The Future as a Democratic Resource

Jonathan White

Beliefs about the future shape attitudes, experiences, and priorities in the present. This article explores the relationship between democracy and the expected world to come. As it argues, visions of the future are an important resource for democratic politics, putting the present in critical perspective, aiding in the formation of a collective agent, and consolidating commitment in adversity. Indirectly, they contribute also to the legitimacy of democratic institutions, shaping the exercise of citizenship and the capacity to contend with the flaws of representation. The democratic significance of the imagined future becomes even more visible in today's age of skepticism toward future-regarding politics, in which speculative modes of thinking run up against the desire for certainty and precision.

The waning of the future as a political reference point is widely reported today. In their rhetoric and actions, politicians are said to be shifting toward piecemeal forms of problem solving and efforts to preserve a receding status quo. In a book called *The Lost Future*, Jan Zielonka (2023, 137) writes of the ascendancy of those who "have little reassurance to offer about the clouds gathering over our heads, [preferring to] talk about heroic or glorious history… . To address the future, you need a strategy and resources, but to address the past you only need rhetorical skills." Such a reading reflects a wider sense that future-regarding politics is an ever-diminishing feature of democratic life (cf. Mackenzie 2021).

This article examines what is at stake in this apparent retreat from the future. How might the future be a democratic resource, and what happens when it is put to one side? What gets lost when the future is lost? Contemporary theoretical discussion tends to approach these temporal matters in terms of ties to the young and the unborn (e.g., Gosseries and Meyer 2009). Certainly, the ethics of intergenerational obligation offers powerful reason to care about the place of the future in politics, but this article presents a different approach. If actors have reason to keep the future in sight, it is not just for the sake of the world they leave behind—perspectives on what lies ahead shape affairs in the moving present. To grasp democracy's relation to the future, one must consider how its practices and institutions reflect the hopes, fears, expectations, and blind spots of the living. Democratic theory needs to expand its gaze beyond the "future present," as it may one day transpire, to the "present future" as it is imagined today (Luhmann 1976).

This article begins by looking more closely at the lost-future thesis. As the first section argues, if there is something distinctive about the outlook of politicians in contemporary western democracies, it is not that they meet the future with indifference. Public officials continue to invest heavily in setting targets for policy and identifying risks. In some ways these concerns are more pronounced than ever, and they have more than a near focus on the coming weeks and months. If future-regarding politics is in some sense diminished, it concerns *how* the future is invoked. Specifically, in question today is the willingness of representatives to develop comprehensive visions of how the future can be positively shaped. We see *policies* for the future but much less often a *politics.* A preoccupation with targets and threats tends to displace a more principled and agential approach. A reactive stance, focused on adapting to the probable and dodging the worst, is typical.

The second section provides an initial analysis of why a comprehensive vision of the future might matter. It argues that broader visions of the future hold particular significance for those committed to social change. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, movements and parties defined themselves by future-oriented programs of reform from which they drew strength in various ways. The "isms" they pioneered combined tangible goals with

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more general commitments that were irreducible to prediction and calculation. Drawing on their experiences, the section identifies three respects in which future-oriented visions of this kind are of value—for putting the present in critical perspective, for aiding in the formation of a collective political agent, and for underpinning commitment in adversity.

As the third section argues, in addition to the future's significance as a resource for projects of change, it shapes the legitimacy of democratic institutions more generally. Modern democracy is centered on representation, and depends on imagined futures both to contend with the dissatisfactions that mediating institutions give rise to and to build ties between the rulers and the ruled. Deep disagreements, fallible procedures, and underinclusive constitutions—none of these fatally weakens democracy so long as it is seen as a continuing process. Conversely, democracy's legitimacy starts to be imperiled once citizens struggle to project forward in time. In the contemporary experience of contested elections, voter abstention, and hostility to representation, one sees the symptoms of the political abdication of the future.

The article concludes by considering three varieties of skepticism toward future-regarding politics that reflect and reinforce its erosion today. These center on doubts about its wisdom, feasibility, or resonance. *Strategic* skepticism sees visionary ideas of the future as ultimately undesirable, all things considered, in view of tendencies toward idealism and vanguardism. *Institutional* skepticism sees future-oriented visions as desirable in principle but as systematically frustrated by the institutions of representative democracy, which erode the outlooks on which they depend. *Historical* skepticism takes no view on desirability but sees future-regarding politics as largely outdated because of wider cultural and economic shifts. Each brand of skepticism alerts us to the problems that a future-oriented politics will encounter, but none—so I argue—gives reason to discount its worth.

The Lost Future?

What should one make of the thesis that today's leaders neglect the future? In some ways the claim is surprising. Aren't public officials in the habit of referencing the future in a wide range of policy fields? Across the developed world and beyond, economic measures like GDP are monitored for the trajectory toward growth or recession (Macekura 2020). Targets for inflation shape the activities of central banks. Parties craft proposals for the coming electoral cycle and cite all sorts of risks as reasons for action (Lakoff 2007). Military spending is justified by the prospect of increasing geopolitical tensions and failing alliance commitments. Public authorities invest in "horizon scanning" and "early warning" systems (Rhinard 2019). All are spurred by the sense of a world in flux and the fragility of existing arrangements. If there is a problem with future-oriented politics, it would seem to consist in something other than the mere willingness to look forward in time.

For many observers, short-termism is the problem. To the extent the future is invoked in democratic politics, they say, it tends to be the near future of the coming weeks, months, or a few years at most. Jonathan Boston (2017, 19) writes of the "presentist bias," whereby elected officials knowingly "display a tendency to prioritize near-term needs, interests or policy consequences over longer-term ones to the detriment of overall outcomes." Zielonka (2023, 140) too observes that "in a high-speed era, democracy is ever more concerned with short-term rather than long-term fears and hopes" (cf. Smith 2021). When the situation is fast moving and there are threats close at hand, long-range speculation can seem out of place: There are nearer hurdles to clear.

Plausible as a diagnosis of short-termism may be, again it can capture just part of the picture. Contemporary politics is often about emergency management, but it is also replete with targets and deadlines for the further future—notably, decarbonization goals for 2050 (IPCC 2018). Such timescales extend well beyond the electoral cycle and seem to challenge the notion that elected officials consider only the near term. Certainly, commitment to these goals may often be superficial. A genuinely future-regarding outlook involves the willingness to devote resources to projects that take time to mature (Boston 2017; Thompson 2010). Setting policy targets decades into the future can be a strategy for kicking the can down the road. But underwhelming as the response to climate change may be, target setting requires extensive processes of international negotiation and brings some inconvenient commitments in tow. It may be half-hearted, but it is not without consequence.

If there is a sense in which the future is neglected today, I suggest it is more specific: as the object of a principled vision. When policy makers set quantified targets to pursue or speak of threats to be avoided, they are casting the future as something to manage. The focus is on pragmatism and necessity, on tracking particular concerns such as growth, and reacting to specific threats. This is a future for experts and insiders, schooled in the practices of forecasting and calculation, rather than for a public engaged in normative choices. External pressures trump the construction of an agenda responding to chosen priorities and overarching ideals. In the terminology of Arjun Appadurai, an ethics of *probability* tends to displace an ethics of *possibility* (Appadurai 2013, chap. 15; cf. Hölscher 1999, 318ff.). Instead of transformative visions, one sees approaches that suppose continuity at the level of structures. Focusing on gauging the most likely outcomes and gravest risks tends to mean stepping away from a more questioning and encompassing outlook addressed to what is desirable in the round and how to pursue it systematically.

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This shift has been charted in democratic politics generally over the twentieth century, and especially on the political Left, where visionary politics was arguably more central to begin with. Stephanie Mudge (2018, 10ff.) has traced how European socialism evolved into Keynesian "economistic leftism" characterized by a technocratic outlook on the future and then into "neoliberal leftism" animated by a managerial concern to adapt to market discipline. Her account documents how parties of the Left by the 1990s had become a mix of finance-oriented economists, policy experts, and strategists, intent on making the existing system more efficient (7). Theirs was the rise of a consciously pragmatic approach to the future: a desire to make reliable forecasts and adjust to their implications. It reflected a more general process in which parties of all stripes aspired to become "catch-all" parties, largely stripped of a consistent program (Kirchheimer 1966), and began to lose the *comprehensiveness* of outlook—the willingness to draw links across issues and episodes—that normative theorists of partisanship identify as one of its distinguishing virtues (Rosenblum 2008; White and Ypi 2016; see also the later discussion).

"Any transformative vision of a common future died in the early 1980s," Adam Przeworski writes (2024, 7). "Social Democrats moved from revolution to reform to coping with problems as they appear. They no longer propose anything beyond a program for the next election." The same thought is sometimes expressed as the decline of utopian politics (Byrne 2019, 2021; Hetland 2024; Fraser 2024; see also Judt 2011). It can be traced empirically in the way party manifestos evolved over the twentieth century from programmatic statements evoking an open-ended, value-driven project to a catalog of concrete goals (Kavanagh 1981; Thackeray and Toye 2020). Such trends are sometimes taken to be expressions of the "end of ideology" (Brick 2013), although this phrase can mislead with the suggestion that ideational influences have disappeared. There are good reasons to see ideologies as a persistent feature of democracy but in a form that tends toward the increasingly fragmented, unsystematic, and detached from public consciousness (Freeden 2005). In their evolution over recent decades, it is the principled vision of a different future that has tended to be cast off first.

On the contemporary political Right, a fixation with past glories is widely visible. Messages such as "make America great again" are nostalgic. They call for the restoration of something that once was and are also often backed by a cyclical view of history (Bauman 2017; Teitelbaum 2020). Again, such views hardly express *apathy* toward the future, but rarely do they convey a principled scheme. The future is cast rather as a source of impending breakdown, to be met with heroic resolve. Where proposals for action are made, the focus tends to be on opaque notions of "disruption" or very specific measures such as reducing migration figures, building walls to protect borders, resisting green innovations, and so on. They speak to a series of specific concerns and anxieties rather than a worked-out political project. Insofar as there are deeper goals in play, typically they find scant expression in the programs presented to the public in elections.

Future-regarding activity in contemporary democracies thus displays an apparently contradictory pattern, one we may capture with the distinction between *policy* and *politics*. On the one hand, there are signs of notable preoccupation with the world to come, seen in such policy practices as target setting and risk monitoring. Contrary to a diagnosis of indifference, contemporary officials are all too conscious of the need to reckon with the uncertain future. In terms of targeted interventions in particular fields, the forward-looking gaze seems as prominent as ever, arguably more so in the light of climate change and related challenges (Delanty 2024, introduction). On the other hand, increasingly rare is a particular *kind* of future orientation, expressly centered on values, normative principles, and the pursuit of far-reaching change. What lies ahead remains of concern, but the willingness to abstract from particularity and construct a more general vision is diminished. Future-regarding *policy* abounds, but future-regarding *politics* is pared back. Already one may speculate that these two tendencies are linked—that a preoccupation with managing the uncertain future in the form of specific problems and variables grows to the extent that confidence in a more general agenda recedes.

It is the significance of these wider, more programmatic approaches to the future that is the focus of what follows. The next two sections examine why these approaches might be valuable in the context of modern politics and what is weakened when they fade. I first consider their direct significance for partisan projects of change, and then their indirect significance for democratic institutions more broadly. Neither has received much attention. Although the sociology of hopes, fears, and expectations is well established (e.g., Adam and Groves 2007), rarely is it connected to the analysis of democracy. A large literature in political economy explores the significance of imagined futures for economic and social behavior (e.g., Beckert 2016; Beckert and Bronk 2018; Beckert and Suckert 2021; Davies 2018) but typically as an approach to studying capitalism and neoliberalism. Historians and critical theorists have recently revisited the value of utopian thought (e.g., Claeys 2022; Thaler 2022) but generally with an emphasis on what it can contribute to a better future, rather than its political implications in the present. As I suggest, outlooks on the future are a key democratic feature, deserving much more consideration than democratic observers tend to give them.

Rather than attempting an exhaustive account of the future as a democratic resource, the following seeks to

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convey why the field deserves greater attention. It should be read as an exercise in historically informed political theory, aimed at reconstructing a series of recurring patterns and identifying their democratic significance. In exploring what is valuable about the politics of the future, we may begin by highlighting three key tasks that such a future-regarding outlook makes possible—the critical interrogation of existing society, the cultivation of collective agency, and the underpinning of commitment to a cause.

The Politics of the Future

Critical Perspective

Imagined worlds very different from the present have long been advanced with political intent. At least since Thomas More's *Utopia* ([1516] 2016), such works have sought to denaturalize the familiar, highlight its shortcomings, and indicate the scope for improvement. The capacity to offer *critical perspective* is the first way in which visions of the future can be an important resource. By offering a point of contrast to existing reality, they can act as sensitizers to its failings and as a reason to explore alternatives.

What exactly is the significance of the future here? Clearly an imagined past and present can also be used to evoke critical distance. The first exercises in utopian thought tended to portray faraway lands or harken back to a golden age (Kumar 1991). Only from the eighteenth century onward did utopian writers in large numbers turn their energies to the future, evoking utopian societies decades or centuries beyond the present (Clarke 1979; Koselleck 2004). Louis-Sébastien Mercier's (1771–72) *The Year 2440*, the story of a more just, humane Paris set seven hundred years in the future, established a genre that would be picked up by literary figures of the Left such as Edward Bellamy and William Morris. But if critical perspective could be achieved in a variety of ways, future-oriented visions offered something distinctive. Not only did they question the desirability of existing society but also its stability. By evoking a world "after" the familiar one, they suggested the latter might be transient, giving reason to expect change and to pursue it.

That such future-oriented visions could have mobilizing potential is underlined by the impact of Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, first published in 1888. This tale of an America recast along statist and quasi-socialist lines, of which more than a million copies were sold, was intended to inspire political action. In the US presidential election of 1892, the Populist candidate James B. Weaver consciously drew on Bellamy's ideas and cultivated support from Bellamy-inspired civic circles (Beaumont 2007). A popular movement emerged seeking to enact the book's ideas. Clearly, only certain texts in certain conditions would have this effect—this one benefited from the novelty of the genre and resonated with a context of rapid change and dissatisfaction. But elsewhere, a similar role was played by party programs. By the end of the nineteenth century, they were being used to mobilize an expanding electorate with concrete demands (e.g., limits on workers' hours) tied to more abstract visions of social and economic equality.

It can be tempting to see the ideas that actors hold about time and the future as secondary to other factors. In one form of Marxist reasoning, although such ideas may shape how actions are rationalized, they are not the drivers of who does what and why. The real work is done by something else—interests and material conflict. Politics, it may be said, takes its bearing from experiences of hardship, conflict, and injustice—things rooted in the here and now. What this downplays, however, is the comparative dimension of human understanding. Interests and experiences are subject to competing interpretations and depend for their evaluation on the points of comparison, real and counterfactual, that are adopted (Feinberg 1974). This is what opens a space in which ideas of the future can be influential. Unlike cross-spatial comparisons, future-oriented perspectives evoke the possibility of social change, encouraging a stance that does not stop at mere resentment. Tracing the potentialities of the present, they can be a basis for reasoned hope and the motivation to act (Bloch [1954] 1986). These are points that Marxist activists have had reason to acknowledge (e.g., Kautsky, [1910] 1892), whatever the skepticism toward ideas one might distill from the theory.

Ideas of the future offer the basis for a positive program, beyond reactive responses to problems as they arise. They offer meaningful alternatives to offer and develop. And for the same reason that they are important to projects of social transformation, they are important to those who would seek to frustrate such projects. In any given context, those wanting to preserve the fundamentals of the status quo have reason to cast future-oriented visions as implausible or absurd, thereby fostering acceptance of the existing order.

Collective Agency

A second way in which ideas of the future can be a powerful resource is as the basis for the formation of a *collective.* Out of such visions can emerge the sense of shared fate that helps strangers find common cause, coordinate as a "we," and build organizations intended to last. This possibility of wider subjecthood is again something that utopian literature helped promote, with ideas of the good city-to-come evoking a social collective that evolved in time and had the capacity to act on its defects. It came to be expressed especially clearly with the emergence of ideas-based collectives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, centered on shared ideological programs such as socialism and social democracy (Koselleck 2004, 273ff.). Conceptions of the future were the basis on

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which they enlisted supporters and negotiated the obstacles posed by existing crosscutting identities. Partisanship emerged as a creative project focused on the construction of new political identities from the fabric of existing social formations (Rosenblum 2008, chap. 7).

Historically, programmatic statements such as movement or party manifestos have generally had at least two functions—they sketch alternative futures, and they evoke the agents who are to pursue them. Manifestos are declarations in the name of a group, intended to give form and visibility to a collective (Lyon 1999). "Proletarians of all countries, unite!": A central aim of the Communist Manifesto (1848) was to name a class and foster its self-awareness. To the extent that manifestos convey a general account of the world, they offer an object of attachment with which individuals can consolidate their ties and coordinate across time. They provide a reference point for the development of solidarity and group strategy, and a basis on which the marginalized can be drawn into politics and empowered.

Again, it is important to underline the distinctiveness of a future-oriented outlook. Collectives can be maintained in a variety of ways. As the scholarship on nationalism makes clear, cultural markers and stories of shared history have often been the basis of group identity (Smith 2003). But collectives defined by present- or past-oriented criteria are constrained in the kinds of formation they can assemble: By necessity, they work with definitions of identity and interest as they have previously existed. More inclusive forms of solidarity—intra-class, cross-class, cross-national—need people to look beyond these existing definitions. They require appeal to ideals and enlightened self-interest, things projected into the imagined future.

As Roberto Unger (1998, 12) has put it, stressing the importance of "the visionary element in politics," "the intimation of a different world, in which we would become (slightly) different people, with (slightly) revised understandings of our interests and ideals, supplements the cold appeal to group interest and familiar conviction. Thus, in a transformative politics we must speak in the two languages of interest calculation and political prophecy." Ambitious projects entail more than channeling the demands of existing groups. With the aid of a principled account of the future, they involve fostering coalitions that are yet to emerge and acting in anticipation of their goals.

Commitment

One of the basic challenges of politics is that the pursuit of desirable change often brings hardship in the short term. If linear progress were the pattern, it would be enough to set goals and track movement toward them, but things are rarely so tidy. For those trying to lead social change, the challenge is not just to rally support but also to retain it in adversity, ensuring that public opinion does not turn against it. Here is where a third contribution of the future-oriented perspective can be identified—in the maintenance of political *commitment.*

Social theorists sometimes describe this challenge in terms of the "transition trough" (Przeworski 1985; Wright 2010, 312ff.). Projects of systemic change are likely to bring social and economic disruption, such as price instability, capital flight, and a breakdown in supply chains and possibly also of law and order. Even a delimited protest such as a workers' strike will bring cost and inconvenience in the short term. Sometimes those invested in the status quo have reason to heighten these disruptions to convince the wider public that the upheaval is not worth it. In line with our earlier point about comparative evaluation, people can be expected to compare how things are "now" with how they were "then," and powerful interests may want them to conclude that things are best left as they were. Those trying to keep a transformative project on track will need competing points of comparison, notably how things can be expected to improve in future or how much worse things will get if the project is left undone (cf. Wright 2010, 217). They need, in other words, some kind of forward-looking narrative that locates short-term experience within a longer-term process, giving reason to stay the course (White and Ypi 2016, chap. 4). A vision of the further future, beyond the near future of stagnating or deteriorating living standards, offers grounds to embrace demanding projects and accept the sacrifices along the way.

Although the concept of the transition trough tends to be associated with anticapitalist politics, it has broader significance too. Consider environmental protection. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2018) reports the pressing need for societies to move away from fossil fuels and the structures that support them, something that may lower living standards for many in the short term. What reason do people have to persist with the process, especially before its impact is seen? A weakness of contemporary climate politics is arguably that it focuses too much on the monitoring of quantifiable targets, notably to do with global temperature and carbon emissions (Asayama 2021; Hulme 2023, chap. 1). Tracking progress in this way can be counterproductive, because the facts on a given metric at a given moment can be demoralizing (Ray 2020, 60). If climate-change mitigation is to be a process with public support, resources are needed to enable one to step back from the data and put negative experiences in context.

This is what a more general vision of the future enables. To evoke the future in terms of values and principles is to focus on things that do not depend on short-term results for their validation. Pitched at a higher level of abstraction than targets, and appealing to normative motivation, they can retain their force in good times and bad. Whereas missed targets can inspire fatalism and disengagement

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(Hulme 2023, chap. 2), values and principles permit ongoing reinterpretation as circumstances change. They can be combined with narratives that explain why short-term setbacks are to be expected or why "failing well" may support later success. To look beyond risks and targets is to look beyond emotions of fear and anxiety and the associated tendencies to burn-out (Ray 2020). And whereas a quantified target foregrounds one measure of success such as carbon reduction, a broader vision can balance several to do with public health, economic development, social justice, and participation. Not only does this support a more rounded assessment of the public good, drawing in more areas of public concern, but it also allows failures in one area to be set against progress in another. Comprehensiveness of vision is an aid to resilience.

Such qualities in politics can be double-edged, of course. Commitment cannot only head off the abandonment of a good cause but can also reinforce an undesirable position or one that is no longer fruitful. We return to concerns about utopianism in the negative sense, understood as dogmatism detached from reality. Not all future-oriented schemes are desirable, but all desirable schemes would seem to draw strength from a future orientation of this sort.

Democratic Institutions and the Future

So far, we have considered how a future-regarding outlook may contribute directly to projects of social change, offering *critical perspective*, the basis for *collective agency*, and the grounds for *commitment* in adversity. Yet in addition to its functions as a partisan resource, the politics of the future has indirect significance for the institutions of democracy more generally. When movements and parties develop principled visions of the future, they give people the tools to act as political agents and to navigate the structures of the state. The mobilizations of socialists in the late nineteenth century secured political rights that expanded the citizenry in emerging democracies and put the ideas-based mass party at the center of modern politics (Duverger 1954). As parties became the embodiment of the long-term cause, they offered something crucial to the legitimacy of electoral politics.

How to convince those of different views to endorse the same institutions is a basic challenge of political consent. Representative forms of democracy are especially exposed. As mediated forms of government, they rely heavily on rules, procedures, and institutions, creating distinctive problems of consent. Even with well-designed structures, not all interests and values can be factored into policy or represented in debate. Some dimensions of conflict eclipse others (Schattschneider 1975). Delegation is also liable to slow down decision making, creating further tension with public preferences. If such institutional structures are to achieve social legitimacy, those subject to them need to be able to abstract from the dissatisfactions of a given moment and find reason to endorse them anyway. Future-regarding principles, by helping locate present-day struggles within a longer process, provide a basis on which to cope with the imperfections of a representative system.

Consider people's willingness to accept election results they disagree with. "Losers' consent" (Anderson et al. 2005) is generally said to rest on the recognition that victories and defeats are provisional. Procedures that put one's adversaries in a position of authority can be accepted insofar as there will be chances in the future to contest power. It is the prospect of a change in fortunes—if not at the next election, then in the further future—that gives reason for the defeated to continue their involvement. The capacity to identify with a principled cause, more general than the goals and disputes of a given moment, seems crucial to the adoption of this perspective. Defeat is never "final" if a group sees its demands as broad and long term. It is when goals become concrete and dependent on tangible success in the short term that defeat starts to be construed as decisive.

The concept of *promissory legitimacy* has been suggested to describe the legitimacy that political authority gains from the credible promise of future good outcomes. It was developed by the sociologist Jens Beckert (2020) to describe the changing fortunes of a particular policy regime—neoliberalism—but it carries a wider relevance. Representative democracy would seem to depend on something similar—a kind of legitimacy not necessarily centered on the expectation of favorable material outcomes but on possibilities to contest the distribution of power, to revise what is provisionally settled. Centered on the anticipation of a "next time," one might call it *anticipatory* legitimacy. Like the kind that Beckert describes, it is fragile: "Legitimation crises can … be triggered if promises are met with suspicion or if promises that were once found credible suddenly fail to convince, i.e. when a certain imagined future collapses" (320). In the democratic context, people denied a say over the rules that structure their lives are likely to turn against the order as a whole unless they can see their predicament as temporary.

Future-oriented visions also act as a resource for democratic *respect.* Scholars of political conflict have observed that how adversaries regard each other is partly a function of the motivations they ascribe to themselves and each other (Herman 2023, 185ff.). Those who see the meaning of their own actions in terms of the pursuit of a lasting, principled cause may be more willing to see their opponents in similar terms. On this basis they can see their adversaries as rational, intelligible, and predictable, and their conflict as one between competing future visions. By contrast, those unable to read their disagreement in these terms are liable to see their opponents as self-interested,

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irrational, or immoral. They may come to see the clash as one of identities, with each protagonist motivated not by a positive agenda but by mutual aversion (187). Those who see their opponents in this way are more likely to seek their exclusion from the political process or from the polity more generally.

Beyond these matters of consent to the democratic process, there are questions of how choices come to be articulated and contested. A familiar distinction in political philosophy is that between a politics of ideas and of presence (Phillips 1998). A politics of presence rests on descriptive representation, whereby the ties between ruler and ruled are understood in terms of social characteristics they share—race, ethnicity, gender, and so on. The value of this type of representation lies in how it helps give voice to the diversity of experiences and identities in society. But representative democracy also depends on a politics of ideas, whereby the link between ruler and ruled is understood in terms of the values and objectives they share—the elements expressed in future-oriented visions (Urbinati 2006, 5–6). These provide a basis on which representatives can justify their actions to their electors and that the latter can use to hold them accountable. Without a politics of ideas, electoral choices are reduced to questions of identity and personal image—how representatives look, the extent to which they appear moral and able, whether they convey an aura of optimism and calm, whether notable persons are willing to endorse them, and so on (Manin 1997). Rulers can be challenged on their personal qualities and their competence in administering specific policies, but it becomes harder to contest the broader direction of their politics, which requires considering the wider social structures their actions serve. When the future-oriented perspective is whittled away, so too is the scope for a politics of ideas.

One of the democratic practices affected is the relationship between government and the opposition. One normative purpose served by their dynamic interaction is to clarify the terms on which authority is exercised. Government that is responsive to a normative program can be held to a discernible logic. It has a "rationale" that makes it intelligible and possible to evaluate (Goodin 2008). One of the responsibilities of opposition is to keep that logic in view by bringing to light assumptions, contradictions, and alternatives. Doing so requires more than a focus on the descriptive characteristics of the executive and more than assessing his or her competence in meeting certain policy targets. It requires reconstructing the ends that policies are meant to serve, questioning their merits and limitations, and offering competing accounts of where society should be heading.

In sum, future-oriented designs are important not just for inspiring and empowering specific political causes but also for underpinning democratic institutions as a whole. When this future-regarding perspective recedes, one can expect democracy more generally to suffer. The preceding observations invite us to grasp some of the key problems of contemporary democracy as problems regarding the weakness of future-oriented politics. Disputed election results, the demonization of adversaries, and a populist impatience with political disagreement can be read as expressions of the weakening belief that democracy is a process in which today's defeats can be rectified in the future. The personalization of politics and the moralization of disagreement—one side good, one side bad—can be understood as symptoms of a public sphere starved of the material for a politics of ideas. Conflict takes the form of personality clashes and intractable "culture wars" when people struggle to see disagreements as rooted in enduring positions of principle. Declining membership of parties and their weakening capacity to maintain voters' allegiance (i.e., electoral volatility) can be linked to the reluctance of their leaders to offer future-oriented programs that people might identify with and try to shape. Declining rates of electoral participation can be seen as a function of the same, as choices become less defined and enthusing.

Empirical research suggests that rates of voting abstention rise when political representatives fail to offer principled alternatives (Facchini and Jaeck 2019, 281). The socially and economically disadvantaged are likely to drop out first: Visions of the better future are what help make politics intelligible and participation attractive. If voting were just about the retrospective evaluation of incumbents, even the most dissatisfied and uninformed would have reason to turn up and cast their verdict. But voting considerations are prospective too (Lacy and Christenson 2017). Those unable to discern a programmatic alternative, and unmoved by personalistic considerations, are likely to stay at home. Into the vacuum left by political representatives, advertisers and celebrity influencers are likely to move, peddling images of the brighter future as about enrichment and status—as about individual advance rather than the betterment of a collective. That way lies political disengagement and disinterest. Democracy, one may say, runs on the availability of political hope.

Tendencies toward the erosion of a future-oriented politics of ideas are ultimately conducive to the growing appeal of nondemocratic alternatives. If representatives orient themselves to the future less in terms of comprehensive visions than managerial competence, they adopt a stance that unelected officials can claim to be better suited to. One of the familiar justifications for technocracy is that expert-based institutions are well placed to pursue long-term targets, free of the constraints of partisanship and public opinion (Mackenzie 2021; White 2024a, 2024b). The more that democratic politics looks like managerialism in a suboptimal setting, buffeted by partisan

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hostility and electoral strategizing, the more one can expect calls to shift authority elsewhere.

Three Varieties of Skepticism

A future-oriented politics of ideas would seem then to be a crucial foundation for democratic politics and its representative institutions, with problems arising to the extent it is set aside. The stakes of the "lost future" seem high. How then are we to make sense of our point of departure—that this type of politics has been in decline? Why might it be viewed with suspicion by those with the capacity to lead it? Arguably, the implication is that its value is overstated or that somehow it resists being realized. This section examines three varieties of skepticism toward the politics of the future, motivated by doubts about its wisdom, feasibility, and resonance. These contend in turn that whatever positive contribution such ideas make is counter-balanced by the negative, that institutional constraints have a tendency to erode them, or that in today's historical conjuncture a forward-looking focus is no longer relevant. Although none of these objections is so decisive as to invalidate the points made, they usefully highlight some of the tensions and trade-offs with which the politics of the future must engage.

A first line of skepticism, which can be termed *strategic*, accepts that such ideas may be attractive in many ways but still doubts whether actors are wise to invest in them. The concern is that they are counterproductive. Developing future-oriented visions may distract from a pragmatic focus on more pressing priorities by encouraging abstract commitments to be preferred over practical considerations. Historians of the Left observe that, to the extent socialists kept their eyes on the long-term goals of socialism, it could raise doubts about how to proceed in the near term (e.g., Sassoon 1996, 21ff.). Considerations of long-term strategy, including the desire to build pressure for radical change, could appear in tension with intermediary goals such as workers' rights. Successes won *within* the existing socioeconomic system could obstruct efforts to go *beyond* it: Long-term progress might depend on short-term regress. As Sassoon writes (47), "What one was supposed to do between winning the election and reaching the final goal was a matter of intense speculation and utter uncertainty." A tempting option would then be to set aside the bigger vision and focus on more immediate reforms, or to deploy the rhetoric of a long-term strategy in a way that had little bearing on practice.

A related version of strategic skepticism holds that a future-oriented outlook can encourage vanguardism, thereby canceling its democratic credentials. It may be said to invite the concentration of power in the hands of leaders, casting themselves as those with special insight into the future. A keen focus on ends can make deliberation over the means seem less important. For those inclined to a more participatory approach, it may seem preferable to keep focus on the here and now. Such concerns inspired Eduard Bernstein's ([1899] 1993, 5) well-known reluctance to put the politics of the future at the heart of social democracy: "I am not concerned with what will happen in the more distant future, but with what can and ought to happen in the present, for the present and the nearest future." As he famously declared, "What is usually termed the final goal of socialism is nothing to me, the movement is everything" (190).

These would seem to be valid reservations about a specific kind of future outlook—one that identifies "final goals" known with some certainty far in advance, to which other considerations should be subordinated. Scientistic forms of ideology may be especially prone to this tendency. Those who see themselves as conveying objective, context-independent truths, anchored in laws of nature or of human behavior, can easily arrive at a misplaced sense of certainty and an intolerance of ambiguity and disagreement. That orthodox Marxism pulled in this direction was one of Bernstein's concerns. But future-regarding politics can take a less rigid form. Rather than reverting to closed dogma, it can involve open-ended general principles that are adaptable to changing circumstances and processes of deliberation.

Consider the kind of outlook that some seek to revive in the context of climate change. In place of a scientistic "climatism" that tries to distill public policy directly from climate science, the call is for a pluralist vision that integrates climate-change mitigation with projects of social emancipation and that seeks public participation in their elaboration (Hulme 2023, chap. 6). Local experiments in "participatory futuring" and democratic self-government are cited as inspiration (Aykut and Maertens 2021), along with elements of utopian thought (Claeys 2022). Some see this model foreshadowed in the various Green New Deals that emerged in western democracies at the end of the 2010s and sought to connect climate politics to broader visions of social justice (Asayama 2021). Eco-socialism has also been promoted in these terms (Klein 2014). There is no reason why a transformative project need be elitist in its methods or shy away from the uncertainties and disagreements that the future entails. One aspect of the art of politics is exactly to negotiate the tensions produced by competing timescales by articulating a long-term project in such a way as to identify intermediary goals that can complement it.

It is also the case that a movement that disengages from the further future cedes this terrain to its opponents. A backward gaze leaves the future in the hands of those who *do* engage with it—and it is often the most powerful and reactionary who project onto it their agendas and fears (Eshun 2003). Offering no positive vision of the future means leaving a space that others can fill. Insofar as ideas of the future shape what comes into being, the long-term

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effects can be profound. Thus, although *strategic* skepticism alerts us to some very real dangers, it is also the case that clear-headed strategy requires at least some form of conscious engagement with the future. The appropriate goal is to make it as participatory and nondogmatic as possible.

A second line of skepticism can be called *institutional.* Here the contention is that although ideas of the future may be beneficial on the whole, they are systematically frustrated by the structures of representative democracy. Electoral institutions erode the future-oriented thinking on which they also rely. The story of the Left since the early twentieth century has been its willingness to commit to the electoral process, yet doing so may seem to extract a fatal price. Electoral cycles encourage parties to be judged on what they achieve within four or five years. Longer-term visions are filtered out, because partisans and their electors can have little confidence in their ability to deliver them (Jacobs and Matthews 2012). Why make promises that cannot be kept? Parties that scale back their programs are adapting to necessity.

This brand of skepticism usefully highlights the constraints that electoral periodicity can pose. If representatives believe their electors care only for tangible rewards, they have reason to focus on the near term. But this view is limited in several important ways. One should be wary of the idea there are few votes to be won in more visionary forms of politics, because voters may be moved by long-term as well as short-term concerns, including ones whose success is uncertain (Mackenzie 2021). Often as important as achievements already made is whether things are felt to be moving in the right direction. A nonconsequentialist evaluation of whether politicians are "doing the right thing" will also be important to many. That the public is impatient for immediate results is surely a one-sided view. Furthermore, a focus on the constraints posed by institutions treats success in the next election as the overriding goal, yet there are other measures of political success. Influencing public debate and building a constituency for social change are goals that can be pursued by movements outside the electoral context or by parties setting their sights on electoral success further down the line (Hetland 2024).

A third line of skepticism, in some ways the most challenging, can be termed *historical.* It holds that visionary forms of politics, although they may once have been feasible and desirable, are now largely obsolete. A culturalist version of the argument may observe that whereas the future horizon dominated between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, today one sees a reorientation toward the present and past (Assmann 2013; Hartog 2015; cf. Jameson 2004). In this reading, the future has lost its capacity to inspire, whether because of disillusionment with yesterday's utopias, a loss of faith in the idea of progress, or social acceleration depriving people of the stable reference points required to project forward in time. An economic version of the argument may emphasise that the structures of contemporary capitalism limit the scope for policy change and trap individuals in immediate concerns such as debt and precarious employment. Demographers may add that, in aging societies, the politics of the future is naturally of declining appeal because more and more voters are in their last years of life. To the extent that political actors seek to distance themselves from more visionary perspectives, they would seem better attuned to the world around them.

Yet, claims that systematic future thinking has lost its allure are hard to assess if political actors do not test them. What is culturally and economically feasible can only be discovered in practice. There is the risk of circular reasoning—that a relative dearth of future-oriented projects becomes evidence of their implausibility. In today's context of climate change, economic volatility, and geopolitical uncertainty, one can detect signs of renewed social awareness of the open future (Delanty 2024). Receptiveness to projects of transformation may be greater than it has been for some time. Furthermore, as contemporary systems show signs of fragility, it becomes harder to see them as all-determining—the scope for agency is to be found in their decay and restructuring.

Twentieth-century tendencies toward the decline of future-oriented visions in democratic politics were shaped in part by factors that are contingent and reversible. The rise of a more managerial outlook within parties, for example, tracks changes in the distribution of power within them. It is among the rank and file of political activists that future-oriented positions of principle have tended to be strongest (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021, 180ff.). As such groups become marginalized from positions of influence not just by leaders but also by electoral strategists, policy specialists, and technical experts (Mudge 2018; cf. Rye 2014), their capacity to shape the collective is weakened. Parties today are controlled by those most focused on short-term electoral success. Reminders of the persistent appeal of more utopian perspectives sporadically arise when a party falls into the hands of its activist base (Byrne 2019), but for the most part such views are kept well away from the decision-making process.

Parties structured in a more internally democratic fashion would potentially allow these more demanding future perspectives to come to the fore. Give activists more powers in the shaping of policy and in the election and recall of high officials, and one could expect parties to look more like communities of principle. Instead of being the electoral vehicles of their leaders, they could be places of collaborative future-making, drawing on the tools of participatory planning and budgeting (Sintomer, Herzberg, and Röcke 2008). Although Green New Deals have often taken a technocratic turn in the encounter with

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existing elites, they remain a promising context for exploring such methods. In addition to making parties more programmatic themselves, such reforms would make them more receptive to other agents of political vision—from social movements to artistic collectives—and weaken the hold of experts over the definition of the expected future.

A wide range of causes is there for the taking, some already being championed from the political margins. Reordering the economy in pursuit of greater equality and popular influence is one, built for instance on a program of wealth taxes, land taxes, new forms of public ownership, and counter-oligarchic institutions (see, e.g., Brown and O'Neill 2024; Vergara 2020). As "big tech," algorithmic governance and AI become more powerful, asserting public control over corporate actors (Aytac 2024) and exploring alternative models such as "platform socialism" (Muldoon 2022) will only become more pressing. Contesting asymmetries of political power is another pertinent cause, extending from municipal and national government to transnational institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations (Koenig-Archibugi 2024; White 2023). In an increasingly tense geopolitical context, newly relevant too are the projects long promoted by peace movements—from disarmament to non-nuclear deterrence to more humane systems of asylum and migration (cf. the Peace and Justice Project). Meanwhile, causes championed by environmental groups, from the transformation of food production to the redesign of our cities, offer ways to address climate change more profoundly and more vividly than carbon target setting alone can achieve (Claeys 2022; Malm 2023).

To the extent that political actors embrace demanding visions of this kind in an electoral context, they may reveal that the cultural and economic parameters within which they operate are less constraining than assumed. Ultimately, however, such optimism is not necessary for the present argument. For even if historical skepticism were well grounded, it would not weaken the claim that democratic politics depends on this forward-looking temporality. That something is elusive does not detract from its importance. For those persuaded of this skeptical view, the implication is simply the stark one that democratic politics is in serious trouble and that only the most profound forms of change will revive it. If one treats future-oriented politics as a thing of the past, there is little to stave off the more general conclusion that democracy is going the same way.

Conclusion

The political significance of the future tends to be approached in contemporary democratic theory as a matter of what the living may bestow on their descendants. The focus is on cross-generational relations and, more generally, on the futures one can plausibly expect. As this article has argued, at least as important as how things ultimately unfold is how ideas of the future shape politics in the moving present. Hopes, fears, dreams and expectations matter, whether they are fulfilled or not. As politically consequential as how people evaluate the present is how they sense the direction of travel and their degree of control over the future. For both empirical and normative reasons, the study of politics and democracy needs to pay more attention to the ways in which the future is imagined and engaged.

Although contemporary political leaders are often castigated for short-termism, it is misguided to suppose they are indifferent to the future. What is characteristic of the political mainstream instead is a shift away from more principled outlooks to a managerial focus on specific targets and threats—a shift, that is, from the *politics* of the future to a concern with specific *policies*. Politicians set goals for decarbonization, for example, but tend to hold back from a broader vision of change and the organizational forms that could support it. They may gesture to the importance of a long-term approach but are reluctant to commit themselves to an open-ended, value-driven cause. Often, they define themselves *against* a visionary approach to burnish their credentials as pragmatists.

This matters partly for its effects on the political projects undertaken and partly for its more general effects on representative democracy. Desirable social change relies on the capacity to take a critical distance from the present, cultivate collective agents, and sustain these in adversity—all tasks that a future-regarding perspective supports. Without credible visions of the future, parties struggle to persuade voters that they stand for something and to mobilize them not just to resent the status quo but also to participate in seeking an alternative. This in turn raises challenges for representative democracy. The capacity to justify and oppose policy decisions at the level of ideas, and to secure legitimacy for representative institutions in the face of the dissatisfactions they spark, is notably weakened when the future is approached in this attenuated form.

A variety of research questions may follow from this. Which actors and structures beyond the political scene have the power to shape popular outlooks on the future, and how is their influence felt? To what extent do progressive actors unknowingly contribute to the outlooks on the future that undermine them? Who suffers most from the abdication of the future as a realm of utopian speculation? Are there democratic societies where these trends are less pronounced, and to what extent do nondemocratic regimes display similar vulnerabilities? Can new spaces of future imagining be developed, in or alongside the existing institutions of representative democracy?

In the context of climate change, geopolitical tensions, and economic instability, the world is more volatile today than it has been for some time. Making predictions may be harder than ever, but the future retains its relevance.

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Indeed, that there is important orientation to be found in the forward gaze—not in the false precision of target setting and risk management but in more general guiding principles. Crises are a reminder that existing structures are not set in stone and that one can expect moments when the presence or absence of alternative visions will matter. Beyond the discontents of the present, how democracy fares will continue to be shaped by the visions of the future it can draw on.

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