

Partisanship and Political Liberalism beyond Reasonableness

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Abstract: I am extremely grateful to Enrico Biale, Alessandro Ferrara and Roberta Sala for their thoughtful comments on my book *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies*. In this paper I address some of the concerns they raise about key aspects of the book, while also identifying potential avenues for future research on the normative dimensions of parties and partisanship.

Keywords: Partisanship, Political liberalism, Rawls, Unreasonableness.

In his insightful analysis of my book, Enrico Biale points out that my account of partisanship, which is grounded in Rawls's political liberalism, may not provide the normative tools necessary to tackle populist parties in Western liberal democracies. More specifically, "public reason, by focusing on constitutional essentials and matters of fundamental justice, is not fit to identify and contain the populist momentum, because it only excludes those parties that explicitly reject liberal democratic values" (p. 221). However, I am not convinced that this is the best way of understanding the place of populist parties within a Rawlsian framework. Populists do not belong to the category of unreasonable citizens, i.e. citizens who are "ready to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so" (Rawls, 2005, p. 49), and who recognize the "burdens of judgment" (Rawls, 2005, pp. 54-58). Populists seem to reject both criteria of reasonableness. First, they normally conceive the people as a homogeneous body, thus de facto neglecting the burdens of judgment. Second, at least in their right-wing variations they exclude certain categories of individuals (e.g. members of ethnic and religious minorities) from equal membership in the political community (e.g. Badano and Nuti, 2018). From a normative perspective, therefore, there is a clear rationale, within political liberalism, for identifying and containing populist parties, at least right-wing ones.

Even if one accepts these points, however, Biale also claims that "[e]very political party, not only populist movements, idealizes the people to which its proposals are addressed as if the whole political community shared its ideological background. Bonotti develops a very demanding account of partisanship that might contain populist parties but significantly curtails other parties as well" (p. 221). I am not convinced by this criticism. My account of parties and partisanship is, of course, an idealized

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one. But this idealization, in my view, has different implications for populist and non-populist parties. The former by definition (and therefore even in their most idealized versions) view the people as a homogeneous body. Idealized reasonable non-populist parties, instead, view the political community as united not by a shared ideological background (or, to put it in Rawlsian terms, a comprehensive doctrine) but by shared evaluative standards (e.g. shared broad political values) that provide the grounds for accessible public reasons. Such parties recognize the burdens of judgment and endorse mutually acceptable terms of cooperation.

The question still remains, of course, of how populist parties could be contained. There are degrees of unreasonableness, and while more extreme types of unreasonable parties (e.g. fascist parties) may warrant more drastic interventions (e.g. in the spirit of militant democracy), the unreasonableness that characterizes populist parties may justify milder forms of intervention, analogous for example to the “duty of pressure” illustrated by Badano and Nuti (2018). Parties could play an important role in fulfilling this duty in a more systematic way than that suggested by Badano and Nuti, who consider this duty solely moral and assign it to all citizens.

A further issue highlighted by Biale concerns my account of partisan hate speech. More specifically, Biale points out, sometimes parties attack minority groups via speech that is apparently respectful but (when “decoded”) in fact conceals hate speech. Should this kind of speech also be regulated? I would be inclined to argue, following Waldron (2012, p. 191), that only the most ‘viciously vituperative’ forms of partisan hate speech should be regulated, thus excluding more apparently non-hateful speech from regulation. This is because while both types of hate speech may be perceived as such by their targets, the latter kind is less likely to perform another important role of hate speech, i.e. that of fostering a community of fellow haters (Waldron, 2012, p. 2). When hate is conveyed in a more subtle and allusive way, it is less likely to attract other haters, and this will reduce the harm it will inflict on its targets.

In his rich commentary, Alessandro Ferrara first illustrates a number of additional functions that we can attribute to political parties within political liberalism, besides the ones I identify in my book. Among these, the idea that parties could also “elaborate *conjectural arguments*” (p. 224, original emphasis) seems particularly plausible. I would argue that the institutional framework under which parties operate can be more or less conducive to their ability to fulfil this function, and that conjectural reasoning among parties can be institutionally encouraged. A way of doing so might be by adopting proportional representation (PR). PR electoral systems normally tend to produce multi-party systems and coalition governments. Parties involved in coalitions have an interest in overcoming differences in order to develop government programmes and policies that can be accepted by their respective constituents. This can provide an incentive for such parties to show each other that their ideological foundations (i.e. the comprehensive doctrine(s) their political platforms are based on) offer principled reasons for endorsing shared liberal institutions and policies. It seems less likely that this might happen under majoritarian electoral systems, when parties have fewer reasons for engaging with each other, especially after elections. These issues, like Ferrara’s point that “parties are carriers of exemplarity” (p. 226), deserve further attention in the normative research on partisanship.

A major criticism of my argument advanced by Ferrara concerns my overly optimistic view regarding partisans' ability and willingness to engage in a process of horizontal accountability with regard to public reasoning. Rather than objectively assessing each other's reasons, Ferrara argues, partisans of different parties are likely to engage in a process of "self-attributions of reasonability" (p. 225), thus becoming "*amplifiers of the delegitimation of political adversaries*" (p. 225, original emphasis). This is a serious criticism which, however, neglects the role that non-partisan actors can play in the process of horizontal accountability. As I already briefly mention in my book, "the monitoring function that is necessary for horizontal accountability should not be restricted only to political representatives but could be assigned to public officials in general" (Bonotti, 2017, p. 129). These may include, for example, judges and civil servants, whose task would be to critically assess partisans' "self-attributions of reasonability". How this monitoring could be institutionalized in practice is an issue that deserves further attention in future research.

Furthermore, Ferrara also criticizes my "neglect of Rawls's liberal principle of legitimacy" (p. 226), and particularly of the fact that the constraints of public reason only apply to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, but not to matters of ordinary politics. If we accept this view, Ferrara argues, there seems to be much more freedom for parties and partisans under political liberalism. However, limiting the scope of public reason to constitutional/fundamental matters may be wrong (e.g. Quong, 2004), and Rawls himself sometimes seems to reject this approach (e.g. Rawls, 2005, p. 215). Furthermore, parties often combine both fundamental/constitutional and non-fundamental/non-constitutional matters in their programmes. This often renders the two types of policy issues interdependent and, more crucially, forces parties to justify their policies as packages, rather than one by one (especially during electoral campaigns), thus reducing their ability to appeal to non-public reasons (Bonotti, 2017, pp. 67-69).

Roberta Sala also raises important questions about key aspects of my book. For example, she asks, "how do parties play as interface between religions and democratic institutions? With regard to minorities: are parties better equipped to deal with their claims than the traditional intercultural dialogue outside of them?" (p. 230). Here parties' contribution to conjectural reasoning is again relevant. Reasoning from conjecture requires expertise and knowledge regarding other citizens' comprehensive doctrines (e.g. Badano and Nuti, 2019). While acquiring this knowledge can be burdensome for ordinary citizens, parties have the financial and logistical resources for engaging in this task, especially if they are open to the input of the various satellite associations and organizations that revolve around them, and of non-partisan associations and experts more generally (Bader, 2014). Furthermore, thanks to their intermediate position between the state and civil society, parties offer a unique channel for translating different individuals' and groups' non-public reasons into public ones. Both processes can contribute to reducing conflict and increasing dialogue among different cultural groups.

However, Sala seems sceptical regarding my account of parties as carriers of reasonableness. According to her, "[u]nreasonableness is much more real and indisputable than any ideal of agreement if not peace. Political party as convector of

dissenting but reasonable positions seems to be too an abstract ideal” (p. 231). Yet, as Sala herself recognizes, parties can be “training grounds” (p. 231) for citizens to reformulate their comprehensive doctrines and values in view of the common good. And this educational process could be fostered via the adoption of various forms of intra-party deliberation (e.g. Wolkenstein, 2016). By deliberating *within* parties, citizens can become accustomed to the idea and practice of mutual respect, which involves moving beyond one’s self-interest and becoming concerned with the common good of the party. That could then provide them with the ability to engage in mutually respectful deliberation and public reasoning *beyond* their party.

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