossibly demanding. Even citizens who are college educated, relatively affluent, and whose jobs and family obligations leave them plenty of time to devote to politics would find it impossible, on this account, to escape complicity in a broad range of injustices.

I argued earlier that citizens cannot be held responsible for injustices unless they are reasonably *foreseeable*. This condition has implications for the extent of our civic demands. After all, our capacity to foresee injustice is constrained by the fact that we do not have unlimited time or attention to devote to public affairs. If there are too many injustices to keep track of, then it seems plausible to conclude—for this reason alone—that we cannot be culpable for them all. This point seems especially relevant to injustices that are relatively obscure, such as the kleptocratic harms Nili describes. But we might worry that it affects even Trump's climate malfeasance: unless we have some way of prioritizing the demands of civic life and carving out a feasible set of duties, our complicity for state action might evaporate altogether.

In his 2012 book *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy*, Eric Beerbohm addresses this problem by laying out a number of helpful guidelines, including a "horizontal" division of labor among citizens. Not everyone has to learn about—or take action against—*every* injustice. There are, after all, millions of other citizens in our society who oppose the Trump administration. Beerbohm argues that each of us can "specialize" by focusing on certain injustices in particular.[14] Beerbohm also suggests a "triage" guideline: The more severe the injustice in question, the more work we have to do to excuse our complicity in it.[15] This guideline gives us reason to prioritize our government's most serious injustices; it also suggests that

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democratic citizens who live under severely unjust governments have more civic work to do than their counterparts who live under governments that are mostly just.

In the rest of this essay, I want to explore the implications of these two guidelines —let us call them the "division of labor guideline" and the "triage guideline"—for the case of the banks and kleptocrats. At first glance, the division of labor guideline suggests a promising way of handling this case. It suggests the following picture: citizens who do nothing to oppose the Trump administration's injustices—such as Trump Hater—are culpable, not just for his climate malfeasance but also for a range of other unjust actions, including facilitating kleptocratic harms. They can avoid complicity in injustice, however, by taking appropriate action, as part of a reasonable division of labor among citizens, against *some* of the administration's injustices. So long as they are taking such action—and so long as other citizens are taking action on the issue of bank regulation—then all of them can deflect blame, collectively, for the injustices they are opposing. This account has the virtue of seeming feasible: at first glance, the demands it places on citizens seem manageable.

One problem, however, is that this account suggests an implausible degree of coordination among citizens. It works well if we imagine a fairly cohesive team of people collaborating to oppose the administration's injustices. They take stock of the moral landscape, assign tasks to one another, and ensure that no injustices are forgotten. Despite their cognitive division of labor, they share information about the actions that the entire group can take to oppose the particular injustices for which each of them is chiefly responsible. They function, in other words, as something like a collective agent.

The division of labor guideline holds up less well, however, when we transpose it onto a group of citizens who lack coordination. The main problem is that this lack of coordination increases the epistemic demands on each individual considerably. To figure out how much I, personally, have to do to excuse my complicity in Trump's injustices, I would need to know, at least: (1) the full range of injustices for which I am potentially blameworthy; and (2) what other citizens are currently doing about them (and where the "gaps" in civic vigilance lie). But this is too much to expect. Keeping track of the Trump administration's many injustices is a tall order even for political scientists. The additional challenge of mapping the organizations and civic groups that are mobilizing against these various injustices is Herculean. We might be tempted to think that some such mapping has already been achieved by advocacy groups—such as Indivisible or the ACLU—that are

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helping organize resistance to the current administration. The problem is that these groups typically address only a small slice of the administration's unjust actions. As they compete for citizens' scarce time and attention, they tend to focus, understandably, on the most urgent cases. Many injustices are left unaccounted for. On closer inspection, then, the division of labor guideline is less helpful than it seemed.

This leaves us with the triage guideline, which instructs citizens to devote their scarce time and attention to their government's worst injustices. Even without considering the many ways we might assess the severity of injustice, I think we can safely conclude that for U.S. citizens, kleptocratic harms will not, by themselves, rank very highly on the list. I say this with some trepidation because the harms suffered by people living in the shadow of violence are, as Nili emphasizes, extreme. But the severity of the harm itself is far from the only consideration: we also surely have to consider the number of people affected, the extent of our government's contribution, and the power it possesses to mitigate these harms. Nili points out that democratic governments have very limited leverage in these cases. Even if affluent democracies succeeded in jointly tightening their banking regulations, this would simply drive kleptocrats' funds into Chinese banks instead. On the other hand, the U.S. government has far greater leverage in addressing a range of other urgent injustices, including those associated with climate change, which will also affect a far greater number of people.

What implications does the triage guideline have, then, for citizens' complicity in their government's injustices? Imagine that Trump Hater is trying to deflect blame for the administration's injustices altogether. She claims that there are too many unjust actions to keep track of and that she cannot therefore be held responsible for any of them—the epistemic demands are simply too great. The triage guideline suggests a plausible response: In the face of overwhelming civic demands, her job is to focus on the injustices that are especially severe and take action against those. Notice that the triage has the effect, at this point, of dividing the state's unjust actions into two categories: those that exceed a certain threshold of severity and those that do not. It suggests that citizens are culpable for the former actions but not the latter. Where exactly this threshold lies will depend on a number of variables, including the extent of the government's injustices and the extent of citizens' organization and coordination.

Some might worry, at this point, that the triage guideline itself makes excessive epistemic demands. Does it not require that citizens understand all of the state's injustices, so that they can assess the severity of each one and place them in rank

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order? Is it not impossibly difficult to figure out exactly where to place the threshold that divides more from less severe injustices? The short answer is that epistemic uncertainty in this situation need not be paralyzing. Citizens can ascertain, for example, that the moral stakes involved in climate change are extraordinarily high without cataloging every last injustice for which the current administration is responsible. They can also respond to uncertainty about the threshold by focusing on injustices that, in their estimation, clearly exceed it—and if they exercise some diligence here, they can be forgiven for making mistakes.

One further clarification is worth offering here: Any plausible version of the triage guideline will also require that citizens prioritize injustices from which they *benefit* substantially. Nili explores the case of Luxembourg, for example, whose economic prosperity is substantially enabled by its willingness to facilitate various financial crimes and the resulting injustices—including kleptocratic harms.[16] In Luxembourg, unlike in the United States, the triage guideline would compel citizens to take action against kleptocratic harms specifically, because they are central to the country's economy; and if they failed to do so, they would rightly be judged culpable for these harms.

Once the triage guideline has narrowed the scope of citizens' complicity, we can safely reintroduce the division of labor guideline, because its epistemic demands are no longer excessive. This guideline now instructs citizens to divide among themselves the work of tracking and opposing their state's "worst" injustices.[17] The epistemic demands involved at this point are further reduced by the presence of activist organizations that do much of this tracking themselves and help citizens find ways of taking effective action. Applied in this way, then, these two guidelines suggest a way of making our civic demands more manageable. And this, in turn, allows us to rescue the conclusion that I considered earlier: citizens can avoid complicity in *all* of their state's unjust actions as long as they are taking action, as part of a reasonable division of civic labor, against *some* of them.

Let us now return to the case of the banks and kleptocrats. I have argued that for U.S. citizens, the kleptocratic harms very likely fall below the threshold of severity introduced by the triage guideline. I have also argued that their relative obscurity makes these harms difficult to see and understand. Does this mean that citizens can bear no responsibility at all in this case? This would be too quick. It seems more plausible to think that citizens' responsibility for the kleptocratic harms is pushed back to the election cycle. In fact, this case can help clarify our obligations at the polls. Knowing that there are likely to be far too many state injustices for us to keep

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track of, we are obliged to vote for candidates who will *care* about these injustices and try to eliminate them—even when their constituents have no knowledge of them. In other words, the existence of numerous and relatively "obscure" state injustices gives voters reason to assign independent moral weight to candidates' character, as distinct from their policy positions. Assessing a politician's character is no simple matter, of course, given that candidates' images tend to be carefully crafted by public relations teams. Making accurate judgments about a politician's character can be every bit as demanding, epistemically, as making sound judgments about policy questions. Still, inferences can be drawn, for example, from the professions that the candidate pursued before running for office, the roles they took on in their communities, the testimonials from people who worked for (or with) them, and so on.

We can see one of the upshots of this analysis if we consider Trump Supporter's moral predicament once more. In voting for Donald Trump—a candidate who manifestly lacks the integrity and moral resolve I have just described—Trump Supporter rendered herself liable to be blamed for the kleptocratic harms. It was entirely foreseeable, we might say, that Trump would *not* work diligently to reduce the U.S. government's complicity in injustice (even when constituents were not paying attention)—quite the opposite. On the other hand, voters who cast their ballot for a more "virtuous" candidate would escape complicity for these harms. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that Kamala Harris was such a candidate, and that there were no other, overriding moral reasons to support Trump. A voter who cast her ballot for Harris but then withdrew from politics in disgust after the election would, according to my argument, be culpable for Trump's climate malfeasance but *not* for the kleptocratic harms.

This last point raises many questions that I do not, unfortunately, have the space to address. How much weight, for example, should voters give to candidates' characters, among the many other factors they should consider? And what happens when there are no virtuous candidates on the ballot at all? Rather than give cursory answers to these questions, I want to close by anticipating one broader objection to the theory of civic obligation outlined in this essay. The extent of any individual citizen's obligations will of course depend on their particular life circumstances. People with more time and money on their hands, for example, can rightly be expected to do more to avoid complicity in injustice. On the other hand, people working long hours and holding down two jobs just to keep a roof over their heads —or people raising young children or caring for elderly dependents—can plausibly

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deflect blame for failing to take extensive civic action. How much we can expect citizens to foresee, and how much time and energy we can expect them to devote to civic action, will thus vary considerably from one person to the next. This variability is implicit in the idea of a reasonable division of civic labor.

Notes

[1] Shmuel Nili, *Beyond the Law's Reach? Powerful Criminals, Foreign Entanglements, and Justice in the Shadow of Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).
[2] Anna Stilz, "Collective Responsibility and the State," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 190–208, at pp. 194–95.
[3] See, for instance, Avia Pasternak, *Responsible Citizens, Irresponsible States: Should Citizens Pay for Their State's Wrongdoing?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
[4] For one recent and compelling articulation of this argument, see Kevin J. Elliott, *Democracy for Busy People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).
[5] Nili, *Beyond the Law's Reach?*, p. 8.
[6] Ibid., p. 4. These trends are explored in more detail in Michael G. Findley, Daniel L. Nielson, and J. C. Sharman, *Global Shell Games: Experiments in Transnational Relations, Crime, and Terrorism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[7] Nili, *Beyond the Law's Reach?*, pp. 98–101. See also Shmuel Nili, *Philosophizing the Indefensible: Strategic Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 98–129.
[8] See Alex Zakaras, "Complicity and Coercion: Toward an Ethics of Political Participation," in David Sobel, Peter Vallentyne, and Steven Wall, eds., *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 192–218.
[9] To reach this conclusion, we must reject the simple counterfactual account of causation; see ibid., pp. 196–98.
[10] Scholars of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes have lately emphasized this point: these regimes draw strength from their subjects' passive compliance. See, for instance, Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Crown, 2017).
[11] Anna Stilz, "Are Citizens Culpable for State Action?," *Politics, Philosophy, & Economics* 22, no. 4 (2023), pp. 381–406, at p. 392.
[12] Ibid., p. 394.
[13] Ibid., p. 393.
[14] Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 180.
[15] See ibid., pp. 188–90. Stilz suggests a similar guideline; see Stilz, "Are Citizens Culpable for State Action?," pp. 398–99.
[16] Nili, *Beyond the Law's Reach?*, pp. 185–88.
[17] I use the term "worst" here to capture the various dimensions of severity outlined above—including the extent to which citizens benefit from the injustice.

Abstract: In his new book *Beyond the Law's Reach?* Shmuel Nili shows how affluent democracies have become entangled with violent autocratic regimes and brutal international cartels, and have thereby become complicit in serious global injustices. This essay asks *who* bears responsibility for this complicity. It argues that citizens of affluent democratic societies often share responsibility for their own government's unjust entanglements and explores the conditions under which this holds true. It focuses in particular on the challenge posed by relatively "obscure" injustices, which even well-informed citizens cannot be expected to know about. In addressing these cases, this essay outlines a theory of civic obligation that can help explain when citizens have a duty to take action against government injustice and clarify how much they can be expected to know about their representatives' wrongdoing.

Keywords: complicity, responsibility, citizenship, civic duty, democracy, coercion, political action, political participation

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