# Rethinking the Imperative Mandate: Toward a Better Balance Between Independence and Accountability

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**Abstract** – Two of the founding principles of representative governments – the independence of elected representatives and popular accountability – are notoriously in tension. The more independent representatives are, the less citizens can exercise control over them. This article defends an institutional proposal – Semi-Directed Mandates – aiming to capture the main concerns of both advocates and critics of imperative mandates and to strike a better balance between independence and accountability than the one usually prevailing in contemporary representative governments. The proposal consists in i) asking candidates or parties to put forward key priorities before the election; ii) allowing voters to give a more specific mandate to their representatives and iii) allowing them to revoke the mandate in case of betrayal of key promises unless they can offer convincing justifications for departing from their mandate. More flexible than the traditional imperative mandate, this proposal also preserves the benefits of a partial division of political labor. It therefore seems better suited to the typical circumstances of mass democracies.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Bernard Manin, a constant source of inspiration who offered his friendly and constructive criticism of an older version presented at the Séminaire de philosophie politique normative in Paris. Several other colleagues read drafts of this article and provided extremely useful feedback: Charles Girard, Marcus Häggrot, Bruno Leipold, Amaël Maskens, Philippe Urfalino and Sixtine Van Outryve, whose Ph.D. dissertation was critical for my understanding of the imperative mandate. In addition to them, I wish to thank Samuel Bagg, Emilee Chapman, Chiara Destri, Kevin Elliottt, Antonin Lacelle-Webster, Hélène Landemore, Victor Mardellat, Viki Pedersen, Théophile Pénigaud and the anonymous reviewers. This work was supported by the Flemish Research Foundation (FWO). Grant no. 1283723N.

One of the key principles of representative governments is the independence of representatives, the fact that they are not tied by instructions from their constituents. As Bernard Manin noticed in his seminal book, "[n]one of the representative governments established since the end of the eighteenth century has authorized imperative mandates or granted a legally binding status to the instructions given by the electorate" (Manin 1997, 163). This principle is grounded on solid reasons, as we shall see. However, it comes in tension with another key principle of representative governments – popular accountability. The more independent representatives are, the less citizens can exercise control over them. Therefore, maximal independence is an unattractive ideal, and the degree of independence that should be enjoyed by political representatives is a matter of debate (Pitkin 1967, chap. 7). Furthermore, it is only the strongest and most implausible form of imperative mandate, forbidding *any* deviation from constituents' instructions, that is precluded by the principle of independence. This is a fact that many democratic theorists have lost sight of, possibly because they ignore the diversity of ways of conceiving the imperative mandate.

In this article, I put forward an institutional proposal that aims to capture the main concerns of both advocates and critics of imperative mandates and to strike a better balance between independence and accountability than the one usually prevailing in contemporary representative governments, while keeping other aspects of representative governments constant[2]. The proposal (called "Semi-Directed Mandate") consists in i) asking candidates or parties to put forward key priorities before the election; ii) allowing voters to give a more specific mandate to their representatives and iii) allowing them to revoke the mandate in case of betrayal of key promises, unless the incriminated representatives can offer convincing justifications for departing from their mandate. This proposal is particularly suited to majoritarian political systems, where a mayor, governor, president or political party receives the reins of power for a given time and can implement announced reforms without taking part in a coalition government.

This is a contribution to two strands of literature. On the one hand, the literature on imperative mandates, recall and other ways of increasing the accountability of elected representatives (Pitkin 1967; Mansbridge 2003; Leipold 2020; Welp & Whitehead 2020). On the other hand, the literature trying to rehabilitate elections in the face of recent challenges to their democratic pedigree. Thus, following the return of sortition in politics and the strong critique of elections that it usually carries (Guerrero 2014; Landemore 2020), many scholarly arguments have been produced to defend elections and reaffirm their essential character (Pourtois 2016; Lafont 2020; Landa & Pevnick 2020; 2021). Among these, the most frequent claim is probably that an alternative system of representation by lot would lack a mechanism of popular accountability as powerful as an electoral sanction. Yet, if popular accountability is the main reason to favor elections over sortition, advocates of electoral representation can hardly be satisfied with the accountability achieved in existing electoral democracies. They should welcome any promising way of *improving* democratic accountability.

[2] This distinguishes my proposal from stronger departures from representative government, such as the communalist vision of a shift of political power from nation-states to communes (Bookchin 2015; Van Outryve 2024). This is meant to keep some focus (one reform at a time), not to deny the legitimacy of more ambitious visions.

Section 1 recalls the main reasons to guarantee some independence to representatives and balances them with reasons to secure and improve accountability. Section 2 introduces the Semi-Directed Mandate mechanism. In section 3 I defend the possibility of recalling elected representatives who have failed to i) deliver on their electoral promises as expressed in the Semi-Directed Mandate or the implicit promise to behave ethically, and ii) provide adequate justification for this failure. Section 4 discusses the independence and complementarity of the two components of the proposal.

## I. The need for independence and accountability

### *The value of independence*

Imperative mandates are a form of delegation of power constrained by clearly defined instructions, deviations from which can be sanctioned by a revocation of the mandate. This form of representation, praised by Rousseau (1762) and Marx (1871)[3], and more recently defended by thinkers such as Castoriadis (1988) or Bookchin (2015), was explicitly rejected by the founding fathers of modern representative governments (Manin 1997) and is still forbidden by many constitutions such as the French, German and Italian ones (Closa Montero 2008). The traditional view inherited from the French Revolution even opposes the *imperative* mandate to the *representative* mandate (Le Digol 2018). Conceptually speaking, however, it would be more accurate to say that there exist (at least) two forms of representative mandates: the imperative mandate and the free mandate, corresponding to the distinction between delegate and trustee conceptions of representation (Pitkin 1967). In between, different degrees of freedom or independence can be imagined.

The idea that political representatives should enjoy *some* degree of independence under conditions of mass democracy is not in itself very controversial. Four main arguments support it (see Pitkin 1967: chap. 7; Manin 1997: 163-167; Przeworski, Stokes & Manin 1999: chap. 1; Urbinati 2006: 132-133).

First, voters cannot anticipate all the circumstances under which their representatives will have to make decisions. Thus, if economic, social, or political circumstances change during the term in office, it is important that representatives have the freedom to adapt their actions and are not strictly bound by promises made under different conditions. Imagine for example that someone is elected with a mandate to cut public expenditures. After a few months in power, a pandemic arises, leading to a temporary lockdown. Massive income support suddenly appears necessary to safeguard a decent standard of living for many people unable to work. In such an event, it would be highly regrettable if representatives were entirely tied to promises made under different circumstances. Even their voters might have changed their minds about the initial mandate. Thus, at the very least, they should have the freedom to renegotiate the mandate or to justify deviations from it instead of being automatically recalled for betraying a promise.

[3] On Marx's vision of representation and its inscription in a wider tradition of radical republicanism, see Leipold 2020.

Second, representatives may sometimes be in a better position than constituents to assess certain facts or constraints relevant to political decisions. An elitist version of this argument probably guided the founders' preference for free mandates over imperative ones. Because there was a widely held belief that elections would bring to power those who distinguished themselves from the masses, who were in some respect superior to ordinary citizens (Manin 1997), it was important not to tie their hands too much. This appears quite clearly in the Burkean vision of representation, relying on representatives' independent and wiser judgment on the general good (Burke 1774). The argument, however, can be given a non-elitist interpretation, i.e., one that does not assume that representatives are wiser or more public-spirited than ordinary citizens. The claim can be that, under conditions of partial division of political labor, thanks to their full-time investment in the task and the epistemic support they receive from the party's back office and public administration, representatives are sometimes better informed than ordinary citizens about what kind of policies work and what kind of perverse effects can be anticipated. Furthermore, they may sometimes acquire the relevant information only after being elected based on some promises[4]. For example, a party promises to build a new sports stadium in a given city. Once elected, it commissions a feasibility and impact study, consults different stakeholders, receives all the results, and concludes that there are strong unforeseen reasons to abandon the initial plan. In such cases, it is valuable if they can renounce to implement a policy initially promised, or if they can adjust their policies to constraints that become visible during their mandate without the need to renegotiate a new mandate with voters systematically. If we accept this argument, it would also make sense for voters to give broad instructions but trust their representatives to figure out the best way of honoring them in practice. As we shall see, the Semi-Directed Mandate presented below allows for this.

Third, it seems important for the substantive fairness of the democratic process that representatives have the freedom to take up legitimate minority demands instead of being exclusively tied to the demands of the majority[5]. These demands may appear on the political scene only after the election when a specific law project is considered. For example, there could be at election time a majority favoring a given reform of unemployment benefits. As a result, the government prepares a law project, and an association defending the interests of the unemployed then points out an unfair and unanticipated consequence likely to result from implementing that law (and any plausible variant of it). Anyone concerned with fairness would value the possibility for the legislators to give up the initial plan and justify it on the grounds of fairness. The problem is, of course, that civil society lobbying is not always aligned with the demands of fairness. The independence of representatives is also what makes it possible for private interest lobbies to sway governmental action in their favor. This is why

[4] Arguably, this is less likely to happen in strong party systems where parties' platforms are shaped through time based on the relevant information and experience.

[5] This seems to me like a stronger version of the argument than the Burke-Sièyes claim (often reproduced in constitutional law) that representatives should represent the whole nation, not only their constituents (see Tomba 2018). Representing the whole nation is a myth. No one ever does that for the simple reason that the nation is divided and it is always a *particular* vision of the general good that is represented when it is not particular interests directly. In contrast, the claim that representatives should not pay exclusive attention to the demands of their constituents is valid: there should be room for minority claims to be heard and taken seriously.

full independence is not appealing and an appropriate balance between independence and popular accountability is required.

Fourth, with strong imperative mandates, deliberation and negotiation between elected representatives become extremely difficult, if not impossible, which can block decision-making processes (Urbinati 2006, 131-132). A possible response to this argument is to allow a navette system between delegates and their constituents, to validate new agreements (Van Outryve 2024: 141-148), but this process is extremely heavy when deliberation and negotiation are constant and constituents cannot be gathered easily as happens in mass democracy. The need to be able to make compromises (and thus to sacrifice some electoral promises) is particularly important in contexts of coalition governments (Manin 1995, 272-273), but also as part of the interactions and negotiations with civil society actors that any vibrant democracy must feature. So, strictly imperative mandates are simply unpracticable in proportional representation (PR) systems because they make coalition compromises impossible, and more generally in any political system forcing compromise (like strong bicameralism or federalism). Yet they also seem undesirable in stricter majoritarian systems because they impede deliberation and position changes. Admittedly, we should not expect much deliberation and take-up of valid objections in parliamentary debates (Leydet 2015). Nevertheless, we have good reasons to value the process of co-construction of laws illustrated by the unemployment example above.

All of this suggests that there should be room for representatives to deviate from electoral pledges and to justify these deviations. Additionnally, as Annabelle Lever puts it, "citizens cannot know much of what legislators tried, but failed, to do because of the uncooperative behaviour of others; nor how far that uncooperative behaviour was justified" (Lever 2024). Thus, if there is a way to promote a more dialogical, or "recursive" (Mansbridge 2019) approach to representation, based on constant interactions between representatives and constituents[6], it would seem preferable to strict, unnegotiable instructions.

In sum, a strictly imperative mandate, completely tying representatives to their voters' initial instructions, and leading to the systematic revocation of mandates whenever the initial contract is broken, seems highly undesirable under typical conditions of mass democracy. However, the arguments presented above all point to the necessity of *some degree* of independence, leaving open the question of the exact degree of independence that should be enjoyed by representatives. As Pitkin (1967: chap. 7) has argued, the independence of representatives should be conceived as *relative*: they are not supposed to act completely independently of the will of those they represent. A reasonable expectation seems to be that their actions generally comply with this will and that any deviation from it be justified by one of the reasons stated above. In other words, ideally, representatives should follow the will of their voters unless i) conditions have changed, making some prior promises unachievable or undesirable; or ii) they have reasons to believe that their voters are mistaken, as a result of new information, about the expected result of a given policy; or iii) they have reasons to believe that an alternative policy would be fairer to some minority whose claim has moral

[6] In contexts of mass democracy these are likely to mainly occur through the media, but more symmetrical dialogue can also be promoted through organized encounters with constituents, as in the model of deliberative town-hall meetings (Neblo, Esterling & Lazer 2018).

weight; or iv) because they need to make some compromises with coalition partners, social partners or other relevant actors.

*The value and modes of accountability*

Popular accountability matters because representatives are supposed to act for the people they represent and cannot be expected to do so spontaneously, without any form of popular control. Representatives usually have interests of their own and are vulnerable to capture by private interest groups. They can also be biased in all sorts of ways – in particular, as a result of their belonging to a social, cultural and economic elite – and thereby become misaligned with their constituents. Hence, their responsiveness to citizens' wishes, which is central to democratic representation, is much more likely to be secured if they are accountable to those they are supposed to represent.

One difficulty is that no institutional formula can guarantee the ethics of representation outlined above (respecting the will of voters unless there is a legitimate reason not to do so). Either representatives are not allowed any deviation from their mandate and this creates all the problems mentioned in the previous section or they are allowed to deviate and it becomes inevitable that they will sometimes do so for inappropriate reasons. We know that they are heavily influenced in their decisions (to different degrees) by lobbies, bureaucrats, businesses, civil associations, media and polls (White and Ypi 2020: 195) and it is often hard for voters to know how this influence is exercised and what kind of motivations lead representatives to make the decisions they ultimately make.

This is where deliberative accountability enters the picture. Considering the diversity of legitimate reasons to deviate from one's mandate, the power to demand justifications and the right to provide them are crucial. We should want citizens to be entitled to justifications and representatives to have the opportunity to provide them because it is only based on these justifications that citizens can assess whether a sanction is appropriate.

This already precludes the crudest form of imperative mandate, where a deviation from instructions is immediately sanctioned, whatever the justification. This, however, is an implausible conception of the imperative mandate, probably existing more in the mind of its opponents than in the vision of its advocates. What the latter usually want is to ensure that delegates remain tied to those they represent and do not use discretionary power in a way that is misaligned with the aspirations of their constituents (Leipold 2024). However, only a discussion with their delegates can allow voters to appreciate the achievability and sustained desirability of the mandate conferred to them. This is why practices of imperative mandates usually make it possible for delegates to come back to their electoral base or primary assembly to renegotiate their mandate or to consult their constituents about the right course of action to adopt in cases of unforeseen changes, discussions or negotiations at a higher ladder of government. In a sense, this is the perfect form of accountability: Y gives X a mandate to do Z and X cannot deviate from the mandate without discussing with Y and obtaining a new mandate; otherwise X is sanctioned.

The problem is that such a procedure is extremely heavy. It is workable when the chain of delegation is short, when there are only a few decisions to make, and when it is easy to summon the primary assembly conferring the mandate. However, it becomes extremely

time-consuming when there are multiple ladders of delegation, many decisions to make on a diversity of issues, or when the primary unit of delegation is not an organized, local assembly but a mass of voters. In contemporary mass democracies, characterized by a high division of political labor, this form of imperative-yet-renegotiable mandate therefore seems unappealing as well. One could of course challenge the background conditions that make it unappealing – state centralization, the practice of mass elections, the absence of primary assemblies, the professionalization of politics – and advocate for a pyramidal system of delegation such as "council democracy" (Muldoon 2018; Popp-Madsen 2021) or "communalist democracy" (Bookchin 2015; Van Outryve 2024). This is not the place to fully assess these alternative models. However, it is important to see that even these models, institutionalized at a wide scale, would face problems related to the number of decisions and ladders of delegation. And under typical contemporary circumstances of mass democracy and advanced capitalism (with little time to devote to politics), it is unrealistic to expect representatives to consult those they represent on each of the decisions they have to make and that involve deviations from their initial mandate[7].

There are other ways, however, to secure popular accountability. Those who are satisfied with dominant forms of representation will claim that the reiteration of elections suffices for securing meaningful accountability (see for example Landa & Pevnick 2021). Representatives are usually elected on the basis of a party platform, and voters are free to judge their fidelity to this platform at the end of the mandate before deciding whether to renew their trust or vote for someone else. In addition to this, elected representatives are held accountable by the media, unions, NGOs, international organizations, etc. Hence, it is legitimate to ask whether it is necessary to increase accountability.

*Do we need more accountability?*

Yannis Papadopoulos (2023), in a recent overview of the literature on accountability, affirms that there is a "remarkable" degree of congruence between public opinion and public policies in mature democracies even though the construction of public policy largely happens backstage and is a "black box" for many citizens. However, this rather optimistic view needs to be nuanced by a whole body of literature that is largely ignored in his overview and provides empirical evidence that representatives, in a diversity of political contexts, are more responsive to the preferences of the wealthy than to those of the majority on issues that divide them (Bartels 2008; Gilens and Page 2014; Elsässer, Herne & Schäfer 2021; Schakel 2021; Lupu & Tirado Castro 2023[8]).

The causes of this unequal responsiveness are still a matter of debate (see Lupu & Pontusson 2023), but three of them, which seem plausible, are particularly relevant in the context of this article. The first is the well-documented representational bias: the personal preferences of elected representatives, in most countries, are closer to the preferences of the wealthier citizens (Elsässer, Herne & Schäfer 2021; Schakel 2021; Lupu & Warner 2022;

[7] One way to overcome this problem, suggested by Van Outryve (2024: 143), is to consider imperative mandates not as a list of specific, rigid instructions, but rather as limits set on the space within which representatives can make decisions. This would bring the imperative mandate much closer to what is defended in this article..

[8] For countervailing findings, see however Branham, Soroka & Wlezien (2017) and Elkjær & Iversen (2023).

Lupu & Tirado Castro 2023). This would not matter too much if their hands were tied, but combined with the second possible cause of unequal responsiveness – the relative independence enjoyed by representatives – it creates a potential problem. Admittedly, elected representatives do not just act as they wish, as caricatural discourses sometimes portray the problem. It seems that they do care about public opinion, especially when their position is threatened (Binzer Hobolt & Klemmensen 2008), and therefore try to honor most of their promises (Naurin 2011; Thomson et al. 2017). Furthermore, strong parties, by imposing discipline on their representatives, can reduce their discretionary power. However, the absence of direct sanction for betraying a promise allows representatives to more easily select which promises they want to honor and which they can decide to ignore, possibly under the pressure of lobbies or powerful financial agents. In this context, they face incentives to honor easy and cheap promises that do not affect their particular interests or those of their powerful allies, while ignoring the others.

The third potential cause further increases the problem. It is the well-known difficulties faced by voters in the formation of sound retrospective judgments on the actions of their representatives (Achen & Bartels 2017). In most democracies, voters have been found largely ignorant about the work (or even identity) of their representatives (Somin 2013; Achen and Bartels 2017). Therefore, they are often not properly equipped to judge their representatives' policy choices. What is more, according to some scholars, they usually "have great difficulty making sensible attributions of responsibility for hard times" (Achen and Bartels 2017, 304) or even assessing whether times have been good or bad during a term in office. As a result, when voters do vote retrospectively, they may reward or sanction representatives for things they are not responsible for, such as droughts, floods or a suddenly changing economic dynamic in the months preceding an election (whatever the economic results of the whole term in office). These findings are not uncontroversial (Chambers 2018; Stokes 2018), but what matters in the context of this article is that they point to the need to *ease* the accountability process. Political parties may already do so, to some extent, by reducing the complexity of the political game and presenting clear platforms (Elliott 2023, chap. 6). However, even if party democracy is arguably an improvement compared to more personalized political systems, strong parties hardly suffice to solve the problems of popular accountability[9]. Hence, while the representational bias combined with the relative independence of representatives call for *increased* popular accountability, to help counter unequal responsiveness, the difficulties of retrospective voting call for *improved* popular accountability. And as we shall see, Semi-Directed Mandates may have the potential to be helpful on both accounts.

Admittedly there are no *guarantees* that increased and improved popular accountability will deliver more equal responsiveness. There may be other factors at play, like the reduction of governments' ability to pursue redistributive policies in the context of international tax competition. However, the preceding considerations give us pro tanto reasons to seek to increase and improve popular accountability. This may also help fight the

[9] Furthermore, while parties may be stronger in PR systems than in majoritarian ones, coalition governments typical of proportional representation make things worse in terms of accountability given that parties tend to blame coalition partners for failures (Anderson 2000) and seem less prone to honor their promises (Thomson et al. 2017).

feeling of powerlessness and lack of control shared by many disadvantaged citizens who have the feeling that representatives can do whatever they want (Hay 2007; Bedock 2020; Abrial, Alexandre, Bedock, Gonthier & Guerra 2022). And after all, in a democracy, the burden of proof falls on those who want to limit rather than increase popular accountability.

## II. The Semi-Directed Mandate

The Semi-Directed Mandate (SDM) can be seen as a more flexible variant of the imperative mandate. As mentioned in the introduction, it consists in i) asking candidates or parties to put forward key priorities before the election; ii) allowing voters to give a more specific mandate to their representatives and iii) allowing them to revoke the mandate in case of betrayal of key promises. What makes it more flexible than the traditional imperative mandate is, on the one hand, that the instructions are only partial, which means that representatives have the freedom to act beyond their mandate and, on the other hand, the fact that they can engage in discursive interactions with their voters to justify any deviation from their mandate. This makes it possible for them to explain why an initial proposal is not appealing anymore, or why some minority objections should be taken into account[10]. The SDM also differs from traditional recall procedures by specifying the circumstances under which a recall vote can be organized, as we shall see.

The term "semi-directed" is borrowed from the research method of semi-directed (or "semi-structured") interviews: the interview is partly framed by the researcher, but there is room for instructive deviations from the initial plan. One of the reasons to use semi-directed interviews instead of fully directed ones is that the interviewer cannot anticipate all the questions or issues that will prove to be interesting over the course of the interview. In a similar vein, and as we have seen, voters cannot anticipate all the decisions that will be worth making over the course of a political mandate. They have both reasons to frame the mandate and reasons to leave it partly open.

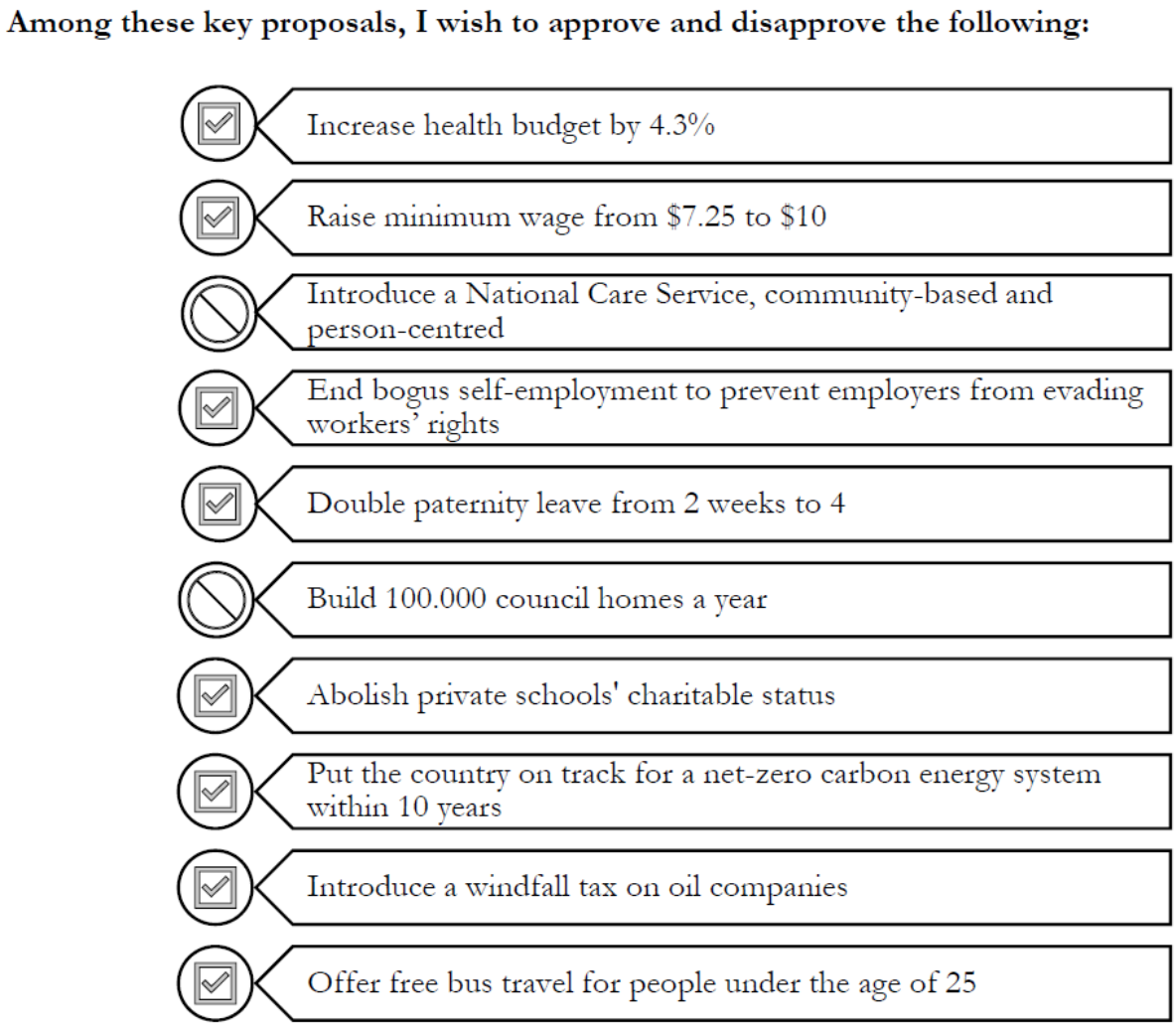
Following this logic, the SDM makes a government's mandate partly directed and partly open. This is achieved through an innovative voting method – Justified Voting (Vandamme 2018) – inviting voters to select justifications for their vote on the ballot, from a predefined list of options[11] (see Figure 1 below). Concretely, parties competing in general elections or candidates in a presidential election are required to come up with a full electoral platform and a more restricted list of six to ten key proposals they commit to implementing if they are in government and which appear on the ballot. Each candidate or party's ballot is sent to all voters a few days before the election so that they can compare them and make up their minds. Then, in the voting booth, voters are first invited to select their preferred candidate or party, and then the priority proposals they want to approve or deselect. They can go backward

[10] Any proposal increasing the power of the majority of voters is exposed to a bias against minorities, which SDM does not make disappear but it compares better than the traditional imperative mandate by making room for the uptake of legitimate post-elections minority demands.

[11] The reasons to "force" voters to choose from a predefined list are essentially practical: preferences would be hard to aggregate, and the procedure would be very time-consuming if voters could write their own justifications. Yet it is also an invitation for citizens to think and discuss in a common language. See Vandamme 2018 for a more detailed presentation of this method.

and change their choice if they realize only then that the key priorities do not conform with their image of the party/candidate.

**Figure 1: ballot example**




Note: This is an imagined ballot using Justified Voting in elections. The proposals are inspired by the UK Labour Party Manifesto 2019. Voters can approve or reject each proposal.

After the election, voters' preferred proposals are made public (though anonymously) alongside the vote share. By default, all the proposals that are not deselected count as approved: by voting for a party without further specification, one is taken to approve its full platform[12]. All the proposals that have been more endorsed than rejected count as mandates: they are imperative in the weak sense that, in the absence of a good countervailing reason, parties or candidates are expected to deliver on them, to show that they are taking adequate measures to implement the announced reforms. If they are in a position to implement them

[12] This is meant to avoid a perverse effect where only a few measures would receive clear popular support, thus allowing representatives to use the lack of relative support for these measures to justify betraying their electoral promises.

but fail to act on these promises, they need to justify it publicly, thus engaging in deliberative accountability. The prospect of electoral sanction or recall (as argued in the next section) is the disciplining threat promoting this deliberative accountability.

If a proposal has more rejections than *explicit* endorsements (among those who expressed an opinion on the key proposals), it is still permissible to implement it, since it still has implicit majority support, but it is not imperative anymore, since it is more divisive, which would count as reason to revise it or bring it to referendum. And if a proposal is rejected by a majority of voters, it becomes impermissible to implement it. One might wonder why a party would ever put on its ballot a proposal (likely to be) rejected by most of its voters. Admittedly, this is unlikely to happen. However, the *opportunity* to reject key proposals serves as a safeguard against very unpopular proposals in case there would be one, and as an incentive for parties to promise things that are both highly supported and achievable. It symbolically empowers voters vis-à-vis their representatives by breaking with the all-or-nothing logic of traditional platforms and it adds to their opportunities for political expression. Ideally, voters should be able to approve and disapprove each proposal of the platform, but this would require much more time and information, jeopardizing some of the benefits of the SDM such as its ease of use and limited cognitive demandingness. To illustrate, consider that the UK Labour Party Manifesto 2019 from which the ballot proposal below was inspired was 105 pages long.

One major benefit of the SDM is precisely that it attracts voters' attention to parties' key proposals, thereby potentially increasing their information and incentivizing more policy-based electoral choices. The associated cost is that the proposals may appear a bit disconnected and not as integrated into a broader narrative as they usually are in party platforms. However, this would count against the proposal only if citizens stopped reading platforms and focused exclusively on the restricted list. Yet most of us do not read and compare all competing platforms and it is unlikely that the few people motivated enough to do it under present circumstances would stop doing it. The overall effect that can reasonably be expected is that the information will be partly equalized and better-diffused thanks to the highlighting of key proposals.

This practice has the potential to change the nature of the mandate conferred to elected representatives by giving it a more definite content. Representatives would be elected with a clear mandate to do x, y and z, to honor such or such promise, and their (in)actions in government could thus more easily be assessed by citizens than is currently the case. Their mandate, however, would not be *fully defined*. This is an improvement compared to imperative mandates[13]. First, it leaves room for unforeseen decisions and co-construction of the laws. Second, it gets rid of a strong practical constraint that afflicts the traditional imperative mandate proposal: the need to reach full agreement among the supporters of a candidate or party on the exact instructions and positions to be defended once elected. With

[13] Although Leipold (2024) suggests that most advocates of imperative mandates in history were open to a flexible use of the mechanism, which, if true, would bring my proposal (SDM) closer to the imperative mandate. In that case, it can be seen as the concrete articulation of a plausible interpretation of the imperative mandate for circumstances of mass democracy, which is lacking anyway since most existing proposals also challenge the state and advocate for smaller political units (Bookchin 2015; Tomba 2018; Van Outryve 2024).

the Semi-Directed Mandate, an overlapping consensus on the candidate or party is sufficient, and different groups of voters can get their way by promoting different key proposals.

Another difference is that the mandate would not be strictly speaking *imperative* – or at least not in a strong sense. First, representatives would not be *legally* obliged to act on their promises, which is desirable for the reasons stated in the previous section. Second, in their recursive interactions with constituents, representatives could still (and probably would) try to convince them that there were good reasons to deviate from what they initially promised. This is desirable considering the legitimate deviations of the mandate presented in the first section. The SDM allows for such deviations while making citizens the ultimate judges of their legitimacy.

Compared with the status quo, the main value of the SDM is that it could facilitate the accountability dynamic. As mentioned above, citizens often lack relevant information to engage in retrospective voting. The SDM would probably ease the process of holding representatives accountable. It would become more focused thanks to the highlighting of key commitments, which would also make representatives' mandates *more readable*. As Manin (1995, 293) explains, in "audience democracy", the independence of representatives is strengthened by the fact that electoral promises are "relatively blurred images" rather than clear instructions. In the present model, instructions would be clarified. This could make it easier for citizens to form a judgment about the incumbent's track record and to decide, based on that, either to renew their trust and give them a new mandate or to sanction them and give a mandate to someone else.

Additionally, the model is not overdemanding, which matters given how little time citizens have to devote to politics (Elliott 2023). Voters can afford to pay limited attention to the work of their representatives – limited to the key mandates conferred to them at election time 1 (ET1). Suppose there are  6 or 8 reform proposals that are widely endorsed at ET1. It is easy enough for voters who do not care much about politics to ask themselves, before the next election (ET2), what has become of these promises. This focus might come at a cost: voters might lose sight of genuine achievements that were not part of ET1 promises or that passed below their radar. This is unavoidable. But the cost seems to be balanced by the gain in focus on relevant considerations. Instead of trying to guess whether the economy is doing better, for example, voters at ET2 can focus their attention on something more easily measurable: were the promised reforms enacted? And if not, why not? This will not make all the informational problems disappear, but it could reduce the likeliness of representatives being punished for floods or shark attacks.

What is more, the process may have value even if it does not work perfectly. On the citizens' side, there would also be a high symbolic gain: reasons to believe that they have more control over their representatives (whether they ultimately succeed or fail to exercise this control effectively). Thanks to the possibility of giving a more specific mandate and recalling representatives in the worst-case scenario, it would be harder for them to get the (partly false) impression that politicians can do whatever they want. Thus, there could also be gains at the level of the perceived legitimacy of the representative process. To the extent that we care about citizens' trust in their representative institutions, a trust-enhancing mechanism is valuable. And it seems reasonable to expect the model defended here to be a source of trust

in the representative system, as it empowers citizens and gives them more opportunities to steer and sanction their representatives.

This sanction could be merely electoral – being voted out at the next election – but historically, those who have defended the idea of instructing representatives also usually supported the possibility of sanctioning them throughout their mandate, which is the second part of the proposal.

## III. The revocation of the mandate

The recall, currently practiced in a diversity of countries, such as several US states, Japan and several Latin-American countries (Welp 2018; Welp & Whitehead 2020), allows citizens to remove elected representatives from office before the next election. By garnering a given amount of signatures, citizens can initiate a recall vote, where the whole population of a given political community is invited to make a choice for or against the recall of the targeted representative. If the latter is recalled, usually, new elections are held (often simultaneously with the recall) or a predetermined substitute takes the position (Welp 2018). Among existing practices, the one that looks most like the SDM or a modern imperative mandate is probably the Colombian *revocatoria del mandato*[14], which demands that candidates running for office register a government plan and allows citizens to activate recall referendums if the mayor or governor[15] is not fulfilling this plan (Welp & Milanese 2018, 1385). We will see, however, how it significantly differs from SDM.

A less well-known *collective* form of recall also exists in parliamentary systems: a citizens-initiated dissolution of the whole assembly leading to anticipated elections, as currently practiced in Latvia, Slovakia and six Swiss cantons (Magni-Berton & Egger 2019, 81–82). This form is more adapted to less personalized, more party-centered systems where it makes more sense to recall the majority in power instead of individual representatives if the motivation for the recall is a betrayal of electoral promises. As we shall see, the SDM model uses both forms of recall.

Here is not the place to provide a full assessment of the democratic value and drawbacks of the recall mechanism (see Cronin 1989 for a seminal study, and for more recent ones Bowler 2004; Qvortrup 2011; Vandamme 2020; Welp & Whitehead 2020). I will instead focus on the main potential benefits and risks that it would bring in its specific use as part of the Semi-Directed Mandate. As briefly mentioned above, the use of the recall would be limited, in this proposal, compared to traditional forms of recall that can usually be motivated by a diversity of reasons, including political ones such as mere hostility to the representative in question[16]. It would be limited to two cases. First, in cases of a clear breach of the explicit mandate, i.e., the electoral promises endorsed at election time through Justified Voting. In this case, it would make sense to recall only representatives who are in a position to deliver on

[14] I thank the reviewer who pointed this out.

[15] A first contrast with SDM is that the latter is not restricted to these elected positions and can serve to dissolve the legislative assembly or recall the president. Other differences will be highlighted below.

[16] In some states and countries, such as Kansas (Siegel 2015) or the UK (Tonge 2019), recall is allowed only in cases of crime or ethical misconduct. Here, I want to make room for politically motivated recalls, but only a subset of them.

their promises: an individual recall might be appropriate for mayors, governors or presidents if they are directly elected and have discretionary power; a collective one to call anticipated elections in case of failures of a government. Second, there would be reasons to also allow individual recalls of any elected representative in cases of strong allegations of misbehavior, given that misbehaving politicians tend not to be sanctioned by their peers. It is plausible to see misbehavior such as corruption or conflicts of interest themselves as breaches of an implicit promise to act, as a representative, in accordance with some basic ethical norms (Mardellat 2019). This promise implicitly accompanies any political mandate. Therefore, recalls should be allowed both in cases of breach of the explicit and implicit mandate.

The main value of the recall comes from its potential to further increase popular accountability. If we want to strengthen the "promissory" (Mansbridge 2003) dimension of representation and popular accountability, we have reasons to see with a positive eye a mechanism that empowers voters to sanction the unjustified breaking of electoral promises and unethical behavior by representatives. The reiteration of elections already allows for this, by incentivizing representatives to anticipate voters' retrospective judgment (Manin 1997: 179), but the recall increases citizens' control over their representatives by making it more continuous and may thereby make it more likely that they will honor their promises. It makes it harder for politicians to rely on voters' short memory and less likely to be judged based on the last months of their mandate only. Finally, it allows sanctioning representatives who are not eligible for reelection (Urbinati 2006: 220). Thanks to the threat of recall, accountability would thus become *permanent*. Not in the sense that representatives would have to spend their days justifying themselves but in the sense that they would be induced, *throughout their mandate*, to justify themselves publicly to reduce the risks of facing a recall initiative. And if they fail to dissuade such an initiative, they will have to convince *at least* their constituents to maintain their trust in a popular vote of confidence.

However, before embracing the recall as an essential part of Semi-Directed Mandates, we need to look at the lessons that can be drawn from its use in contemporary democracies. Although existing forms of recall – including the Colombian *revocatoria del mandato* – differ in important ways from SDM, as we shall see, they call our attention to potential difficulties. Two main problems stand out in the empirical literature. The first is that a recall procedure easy to enact can create a state of permanent campaigning (Bowler 2004: 205; Sieberg 2015; Welp 2018: 461) as happens, for example, in Peru (Welp 2016). This can be a problem insofar as elected representatives need time to act. Policymaking can take time, especially when it involves feasibility and impact studies, or negotiations with different actors. Thus, if recall initiatives closely follow elections, or if representatives are continuously worried about the possibility of being recalled, it might become difficult to rule effectively. What is more, rulers would have incentives to favor policies whose results can be observed in the short term, to please an impatient electorate. This is undesirable, considering the importance of long-term issues such as the protection of the environment, education or social investments, for

example, the benefits of which rulers may not have the possibility to claim credit during their time in office[17].

Some design features can mitigate this risk. A demanding threshold of signatures can make the procedure sufficiently difficult to initiate to make it relatively exceptional[18]. What matters for accountability is a credible *threat* of sanction; the *possibility* to sanction clearly inappropriate or dishonest behavior without having to wait for the next election. Thus, the threat should be sufficiently realistic to incentivize representatives to deliver on their promises, but recalls should not be too frequent, to leave representatives some leeway. Furthermore, to make sure that representatives have time to act before they are judged, it can be stipulated, as is the case in some countries (Welp 2018), that recall initiatives cannot be launched during the first two years of a representative's term in office. To strengthen long-termism, one could even imagine pairing the recall with a widening of terms in office, to allow representatives enjoying continued support to pursue their reforms (Cronin 1989: 149-150) but we must acknowledge a trade-off between accountability and long-termism.

A good thing about the SDM, in this respect, is that it makes the recall process more focused. Instead of being revokable for any reason, just because a majority of citizens are dissatisfied, the SDM specifies the reasons based on which a representative might be recalled. In this framework, if a representative receives a mandate to make social investments, for example, what will be expected is evidence of investments, not results. And if it takes time to implement some promised reform, representatives would have the opportunity to explain why it is so.

Yet it is here that the second problem enters the picture: we cannot presuppose the good faith of political actors and activist groups, as a result of which the recall always runs the risk of being instrumentalized by the opposition for partisan purposes (as frequently happens in Colombia, for example) or by private interest groups for unjustified reasons. This risk cannot be eliminated, because malevolent actors can always pretend that there is a good reason to recall someone. They can pretend that X is not acting on their promises although they are. They can always deny the validity of X's justification for a delay in implementing a promised reform. And the opposition can seize the opportunity to bring down opponents or regain power.

The specific use of recall within SDM has again the advantage of reducing, on paper, the number of valid recall initiatives. In this respect, the SDM model compares favorably with the Colombian *revocatoria del mandato* and with unspecified recalls because it limits recall opportunities to cases of betrayal of key proposals[19] – not any deviation from the government plan. This marks an important difference. First, it reduces the possibility of recall to specified

[17] That said, with SDM, candidates and parties might also have incentives to include long-term goals on their ballot, like the carbon emission reductions in figure 1 because it is easier for them to claim that they are on the right track towards these long-term goals than to show that they have fully achieved them.

[18] At the same time, the threshold should not be too high and make the right to recall merely formal, as seems to be the case in Colombia for example, where the Constitution promises a strong popular empowerment but procedural hurdles make recalls unlikely (Cáceres 2013). Given the strong incentive for politicians to make recalls difficult, the appropriate threshold should be set, evaluated and revised by an independent citizen jury.

[19] This has the additional advantage of focusing the public's attention on key proposals, giving them more political salience and facilitating popular accountability, as argued above. In the Colombian system, the government plan is registered and made *available*, but not particularly *visible*.

and serious breaches of trust, which reduces opportunities for partisan instrumentalization. Consider, in contrast, that in Colombia any deviation from a government plan can be invoked to justify a recall. Second, the SDM also changes the incentives for the opposition: launching a recall procedure for a failure to implement a key proposal might push the government to implement it quickly to avoid a recall, which is not in the interest of the opposition if (as will often be the case) they do not support this policy. This matters since in the Colombian case, no less than 60% of the initiators of recall procedures belong to opposition parties (Welp & Milanese 2018, 1392). In contrast with SDM, the Colombian procedure makes it too easy and not costly enough for political opponents to initiate a recall.

The reduction of the basis for recalls and the significant change of incentives are already important differences providing reasons to believe that SDM is better protected against the undesirable effects of the *revocatoria del mandato* and other existing forms of recall. However, to further protect the process against instrumentalizations, additional constraints might be imagined. Opposition party members could be forbidden to launch recall initiatives and assist in the collection of signatures. The task of judging the validity of recall initiatives, as a public body is mandated to do in Minnesota (Bowler 2004: 203), Ecuador (Welp 2018) or Romania (Campodonico 2016: 366) could be entrusted to a randomly selected citizen jury, to minimize partisan quarrels. Any recall initiative meeting the required threshold of signatures would lead to the creation of such a citizen jury, which would hear the arguments of the initiators and the accused. This jury would not be asked to decide whether the accused representative should be recalled, but only whether the motivations for organizing a recall vote are valid, i.e., whether there are reasons to believe that the accused representative betrayed a key promise or the implicit mandate. All of this would not make the risks of manipulation disappear entirely, but combined with limits on campaign expenditures to reduce the power of special interest groups[20], they would arguably be sufficiently reduced to make the proposal credible, although only practice will tell us whether it succeeds in meeting its aims without creating undesirable effects.

However, some might argue that the SDM compares unfavorably with another parent alternative, the intra-party recall, which allows party members to recall their representatives "whenever their conduct is felt to be at odds with the aims or standards associated with the party" (White & Ypi 2020, 187). Intra-party procedures might be more prone to deliberation and deep reason-giving thanks to higher mutual trust and shared normative precommitments (White & Ypi 2016: 90-95). In addition to this, the intra-party recall has the considerable advantage of resisting strategic manipulation by opposition parties since it is only accessible to party members (and massive entryism is usually difficult to achieve). However, this benefit is associated with a very high cost: unlike the SDM, it empowers the few, not the many. Even if this kind of instrument may motivate more people to become party members by increasing participatory opportunities within parties (White & Ypi 2020, 191), we can expect the proportion of party members among the citizenry to remain low and their sociological profile to remain unrepresentative of the wider population (van Haute & Gauja 2015). Therefore, while the intra-party recall can be useful in solving intra-party problems of misalignment between party leaders and rank-and-file members, it compares unfavorably with SDM in

[20] On the influence of interest groups on recall in the USA, see Siegel 2015: 334-335.

terms of improving *popular* accountability. Thus, although it is not incompatible with other instruments of intra-party democracy, the SDM has a wider scope and more ambition.

## IV. The Complementarity of Justified Voting and Recall

Conceptually speaking, the two components of the Semi-Directed Mandate – Justified Voting and Mandate-Based Recall – are independent. One could defend Justified Voting without allowing recalls. It would then be a relatively minor reform of electoral representation, making electoral mandates a bit clearer and more focused, and promoting a more informed and deliberative attitude on the part of voters by inviting them to reflect upon the policy choices that motivate their vote (Vandamme 2018). This might be appealing to people who are closer to a trustee model of representation while recognizing the need to *improve* or *ease* electoral accountability. Others will want to *strengthen* accountability by increasing citizens' effective control over their representatives. The recall will be more appealing to them. They could certainly drop the highlighted key proposals element if they prefer either a fully directed mandate or a less constrained right to recall representatives for any reason.

There are, however, reasons to value the combination of the two elements. Most importantly, the SDM would improve the traditional recall practice by dealing with what a seminal study considered as its "most controversial aspect": "the lack of specificity required by law for individuals' or groups' reasons for seeking to recall a public official" (Cronin 1989: 151). This lack of specificity makes the recall too easy and more prone to instrumentalization. If it is enough for representatives to be unpopular to recall them, most of them could be recalled. Normatively speaking, we can legitimately expect recalls to be properly motivated. With the SDM, the promises supported at election time (in addition to the implicit promise not to be corrupted or seek personal advantages) would be the basis on which the receivability of recall initiatives would be assessed.

This gain in focus allowed by Justified Voting also has the potential to make the process more deliberative. Thus, taking stock of the different practices of recall around the world, Welp and Whitehead conclude that the "recall may work better when it is embedded in a broader process of public deliberation and policy debate, rather than simply operating as a device available to be used for the purpose of partisan aggression" (Welp and Whitehead 2020, 25). Interestingly, the SDM could help embed recall procedures in a broader deliberative process. Being constrained by the specific mandates, the recall would serve mainly as a threat incentivizing recursive interactions between representatives and constituents, the former keeping the latter informed about their plans for implementing the promised reforms. And even in cases in which a recall procedure would be enacted, the deliberative aspect would be maintained. First, initiators of the recall would have to provide convincing reasons for enacting it. Second, the incriminated representatives would be allowed to publicly defend themselves. In contrast with unspecified recalls, where a lack of popularity is sufficient to bring down a representative, the accusation would be clearer and the defense easier to build. Thus, the arguments pro and contra the recall would be publicly discussed during the recall campaign, attracting public attention to the representatives' mandates, achievements and inactions.

Furthermore, we could imagine using Justified Voting again in the recall vote. Thus, after hearing both sides, the citizen jury would set up a short list with the main arguments on both sides, which would be made available to all voters on the ballot. This would partly compensate for the partisan character of most media coverage and the information bubbles making it unlikely that voters genuinely consider alternative views. Whether the easy access to arguments on both sides will influence voters' intellectual engagement with opposed arguments should be examined empirically, but it seems plausible.[21]

There is therefore an interesting complementarity between these two instruments. The recall provides a mechanism that helps empower citizens in their monitoring role and strengthens the deliberative relationship between representatives and their constituents that the Semi-Directed Mandate aims to foster, by forcing representatives to continuously justify their actions to avoid a dangerous recall procedure. Justified Voting, in turn, makes the recall more focused, better protected (though not immunized) against partisan instrumentalizations, and more deliberative. Together they can strengthen popular accountability and reinforce the promissory dimension of representation while also stimulating "recursive representation" (Mansbridge 2019), i.e. recurring deliberative interactions between citizens and representatives, thereby overcoming some limitations of strictly promissory representation.

## V. Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, popular accountability is often put forward as one of the main values offered by electoral representation. However, given the well-documented accountability failures in existing electoral democracies, an alternative electoral model offering better prospects of accountability might strengthen the case for elections. The Semi-Directed Mandate proposal, with its potential to improve, ease and strengthen popular accountability, while fostering recursive interactions between representatives and citizens, can be seen as an attempt in this direction. It avoids the difficulties of strictly imperative mandates by allowing representatives to act outside the mandate if required by new circumstances and to publicly justify legitimate deviations from the mandate, while preserving citizens' power to sanction them.

Besides strengthening the case for elections against their discontents, the proposal made in this article also has the potential to seduce those who have a more radical conception of electoral representation[22], have sympathy for the imperative mandate, but are unsure how it could work in practice. By being more flexible in use than the traditional imperative mandate, and more open to negotiation and deliberation, the Semi-Directed Mandate could embody a credible new, less elitist and more egalitarian understanding of electoral representation, provided that it resists instrumentalizations. Instead of deferring to representatives to act in their name, citizens would be empowered to give them a more precise mandate and to monitor them more closely. Furthermore, one can hope that by reducing the independence of

[21] Some supportive evidence can be drawn from the Citizens' Initiative Review device, where voters have access to pro and contra arguments before voting. See Gastil and Knobloch 2019.

[22] I have in mind, among others, the tradition of radical republicanism, as presented in Leipold, Nabulsi & White 2020 or Hayat 2023.

representatives and increasing popular control, the mechanism could help reduce the undue influence of lobbies and, more generally, the unequal responsiveness in favor of the wealthy.

Nevertheless, the transformative potential of the proposal is limited. Many problems will persist that demand other, more ambitious responses, like the fact that citizens are insufficiently informed about politics, do not have much time to devote to it, or the other ways in which money permeates politics. Thus, the benefits that can be expected from introducing the model here defended – if they are confirmed in practice – will certainly be modest and insufficient. Furthermore, the model will be prima facie more appealing in majoritarian than in PR systems, as the latter are less concerned with direct accountability (see Powell 2000) and because coalition governments make the total fulfillment of key electoral promises illusory[23]. All these limitations, however, do not make the proposal irrelevant or uninteresting. It can at least be taken as an invitation to think creatively about ways of improving electoral representation.

[23] One could imagine using the SDM in a PR system to allow voters to approve non-negotiable policy proposals and sanction their party in case of unacceptable governmental compromise but it would risk leading to deadlock in coalition negotiations.

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