The Efficacy of Voting

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Popular voting is central to the current practice of large-scale democracy, and most citizens of established democracies regard voting as the primary practice of citizenship. Voting is the main, and in some cases the only way that most citizens currently participate in the collective exercise of authority over institutions of government. Because of this central focus on voting as the main form of citizen participation, evaluation of contemporary democracies requires an assessment of the meaningfulness of electoral participation as an exercise of citizens’ political authority.

The question of what makes electoral participation meaningful does not yield an obvious answer. The four most commonly invoked standards of electoral efficacy – individual decisiveness, partisan victory (or collective causal efficacy), mandate production, and preference aggregation – all face serious empirical and conceptual challenges and lead many to doubt whether voting can *ever* be regarded as a meaningful exercise of citizens’ political authority.

In this paper, I argue that voting is efficacious when it allows citizens to contribute to the shared project of democratic self-rule according to their community’s shared plan. Democracy is a collective activity that requires participants to share a plan for how their individual contributions fit together to accomplish their shared goal of collective self-rule. Evaluating the efficacy of electoral participation therefore requires understanding the particular role that voting plays in a contemporary plan for democracy. We should not expect voting to be a microcosm or instantiation of all the values of democracy; it cannot bear the entire normative burden of democracy on its own. Instead, I argue, voting plays a particular role within a broader plan for collective self-rule as a unique form of mass participation that concretely and formally establishes the equal political authority of all citizens over at least a few important decisions.

With this understanding of the role of voting in contemporary democracies in mind, I explain why the most common standards of electoral efficacy fail to evaluate voting in the right way. I then develop a set of conditions for electoral efficacy that are sensitive to the particular role that voting plays in contemporary plans for democracy. In developing these standards, I make use of the common distinction that scholars of voter attitudes make between internal and external political efficacy. I argue that these two attitude constructs reflect two kinds of evaluation of the citizens’ authoritative role in the political system and when considered in an institutionally specific way, both can offer insight into the standards for assessing when voting effectively fulfills its role in a plan for democracy.

These standards are not fully determinate of all electoral institutions. Though voting as a form of participation seems to play a similar role in nearly all contemporary democratic communities, the practice of voting is embedded within different kinds of plans for democracy. The particular way that a democratic community meets the standards for meaningful electoral participation will therefore depend on the particular plans that members of that community have worked out together. The conditions for efficacy I offer here will not settle all debates about the design of electoral institutions, but it can still offer critical purchase for intervening in those debates and in other questions of electoral administration. In the final section of this paper, I briefly discuss how my account of electoral efficacy can illuminate the debates over compulsory voting and limited ballot access.

**Section I: The Role of Voting in the Plan for Democracy**

Evaluations of voting as a democratic practice tend to think of democracy as an abstract ideal, a collection of evaluative standards that might be applied to any system or institution to assess how closely that institution adheres to those standards.[[1]](#footnote-1) But democracy is not just an abstract ideal. It is a collective activity. At its most basic, democracy means that the people rule.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Understanding democracy not just as a set of ideals, but as a collective activity should affect how we think about evaluating democratic institutions. This is because once we see democracy as a collective activity, we recognize the necessary particularity of democracy’s instantiation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Democracy is a thing that the members of a particular political community do together. Annie Stilz and Eric Beerbohm have argued that this understanding of democracy as a collective activity can generate loyalty to and obligations to participate in particular democratic communities.[[4]](#footnote-4) Likewise, the philosopher Christopher Kutz has argued that civic and political obligations, like the obligation to vote, arise from individuals’ commitment to a collective project of self-rule.[[5]](#footnote-5) Individuals involved in a collective project form “participatory intentions:” they intend to play their part in producing the collective goal.[[6]](#footnote-6) Kutz argues that voting enables a citizen to act on her democratic participatory intention: “individual voting is rational, indeed instrumentally rational, because voting is a *constitutive* element of a collective project that voters can conceive as their project.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

But seeing voting as a constitutive element of the project of democracy depends on the community’s shared understanding of *how* they will rule together. As participatory and deliberative democrats have observed, voting is not the only way to make collective decisions. Even assuming a representative system, officials might be selected by lot instead of election. Democracy, as rule by the people, is not fully institutionally determinate. Since there may be lots of ways of doing democracy, the members of a political community need a shared understanding for how *they* will undertake the collective project of self-rule.

Philosophers like Michael Bratman have pointed to the importance of shared plans for enabling collective action. Bratman argues that one of the conditions for a group of people to share an intention to engage in a particular activity is that each of the members intends to participate according to a set of “meshing sub-plans.”[[8]](#footnote-8) If the members of a group are to meaningfully contribute to a collective project, they need to share an understanding of how each of their actions will fit together to produce the shared aim. In his account of the “planning theory of law,” Scott Shapiro emphasizes the importance of shared plans in group life. According to Shapiro, shared plans “guide and coordinate behavior by resolving doubts and disagreements about how to act.”[[9]](#footnote-9) If a group of individuals is to accomplish a collective goal, they need a shared understanding of *how* they will accomplish that goal together.

Like any collective activity, democracy depends on citizens’ sharing a set of plans for how they will accomplish their shared goal of collective self-rule. Citizens need to share an understanding of how their individual acts of participation will fit together to produce democracy. A plan transforms mere expression and meaningless gestures like pulling a lever into political participation and the collective exercise of authority.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Recognizing the importance of shared plans to democracy allows us to formulate how we should understand individual efficacy in elections. Voting should be understood as efficacious if by voting a citizen is able to contribute to the collective project of self-rule according to her community’s plan for democracy. As Christopher Kutz explains, when individuals act on their “participatory intentions,” their actions derive their meaningfulness from the way that they combine with others’ actions to produce a shared goal. The meaningfulness of an individual’s vote thus depends on the existence of an effective shared plan for democracy that identifies how individual votes constitutively contribute to the collective project of self-rule.

Evaluating the efficacy of voting, then, requires attention to the role that voting plays in particular plans that guide democratic participation in actual communities. This cannot be achieved simply by reasoning from abstract principles of democracy. It is not enough to know what would be the best plan for democracy. As Scott Shapiro argues, the authoritativeness of a plan cannot depend on its being the *best* plan, since the point of plans is just to settle uncertainty about how to act, in the face of disagreement about which is the best way to proceed.[[11]](#footnote-11) Even when citizens doubt whether mass voting (or particular electoral rules) should play an important role in the best plan for democracy, they can still recognize that the collective project of democracy requires a generally *shared* plan. So long as the existing plan for democracy is more or less effective, that plan still offers citizens the surest guide for how to participate, confident that their contributions will fit together with those of their fellow citizens to produce democracy.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In this paper, I aim to evaluate the practice of voting on its own terms, looking at the particular role that voting plays in contemporary plans for democracy, and investigating what conditions are necessary for voting to effectively play that role. This is an exercise of constructive interpretation. In *Law’s Empire*, Ronald Dworkin defines constructive interpretation as “imposing purpose on an object or practice in order to make of it the best possible example of the form or genre to which it is taken to belong."[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, the constructive interpretation I offer here examines the beliefs, principles, and practices that characterize voting in contemporary democracies and identify a purpose that makes the most sense of them *as part of a plan for democracy*. A constructive interpretation is thus constrained from two ends: by empirical reality – the interpretation needs to “fit” the actual practices I interpret, and by the conceptual requirements of a plan for democracy – the interpretation of the role of voting I offer should be part of a plausibly effective way for the people to achieve collective self-rule.

The project of constructive interpretation then has a further normative component in which existing practices are critically evaluated in light of the best purpose that can be ascribed to them. My principle aim in this paper is to offer a set of conditions that need to be met if voting is to effectively fulfill its role in contemporary plans for democracy. These standards can then be used to evaluate existing practices and provide some guidance for the reform of electoral institutions and practices.

*A constructive interpretation of the role of voting in contemporary democracies*

Though it is embedded in very different plans for democracy, voting, as a form of participation, plays a similar and central role in most contemporary established democracies.[[14]](#footnote-14) Survey data on citizens’ attitudes toward voting and habits of participation, as well as public discourse and common practices reveal that voting plays a unique role as a form of mass participation that concretely and formally instantiates the equal political authority of all citizens in a democracy. Elections reserve certain important decisions for the final political authority: the citizenry as a whole, and it is expected that these important decisions depend on the *actual* inputs of all citizens. Voting thus identifies a minimum level and form of participation that citizens must engage in if they are to contribute to the project of collective self-rule according to their community’s shared plan for democracy. Because they are such mass moments of participation in which individual influence is minimal, elections draw attention to the distinctively collective character of the democratic project. By voting, citizens do not just contribute to government, but they clearly participate in the *democratic* project of collective self-rule

Global public discourse and activism reflects the centrality of voting to our understanding of participation in modern democracies. The watchdog group *Freedom House* keeps a running tally of *electoral* democracies,[[15]](#footnote-15) while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that the authority of governments should be derived from the “will of the people…expressed in periodic and genuine elections” [[16]](#footnote-16) This way of defining democracy does not reflect the triumph of the minimalist claim that democracy just *is* a regime with elections. The Freedom House and UNDHR definitions of democracy attach a normative value to the institution of elections. They see popular voting as a method for rule by the people.

If we want to assess the efficacy of electoral democracy, though, we need a better understanding of the role that voting plays in a shared plan for collective self-rule. After all, popular voting isn’t conceptually necessary for democracy (perhaps we could have a lottery system to select representative rulers). Nor is voting the only way that citizens actually participate in decision-making today’s democracies. Citizens might also contribute to public deliberation, lobby or petition their representatives, engage in protests or public shaming, donate time or money to a campaign, or even stand for office themselves. As numerous scholars have pointed out, compared to the myriad of other forms of participation, voting is a very “blunt instrument” for influencing policy.[[17]](#footnote-17) Popular voting alone surely cannot bear all of the normative weight of the idea of rule by the people. So, just how does voting contribute to rule by the people?

Since a plan for democracy is essentially a shared understanding among citizens about how their participation fits together with that of their fellow citizens to generate democracy, the best place to begin looking for evidence of the role that voting plays in the plan for democracy is the actual beliefs and attitudes that citizens hold toward the practice of democracy.

In surveys, citizens of democracies all over the world overwhelmingly endorse the idea that there is a duty to vote.[[18]](#footnote-18) In one of the broadest based surveys of political attitudes, the 2004 ISSP citizenship module, respondents were asked to rate on a seven point scale how important it is for a good citizen to “always vote in election.” In 37 of 40 countries included in the survey, over fifty percent of respondents rated this a 6 or a 7.[[19]](#footnote-19) In twelve of these countries, more than 75% of respondents rated always voting in the top two categories. By contrast, the percentage of respondents who rated “keeping watch over the government” in the top two categories of importance exceeded 50% in only twenty-two of the 40 countries studied, and it exceeded 75% in only three. And only in one country (The Phillipines) did more than 50% of respondents rate “being active in social and political organizations” in the top two categories of importance. These results suggest that the widespread belief in the duty to vote is not just one example of a more general duty of political participation. Rather, voting is regarded as a distinctively important kind of participation.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In depth studies of citizen participation in the United States consistently show support for the distinctiveness of the duty to vote. Russell Dalton finds that support for the duty to vote in the US is more akin to belief in the duty to obey the law than in the importance of other forms of participation.[[21]](#footnote-21) Other studies show similar results, with voting ranked very highly on lists of citizen duties – and often freely reported - more in the league with unconditional duties like obeying the law than with other forms of political engagement or political interest.[[22]](#footnote-22) Scholars of participation support the distinctiveness of voting by observing that the reasons and background factors that lead people to vote exhibit a completely different pattern from those that lead people to participate in other ways.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Voting’s distinctiveness seems to arise for two related reasons: 1) the meaningfulness of voting seems tied to the fact that so many citizens actually participate in it, and 2) voting need not be policy or outcome oriented. American survey respondents consistently affirm that it is important to vote even when many other people also vote,[[24]](#footnote-24) and In a survey of Canadians, Andre Blais finds overwhelming agreement with the statement "In order to preserve democracy, it is essential that the great majority of citizens vote"[[25]](#footnote-25) Widespread participation in voting is not incidental; citizens see mass participation as actually constitutive of the electoral process.

It is probably *because* voting is meant to be a mass form of participation that it is seen to be less outcome-oriented than other forms of participation. If voting were primarily outcome oriented, then a citizen should only vote when she actually has a preferred outcome to promote, and her voting is likely to contribute to producing this outcome. But the popular understanding of the duty to vote holds that a good citizen should “*always* vote in elections.”[[26]](#footnote-26) If all citizens are supposed to participate in voting, then voting can’t be meaningful only when it is primarily outcome-oriented. Actual voting behavior supports the understanding of voting as distinctly non-policy-oriented. In his broad study of voter participation in the United States, David Campbell finds high voter turnout in very politically homogeneous where electoral outcomes are a foregone conclusion, but the sense of the duty to vote is very strong.[[27]](#footnote-27) Chris Achen and Andre Blais likewise find that in predicting voter turnout, belief in the duty to vote has a negative interaction with the effect of caring about the outcome on the decision to vote. How much a person cares about the outcome of an election is generally a strong predictor of the likelihood that she will vote, but its effectiveness as a predictor decreases among survey respondents who believe more strongly in a duty to vote. Individuals who believe there is a duty to vote are not just more likely to actually vote; they actually think about the decision to vote differently.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The belief in the distinctive importance of voting that these surveys reveal reflects a *publicly shared* norm. Numerous countries (thirty-one by one count[[29]](#footnote-29)) have some form of compulsory voting.[[30]](#footnote-30) Even where voting is not compulsory, official language often endorses the idea of the duty to vote. The US *Citizenship and Naturalization Information* document describes voting as “a duty as well as a privilege,”[[31]](#footnote-31) and voting is actually listed among the duties of a citizen in the Italian Constitution.[[32]](#footnote-32) Our political practices also reflect a belief that widespread participation in voting is distinctively important. Governments go to great pain and expense to ensure that voting is as accessible as possible.[[33]](#footnote-33) The special attention that we give to making voting accessible – where other forms of participation notoriously are not – suggests the expectation that *everyone* participate in voting. Indeed, we wring our hands over voter turnout rates of 60%. If voting were just another kind of participation, this would be astonishing given the fact that other forms of political engagement enjoy much lower rates of participation.[[34]](#footnote-34)

But voting is not just another form of participation; instead, it plays an important and distinctive role in contemporary democracies as a special form of mass participation. In large-scale contemporary democracies, most decision-making takes place at some remove from “the people.” Though citizens can theoretically influence political decision-making through a variety of channels, in reality, accessing these different channels of influence often requires civic skills and resources that ordinary citizens lack. Moreover, modern political life is tremendously complicated, and citizens might not even know where to begin. In this modern reality of distant decisions making, elections focus citizens’ attention on a set of decisions that *they are supposed to make,* and offer unique occasions on which the equal political authority of all citizens is made formal and concrete.

The plan for democracy allows for the people to formally and informally delegate a great deal of their decision-making authority, but the plan also reserves a set of important questions to be decided by the final political authority: the citizenry as a whole. The plan offers citizens a clear guide for how their individual actions can contribute to collective self-rule by focusing their attention on a particular set of questions that belong to them, that they are meant to decide. Voting thus acts as a minimum required form of participation. Citizens can (and should) seek to influence political life in many other ways, but if they are to be part of “the people” that rules in a democracy, then they must *at least* contribute to deciding the questions that have been reserved for the exercise of the people’s collective authority.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Voting is the clearest way an individual can act, confident that her actions will fit together with her fellow citizens’ to achieve their shared aim of collective self-rule. Because it is such a massive undertaking, voting also makes plain the truly collective nature of the democratic project. When citizens cast their ballot in a polling place or watch electoral returns on the news, it is very difficult to ignore the way that their political influence depends on their fellow citizens. By voting a citizen cannot see herself as just an individual aiming to elect a candidate or influence a policy, but rather, as Christopher Kutz observes, by voting she “orients [herself] around the agency of others.”[[36]](#footnote-36) She affirms her role in a collective project of self-rule, a project in which all citizens are equal co-agents.

Scholars often emphasize the symbolic value of voting as a civic ritual, an expression of democratic solidarity.[[37]](#footnote-37) But voting is not a mere symbol of democracy. When citizens vote, they *actually participate* in collective decision-making. When citizens vote, they carry out their part in a plan for democracy. When I vote, I actually contribute to the collective exercise of political authority on equal terms with my fellow citizens. Though my contribution seems only marginal, it is precisely this minimal individual influence (no greater or smaller than anyone else’s) that identifies my action as part of a distinctly democratic project. When I vote, I do not just take part in political rule, but rather, I take part in a particular shared project of ruling together with my fellow citizens.

Voting is efficacious when it allows citizens to participate according to the shared plan for collective self-rule. The efficacy of voting therefore depends on voting’s actually fulfilling its role in the plan for democracy; voting should really be a unique form of mass participation in which a few important decisions depend on the equal political authority of all citizens. In the second half of this paper, I develop some conditions that political systems need to satisfy if voting is to effectively fulfill its role in the plan for democracy. But first, I briefly discuss four commonly used standards of electoral efficacy. I argue that these standards are inadequate because they do not appropriately account for the distinctive role of voting contemporary plans for democracy.

**Section II: What efficacy isn’t**

Scholarshave often been invoked one of four common standards as a way of evaluating when voting is meaningful or worthwhile: individual decisiveness, partisan victory, electoral mandate, and preference communication and aggregation. Each of these standards offers a different way of thinking about the meaningfulness of individual participation in elections, and all have been sharply criticized by political science and positive political theory in the 20th century. I argue that the failure of any of these standards of electoral efficacy to stand up to reality should not be taken as a failure of voting itself, because these standards do not account for the particular role that voting plays in the plan for democracy.

*Individual Decisiveness*

The standard of individual decisiveness as electoral efficacy is the electoral version of rational instrumental reasoning. Because voting entails some cost (at least an opportunity cost), a person should only vote if by voting she can bring about an outcome whose benefit outweighs the cost of voting (this applies both to act-consequentialist and to self-interested rationality). If this is the standard we use to evaluate the efficacy of voting in elections, then we would have to say that voting is almost never efficacious. Elections almost never come down to a single vote. For all except a small handful of local elections, each voter can see that the electoral outcome would be the same regardless of whether she voted or not, so by voting, she effectively wasted the opportunity to act in a way that would make some difference to her well-being or to the common good.

Rational choice theorists’ efforts to rescue the rationality of voting have succeeded by pointing out that an individual can decisively contribute to her own well-being by voting if she enjoys the act of voting itself.[[38]](#footnote-38) But this way of recasting the rational efficacy of voting eliminates the critical purchase of the concept of efficacy for evaluating electoral democracies. Efficacy comes to be a function of individual psychology, rather than of the political context.[[39]](#footnote-39)

One way of rescuing the critical purchase of this individual decisiveness view of efficacy is to suggest that the electoral system should maximize the probability that an individual voter will be decisive. Though officials can certainly look at partisan affiliations and voting trends to draw electoral districts that will be more or less competitive, evaluating the effectiveness of an election based on the probability that an individual will be decisive ignores the importance of the individual choices that determine the probability of decisiveness. It would be strange, I think, to conclude that voting is not an effective form of democratic participation just because a sizeable majority of voters prefers one candidate over the other. Maximizing the probability of individual decisiveness in elections would require constantly redefining electoral districts in a way that would undermine the point of electoral choice. It would also be basically impossible to manipulate this probability for the kinds of offices and ballot questions for which the electorate is predefined.

Though some individual elections might happen to meet the standard of efficacy as individual decisiveness, elections in general can’t be expected to meet this standard. But once we understand the role that voting plays in a democracy, it is clear that individual decisiveness isn’t the appropriate understanding of efficacy against which we assess the meaningfulness of voting. The individual decisiveness approach just misses the way that for citizens committed to democracy, policy pursuit is imbedded within an intention to rule together with others. Voting is not just one way that I can pursue my policy goals. It is the way that my fellow citizens and I have agreed we will make decisions together. In fact, voting is special in that it is meant to be a mass form of participation in which all citizens contribute to deciding a few important questions that are reserved for the citizenry as a whole. Voting makes clear to participants the collective nature of democracy, and the radical implications of engaging in a collective endeavor with millions of their fellow citizens. Demanding individual decisiveness in elections simply denies the role of voting in a democracy as formally establishing the equal political authority of all citizens at once.

*Partisan victory*

Recognizing that individual decisiveness in elections is an impossible standard, some consequentialists have suggested that voting should be understood as efficacious when an individual’s preferred outcome prevails. Contrary to the version of rationality which holds that individuals should avoid paying the opportunity cost of voting unless they can be decisive over outcomes, causal consequentialists argue that individuals should want to be part of a group that is jointly efficacious in bringing about a good outcome.[[40]](#footnote-40) A similar logic underlies many competitive understandings of democracy: individual citizens relate to politics through parties or associations of which they are apart. Individuals who contribute to their team’s victory can be said to have efficaciously voted.

This view of efficacy renders the losers’ participation meaningless in hindsight, though, and doesn’t fully capture the way we think about the point of voting. As our exploration of attitudes toward voting revealed, most citizens believe that a person should vote even when the preferred outcome is unlikely to “win” and many even believe that voting does not require having a preferred outcome at all. Partisan causal efficacy clearly can’t be the standard of meaningfulness if voting is important even when an individual does not have a preferred partisan outcome.

Voting can’t be motivated solely by a desire to contribute to good outcomes or to ‘win’ in political competition. As critics of the consequentialist argument for the duty to vote have pointed out, there are lots of ways that an individual can contribute to good outcomes,[[41]](#footnote-41) and many more effective ways to gain political influence. What directs people to pursue their political aims by *voting* is a plan that identifies a set of decisions that citizens are supposed to participate in answering. The plan for contemporary democracy defines voting as a form of mass participation in which decisions are made by all citizens, but this plan clearly requires the participation of the winners as well as the losers.[[42]](#footnote-42) The individual citizen who votes for a losing candidate has still participated according to a shared plan for democracy. He has contributed to the collective project of self-rule to exactly the same extent as his fellow citizens.

The partisan victory understanding of the efficacy of voting does not give enough weight to the way that partisan competition and the pursuit of policy goals are embedded within a shared intention to rule democratically with one’s fellow citizens. Even when my preferred outcome does not prevail, I may still have effectively contributed to the shared project of self-rule by participating in the process of collective decision-making according to the plan that I share with my fellow citizens for how we will work out the process of governing together.

*The electoral mandate*

An account of individual efficacy in elections needs to be attentive to the role of voting in the plan for democracy as a form of mass contribution to a decision that is meant to be truly collective. The standard for individual efficacy can’t be based on “getting one’s way,” but rather should be based on how one’s vote contributes to the collective exercise of authority according to the plan for democracy. One of the more commonly accepted standards for evaluating electoral efficacy, the “electoral mandate” view takes seriously that voting really is a contribution to a collective decision. The electoral mandate account of efficacy evaluates the effectiveness of elections as an instrument of the citizenry as a whole, but this view still neglects the significance of voting’s special role in a plan for democracy.

The idea of electoral efficacy that lies behind the electoral mandate is the idea that when citizens decide which candidate should hold a certain office, they also settle policy questions which, though not themselves on the ballot, are asserted to be implicitly at stake in candidate elections. Upon election, public officials often claim a “popular mandate” to enact the policy program on which they campaigned.

Political theorists and political scientists have raised serious doubts about the idea of an electoral mandate, by observing that citizens vote for candidates on the basis of many different reasons, and that majority support for a candidate may not reflect majority support for any particular component of a policy platform.[[43]](#footnote-43) An electoral majority can be constructed from a coalition of minorities who feel very strongly about one or two issues. This led Robert Dahl to characterize pluralist democracy as “minorities rule”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Despite the dubiousness of interpreting elections as mandates for entire policy programs, the mandate conception of electoral efficacy remains implicit in the assumption that many political theorists and political scientists make that citizens ought to decide who to vote for on the basis of policy issues. But as so many critics have pointed out, voting for public officials is not an effective way of communicating policy preferences.[[45]](#footnote-45) Voters are unable to list their reasons on the ballot.

The problem with the electoral mandate view of efficacy is that it tries to make elections do too much. Rather than seeing voting as a particular kind of participation that plays a particular role in the plan for democracy, the electoral mandate view takes the centrality and universality of electoral participation to mean that it must encapsulate the full normative value of democracy. If the people rule, then they must do so entirely by voting. This means that rather than understanding elections as identifying a few important questions that are reserved for the citizens as a whole, elections identify a few questions to serve as proxies for all political decision-making. Because it expects to use a very simple mechanism to enable complex communication on a massive scale, the mandate conception of electoral efficacy is doomed to fail.

It is the simplicity of the electoral decision that makes meaningful mass participation in voting possible. As many scholars have repeatedly observed, voting is an information poor kind of participation. The people can only translate their choice in a small set of narrowly defined questions. Nevertheless, Voting is uniquely structured to enable mass contribution to these few decisions. Elections play a central role in the plan for democracy, because they represent distinctive moments of mass participation in which a few important decisions have been reserved for the citizenry as a whole. By voting, individual citizens participate in making these decisions together with all of their fellow citizens.

The mandate conception of electoral efficacy misunderstands the distinctive role that voting plays in elections, but it also neglects the way that voting is embedded within different communities’ broader plans for democracy. The electoral mandate view assumes a direct translation between the election of public officials and policy decision-making, but different communities’ plans for democracy may imagine different roles for elected officials, and define the relationship between mass electoral decisions policy outcomes in different ways. They also include different roles for non-electoral forms of citizen participation, and more or less formal involvement of intermediate groups like parties. All of these features of a plan for democracy may affect the ways that electoral outcomes actually affect the character of a community’s public life.

*Preference Communication and Aggregation*

Like the electoral mandate conception, the preference aggregation understanding of electoral efficacy rests on too narrow a conception of how voting might function within the plan for democracy. Unlike the electoral mandate conception, the preference aggregation assumption does not expect electoral decisions to act as proxies for other decisions, but preference aggregation does expect that the question on the ballot will be decided in a particular way. This view holds that voting is efficacious when citizens can successfully communicate their preferences over the question (or choice set) at hand and aggregate them in such a way that an election yields a “social choice” determined solely by voters’ preferences.

The Social Choice Theory of the 1960s and 70s troubled this conception of efficacy by revealing both the impossibility of reliably identifying a unique social preference,[[46]](#footnote-46) and the significance of agenda-setting for constraining or even determining outcomes.[[47]](#footnote-47) Meanwhile, surveys of voter attitudes have repeatedly revealed that many citizens cannot be said to have political preferences at all.[[48]](#footnote-48)

These results present a devastating challenge to the preference communication and aggregation account of electoral efficacy. In *Liberalism Against Populism*, William Riker leverages the results of social choice theory to argue that reality could not support the “populist” interpretation of voting as an expression of the people’s will. Instead, Riker suggests, voting could at best support a “liberal” interpretation – elections allowed for the possibility that people might occasionally be able to kick a tyrant out of office. Meanwhile, scholars who wish to retain the preference aggregation view of democracy labor to demonstrate the limited applicability of certain social choice results,[[49]](#footnote-49) and to broaden the way that we think about political preferences.[[50]](#footnote-50) On the other hand, deliberative democrats often use these empirical results as part of their argument for shifting the attention and normative weight of democracy away from voting.[[51]](#footnote-51) The core of democracy, deliberative democrats argue, should not be about the aggregation of individual preferences, but about that way citizens form their political preferences in a process of shared reasoning with others.

The preference aggregation understanding of electoral efficacy, though, again misses the point of the role that voting plays in a democracy. Democracy is not rule by preferences; it is rule by the people.[[52]](#footnote-52) By voting, citizens exercise their agency in making a choice. To vote is an act of will. More importantly, it is an act of will within a particular collective context. When citizens vote, they do not just make a decision, rather, they participate in making a *collective* decision – within a broader project of collective self-rule.

The preference aggregation view of electoral efficacy reflects an impoverished view of collective life; it takes group decisions to be some kind of predictable mathematical combination of individual decisions. But this neglects how the collective context itself shapes the way that individuals reason and decide. Political participation is participation in a collective project that depends on massively shared agency. Taking part in the process of political decision-making is just a fundamentally different kind of activity than making a decision in circumstances where the individual is sovereign. The shared work of collective self-rule involves a messy mixture of conflict and compromise as citizens develop a sense of the concerns, priorities, and primary disagreements that characterize *their shared public life as a community*. The actual interactions of its citizens distinguish a community from a random collection of individuals, and the public life that results from these interactions can’t be predicted just by knowing the preferences of the community members.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Deliberative democrats have long criticized “aggregative” democracy for ignoring the way that individuals’ preferences are shaped in public discussion, and in their renewed focus on deliberative preference formation, they tend to relegate voting to the periphery of public life. But this is a mistake. The collective work of democracy involves not just making collective decisions, but also identifying a plan for how citizens will make these decisions together, and even identifying the questions that they will decide. Communities settle on decision procedures that will allow them to answer the kind of questions that need to be settled in their political life, but at the same time, these procedures influence the kinds of questions or concerns that a community will address publicly.

In contemporary democracies, the political process of developing political agendas, priorities, and preferences takes place in a context in which a few important decisions will be settled by the mass participation of the entire citizenry. These mass moments of participation provide a frame for public discussion and structure the possibilities of political life.[[54]](#footnote-54) Even though elections do not reveal some underlying social preference or popular will, they nevertheless play a central and distinctive role in citizens’ collective project of self-rule.

**Section III: Electoral Conditions and The Sense of Efficacy**

These traditional ways of thinking about the efficacy of elections fail to account for the particular role that voting plays in a plan for democracy. Because voting is a *mass* form of participation in which political decisions depend on the contribution of *all* citizens to a *collective* exercise of political authority, the efficacy of voting cannot be defined as individual or even group decisiveness over outcomes. Instead, individual efficacy in elections should be characterized by a citizen’s actually being able to play her part in the shared plan for self-rule. This means that contemporary communities’ *plans* for democracy, in which voting plays a central role as a unique form of mass participation, must effectively generate democracy. Moreover, if individuals are actually to play their part in the plan for democracy by voting, then the community’s *political reality*, its actual electoral institutions and practices, must enable voting to actually fulfill its role in the plan for democracy.

In the remainder of this section, I examine what scholars of political attitudes call a sense of political efficacy. Examining the concept of political efficacy can offer insight into the kinds of conditions that a plan for democracy must meet if it is to provide a reliable guide for citizens’ contribution to the democratic project. In the following section, then, I use these insights to articulate a set of conditions that must be satisfied if voting is to effectively fulfill its role in contemporary communities’ plan for democracy, that is, if by voting, citizens are actually able to do their part in the shared project of collective self-rule, according to their shared plan.

Scholars of political attitudes in the United States have long recognized a construct of attitudes that indicate a broad feeling of political efficacy. An index of questions intended to measure political efficacy appeared on the earliest versions of the NES. In *The Voter Decides*, the authors define efficacy as “the feeling that individual political action does have or can have an impact upon the political process.”[[55]](#footnote-55) This kind of efficacy does not depend on the individual’s ability to get her way in any particular election, but refers instead to a more general sense that the political system does depend on actual citizen inputs. We might say that it refers to a sense that the existing plan for participation actually produces rule by the people.

The sense of political efficacy that interests political scientists is a subjective attitude, and it may seem unimportant at first to objectively assessing the effectiveness of voting within a plan for democracy. After all, an individual can simply be mistaken about the plan’s actual effectiveness. Citizens’ subjective feelings of efficacy are important, though, because shared plans do not exist independently of the beliefs of those who are to carry out the plans. The action-guiding character of plans arises from the fact that they coordinate action and settle the matter about what is to be done. A few individuals may be mistaken about the effectiveness of their community’s shared plan for democracy. But if most citizens actually do not believe that they have an effective plan for democracy, then it will just be the case that there is no shared plan. A plan is only a plan when people actually recognize its action-guiding authority.[[56]](#footnote-56) Those who have a low sense of political efficacy are less likely to vote, and less likely even to feel that they ought to vote.[[57]](#footnote-57) Thus, if we are interested in whether voting actually fulfills its role as a form of *mass* participation that formally and concretely establishes the political authority of *all* citizens, we should be attentive to citizens’ subjective sense of political efficacy and to the objective conditions that underlie it.

Political scientists who study political attitudes generally agree that the sense of political efficacy includes two related but distinct attitudes described as “internal” and “external” efficacy.[[58]](#footnote-58) Each of these components affects a citizen’s sense of her ability to contribute the exercise of political authority, but internal and external efficacy have distinct attitude “objects.”[[59]](#footnote-59) External efficacy has as its object the political system. It refers to “beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizen demands,” while internal efficacy has as its object the self; it refers to “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and participate effectively in politics.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Though scholars disagree about the relationship between internal and external efficacy, and how best to measure each of them, there seems to be a consensus that these are distinct sets of attitudes that are differently related to other beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of participation.

These two components of the sense of political efficacy also reflect assessments of different objective features of the electoral system. The relationship between external efficacy and the actual effectiveness of the voting-centered plan for democracy is fairly straightforward. The contemporary plan for democracy identifies voting as a form of mass participation that formally and concretely instantiates the equal political authority of all citizens. If voting is to actually fulfill its role in the plan for democracy, then “governmental authorities and institutions” need to be appropriately responsive to electoral participation. The point of voting is that at least some political decisions should be, not just responsive to, but actually dependent on the actual contribution of all citizens. If the results of elections have little or no effect on governing institutions, then voting cannot be construed as individual participation in a collective project of *self-rule*.

The relation between the sense of internal efficacy and the objective efficacy of the plan for democracy may seem less obvious at first. A person with a low sense of personal efficacy might simply not feel up to the challenge of participating in the collective exercise of authority, even though he sees that voting would offer him an effective way of doing so. Political scientists and sociologists often treat the sense of internal efficacy as essentially a personality trait – whether an individual feels personally able to affect political life is primarily a reflection of whether he feels generally able to exert a measure of control over his life. [[61]](#footnote-61)

But we should not be too quick to conclude that a sense of internal efficacy does not reflect an assessment of the objective conditions of the political context. Internal *political* efficacy, though it takes the self as its primary reference object, fundamentally concerns the self in relation to politics. The sense of internal efficacy therefore implicitly includes an evaluation of the political system on one dimension that is crucial in a democracy – whether it facilitates the participation of ordinary individuals.

The contemporary plan for democracy identifies voting as a form of mass participation in which all citizens are expected to participate. This role depends on voting’s actually being a form of participation that is suitable for the basic competence of ordinary citizens. Survey questions that aim to measure internal efficacy ask respondents whether they agree with statements about the extent to which “people like me” are qualified to participate in political life,[[62]](#footnote-62) but this assessment, of course, depends on what qualifications citizens believe they would need to participate. Thus, though internal efficacy may be primarily an evaluation of the self as a political actor, it must also implicitly include an evaluation of the political context in which the citizen might act.[[63]](#footnote-63) If voting is to effectively fulfill its role as a form of mass participation, then it must be designed to foster participation by ordinary citizens.

**Section IV: Conditions for Efficacious Voting**

The two distinct attitude constructs of internal and external efficacy described by the empirical literature can help us to articulate some conditions for electoral efficacy. That is, thinking about the objective conditions that would need to obtain to generate a sense of both external and internal efficacy, we can articulate some conditions necessary for voting to effectively play the role in the plan for democracy that I described in Section I. This takes up the normative component of constructive interpretation, as these conditions offer a critical standard for assessing existing electoral systems and revising them to render practices more coherent with the best interpretation of the role of voting in the plan for democracy.[[64]](#footnote-64)

*Decisive elections*

First, and most obviously, the results of an election should *decide* some political question, and that decision should be counterfactually robust. Voting does not fulfill its role in the plan for democracy if the ruling party holds elections but only plans to heed the electoral results should their preferred outcome prevail. If voting is to fulfill its role as a unique moment in which the entire citizenry actually exercises collective political authority, public officials cannot have discretion to disregard electoral results. This is the key difference between elections and public opinion polls or even many other forms of intentional participation. Votes are not submitted for consideration. Votes are counted equally according to a predefined aggregation rule,[[65]](#footnote-65) and electoral returns are decisive.

*Impactful elections*

The second condition for voting to effectively play its role in the plan for democracy is that the impact of elections on the character of public life should be substantial. The plan for democracy focuses citizens’ attentions on a few questions that have been reserved for the people as a whole. The plan identifies voting as the minimum participation necessary for a citizen to actually contribute her part to the collective project of self-rule, and most citizens never participate beyond this minimum. If elections really concretely and formally establish the ultimate political authority of the citizenry as a whole, then it should be the case that the exercise of electoral authority can radically affect the character of a community’s political life.

The condition of impactful elections is often misinterpreted to mean that effective electoral participation requires that citizens vote on as many decisions as possible. If most people only ever participate by voting, then it might seem that achieving a more robust democracy depends on increasing the number of questions on which the people vote. Many political theorists and political scientists have pointed out the flawed logic that more elections are better elections.[[66]](#footnote-66) The point is not, as some people think, that the people are poorly equipped to evaluate technical questions and offices like the local coroner or minor tax measures. Rather, the point is that these questions ought not be decided by *voting*.[[67]](#footnote-67) If voting is going to retain its role as the special, minimum form of citizenship – a unique kind of universal participation – it must not become too cumbersome or burdensome. There will be some kind of upper limit on the number of questions that can be decided by election, and priority ought to be given to more significant questions.[[68]](#footnote-68)

On the other hand, scholars often misinterpret the impactful elections condition to require electoral mandates: since citizens vote on so few questions, they must be able to use occasional elections to authoritatively decide a range of political questions that do not appear on any ballot. As I argued earlier, though, the mandate conception of electoral efficacy neglects the particular role that voting plays in contemporary plans for democracy as well as the distinctive ways that the participatory practice of voting is embedded in different communities’ plans for democracy that may link electoral decisions with policy outcomes in different ways.[[69]](#footnote-69)

Though voting is meant to formally establish a minimum connection between political decisions and the participatory contributions of all citizens, voting is not meant to be the only way that citizens exercise their political authority. The best interpretation of the role of voting that is common to most contemporary plans for democracy requires that some important decisions be settled by a procedure that calls for the equal input of all citizens, but this interpretation of the plan does not specify what those decisions are or why they are important. Evaluating whether the impactful elections condition is satisfied will therefore depend on more context-specific features of a particular community’s plan for democracy.[[70]](#footnote-70)

*Meaningful Choice*

The third condition necessary for voting to fulfill its role in the plan for democracy is that the choice that citizens face in an election needs to be sufficiently meaningful. That is, citizens should be able to decide between options that will produce different political results. This condition is clearly violated, for example, when citizens can only choose between two candidates who would both be puppets for some shadow ruler.

The question of what counts as a meaningful choice in an election must be sensitive to the electoral context and to the point of voting. To vote is not just to make an individual choice (who will I vote for?), but also to make that choice within a collective context and as part of a collective decision (who will we elect?) The kind of decision that citizens make when they vote is fundamentally different from the kind of decision they would be making if each were a dictator. The conditions for a meaningful choice in the electoral context will therefore be different than the conditions that characterize a meaningful choice in other areas of life in which individual choices are decisive. Elections are massive collective undertakings. They will necessarily involve compromise, not just in the final outcome, but also in how the choice itself is defined.[[71]](#footnote-71)

The condition of meaningful choice does not, therefore, entail that citizens need to be able to select their most preferred outcome from among the broadest range of choice possible. As I argued earlier, this view of electoral efficacy rests on the deeply problematic idea that there are predefined questions to be decided by voting and an objectively relevant set of choices over which individual citizens might have preferences. Voting is a way for all citizens to contribute to deciding a few questions that have been reserved for the citizenry as a whole, but the questions to be decided by elections, and the options that are to be considered relevant in those decisions have to be worked out as part of the broader practice of collective self-rule in which voting is embedded.[[72]](#footnote-72)

As with the condition of impactful elections, what it means for voters to have a meaningful choice in an election will depend on the community’s particular plan for democracy, on the nature of the offices and questions to be decided by a popular vote, on the divisions that are most urgent and the political possibilities that are most salient in a particular community, as well as the various political structures and participatory institutions that surround the practice of voting, including the role of intermediate institutions like political parties and interest groups, and the various processes of agenda formation. This doesn’t mean that the condition of meaningful choice can offer us no critical purchase for assessing the efficacy of elections, but rather that critical assessment will be context specific; there is no simple formula for assessing the meaningfulness of electoral choice that can be easily applied across a variety of democratic political systems.

These first three conditions (the decisiveness of electoral results, the impact of electoral decisions, and the meaningfulness of electoral choice) might be thought of as the objective conditions for a sense of the external efficacy of voting. They detail how, for voting to fulfill its role in the plan for democracy, it must be the case that citizens (taken as a whole) can exercise authority over government through elections. The political system must be not just responsive to, but dependent on electoral inputs.

For voting to effectively fulfill its role in the plan for democracy, though, the political system also needs to satisfy the objective conditions that produce a sense of internal efficacy. If voting is to fulfill its role in the plan for democracy, it must be the case that individual citizens are able to effectively participate in the collective exercise of electoral authority. Voting must be a form of participation that is suitable for ordinary citizens. We can therefore articulate two more conditions that must be satisfied if voting is to fulfill its role in the plan for democracy.

*Material accessibility*

The fourth condition on the effectiveness of voting is material accessibility*.* If voting is to fulfill its role as a unique form of mass participation that formally instantiates the equal political authority of all citizens, then obviously citizens must not be formally excluded from voting (as in the case of felon disenfranchisement laws in some US states). The condition of material accessibility also requires that citizens be protected from informal exclusion. If voting is really to be a moment of mass participation, then citizens need to be able to vote free from intimidation. Moreover, voting should not require a substantial sacrifice of time or resources, nor should it require special “civic skills” (like the ability to successfully navigate a complex bureaucracy) that ordinary citizens do not have. It should be easy to find out when, where, and how to vote. Information about any qualifications should be made readily available to all citizens, along with information and assistance about how to meet those qualifications.

*Cognitive accessibility*

If voting is to be suitable for ordinary citizens, material accessibility is not enough. Voting must also be cognitively accessible to ordinary citizens. It should be the case that citizens are able, without unusual effort, to acquire at least a rough understanding of how their individual votes will fit together with others’ to produce electoral outcomes and how different electoral outcomes translate into political outcomes. To meaningfully participate in the collective exercise of political authority, citizens need to have some sense of how their individual votes contribute to shaping their community’s public life.

I want to make two points here: first, the standard of cognitive accessibility is one of substantial controversy, but I want to argue that cognitive accessibility is not so demanding a standard as it seems. The idea that something like “full information” is necessary to cast a meaningful vote seems quite extreme.[[73]](#footnote-73) Politics is a complicated business. Even political experts can’t really predict all of the possible consequences of any given election. I think we overstate the extent to which this is a unique problem for politics, though. Uncertain and unbounded consequences are just a feature of what it means to act into a social world full of unpredictable, agential human beings.[[74]](#footnote-74) The uncertainty and complexity of consequences may be more apparent in those activities we typically classify as political. But uncertainty and moral risk characterize all action. The kind and quality of information that is necessary to vote meaningfully is not substantially different from the kind and quality of information that is necessary to make any other kind of decision in our daily lives. Our understanding of the consequences is always incomplete and tentative, but we have to move forward like this if we are not to be completely paralyzed. [[75]](#footnote-75)

The second point I want to make is that making voting materially and cognitively accessible does not mean that we have to “dumb down” the process. The plan for democracy need not take citizens’ competence as it is, but can also be designed to cultivate the skills and competencies that might make voting meaningful and accessible.[[76]](#footnote-76) It can also be designed to encourage citizens to recognize competencies that they already have. Participatory democrats have made these points for a long time, and there is empirical evidence to support the idea that competence and a sense of internal efficacy do not always proceed participation – participation itself can have positive effects on a citizen’s sense of her own ability to influence politics, because it helps citizens both to develop new “civic skills” and to recognize those skills they already have.[[77]](#footnote-77)

*Further conditions*

These five conditions characterize the objective bases for a sense of internal and external efficacy in relation to voting. These are the conditions that must be satisfied if voting is to effectively fulfill its role in the plan for democracy. But these conditions are not fully sufficient for us to say that voting is efficacious. The satisfaction of these objective conditions must be accompanied by the subjective sense of efficacy. Citizens need to actually recognize the effectiveness of voting; they need to believe that by voting they really do contribute to the collective project of democracy, according to their shared plan. Moreover, citizens need to actually act on these attitudes. If voting is to fulfill its role as unique moment that renders the equal political authority of all citizens formal and concrete, then people need to actually vote en masse.

When large portions of a political community feel alienated from the political process – when they feel as though voting does *not* enable them to contribute to the collective project of democracy – it is not enough to point to the satisfaction on the objective conditions for electoral efficacy. Citizens need to actually believe in the efficacy of voting if voting is to fulfill its role in the plan for democracy. It will therefore be essential that we pay attention to what Dennis Thompson calls the “expressive effects” of electoral institutions. It is not enough that institutions make electoral participation meaningful; they also need to make the meaningfulness of voting *manifest* to all citizens. Electoral institutions and administration should expressively reinforce the role of voting as a unique form of mass participation in which political decisions actually depend on the political authority of *all* citizens.

In this paper, I focus on conditions that electoral systems must meet to ensure that voting effectively fulfills its role in the plan for democracy, but the efficacy of voting does not just depend on features of electoral institutions. Voting is embedded within a much broader plan for democracy, and though voting is a very important part of this plan, it is still only one part. If citizens are truly to contribute to a collective project of self-rule by voting, then voting can’t be the only “democratic” element of the political system. When the formally equal political authority in elections masks a system of political decision-making that is dominated by an unrepresentative subset of the community, then citizens do not really share an effective plan for self-rule. Voting alone cannot bear the normative weight of democracy. The distinctive importance of voting as a form of mass participation is possible only because it is embedded within a broader plan for democracy in which citizens use other forms of participation to supplement, contest, and correct the “blunt instrument” of voting.

**Section V: Some Practical Implications: compulsory voting, ballot access, and formal abstention**

I doubt there will ever exist a real political system that perfectly satisfies any of the conditions I’ve listed here. But that does not mean that we can or should simply ignore the voting centered plan for democracy. Democracy is not an all-or-nothing short of goal. It is perfectly coherent to speak of a community as more or less democratic, and even though the existing plan does not produce perfect democracy, it may still allow the community to come close enough to their collective goal to be considered worthwhile. Even when the conditions for efficacious voting are only imperfectly satisfied, the voting-centered plan for democracy may still provide the most reliable guide for how individual citizens can act, knowing that their actions will fit together with others’ to produce (or at least approach) their shared aim of democracy.

Even though they remain authoritative guides for action, plans can still be reformed and revised. This is the normative component of constructive interpretation. The conditions I’ve offered here provide an evaluative standard that should allow us to assess the efficacy of voting in a political community and to suggest ways in which democratic systems might be reformed to better enable voting to fulfill its role in the plan for democracy. These conditions do not offer a neat institutional formula that can be applied across political contexts. These conditions can be satisfied in a variety of ways, and what they require of electoral institutions will often depend on the way that voting is embedded in each community’s particular plan for democracy. Still, these conditions for electoral efficacy may offer distinctive insight into debates about electoral design and administration and sometimes suggest policies that might be applicable in a variety of contexts. In this final section, I briefly discuss how the account of electoral efficacy I’ve offered here might be applied to a few debates about electoral administration.

*Compulsory voting*

The standards for electoral efficacy I’ve offered here suggest a strong case for compulsory voting. Compulsory voting reinforces the role of voting as a particular form of mass participation, by ensuring actual widespread participation. When the conditions for the effectiveness of a voting-centered plan for democracy are satisfied, compulsory voting ensures compliance with the plan, making it the case that voting really does concretely instantiate the equal political authority of *all* citizens.

The most common objection to legally enforcing the duty to vote – that it encourages uninformed or indifferent citizens to vote, and may therefore produce “bad” electoral outcomes[[78]](#footnote-78) – reflects a poor understanding of the role of voting in a democracy. Elections identify decisions that properly belong to the citizens, that citizens are *expected* to participate in making. Voting is not a privilege granted to those citizens who already happen to have political information and preferences. Rather, voting is a form of participation *reserved* for the citizens as whole, to formally establish the equal political authority of all citizens in a community that aspires to collective self-rule. If citizens are to contribute to the collective project of democracy, according to their community’s shared plan, citizens should acquire political knowledge and develop preferences with a view to the vote that they are expected to cast. [[79]](#footnote-79)

Compulsory voting can help to satisfy the conditions for internal efficacy by clearly and strongly expressing that voting is a form of participation that is meant for all citizens without qualification. Beyond this expressive effect, though, compulsory voting may also have secondary effects on the material accessibility of voting and the meaningfulness of electoral choices. If voting is required by law, then states have additional strong reasons for making voting more accessible. And the expansion of the electorate may affect the kinds of choices that citizens face at election time and might lead to choices that appear to be meaningful to a wider range of society.[[80]](#footnote-80) An expanded electorate would also undoubtedly change political messaging, as political groups shift focus from turning out the base to persuading the undecided.

*Ballot access and write-in voting*

The view of electoral efficacy I’ve presented here is less clear in how we should settle questions about ballot access, but it does suggest that the debate needs to be reframed. Proponents of expanded ballot access and write-in voting often argue that the efficacy of voting requires that voters face the widest range of choices possible. This is usually based on one of two arguments, either that the value of making the choice itself depends on there being a wide range of alternatives, or that the wide range of options is necessary to provide all voters with an option that is very close to their strongest preference. But these arguments neglect the distinctiveness of voting as a form of mass participation.

When individuals vote, they are contributing to a collective decision made on a massive scale. The conditions for meaningful contribution to a collective decision will just be different than the conditions that would be required to say that an individual faced a meaningful choice if she were a dictator. When voting, citizens exercise their choice *in light of the fact* that they are participating in a collective decision, and the choices they face are meaningful specifically in that context.[[81]](#footnote-81) The massively shared project of self-rule will necessarily involve a great deal of compromise to be responsive to the agency of all citizens as equal co-authors of democracy. But this compromise applies not only to the final substantive outcomes, but also to the process of deciding itself. The range and kinds of choices that it is important for voters to face on the ballot will itself depend on the collective process of working out the community’s concerns and priorities and identifying major disagreements.

This doesn’t mean that we have no way to criticize how we determine what goes on the ballot; it seems likely, for example, that the system used by many US states that grants two major parties significant advantage in gaining ballot access could be reformed to better meet the condition of meaningful choice that I elaborated in the previous section. But this system does not fall short simply because citizens only face two options, or because these options are too similar to one another. Rather, it is because the system itself makes it difficult for the people to discipline the parties to consistently reflect the major concerns and disagreements that arise in the community’s public life. The standard for meaningful choice in elections cannot be determined by what would count as meaningful choice if each citizen were a dictator, instead, it must be sensitive to the collective context.

*Formal Abstention*

Objections to compulsory voting and limited ballot access, though, may reflect a concern that voters will be forced to choose between options that are not only suboptimal, but *unacceptable*. As part of a massively shared project, voting necessarily involves compromise and responsiveness to one’s part in a collective project, which means that citizens should not expect to contribute by registering their strongest preference. But there are limits to the compromises that citizens can be expected to accept as part of participation in a collective project, because there will be limits to citizens’ commitment to that project. Democracy is not an ultimate value, and citizens’ commitments to other values may outweigh the value of contributing to the shared democratic project, when they come into conflict. When a ballot presents a citizen with a set of options that she considers seriously unjust, her commitment to ruling democratically with her fellow citizens may not provide a strong enough reason for her to contribute to *this* collective decision. Even where the value of democracy is not *outweighed* by values external to democracy, the options a voter faces on the ballot may *undermine* the value of democracy itself. When citizens may only select from among candidates who all favor suppressing the political rights of a minority group, then contributing to *that* collective decision simply isn’t a way of participating in a shared project of democracy.

Recognizing that there will be disagreement about the kinds of decisions that might outweigh or undermine the value of democracy, respect for the equal agency of all citizens as co-authors of the democratic project may recommend that ballots include a formal abstention or “none of the above” option.[[82]](#footnote-82) In most contemporary democracies, citizens who find all of the options on the ballot unacceptable can abstain simply by not casting a ballot (under compulsory voting systems, citizens can “spoil” their ballots). This is problematic from the point of view of the plan for democracy, since it means that some citizens are excluded from what is supposed to be a moment of mass participation. Including a formal abstention or none-of-the-above option on the ballot allows citizens to distinguish their dissent from apathy or ignorance. It allows them to register their ongoing commitment to be part of an equally shared project of collective self-rule, and ensures that their objections are formally counted as part of the collective decision.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that voting is efficacious when it allows individual citizens to play their part in an effective plan for democracy. This account of electoral efficacy might be thought of as a procedural view of efficacy. It does not require that voters achieve particular political outcomes or that elections produce any particular substantive results (such as an electoral mandate). Rather, the efficacy of voting depends on features of the electoral system as a whole; it depends on the extent to which the process of voting fulfills its role in an effective plan for democracy. The importance of plans both for coordinating contributions to the collective project of democracy, and for making manifest the way that political decisions arise from the collective activity of self-rule, suggests that proceduralism will play an important role in a democracy. The collective activity of democracy requires a shared understanding of *how* the people will act together to achieve their shared goal of collective self-rule.

But the proceduralism of democratic plans differs from the kind of proceduralism that usually applies to elections. A procedural account of democracy requires that decision-making processes conform to a set of rules or expectations. But on the traditional view, whether an election is considered to be a legitimate democratic procedure depends only on design and administration of elections, that is, it is often assumed that procedural rules apply only to the actions of public officials. The account of electoral efficacy I’ve offered challenges this view of proceduralism. Shared plans for democracy do not just apply to public officials, rather they apply to *citizens*, who are themselves the agents of democracy. The shared plan for democracy tells citizens how they can act so that their actions fit together with others’ to produce their shared goal of collective self-rule. To say that an electoral decision has been made according to the plan or that the system meets the procedural conditions for electoral efficacy, we need to look not just at whether officials have correctly followed the rules in setting up and administering the election, but also at whether citizens have in fact followed the plan for democracy. Given the role of elections in the existing plan for democracy, this electoral proceduralism requires that citizens actually vote.

1. Thus, critics of voting may object that it does not effectively promote citizens’ interests, and is not a very informative form of participation – two things we expect in a democracy - while proponents of voting argue that it instantiates equality, and that majority rule is ultimately the most defensible decision procedure in situations of unresolvable disagreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Josiah Ober has effectively argued that this is the way we ought to think of ancient democracy – as the power of people to actually do things, to act collectively (Josiah Ober, “The Original Meaning of ‘Democracy’: Capacity to Do Things, Not Majority Rule,” *Constellations* 15, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 3–9). But many people will probably doubt whether we should really talk about modern democracy in this way. There are, however, I think many reasons for thinking about democracy as a collective activity that will be compatible with a range of conceptions of the value of democracy. Certainly, any democratic theory that emphasizes political autonomy as an important piece of individual autonomy, the distinctly human interest in political activity, or the educative/developmental value of political participation should understand democracy as a collective activity. But thinking about democracy as a collective activity undertaken by all of the members of a community will be important for any democratic theory that emphasizes democracy as a condition for the legitimate exercise of political power under conditions of disagreement. It’s not clear why I should accept an exercise of power that arises from processes that actually involve the agency of only a subset of the community. That those who neglect to participate still have the opportunity to participate may give *them* a reason to accept laws and policies they’ve taken no steps to oppose, but the apathy and alienation of some of my fellow citizens doesn’t seem to give me a reason to accept the laws imposed on me by a majority of the politically engaged. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. When the citizens of a political community are committed to ruling themselves democratically, that commitment must be at least somewhat robust to the way in which they accomplish their collective self-rule. Democratic theorists have long recognized the necessity of this robust commitment in relation to the *objects* of democratic self-rule – if democracy did not entail citizens’ willingness to go along with laws and policies they did not support, then democracy could only apply in the trivial case of total agreement. It would not be a useful concept for our messy world. What democratic theorists often miss, though, is the way that citizens’ commitment to democracy must also be somewhat robust to the *means* of democratic rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anna R. Stilz, *Liberal Loyalty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 184.; Eric Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012)., esp. 62-77 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Christopher Kutz, “The Collective Work of Citizenship,” *Legal Theory* 8, no. 4 (2002): 471–94., see esp. 473, 489-490 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 489., emphasis added [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Michael Bratman, “Shared Valuing and Frameworks for Practical Reasoning,” in *Structures of Agency: Essays* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Scott Shapiro, *Legality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Belknap Press), 2011), 177. Shapiro argues that plans are necessary for “complex, contentious, or arbitrary activities” – anytime there is any uncertainty about how a goal should be accomplished (see pg.s 132-133 for a more extended discussion of the role of plans in resolving disagreement. ) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In a democratic collective activity, plans also serve a second function: they contribute to the legitimacy of the democratic system. Political regimes inevitably make demands of people to comply with laws they don’t agree with. But if citizens are committed to the collective project of ruling together with their fellow citizens, then they have a reason for accepting and complying with the laws and policies that the community produces when those laws and policies really are a product of the jointly intentional activity of democracy. A shared plan helps to make manifest the legitimacy of the community’s rules as the product of their joint activity. He plan reflects a shared understanding of how individual contributions fit together to produce the collective aim of democratic rule. When citizens follow the shared plan, then it will be manifest to the citizens that there laws and policies are legitimate products of the collective activity of democratic self-rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Shapiro, *Legality*, 177.: “Shared plans must be determined exclusively by social facts if they are to fulfill their function. As we have seen, shared plans are supposed to guide and coordinate behavior by resolving doubts and disagreements about how to act. If a plan with a particular content exists only when certain moral facts obtain, then it could not resolve doubts and disagreements about the right way of proceeding." [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is not, of course, to say that a community is stuck with the plan it has. Plans can and do change, via both formal and informal mechanisms, and individual citizens can and should advocate for reform. In fact, one of the reasons we have for thinking it is important to respect communities’ plans for democracy is because we recognize that a community’s particular shared plan for democracy – the principles, procedures, and ethic of participation that enable collective self-rule – is itself the object of political creation and contestation. The project of collective self-rule will always involve trade-offs, not just between democracy and other values, but between various values within the constellation of democracy (between individual influence and equality, between a responsive government now and a robust democracy into the future), and a community’s plan for democracy will reflect the concerns and priorities that arise from the political interactions of its citizens. Democratic plans are themselves products of a political community’s creative determination of the character of their own public life. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ronald Dworkin, *Law’s Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Belknap Press), 1986), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. When I talk about established democracies here, I have in mind large-scale, purportedly “sovereign” communities (nation-states or countries). Local and associational practices of democracy are likely characterized by different plans (though the centrality of voting in the life of the national political community undoubtedly bleeds into conceptions of good citizenship in other areas of life.) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Arch Puddington, *Freedom in the World 2013: Democratic Breakthroughs in the Balance* (Freedom House, 2013), http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202013%20Overview%20Essay%20for%20Web.pdf. Six of the eleven items on Freedom House’s “political rights checklist” refer specifically to elections (including the conduct of elections, the role of elected offices, and access to suffrage) – see pg. 33 of the report [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” 1948, http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/. Article 21.3 reads: “The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Douglas A. Chalmers, *Reforming Democracies: Six Facts about Politics That Demand a New Agenda* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013). See also Marvin Olsen, *Participatory Pluralism: Political Participation and Influence in the United States and Sweden* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1982), 7; R. I. Pranger, *The Eclipse of Citizenship* (holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Belief in the duty to vote is one of the most commonly measured attitudes in studies of citizenship norm, and though the rate of belief has declined slightly over time, In the US and Canada, endorsements of the idea of the duty to vote remains very high: *Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987-2007* Pew Research Center report, released March 22, 2007 <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/312.pdf>; Andre Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote?: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2000), 94–98. In Europe, belief in the duty to vote is falling faster, though it is still high in many countries: Goerres, Achim “Why are Older People More Likely to Vote? The Impact of Ageing on Electoral Turnout in Europe” *British Journal of Political Science* (Vol. 9, No. 1) 2007, pp. 90-201 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ISSP Research Group (2012): *International Social Survey Programme 2004: Citizenship I*

    *(ISSP 2004).* *Variable Report*(released 6/27/2012), available at <http://www.gesis.org/en/issp/issp-modules-profiles/citizenship/>, 31-44, Related to the data set: GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA3950 Data file Version 1.3.0. The results for East Germany are actually reported separately here. East Germany is one of the three countries where less than 50% of respondents rank Always Voting in the top 2 categories. The other two are Slovenia and the Czech Republic. In general, former Soviet Republics tend to rate the different categories of citizen duty lower across the board. This might indicate a different (more contestatory) plan for democracy at work in these countries, but it could also indicate a more fragile commitment to democratic governance (see Christopher J. Anderson et al., *Loser’s Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In six of the ISSP countries, more citizens even rate “always voting in elections” in the top two categories of importance than “never evading taxes” and “always obeying the law.” (ISSP Citizenship I Variable Report, 31-36) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Russel J. Dalton, “Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation,” *Political Studies* 56, no. 1 (2008): 76–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Campbell, David *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), especially pgs. 34-35 and 157-176; [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995)., 23-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin, and Warren Miller, *The Voter Decides* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, and Company, 1954), 194. The rate of agreement with this and the other questions in the ANES citizen duty index have remained fairly consistent over time (see Warren Miller, Arther H. Miller, and Edward J. Schneider, *American National Election Studies Data Sourcebook 1952-1978* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 263–264.) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Blais, *To Vote or Not to Vote?: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory*, 95. In Quebec, 99 percent of respondents agreed with this statement, while in British Columbia, 96 percent of respondents agreed, with over 75% of respondents in each survey saying they “strongly agreed” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This language is from the ISSP citizenship survey, but the questions measuring citizen duty on the ANES similarly reflect a belief in an unconditional duty to vote, asking citizens whether they agree that they ought to vote even when the election isn’t important, their candidate can’t win, lots of other people are voting, and when they don’t care (see Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, *The Voter Decides*, 194.) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. David Campbell, *Why We Vote: How Schools and Communities Shape Our Civic Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006)., esp. 34-35. Campbell actually finds that the relationship between political heterogeneity and voter turnout can be represented by a U-shaped curve – turnout is highest at the extremes, which leads Campbell to posit a “dual motivations” theory of voting. In politically heterogeneous communities, citizens may be “politically” motivated, believing that their individual action is more likely to affect the outcome, while in homogeneous communities, citizens may be more “civically” motivated, wanting to do their civic duty. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Christopher Achen and Andre Blais, “Taking Civic Duty Seriously: Political Theory and Voter Turnout,” 2010, http://www.princeton.edu/csdp/events/Achen031110/Achen031110.pdf, 11. Since surveys respondents typically endorse the duty to vote at a very high rate, Achen and Blais identify those who have most strongly internalized the belief in the duty to vote by asking respondents whether voting is for them “first and foremost a Duty or a Choice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Frankal, Elliot “Compulsory Voting Around the World” *The Guardian.com,* 4 July 2005, (accessed 18 March 2014) http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/jul/04/voterapathy.uk [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Though most do not enforce it, the fact that they have this unenforced law suggests that the point is to express affirmation of a civic duty to vote than to achieve a particular outcome. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Dalton, “Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *The Constitution of the Republic of Italy* 1947(English version), Article 48, *LegislationOnline*, <http://legislationline.org/documents/section/constitutions> [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Given the debates about voter qualifications in the United States, it may not seem that we are all that interested in making voting accessible to all, but the fact that we have these debates at all is fairly extraordinary when compared to the more limited accessibility of other forms of participation. Debates about the accessibility of voting are premised on the expectation that all citizens be able to vote. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Lester W. Milbrath, *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally and Company, 1965); Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The expectation that all elections will be moments of actual mass participation informs and structures the rest of political life. As many political theorists have pointed out, elections discipline officials to be responsive to other forms of citizen influence and public sphere activity. In a political system in which periodic elections define the rhythm of public life, mass participation in elections also reinforces democratic legitimacy – demonstrating that political decisions are based on citizens’ actual exercise of authority. Low turnout elections do not make the legitimacy of a decision manifest. We cannot always assume that citizens who fail to vote are exercising reserve agency – that they are indifferent to the outcomes, or trust the judgment of their fellow citizens. Instead, nonvoters may be ignorant, alienated, or apathetic – they may not vote because they do not think the electoral decision properly belongs to them. But if this is the case, then those who do vote, but find themselves in the minority might doubt whether there is really good reason for them to accept the electoral outcome – since it simply reflects the will of another minority. Elections as moments of mass participation are valuable for securing democratic legitimacy because they make *manifest* the way that political decisions really do arise from a collective project that respects the equal agency of all citizens. It is important, therefore, that citizens vote, even if they participate in other ways. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Kutz, “The Collective Work of Citizenship,” 489. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Dennis Thompson, *Just Elections: Creating a Fair Electoral Process in the United States* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2002)., 34; Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)., 301; Loren Lomasky and Geoffrey Brennan, “Is There a Duty to Vote,” 2000, 62–86., esp. pg. 80-81 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. William Riker and Peter Ordeshook, “A Theory of the Calculus of Voting,” *The American Political Science Review* 62, no. 1 (March 1968): 25–42. See also Lomasky and Brennan, “Is There a Duty to Vote.”, esp. 66-68, and Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky, *Democracy and Decision: The Pure Theory of Electoral Preference* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Of course, the political context can certainly affect the “enjoyment” a person gets out of voting, but if a person’s enjoying the sense of fulfilling her civic duty, or of expressing herself on a matter of political consequence depends on elections actually being effectively democratic, then we’ve built in another standard of efficacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Person* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987); Alvin Goldman, “Why Citizens Should Vote: A Causal Responsibility Approach,” *Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation* 16, no. 2 (1999): 201–17; Richard Tuck, *Free Riding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Jason Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 17–19; Lomasky and Brennan, “Is There a Duty to Vote,” 75–76. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Of course, this is not to say that losing doesn’t affect citizens’ sense of efficacy. Individuals who consistently find themselves on the losing side of elections may perceive (perhaps correctly) that electoral decisions are not actually responsive to those who find themselves in a permanent minority. See Anderson et al., *Loser’s Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy*, for an extended discussion the effect of losing on support for democracy, especially in new democracies. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See esp. Stanley Kelley Jr., *Interpreting Elections* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Robert A Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, expanded edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Chalmers, 66-67; Olsen, 5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The Gibbard-Satterthwaite theorem shows that for any group with more than three individuals with well-behaved (complete, transitive) preferences over a choice set with more than three options, there does not exist a rule for aggregating these preferences into a single collective decision that satisfies the normatively desirable conditions of unrestricted domain, non-dictatorship, and strategy-proofness. See Allan Gibbard, “Manipulation of Voting Schemes: A General Result,” *Econometrica* 41, no. 4 (July 1, 1973): 587–601; Mark Allen Satterthwaite, “Strategy-Proofness and Arrow’s Conditions: Existence and Correspondence Theorems for Voting Procedures and Social Welfare Functions,” *Journal of Economic Theory* 10, no. 2 (April 1975): 187–21. Though Arrow’s theorem is more famous, Gibbard-Satterthwaite is more immediately relevant to the case of voting since it involves the production of a single winner, rather than a complete ranking of social preferences. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. see Richard D. McKelvey (1976): “Intransitivities in Multidimensional Voting Models and Some Implications for

    Agenda Control”, Journal of Economic Theory 12, 472-482 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. See, e.g. Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in a Mass Public,” in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David Apter (New York: the Free Press of Glencoe, 1964); Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1960); Kelley, *Interpreting Elections*. Joseph Schumpeter anticipated many of these results in his criticism of the “classical” definition of democracy (Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, second (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2011), 251-261). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See Gerry Mackie, *Democracy Defended*, Contemporary Political Theory (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).*,* but also Dasgupta’s and Maskin’s demonstration that majority rule is decisive over the largest domain, Partha Dasgupta and Eric Maskin, “On the Robustness of Majority Rule,” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 6 (2008): 949–73. And Moulin’s important result that when options are defined along a single dimension and voters’ preferences can be characterized as “single-peaked,” the aggregation of preferences can determine as unique majority-rule “condorcet winner.” H. Moulin, “Generalized Condorcet-Winners for Single Peaked and Single-Plateau Preferences,” *Social Choice and Welfare* 1, no. 2 (August 1, 1984): 127–47, doi:10.1007/BF00452885. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Scholars have, for example, begun measuring the public’s “policy mood” – an inclination toward more or less government expansion (Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimsom, *The Macro Polity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 256). Though some scholars have responded to the problem of indifference by arguing that electoral efficacy is better served when indifferent citizens don’t vote (see, e.g. Keith Jakee and Guang-Zhen Sun, “Is Compulsory Voting More Democratic?,” *Public Choice* 129, no. 1 (2006): 61–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Joshua Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” in *The Good Polity*, 1989, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See Eric Beerbohm on “correspondence” theories of democracy, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy*, 28–30. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Hannah Arendt argued that it is the unpredictability of public life – of interacting with other *agents* - that makes political action so distinctive (and so distinctively human) (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).) [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. My thinking on this subject has been substantially influenced by conversation with Joseph Lacey. For further discussion, see Joseph Lacey, “Must Europe Be Swiss? On the Idea of a Voting Space and the Possibility of a Multilingual Demos,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 01 (2014): 61–82. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, *The Voter Decides*. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Shapiro, *Legality*, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, *The Voter Decides*, 190. (see also Miller, Miller, and Schneider, *American National Election Studies Data Sourcebook 1952-1978*, 321; Riker and Ordeshook, “A Theory of the Calculus of Voting,” 36, fn16). In their classic cross-national study, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba also find a general relationship between a sense of efficacy (or political competence) and a belief in the obligation to participate. (Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 205.) [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Though he does not use the language of internal and external efficacy, many political scientists attribute the original formulation of the distinction between the two attitude constructs to Robert Lane’s 1959 book *Political Life*. (Robert E. Lane, *Political Life: Why and How People Get Involved in Politics* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1959), 151.) [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. In their 1976 article on the relationship between internal and external efficacy, Coleman and Davis suggest that that distinction between the two kinds of efficacy is implicit in Almond and Verba’s language of different “attitude objects” in evaluations of citizenship (see Kenneth M. Coleman and Charles L. Davis, “The Structural Context of Politics and Dimensions of Regime Performance: Their Importance for the Comparative Study of Political Efficacy,” *Comparative Political Studies* 9, no. 2 (July 1, 1976): 189–190, and Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, 136–137. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. (Richard G. Niemi, Sephen C. Craig, and Franco Mattei, “Measuring Internal Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study,” *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4 (December 1991): 1407–1408. These definitions are essentially identical to the standard definitions used by the administrators of the American National Election Survey (seeMiller, Miller, and Schneider, *American National Election Studies Data Sourcebook 1952-1978*, 253.), despite debates about the best way to measure internal and external efficacy, scholars still seem to generally agree about the basic definitions of the constructs they are trying to measure. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Lane, *Political Life: Why and How People Get Involved in Politics*, 149–150. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Sephen C. Craig and Michael A. Maggiotto, “Measuring Political Efficacy,” *Political Methodology* 8, no. 3 (1982): 85–109; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei, “Measuring Internal Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study.”: 1408 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. This implicit system evaluation in internal efficacy is partly responsible for the difficulty of constructing distinct measures of internal and external efficacy. In a 1974 article, Balch observed that the ANES index of questions measuring political efficacy included two pairs that seemed to be measuring distinct attitude constructs, leading to the standard interpretation that one pair of questions measured external efficacy and the other internal efficacy. But several scholars suggested that the internal efficacy index was insufficiently distinct from the external efficacy index. Craig and Maggioto observe, for example, that the question “people like me have no say in what the government does” actually includes stimuli for both internal and external efficacy attitudes – individuals may have no say because the system is unresponsive to them, and they point out that this item is more closely correlated with the external efficacy index than it is with the other items that purport to measure internal efficacy (Craig and Maggiotto, “Measuring Political Efficacy,” 90.). Even the one item that Craig and Maggioto observe probably does capture primarily the internal efficacy construct: “politics is too complicated for someone like me to understand” still includes an element of evaluation of the system - politics IS very complicated! (Ibid., 89.) Beginning with the 1988 NES, new questions were introduced to measure internal efficacy that do a better job of distinguishing between internal and external efficacy, focusing on individual competence to participate, but they still cannot avoid implicit reference to the context in which citizens are expected to participate (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei, “Measuring Internal Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study,” 1408.). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. The conditions I offer here overlap at times with Dennis Thompson’s proposals for electoral reform in Just Elections. Thompson offers an excellent, detailed look at the democratic value of the finer points of electoral administration, but he derives his conditions for just elections from three general principles of democracy: equality, liberty, and popular sovereignty, looking at how elections instantiate these three principles (Thompson, *Just Elections: Creating a Fair Electoral Process in the United States*, 9.), whereas I emphasize the distinctive role that voting plays in a contemporary plan for democracy. My analysis will therefore sometimes suggests a different answer than Thompson’s when democratic values conflict. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Though the equal weighting of votes is not a necessary feature of voting as a practice – as demonstrated by J.S. Mill’s famous plural voting scheme that give greater weight to the votes of aristocrats or intellectual elites – but it is a clear feature of the contemporary plan for democracy (see Thompson *Just Elections*., 43–58. for further discussion of the principle of equality in voting). Melissa Schwartzberg has also argued that the logic of counting votes already suggests a respect for the “equal dignity of individual judgments” and that counting votes ought therefore imply counting them equally (Melissa Schwartzberg, *Counting the Many: The Origins and Limits of Supermajority Rule*, Cambridge Studies in the Theory of Democracy (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 106.). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Matthew J. Streb, *Rethinking American Electoral Democracy*, second (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).; In The Semi-Sovereign People, E.E. Schattschneider declares that “the unforgiveable sin of democratic politics is to dissipate the power of the public by putting it to trivial uses.” (137) [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. The proliferation of elections in American local politics seems particularly odd, given that local politics (except perhaps in very large cities) is much more conducive to other forms of more direct and informative engagement. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. This does not mean, as some people take it to mean, that substantive questions ought not appear on the ballot (see David S Broder, *Democracy Derailed: Initiative Campaigns and the Power of Money* (New York: Harcourt, 2001). The practice of submitted proposed constitutional amendments to a referendum seems to me the quintessential example of reserving the questions with the most significant impact on the character of political life for the citizenry as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Voting may play a central role in the ethic of participation of communities that nevertheless have very different concepts of representation, different agenda-setting procedures, and different sets of elected offices and decisions G. Bingham Powell Jr., *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). It is possible that in some communities, the widely shared plan for self-rule may include a shared understanding of the most fundamental policy divisions in the community, and a shared belief that all elections implicitly reduce to a decision on those policy divisions. In the *Semi-Sovereign People*, Schattschneider observes that US electoral politics is dominated by the cleavage between business and government (by which he presumably means regulation benefitting consumers and employees) (Schattschneider, esp. 41-42). This idea is reflected in recent American Politics research that aims to assess the efficacy of elections by examining the extent to which public policy tracks Americans’ “policy mood,” understood as a general preference for more or less government (Erikson, et al *The Macro Polity,* 256, 339). The assumption underlying this research is that citizens basically agree that electoral decisions are basically about the single issue dimension of the size of government. This picture becomes immediately complicated, though, once a second dimension is introduced (as Schattschneider himself pointed out w/ the foreign policy dimension), and while some scholars try to solve this by imagining all policies lined up on an ideological spectrum, the empirics just don’t seem to suggest that this spectrum is accepted at a level that would be necessary to call it a shared plan (Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in a Mass Public.”). And while it might seem that strong parties in European parliamentary systems make some difference here, the issue of nationalism (and the future of the EU) often complicate the simple conservative/labor dichotomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. It is important to note, too, though, that voting can greatly affect the character of political life in ways that are not directly attributable to the particular decisions made in elections. Periodic elections provide a kind of rhythm for public life that structures deliberation and other political activity, and affects the issues most likely to be settled publicly. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. This is also surely on a spectrum – We can think that third party ballot access in the United States would make for *more* meaningful choice, without thinking that a choice limited to two major parties is utterly meaningless. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. The electorate as a whole simply cannot coherently define a set of options from among the infinite possibilities for action. It will just have to be the case that some subset of people is charged with identifying and defining the choices from among which people choose. Some degree of electoral agenda control (like open primaries or two-stage elections) might provide more meaningful choice, but at some point, decisions about the agenda will have to be made by a subset of population. Of course, as democratic theorists often point out, this subset of the population could be much more representative than it currently is. In fact, the role that participatory and deliberative democrats often imagine for citizens’ assemblies looks like an agenda-setting one – as, for example, with Fishkin’s “Deliberative Opinion Polls” that he imagines will “set the tone” for election campaigns (James Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).), or more concretely, with the British Columbia Citizen’s Assembly charged with drafting an electoral reform measure that would then be subject to a popular referendum. On this and other deliberative mini-publics, see Robert E. Goodin, *Innovating Democracy: Democratic Theory and Practice After the Deliberative Turn* (Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. I have in mind views like Jason Brennan’s that voters who are not well informed ought not vote, because they risk contributing to a harmful outcome Brennan, *The Ethics of Voting*, 68–85.. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. For Hannah Arendt, the unpredictability of acting in public – amongst other people who can *re*act – just is what defines the political (Arendt, *The Human Condition*.) [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Of course, many political scientists and political theorists have explored the many ways that citizens have of coping with the demands of voting despite ordinary cognitive limits. See, for example, Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy*, esp. 142–168; Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan, *Demanding Choices: Opinion, Voting, and Direct Democracy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. This may include some familiar simple fixes like mailing out sample ballots and voter guides, but likely also involves thinking about the nature of electoral campaigns – shorter campaigns might be called for, as they would allow citizens to devote more attention for a shorter period of time to the decision at hand – longer campaigns may lead citizens to forget relevant information they learned early in the campaign. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Olsen, *Participatory Pluralism: Political Participation and Influence in the United States and Sweden*, 126, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. See Jason Brennan (2011) for an account of this argument. A version of this argument is applied to compulsory voting in: Jakee and Sun, “Is Compulsory Voting More Democratic?”. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. This is analogous to the various kinds of decisions in everyday life (decisions about medical treatments, purchasing a house, etc.) that may be very complex, but that we still think properly belong to individuals, and that they must find a way to decide. They may defer to expert advice (as voters may defer to party cues), but they decide whose advice to take, and the final decisions is always theirs. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. This, of course, depends on how agendas are set, but presumably, those involved in agenda setting will represent interests (parties or other groups) in society that will have an incentive to provide options that will appeal to as many voters as possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Similar reasoning appears in the Justice White’s majority opinion for the Supreme Court decision in *Burdick v Takushi* that upheld the constitutionality of elections that did not allow for “write-in” voting (*Burdick v. Takushi* (91-535), 504 U.S. 428 (1992)). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. A policy like this has recently been introduced in India. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)