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SYMPOSIUM ARTICLE

Is Democratic Theory Carbon Competent?

Larry Alan Busk

Department of Philosophy, Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana, USA
Email: buskl@wabash.edu

Abstract
Carbon competence refers to individuals' knowledge and understanding concerning the causes and impacts of greenhouse gas concentrations. Using a robust and expansive version of the concept, this essay poses the question of whether contemporary democratic theory demonstrates carbon competence. I argue that prevailing approaches reveal low carbon competence in two respects: implicit or explicit underestimation of the scope and severity of the ecological crisis, and commitment to normative strictures that actively discourage the possibility of rapid decarbonization. As exemplary models, I foreground the work of Nadia Urbinati, Cristina Lafont, and Hélène Landemore.

Keywords: climate change; environment; democracy; constitutionalism; deliberative democracy; epistemic democracy; liberalism

A recent paper in *Nature Climate Change* (Johnson et al., 2024) introduces the concept of "carbon competence": individuals' knowledge and understanding concerning the causes and impacts of greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations. The study finds that carbon competence is generally low, and that this hampers the public's ability to make choices—as consumers, investors, or citizens—compatible with sustainability. This finding complements other recent papers, which document widespread misunderstanding of carbon footprint inequality (Nielsen et al., 2024) and reveal that adults' mental models of climate change violate the conservation of matter (Sterman & Sweeney, 2007).

Using an expanded version of the concept, this essay poses the question of whether contemporary democratic theory demonstrates carbon competence. I argue that prevailing approaches reveal low carbon competence in two respects: implicit or explicit underestimation of the scope and severity of the imminent catastrophe, and commitment to normative strictures that render rapid decarbonization all but impossible. As exemplary models, I foreground the work of Nadia Urbinati (representing the liberal-constitutionalist strain of democratic theory), Cristina Lafont (representing the deliberative tradition in its Habermasian and Rawlsian veins), and Hélène Landemore (representing the "epistemic" and "lottocratic" turns). These figures are widely considered leaders in the field, and each has published at least one widely discussed book within the last 5 years. While democratic theory is too large a domain to comment on every intervention, I will make occasional reference to other recent publications throughout.

Despite their significant philosophical differences, Urbinati, Lafont, and Landemore are all broadly concerned about the worldwide decline in democratic institutions witnessed over the last decade. They are all interested in theorizing conditions under which ordinary citizens would legitimately understand themselves as having some degree of power and control over their own

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lives. This concern is reasonable and well-founded, and this theoretical project is *ceteris paribus* admirable. The real and present dangers of "democratic backsliding" do not absolve us from confronting the realities of the climate crisis, however. The question is not whether these accounts have value or applicability in any conceivable context, but whether they are still coherent when considered in relation to the exigencies of a world threatened by catastrophic climate change. If not, then such theoretical models have become counterproductive even to their own aims; we cannot save democracy by ignoring or misrepresenting a systemic problem that, among other things, threatens the conditions for the possibility of any political order whatsoever, democratic or otherwise.

This essay is intended as a contribution to the small but growing literature highlighting a tension between the limitations of democratic politics and the "rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes to all aspects of society" (IPCC, 2018) required to secure a habitable climate future (Di Paola & Jamieson, 2018; Duvernoy and Busk, 2020; Kitcher, 2013; Mittiga, 2024; Oksala, 2016, 55–58; Parr, 2018, 75–84, 202–203; Shearman & Smith, 2007).[1] I will not repeat these arguments. Rather, my aim is to show that democratic theory in its current state is not prepared to engage in a meaningful debate on this question insofar as it demonstrates low carbon competence. I stress that I am not speculating as to these authors' level of scientific literacy or their ideological motivations, nor do I mean to castigate them for writing about one topic rather than another. I suggest, rather, that their normative theoretical interventions presuppose an understanding of the climate catastrophe that is, at best, outdated and, at worst, a form of denialism.

Throughout the essay, I will take for granted a robust appreciation of the scope, severity, and urgency of the climate crisis, including its "mortality cost," and of the dangers of overshooting planetary boundaries. This is what I mean by an expanded notion of carbon competence: it is elaborated and substantiated in the primer essay included in the present volume. This paper also makes use of some vocabulary explained there, for example, the distinction between literal, interpretive, and implicatory denial. Briefly, literal denial denies an empirical reality, interpretive denial misrepresents the meaning of this reality, and implicatory denial downplays or trivializes "the psychological, political, or moral implications that conventionally follow" (Norgaard, 2011, 11). I argue here that the normative interventions of Urbinati, Lafont, and Landemore depend on forms of interpretive and implicatory denial.

To help better illustrate the full stakes of ecological breakdown and its relationship to democracy, I will begin with a thought experiment. Its debt to Plato (Republic 488a-489d) will be evident.

1. On the Life Raft

Imagine that a raft with 10 rowers is barreling down a river rapid. They see a fork in the river up ahead, and must choose whether to go left or right. The current is pulling the raft to the right, so in order to make a leftward turn the rowers will need to make a concerted effort starting imminently; the window of time needed to make a left turn comfortably is closing fast. Now, imagine that two members of the party have studied the map and, after having consulted with each other and triple-

[1]It is frequently remarked that democracies empirically "perform better" than "authoritarian regimes" at addressing environmental problems (Fiorino, 2018, 34–61; Lazar & Wallace, 2025, 141; Selseng et al., 2022). Since no one in the debate is claiming that authoritarianism *not otherwise specified* would be more effective at tackling climate change, the point is something of a non sequitur. The metrics used are also curiously skewed: if we took present and historical per capita emission rates as a standard, we could just as easily conclude that democracies like the United States and Australia perform terribly on climate change while "authoritarian regimes" like Laos and Zimbabwe perform extremely well. Interestingly, the "climate change performance index," on which Fiorino relies, has no entry for Cuba (https://ccpi.org/), which has achieved greater strides in agroecology than any democracy in the hemisphere (Betancourt, 2020) and has a far superior record on balancing HDI increases with a decreasing ecological footprint (Cabello et al., 2012). For further retort, see Mittiga (2025, 156–157) and Chesler et al. (2023).

checked their work, determined that if the raft goes right it will soon careen off of a waterfall cliff. The drop is extremely steep, and there are several jagged rocks along the way. The people in the front of the raft—incidentally, the poorest members of the expedition—will be hit first and hardest, and will likely not survive. While some of the rowers are old enough that they may pass away before hitting the bottom, others are pregnant—their offspring will suffer the worst effects of going over the cliff. Depending on the nature of the landing, and with some luck, some members of the crew may survive, but they will almost certainly be injured and, in some cases, maimed. The few who do manage to recover will be trapped in a ravine, facing starvation and life-threatening weather. Their children will struggle to survive, and the odds will be stacked against them.[2]

The two rowers with map expertise realize that making a left turn against the current will be difficult, and that the route to safety will be harrowing. However, they estimate that all members of the raft could be delivered safely if some nonessential supplies (including the meat rations) are jettisoned. These two members plead desperately with the rest of the party: "*Change course! Go left! Everybody start rowing!*" But they face opposition. A few deny that the waterfall cliff is even there. A few more acknowledge the cliff, but insist that they can survive the fall if they take on even more supplies. One argues that the current will naturally change course and send the raft left without a rigorous rowing effort. Another member, alluding to the map but crucially misreading it, argues that the cost of going left would outweigh the benefits, and favors going over the cliff and waiting for helicopter rescue before the landing hits. Finally, a few members do not seem to be paying attention to the debate at all: they are playing games on their phones and idly chatting about celebrity gossip among themselves.

The raft is a democracy. After vigorous discussion, a vote is called on whether to immediately and drastically change course and go left or let the current keep guiding the raft to the right. The two cartographers vote to go left. Everyone else—some enthusiastically, some sheepishly—votes to stay the course.

This is the question to consider: would it be *wrong*, *unjust*, or *illegitimate* for the two rowers informed by the map to commandeer the raft, disregard the democratic procedure, and coerce their fellow rowers into changing course through an authoritarian exercise of power? It would certainly not be democratic. But if letting the raft fall over the cliff is the democratic course of action, then have democratic values become perverse?

Like all thought experiments, this one is imperfect. But it expresses something meaningful about our current situation. A habitable future (avoiding the cliff) demands rapid decarbonization (turning the raft to the left), but most citizens seem content to deny, ignore, or minimize this reality (staying the rightward course) in spite of the frantic warnings of climate scientists and activists (those informed by the map). This thought experiment captures the stakes of democratic failure more robustly than other examples that frame democratic proceduralism against specific environmental harms (Vanderheiden, 2020, 54–55); here, the potential negative outcomes are not reducible to one species going extinct or one nature preserve being despoiled, but the habitability of the human climate niche itself—and thus the condition for the possibility of the procedure. A twenty-first-century democratic theory must account for this reality, but prevailing approaches proceed as if nothing of the sort is occurring.

2. Urbinati and Liberal Constitutionalist Democracy

In the ongoing debate between intrinsic and instrumental justifications of democracy, Urbinati lands squarely on the side of the former. Measures to ensure that the democratic process yields

[2]None of the extensive literature on the mortality cost of carbon or existential risk is cited or discussed in Lazar and Wallace's (2025) defense of democracy against "climate authoritarianism." They are comfortable, however. Stating that authoritarianism represents "a politics of death" (142). Speculation about the dangers of a nondemocratic regime apparently counts for more than empirically informed projections about the mortal dangers of unchecked emissions.

"correct outcomes," she claims, divest this process of its "political nature" and "opinion-based character," in fact "disfiguring" it into a form of "democratic Platonism." Against this theoretical and political trend, Urbinati puts forward an understanding and defense of democracy rooted in "outcomes that are procedurally and constitutionally valid" (2014, 7). I will foreground five elements of Urbinati's argument with reference to climate change: noncognitivism, pluralism, the right to bad outcomes, the reversibility of decisions, and—the ultimate foundation of her theory—constitutionalism.

According to Urbinati, "a 'commitment to truth' in politics makes consent redundant" (2014, 10). Democratic politics is thus not about discovering and implementing a set of policies because they are "true" or "right"; it is, rather, "government by means of opinion" (2019, 7). She consistently anchors this noncognitivism in a rejection of the "Enlightenment" notion that "reason" is "the only legitimate political sovereign" (2014, 10), criticizing those who defend democracy on epistemic grounds for relying on a "rationalist version of philosophy" (2012, 203).[3] A commitment to pluralism is a natural consequence of this view.[4] The essence of democracy, she tells us, is the "promise to allow for effective political rivalry and debate among diverse and competing views" (2019, 7); it is a "form of polity [that] lives on toleration, and on the acceptance of a pluralism of ideas and interpretations" (2019, 171).

How should we understand noncognitivism and pluralism in relation to the denialism that dominates the public discussion around climate change? Straightforwardly, it would mean that "opinions" about the "natural" causes of climate change or "interpretations" of massive biodiversity loss as essentially benign would have to be "accepted" (if not endorsed) as "diverse and competing views." Moreover, while we could rival and contest these opinions, we should ostensibly refrain from dismissing them as *false*, as if our own political view were somehow more in tune with the truth; this would be to endorse a rationalist Enlightenment philosophy that disfigures democracy. The mainstream media's "both sides" approach to climate change should likewise be championed and encouraged.

If Urbinati's political noncognitivism was only intended to apply to values, rather than empirical facts, she does not stipulate this. Relying on such a distinction would also be inappropriate to her theoretical target, as the tradition of epistemic democracy is primarily concerned with securing empirical truths in the democratic process. Whether there really is a waterfall cliff around the rightward bend, the two rowers who have studied the map should not claim that their vote to turn left better reflects "the truth" of the situation. They must "tolerate" the cliff-denying views of their fellow travelers.[5]

The epistemic damage involved in countenancing climate denialism as an "opinion" is severe, but the consequences of letting such views influence decisions are more troubling. This brings us to another nodal point in Urbinati's work: the potential for bad outcomes as a desirable feature (rather than a bug) of democratic politics. "Procedures are legitimately democratic," she writes, "because they deliver what they are made for: to protect the freedom of its members to produce 'wrong' decisions" (2014, 58). In other words:

> "the 'outcome' is much less relevant than the way it is achieved, and much less relevant than the way the game has been played. In actuality, the way the game is played renders an

[3]While by no means universal, noncognitivism has been a staple of democratic theory for decades (Barber, 1996, 349; Dahl, 1989, 71; Reiss, 2019, 183).

[4]It is of course possible to subscribe to pluralism without affirming noncognitivism (e.g., Shapiro, 1996, 134).

[5]Defenders of democracy from a liberal constitutionalist perspective often regard labeling political opponents an "existential threat" as an unacceptable overture to authoritarianism (Arato & Cohen, 2021, 191; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, 102, 106). The possibility that certain political positions—for example, climate denialism and obstructionism—may *actually* represent an existential threat is not considered in these accounts.

> unsatisfactory outcome legitimate and produces a situation in which citizens confirm their support of the democratic system" (2019, 162–163).

In the life raft scenario, then, what matters is not so much which direction the rowers choose to go, but whether the decision-making process followed the procedural rules. If the outcome is "unsatisfactory," the defeated minority can take comfort in knowing that they respected the democratic system—even though this outcome means going over the waterfall cliff to their likely demise (thus foreclosing the possibility of any future legitimate procedures).

In her defense of the freedom to produce bad outcomes as constitutive of democratic legitimacy, Urbinati never entertains the possibility that certain bad outcomes may be *catastrophic*. As we know, the decision to maintain increasing GHG concentrations will cause widespread devastation and mortality by the end of this century, eventually jeopardizing the sustainability of organized human life. Climate change, however, is not mentioned a single time in either *Democracy Disfigured* (2014) or *Me the People* (2019). Implicitly, then, she construes the "wrong decisions" or "unsatisfactory outcomes" of the democratic procedure as at least relatively limited in their scope and severity. This is interpretive denial insofar as it ignores the fact that our political decisions around climate change involve catastrophic possibilities and existential risks. Unless Urbinati would defend the claim that mass death and human extinction are less important than the procedural rules of the democratic process, her commitment to the right to bad outcomes is likewise denialist in an implicatory register. In the manner of popular denialist discourse, she avoids having to defend the stronger claim by never acknowledging the potential results of misinformed climate decisions.

This implicit denialism is also evident in Urbinati's presupposition that the effects of political decisions are only temporary and can always be reversed. Once it becomes apparent to participants that a given outcome was undesirable, they can change course during the next round of decision-making. She makes this point while defending democracy against those overanxious about its potential for epistemic irresponsibility:

> "Undoubtedly people's votes can be, and many times are, blatant evidence of their irrationality or lack of information or incompetence. Yet **given the constitutional regulation of votes' temporary effectiveness**, at what time would lovers of truth decide to interrupt the political process and proclaim the verdict a falsehood?" (2012, 213, emphasis added).

Bracketing the question of whether the effects of *any* political decision are ever truly "temporary," this is manifestly not the case for decisions concerning anthropogenic climate change. Every additional ppm of CO_2 and CH_4 in the atmosphere carries consequences beyond the timescale of any constitutional democracy to fully redress. As with our life raft scenario, there is a short window of time beyond which catastrophically poor past decisions are "locked in"; at a certain point, it becomes too late to change course and go left even if all rowers now perceive the waterfall cliff in front of them. Biospheric collapse, species extinction, and the crossing of tipping points are irreversible changes. If a democratic body makes a set of decisions that result in Amazon forest dieback, this cannot be undone by any future democratic body. Urbinati's argument proceeds as if this is not the case, and it thus reflects low carbon competence.

Ultimately, however, Urbinati's commitments to noncognitivism, pluralism, and the freedom to make wrong choices are not as radical as it may appear. In her understanding, the democratic procedure must be governed by a constitutional framework that guards against the worst tendencies of popular opinion. Basic rights guaranteed by a constitution—such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and a "free and multiple media" (2019, 7)—must be out of bounds for emendation even by a popular majority. In fact, the maintenance of these basic rights is a condition for the possibility of democracy: "Liberal democracy is a pleonism and illiberal democracy is a contradiction in terms" (2019, 10). If an antiliberal "opinion" comes to dominate the democratic order, its decisions must be checked by a non-representative judicial body ostensibly capable of interpreting the constitution in a neutral, apolitical way. Urbinati is explicit about this:

> "Of course, none of these [constitutional] liberties is unlimited. But it is essential that the interpretation of their scope does not lie in the hands of the majority in power—not even a majority in power whose policies seem to meet the social interests of the many" (2019, 10).

So, democracy is rule by a plurality of diverse opinions with the freedom to make bad decisions *provided they operate within the purview of a set of liberal constitutional rights understood in a specific way over which they have no power*. This is how Urbinati critiques "populism," which in her description attempts to collapse the distinction between "ordinary law" and "constitutional law" and "constitutionalize the will of a specific majority" (2019, 191). In sum, she avoids the problem of bad democratic outcomes by stipulating that, by definition, the outcomes of the democratic procedure can never be too dire, since the concept of democracy includes a set of unamendable liberal constitutional rights.

Our interrogation of the carbon competence of Urbinati's theory thus arrives at a new question: is the right to a habitable climate already enshrined in a given constitution? If it were, our concerns about denialist "opinions" and catastrophically bad outcomes could be alleviated. At least in the case of the United States, this is at best highly contentious and ambiguous. As of this writing, the Supreme Court has declined to even hear Juliana versus United States, the most ambitious federal lawsuit dealing with this question to date.[6] This reflects the fact that, contrary to Urbinati's presentation, judicial review is already politicized and constitutional interpretation always subject to fractious popular opinion. Even granting this, however, Urbinati's theoretical strictures would seem to doom any hope of radical climate action through constitutional channels. In the American context, if a climate justice movement did manage to elect a planetary president who succeeded in stocking the Supreme Court with eco-friendly justices, would this not be an instance of "populist constitutionalism" as she understands it? Given that the US Constitution does not *straightforwardly* guarantee the right to a habitable climate, even calling for a constitutional amendment would seem to be an instance of "constitutionalizing the will of a specific majority" against those who claim their basic right to profit from fossil fuels, use private jets, or fund denialist think tanks—all of which have a clearer constitutional basis.

While the potential of a green constitutionalism remains to be seen, it is far more apparent that constitutional safeguards as conventionally interpreted tend to act as barriers to the urgent task of rapid decarbonization. As climate justice lawsuits struggle to be heard in court, a South Dakota jury recently ordered Greenpeace to pay $660 M in damages to Energy Transfer Partners for "defamation" (Leingang & Lakhani, 2025). We can only imagine the litigious obstruction if the government attempted to nationalize energy production or requisition land for rewilding. Rights of private property and free enterprise are more firmly entrenched than anything resembling a right to less than 400 ppm of CO_2 in the atmosphere. As Kalke et al. (2024) point out, an ecological transition would require hitherto unprecedented encroachments upon economic autonomy and consumer sovereignty (see also Brand et al., 2025; Camfield, 2022, 28).

Likewise, as discussed above, the received culture around constitutional rights such as freedom of speech and press functions to ensure that climate deniers are free to disseminate misinformation and that "independent" news media outlets are free to disproportionately amplify their voices.[7] As Kang et al. (2023) put it, "the very strength of liberal democracy—its pluralism—becomes its weakness during such critical circumstances" (6). Again, even if public opinion shifted decisively

[6] See Ziebarth (2024) on the structural difficulties facing climate litigation.

[7] It is at least doubtful that any major media outlet is "independent" today. To take just one example: the asset management firm BlackRock holds one of the top three shareholder positions for around one third of the largest publicly listed oil and gas companies in the United States (Hanieh, 2024, 257–258), but also owns between 5% and 7% of Warner Brothers Discovery, Comcast, and Fox (parent corporations of CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News, respectively). Noting that much climate denialist discourse circulates on social media, Gounaridis and Newell (2024) recommend that companies "should flag accounts that spread falsehoods about climate change"—but Blackrock owns 6–7% of Meta and Alphabet as well.

toward radical climate action, Urbinati would demand that the policies of a hypothetical climate czar—policies that "seem to meet the social needs of the many"—be constrained by a judiciary that is by design conservative, inflexible, and insensitive to popular demands.[8] "Clear and effective responses to climate change," Kang et al. conclude bluntly, are "virtually impossible within liberal societies" (3).

Urbinati's intervention demonstrates low carbon competence in several respects. Her commitments to noncognitivism, pluralism, and the right to make bad decisions obscure the potentially catastrophic consequences of negative climate outcomes and of the "opinions" that foster such outcomes. Her claim that the effects of political decisions are temporary and reversible is ecologically illiterate. Finally, her staunch liberal constitutionalism actively undermines the potential efficacy of acutely needed radical climate action.

3. Lafont and Deliberative Democracy

Lafont's intervention hinges on maintaining normative strictures that would render non-majoritarian coercive measures illegitimate even in an emergency situation. Like Urbinati, Lafont preserves the coherence of her theory by never considering the exigencies of a political catastrophe, thereby implicitly denying that we are presently in such a situation—revealing low carbon competence.

In contrast to Urbinati, Lafont does not endorse noncognitivism. She accepts that there may be better and worse answers to at least some political questions. From the point of view of the democratic ideal, however, figuring out the correct policy is ancillary to justifying this policy to citizens and convincing them to comply with it (2021, 97). The criterion for democratic legitimacy, according to Lafont, is that citizens "identify with the laws and policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own" (2019, 18). Only if this condition is met can the ideal of democracy as self-government be realized. Arguing against various "shortcuts" (e.g., lottocracy, Urbinati's "deep pluralism") that would streamline or bypass the slow, piecemeal process of citizens influencing each other's views through public deliberation, she endorses a participatory conception of democracy as "essential to prevent an *alienating disconnect* between political decisions to which citizens are subject and their political opinions and will" (2019, 22–23).

Of course, universal agreement on all decisions is unrealistic in practice, even if this possibility should be maintained as a normative ideal. Lafont's stricture is not meant to imply that all citizens must assent to all policies at all times. Inevitably, some will have to obey laws to which they have not agreed; the key is that they not be "coerced into blind obedience (like in authoritarian regimes)" but instead be enabled "to endorse the laws and policies to which they are subject of their own accord" (2019, 168). The difference turns on whether the laws and policies in question have been justified with reasons that every citizen could endorse "as at least reasonable upon reflection" (2019, 18). This process of mutual justification ensures that the coercion citizens exercise over each other is legitimate. In a democratic regime, "the best policies" are "not simply those that each of us considers best…but those that our fellow citizens who have to comply with them can also reasonably accept" (2019, 169).

What this demanding conception of public deliberation would entail in practice is a point of some ambiguity in Lafont's work. It is clear that everyone must have the right to initiate the process of mutual justification: "as soon as some citizens contest the legitimacy of a law of policy… those who support it must be willing to engage in public debate so that it can be determined which side is justified" (2019, 178). While this is simple enough, the difficulty lies in adjudicating the quality of the "reasons" given. What if the justifications provided by the ruling majority are not accepted by

[8]Arato and Cohen (2021) also argue for democracy to be chastened by a constitution that is "entrenched" and difficult to change (195–197). This book contains no reference to climate change or environmental issues.

the dissident minority as "reasonable," even upon reflection? Given that the stipulation calls for reasons "everyone *can* accept upon reflection," it would seem to presuppose a robust and elaborate conception of rationality. This not only blunts the force of the normative injunction against coercion when it comes to any participating citizen who fails to meet this standard, but also contravenes the ideal of democratic self-government as Lafont understands it.

Let me try to express this tension differently. At one point, Lafont invokes the deliberative trope that democratic legitimacy "*requires* better reasons to have greater influence over outcomes" rather than merely "giving equal treatment to everyone's views" (2019, 75, emphasis in original). But who decides which reasons are "better"? If the ruling majority makes this call, the right of the dissident minority to contest a given policy loses its significance; those who support the law will simply provide a justification that it has decided "everyone can accept upon reflection," whether the opposition does or not. On the other hand, if there are procedure-independent standards that determine the quality of a given reason, this would seem to render a host of laws and policies supported by the majority illegitimate, along with the coercion they exercise over the minority.

Lafont's account of her "institutional approach" to mutual justification does not clear up this difficulty. This approach, she says, "require[s] that institutions be in place, which enable any citizen to contest any laws and policies they find unreasonable by requesting that proper reasons be offered in their support" (2019, 186). But what is a "proper reason" to one citizen will not be a proper reason to another; if a covid denier maintains that any social distancing policy is *a priori* unjust because it constrains individual freedom, scientific evidence is not "acceptable" to her (even if she "could" accept it upon rational reflection). So, does democratic legitimacy require that citizens actually assent to the reasons provided, or only that objectively *good* reasons *are* provided? If the latter, this would potentially legitimate a dictatorship, provided the dictator offered "proper reasons" that everyone "could accept upon reflection." If the former, we return to an extraordinarily demanding conception of mutual justification that would seldom if ever permit coercion of any kind.

We can make this more concrete by considering actually existing laws and policies around climate change. The denialist majority in power can certainly provide "reasons" for expanding the fossil fuel economy, but, given what we know about the consequences of increased GHG concentrations, these are not "proper" reasons that "everyone could accept as reasonable upon reflection." As things stand, the "unforced force of the better argument"[9] is losing, and the consequences are dire. If this renders the coercion to which carbon-competent citizens are subject illegitimate, what follows from this? In this case, are we justified in seizing power and exercising minoritarian control, on condition we provide (good) reasons to the legions of climate deniers upon request?

In one of the only passages in *Democracy without Shortcuts* (2019) to mention climate change, albeit parenthetically, Lafont clarifies her position on this question:

> "Perhaps the current vegan minority is right and we should not be…slaughtering billions of animals every year (with the additional and unsustainable negative impact on climate change). However, taking the shortcut of letting the 'enlightened' vegan minority rule while urging the rest of the citizenry to remain passive and blindly defer to their decisions would hardly lead to the purported better outcomes…getting there is going to take a lot of 'convincing' (i.e., changing hearts and minds) first" (133–134).

It is not the case, however, that the carnivore majority would have to "blindly defer" to the dictates of the "enlightened vegan minority." As Lafont indicates here, the livestock industry (particularly beef) is an enormous contributor to GHG concentrations and other planetary overshoots. Even complying with the Paris Agreement would require a global shift to more plant-based diets, especially in high-income countries (Harwatt et al., 2024, see also Tian et al., 2024, Li et al., 2024,

[9]Lafont uses this Habermasian phrase five times in *Democracy without Shortcuts* (2019, 65, 67, 68, 76, and 166).

Crippa et al., 2021, Hayek et al., 2021). In Lafont's conception, then, this hypothetical vegan oligarchy could easily provide "proper" reasons "that everyone could accept upon reflection." But here, she indicates that democratic legitimacy would require *actual* majority assent, that is, the winning of hearts and minds, regardless of whether "better reasons" are actually influencing outcomes.[10] There is no suggestion that the pro-livestock majority be compelled to provide "proper" justification for its unsustainable policies or else cede power.

In the life raft scenario, therefore, Lafont's theory would require that the rowers deliberate inclusively and provide reasoned justifications for their positions. Suppose that the two dissident rowers provide good reasons (appealing to the map and their training as cartographers), while the other eight provide spurious reasons (e.g., cliffs do not exist, a helicopter is probably nearby, etc.). If the cartographers fail to "win hearts and minds" in time, democratic legitimacy would require them to let the majority take the raft over the cliff. Any coercion they tried to exercise over their raftmates would remain illegitimate as long as the majority does not accept their (correct) interpretation of the map. Lafont says as much:

> "Guessing the right answers to political questions [i.e., reading the map] is one thing, getting the citizenry to comply with them against their own opinions and will is quite another. Needless to say, doing the latter [i.e., commandeering the raft] should be problematic for anyone interested in the democratic ideal of self-government" (2019, 98).

As unfortunate as this may be, it is the price we must pay for democracy. "There are no shortcuts to make a political community any better than its members," she says. "We are stuck with the fellow citizens we've got and must take each other along wherever we want to go" (2019, 88–89). Mutatis mutandis, if we cannot convince our fellow citizens to dramatically alter course on climate change, we will simply have to accept the likelihood of 3 °C or more of warming and the possibility of system-wide cataclysm.

We can articulate this problem differently by considering an analogy provided by Lafont. To illustrate her point about justifying laws to those subject to them, she uses the example of a "no texting while driving" policy she enforces with her teenage son (2019, 165ff). Despite protestations and counterarguments from the teen, Lafont provides reasons and justifications for the policy rather than merely ruling by fiat. "I want him to endorse the policy as reasonable upon reflection so that he can *identify it as his own and comply with it on its own accord*" (2019, 167, emphasis in original).

This analogy is meant to clarify the difference between expecting someone to "blindly defer" to a policy and trying to convince them of its reasonableness. But the structure of the example elides the difficult question for this theory. In the analogy, is Lafont supposed to represent the majority? In this case, it is an example of the majority instituting a reasonable policy and providing justification for it (so far so good). But suppose I have two children, and, after a round of deliberation during which I provide (good) reasons and they provide (bad) ones, the vote is 2–1 to allow texting while driving—including when I am a passenger in the car. "The unforced force of the better argument" failed this time, and the consequences endanger all of our lives as well as the lives of others. This would be a better analog for the climate conjuncture.

Based on Lafont's other remarks, I would ostensibly have to live with such a policy until I could "win the hearts and minds" of my patently irresponsible children. Her example is compelling only because the family is, in the last instance, an "authoritarian" regime in which paternalism is at least somewhat appropriate. It would of course be preferable if our children complied with such policies of their own accord, but if they do not, we are presumably prepared to exercise some coercive

[10]Lafont clarifies that, in denying that coercive measures would produce "better outcomes," she means "substantively better political outcomes *while preserving citizens' rights and freedoms*" (2019, 85n25). By this logic, the minority commandeering the raft and steering it left would not be a "better outcome" than the raft falling off the waterfall cliff, because the former would violate the rights and freedoms of the majority.

controls (something forbidden in the democratic context). At the moment, our climate-denying fellow citizens are texting while driving, but letting an "enlightened traffic safety minority" rule would apparently be an affront to the democratic ideal of self-government.

In a manner similar to Urbinati, Lafont's framework forces us to accept one of two conclusions. Either respecting the political norms of democracy is worth the widespread ecological destabilization of increased warming (which will probably endanger democratic norms anyway), up to and including the threat of civilizational collapse (which certainly will endanger those norms), or the threat of climate change is not really as catastrophic as the life raft scenario suggests. Unless one actually regards democracy as more important than human civilization itself, the first option is implicatory denial; the second is interpretive denial.

The low carbon competence of Lafont's intervention is nowhere better revealed than in her repeated insistence that the process of "winning hearts and minds" is slow and that the deliberative/participatory road is "long" (2019, 4, 71, 88). The window for avoiding a highly dangerous to catastrophic future is rapidly closing even as popular climate denial remains firmly entrenched. The structural, infrastructural, and socioeconomic changes necessary for a green transition are massive and deep, particularly after decades of inertia. In a life-or-death emergency situation, there simply may not be enough time to deliberate with and persuade a sufficient number of contrarian citizens; the cartographers in the life raft might fall off the waterfall cliff before they succeed in persuading a majority of other rowers.

In doubling down on the "slow, long road" and scarcely mentioning climate change, Lafont implicitly denies that we are presently in such an emergency situation (one which is not temporary, like the life raft, but sustained and possibly permanent). As we saw with Urbinati, then, the force of Lafont's argument relies on this conspicuous omission. The surrounding literature has followed suit: while one would expect the near-total invisibility of the most momentous political problem of the twenty-first century to invite some comment or criticism, *not a single entry* in the symposia dedicated to Lafont's book in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* and *The Journal of Deliberative Democracy* critiques it on this score or invites her to comment on the issue.[11]

There is, however, one concrete reference to climate matters in Urbinati and Lafont's recent coauthored work. It occurs in the context of a sustained attack on the "technocratic" view of politics, which assumes that all political questions have a single right answer reducible to "knowledge" and thereby undermines "freedom of choice" and "political pluralism" (Urbinati & Lafont, 2025, 220–225). In a footnote, they make a notable distinction:

> "There is no need to deny that many political questions have single right answers (e.g., slavery is wrong, rape is wrong, and poverty is wrong) in order to recognize that many others do not (e.g., joining the European Union or remaining an independent nation, **dismantling nuclear energy or reducing use of fossil fuels,** eliminating all forms of surveillance or the risks of cyberattacks…" (Urbinati & Lafont, 2025, 225n14, emphasis added).

First of all, construing energy politics as a choice between nuclear and fossil fuels already signals low carbon competence, as it elides the necessity of renewable energy entirely. More significant, though, is their framing of "reducing fossil fuels" as a political question that does not admit of a right answer. Apparently, we are obliged to tolerate those who want to maintain or expand fossil fuel consumption in the name of pluralism and freedom of choice, the scores of millions who will perish under 3 °C or 4 °C of warming be damned. Either Urbinati and Lafont think this is less morally impactful than slavery, rape, and poverty, or they are unaware of the full consequences of failing to drastically scale down fossil fuel consumption. Regarding the imperative of decarbonization as a matter of reasonable disagreement indicates low carbon competence.

[11] *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 47.1 (2021); *The Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 16.2 (2020).

4. Landemore, Epistemic Democracy, and Lottocracy

Unlike Urbinati and Lafont, Landemore does not defend democracy in spite of its potential for negative outcomes. She argues, rather, that because it is more epistemically inclusive, democracy will in principle lead to better outcomes when compared to nondemocratic regimes. While not unfriendly to its intrinsic value, Landemore's defense of the democratic form is instrumentalist. My critique will center on the following charge: in her defense of epistemic democracy, Landemore assumes away the problem of climate denialism, effectively becoming a *climate denial-denier*. Misrecognizing this aspect of the problem, I claim, constitutes low carbon competence.

The basis of Landemore's argument is the proposition that "diversity trumps ability," better known as the Hong-Page theorem. It states that, under certain conditions, a large group of randomly selected individuals will be more knowledgeable and effective than a small group of experts when it comes to solving complex problems. "The advantage of large numbers," she writes, "is that it automatically ensures greater cognitive diversity" (2013, 104). By this token, inclusive democratic procedures will outperform an oligarchy of expertise even on epistemic grounds, because the former are "generally more able…to tap the distributed collective intelligence of a given people" (2017, 28). To illustrate this point, Landemore invites us to imagine a group of people trapped in a maze (2013, 3–5). Finding the way out requires navigating various kinds of clues, puzzles, and traps, involving distinct skillsets, requiring different approaches and techniques, perhaps in multiple languages, and so forth. In this scenario, the "cognitive diversity" of a larger group of people would be an asset rather than a hindrance. A large democratic group would probably outperform a smaller group even if the latter had heightened expertise in maze design or in one style of puzzle.

As Landemore acknowledges, however, the Hong-Page theorem relies on several assumptions—the "certain conditions" under which it holds are of critical importance here. First, it assumes that the problem solvers are at least "relatively smart" or "not too dumb" (2022, 151; see also 2013, 102). It takes for granted, in other words, that "on average citizens are at least competent enough to engage in a deliberation about political issues" (2022, 145). The data on popular climate denial and low carbon competence—detailed in the companion essay to this article—should give us pause regarding this assumption. I do not mean to suggest that a mastery of scientific literature is necessary for competent political deliberation. As we have seen, however, denialism is not limited to simple passive ignorance but involves active delusions about the nature of the problem and fundamental cognitive failures (e.g., mental models that violate the conservation of matter). Are Senator Inhofe and almost-Senator Walker competent enough to deliberate about climate policy? This is at least doubtful, and yet these are hardly the dumbest members of our society. Landemore disregards this problem by simply asserting that "with respect to *political* problems people can be assumed to be smart enough" (2014, 219).

There are other, more troubling conditions required for this theorem to hold. As Jason Brennan (2022) points out in his exchange with Landemore, Hong-Page also stipulates that all members of the decision-making collective already have the same preference among possible outcomes. In other words, it asks us to "assume that there is some problem everyone agrees on, both on what the problem is and what counts as a solution…[and] that everyone automatically accepts any improvement or better solution offered by anyone else" (258). We do not have to endorse Brennan's anthropological pessimism to see that these assumptions are incongruent with actually existing "debates" over climate change, where the nature of the problem—indeed, whether there even *is* a problem—is a matter of contention.

In Landemore's maze scenario, the participants already agree on what the goal is (to escape the maze). To incorporate climate denialism into the metaphor, we would have to imagine that a significant percentage of the lost do not believe they are in a maze at all. Another substantial portion do not believe that escaping the maze is a worthwhile goal. A percentage with expertise in maze navigation believe that, rather than finding our way out in the traditional manner, we should invent

new technology that will let us catapult ourselves vertically at great personal risk. In addition to this, the maze is emitting a toxin that will kill the searchers slowly, starting with the poorest and most vulnerable. Furthermore, a few of the members profit immensely from everyone else being lost in the maze, and they spend billions of dollars convincing everyone that escape is a bad idea. Suddenly, democracy does not seem like the best bet if our goal is escaping the labyrinth.

Landemore explicitly defends this "oracle assumption," or the "general requirement that problem solvers be able to identify the value of the solutions when they are presented with them" (2014, 220). She addresses concerns about the appropriateness of this assumption by reiterating the qualified political cognitivism that animates her approach: "the values of competing solutions…can be relatively self-evident, at least with the benefit of hindsight, given enough time, and in relative if not absolute terms" (2014, 220–221, see also 2013, 208). This is not what was in question, however. We can take political cognitivism for granted but still recognize that significant numbers of people may refuse (or are refusing) to accept a better solution. There is a crucial difference between being cognitively *able* to recognize salient problems/right answers and being *willing* to affirm them when prompted. The Hong-Page theorem requires that participants do the latter, while Landemore's defense of cognitivism would only apply to the former.
Landemore concedes this point:

> "in many cases, the reason that disagreement rather than consensus remains so prevalent in politics is not because oracles do not exist but because people do not share the same values, or because they have a vested interest in refusing to accept the oracle's verdict" (2014, 221).

This is a more realistic description of the politics of climate change, where the scientific "oracles" are ignored by a denialist citizenry motivated by "system justification." Once we drop the assumption that participants will automatically recognize when problems exist and when good solutions are presented, however, the argument falls apart. A large random group committed to successfully navigating the maze may be smarter than an expert small one, but this ceases to hold once we introduce substantial numbers of maze-deniers into the fold. Likewise, Hong-Page does not establish that a large group with a high percentage of climate deniers would draft better climate policy than a small group of the most carbon competent citizens.

Landemore's conception of epistemic democracy involves inclusive deliberation followed by majority rule (2014, 221). Given the ideological nature of climate denial as described above, it is far from clear that a deliberation process would succeed in disabusing contrarians of their delusional beliefs. Given the prevalence of denialist views, there is little reason to believe that carbon competent policies would win the day even under better deliberative conditions, at least in the short and medium term.[12] In the absence of the oracle assumption/requirement, then, inclusive democracy is *not* necessarily smarter and may lead to catastrophic results.[13] Landemore nevertheless proceeds

[12]Dryzek and Niemeyer (2019) likewise assert that deliberative mini-publics would yield better outcomes without grappling with the depth and prevalence of climate denialism. Elsewhere, Dryzek offers helpful strategies for persuading climate deniers in deliberative contexts (Bächtiger & Dryzek, 2024, 138–146; Dryzek & Lo, 2015), but the most positive tested result of these tactics has been getting contrarians to discuss a carbon tax (a far cry from "rapid, far reaching, and unprecedented changes to all aspects of society"). Bächtiger and Dryzek (2024) argue that "democratic renewal" would require a "procedural consensus" around truth-seeking (70ff; see also Dryzek, 2017, 625), while Willis et al. (2022) advocate "changes to institutional structures" to foster better debate. Of course, the outcomes of deliberation would be improved if everyone had better epistemological scruples, but the ticking climate clock may run out while we wait for this condition to obtain. If epistemologically inadequate positions are excluded from the procedure by design, the result would already be an effective oligarchy of the carbon competent.

[13]Broadly, the deliberative tradition's conception of "reasonable disagreement" is inappropriate to the context of widespread climate denialism. Chambers (2023) writes: "every society has a certain number of mentally ill or just irrationally contrary people who will not agree to anything. We need to respect these people as persons, but to the extent that their disagreement is arbitrary we need not accommodate their disagreement" (42). Given the state of carbon competence, this may mean that we do not need to accommodate the disagreement of the vast majority of citizens when it comes to action on climate change.

with her instrumental, epistemic defense of democracy as if the oracle assumption holds in most relevant cases, thus rendering invisible the scope, severity, and consequences of climate denial.

In contrast to Urbinati or Lafont, Landemore actually spends some time talking about climate change. Her comments reflect low carbon competence broadly but especially with regard to the prevalence of climate denial. Her contribution to the *Democracy in a Hotter Time* volume affords one mention to unspecified and undifferentiated "climate skeptics" (2023, 38) before cautioning against the "technocratic temptation."[14] Rule by climate experts, she argues, would face two main problems:

> "First, while climate change is often conceptualized as one issue, it is in fact many interrelated issues touching on every possible domain of life…a niche of independent decision-making that would be strictly related to climate is implausible. The sheer complexity of the issue would introduce all kinds of uncertainties (beyond the intrinsic uncertainty of climate modeling). In the end, climate change would have to [be] recognized as merely one of many issues that bear on humanity's future…
>
> Second…climate change is not just a technical issue of prediction…the burdens of widespread decarbonization can be distributed many ways, which means that fighting climate change will always be an eminently political process…" (2023, 39).

There are several serious misdirections here. First, while it is certainly true that climate change is complex and involves various domains, it does not follow that it is "merely one of many issues" bearing on our future. One would have to cite another issue that threatens to displace one third of the human population by the end of this century and to eventuate in human extinction for this to be cogent. Even acknowledging other existential risks (e.g., pandemics, nuclear war) obscures a crucial difference: these represent exceptional and contingent circumstances, as opposed to a catastrophe resulting from an uninterrupted continuation of the status quo. Climate change is not an event that might be triggered, but a progressive destabilization of the Earth system resulting from global practices of energy production and resource intensity. Using the word "merely" in this context is interpretive and implicatory denial par excellence. Furthermore, Landemore must know that invoking "uncertainty" with regard to climate modeling is a textbook denialist trope, and a particularly cheap one.[15] As Wagner and Weitzman (2015) point out, highlighting uncertainty in climate forecasting should have the opposite of its intended effect; a projection may *underestimate* the extent of danger to the same degree that it overestimates, and even a 10% chance of 6 °C of warming is not a risk anyone would take if they understood what 6 °C means (78–79).

More significantly, however, Landemore's framing fundamentally mischaracterizes the nature of climate politics. There are obviously different ideas about the right path toward decarbonization, but they are not all equally scientifically literate. Even talking in these terms is misleading: substantial portions of the *demos* do not believe that climate change is occurring in the first place, let alone that decarbonization should happen anytime soon. The prevailing debate is *not* about *how* to change course, and there is precious little debate about *whether* to change course. Political candidates do not often lay out differing visions for reducing emissions and respecting planetary boundaries; most often, one dismisses the entire thing as a nonissue while another genuflects before platitudes but promises to increase oil drilling and expand dirty energy subsidies. While public

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For a more sustained critique of the "reasonable disagreement" caveat common in deliberative theory, see Busk (2021, 688–692) and Busk (2024, 96–105).

[14]Powell (2011) points out that, given the overwhelming nature of the evidence, "skeptic" is an inapt term and "denier" the only appropriate one (4–5).

[15]She invokes this talking point elsewhere as well (2022, 162–163), as do Benson (2024, 160), Stehr (2016, 39), and Lazar and Wallace (2025, 146).

deliberation may not mirror these options exactly, there is no reason to assume it will look radically different without a massive campaign of political education occurring first.

This does not mean that the question of how best to decarbonize is a straightforward empirical matter. Before such political debates can take place, however, all participants must recognize the nature, timeline, severity, scope, and dynamics of the problem in a rigorous and scientifically literate way, and this condition *emphatically* does not obtain as long as denialism in its various iterations persists. A debate about "values" where one side is empirically deluded cannot be a debate about values.[16] Landemore, however, proceeds as if everyone already recognizes the basics of the problem. Her thesis that democracy is best equipped to address climate change, then, requires us to abstract away from the reality of climate denialism.[17]

As a positive example of the deepening of democracy that she advocates, Landemore frequently cites the 2019–2020 French Convention for Climate (2023, 42; 2022, 168). This was a citizens' assembly of 150 people (drawn by lot), which produced 149 policy proposals for reducing emissions 40% relative to 1990s levels by 2030. As she acknowledges (2022, 224), however, the agenda for the assembly was set by the president. In other words, the participants already took for granted *that decarbonization ought to occur*. While Landemore frames this kind of representative body as an alternative to Brennan's "epistocracy," an effective citizens assembly would have to be limited to those who already accept the basic reality of climate change and the necessity of rapid decarbonization—and this would already be an epistocracy. "What citizens mostly bring to political decision-making," she writes in praise of the Convention, "is the ability to open or re-open questions closed or seen as closed by professional politicians or experts" (2020, 21). Presumably, this would have to include the ability to "re-open" the question of whether burning fossil fuels really causes a greenhouse effect, or if the entire thing is a "hoax" designed to stifle our freedom. As this was excluded by design in the case of the French Convention, Landemore's appeal to this experiment mirrors her broader invisibilization of climate deniers.

Finally, the denial of climate denialism is evident in Landemore's recent turn toward lottocracy, that is, rule by a random sortition of citizens organized into deliberative "mini-publics" (a generalized and enlarged version of the French Convention on Climate). If this representative body were "statistically identical with the demos" (2020, 89) in an American context, we should expect 80% of the participants to deny or doubt the unanimous scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change. While Landemore assures us that this representative sortition would have "infinitesimally low probably of containing a large proportion of crazy and evil people" (2020, 98), these categories would have to be expanded exponentially if we recognized that climate denial constitutes "madness." In the life raft scenario, delegating the decision to a randomly selected sample of two or three rowers would almost certainly yield a policy of staying the course to a watery grave.

Simply put, there is no reason to expect a substantially more positive outcome from a deliberative mini-public populated by different shades of climate denial in proportion to the general public. Landemore does envision an advisory role for experts and specialists, though she hastens to add that they should not have more voting power than anyone else—"experts on tap, not on top" (2020, 192). Given the ideological nature of climate denial, it is unlikely that having a climate specialist "on tap" will have much influence. There is an even deeper problem: in the context of climate politics,

[16]In another defense of epistemic democracy and lottocracy, Benson (2024) writes: "While some may want to trade off economic growth for environmental quality, and others the reverse, all will wish to have institutions with the epistemic capacities needed to manage this trade-off" (27). Construing the catastrophe of climate change as a question of "environmental quality" reflects low carbon competence. Likewise, given the mortality cost and existential risk of ecological breakdown, anyone who wants to do "the reverse" is either ignorant or engaged in implicatory denial.

[17]Stehr (2016, 42) makes this mistake as well. Lazar and Wallace (2025) likewise take for granted that the political question of climate change is "how to fairly allocate decarbonization's costs and benefits" (147), assuming that all citizens already believe in climate change, fully grasp its consequences, and understand that decarbonization is necessary. While denying their opponents the right to imagine the best version of green authoritarianism, they rely on an ideal, counterfactual version of democracy.

who decides who the experts are? Many deniers would categorically reject the testimony of scientists and demand equal "expert" representation for think tank ideologues, rehearsing the "both sides" discourse familiar from mainstream media coverage.[18]

Carbon competence requires a robust understanding of the causes and consequences of anthropogenic climate change. This in turn demands a realistic understanding of the chasm between the present trajectory and the radical changes needed to secure a habitable future. Accounting for this chasm involves reckoning with widespread and deep-seated denialist beliefs. In failing to grapple with denialism, and in fact assuming it away, Landemore not only undermines her case for epistemic democracy but also displays a misapprehension of the full import of climate change.

5. Conclusion

Dominant approaches in democratic theory demonstrate low carbon competence. First, there is conspicuously little discussion of what is undoubtedly the most momentous political problem of the twenty-first century, and denialist tropes are often invoked in the few instances where it does rate a mention. Furthermore, while much of the literature consists of navigating potential "negative outcomes," there is a consistent failure to regard catastrophic climate change and civilization collapse as a viable potential result of the democratic procedure. While reversibility of decisions and slowness of speed are taken as virtues, these features are incongruous with the exigencies of the warming condition. Commitments to pluralism, liberal constitutional safeguards, and norms of mutual justification demand an untenable degree of tolerance for obstructionist climate policies likely to eventuate in calamitous overshoot. The theoretical interventions considered here avoid having to confront this problem by simply never acknowledging the climate catastrophe in its full scope, exigency, and severity; their viability therefore relies on an underestimation and misrecognition of our present situation. Finally, appeals to the epistemic benefits of democracy assume away the phenomenon of climate denialism in its widespread prevalence and myriad, often subtle forms. This ignores the profound and alarming gap between the level of popular consciousness and the dire implications of business as usual, thus implicitly downplaying these implications. These interventions are therefore denialist themselves in interpretive and implicatory registers. In one way or another, following Urbinati, Lafont, or Landemore would mean letting the life raft fall over the waterfall cliff; this conclusion, however, is never defended, because the full reality of the waterfall cliff is not acknowledged.

In its current state, democratic theory is an anachronism, trading in concepts and normative strictures that may have been appropriate only before the full stakes of rapid decarbonization became clear. Like mainline denialists, the representative interventions considered here operate in an alternate universe where we are not barreling toward catastrophe at ever-increasing speed. We cannot have a meaningful debate about the legitimacy of democracy in the face of climate change if one side is not operating with a realistic picture of our present peril. Perhaps there is a robust defense of democracy to be made even in full cognizance of ecological collapse. Or perhaps a carbon-competent democratic theory would no longer be a democratic theory.

Larry Alan Busk is a visiting assistant professor of philosophy at Wabash College. His articles on climate change, democracy, and critical theory have appeared in *Philosophy & Social Criticism, Philosophy Today*, and many other journals. He is the author of *Democracy in Spite of the Demos* (Bloomsbury, 2020) and *The Right-Wing Mirror of Critical Theory* (Bloomsbury, 2023).

[18]In their defense of sortition, Mulvad and Popp-Madsen (2021) say that "embracing climate change denialism as a legitimate standpoint also to be considered as part of discussion" is "preferable" to "block[ing] out climate deniers." This is because "a citizen assembly that decides a priori [sic] to discount certain potential standpoints among participants—however insane they may seem to the majority—is running the risk of attacks on its legitimacy" (90). Again, none of the literature on the mortality cost of carbon or existential risk is cited or discussed, so the authors are relieved of the burden of defending the claim that democratic legitimacy is more important than hundreds of millions to billions of unnecessary deaths.

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