

Democracy without elections and the value of political parties

Pierre-Étienne Vandamme (KU Leuven)

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There are at least two ways of assessing the democratic value of sortition. One can consider it as a full-blown alternative to elections, or as a complementary institution to be embedded in a democratic system that remains election-centred. Many objections to sortition fall when it is considered in the latter way, as an add-on, which is also the most often advocated use of sortition. Hence, arguments against the most radical use of sortition have a limited strength and do not in fact disqualify all uses of sortition. There is nevertheless some interest in the exercise of imagining the strongest version and thereby picturing a democracy without elections, for it helps us to form a better appreciation of elections. We tend to value them because we have cultivated the habit of associating them with democracy and because existing political regimes without elections are not attractive at all. Therefore, it takes a thought experiment to see whether there is more to elections than a useful way of pacifying political conflicts (Przeworski 2019) to which we are accustomed and to which we know no plausible alternative.

In this chapter, I start with a brief presentation of what I take to be the strongest alternative to electoral democracy: a hybrid of sortition and direct democracy (section 1). I argue that it can stand up to the most powerful criticism that has been levelled against a democracy exclusively based on sortition. From there, I then examine what would be missing under such an arrangement and argue that it is political parties that we might miss more than elections as such (section 2). I end with a balanced assessment of the value and limits of parties (section 3).

1. Democracy without elections

When theorists consider sortition as a full-blown alternative to elections, there is one objection that immediately rises: in a mass democracy, the use of sortition for the distribution of political offices would disenfranchise a large part of the population – the non-selected – or at least reduce importantly their opportunities for continued participation (Chambers 2009; Lafont 2015; Malkopoulou 2015; Abizadeh 2021). I see this as the most powerful objection to

a pure lottocratic model¹. Admittedly, non-selected citizens would not be fully disenfranchised, because they would face the prospect of being selected in turn. However, in the period in which they do not occupy any political office, they are disenfranchised in the sense that they would have no institutional means of conveying their political preferences or of influencing the decision-making process. They would still have all the extra-institutional means such as the right to take part in public debate, to protest, to strike, to sign petitions, etc., but it is hard to deny that they would face a major loss of *agency* (Abizadeh 2021) compared with the agency offered to them by the reiteration of elections.

Some might argue that this loss is compensated by the major gain of agency *when selected* and by other benefits of sortition, such as the equalization of opportunities to access positions of power. This, however, is implausible. First, it runs against the principle of political equality to justify the disenfranchisement of some by the greater power conferred to others. Second, equality – especially understood as narrowly as the mere equal probability of access to positions of power (Leydet 2019; Destri & Lever 2023) – cannot be taken to be the only democratic value. The participation of all, or at least all of those who want to participate, seems at least as important for democracy as equality. The best way to see it is to imagine a single decision-making body selected by sortition, with 500 people making decisions for a population of several millions. The harm to participation and agency, in that case, is clear. It is arguably less clear in a multi-body and multi-level sortition system (Bouricius 2013) where several allotted bodies exist at all layers of power and where rotation is frequent. In such cases, the chance of being selected would be higher and agency might be conferred to all *through time*.

The harm to agency, however, should also be appreciated in light of its likely consequences. Even if agency were fairly distributed through time thanks to the principle of rotation that characterized classical Athens (Manin 1997: chap. 1), the loss of “permanent” agency would be dangerous in several respects. First, citizens would lose control over the decision-making process. As deficient as they are as an instrument of popular control (Achen & Bartels 2017), elections have the comparative merit of keeping everyone involved at regular intervals and to offer citizens a “permanent”² opportunity to shape representatives’ decision-

¹ The second most powerful being probably the accountability objection, which can be accommodated to some extent, as discussed in Vandamme 2023.

² *Permanent* is to be considered here in contrast with a pure lottocratic model where citizens have the opportunity to act within institutions only when they are selected. As we shall see later, rights to initiative and recall would make citizens’ agency even more “permanent” than elections.

making structure. Arguably, elected representatives enjoy an important degree of discretion in their decisions, but the set of options available to them is constrained by the combination of electoral results and public opinion – which is why they spend millions in confidential opinion polls (Bronner 2023). Thus, citizens may not perceive it, but in some respect, they are constantly involved in the decision-making process, if only by acting as a judge with the power to switch the result of the next election. This relative control offered by elections is extremely valuable because, even if it often fails to secure adequate responsiveness to the demands of the majority, it contributes to making electoral democracies better protected against authoritarian backsliding. In a pure lottocratic model, other institutional safeguards can probably be imagined, but this means of control would be lacking. As a result, non-selected citizens would also have fewer reasons to trust the whole decision-making process. Because if something goes wrong, if a random selection is manipulated, or participation rates are extremely unequal, or civil society groups achieve excessive influence in the deliberations of an allotted body, non-selected citizens cannot act institutionally to bring in a remedy. All they can hope for is either to be selected soon or that an allotted “control” body (which they cannot control), in charge of fixing these problems, does its work correctly. In a very egalitarian society with extremely high mutual trust, this could work smoothly. In an unequal society with vested interests, it seems very dangerous.

Besides, the permanent involvement of citizens through elections has a pacifying virtue: it means that those who are on the losing side of legislative decisions know why they are defeated and what they can do to try to shape decisions in their favour: garnering more electoral support (Przeworski 2018; Abizadeh 2021). In a pure lottocratic model, in the absence of political parties, the divide between majority and opposition is likely to be less clear. Majorities are indeed likely to fluctuate from one issue to the other. This is beneficial in one respect, because it could increase overall satisfaction with policy by increasing the number of citizens who see *some* of their preferences satisfied. Nevertheless, there are still likely to be people whose preferences are almost systematically defeated, who would therefore be highly dissatisfied with the system and find themselves incapable of acting *within* that system to defend their aspirations. They might thus face higher incentives to act *outside* the system, leading to higher instability and higher risks of social unrest (Rummens & Geenens 2023). Admittedly, social unrest is not necessarily negative, but once again, in a scenario where things would go wrong in the political process, the risks of revolt against the system would be higher.

There is a way, however, in which these problems can be avoided without resorting to elections: this would involve the pairing of sortition with mechanisms of direct democracy such

as the citizen-initiated referendum and the right to recall representatives from office before the end of their term. Both mechanisms work in the same way: if citizens collect a sufficient number of signatures, a referendum must be organized by public authorities. This referendum can bear on a diversity of questions (Cronin 1989; Magni-Berton & Egger 2018): whether a legislation or constitutional change promoted by some citizens should be adopted; whether a legislation or constitutional change approved or considered by representatives should be abrogated or rejected; whether a given representative should be recalled from office; whether the whole legislative assembly should be dissolved³. All of these options would make high sense in a political system where representatives would be randomly selected, because it is a significant way of preserving agency and control for the non-selected. If the representative process runs smoothly and things go well, the non-selected do not need to make use of these participatory opportunities, but if they are unsatisfied with the way they are represented, they can. They are therefore not powerless spectators of a process over which they have no control. In a way, they would even benefit from more significant opportunities of agency and control than in a purely electoral democracy without these instruments of direct democracy.

This, I believe, is the most credible alternative to electoral democracy, and it shows why elections should not be part of our definition of democracy. A democracy without elections is conceivable at a large scale, and it would not by necessity entail a major loss of agency for citizens. Hence, if elections are necessary, it is not by definition; it must be because they offer democratic goods that we would miss without them and that are not compensated by goods offered by alternative systems.

Would we miss elections under such hybrid arrangement (let us call it SDD, for sortition + direct democracy)? I am not sure we would have reasons to miss *them*. Provided that there are some guarantees that the system is organized sufficiently well⁴, it seems that citizens might

³ I have argued elsewhere (Vandamme 2023) that the right to recall the whole assembly is probably better suited to sortition than the individual recall, which would be particularly harsh for people who have not asked to be there, and which could further reduce acceptance rates, which are already a source of worry for sortition advocates and critics (see Jacquet 2017).

⁴ In other words, if the random selection of representatives is properly organized, with stratified sampling, strong incentives to accept the mission, a sufficient number of representatives for the sample to count as sufficiently representative, statistically speaking, a fair audience process, etc. The threshold for citizens' initiatives to lead to a referendum should not be too high, so that these instruments can be considered as meaningful options. Nor should it be too low, for a certain legislative stability needs to prevail (without systematic cancellation of laws by organized minorities).

be better-off in SDD in several respects. In terms of agency, the average citizen would certainly be better-off than in a purelottocratic system, and they might also be better-off than in a pure electoral system. This comes from the fact that their opportunities to shape public policy would be increased. They would be increased, first, by the higher probability to access a position of power at least at one point in time. Secondly, they would be increased by the significant opportunities for political influence offered by direct democracy mechanisms, which reach further than the influence offered by elections. True, they would lose the opportunity to choose their representatives. But is this not compensated by the gains of agency?

Suppose we were asked to choose a political system under a veil of ignorance, to borrow Rawls' (1971) thought experiment. We know general facts about politics and sociology, but we ignore the system in place and are free to choose an entirely new system. Now, imagine a further constraint: we must choose either mechanisms of direct democracy (+ sortition) or elections; we cannot have both⁵. What would be our reasons to choose elections? I do not think that, in such circumstances, a case for elections can be based on agency or popular control. If we really want to secure continued agency and a significant control over the decision-making process, I think we are better-off with the opportunities to set the agenda, to repeal unacceptable legislation and to dissolve the representative assembly than with the mere opportunity to choose representatives among the available options. Both agenda-setting and decision-making power are increased, and one avoids the risks of closure and misrepresentation generated by the monopoly of political parties over the appointment of candidates and the making of final decisions.

Instead, one could try to build a case for elections based on political equality. This, however, is not entirely straightforward either. Sortition offers, in two respects, a more egalitarian selection procedure than elections. It strongly equalizes the chance to access positions of power and hence to exercise genuine influence over legislation (Abizadeh 2021). And more symbolically, its underlying message that no one has a special title to rule (Rancière 2005) and that everyone is at least sufficiently able to rule⁶, is much more egalitarian than the aristocratic message conveyed by elections. Nevertheless, there is at least one important aspect

⁵ This constraint is added to focus the comparison and see whether the benefits of direct democracy mechanisms can compensate for the loss of elections.

⁶ Rancière claims that sortition is premised on the *equal* capacity to rule, but such a strong claim is not necessary to support sortition: assuming a sufficient capacity is enough.

in which elections might score better than SDD in terms of equality⁷: taking extra-institutional means of influence as constant, elections make the popular control of representatives quite egalitarian. Every vote in election counts equally, and it is this moment of egalitarian expression that structures the choice set faced by representatives. Under SDD, things would be different, because although every vote counts equally as well in a referendum, there are likely to be significant inequalities at the initiative stage. Although starting an initiative is formally open to all, it takes self-confidence, time, motivation and organisational resources to launch initiatives and mobilise one's fellow citizens in support of it. As a result, some social groups are likely to make a much more intensive use of participatory mechanisms than others, achieving a significantly higher influence. To be sure, organised groups already enjoy more influence under electoral democracy, but the argument is that the problem might be deepened by the replacement of a simple participatory mechanism such as elections by more complex and optional ones like direct democracy mechanisms. Whether overall, this would weigh more in the balance than the egalitarian benefits of sortition is not obvious, though.

Are there other considerations that might make electoral democracy more attractive than SDD? I think there are, and they are related to the democratic value of political parties. Let me explore these in the next section.

2. The value of political parties

Let us start by briefly considering the place that there would be for political parties in a democracy without elections. Parties are highly tied with elections. Indeed, they are often defined with reference to elections. In Sartori's classical definition, for example, a party is described as a "political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free), candidates for public office" (Sartori 1976: 63). What is more, it seems that parties in the contemporary sense of the world did not exist in the main historical alternative to electoral democracy: the Athenian proto-democracy (see Hansen 2014). Finally, the absence of political parties in a lottocratic form of government is sometimes considered as one of the desirable aspects of sortition (see for example Burnheim 1985: 101, 116).

Nevertheless, one cannot exclude the formation of parties in a democracy without elections, for the simple reason that they are the natural product of pluralism and freedom of

⁷ For a broader egalitarian argument in favour of elections, see Destri & Lever 2023.

association, while offering major organization advantages to people seeking political influence (see Lucardie & Vandamme 2022). As Bouricius (2019: 314), who defends a model of democracy without elections, rightly points out, “parties have organized across the globe under nonelectoral regimes, even when outlawed”. It therefore seems plausible to expect political alliances to form within allotted bodies to coordinate action and gain influence. However, the absence of elections and the frequent rotation among representatives would be likely to impede a stable partisan structure from emerging and prevent parties from achieving enough influence to discipline their members. By not counting on anyone for election or re-election, randomly selected representatives would enjoy a significant independence that elected representatives lack and that would make party discipline much more difficult to achieve. Parties having lost their grip on the political system would also be unable to promise nice jobs to allegiant representatives. In sum, it is likely that some kinds of parties would form within the legislative assembly, but they would be much weaker parties. One might also expect political associations to emerge with the “aim to influence the general public, who would form the minipublics” (Bouricius, 2019: 314; see also Burnheim 1985: 162). This, however, would bring them closer to pressure groups or civil society organisations than parties in the usual sense, as they would seek to influence public opinion rather than compete for access to political offices. Hence, parties might exist in SDD, but in a quite different, much more modest role, and this would entail some losses.

Parties and the executive

Let us start with what may be the least important of the three arguments about the value of political parties. It is one, nonetheless, that is worth considering given the frequent neglect of the executive in these debates. As Rosanvallon (2015) argued, political theory has been neglecting the executive branch of government even though power has massively shifted towards that branch in many political contexts. In debates on sortition, the focus is clearly on the legislative branch, because sortition seems much better suited to compose an assembly than to appoint a minister for example. Its virtues play out when a plurality of people is selected, each bringing the benefits of a situated perspective. As a result, partisans of sortition are usually either in favour of preserving elections for the selection of the executive, or in favour of a shift of power back from the executive to the legislative branch. In the few instances where the case is made for abandoning elections altogether, either the fate of the executive is left undiscussed

(Guerrero 2014; Landemore 2020) or the executive is reduced to a purely administrative role (Bouricius and Schecter, 2014; Bouricius 2019: 330-331).

Even a purely administrative executive in charge of applying decisions made in the legislature or via a referendum would need an appointment procedure. Bouricius and Schecter (2014) propose to entrust an Executive Hiring Panel, randomly composed, and paired with another randomly composed Performance Review Panel. Two things might be lacking in such a framework in the absence of political parties. The first is the loss of the inside knowledge about the merits of different candidates for executive functions and their performance at lower ladders of power (Malleon 2018). Candidates would presumably be assessed and appointed by people with no inside knowledge at all. It is hard to imagine how that would work. There could be a kind of certification process or exam narrowing the set of candidates for executive positions. Yet such procedure is unlikely to single out *one* ideal candidate. There will be choices to be made, and without the accumulated knowledge within parties, it is unclear on what basis such arbitration would be made. The most likely scenario is a kind of self-regulation by the administration, under the external supervision of an allotted body. It is likely that members of the Executive Hiring Panel would trust senior officials of the administration to come forward with appointment recommendations.

The second element that would be missing is a form of symmetry and continuity between the legislative and the executive. The latter is likely to be composed of people with a high experience in the public administration, while the former would be novices and would be constantly renewed. As a result, an important amount of political power, such as the power to influence decisions or appointments or to implement choices etc. would reside in the hands of the administration. And in that respect, the value of parties is that – especially where they have the power to appoint the heads of the administration – they supervise the whole process and take in charge the continuity between legislation and execution.

This asymmetry and the uncertainty about the functioning of the executive probably do not count as decisive objections to SDD, but they count at least as points of attention, requiring further thought, and they highlight a function of political parties that is often lost from sight.

Parties and readability

More significantly, it seems that a major loss indirectly resulting from the abandonment of elections would be the structuring function of political parties. The presence of strong parties highly reduces the complexity of political processes (Manin 1987; 2017; Rummens 2012). It

does so, first, by reducing the number of players. Although party members may disagree on many issues, parties are usually able to secure some cohesion and consistency in the decisions of their members. For citizens, this means that the plurality of political actors can be apprehended more easily. They can take it for granted that parties will usually act, in a way that can be predicted, based on their ideology. And this makes politics much easier to follow than if citizens had to follow the uncoordinated actions of individual representatives acting in unpredictable ways.

Second, when decisions are made by the Parliament or government, they can quite easily be attributed to a party or coalition of parties that is known to have the lead during a given legislature. Under representation by lot, as mentioned above, majorities would be changing from one vote to the other. To be sure, this happens within party democracy as well, in cases of minority government, but this is quite exceptional and still more readable than highly liquid majorities. For citizens, again, a clear majority/opposition divide makes the legislative process much more readable. At the end of a legislature, it is easier to know who can be held accountable for what decisions. Admittedly, many of us are poorly informed about passed legislations and insufficiently equipped for a meaningful retrospective voting – yet the point is only that following the legislative process would be *even more* difficult and less likely in political arrangements that lacked strong and relatively stable parties.

Defenders of lottocracy might nonetheless insist that monitoring the majority in power and keeping it accountable is so defective in electoral democracies that we would be better off in a system that does not rely on it. With randomly selected representatives, one could argue that monitoring and accountability would be less necessary, because the random process would be more likely to select what Jane Mansbridge (2003) called “gyroscopic” representatives, who would be “collectively disposed to act in constituents’ interests because random selection tends to produce an assembly that, if large enough, is descriptively representative of them” (Abizadeh 2021). As a result, citizens would have more reasons to be trustworthy and the need to monitor representatives would be lower. Empirically, it might be true that random selection, properly done, produces a better congruence between the preferences of citizens and representatives than elections. However, taking this for granted would be very dangerous. One should not trust a political process requiring citizens to blindly defer to their representatives (Lafont 2019). Some degree of popular control over the process, and **a** means to hold decision-makers accountable seem necessary under any democratic arrangement. And from that perspective, the structuring function of parties is essential: it allows citizens who do not participate in the decision-making

process to have access to a better knowledge of who defends what and who is accountable for what⁸.

Finally, the structuring of political divisions and the staging of the main lines of political conflict achieved through the media have another beneficial effect: they arguably help citizens build their own political judgments (Rummens 2012). When dividing lines and positions are clearer, it is much easier to *take part* and thereby form political judgments. Without this reduction of complexity, more citizens might become alienated by a process they do not understand than is already the case.

Parties and ideological mobilisation

A third contribution of political parties that might be missed in a democracy without elections is their capacity to mobilise and raise consciousness among the population – an argument that will particularly speak to those who think the status quo is deeply unjust. In contrast with partisan electoral competition, sortition brings people who are potentially not at all politicized, and who do not necessarily have a deep consciousness of injustice, into positions of political power⁹. The latter must be understood as a revision of the Marxist notion of class consciousness, which refers to the awareness of belonging to a class, located in a struggle, an awareness that generates a desire to act with a common purpose to promote the interests of that class. In other words, class consciousness points to the ability of the oppressed classes to see that they are being oppressed and to form a united front to stand against their oppression, in spite of the ruling ideologies that attempt to conceal it and create what Marxists called “false consciousness”. Yet, in a world where divisions have multiplied and where workers’ interests have become very disparate, the binary opposition between two classes, capitalists and proletarians, is no longer sufficient to understand social dynamics and conceptualise social change¹⁰. Furthermore, injustices that are not reducible to class relations must also be taken into account, such as patriarchal domination, racism, homophobia, social contempt (Davis 1981;

⁸ This is not meant to minimize the difficulty and loss of readability created by the multiplication of actors and unaccountable institutions in contemporary democracies. See Papadopoulos 2013.

⁹ The following paragraphs borrow some passages from Vandamme 2021.

¹⁰ Not all salaried employees are part of the oppressed class or capitalism’s losers; “interclass” households now exist; some workers are also shareholders; self-employed people have their own concerns; the concerns of the most precarious members of society are not those of the middle class; the concerns of unemployed people are not the same as those of people who are in work. See Offe 1987; Van Parijs 1987; Wright 2010: 103-05).

Fraser & Honneth 2003) or the injustices that will be incurred by future generations. Therefore, what matters is perhaps not so much people's class consciousness but their ability to identify all types of injustices, the sources of these injustices, and how they can be resolved – what I call the consciousness of injustice.

The limitation of sortition, in this respect, is that, as a selection process, it takes no account whatsoever of whether or not people are interested in politics, are active in civil society organizations, or are conscious of existing injustices. This is in contrast to the process of selecting representatives via elections. In an electoral democracy, people who believe they have ideas about how society should be organized compete publicly with each other. They are invited to explain how their political projects are fairer than those of other candidates, and to highlight the injustice in their opponents' plans. With party competition, gaining political office therefore assumes a certain degree of politicization, in the sense of having an ideological¹¹ vision and strong beliefs about the way in which institutions should function.

That does not mean that elected officials all have a strong consciousness of injustice. Their political commitment may be based on less noble motives. Their strong beliefs may be wrong or unjust. Not everyone shares the same understanding of justice, and many people care little about inequality. In addition, since the general public has a low level of consciousness of injustice, the most conscious candidates are not the most likely ones to be elected. The argument is not, therefore, that elections necessarily bring to power people with a greater consciousness of injustice than sortition. Nevertheless, it could be argued that electoral democracy is potentially more suitable than sortition from that point of view. First, because it does at least provide citizens with the *opportunity* to be represented by the people with the highest levels of consciousness – the avant-garde, in Marxist language. Second, because it involves more than the selection of representatives via elections: it also enables political parties to mobilize citizens with low levels of consciousness and similarly allows highly conscious civil society organizations to have a significant influence in shaping public opinion and public decisions.

Now, whereas I believe that this is a strong argument against a pure lottocratic model, a hybrid like SDD somewhat mitigates the problem for it would still be possible for parties (and associations) to try to shape political decisions by starting “citizen” initiatives and advocating issues in referendum campaigns. As a matter of fact, that is how parties behave under hybrids

¹¹ Ideology is understood here not in the pejorative sense of a closed system of thought meant to justify the status quo (Ricoeur 1997), but in the sense of a set of ideas reflecting an understanding and an evaluation of the existing world and of its alternatives.

of electoral and direct democracy such as Switzerland or several US states (Smith and Tobert 2001). Nevertheless, by being deprived of the access to institutionalized positions of power, parties are much less likely to strive under SDD than they do in these existing configurations where they are still prominent actors. As a result, their impact on initiatives and referendum campaigns is likely to be much less significant. However, one could expect civil society organisations to take up the task and play this role of ideological mobilization. And in that respect, SDD scores much better than pure sortition because it creates incentives to mobilise the whole population and to bring it to act against injustices.

It remains true that under SDD, as a result of the rather atomistic nature oflottocratic representation and of the marginalization of parties, there would be a loss of ideological confrontation between encompassing projects for the whole society¹². At the heart of the legislative process, this dimension would largely be absent. One could imagine parties or associations playing that role from the outside and trying to influence the randomly selected representatives. However, it is not clear that they would be permitted to undertake the latter role in full. There would be grounds for “protecting” randomly selected representatives from outside influences, in the manner the organizers of the Citizens’ Convention for Climate in France sought to do (see also Rummens & Geenens 2023). The first reason would be on epistemic grounds. If the members of a group formed via sortition are selected because of the value of their diverse viewpoints, the greatest benefits would be expected to come from their internal deliberations, not from outside influence. The second, on grounds of perceived legitimacy. If a citizens’ assembly is presented to the general public as representative of the population’s diversity, people are more likely to trust the assembly’s opinions and judgments. But if it is also told that the assembly works closely with a range of unelected civil society organizations and other self-appointed representatives, trust will probably be more fragile. If, during deliberations, it is not clear who is defending what point of view or who ultimately influences the group’s decisions, there is a risk that the process will seem too opaque to generate trust and perceived legitimacy. Hence, it is plausible to expect interactions between militants and decision-makers to be lower in a democracy without elections than in electoral democracy.

¹² In a similar spirit, Malkopoulou (2015: 247) evokes (in a context of sortition, not SDD) a “form of depoliticization, which eliminates the political socialization and action enabled by partisanship. It also undermines the spirit of group formation on common ideological goals (i.e. parties) and breaks down collective power into purposeless individualistic inaction.”

In sum, there are grounds for believing that the move from electoral representation tolottocratic representation may reduce the opportunities for influencing and mobilizing the most conscious sections of the population, either through political parties or civil society organisations. This problem is arguably weaker with SDD than it would be with pure sortition, but it still ought to be taken into account.

3. The right dose of parties

Obviously, one should not idealise political parties. A full assessment should put the benefits highlighted in the previous section in balance with their many drawbacks. Among these, one could mention their tendency to pursue partisan interests at the expense of the public interest¹³. Thus, it has been argued that dominant parties have in many political contexts become agents of the state, alienated from civil society and betraying their original principles and ideologies for the sake of keeping their power and privileges (Crouch, 2004: 70-77; Mair, 2013: 87) – what I call *partisan interests*. As a result, parties increasingly fail in their linkage function and thereby weaken democracy to some extent (Ignazi 2017).

Parties' dominance in electoral democracies also generates a form of 'closure' of the representative system. It does so, first, by excluding valuable candidates for office that are unaligned with existing parties or have failed to win the favours of party leaders – a problem that is arguably deeper in two-party systems. Second, the monopoly over empowered representation¹⁴ enjoyed by parties results in the exclusion of popular demands which are not taken up by parties – and cannot be “imposed” from the inside by committed citizens because parties' structure is usually extremely oligarchical (Michels 2017/1911; Ostrogorski, 1964) even when they claim to democratise internally (Cross & Pilet 2015: 173; Ignazi 2020: 12-13). This gatekeeping power may be beneficial in some cases, for example when anti-democratic or illiberal demands are excluded (see Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018), but regrettable in other cases, for

¹³ This is to be distinguished from the traditional criticism according to which they defend private, factional interests at the expense of the general or public interest (see Sartori, 1976; Rosenblum, 2008). Nowadays, this criticism has lost most of its past strength. It has become more common to see parties as offering competing interpretations of the common good or public interest (White & Ypi, 2016; Bonotti 2017), although these interpretations can obviously largely be based on hidden private interests.

¹⁴ To be distinguished from more spontaneous and non-institutionalized forms of representation, by associations typically (see Montanaro 2012).

example when the main parties act like a cartel (Katz & Mair 1995), deliberately leaving aside some policy issues, at the cost of responsiveness.

Another problem related to parties' dominance in the political system is a loss of impartiality in institutions where this virtue is valuable. Parties' influence over the selection of office holders in the administration or in supposedly independent institutions like constitutional courts may lead to an excess of partisan politicisation, often pointed at as "partitocracy" (De Winter, della Porta & Deschouwer 1996). It is probably naïve to expect pure impartiality from civil servants or constitutional judges, who, as with every other human being, are partly moved by personal values which are not neutral. Nevertheless, a willingness and freedom to act or judge impartially might be valuable even if full impartiality is unachievable. And it remains true that the spheres of the administration and of justice derive part of their value and perceived legitimacy from their independence from partisan logics (see Rosanvallon 2008). Hence, an excess of politicisation of these institutions is regrettable¹⁵.

Finally, there is a deep tension between partisanship and deliberation, which manifests itself both in the political and in the public sphere. If parties discipline MPs, debates in parliament have no chance of leading to position changes. They become merely addressed to the electorate. This can help voters make up their mind by staging major political conflicts (Rummens 2012) and exposing citizens to a plurality of visions, but it also creates frustration if people have the feeling that elected representatives are incapable of changing their mind or that the opposition is incapable of recognizing a good policy enacted by the majority. Epistemically speaking, the strong incentives to keep the party line also inhibit collective progress through argumentation and correction of errors (Leydet 2015; Landemore 2020). Furthermore, the logic of electoral competition creates incentives for parties to discredit political opponents, attack straw men, or even to demonize some parts of the population when the distinction between legitimate opponents and enemies becomes blurred. This "plebiscitary rhetoric" (Chambers 2009), again, makes reasoned public deliberation more difficult and explains how the problem spills over to the public sphere. This dynamic of mutual discredit between parties creates polarisation (in two-party systems at least), ossifies political identities and impedes the development of a public culture of reason-based political discussion. Thus, the French philosopher Simone Weil (2017/1950) blamed parties for being exclusively concerned

¹⁵ One could nonetheless make the case that the politicisation of the administration is less problematic than that of the judiciary, for it secures the kind of continuity between political decisions and their application mentioned above.

with their own growth and capturing their members into a partisan logic “killing in the souls the sense of truth and justice” (33).

All of this means that democratic reformers must identify the “right dose” of parties. We do not want them to capture democratic processes entirely, nor to colonize the judiciary and the administration (at least not too much, for the latter). Yet at the same time, we have reasons to value them, highlighted in the previous section. This, I believe, is what makes hybrid bicameralism (one elected and one randomly selected chamber) particularly attractive (see Gastil & Wright 2019 for a wider discussion). A political system in which the main chamber would be elected and form the executive, but whose legislation would be checked by a randomly selected chamber playing a role of popular review would have the potential to combine the benefits of ideological confrontation and the structuration of the political process on the one hand, and non-partisan deliberation and wide social inclusion on the other. And if we added to this combination some of the mechanisms of direct democracy considered in the first section, we might find a new equilibrium that would keep partisan confrontation centre stage, yet leave room for non-partisan deliberation at the heart of the legislative system, and leave the representation process open to citizens’ input, thereby somewhat loosening the grip on the political system exercised by parties.

4. Conclusion

The main thesis of this chapter is that the reasons that make a democracy without elections unattractive are only indirectly related to the value of elections. In an alternative model of democracy that would combine representation by lot and mechanisms of direct democracy, it is not so much the opportunity to elect our representatives that we might miss; it is more the structuring of political processes by a reduced plurality of collective agents, parties, that have the capacity to mobilise and raise consciousness among the population, to structure and stage political conflicts, to make decision-making processes more readable and controllable for citizens, and to care for the continuity between the legislative and the executive. In these respects, parties are a desirable by-product of electoral competition. They might still exist under alternative arrangements that did away with elections, but they would be likely to be marginalised and come closer to acting like simple pressure groups (among the many others).

As we have seen, however, parties can also harm democracy in many ways. This is why the status quo is not attractive either. We must find a way to preserve the benefits of political parties while mitigating the diversity of the problems that they create. In this respect, a right dose of sortition could play an important role. As argued in the third section, combining partisan

confrontation with spaces for non-partisan deliberation (and mechanisms of direct democracy) could be an appealing way of reaping the benefits of sortition (in particular in terms of deliberation and inclusion) without marginalising political parties.

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