

Political Parties and “the Long Road of Participatory Deliberative Democracy”

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Abstract

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Ronald Tinnevelt

1. Introduction

Although party membership has witnessed a strong decline in many European countries over the last few decades, political parties are still seen – at least within our current political constellation – as key elements of our democratic imagination and reality (Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). Political parties participate in the exercise of political power and perform central functions in liberal democratic societies: they mobilize voters, nominate candidates for public office, shape public opinion, develop policies and legislation, put political issues on the deliberative agenda etc. They are, in that sense – for better or worse – intertwined with democratic self-government (Teorell 1999, 363).

In contrast to the field of political science this intricate role of political parties has long been neglected within political theory. Even though things are gradually changing - specifically within the field of deliberative democratic theory – a gap still exists between normative political theory and political science regarding the status and relevance of political parties (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 100; Van Biezen and Saward 2008, 21). Nancy Rosenblum’s remark in *On the Side of Angels* (2008) in that sense still holds true: “If parties are the orphans of political philosophy, they are the darlings of political science” (Rosenblum 2007, 16).

How might it be possible to fill this gap and develop a theory of democracy in which the importance of party – both as an empirical and normative concept (White and Ypi 2016, 8-9) – and partisanship is reflected? Given its goal of articulating a participatory conception of deliberative democracy that people with different understandings of the democratic ideal of self-government can endorse, *Democracy without Shortcuts* (2020) seems a very promising candidate for providing such an answer. *Democracy without Shortcuts*, after all, repeatedly stresses the importance of the macro-deliberative strategy (besides micro and local deliberation) in which, at first sight, parties seem to play an important part (Lafont 2020, 172).

Unfortunately, there are scarce references to political parties in the book. Moreover, given, that Lafont’s participatory conception is based on an “ecumenical interpretation of the democratic ideal of self-government” (Lafont 2020, 4), ardent sceptics might even claim that

it is an open question whether political parties can at all be considered an integral part of what Lafont labels “the democratic ideal of self-government *under any minimally plausible interpretation of that ideal*” (Lafont 2020, 17). This article, therefore, tries to invite Lafont to further reflect on the importance of political parties for a deliberative conception of democracy; are they essential for realizing this ideal? (Lafont 2020, 179n).

For the sake of argument, I will presuppose that Lafont and possible sceptics not only accept that parties are an inescapable part of the political reality of democratic societies, but would also agree that parties *could* play a role in realizing the democratic ideal of self-government. With regard to *Democracy without Shortcuts* this presupposition is substantiated by Lafont’s claim that an important building block for her participatory conception of deliberative democracy is formed by Habermas’ feedback-loop model of political deliberation (Lafont 2020, 24 and 171). In this model political parties play a substantive role in the process of political opinion- and will-formation. Unfortunately, Habermas has never tried to combine his different observations and analyses regarding the role and status of political parties. To give a sketch of what role and status parties might have in Lafont’s participatory conception of deliberative democracy the general contours of Habermas’ deliberative conception of political parties will be reconstructed in section 2 of this article. In addition, four functions of political parties will be distinguished. This reconstruction will form the basis for posing two questions to Lafont: (a) does she agree with this deliberative take on political parties or would she claim that parties have a different role to play within her participatory conception of deliberative democracy?; and (b) if she agrees, do parties have a unique role to play in mediating between micro- and macro-deliberative processes of opinion- and will-formation? If micro-deliberation should not be seen as an *alternative to*, but *resource for*, macro-deliberation, this is an important question to answer (Lafont 2020, 141).

If political parties do indeed have an important role to play in securing a political climate in which all those subject to the law are also their authors, there is also a second issue that needs to be addressed: the idea of public or mutual justification. Public deliberation, as Lafont rightly argues, has two important aims: the purely *epistemic* aim of reaching “considered judgments about the best policies” (Lafont 2020, 167), and the *democratic* aim of mutually justifying the coercive political power that citizens exercise over each other. Section 3 raises the question of

whether the constraints imposed by Lafont's institutional approach to public justification leave enough room for the partisan advocacy and party politics that is implied in the mediating role of political parties. Given that Lafont develops her approach to public justification by building on and criticizing Rawls's and Habermas' conception of public justification – not only in *Democracy without Shortcuts*, but also in “Religion and the Public Sphere” (2009) and “Religious Pluralism in a Deliberative Democracy” (2014) – this section will sketch some of the problems that Rawls' and Habermas' conceptions raise for party politics and partisan advocacy. If Lafont's institutional approach to mutual justification does indeed present us with a more coherent and justifiable alternative to Rawls' and Habermas' conceptions of public reason, as she herself claims, then it should be able to address these problems. Section 4, finally, will briefly summarize the main questions of this reply.

2. Political Parties: discontentment and hope

Although Habermas has never developed a deliberative conception of political parties, parties have always played an important role in his political essays, and also to a lesser extent in his more theoretical work. Two different messages about parties are constantly intertwined: one of *discontentment* and one of *hope*. In his early- and mid-period writings – from roughly *Student und Politik* (1961) to *Faktizität und Geltung* (1992) – Habermas' discontentment with political parties seems to outweigh his hope in their deliberative potential. In these writings he strongly focused on the domination of both the political system and the public sphere by professional, hierarchically organized political parties (Haysom 2011, 182). In his later-period writings – starting with *Faktizität und Geltung* (1992) – this message of discontentment can still be found, but it is counterbalanced by the more constructive role that political parties can play in his two-track model of deliberative politics. Political parties, as also Hans Kelsen claimed in *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie* (1920), “mediate between the individual and the state” (Kelsen 2013, 39) and can play a constructive role in the “formation of the political will of the people” (Article 21 of The Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany). Parties should function “as a catalyst, clarifying and concentrating opinions rather than creating and prompting them” (The New Conservatism, 192). They can do this, among other ways, by informing the public, thematizing alternatives to current policy courses, or publicly articulating “opinions which have been formed in the communicative exchange of issue-relevant positions, information and reasons” (Habermas 2012, 135).

Two important lessons can be drawn from these later-period writings: (1) political parties are both (a) *vehicles* for and (b) *sites* of political deliberation and participation; and (2) agonism and partisanship are necessary for enhancing the quality of deliberative processes and the results of those processes. The first lesson goes back to the mediating function of parties. “The political system”, Habermas writes in *Faktizität und Geltung*, “which must remain sensitive to the influence of public opinion, is intertwined with the public sphere and civil society through the activity of political parties and general elections. This intermeshing is guaranteed by the right of parties to “collaborate” in the political will-formation of the people, as well as by the citizens’ active and passive voting rights and other participatory rights” (Habermas 1996, 368). Political parties can create an “entire linkage chain” (Lawson 1988, 16; Teorell 1999, 363) between citizens and government, and anchor parliamentary opinion and will-formation in the informal streams of communication emerging from the weak public sphere (Habermas 1996, 171).

The image of parties as “catalysts in the conversion of public opinion into communicative power” (Habermas 1996, 434; Habermas 1989, 192), however, shows that parties are also “sites of deliberation” or “deliberative bodies” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 101; Van Biezen and Saward 2008, 29). Parties should not only connect different deliberative spheres and make deliberation possible, but they should also act as filters. The image of parties as catalysts – which Habermas probably derives from German constitutional and party law^[1] – has, after all, an interesting dual meaning: parties as catalytic agents and parties as catalytic convertors. According to this second meaning, parties should act as deliberative filters. They must, as Habermas writes, “get involved in the deliberative style and internal logic of political discourses” (Habermas 1996, 273).

Moreover, to properly function as both vehicles for, and sites of, deliberation, interparty and intraparty democratic mechanisms need to be introduced and a healthy form of political polarization stimulated (Habermas 1989, 209 and 2016b). Partisanship and a system of party competition, (and this is the second lesson that can be drawn from Habermas’ later-period writings), are crucial for both the ideal of popular sovereignty and the quality of deliberative processes and their results. To counter what Bernard Manin calls the “bounded nature” of deliberation and the danger of hegemonic discourses, politics should be a stage for “competing

opinions” and a wide “diversity of voices” (Habermas 1996, 286).

Unfortunately, the scattered remarks and short analyses in Habermas’ early-, mid- and later-period writing don’t add up to a detailed and coherent account of the different functions political parties ought to perform within deliberative democratic societies. Taking also the work of other deliberative democrats as our source of inspiration, however, it is safe to argue that political parties have at least four specific functions within Habermas’ feedback-loop model of deliberative politics. Political parties are, *first of all*, important vehicles for political participation. They recruit, select and nominate candidates for public office and provide a platform for voicing political concerns. Such a platform can only function properly if there is real and publicly visible competition between a plurality of different political views (cf. Habermas 2009, 140-141).

Connected to this first function is a *second* one. Considering the complexity of modern democratic societies and of the great many political issues at stake, real and meaningful deliberation and participation for citizens is difficult to attain. One way of addressing this problem is if parties structure and focus public opinion in such a way that they become “manageable” for democratic choice and deliberation (Muirhead 2010, 145). “It is not possible”, as Manin rightly argues, “to deliberate about everything or all the possibilities permitted by a given situation [...] the range of proposed solutions must by necessity be limited”. Effective deliberation is only possible if parties and other intermediary organizations “simplify” choices.

Parties, *thirdly*, not only simplify political choices but they also form public opinion in terms of content. And they do this by articulating competing political visions (Habermas 2001, 112). Or put differently, parties “organize the multitude of opinions” (Muirhead 2010, 142) by clarifying what is at stake and mobilizing voters on the basis of specific preferences and opinions. So political parties not only “stage the battle” by structuring and restructuring the debate, but they “create a system of conflict” in which lines are drawn up. By formulating and defending competing political visions “stakes are delineated” and “points of conflict and commonality are located” (Rosenblum 2014, 7 and 278; Habermas 1961, 28).

Presupposed in the previous point is the *final function* of parties and party competition. Parties not only need to provide citizens with a background of different and coherent political views,

but these views should be based on diverse conceptions of the *public good* (Rosenblum 2012, 826). Unlike factions, political parties serve ends that are “irreducible to the interests of a sectoral grouping”, they should provide citizens with a “wider normative vision involving claims that can be generalized” (White and Ypi 2016, 21 and 59). Such visions of the public good, or the just ordering of society, Habermas argues, should not be limited to the national level. Political parties should have the courage to think forward and reflect on the question of whether more democratic and just forms of supranational decision-making are possible.

As indicated in the introduction, this reconstruction of the role and functions of political parties in Habermas’ feedback-loop model of deliberative politics not only serves as a possible interpretation of what a deliberative conception of political parties might look like. It primarily serves as an invitation to Lafont to address two related questions. Our leading question concerned “what implications the discursive concept [of democracy] has for the functioning of political parties” (Munnichs 2002, 192). The question to pose to Lafont is whether she would agree with this reconstruction or would argue that parties have a different role to play within her participatory conception of deliberative democracy. If she agrees that parties are both vehicles and sites of deliberation and participation, mediating institutions that create vertical linkages between the formal political and informal public sphere, a second question arises. Do political parties have a unique role to play in mediating between micro- and macro-deliberative processes of opinion- and will-formation? How can political parties utilize deliberative minipublics to stimulate public deliberation, improve its quality, and guarantee political control? These questions are not only prompted by the view of parties as mediating institutions, but also by the fact that mini-publics and political parties seem to fulfill similar functions with regard to the quality of deliberation in the public sphere, such as making “the most relevant arguments for and against the political decisions at stake available” (Lafont 2020, 141) to the citizenry. If Lafont wants to develop a convincing participatory conception of deliberative democracy, which I think she does, these questions also need to be addressed.

3. Political Justification

If an important function of political parties is to form bridges between the political system, the informal public sphere, and civil society, a crucial issue to address is the connection between partisan advocacy and mutual justification. At least two reasons can be given for this. From an *external point of view* the reason is a simple one. If political parties play an important role

in the process of political opinion- and will-formation, and if coercive policies in democratic societies need to be justified to all those subjected to them, the constraints of public reason should also apply to parties. Seen from an *internal point of view* one could argue that if political parties are more than mere factions – given that they formulate competing normative visions of a just ordering of society and are aimed at the public interest – their “partisan activities involve seeking to convince a wider public of its appeal” (White and Ypi 2017, 20-21) on the basis of reasons that are acceptable to other citizens^[2]. Two questions follow from this: (a) do partisanship and party politics undermine the goal of mutual justification?; and (b) do the constraints of public justification entail a strong barrier for partisanship and party politics? This section deals with the second question and applies it to Lafont’s institutional approach to mutual justification: to what extent does this approach leave sufficient room for partisanship advocacy and party politics? To address this question, we will take a small detour: arguing that Rawls’ and Habermas’ conceptions of public reason don’t leave sufficient room for both. The rationale behind this detour is a pragmatic one: given that Lafont’s institutional account of mutual justification is developed by critically building on Rawls’ and Habermas’ conceptions of public reason and their accounts of the role of religion in the formal and informal public sphere, looking at the mistakes that Rawls and Habermas make with regard to party politics and partisan advocacy might help us in answering our main question.

Partisans come in many shapes and forms (from activists and party members, to party candidates and elected party officials when they are campaigning) (cf. Bonotti 2017, 65), and both partisans and political parties operate between public political culture, background culture and nonpublic political sphere (Rawlsian terminology), or public sphere and political system (Habermasian terminology). To what extent do Rawls’ and Habermas’ conceptions of public reason unreasonably hinder or even “suffocate partisanship and party politics” (Bonotti 2017, 62)?

Public reason, according to Rawls, concerns the logic of justification that citizens and government officials should abide by “when they support laws and policies that invoke the coercive powers of government concerning fundamental political questions” (Rawls 1996, 476); specifically, when constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice are at stake. The reasons they have to support or reject political issues should be reasons that are given by

a particular political conception of justice. By defining the content of public reason in terms of a political conception, Rawls introduces a sharp distinction between the public and the nonpublic. Public reasons are distinguished from social and domestic reasons, and public political culture is differentiated from background culture (civil society), nonpublic political sphere (media), and domestic life (Rawls 1999, 576n). This divide became somewhat less stringent in his latterly developed wide-view of public reason (and proviso) according to which comprehensive doctrines can be introduced into public discourse at any time provided that in due course public reasons are also given (Rawls 1999, 619).

Different arguments can be given for why this account of public reason is very restrictive when it comes to party politics and partisan advocacy^[3]. The first thing to notice is that Rawls' idea of public reason casts a far wider net than just covering elected party officials. It also extends to "citizens when they engage in political advocacy in the public forum", "members of political parties", "candidates in their campaigns and for other groups who support them" (Rawls 1996, 215). Secondly, his distinction between normal politics and fundamental political questions (a), and the introduction of his wide-view of public reason (b) don't create extra breathing space for partisan advocacy and party politics. Not only is there no clear line of separation between questions of normal politics and fundamental political questions, but this distinction becomes irrelevant, as Bonotti rightly argues, "when we consider that parties manifestoes and programmes include both kinds of issues and need to be justified to the public in their comprehensiveness" (Bonotti 2017, 63). A similar argument applies to Rawls' wide-view of public reason. Postponing the introduction of properly political reasons is often difficult for partisans as members of political parties because they are under constant pressure to convince the wider public of the generalizability of their normative vision on the just division of political power and ordering of society. Rawls' idea of public reason in that sense creates rather strict constraints, which are burdensome for partisans and specifically so for members of religious political parties.

In contrast to Rawls' idea of public reason, Habermas' notion is based on a strong "institutional divide", a stringent separation between the formal and the informal public sphere. According to Habermas Rawls' strict demand of public reason "can only be laid at the door of politicians, who within state institutions are subject to the obligation to remain neutral in the face of

competing world views; in other words, it can only be made of anyone who holds a public office or is a candidate for such”. Regarding citizens, on the other hand, his view of public reason is far more open to the use of non-public reasons and arguments: “Every citizen must know and accept *that only secular reasons count* beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations. But all that is required here is the epistemic ability to consider one's own faith reflexively from the outside and to relate it to secular views” (Habermas 2006, 9-10). Habermas’ two-track model of deliberative politics, in that sense, forms the basis of his conception of public reason and mutual justification. The informal public sphere is a context of discovery, the formal a context of justification.

An important problem with Habermas’ “institutional translation proviso” is determining when and where the institutional threshold is crossed and deciding how to deal with partisan advocacy that occupies ground in both the formal and informal public spheres. Although party competition, according to Habermas, belongs to the “core area of the political system” (Habermas 1996, 354-355), the same cannot be said of all the activities of parties or all their members or supporters. Whereas the main issue of Rawls’ idea of public reason is that partisans qua partisans are always subjected to the strong constraints of public reason – Bonotti, referring to Jeremy Waldron’s *The Harm in Hate Speech* (2012), describes this very nicely: “partisans carry around ‘a portable public realm’ wherever and whenever they speak qua partisans” (Bonotti 2017, 67) – Habermas seems to subject partisans to the same form of “split” (Habermas 2006, 10) that he argues Rawls’ citizens are under: strict constraints when deliberating in parliament, lesser or no constraints in the pre- or outer-parliamentarian domain, such as when campaigning, speaking to supporters or trying to shape public opinion through the media. More generally, the question that needs to be answered by Habermas is whether the institutional filter he introduces with regard to his conception of public reason can be squared with the mediating role and dual site (neither state nor public domain) of political parties. Or put differently, how can Habermas reconcile the spatial logic of his two-track model of deliberative politics and conception of public justification with the non-spatial status and functions of political parties?

Lafont’s institutional approach to mutual justification replaces Habermas’ institutional

translation proviso (i), and Rawls' proviso and wide-view of public reason (ii) with an *accountability proviso*: "citizens who participate in political advocacy can appeal to whatever reasons they wish in support of the policies they favor, provided they are also prepared to show – against objections – that these policies are compatible with the democratic commitment to treat all citizens as free and equal, and can therefore be reasonably accepted by everyone" (Lafont 2020, 207). By introducing this proviso Lafont hopes to retain the priority of properly political reasons while at the same time creating room for "the right of all democratic citizens to adopt their own cognitive stance" (Lafont 2020, 207), and for their legal (and political) right to contest political decisions. Whereas the accountability proviso would certainly solve some of the issues with Rawls' and Habermas' conceptions of the ethics of democratic citizenship, it is somewhat of an open question whether the same can be said regarding partisanship and party politics. Parties and party politics, as indicated above, hardly surface in Lafont's institutional approach to mutual justification. There is, however, one footnote where she explicitly addresses political parties in the context of the idea of public reason. On page 179 Lafont argues the following: "whereas debates on the constitutionality of legislation focus on and are structured according to the priority of public reasons, political debates about the comparative value or desirability of the different packages of policies articulated by each political party need not focus on or be limited to public reasons". Unfortunately, chapter 7 – where this claim is supposed to be elaborated – does not mention parties. So the question remains whether Lafont's institutional approach is able to circumvent the problems that haunt Rawls' notion of public reason (regarding the separation between normal politics and fundamental political questions and the wide-view of public reason) and Habermas' institutional divide (regarding the 'split').

Two questions, therefore, present themselves which I would invite Lafont to address: (1) to what extent is this approach capable of lifting some of the burdensome constraints on partisan advocacy and party politics that are entailed in Rawls' and Habermas' conceptions?; and (2) how to incorporate the mediating function of political parties in a coherent and comprehensive institutional approach to public justification?

4. Concluding summary

Over the last ten years, many political scientists have argued that we are witnessing the crisis of political parties, or even that the "age of party democracy has passed" (Mair 2013, 1).

Political parties, however, are still among us and few can deny that they are important actors in our political landscape. Although attention has increased during the last decade or so, political parties have received comparatively little attention in the field of political theory. The main goal of this article was not to criticize the participatory conception of deliberative democracy that is developed in *Democracy without Shortcuts*, but to invite Lafont to further reflect on the ways in which parties can contribute to realizing the democratic ideal of self-government. Two questions were central: Do parties, as both vehicles and sites of deliberation and participation, have a unique role to play in mediating between the micro- and macro-deliberative? And: How might it be possible to incorporate partisanship and party politics in an institutional approach to mutual justification?

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Biography

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