

In Defence of Political Parties: A Symposium on Jonathan White and Lea Ypi's *The Meaning of Partisanship*

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Abstract

Over the past 10 years, the literature on the normative dimensions of partisanship and party politics has rapidly grown. Yet, however rich and diverse, this literature lacked so far a single text able to comprehensively map the contours of the existing debates and, at the same time, open up a range of future research avenues. Jonathan White and Lea Ypi's *The Meaning of Partisanship* does an excellent job at fulfilling both tasks. First, it offers a wide-ranging and sustained engagement with key debates in the history of political thought, contemporary democratic theory and analytical political philosophy. Second, it opens up new areas of research ranging from partisanship across time to revolutionary and transnational partisanship. In this symposium, White and Ypi re-examine some of the book's main themes by responding to the commentaries offered by six political theorists.

Keywords

political parties, partisanship, political justification, political commitment, compromise

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Over the past 10 years, the literature on the normative dimensions of partisanship and party politics has rapidly grown (e.g. Bonotti, 2017; Bonotti and Bader, 2014; Muirhead, 2014; Rosenblum, 2008). Yet, however rich and diverse, this literature lacked so far a single text able to comprehensively map the contours of the existing debates and, at the same time,

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open up a range of future research avenues. Jonathan White and Lea Ypi's (2016) *The Meaning of Partisanship* does an excellent job at fulfilling both tasks. First, it offers a wide-ranging and sustained engagement with key debates in the history of political thought, contemporary democratic theory and analytical political philosophy. Second, it opens up new areas of research ranging from partisanship across time to revolutionary and transnational partisanship.

In this symposium, a number of political theorists offer comments on different aspects of White and Ypi's book. Andrew Vincent critically examines the conceptual and historical analysis of the idea of partisanship that White and Ypi offer in the first two chapters of the book, thus providing the foundations for the rest of the symposium; Peri Roberts addresses the problem of partisan justification, which is relevant to key debates in contemporary political theory and especially to theories of political liberalism and deliberative democracy; Mark Donovan analyses the relationship between partisanship and political commitment, drawing especially on (and showing the relevance of White and Ypi's book for) political science and political theory; Howard Williams focuses on partisanship and representation, especially examining the subtle connections between issues of representation and issues of intergenerational justice that characterise partisanship over time; Gideon Calder examines the implications of partisanship for political compromise, thus highlighting the relevance of White and Ypi's book beyond the consensus-oriented character of much contemporary (and especially deliberative democratic) political theory; and finally, Matteo Bonotti discusses revolutionary and transnational partisanship, especially focusing on the transformative power of the former with regard to public justification, and on the challenges posed to the latter by different electoral systems (which both reflect and contribute to shaping distinct political cultures) and by linguistic diversity. White and Ypi's response to the six commentaries forms the final section of the symposium.

Andrew Vincent

The Idea of the Party

The core theme of White and Ypi's book is normative retrieval or reconstruction. The premise is that an empirical practice exists (parties/partisanship); the task is then to move from this empirical practice and identify the reasons and values implicit within it and thence to systematically reconstruct them (thus a *schematism* for parties). This allows a renewal of the generalisable normative elements underpinning the idea of the partisan.

The immediate implications of the above are that partisanship refers to a common allegiance (by a like-minded group) to a set of jointly defined ethical ends – ends which are irreducible to factional/sectional interests. Such ends are subject to ongoing *deliberation* and *justification* within a civil society and representative democratic framework. This sequentially provides an epistemic premise for the identification of parties, as well as a motivational core which reinforces ethical obligations between party members. Certain corollaries are as follows: membership of a party is something which should be ethically exacting; there should be (in line with the criteria of *demanding membership, justification and deliberation*) periodic regular conferences; a party constitution should be both authoritative and critically evolving, subject to publicity and regular debates over consistency. The loyalty that members feel to this

party constitution is characterised (*à la* Habermas) as a form of ‘constitutional patriotism’.

On the positive side, the authors are absolutely spot-on with regard to the positivistic/empirical scholarly dominance in the study of parties. A normative analysis of parties is therefore welcome and unusual. The authors are also correct that the major hurdle that has to be overcome in any such normative analysis is the conceptual and practical overlaps with *faction*. Furthermore, the widespread awareness of decline, corruption or suspicion in much current assessment of parties needs to be addressed. Dredging in the foul pond of parties searching for their ethical soul does look a thankless task. However, there are a few core questions which I remain uneasy about.

First, should the concept ‘party’ be so directly conceptually linked to ‘partisan(ship)’? Does the more ordinary language usage of ‘partisan’ sustain the ethicized use? There appear to be roughly five (occasionally overlapping) meanings of partisan in current usage. My sense is that the first four are the more prevalent: first, a partisan can be considered a strong supporter of a party, that is, someone who is not just a *member* of a party but rather participates actively and intensely in the activities of the party, displaying strong attachment to it; second, ‘a’ partisan can be someone who fights for their country against an occupying force, without necessarily being a member of any party (e.g. the Yugoslav Partisans during WWII); third, and more generally, being a partisan may indicate displaying strong support towards *any* kind of cause, not just a political party (e.g. being a partisan of the revolution); fourth, partisan can pejoratively imply bias, and intended in this sense, it may refer to either a person or a thing (e.g. a partisan view); fifth, partisan may refer to a principled commitment to shared values and ideas, which are also generalisable and reflect the common interest. This is the meaning defended and explored in the book, but it seems to be very rare, etymologically speaking. Why should the reader embrace this meaning as opposed to any of the other ones?

Second, there is an oddly *essentialist*, almost Platonic, sense to the deployment of the normative idea of party/partisanship in the book. I remained puzzled about entities such as Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* (one man’s ego project), The Women’s Equality Party (WEP), Greens or nationalist parties such as the Scottish National Party (SNP) or Plaid Cymru. Are they full parties in the book’s sense? Although most ‘dress up’ their programmes in more comprehensive drag, they are all basically *single issue* (with little overt ethical dimension). Should any or all of these be thought of as parties (in the book’s sense)?

A related question is whether partisanship, as intended by White and Ypi, is something that takes time to develop, or whether it can be found in all parties, both old and new. For example, does France’s *En Marche!* display the kind of partisanship discussed by White and Ypi? Does its relative lack of history and of a clear ideology prevent it from being associated with the kind of partisanship White and Ypi invoke?

One odd absence in the book is the concept of ideology. I conjectured – is a unifying political ideology the same as a justified ethical commitment? Many political philosophers have often been at pains to distinguish political philosophy from the grubby world of ideology. Thus, is being ideologically committed to a party the same as being ethically committed (in the full deliberative sense)?

Political ideology – on a certain conceptual level – does appear very significant in talking about parties. Yet, its precise relation to ethics and political philosophy remains tricky and vague in the text. The kernel of the book, on the other hand, seems to inhabit unproblematically the realm of ‘ideal political philosophy’.

Peri Roberts

Partisan Justification

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between partisanship and political justification in democratic politics, arguing that partisan practices of justification play a ‘basic role in linking decision-making to the democratic ideal of collective self-rule’ (p. 75), and hence to justified power. This is in response to the common concern that partisan justification is problematic as it is thought to be necessarily aimed at some subunit of the people as a whole, and therefore necessarily factional. White and Ypi argue that this conceptualisation misunderstands the partisan claim, which is focused on persuading others that one’s party pursues generalisable (and attractive) principles. Partisan claims are therefore ‘constrained by standards of political justification’ (p. 61) to be widely accessible, demonstrating public appeal beyond a particular constituency and voicing universal concerns. Parties, properly conceived, are publicly advancing claims about how the people as a whole should rule themselves rather than advancing sectional interests. Indeed, far from undermining political justification, the ‘circumstances of political justification’ (p. 63) are such that partisanship has a positive central role to play. These circumstances make political justification comparative and adversarial. Partisans play a key role in generating and maintaining this competition between principled alternative political programmes that are the subject of comparative public judgement. In marshalling these programmes, they also amplify arguments, elevating their visibility, accessibility and, therefore, also their challengeability in the public comparative exercise that is political justification (pp. 62–63). This is the heart of the claim that ‘partisanship is both constrained by standards of public justification and conducive to its emergence in democratic politics’ (p. 74).

White and Ypi contrast this picture of partisan justification with how precarious political justification would be in a ‘no-party democracy’ where ‘in the absence of partisan practices one would need to rest one’s hopes on morally committed individuals or ad hoc groups’ (p. 70), and the risk of factionalism would be exacerbated. However, it is not clear that partisanship does not also involve resting one’s hopes on the moral commitment of individuals. This can be drawn out by focusing on the relationship between partisanship and citizens as voters who, it is presumed, are not necessarily partisans (and certainly not necessarily party members). It is claimed that partisan justification targets ‘persons as a collective’ (p. 74) or ‘the whole people’ (p. 34) and works ‘in the name of the people as a whole’ (p. 57). However, while ‘the electorate’ may be a collective, citizen voters are not, and it is voters rather than electorates who are moved or not by partisan justifications. Voters are a multitude of individuals motivated in varied, plural and diverse ways. While parties may attempt to play a mediating function between individual interests and justified collective self-rule by transcending the language of particularity (p. 34), in the end they have to appeal not to ‘the electorate’ but to voters, to many potentially private reasoners rather than to a public reason. Now, if partisan competition involves a public comparative exercise whose purpose may be negated by factionalism (p. 63), doesn’t this raise an issue for partisans? Isn’t the electorate, as a plurality of potentially privately motivated individuals, analogous to a comprehensive factionalism where each voter may be motivated by their own interest? Persuasion and justification in the face of such a comprehensive factionalism might require strategic thinking alien to the partisan mindset. Isn’t this, therefore, potentially undermining of partisanship’s role in making authority responsive to genuine normative concerns?

One way in which this conclusion could be avoided is to reject the idea that voters are different from partisans. Indeed, one could argue that one of the main tasks of partisans is to persuade voters that they should also become motivated by the common good rather than by factional individual or particular interests. After all, political liberals such as Rawls (2005) openly defend the view that voters should display a commitment to public reasoning and to justifying their voting decisions based on arguments that appeal to the common good. Conceptualised in this way, therefore, partisan justification can be considered successful only to the extent that it manages to educate voters to become morally committed to (and motivated by) common concerns, at least at the time when they cast their vote. Would White and Ypi be ready to espouse this view?

An alternative might be to argue that it does not really matter that much what justifications actually motivate individual voters so long as partisan justifications of the political programmes on which they vote are available. On such an approach, we would not require an account of the partisan voter as the voters themselves need not be conceived in this way. Instead partisanship is expressed in the responsibility of parties to place only partisan programmes before the electorate. However, this is not a real alternative. Who is the assessor of whether a programme is appropriately partisan if not morally committed citizens? What is the test for partisan justification if it is not persuasiveness to partisan voters (and, perhaps, the ability to persuade voters to become partisans)? If citizens are not conceived of in this way but rather as variously motivated potentially factional voters then we might expect them to be persuaded by badly partisan (factional) arguments. In view of these problems, a discussion of the relationship between partisans and voters is therefore necessary, regardless of whether White and Ypi see partisans as voters' educators or voters as partisans' appraisers, or both.

None of these points is intended to undermine the importance of partisanship in promoting and enabling the public motivation of citizens. As White and Ypi highlight (p. 73), partisanship may be better than its absence at challenging particular interests and factional justifications, and at encouraging voters to consider genuinely public reasoning. However, unless we are also equipped with an explicit conception of citizens as potentially public-minded voters, how much hope can we place in the success of partisan justification?

Mark Donovan

Partisanship and Political Commitment

Chapter 4 makes a normative argument in favour of partisan commitment or partisanship. Existing empirical analysis of parties in contemporary democracies has overwhelmingly affirmed the centrality of multiparty competition and contestation to democracy, but this systemic understanding ignores partisanship. The focus here is, then, not on the systemic level nor even, primarily, on parties as organisations. It is on party members and 'aligned' citizens forging and maintaining a particular type of collective action argued to be essential to the democratic good. Democracy is understood as liberal, pluralist and participatory. Depoliticisation imperils it (p. 84). The chapter therefore seeks to ground partisanship as a positive normative principle for creating, maintaining and perhaps, where ethical standards have declined, recreating democracy.

As per Chapter 1, partisanship is that which claims 'to be advancing a shared interpretation of the public good and how to shape public life accordingly' (p. 30). This distinguishes partisanship from other collective enterprises such as interest groups. Partisanship

external to parties may comprise non-formalised personal alignment, semi-formal, para-party associationalism as contemporary parties increasingly experiment with different types of citizen linkage, or non-party associationalism, most notably in social movements. Such movements, as recent cases like Podemos have shown, sometimes develop into parties. In fact, since the ongoing pursuit of shared political projects is essential to democracy understood as active popular rule, party organisation is 'crucial' (p. 92). It sustains and advances or enhances commitment, and it magnifies virtues (p. 96).

That organisation has a price, most notably a degree of intransigence and some loss of independence of thought and action, is acknowledged and addressed. The costs are argued to not be absolute; the benefits to democracy to outweigh these costs. In sum, partisanship matters because citizens' political commitment matters to democracy and because association is essential to sustaining or nurturing it (p. 87). Whether many existing parties display partisanship as understood here is doubted, though more strongly in the Introduction. Contemporary 'parties' are perhaps often, rather, factions, seeking merely group interest. Finally, the chapter reaffirms that no specific political project is endorsed, though it is assumed that 'we know what it is worth fighting against' (p. 86). This review reflects upon three issues. First, the type of democracy that is under consideration; second, the type of parties that actually exist; and third, how the arguments made in the chapter and the book might be promoted.

The chapter understands democracy as liberal and confirms that multiparty competition is necessary to it. It argues further that without mass partisanship such competition will scarcely be able to sustain itself as an ethically based process. And that disengaged, disaffected citizens and depoliticisation are antithetical to (liberal) democracy. In fact, the decline of party membership has been so well attested that the possibility of 'parties without partisans' or, more accurately, with very few partisans has been identified and analysed. Thus, 'centralized, professionalized parties with short time horizons have replaced ideologically driven, mass parties' (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). If the chapter's argument is taken seriously, then the disaffected nature of contemporary democracy is a result of half a century of degeneration (Pharr and Putnam, 2000). A key, long-term consequence of this process has been differential demobilisation, that is, the alienation in particular of the popular or working and less well-educated classes (Schäfer and Streeck, 2013). Still, the 2016 UK 'Brexit' referendum and the election of President Donald Trump in the USA are widely held to have signalled the remobilisation and/or realignment of dissatisfied citizens with markedly illiberal implications. Is it true, then, that citizens 'know what is worth fighting for'? A drift to illiberal democracy, or autocracy, simply (Müller, 2016), has also been identified in continental Europe, notably in Poland and Hungary. Does the existence of authoritarian understandings of democracy render partisanship more problematic and more necessary (Norris, 2011)? The question does not invalidate the chapter (or book) so much as confirm the significance of the fear, expressed in it, that the book might have arrived too late.

Focusing more specifically on parties, a perhaps overly schematic evolutionary view of their organisational development sees elite, parliamentary parties as having been challenged by mass parties from the late nineteenth century. The consolidation of democracy after 1945 led to catch-all or electoral-professional parties gradually replacing the mass parties leading, often, to cartelisation in turn provoking the rise of anti-establishment parties. The chapter section on the advantages of *historical persistence*, that is, the 'institutionalisation' of parties to overcome motivational/epistemic challenges (pp. 96–102), has an ironic ring given the realities, despite its accurate insights. Party institutionalisation evidently does bring the danger of the 'substitution of aim': prioritising organisational

survival, thence pure ‘office-seeking’, over the political project. Again, this is recognised. But what is to be done? As the conclusion makes clear (pp. 209–212), while office-seeking may be most parties’ *raison d’être*, it is not sufficient if mobilisation and ethical politics are to be maintained. Indeed, the trajectory of many established parties suggests that their transformation into machines with more or less marginalised partisans has made them vulnerable to corruption and capture by elite interests, arguably creating ‘pluto-democracies’. The point is not that the horse has bolted. As suggested, this makes the chapter all the more relevant. But where, finally, might real-world reformists go from here?

The chapter and the conclusion are rather light on how parties might be made more welcoming to the key requirements of democratic partisanship: that is, championing their partisan claim and promoting proportionate ‘voice’ to mass partisan bases to preserve the constancy of the partisan project. Nor is the issue one that only concerns parties’ internal workings. In the academic world, it is necessary to reconsider the relationship between democracy, partisanship and policy outputs. The process-based definitions of democracy that have dominated mainstream political science have proved inadequate; they have contributed to misunderstanding the significance of electoral demobilisation and democratic disillusion. The substantive or policy-seeking dimension of democracy, that is, what citizens get out of it (and can see they are getting out of it), matters more than has been credited. Perhaps, this focus on the outcomes (rather than the procedures) of democracy has often been overlooked because many have (mis)identified it with broadly socialist (and communist) concerns. Yet, one need not embrace any specific ideological position to acknowledge its importance. Being concerned about democracy, including its procedures and its outcomes, is something that transcends narrow ideological views.

Howard Williams

Partisanship and Representation

This book highlights a problem with representative democracy in a modern large scale society. Given that we subscribe to the idea that modern governments are best led by elected representatives, and that there is an advantage (in accountability) in those representatives being open to close scrutiny as individuals, how are electors as a whole going to be able to obtain an overall view of what their representatives might achieve, and how are the latter going to be accountable given that there may be a large number of representatives and potentially each representative might have their own view as to what policy or new law is appropriate? If the representatives are all wholly individualist in their approach, what likelihood is there of a discernible consensus emerging among them? As the authors point out, this is a problem Rousseau sought to address with his notion of the general will. Rousseau’s answer was to attempt to stifle any emergence of a factional, particular will as a dominating force in the society by banning factions. Rousseau wanted to discourage any formal organisation among the citizens and their representatives. The general will emerges best if each speaks only for himself.

But Rousseau’s approach leaves too much to good fortune. It would be good to think that a consensus emerges automatically as each representative follows his or her inner voice, but it is far from certain this will ever happen. As Mill stressed, often it is the most vociferous minorities that win out in large-scale debates that form public opinion. One answer to this problem posed by representative democracy as a form of government is the creation of political parties. In Burke’s understanding, a party was a group of representatives who put forward a platform of policies in the national interest. With this idea

of the party, the individual representatives not only owe to the public that elect them the responsibility to think for themselves and use their voices in parliament to press the interests of the electorate as they interpret them but also they have a duty to join with likeminded others to create a coherent view of state policy and lawmaking.

We need not fully share Burke's vision to see that a party can perform a valuable role in clarifying issues for the public at large and making the process of determining national policy and law more concise and reviewable for the electors. Popular sovereignty requires that individual citizens should have a voice in shaping the policies and laws of their state, but it is clearly unwieldy to expect that citizens should have a direct hand in shaping every policy and law. There has to be a division of labour in this respect with politics, which is similar to the division of labour in the economy and which has similar benefits; there's an increase in specialisation and so greater skill at the one task, and so the whole society can benefit from the greater expertise, knowledge and so ensuing efficiency. Parties thus provide a means of mediating between representatives and the citizens they represent. It is important to note though that the existence of parties does not eliminate the original problems that we noted with individual representation. Individual representatives in a party system still have to be scrutinised for possible corruption, as do the parties to which they belong. Arguably it might be asserted that the original problem which requires continuous vigilance of representatives has been magnified. The voter/citizen has to be wary of the individual's probity and the party's probity.

The chapter on 'Partisanship in Time' highlights one particular issue in this new constellation: How do we ensure that a party maintains its integrity? White and Ypi argue that a particularly marked trend of modern politics is that parties are often encouraged to focus on concerns that trouble the voters *now*, and so determine their priorities not in terms of a coherent platform that reflects the values of the party over time, but rather permit them to be determined by what currently might be electorally successful. Indeed, the authors regard this trend as having brought about the decline of established political parties in the major democracies in recent years. Partisan de-alignment has led to the major parties in many of the most prominent Western democracies taking increasingly lower percentages of the polls. One of the consequences of this in Europe has been that fewer parties have governed on their own. And a drawback with coalition governments is that it becomes more difficult to track how coherent representatives and parties are in carrying out the mandates they have received in elections.

With multiparty governments, the mediating role that parties notionally undertake between the individual citizen and the formation of state policy and laws becomes more difficult to perform. And if this is exacerbated by parties being drawn more heavily to what is electorally expedient then representative democracy itself is put in doubt. As White and Ypi put it, 'parties with no discernible past and future convey little sense that they stand for something' (p. 141). Parties, if they are to be adequate to their own logic, must stand on a clear platform of policies and not simply fish for votes in what they take to be the most popular view at the time. 'Elites who act as though a presentist conception of the party is adequate', White and Ypi claim, 'contribute to the decline of existing parties: the model is an unstable one' (p. 141).

A greater reassertion of party identity over time may improve the overall condition of politics (albeit at the possible short term cost of political insuccess for the parties concerned). This may appear as an increase of factionalism in politics, but the greater diversity and clarity may have the advantage of allowing citizens to determine more clearly their view of the best interests of the body politic and so lead to a more clearly delineated and moral politics overall.

Gideon Calder

Partisan Compromise

Compromise is under-discussed in political theory, even where we might expect it to be crucial. The literature on deliberative democracy, for example, gives plenty of airtime to the transformation of preferences, but much less to the particular predicament of the compromiser. Rather than a movement from A to B, compromise involves an accommodation with a tension between A and B – specifically, between one’s strongly held principles and what’s needed to agree on a common course of action. It means giving up (part of) what one *still* stands for (p. 145). And that is why it looms largest for those with a partisan stake. For partisans, compromise is an occupational hazard. It points to a form of agency, or practical wisdom, that the partisan needs to be particularly adept at. And so a vital service is provided by White and Ypi’s treatment of these issues, as a stand-alone exercise as well as a key plank of their larger project. Part of that service is in the instructive provoking of further lines of questioning. I will pick out three.

First, compromise involves a complex relationship between partisan principles and positions on this or that issue, and the wider political cause. These relations shift, for many reasons – but saliently – because principles do not interpret themselves. While there may be inauthentic political renderings of a principle, it’s only in rare cases that there could be a single authentic one. So, fellow partisans sharing the same principles and committed to the same cause, both of these in good faith, may still differ in their position on a particular issue and stay the partisans they are. That positions are non-identical with, and underdetermined by, principles, matters in ways the book’s discussion of compromise does not fully tackle. Two seem salient. The first has a Wittgensteinian flavour. If we can’t be sure what it is for a position to follow a principle, it seems difficult to know for sure when a position has compromised the holder of a principle. The other reflects the problem of other minds. It seems hasty to conclude that all partisans are compromised in the same way, by virtue of their partisanship or to the same degree. Who’s compromised most? – The true holder of the principle or the one who cleaves to it most strongly? Who *is* that? This is not just saloon bar nit-pickery. It sits at the heart of the idea of partisan compromise because it’s precisely a feature of a partisan’s relationship to his/her principles, and a matter of the relationship between those principles and an emergent stance. An omniscient narrator would know the story of compromise, inside and out – but not the rest of us, and not partisan fellow-travellers, and indeed not necessarily the partisan himself/herself (who may not be the sole or best authority on, for example, the comparative authenticity of his/her own principles).

Second, White and Ypi draw a key, convincing distinction between consensus and compromise. Reaching consensus involves settling a dispute (p. 145), and so requires the revision of initially held views (p. 146). When reaching compromise, ‘no moral correction takes place’ (p. 146); initially held views remain intact. Compromise entails cleaving to one’s starting-point. Writ large, this stubbornness is crucial to the integrity of a party over time. Because ‘a party lacks integrity to the extent its founding principles and goals become unrecognizable in the long run’ (p. 156), enduring consensus with other parties would by definition mean the dilution and ultimate death of one’s own. But presenting things this way implies a dubiously Platonic model, which risks inflating the role of original scripture – or the words of the founders, or whatever happened to kick things off – in the maintenance of integrity. (‘The party is an *ethical* unity before it is an organisational one’, we hear in an earlier chapter (p. 29).)

It is also – perhaps – a sign that throughout the book, parties of the Left are taken as emblematic vehicles for partisanship in a way that their conservative counterparts are not – for there is a trait of the latter that is less introverted and hair-shirted about party transitions. After all, conservatism as an ideology will stress, among other claims, the view that human nature is imperfect. This may explain the less Platonic character of conservative parties (as opposed to their left counterparts) and their greater willingness to compromise. This is just a generalisation, for sure – but this may make it easier for parties of the Right to accept that what first looked like compromise (rather than consensus) may emerge over time as a *better* realisation of principles to which the partisan is committed than their initial path. We could call this fallibilist partisanship. Like human beings in general, that is, partisans are also imperfect and fallible. Fallibilist partisanship, however, does not conflate compromise and consensus. It may be that during the same transition, their counterparts view the compromise as unacceptable. But it is an adjustment of what compromise consists in. One example here, in the UK context, would be the Conservatives' pragmatic accommodation to the 1945–1951 Labour government's radical reforms – most conspicuously, the institution of a welfare state the terms of which the Conservatives initially opposed outright. For fans of Harold Macmillan, what began as compromise, and was then repackaged as orthodoxy, *became* party principle, and bolstered party integrity in a period when it might have been lost. Must that always be a self-deception, or a performative contradiction, because the original interpretation of principle holds a default authority regardless of whether later versions come to serve the party cause in a demonstrably better way? Not *obviously* so.

Third, we know that compromise is a crucial element of partisan agency. But what are the *skills* of compromise? What makes for an *adept* compromiser? Not just an orientation towards one's own principles but an orientation towards dialogue? Will the best compromisers be those who listen out best for the particularities and nuances of others' stances in what Kelsen calls the 'dialectical procedures ... based on speech and counter-speech, argument and counter-argument' (p. 151)? This would make the skilled partisan – he/she who has the most nuanced understandings of why others think differently – not the character profile one might expect. Is the best holder of partisan principles one who is able, when the situation demands, to bracket or suspend them? (After all to compromise is not to give way: it's the kind of giving-way which involves engagement with what one finds flawed.) The quality of partisan agency – what it's like to be one – is crucial to partisanship in general and the nature of compromise in particular. We might have heard more about it.

These are clusters of issues, not single questions. And rather than rejoinders as such, each marks a site for further digging into issues raised so adroitly and distinctively in *The Meaning of Partisanship*.

Matteo Bonotti

Revolutionary and Transnational Partisanship

Revolutionary partisans, White and Ypi argue in Chapter 8, face a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, they can only preserve their innovative energy and drive for change through spontaneous mobilisation and horizontal organisation, in order for their demands not to be hindered by bureaucratisation and co-optation. On the other hand, their very ability to preserve the results of their endeavours is only possible through the kind of stability and cohesiveness that a centralised and bureaucratized organisation can guarantee. White and Ypi's proposed solution is a mixed account of partisanship, in which parties and social

movements exist in symbiosis rather than in opposition, combining the stable and unified structure of the former with the critical and innovating energy of the latter.

The most interesting aspect of White and Ypi's analysis, in my view, concerns the role they assign to revolutionary partisanship in relation to political justification. Partisanship, White and Ypi argue throughout the book, involves a commitment to advancing political proposals by appealing to generalisable reasons which take into account the general interest and can be accepted by all citizens, and not only by a partial constituency. Sometimes, however, the shared democratic principles that render this justificatory practice possible are lacking, and it is the task of revolutionary partisans to construct them, aiming for the 'inclusion of demands previously excluded, marginalized, or unrecognized by existing power structures' (p. 164). This suggests that the task of revolutionary partisans may not always be that of creating new terms of political justification from scratch, and that they may more often be involved in changing the existing terms of political justification in order to render them more inclusive, also in view of changes within society.

If that is the case, however, how can this drive for change be compatible with partisans' commitment to complying with 'the constraints of public reason' (p. 164), which is central to White and Ypi's normative understanding of partisanship? In other words, how can revolutionary partisans comply with the constraints of public reason and public justification while trying to change them, and therefore potentially violating them (e.g. Flanders, 2012)? Answering this question seems crucial to a fuller understanding of the progressive potential of parties and partisanship.

The other issue I would like to focus on concerns the transnational dimension of partisanship, which White and Ypi examine in Chapter 9. Partisanship, they argue, presupposes certain conditions, namely, 'an enabling institutional environment', 'strong social ties' and 'continuity in the structure of political division' (pp. 189–195). While these conditions are weaker beyond the nation-state, White and Ypi claim, they are not entirely absent. Transnational partisanship is therefore possible, even though it is likely to be 'episodic', characterised by a 'low-density network' and 'ideationally delocalized' (pp. 196–203). White and Ypi's argument is persuasive and well crafted. However, there are two aspects of their analysis which I think would deserve greater attention.

First, do linguistic differences not pose a significant obstacle to transnational (and, more specifically, multilingual) partisanship? Is it sufficient to argue, as White and Ypi do, that transnational partisans can overcome linguistic barriers through the adoption of 'communication technology or a lingua franca' (p. 192)? Alongside its communicative function, language also presents identitarian (Kymlicka and Patten, 2003) and epistemic (Collin, 2013; Peled and Bonotti, 2016) dimensions that might hinder joint political mobilisation across linguistic boundaries.

Second, is it not also important to consider the role that electoral systems play in shaping the structure of political division within and across nation-states? In the European Parliament elections, for example, each European Union (EU) member state can adopt a voting system of their choice, as long as it is some form of proportional representation. Even in the presence of similar societal cleavages across member states, therefore, the structure of political division and the way in which partisans exercise their political 'creativity' (p. 195) may vary between states, as they will be affected by the different electoral systems. One could imagine other transnational political contexts where differences between national electoral systems are even more significant than in the EU. Since electoral systems reflect and contribute to shaping distinct political cultures, to what extent can differences in electoral system design be an obstacle to transnational partisanship?

Jonathan White and Lea Ypi

Response to Commentaries

Our commentators have raised some excellent points, and we are very pleased to have the opportunity to respond.

Andrew Vincent notes that *The Meaning of Partisanship* adopts just one of the several meanings of ‘partisan’ in popular usage. We acknowledge that the term has been used in ways different to ours and focus on the first and fifth alternatives mentioned. The book aims to reconstruct the political outlook that terms such as party, partisan and partisanship have historically been used to describe when connected to principled allegiances taking associative form. While having important historical resonances, our sense of the partisan may well be one of the more rarely articulated. But this gives all the more reason to examine it at some length from a normative perspective.

A crucial issue raised by Vincent makes for a good point of entry into the substance of the book. He wonders whether we have not developed too abstract a concept of party, one that fits awkwardly with many of the groups conventionally termed as such, including Greens, nationalists, the Women’s Equality Party or Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia*. What is one to make of such collectives – are they parties or perhaps something closer to what we term factions, that is, groups pursuing a sectoral interest or identity? Assuming that all real-world formations have more than one current within them, some will be more partisan than others. The party/faction distinction is a continuum, and rarely may one be able to offer a definitive classification of an empirical case. But how might one orientate oneself when approaching the kinds of parties Andrew Vincent mentions?

The Women’s Equality Party poses an interesting challenge: can something defining itself in terms of the good of a particularist identity – women – really claim the name of *party* if to be such on our terms is to make generalisable claims? The leading statement on the group’s website gives us a steer. ‘Equality for women isn’t a women’s issue. When women fulfil their potential, everyone benefits. Equality means better politics, a more vibrant economy, a workforce that draws on the talents of the whole population and a society at ease with itself’ (<http://www.womensequality.org.uk>). There is an act of equation here. One sees the interest of the one social group being located in a larger argument about the interest of ‘everyone’, in much the way we highlight in Chapter 1 of the book when discussing the credentials of ‘workers’ parties’. To be sure, the WEP’s programmatic concerns may not extend to all areas of public policy, unsurprisingly for a group just 2 years in existence. The point is that here is a group that defines itself by principles that can be generalised to a non-female constituency. In this sense, it expresses neatly the partisan idea as we describe it.

What of the nationalist party? Again, one must explore the details of the case in question. To take one of Andrew Vincent’s examples, in the SNP, there are undoubtedly voices agitating for the defence of an exclusive community of Scots. This might lead one to view the SNP as closer to a faction, since those in Scotland and beyond not conforming to a certain idea of Scottishness are then beyond the reach of its claims. But this is not all the SNP is; indeed, arguably it is not the dominant current. During the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, many in the SNP were advocating independence on the grounds of opposing an unwanted economic model. In articulating an anti-austerity message and consciously presenting it as one that should be heard not just in Scotland but elsewhere, activists were making an argument of generalisable significance. In this sense, they were true to the movement’s claim to be a *party*.

This then is how one can go about operationalising these terms. The other groups Andrew Vincent mentions may be somewhat easier to place, Greens typically promoting clear commitments that are generalisable in scope, and personalistic entities such as *Forza Italia* typically having little in the way of a programmatic core. (One of the intentions behind our book was to encourage the reader to reflect on whether all groups contesting elections should necessarily be recognised as ‘parties’.) With some political formations, the jury is still out. Partisanship can be initiated at any moment, but it takes a while to reveal and confirm itself, as it involves maintaining a principled perspective over time. Whether new groupings such as France’s *En Marche!* will warrant the description of party is something one will be better placed to judge in a few years. But the larger point is that with the categories we are using one can orientate the critical analysis of existing political groups, even when they resist definitive characterisation as purely a party or faction.

Parallel to the concern that our concepts may be too abstract is the concern that they may be too *ideal*. As Andrew Vincent observes, talk of parties and partisanship seems to invoke the conflictual realities of politics – but have we done more than gesture to them? Is ours not actually a highly moralised and holist account, posing as something more realist?

Insofar as this is a book about the legitimate use of power, its point of departure is the real-world circumstances of politics. We did not want to assume a perspective of ethical holism; indeed, by emphasising the contestability of partisan claims, and this as one reason for partisans to engage with institutions (Chapter 1), we sought to take some distance from it. Partisanship, as we understand it, is quite different from the holism one tends to associate in today’s world with the term *populism*. We also tried to elaborate the account in a way that avoids suggesting there is but one true party in a world of factions. Contrary to what Gideon Calder suggests, there is space in our perspective for parties of the right – such as those associated with Christian Democracy – as well as those of the left. But at the same time, it is true that we avoided basing our account on concepts that risk doing away with a moral perspective altogether. Andrew Vincent notes the absence of ‘ideology’. Our account could be retold in the language of ideology if one meant by this clusters of principles, values and goals that direct attention to some features of the social world over others and that are revisable by those who adopt them – much the sense in which Michael Freeden uses the term. But as is well known, ideology is a concept also laden with connotations of untruth and distortion: as these would distract from our argument and take things unnecessarily towards the more disenchanting end of ‘realism’, we chose to express ourselves differently.

Still, a related query is raised by Peri Roberts, who wonders whether our account pays insufficient attention to the real-world motives of voters. What good is a demanding normative idea of the party if ultimately any such entity in the real world must stand or fall by the level of support it gains from interest-driven individuals? Perhaps, Peri Roberts is too quick to discount the answer he suggests. Arguably more important than private motives are the justifications that actions do or do not permit. Partisanship is not about the negation of interests but their location in a wider normative argument explaining which interests should be pursued. Here lies the contribution to political legitimacy, making reasons available to those who must live by decisions they did not endorse. Any electorate will feature multiple outlooks, of which self-interest will surely be one. But the distribution of such motives is presumably not a given. A world of partisanship, properly understood, is not only one where individuals have the resources to develop more principled perspectives in cooperation with others, but one where the assumption that *other* citizens are moved only by interest can be challenged.

Here lies the basis of a response to Mark Donovan's query regarding what real-world reformists of parties might aim for. Top of the list would seem to be a clear programmatic statement of principle – a partisan claim – that allows adherents of a party to understand themselves and others as engaged not merely in the pursuit of self-interest but as part of a shared normative project. It involves connecting specific policy goals to a larger account of the principled reasons why they are worthy of pursuit. Otherworldly as this might initially sound, it is essentially the approach that served the British Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn rather well in the 2017 UK General Election, and it is what the UK Conservatives so obviously failed to do in the same election, demotivating their partisans and potential voters alike.

The normative significance of partisanship in mediating the views of individuals and the democratic construction of popular sovereignty is acknowledged in Howard Williams' intervention. He presses a similar charge to Peri Roberts but in Rousseauian language: how do we ensure that political representatives (themselves all too fallible as individuals) truly articulate the principles and commitments of citizens? Even assuming that the abstract problem of representation can be overcome, how do they avoid the short-termism which the imperative of winning elections invites? Williams rightly acknowledges that the key to answering the first question lies in distinguishing the representation of generalisable principles and views from the pursuit of particularist interests. He also correctly notes that the key to answering the second question lies in the recognition of cross-temporal partisan obligations that ask partisans to reconcile their actions with the projects of their predecessors and successors. And yet, his suggestion is that there is a more modest and perhaps more plausible defence of partisanship, centred on the need for the division of labour and specialisation of skills when politics is understood as a profession.

This view clashes with the anti-technocratic and anti-hierarchical stance in our book. If partisanship is understood as an open practice that does not favour the authority of professional politicians over rank-and-file members and sympathisers, the avenues for democratic scrutiny of the former by the latter are expanded. Partisanship, we argue, should be understood first and foremost as a forum for the revision and strengthening of one's justified political commitments. To ensure that fellow partisans do not undermine these commitments by action in bad faith requires vigilance to be sure and probably intra-party mechanisms of oversight (a discussion of the party constitution features in the book's final chapter). Maintaining the integrity of the partisan collective is a persistent challenge, but it is one that is not to be avoided without foregoing the benefits of partisanship.

This demanding view of partisanship might again seem politically detached: how does it fare in the age of Trump and Brexit? Mark Donovan asks whether the appearance of authoritarian and anti-elitist strands in contemporary democracy renders partisanship as we describe it less attainable, albeit more necessary than ever. It seems fair to say that there is little authentically partisan about the Trumpians of this world: their politics relies on denying the contestability of their claims and the legitimacy of opposition, on addressing a constituency defined in exclusive (often race-based) terms, and indeed on attacking organisations such as parties that mediate between ruler and ruled. They also dismiss the virtues and necessity of compromise, and the authentic problem of balancing it with the preservation of partisan integrity.

Gideon Calder's comments remind us just how tricky this balancing act is in practice. Principles, as he rightly observes, do not interpret themselves, and a principled view of

partisanship cannot settle the question of what fair compromise looks like in the particular instance or what exactly the skills of compromise involve. There can be no substitute for engaging one's adversaries and fellow partisans in processes of justification, and even then a single right answer may be unlikely to emerge. More probable is that the process will illuminate those agendas that lack integrity and respect for opponents (think Trump again). The point of highlighting fidelity to existing commitments as a constraint on compromise is not to sanctify the views of founding partisans. It is to highlight the justificatory standards that apply to the kind of fallibilist partisanship to which Gideon Calder too seems at least implicitly committed.

Justification, oriented outwards towards one's adversaries and inwards towards one's fellow partisans, is at the heart of partisan compromise and partisan innovation. Throughout the book, we highlight the ways in which partisanship is constrained by standards of public reason and contributes to shaping them. In the case of compromise, we presuppose a relatively stable institutional background conducive to this process of democratic adjudication and place more emphasis on the former (constraints). In our chapter on revolutionary partisanship, the emphasis shifts to how such an environment can be created in circumstances where it is not only absent but actively obstructed by the existing legal and political order. This may help answer Matteo Bonotti's question concerning how revolutionary partisans can be committed to certain standards of public reason while also trying to change them. Public reason is not the same as positive law; if the two were identical, the conservative qualities of public reason that Bonotti highlights would be telling. While the revolutionary partisans we have in mind act in defiance of positive law, they rest their claims to political innovation on reasons constrained by standards of generality and reciprocity that, given the context at hand, are typically not reflected in the institutional configuration they seek to change. It is important not to reify public reason and take it to be the kind of reason available only in the currently existing order. New forms can be fostered through reflection on models of the past or competing examples in the present.

As part of the book's effort to conceive partisanship independently of a given institutional framework, one of the last chapters examines the prospects for its expression at a transnational level, where one might look to it as a means to contest the macro structures of power. Of the many challenges facing partisanship in this setting, Bonotti underlines the problem of language. The suggestion is that we may be too quick to assume linguistic differences can be overcome by functional solutions, be it communication technology or a lingua franca, since these do nothing to address the identitarian and epistemic barriers that language presents. Here, we would acknowledge that language is much more than just a medium of communication, and that some differences are therefore not readily bridged. But as our historical examples suggest, sometimes they can be bridged, and one reason why is that the significance attributed to markers of difference can change in the context of interaction – provided communication obstacles can be overcome. Much depends on the context of encounter, but the adversarial conditions of partisan cooperation may exactly be conducive to the renegotiation of such differences. New transnational solidarities may be forged in the struggle against a common adversary – the experience of left partisans in the Spanish Civil War would be one indication of this possibility.

But clearly, there is more work to be done in this area. Bonotti also rightly notes that the structure of electoral systems can express and consolidate a distinct political culture, one likely to influence the forms its partisanship takes and the links its partisans can form

with counterparts abroad. The normativity of electoral systems is another topic that bears further examination and one our book does not engage. Our aim here was to develop a theory of partisanship decoupled from the context of existing institutions so that their reform and even transformation could be part of its rationale.

In short, our point of departure was a world often at odds with the activist ethics we defend in the book, and our idea of partisanship one modelled to be sufficiently critical of it. Highly imperfect political institutions and populist movements that define themselves in part by their scepticism towards party democracy are two of the unfavourable circumstances of the day. On an optimistic reading, it is perhaps exactly such adverse conditions that can inspire a partisan response. In the realignments taking place in contemporary democracies, though many partisans find themselves displaced by demagogues and divided on major questions, a more general appetite to seek common cause with others to oppose regressive forms of politics seems evident. Is it far-fetched to suggest that it is in such moments that partisans may find their party?

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