

Should we regret the erosion of partisan loyalties?

Partisanship and the ethics of voting

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Abstract – People who value political parties are often worried about the decline of partisanship, understood as the sustained commitment by citizens to a political party. From a normative perspective, however, one does not imply the other, and the reasons to value parties seem stronger than the reasons to value partisanship. Although there is value in the joint and sustained commitment to a political cause, partisans are less likely than other citizens to adopt a critical attitude toward their party in case of betrayal of its basic principles, and they are less likely to see the truth in the opponents' arguments. For a well-functioning democracy, it seems important to have citizens who are politically committed yet open-minded, capable of revising their political views, and willing to sanction their preferred party at the ballot box. And while partisan commitment certainly does not impede this, it is often in tension with the ethics of voting.

Keywords: parties; partisanship; ethics of voting; accountability; deliberation

Scholars who value political parties or think they are essential for the proper functioning of representative democracy under conditions of mass politics often also value partisanship. They believe that parties and partisanship go together and have common virtues. Hence, they are sometimes worried by what is often described as a contemporary decline of partisanship. In this article, I want to challenge this worry and develop a more nuanced view of the democratic value of partisanship. While the joint commitment to create and support a given political party has high democratic value, the central argument of this article is that democratic societies are better off with a few committed partisans and a large majority of non-partisan citizens. This makes it more likely that democracy will function nicely, as we shall see.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1 starts from the diagnosed erosion of partisan loyalties and brings it together with recent theoretical literature on the value of parties and partisanship, to ask whether we should regret this erosion. Section 2 considers the expected role of citizens in the traditional understanding of representative democracy and its implications for the normative assessment of partisanship. Section 3 considers the role of citizens from the viewpoint of a deliberative understanding of democracy. From both perspectives, I argue that it is preferable if a few citizens are committed partisans (to sustain the existence and dynamism of political parties) and the majority is not. Section 4 considers the institutional implications of this claim, i.e., what kind of political institutions can promote an appropriate attitude towards political parties among the general population.

1. The erosion of partisan loyalties and its implications

In an important collective book published in 2000, *Parties without Partisans*, several scholars diagnosed a waning of party membership and partisan identification, as well as an increasing skepticism, within populations of advanced industrial democracies, towards partisan politics (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). These trends were widely confirmed by later research despite country-based variation (Van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke, 2012; Mair, 2013; Heath, 2017; Fieldhouse et al., 2020; but see Onnudottir & Hardarson 2020). And in the postface to the French republication of his *Principles of Representative Governments*, Bernard Manin subsumed these phenomena under the label of an “erosion of partisan loyalties” (Manin, 2012: 310).

In parallel, breaking with a long tradition of either neglect of parties or strong antipartyism (Rosenblum, 2008), political theorists rediscovered the value of parties and partisanship, giving rise to a rich and stimulating literature showing among others why democracy would be impoverished without partisan confrontation, how partisanship can enable and motivate joint political action, regulate political conflicts, institutionalize contestation, educate to pluralism and compromise, or provide encompassing political justification (Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White & Ypi 2016; Bonotti 2017; Efthymiou 2018; Wolkenstein 2019; Chapman 2021).

However, to be able to assess the normative value of partisanship and see if we should regret the erosion of partisan loyalties, we must distinguish different meanings of “partisanship”. At the most general level, it refers to the “relationship between citizens and parties” (Oscarsson &

Holmberg, 2020: 1). But this can include membership in, identification with, attachment to, ideological proximity with or electoral support for a particular party, and it is even sometimes used indirectly to refer to people's general appreciation of parties¹. It can describe an attitude, an organizational link, or a voting behavior. In this article, I will understand partisanship as the *sustained commitment by citizens to a particular political party*, bracketing debates on whether the tie is more affective or cognitive, and whether it is better characterized as identification or ideological proximity. My attention will be focused on the value of electoral fidelity or loyalty to a party, rather than on party membership or party involvement. In other words, I am interested in the attitude and behavior more than in the organizational link.

It should also be acknowledged that the sustained commitment to a political party can take a diversity of forms, and that identifying with a party, as in the Michigan school model, is not the only way of being a partisan (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2020; Elliott, 2024). As Elliott has argued, one may *feel close* to a party without *identifying* with it, and that makes a significant difference. "When a subject considers an object identical with itself, the subject will find it difficult to treat the object impartially and may perceive threats or triumphs associated with the object as applying to themselves as well" (Elliott, 2024: 587). He therefore argues that *proximity* to a party is a better description of the normative ideal of partisanship that has been defended by the political theorists mentioned above than *identification* with a party (Elliott, 2024: 594-597; see also Lavine, Johnston & Steenbergen, 2012). My arguments below will mostly target the identification with a party and not so much the feeling of proximity to a party (although some arguments against identification apply to proximity to a lesser extent).

A further distinction that matters is between the value of parties and the value of partisanship. They are usually considered together, as if they were indissociable, although some scholars have laid the accent more on one or the other. People who value political parties or believe they play a crucial role in contemporary, mass democracies are often worried about the decline of partisanship. This worry may be legitimate to the extent that a decline of partisanship weakens political parties and therefore reduces their capacity to fulfil some of their beneficial functions. However, for many functions exercised by parties, a widespread attitude of partisanship is not necessary².

Consider some key functions (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000: 5-10; Mair, 2013: 89; Vandamme & Lucardie, 2025). Articulating and aggregating political interests, simplifying voters' choice, linking citizens with decision-making, making political processes understandable, recruiting and training political elites, controlling the executive, and making the opposition visible: all of this can be achieved by parties with relatively few members and few stable partisans³. As long as it is parties that compete for political office and organize government and opposition, these

¹ As when people associate a decline of partisanship with a decline in the public's support for parties.

² In contrast, Fumagalli, Giavazzi and Ottonelli (2023: 200) argue that "parties can play their essential functions only if they can count on a stable electorate and the genuine partisan commitment of their affiliates".

³ In the remainder of this article, I will consider all party members as partisans, but the set of partisans as wider than the set of formally registered party members. The sustained commitment to a particular political party can simply translate into consistently voting for the party, without being involved at all in its internal affairs.

functions are likely to be performed. What matters, in this respect, is the centrality of parties in the structuring of the political process, not partisanship itself. To put it differently, their performance of these functions is not fundamentally affected by the decline of party membership and partisan identification⁴.

However, this claim must be qualified. Other potential functions *are* affected by this decline. Come to mind in particular the education function that has sometimes been assigned to parties, as well as the mobilizing function. Being a member of a party may have educational effects by increasing people's general level of political knowledge and understanding (Dalton, 2000: 21; White & Ypi, 2016: 90-93), and possibly by cultivating their ability to compromise (Rosenblum, 2008: 374; Muirhead, 2014: 53). In this regard, the more active and committed⁵ party members, the better. However, parties are not the only possible space of political education, and probably not the best, as we shall see later. Hence, it is not clear that we should regret the decline of partisanship from *that* perspective. Considering the mobilizing function, things are more complex, as we shall see in the next section.

As I will argue, while a decline of *parties* could be worrisome, the decline of *partisanship* itself is probably not to be regretted. We have stronger reasons to value parties than partisanship. To see this, I suggest considering first the role that citizens are supposed to play in the traditional vision of a well-functioning representative democracy. Then, I will consider the role they are supposed to play in a deliberative understanding of representative democracy. As we shall see, the commitment to political deliberation strengthens the case against widespread partisanship. However, because the deliberative approach is a more controversial one, I want to show that the argument works even without the assumption that widespread deliberation is valuable or even achievable.

2. Citizens' role in the traditional model of representative democracy

The standard theory of democratic representation expects political parties to articulate encompassing political projects to attract citizens' votes and gain the political power to pursue their projects through policy-making. Citizens, in turn, are supposed to get informed about the competing projects and choose the most appealing one. Then, they are supposed to check whether their representatives, if elected, have done what they said they would do, to assess if there are acceptable reasons why they have not⁶, and to decide whether to renew their trust or vote for another party. This ethic of voting, when performed properly, produces popular accountability since citizens' paying attention means that representatives are forced to

⁴ Thus, in the collective book mentioned above, Kaare Strøm (2000) observed that the loss of partisans had not affected parties' centrality in government. The main effect of these trends is that parties have had to adapt their electoral strategies to face a more volatile electorate.

⁵ A further qualification to add is that more recent forms of party affiliation, while attracting more diverse profiles, generate looser ties with the party, and less involvement, which mitigates the educational effects of party membership (Hooghe & Kolln 2020; Kosiara-Pedersen, van Haute & Scarrow 2025).

⁶ These could range from external constraints to changes of circumstances and legitimate compromises with other actors.

anticipate a possible sanction and justify their actions (and lack thereof) (Manin, Przeworski & Stokes, 1999). And it produces responsiveness because it incentivizes representatives to respond to changes in public opinion and to try to deliver what their voters want. Thereby, the representative system can be considered to work properly, allowing collective self-legislation in the form of majority rule.

Now, consider three ideal-typical citizens – Partisans, Apathetic, and Committed Non-Partisans – evolving in a multiparty system. (I shall start from an abstract description and then move towards more practical considerations, such as the type of party system in section 4.)

Partisans (P) strongly identify with a political party. They sometimes attend meetings, know many fellow party members, vote most of the time, and almost systematically for that party. They would not follow their party if the latter completely betrayed its principles, but they know that compromises are part of the political game, and although they are often disappointed by what their party does in government, they believe that no other party would do better to promote their political values.

Apathetic (A) do not very much like parties in general, are not members of any, and do not identify with a particular party. Sometimes they vote, sometimes they do not, depending on how some candidates manage to motivate them.

Committed Non-Partisans (CNP) have nothing against parties in general, but are not members of any, and do not strongly identify with a particular party. They vote most of the time, but often change their vote. Not because they lack political convictions, though. They simply think several valuable options are consistent with their political values and decide whom to vote for at each new election based on a diversity of considerations, such as these parties' program, their position in the polls, their willingness to join others in a coalition, or the particular candidates they put forward.

Who is more likely to perform his or her role in the best possible way? We could start by saying that P and CNP have a higher chance of doing so than A because of the latter's possible lack of political interest (which often goes along with low partisanship and electoral abstention). This would make A less likely to vote, first, but also less likely to make a sufficiently informed electoral choice and to follow the work of their representatives enough to know whether they deserve support or sanction at the next election.

The more interesting comparison is thus between P and CNP. By stipulation, they are equally likely to vote. (I will add complexity on this score afterwards.) Are they equally likely to make a sound electoral choice? One may deny the very notion of a sound electoral choice. Hence, let us simply define a sound choice as a choice aligned with their political values⁷. Even excluding the idea of an external standard of good choice, one could consider CNP in a better position to make a good choice, i.e., one aligned with their political values, since P will, in most cases,

⁷ Which is one way in which "correct voting" is sometimes measured (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997).

stick to their initial choice and remain loyal to the party they strongly identify with. Even if P are open-minded and critical of their preferred party, CNP seem to be in a better position to identify relevant reasons to vote differently. Because several options are genuinely open to them, they are less likely to vote out of habit, less likely to blindly defer to some party leaders, and less likely to turn a blind eye to one of these parties' failures. Sanctioning the party they voted for the last time will be psychologically less costly to them. Hence, in a polity with more voters behaving like CNP than P, the accountability mechanism is likely to work better, producing more responsiveness. This theoretical hypothesis finds some empirical support in the observation of a positive impact of electoral volatility on ideological responsiveness (Dassonneville, 2018).

Responsiveness is also likely to be more *equal* in a polity with many committed non-partisans than in one with many partisans. Since the latter are much less likely to change their vote, in a polity with many partisans, elections get decided by a small set of voters: the undecided, who may have weak political opinions, i.e., opinions less grounded on deeply reflected judgments, and more quickly abandoned. This is far from being ideal. First, it harms political equality understood as equal influence over decisions. Second, it means that the least politically interested citizens may be the ones who have the most influence over the results, which sounds counterintuitive.

Thus, for the well-functioning of a representative democracy, a polity composed of too many partisans does not seem appealing. One could nonetheless raise the following objection: partisanship also plays a mobilizing function (Verba et al., 1978; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000: 7; McAllister, 2020), since the identification with (or membership in) a party motivates people to get to vote and follow the political process. And this is valuable since, in most cases, when people are not of the Partisan type, they are more likely to be Apathetic than Committed Non-Partisans. If the latter assertion is true, then yes, we should also regret the erosion of partisanship. However, it does not turn P into the best option; it is at most a second-best when the choice is reduced to P or A. The first best remains CNP. If there were a way to promote this kind of civic attitude, it would seem preferable from a democratic perspective. And as it happens, some empirical research documents a generational evolution in the profile of non-partisan citizens, with a progressive increase in the percentage of "cognitively sophisticated non-partisans" (which roughly correspond to my CNP category) in comparison with apathetic non-partisans (Dalton, 1984; 2000: 32).

Another objection might be that loyalty to a party makes citizens less susceptible to being swayed by demagogic leaders and extremist movements (Converse & Dupeux, 1962; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000: 6). I am not aware of available empirical evidence on this account, but it sounds a bit less plausible to me after Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump. The electoral rise of these authoritarian leaders from within initially more moderate conservative political parties shows all the dangers of excessive party loyalty. Some Republican voters, because they so strongly identify with their party, would support *any* Republican candidate instead of a Democrat, whatever the risk of authoritarian backsliding. Democracies vitally need citizens who resist their parties' betrayal of their core principles and who oppose authoritarian leaders

even when they emerge from their party. (And as we shall see in section 4, they also vitally need the viable exit options that facilitate this.)

Note that the description of P offered above, consistently with the best normative reconstructions of partisanship that have been developed by political theorists (Rosenblum, 2008; Muirhead, 2014; White & Ypi, 2016; Bonotti, 2017), includes this capacity to adopt a critical attitude towards the party one identifies with and towards its leaders. Nevertheless, it seems to me that loyalty to a *group* (which partly characterizes P) is riskier than loyalty to particular political *ideals* (which characterizes CNP). When one puts a lot of faith in a particular party and deeply socializes with party members, this has a good chance to translate into electoral loyalty, since one becomes less likely to develop critical attitudes towards the party and its representatives. One becomes more exposed to a form of in-group bias that may reduce the capacity to take seriously some critical information about party leaders' behavior, and to give the option of voting for another party its due weight – the kind of affective polarization that many scholars perceive as an important threat to democracy (Inyengar & Westwood, 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Bettarelli, Reiljan & van Haute, 2023; Landa & Pevnick, 2025: chap. 10). Loyalty to political ideals, in contrast, does not bias the judgment in favor or against any political party on offer. It thus makes it easier to make an enlightened choice in specific electoral circumstances, taking due consideration of all sorts of relevant retrospective and prospective considerations.

Drawing on the distinction introduced in section 1 between identification with and proximity to a party, one could think that it is mostly *one* particular form of partisanship – characterized by strong party identification and strong electoral loyalty – that seems undesirable as the dominant political attitude and behavior within a democratic polity. Nevertheless, one might go further and question whether *proximity* to a party is valuable at all for the average citizen⁸. If parties play an essential democratic role, it is certainly important to have *some* citizens who are strongly committed to parties, to make these parties live and endure. We thus need some degree of partisanship understood as an organizational link, for parties to exist at all. One could also highlight the importance of having committed party members containing the ambition of party elites, keeping them in check, ensuring a form of continuity with the history of the party (Muirhead, 2014: 128-130), and promoting its sustained integrity (Elliott, 2024: 594). However, it is usually a very small set of citizens who are partisans in this way. And while it is valuable at the system level, for most citizens, this active commitment within a party is not only superfluous, but perhaps also not commendable. Considering the role of the average citizen highlighted at the start of this section and the ethic of voting that follows from it, would the ideal attitude not be an equidistant attitude towards all parties in one's broadly defined area of the political spectrum⁹? This would make vote-changing easier, less costly, and would thereby promote accountability and responsiveness.

⁸ We could also question whether mere “proximity” to a party really counts as partisanship, but let us grant it for the sake of the argument.

⁹ One may ask why not prefer an equidistant attitude to parties across the whole political spectrum. The reason is that the latter attitude is much more likely to be correlated with a lack of political knowledge and interest, since it

The problem is, of course, that in two-party political systems, this option is simply not available to voters. Thus, the case for being an independent voter may be much less appealing in such systems. In the US context, for example, the independent attitude might evoke an indifference between two considerably different political projects, which would be hard to defend ethically. I therefore believe it is no surprise that most normative defenses of partisanship have been developed by scholars working in countries with a two-party or two-and-a-half-party system. Since, in these contexts, independence can be an indicator of political indifference or of a cognitive difficulty in identifying morally significant differences between the competing projects, it is less normatively attractive¹⁰.

Nevertheless, there is value in assessing the democratic appeal of partisanship by abstracting away from these contextual features. Otherwise, we may naturalize these contingent features – a particular party system, typically – and lack imagination about what democracy could look like. If the widespread attitude of identifying with a single party stands in the way of a proper functioning of representative democracy, as I argue in this article, this should lead us to reassess the value of multipartyism. I will come back to this in the last section.

Another important objection that could be addressed to the argument so far defended stems from the value of stability. Thus, it has been argued that a relatively stable party system is instrumental to a lasting and well-functioning democracy (Converse, 1969; Aldrich et al. 2020). Stability certainly matters to increase the resistance of democratic institutions to democratic backsliding. If a few parties gain prominence within a system and last, they are more likely to develop democratic habits and incentives to pursue their aims within that system. Perhaps thanks to the acquired habits and incentives to abide by the rules of the democratic game, party system stability is also associated with good governance (Pelizzo, 2020). Besides, it facilitates retrospective voting in comparison with systems where new entrants systematically replace older parties. In such a system, the credibility of electoral promises by new entrants is more difficult to evaluate (Tóká, 1998: 592); thus, voters are less in control and can be more easily manipulated by false promises. Furthermore, extremely high volatility of a party system may significantly hamper one of political parties' key functions: making the political process readable and understandable by ordinary citizens, allowing them to know who defends what and who is responsible for what (Manin, 1987; Elliott, 2023: chap. 6; Vandamme & Lucardie, 2025).

However, we should distinguish voter volatility from party volatility, even if they can be correlated. Thus, we could imagine a system with high voter volatility but low party volatility;

is hard to imagine a knowledgeable and politically interested citizen being as likely to vote for *any* party on the spectrum.

¹⁰ This is also why “ambivalent partisans”, i.e., people holding beliefs at odds with their party identification, may be a less appealing type of voters than stronger partisans, in such party systems. If ambivalent partisanship is associated with a lower degree of political interest or political information, for example, it is less surprising to observe a greater ability for partisans to vote “correctly”, as in Robison, 2021 (although see Dusso, 2015 for a contrasting result).

a system in which it would be relatively difficult for new parties to enter the political stage¹¹ but where voters' support for the *existing* parties would vary greatly from one election to the other. And there is indeed empirical evidence from Eastern Europe (Sikk, 2005) and Africa (Nwokora & Pelizzo, 2018) that one type of volatility does not imply the other. Such a system would likely keep parties on their toes, incentivizing them to continuously seek new support and to deliver on their promises, yet without the undesirable effects of party system instability.

It could still be the case that a continuous erosion of partisan loyalties increases the risk of party rebranding. Because fewer citizens would be attached to a particular "brand", the temptation would become higher (and it is already quite high in some political contexts) for parties to engage in forms of rebranding to suggest that they are changing and thereby attract voters seduced by (facade) novelty (for empirical evidence, see Kim & Solt, 2015). This would not reintroduce the risk of democratic backsliding or necessarily lead to bad governance, but it would harm the readability of the political game for citizens and hence their capacity for retrospective voting. If this problem cannot be mitigated by regulation limiting party rebranding, we would have to conclude that there is a trade-off between two conflicting desiderata at the system level: the need for citizens to be equally willing to switch their vote when disappointed, and the need for some degree of stability in the party system.

3. Citizens' role from a deliberative viewpoint

The previous section made the case that citizens' independence from political parties and the electoral volatility it allows may be desirable for democratic representation to produce accountability and responsiveness. An additional consideration that increases the normative case for voter volatility comes from the deliberative approach to democracy. This normative approach is essentially concerned with the conditions under which governments can make legitimate decisions (O'Flynn, 2022: vii). And from this perspective, it is not enough for governments to be responsive to citizens' preferences as in the standard understanding of democracy. What matters for legitimacy is not so much people's preferences at a given time, but the way in which these preferences are formed (Manin, 2025: 195-196). It matters to deliberative democrats (and to others who do not identify with this label) that political preferences are formed in a way that favors appropriate information as well as due consideration of alternative options and counter-arguments. A decision-making process will be more legitimate, for example, if citizens are better informed and if they have considered contrasting viewpoints on the issues on which they have formed specific beliefs. The process by which information is shared and a diversity of viewpoints are expressed and taken up is called deliberative. It creates the possibility for minorities to try to convince the majority. As a result, in contrast with a more minimalist understanding of democracy, collective self-legislation becomes more than mere majority rule and gains in normative legitimacy.

¹¹ One could argue that this is far from ideal from a democratic viewpoint, because it must be possible to politicize new ideas and to challenge existing parties, but the case for new entrants is significantly lower in already diversified party systems than it is in two-party ones.

How should we assess the value of partisanship from this deliberative perspective? As Bernard Manin emphasized in his seminal article on deliberation, parties are instrumental to political deliberation. First, they structure it by offering the political community a clear choice between competing projects (Manin, 1987: 357). This allows the deliberation of the people to be focused. Second, they not only provide public justifications for their own project (see also White & Ypi, 2016: chap. 3), but they also expose weaknesses, blind spots, or unintended consequences in the opponents' projects, thereby potentially increasing the information of citizens who need to arbitrate between these projects (Manin, 1987: 352). Thus, parties are valuable for mass deliberation (see also Rummens 2012).

In contrast, the value of partisanship, as a sustained commitment to a particular political party, is less clear from a deliberative viewpoint. In her pioneering work *Hearing the Other Side*, Diana Mutz highlighted the deliberative limits of partisanship, showing how it could create bias, hinder information processing, and encourage a form of cowardice of mind (deferring to party peers' or leaders' judgments) (Mutz 2006: 128). It has now become a well-known fact that homogeneous groups in general tend to reinforce preexisting prejudices and produce cascade effects of disinformation (Sunstein, 2002). Parties are not entirely homogeneous groups, to be sure. They are also, to some extent, spaces of deliberation – and sometimes heated confrontation of opposed viewpoints (White & Ypi, 2016; Wolkenstein, 2020). Nevertheless, their ideological diversity is always highly limited by shared agreement on some key principles or beliefs. As a result, by being exposed most of the time to converging discourses, partisans tend not to take divergent discourses as seriously as they could and become more resistant to the correction of factual errors (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Jerit & Barabas, 2012; Dalton, 2020). This is why Manin himself insisted in his later work on deliberation that its key feature was not discussion, as such, but contradiction: a satisfying deliberation demands the open examination of reasons for and against a given action or decision (Manin, 2025: 134-143).

This has implications for the ethics of citizenship – and the ethics of voting in particular: a good citizen should ideally be open-minded, willing to obtain reliable information, to hear contrasting viewpoints, and to make an autonomous judgment on this basis¹². This is certainly not *incompatible* with partisanship, as several normative theorists have argued (Muirhead, 2014; White & Ypi, 2016), but the empirical evidence mentioned above suggests that strong¹³ partisanship will usually not facilitate – and most of the time hinder – the development of this kind of attitude. This is why parties may not be the best space for political education, as suggested above¹⁴. Mutz thus concluded that, from this viewpoint, partisanship was “the antithesis of open-mindedness and tolerance” (Mutz, 2006: 128).

¹² For a rich account of voters' epistemic duties, see Giavazzi, 2022.

¹³ I add “strong” because as argued by Elliott (2024), what he presents as weaker forms of partisanship, or what Muirhead (2014: 17) calls “a kind of party spirit that is worn lightly” are *more* compatible with the open-minded ethic of voting.

¹⁴ Schools, being usually more diverse from an ideological viewpoint, may be much better environments for political education and should probably take over the educational function once assigned to parties. Civil society associations can also contribute to it, though they are likely to suffer from more ideological homogeneity.

However, Mutz (2006: 129-131) was also aware of some desirable aspects of partisanship: in particular, its capacity to motivate political commitment, which she also rightly considered essential for a healthy democracy. This argument has been more recently developed further by Jonathan White and Lea Ypi (2016: chap. 4). According to them, partisanship consolidates political commitment and promotes an active democratic ethos; it contributes to the feasibility of principled political projects by providing important motivational and epistemic resources (White & Ypi, 2016: 77-78). From their perspective, partisanship seems mostly instrumental to the realization of political projects that are worth pursuing.

This is compatible with the claim, made earlier, that a well-functioning polity needs a few committed citizens creating or engaging in political parties offering competing projects to the citizenry, while the vast majority of citizens play an arbitrator role: arbitrating between the different projects and assessing the attempts at realizing them when in power. This does not mean that the majority of citizens will not be politically committed, though. There are many other ways of being politically committed than just by supporting a given party. One can be active in civil society associations, organize petitions, engage in principled disobedience, or consciousness-raising activities, for example. At a time of disintermediation and loss of collective ties (Borriello and Jäger, 2023; Gerbaudo, 2019), it is certainly valuable if citizens are members of associations and unions, where a different form of political socialization can occur, and where they can build ties favoring collective action. These types of commitments will be easier to combine with a form of independence towards parties. A person moved by political values and ideals but not identifying with a particular party might be more likely to sanction a party she voted for when it disappoints or betrays its principles, more open to information unfavorable to that party, and more open to new reasons to support another party. A polity inhabited by citizens of that sort, although admittedly utopian, would come closer to the normative ideal of a deliberative democracy.

4. Institutional implications

The next question is what kind of political institutions can promote the citizen attitude presented above as normatively desirable. It seems clear from earlier remarks that a two-party system and, by extension, systems with limited party pluralism, will, *from this perspective*¹⁵, look less desirable. Recall that the traditional view of electoral representation expects voters to change their vote when unsatisfied, to produce accountability and responsiveness. The two-party system is often praised for its capacity to provide accountability by giving the reins of power to a single party, thereby facilitating the attribution of responsibility for failures (Powell, 2000). What often goes unnoticed, though, is that this system harms popular accountability by making vote-changing – and hence the sanction of disappointing representatives – extremely costly for citizens who are not indifferent between Left and Right. Consider, as an illustration, the situation of the US Democrat sympathizers who, in the 2024 Presidential elections, wanted to sanction the Biden administration for its support of the Israeli government despite its crimes

¹⁵ This is obviously not the place to offer a full treatment of all the arguments for and against multipartyism. For two contrasting normative perspectives on the two-party system, see Disch, 2002 and Rosenbluth & Shapiro, 2018.

against humanity. The only way they could sanction it was by helping Donald Trump win the election – an alternative that looked appalling to most of them. We cannot expect most citizens to play their role of reward and sanction when all they face is the most reductionist choice.

What is more, the two-party system harms deliberation by promoting rigid partisan identities and polarizing dynamics (Guerrero, 2024: chap. 4), by favoring party-identification at the expense of party-closeness (Elliott, 2024), and thereby making it less likely that people will genuinely “hear the other side” and openly engage with its arguments. In a system where changing one’s vote is very unlikely for most people, it is much more natural to end up identifying with a single party. Furthermore, the choice being as reduced as it can be, it is natural to put all of one’s hopes on the only party that seems to conform to one’s political values. As a result, it becomes psychologically costly to accept criticisms of this party or to acknowledge its failures. Partisans’ openness to contradiction and revisions of their political beliefs thereby becomes less likely.

Systems with limited party pluralism attenuate these problems but usually do not make them disappear. In these systems, typically, two (sometimes three) parties are dominant, and a few more minor parties try to compete with them. The problem, however, is that in such contexts, although a plurality of parties compete and coexist, some options are more viable than others. If citizens want to have a chance to appoint the winner or to influence the choice of the coalition government, they will have incentives to consider who is leading in the polls or likely to join a ruling coalition, and to vote tactically on this basis. This reduces the ease with which they can withdraw their vote from a party they initially supported, that governed and disappointed, and which they may want to sanction. Sanctioning the incumbent risks facilitating the win of the other political camp. The pressure towards tactical voting also reduces the appeal of smaller parties that they may feel closer to, but are unlikely to win.

This is why genuine party pluralism requires more. When the options have strongly unequal chances of success, equidistance to several parties becomes unlikely because of the pressure towards tactical voting. One might object that unequal chances of success are an unavoidable feature of electoral politics, as is the tactical dimension of voting. However, while no electoral system can avoid it (Gibbard, 1973; Satterthwaite, 1973), “different systems vary greatly in the degree of incentive they give for tactical voting” (Dummett, 1997: 12). And there are voting methods that highly reduce the pressure towards tactical voting, such as evaluative voting methods, allowing voters to evaluate separately each of the different candidates or parties by giving them points or an appreciation mark¹⁶. This is not the place to examine all the virtues and limitations of this alternative form of voting, but we can notice a few desirable properties from the perspective defended in this article.

¹⁶ The most basic (and least expressive) form is “approval voting”, where voters give either 1 or 0 to each candidate (Brams & Fishburn, 1983). The most complex is probably the range voting with a 0-99 scale promoted by the Center for Range Voting in the USA. In between, there is “majority judgment”, inviting voters to evaluate each candidate with one of the following marks: “Excellent”, “Very Good”, “Good”, “Acceptable”, “Poor” or “To reject” (Balinski & Laraki, 2010) and its equivalents with points instead of appreciation marks (Laslier, 2019).

Evaluative voting seems ideal to promote multipartyism because it allows voters to support several parties at the same time. The support you give to a party that is not your first best is not withdrawn from your first best and will not indirectly help your opponents win the election. You can either give the same appreciation to different parties or differentiated appreciations reflecting your genuine preferences. While there might be tactical reasons to exaggerate one's evaluations, to increase the chances of one's preferred candidates or parties (Nuñez & Laslier, 2014), the pressure to vote tactically is greatly reduced compared with uninominal voting methods. This means that a plurality of viable options can coexist. And as a result, it might be easier to withdraw (some) support from a disappointing party and to increase support for another ideologically close party. This highly facilitates the accountability dynamic for *all* voters (not just the quasi-indifferent).

A related benefit is that, in a multiparty system breaking with the uninominal logic, voters have fewer incentives to identify with a single party and can more easily act as committed non-partisan citizens. Thus, evaluative voting could reduce the polarizing dimension of partisanship by better respecting the fact that, in multi-party systems at least, partisan attachment is often more a matter of evaluation on a continuum than a matter of identification with a single party (Rosema 2004: 217-219). In a system providing fewer incentives for strong party identification, citizens are less likely to develop a strong in-group bias, and they will have a higher chance of being open to new relevant information, leading them to change their vote. Thus, it seems that the voting method can have indirect effects favoring more open-minded and deliberative attitudes. It is perhaps not the existence of parties themselves that induces undesirable partisan attitudes and behaviors, but the questionable demand imposed on citizens to support *only one party*.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that we should not regret the time when most citizens strongly identified with a particular political party and remained loyal voters throughout their lives. The erosion of partisan loyalties is actually to be welcomed as an emancipation of voters from social predeterminations and from the dangers of groupthink, offering them the opportunity to better play their key role in the functioning of representative democracy. A well-functioning democracy requires voters willing to change their vote to sanction disappointing representatives, having sufficient distance from their preferred party to be able to see its limits and failures, and facing genuine alternative voting options. A well-functioning *deliberative* democracy, in addition, requires voters who are open to new information, willing to hear contradictory perspectives, and who form their political judgments in an open-minded way. From these perspectives, strong party identification and party loyalty are undesirable.

The purpose of the article, however, was not to criticize partisans. There is high value in the choice that some fellow citizens make to commit themselves in support of a principled political project by joining a political party – partisanship in the organizational sense. For many of them,

this can be seen in large part as a praiseworthy altruistic commitment to the common good¹⁷ prompted by a desire to make their society better (for empirical evidence, see van Haute & Gauja, 2015: 42, 93, 115; Bale, Webb & Poletti, 2019: 78-79). And it is valuable from a systemic perspective since parties need a certain number of committed partisans to work, strive, and survive. Furthermore, the advocacy of new ideas and projects for society by parties and their partisans fuels public debates. A democracy without any partisans would be highly ideologically impoverished. The claim, however, is that most citizens do not need to become committed partisans in the organizational sense, should better avoid becoming partisan in the attitudinal and behavioral sense, and might thereby play their role better. Thus, the aim was to add some nuance to the normative appreciation of partisanship: it is more valuable when it is limited within the population than when it is widespread.

In the end, there is value in a sort of division of political labor among citizens themselves, with some very committed partisans making party democracy work and many more open-minded citizens who have genuinely alternative projects to autonomously choose from. Some play the role of advocates, others the role of a judge or arbitrator. Incidentally, this seems to correspond roughly to the model implicitly endorsed by John Stuart Mill in his book *On Liberty* (1859; see Muirhead, 2014: 99-105; Efthymiou, 2018: 202). However, since we all know that it is far from ideal to be both judge and party, it is probably better if most citizens play the role of judges only. After all, the quality of democratic decisions depends upon the quality and autonomy of their judgments.

In contrast, what is potentially more worrisome than the decline in party identification and loyalty is the growing skepticism towards party politics (Poguntke & Scarrow, 1996; Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Hay, 2007; Mair, 2013), which can also be described as a decline of trust in parties as “agents of popular sovereignty” (Wolkenstein, 2019). This particular decline is more worrisome than the other two, from a democratic perspective. Because if it is true that parties play an essential role in the organization and structuring of political representation, as many scholars have argued, such a declining trust may carry with it a threat to democratic representation. An excessively low appreciation of the value of parties means that citizens may be less likely to resist the siren call of political reforms that would significantly weaken parties and threaten their most valuable functions. Thus, in this case, it is not citizens’ lack of identification with a *particular* party that is a problem; it is their lack of appreciation of the value of parties *in general*. Thus, an important agenda for future research will consist of identifying ways of reconciling citizens with the party form and with party-structured democracy (see Ignazi 2017) – though not necessarily with the partisan attitude.

¹⁷ It is the conjunction of *commitment* and *concern for the common good* that makes partisanship (sometimes) valuable. See Efthymiou (2018: 200). Commitment has no intrinsic value since people can be committed to awful projects.

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