Making Attentive Citizens: the Ethics of Democratic Engagement, Political Equality, and Social Justice

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Abstract: Much discussion of the ethics of participation focuses on electoral participation and whether citizens are obligated or can be coerced to vote. Yet these debates have ignored that citizens must first pay attention to politics and make up their minds about where they stand before they can engage in any form of participation. This article considers the importance for liberal democracy of citizens paying attention to politics, or attentive citizenship. It argues that the democratic state has an obligation to cultivate interest in politics and that this obligation authorizes means up to and including some forms of coercion. The argument is that when citizens are inattentive to politics, it undermines political equality and social justice because it undermines what John Rawls called the fair value of the political liberties. The importance of these ends for liberal democratic states requires them to take steps to promote attentive citizenship. (146 words)

Key words: democracy; citizenship; equality; political interest; social justice; fair value of the political liberties

Much of the literature on the ethics of participation focuses on questions of electoral participation, especially regarding whether we are obligated to vote (Hill 2002; Lacroix 2007; Lever 2009b, 2009a; Saunders 2010; Machin 2011) or perhaps have a right not to vote (Lardy 2004; Hill 2015), and even whether there are times that it would be wrong of us to vote (Brennan 2011; Brennan and Hill 2014). Yet this focus ignores that before citizens can vote in any meaningful sense of the term, they must first attend to politics and make up their minds about where they stand. Without caring about some set of issues or being committed to some political party or cause, there can be no participation since it would have no purpose and thus no motivation. This makes paying attention to politics a necessary precursor to any form of active democratic citizenship. Yet many democratic citizens do not concern themselves with politics at all and so would be unprepared to participate in any way even if they had an obligation to do so. Political theorists have all but ignored political attention as an independent concern, yet for these reasons it seems to be important, especially for the ethics of participation. In this article, I want to begin to elaborate the importance of citizens paying attention to politics by considering the question of whether democratic states have an obligation to promote interest in politics among their citizens.

This may seem an odd place to begin. It might appear more natural to first consider whether citizens have a duty to pay attention to politics. Though I shall offer some reason to think that citizens in democracies do in fact have a duty to be politically attentive, this is not the central line of argument. I take up the question of democratic states' obligation instead because even if citizens lack an individual moral duty to be politically interested, the state may still have a justification—or indeed, as I shall argue, an *obligation*—to try to make them so. I also contend that the importance of political attention is such that it could justify state coercion, should doing so be effective.

I argue that political attention is necessary for two vital liberal democratic ends: political equality and social justice. In the former case, political attention on the part of all citizens is needed to ensure what John Rawls called the fair value of the political liberties, or equal political empowerment. Inattention on the part of any significant number of citizens undermines political equality in a number of insidious and underappreciated ways which are detailed below. It also undermines justice by degrading the utility of the political liberties which are needed as social primary goods. Without the political liberties, citizens lack the means to repel politically-generated burdens on their pursuit of the good life as they see it, preventing the terms of social cooperation from being just. In both cases, moreover, political inattention inflicts harms beyond the inattentive themselves through undermining the standing and representation of groups to which inattentive citizens belong. For these reasons, the democratic state is not only authorized but obligated to cultivate political attention among its citizens.

One contribution of this article is to highlight that political attention is an important part of securing political equality. Egalitarian liberals often worry about the corrosive effect that economic inequality has on political equality. The argument here emphasizes that other resources—including qualities or habits of character like political attention—are necessary for political equality. I argue that the state must do what it can to ensure that all have access to the particular resource of political attention, requiring efforts by the state to cultivate it in citizens.

By emphasizing the importance of political attention, this article also aims to further develop a theory of audience or monitorial democracy. This theory has been developed in recent

work by Jeffrey Green (Green 2010) and John Keane (Keane 2009), who follow the pioneering work of Bernard Manin (Manin 1997) and Michael Schudson (Schudson 1998). I emphasize that all of these accounts can only deliver on their promise of an attractive democratic politics if citizens do in fact turn their eyes to politics, yet there has been little consideration by these theorists of cultivating political attention.

The first section clarifies the concept of political attention or, as I call it, attentive citizenship. The second lays out a challenge to the project of making attentive citizens, which is answered in the following three sections. A brief sixth section discusses whether there is an individual duty to be attentive to politics and the seventh considers whether coercion is justified to promote it.

Attentive Citizenship

I refer to attentive citizenship interchangeably in what follows with terms like political attention, political interest, interest in politics, and political engagement. The latter terms are used by scholars of political behavior to capture the idea of individual citizens taking a habitual interest in the substance of democratic politics (Neuman 1986; Zaller 1992). Whether at the local, state, national, or international levels, taking an interest in politics means that we see this dimension of life as involving us and spend some of our time attending to it and thinking about what we see. It does not make us political junkies, following every twist and turn of the news cycle, nor does it imply that we approve of the personalities, process, or regime that characterizes the politics of our place and time. Attentive citizenship is consistent with a considered hatred of the status quo in all of its particulars. It is even consistent with a reflective kind of political apathy, by which we fail to take political stimuli as providing any reason to act. So long as our apathy in this sense is caused by a considered judgment regarding the merits of the political agenda, electoral choice, or overall regime we might be facing, it is a species of attentive citizenship.

Attentive citizenship is therefore a stable proclivity or aspect of character, but not one synonymous with constant or unceasing preoccupation with politics. It is consistent with episodic political engagement, so long as it has some regularity. By characterizing this habit of character as a form of citizenship, the idea acquires a normative dimension which can be captured by thinking of it as a kind of civic virtue. In doing so, however, we must bear in mind that it is rather far from notions of civic virtue pursued by theorists of civic education and civic virtue, who—whether they take a more minimal or maximal view of citizen virtue—are generally concerned to promote a wider set of characteristics (McLaughlin 1992). For them, the aim is constituting citizens who are reasonable, respectful of others, publicly-spirited, fair-minded, tolerant, etc. The *exclusive* focus on political interest therefore constitutes an important divergence from the civic education and civic virtue literatures and limits the scope of the present argument. Focusing on political interest also narrows the discussion to a smaller set of considerations which rarely intersect with those regarding civic education and civic virtue. Yet limiting the scope in this way also raises the question of why we should be so concerned with political interest. Surely these other qualities are worth promoting. Why privilege attentive citizenship?

There are at least three reasons to focus on it which also help clarify attentive citizenship's relationship to actual political participation. Recall the question we began with,

whether citizens should concern themselves with politics. Since the debate over the ethics of participation is in part about whether citizens have good reason to engage in democratic politics in the first place, taking an interest in politics is the very thing called into doubt in this debate. Yet one might respond that it is not only interest in politics that is questioned, but also participation. Could not the question be understood as whether the state should promote *participation*, not attention? This question brings into focus the three reasons to focus on political attention. The state should focus on promoting attention rather than participation because attention constitutes a precondition of active participation of any kind and is—on its own—often enough to achieve democratic goals like representation. Moreover, there is evidence that political attention is the single most powerful predictor of participation. Together, these reasons suggest that the aim should be to promote attention and, in particular, *not* participation.

As mentioned above, political interest is a precondition for participation because any particular act of political participation must be preceded by making a decision to act in support of (or opposition to) a political group, organization, or cause. In the course of making such a decision, one must attend to the political considerations which tell in favor of such support (or opposition). Forming an intention regarding what government or those around us should be doing, or even simply articulating one's political preferences or interests, is not possible without attending to the content of politics. Without paying attention to politics and making up one's mind about it, what point is there in participation? Participation would be futile without political interest because it would lack purpose.

Yet there are cases where democracy can work well without participation, so long as there is popular political attention. For instance, representation often works through anticipated response on the part of representatives who know that their actions will be observed by the public (V. O. Key 1961; Mansbridge 2003). They expect that if they sufficiently displease the attentive public, they will not be reelected. In anticipation of such a response, they seek to serve the interests of this part of the public. Achieving representation in this way does not rely upon active participation, but merely upon attention, joined to an implied threat of *future* participation. What is important therefore is that the public is attentive and prepared to participate should the need arise, not that they constantly do in fact participate.

As an empirical matter, moreover, political interest powerfully motivates actual political participation and so makes a threat of future participation credible. A landmark study of political participation in the US found that political interest is the single most powerful predictor of almost every type of conventional political participation (Verba et al. 1995). This finding confirms the common sense intuition that those who concern themselves with politics are the most likely to actively participate in it. Moreover, citizens are only going to be able to mobilize for a given political purpose if they are paying attention to how that purpose might be at stake in politics. Since political interest is precisely about being concerned with politics, it not only makes participation possible by fitting citizens out with substantive decisions, it also helps motivate actual participation and thereby incentivizes representation. The democratic state should therefore be limited to promoting political attention since attention is a necessary part of participation and makes it more likely, yet in a representative system attention is often sufficient for good democratic citizenship. Because of this latter fact, any more ambitious goal would violate the principle of minimal intervention and would likely require instilling the dubious belief that political participation is intrinsically valuable.

Political attention should therefore be seen as occupying a place between passive inattention or apathy, on the one hand, and active participation, on the other (Green 2010). For although attentive citizens outwardly resemble inattentive or apathetic citizens in their apparent passivity, their minds are active and engaged in politics through periodically surveilling and assessing political developments. Attentive citizens are thus idle, but idle in the way that an engine is idle; they are *standing by*, observant, and prepared to do the active work of democratic citizenship should the need arise (Amna and Ekman 2014).

This form of citizenship is especially apt for an age of audience or monitorial democracy. The notion of audience democracy was first elaborated by Bernard Manin as the latest developmental form taken by representative democracy in its history (Manin 1997). Around the same time, Michael Schudson elaborated the notion of the 'monitorial citizen' as the modern form of American citizenship in a similar historical progression (Schudson 1998). More recently, Jeffrey Green has articulated a spectatorial theory of democracy based on the 'ocular' empowerment of citizens, though Green's conception of spectatorial citizenship differs markedly from attentive citizenship in that Green's spectators watch politics without subjecting its content to scrutiny via reflection (Green 2010).[1] Michael Keane in his massive history of democracy has recently concluded similarly that we live in an age of 'monitory democracy' in which power-monitoring and -authorizing mechanisms have proliferated in a transformative fashion tending to subject all concentrations of power to public scrutiny (Keane 2009). For all of these scholars, this new form of democracy and citizenship is both an historical and normative phenomenon in which the main role of citizens is to scrutinize the powerful and to politically support the most worthy among them, or oppose the worst. Such models cannot subsist without citizens who are inclined to be attentive to politics, so attentive citizenship is a necessary element of this broad approach to thinking about contemporary democracy. Nonetheless, there has been little detailed consideration in the existing literature of the kind of citizen needed for this model of democracy, nor of how they might be cultivated. This article contributes the idea of attentive citizenship to this literature as well as a consideration of the ethics of cultivating such citizens.

The argument that democratic states should promote attentive citizenship shares many basic assumptions and preoccupations with theories of civic education but it diverges from them in two fundamental ways. The most important shared view is that democracy requires citizens of a particular kind and that we cannot assume such citizens will spring up spontaneously. Yet as discussed above, attentive citizenship constitutes a more minimal aim than those of most theories of civic education. This is the first major difference. Also, because attentive citizenship is a companion to the political liberties and enables their exercise, the primary focus here is on efforts to cultivate it among *adults* rather than children because only adults possess the full suite of political liberties. This marks another major divergence from the civic education literature and in particular raises questions regarding coercion that do not arise as acutely there (Callan 2004). Together, these differences generally distance the questions at issue here from those of the civic education literature.

[1] Green insists on the mental passivity of his citizen-spectators at several points, such as when he discusses the difference between citizen-spectators and deliberative citizens. '…[T]he [citizen-spectator] is not engaged in political discussion and debate…but rather watches politics as a spectator, looking neither to convince *nor to be convinced* by political arguments' (Green 2010), emphasis added. His spectators do not form opinions about the things they see in the political forum, evidently failing to reflect about them.

Moral Economy and the Problem of Non-neutrality

What could be wrong with the project of making citizens attentive to politics? On what grounds could one reasonably object to democratic states cultivating interest in politics among their (adult) citizens? The core of the objection is that doing so involves a kind of interference in the lives of individuals which is uniquely troubling and problematic. This is because it infringes on the control each of us can reasonably expect to have over what I call the moral economy of our own lives, improperly burdening the pursuit of our ideas of the good life.

The moral economy of one's life refers to the overall scheme of concerns to which one devotes one's time and resources. Life is full of areas to which we can devote more or less of ourselves. We might emphasize the professional sides of our lives, that of a hobby or religious community, or the familial. We might spend our time and resources on cooking, crafts, physical achievement, or reading. We might seek religious epiphany, comradery, quiet repose, or carnal delight. The finitude of life raises the stakes of these choices since we may reasonably feel that there is always more we want to do, create, or experience than we are able. In this context, it behooves individuals to carefully consider how they spend what life they have left. This task of choosing the composition of one's moral economy constitutes what we might call the problem of moral economy.

A conception of the good life often supplies a general answer to the problem of moral economy, providing guidance on how to spend our lives and how to divide our energies between the activities that beckon for inclusion in a life well lived. This means that pursuing one's idea of the good life requires being able to impose a particular configuration on one's moral economy, and thus that controlling it is a necessary part of pursuing virtually any idea of the good life. Due to the close connection between moral economy and the good life, I will not strictly distinguish control of the former from pursuit of the latter in what follows, bearing in mind that controlling one's moral economy is properly speaking only one part of pursuing the good life.

If this view of the importance of controlling one's moral economy is right, then promoting interest in politics becomes more fraught and intrusive than we might otherwise think. It seems to imply that the state thinks you ought to make politics one of the things you concern yourself with, deducting from the limited 'budget' of time and attention you have to pursue the things in life you find rewarding. This may therefore seem to infringe on an area of decision making over which you are rightly sovereign, reducing the percentage of your life that you yourself control and seriously burdening your pursuit of the good life. The intuitive point here is that individuals should be the ones who determine how the moral economy of their lives are structured. This means that only individuals can legitimately determine how to use their limited attention, time, and resources.

One way of understanding this intrusion is as a failure of liberal neutrality. Though there are many accounts of liberal neutrality, most would agree that it forbids the state from acting on reasons that must be justified with reference to some particular conception of the good life. Bruce Ackerman for instance argues that liberal neutrality implies that no reason is a good one if it requires a power holder to assert that his or her conception of the good is better than that asserted by any fellow citizens (Ackerman 1980). Insofar as the state, in promoting political attention, advances the view that politics is a worthwhile life pursuit, it seems to convey that conceptions of the good life which exclude politics are in some way deficient.

This line of argument can be considered a sophistication of Michael Sandel's argument about civic republicanism vis-à-vis contemporary 'procedural' liberalism. Sandel argues that liberalism is incapable of making sense of concepts like character and civic virtue due to its commitment to neutrality between different conceptions of the good life (Sandel 1996). Since attentive citizenship can be seen as a habit of character and civic virtue, the argument above extends Sandel's logic to show how liberal neutrality could also be thought to ban the promotion of attentive citizenship due to the assumption it involves about the worth of political engagement in a life well lived.

Yet, as pointed out by Will Kymlicka, Sandel's argument is insufficient for establishing that liberalism cannot endorse the importance of certain kinds of character or civic virtue (Kymlicka 1998). Sandel's argument elides an important distinction between what Kymlicka calls *consequential neutrality* and *justificatory neutrality* (Kymlicka 1989). Consequential neutrality would require that actions or policy be neutral in their *effects* on the pursuit of different ideas of the good life, while justificatory neutrality would require only that the *reasons* used to justify or motivate actions be neutral in the sense that they do not presuppose any view of the good life to be better than another. According to Kymlicka, liberal neutrality is about justificatory neutrality, not consequential neutrality, such that only the justifications offered for state action must be neutral.

On Kymlicka's view, liberal neutrality relates to the state's justifications or reasons for actions, rather than to actions themselves. What is at issue is the kind of reasons offered by the state for its actions. It is thus not enough to show that some action by the state *could be seen* as reflecting a non-neutral attitude toward some conception of the good life, as the argument suggests above in the case of attentive citizenship. It must be that *no other justification* is open to those who want to justify it. The question of whether promoting attentive citizenship is justified therefore becomes whether there are reasons that are neutral regarding conceptions of the good life and intelligible within a liberal framework for the state to do so.

I argue that there are two such avenues of argument in Rawlsian political philosophy. Both have to do with the political liberties and their worth. The first is about the special egalitarian value of the political liberties and the second stems from their status as primary goods whose worth is necessary to ensure just terms of social cooperation. Both lines of argument offer justifications for making attentive citizens which are neutral in the relevant sense. Moreover, both lines of argument justify the use of coercion to cultivate political attention, should doing so be effective.

The Fair Value of the Political Liberties

Since the arguments of the next two sections deploy the idea of the fair value of the political liberties, we must consider this idea with some care. Rawls argues that the political liberties—above all, the right to vote and stand for election—should receive special treatment compared to the other basic liberties in that they must be guaranteed their 'fair value' (Rawls 1971). Rawls's main concern is inequality caused by money in politics. Those with greater economic resources are often able to convert those resources into political influence and—since influence over decision making is zero-sum—this dilutes the influence ordinary citizens are able to exert (Rawls 1971, 2001). This feature marks an important difference from other basic liberties like freedom of conscience or of the person since one person's enjoyment of those

liberties has little impact on others' enjoyment of them (Rawls 2001). Rawls wants to prevent the formal equalities embodied in the political liberties from degenerating into substantive inequalities in political influence. He wants, in other words, to ensure that the political liberties remain substantively meaningful—that they preserve their 'worth'—and are not mere formalities (Daniels 1975).

It is important that we have a clear idea about what is at stake with the fair value of the political liberties. Harry Brighouse argues that 'fair value' must mean *equal* value, in the sense of having equal influence over settling political and social questions (Brighouse 1997). If Brighouse is right, what is at stake with the idea of fair value is a certain idea of political equality, in which power or influence over collective decisions is equalized. This is no surprise given Rawls's concerns about economic inequalities infecting politics, but it seems to differ from views that focus on equal standing, discussed below, as well as those that view *opportunity* for influence or power as the core egalitarian political commitment. Yet this latter is misleading. The fair value idea is meant to capture the opportunity conception.

The idea is that all citizens must have a 'fair opportunity' to affect the outcome of elections, or hold office, etc. (Rawls 2001). Rawls specifies that this is to parallel the fair equality of opportunity found in his second principle of justice, meaning that it implies something more demanding than formal opportunities to participate (Arneson 2013). The idea of fair value therefore seems to mean that, *when* we choose to employ our political liberties and take part in the democratic process, the prospects for our influencing the outcome should be equal to all other participants'. Ensuring this requires something more than formal opportunities to participate, but something less than, say, radical participatory democracy. In what follows, I refer to the aim of the fair value of the political liberties as equal power or influence, on the understanding that this terminology is inexact and that it embodies a non-standard and relatively demanding opportunity conception of political equality.

The concern that formal rights might not be substantively protected is a familiar theme in the history of political thought and Rawls is surely right to be concerned about money in politics. But there are *other* ways the political liberties can be denied their fair value, and I argue that inattention to politics is one such way that has gone underappreciated in democratic theory. Because inattention undermines their fair value, ensuring the worth of the political liberties requires that the democratic state take steps to cultivate attentive citizenship.

Though some critics have noted that Rawls's argument for the fair value of the political liberties is incomplete (Brighouse 1997; Krishnamurthy 2012, 2013) or faulty (Wall 2006), this need not concern us here since these are arguments internal to Rawls's theory and we are not committed to that theory in all of its particulars. The idea of fair value names a *general* problem that attends any theory assigning the political liberties an important place—which is to say, most liberal theories. Only this general sense is at stake in the present argument. Whatever reasons undergird the importance of the political liberties will militate against their becoming purely formal and so will be sufficient for understanding why the lack of political attention is a serious problem.

That being said, there are some consequential differences on this point that will matter for the argument later. The most important of these is over the status of political equality and whether coercion is authorized to combat it. If we agree that political equality is foundational for

liberal justice, as do many if not most prominent political philosophers e.g. (Beitz 1989; Sen 1992; Dworkin 1996; Waldron 1999; Gutmann 2003; Christiano 2008), we will not be able to deny that promoting attentive citizenship is important enough to authorize coercion in light of the argument to come. If however we deny the co-originality of the political and personal liberties, and so view the political liberties as purely instrumental to, for instance, the making of good policy (Arneson 2004), or the protection of the personal liberties (Riker 1982), or perhaps the promotion of one's interests and pursuit of the good life, we may deny that securing attentive citizenship can authorize coercion. I say 'may' since even on an instrumental view, one could decide that the systemic threat of political inattention is dire enough that coercion would be justified. The question of coercion will be considered in its own section below. For the moment, we must consider how political inattention harms political equality and the fair value of the political liberties.

The Spiral of Political Inequality

Ensuring the worth or fair value of the political liberties, and so political equality, licenses and indeed necessitates that the democratic state promote attentive citizenship. This is because inattention creates compounding and enduring inequalities of power and influence. And if inattention breeds inequality, then the democratic state, as the guarantor of the worth of the political liberties, is authorized and required to take steps to secure it, including by cultivating political attention.

The first way inattention produces political inequality is by short-circuiting the representative mechanism of anticipated response discussed above. Inattentive citizens are not represented because representatives know they can neglect their interests without fear of electoral reprisal. Over time, representatives learn which groups they can safely ignore and which they must cater to, cementing habits of neglect for the inattentive, creating ignorance of inattentive groups' interests and concerns, and building self-reinforcing expectations among all involved that certain groups do not matter. Thus is born lasting inequality.

The spread of mutual awareness regarding who does and does not matter politically gives rise to a distinct egalitarian harm on the view that all citizens must have or be recognized as having equal standing (Shklar 1991; Dworkin 1996; Pettit 2012; Schwartzberg 2014; Kolodny 2014). On this view, when it becomes obvious to all members of society that some groups are significantly more powerful than others due to variance in their levels of political attention, then the possibility of citizens relating to each other as equals evaporates. Such a state of affairs constitutes a violation of equal standing and thus political equality. In this way, political inattention causes inequality not only in power or influence but also in social and political standing.

Inattention to politics also causes unequal influence through the degradation of civic skills and knowledge. Civic skills refer to the embodied practical knowledge of how to go about participating in politics, including the mechanics of registering and turning out to vote, social connections with politically active groups and individuals, and, crucially, familiarity with the political landscape, its rules, and its major players (Verba et al. 1995). When we ignore politics, these skills degrade and with them goes our ability to engage in political participation. Those who lack civic skills through inattention face steep costs to engaging in ordinary forms of political participation due to the fact that they must (re)acquaint themselves with the basics of

political life, such as who the major parties are and what they stand for, and how to go about participating before they can undertake political action. Inattention breeds the decline of civic skills, which in turn brings about the inability to participate, which itself causes further degradation of civic skills, creating a vicious cycle of disempowerment. Inattention therefore leads to an enduring lack of equal political power.

The third way that inattention creates inequality is through network or social contagion effects. A wealth of empirical evidence has shown that behaviors, including political behaviors, spread through social networks like a contagion (Bond et al. 2012; Christakis and Fowler 2013). In the case of political disengagement, it would work as follows. When one person is inattentive to politics, it makes others in that person's social network recognize inattention as a possible behavior. When it spreads through enough of a social network, it becomes a social norm and so is reinforced by the ordinary but potent pressures of social life. In the language of social choice, this is a result of the social coordination point ending up at an equilibrium of non-engagement with politics.

These contagion effects are particularly problematic because they imply that the harms of inattention are not limited to those who neglect politics. They extend also to those who share their interests, identities, or ideas of the good life since when even one individual is inattentive, everyone similar to that individual is disempowered through the underrepresentation of that group's common views. Since the proclivity to be inattentive is distributed unequally, social contagion effects would likewise be expected to cause spiraling political inequality.

This social dimension of the harm of inattention makes intervention by the state particularly apt. This is firstly because even if individuals consciously choose not to pay attention to politics (which is surely not how all or perhaps even most politically inattentive citizens become so), their choice causes harm to others through reducing the political power of the groups to which those individuals belong. Since John Stuart Mill, the prevention of harm to others has been widely recognized as one of the core functions of the liberal state and forms the sole basis for interfering with individuals undertaking self-regarding actions.

Another reason inattention's social dimension invites state action is because it demonstrates that, in mass democracies, political equality is a product of collective political engagement. Political engagement is therefore a public good that generates political equality and preserves the fair value of the political liberties. Individuals often lack the incentive to provide public goods and so, uncoordinated by the state, they can get stuck in social equilibria which perpetuate underprovision of important goods. The good in question here is equal (opportunity for) political power. The state is often called upon to solve such collective action problems, and so should it be here. The importance of this good, and the danger of its being underprovided, requires the state to take steps for its provision.

In sum, inattention causes unequal power and undermines the fair value of the political liberties. In seeking to protect the worth of its citizens' political liberties and guarantee political equality, the democratic state must combat this inequality. It is therefore not just authorized but *required* to prevent inattention—if it can—through the cultivation of attentive citizenship. Recall also that political interest is often sufficient for effective democratic control through the anticipated response of representatives. This makes interventions beyond encouraging attentive citizenship questionable in a way that promoting attention is not.

Attentive Citizenship and the Pursuit of the Good Life

Inattention also harms our ability to pursue our conception of the good life in ways that undermine just terms of social cooperation[2] and require the democratic state to intervene. This is for two reasons. Firstly, inattention on the part of one person indirectly harms others in ways (distinct from those discussed above) that the state ought to combat. Secondly, inattention undermines the fair value of the political liberties, and the political liberties constitute primary goods whose fair distribution is necessary for social cooperation to be just. The democratic state, as an important agent of justice, must therefore take steps to cultivate attentive citizenship.

There are two key assumptions in these arguments: one obvious, the other less so. The first is that the state may make policy, usually via elected representatives, which can harm or burden our pursuit of the good life. Whether through outlawing or burdening certain sorts of associational life, taxing or regulating particular goods or activities, etc., the state has immense power to make it difficult to realize one's conception of the good in the world.

This is apparent enough, but less remarked is that the resources we need to pursue our idea of the good are often specific to a particular group who share that idea and, in democracies, depend upon the group to ensure their protection or provision by the state. Contemporary political theory is sometimes chided for neglecting the importance of groups (Young 1990), and here is a less obvious way that they matter considerably. Our ideas of the good life tend to be shared such that certain goods are especially important to groups defined by such shared ideas. For some, these goods might include certain associational forms, such as churches or universities, ritual practices, or sacred lands and the ability to visit them. Most groups will have some goods that the state might tax, regulate, or control to a degree that severely burdens the group's pursuit of the good as its members see it (Nussbaum 1999). Conversely, there are many goods the state can provide or protect which enable that pursuit.

This underappreciated group-specificity of goods causes inattention to politics to become both a prudential problem for pursuing one's own conception of the good life as well as a moral problem in that it indirectly harms the members of groups to which one belongs. Members of groups to which we belong can be called *similar others* in that they share our ideas about the good but we do not know them personally. The problems created by inattention can be seen through the following variations of the three arguments discussed above regarding how inattention causes political inequality.

Because inattention creates a self-reinforcing spiral of disempowerment and lack of representation, as discussed above, it also hinders the pursuit of the good life insofar as it licenses harming or ignoring one's interests. When representatives learn which groups they can safely ignore because members of that group are politically uninterested, they also learn whose interests can be sacrificed in making political deals. Representatives need not even be nefarious. Because inattention also leads to *ignorance* of the interests and concerns of inattentive groups,

[2] This deviates from Rawls's formulation of *fair* terms of social cooperation because, as mentioned above, the argument here is not wedded to Rawls's theory. Rawlsian concepts like primary goods are used in their general form, not as pieces of the argument for justice as fairness. Rawls's inclusion of the political liberties as primary goods is not a move unique to his theory, nor the stance that a fair division of primary goods is necessary for justice.

representatives may not even know they have harmed a group's pursuit of the good life. Since the representative mechanism of anticipated response has been short-circuited, they have no incentive to learn, nor to care. In many cases, this would lead to the degradation of the goods that politically disengaged groups need in order to pursue their conception of the good life.

Recognizing the social or collective nature of the pursuit of the good life also allows us to see that one individual's inattention to politics does not merely harm the representation of their interests and conception of the good life. It also harms all the members of the groups to which that individual belongs by contributing to their underrepresentation. Inattention is not therefore merely a self-regarding action; it also harms others.

We might think this harm is, for any individual, too small to be morally serious. Yet we do not have to be Kant to recognize that if everyone thought this way, disaster would ensue. Free-riding—of which this is an instance—is only rational on an implausibly narrow and perhaps self-defeating conception of rationality (Tuck 2008). When doing our part is not prohibitively expensive, it is instrumentally rational to do so. This is in part because the harm we do to others (and ourselves) is not limited merely to the simple subtractive quantum of our individual attention and potential influence but is multiplied due to social contagion effects.

By opting out of engaging cognitively with politics, we performatively demonstrate, for those in our social networks, our belief that politics is not something persons like ourselves are concerned with. This shapes the behavioral expectations of those in our networks and so propagates the message that neglecting attentive citizenship is normal for people like us. Since we tend to be connected to people who share our ideas of the good life, this can dynamically lead to the whole group becoming less interested in politics and so less represented. The result is burdening not just our own pursuit of the good life but also that of similar others through the potential ruination of the goods on which that pursuit relies.

Finally, in the case of inattention eroding civic skills, this erosion literally constitutes the diminution of our ability to fight for our own conception of the good life insofar as it is at stake in politics. It is a form of unilateral surrender in the midst of political battles where our group's interests may hang in the balance. Nor it is merely a surrender of today's battles, but also those of the future. The longer we check out of politics, the higher the costs of rebuilding our civic skills due to the costs of information search, administrative hoop-jumping, and resocialization. Inattention thus raises a mounting tariff of costs which weakens us in political struggles impacting our own, as well as similar others', pursuit of the good life.

These arguments show that not only would we be foolish to ignore politics, but that doing so harms a class of similar others who belong to groups that share our conception of the good life. As in the case of political equality, the state can be seen to be both authorized and required to take steps to prevent these harms. Yet there is a further reason to regard attentive citizenship as an imperative of the democratic state and not simply prudential advice for individuals. This is because political attention is essential to the worth of the political liberties and because the political liberties are a vital part of justice through their role as social primary goods whose equitable distribution is necessary to just terms of social cooperation.

Primary goods are goods that we want whatever else we want, that is, regardless of our substantive conception of the good life. Their function in Rawls's theory is as the impartial

currency of justice, enabling interpersonal comparisons of advantage when there is disagreement about the good (Rawls 1971, 2005). But for individuals, primary goods constitute the means by which they are able to pursue their ideas of the good life (Rawls 1971, 2005). They are therefore of immense value and utmost importance to individuals as means for pursuing the good life. It is essential that these goods be fairly distributed to all members of society in order for its scheme of social cooperation to be considered just.

Among the primary goods are the political liberties (Rawls 1971). This is because the political liberties can be instrumentally effective at furthering one's pursuit of the good life due to the kinds of reasons discussed above, as well as because they embody equal standing. At this point, the argument here draws from that above regarding political equality. Insofar as that argument is sound and so ensuring the worth of the political liberties is indeed both essential and dependent upon attentive citizenship, it follows that cultivating attentive citizenship is a necessary part of securing to each person the fundamental primary good of political empowerment via the political liberties. Put differently, if the political liberties only have their fair value when citizens are attentive to politics, and if ensuring the fair value of the political liberties is a key part of ensuring that everyone has the basic means to pursue their own conception of the good life, then the democratic state, as a primary agent of justice, is obligated to take steps to cultivate attentive citizenship among its citizens.

According to this argument, the source of the obligation is the state's duty to enforce just terms of social cooperation. Such terms would require reasonable efforts to supply the all-purpose goods needed by most people to pursue the good life as they see it. It is thus not paternalistic coercion aimed at getting individuals to act upon the state's view that political attention would do them good. Nor is it objectionably non-neutral between different conceptions of the good life since it does not assume the superiority of views of the good life that involve politics. It merely assumes that those making room for politics are more likely to be successful by their own lights due to their enhanced ability to protect and promote their interests and conception of the good life, and that ensuring the means of such protection and promotion is an essential part of justice. This means the argument honors justificatory neutrality.

Is Attentive Citizenship a Duty?

I suspect the arguments above show that we have a duty to be attentive to politics, but I will offer only a few comments as to why that is because it is unnecessary for my main argument. Inattention harms others, prevents justice, and undermines political equality. It is our duty not to contribute to harming others if we can, and to do our part to bring about justice. Whether we have a duty to advance political equality is perhaps more controversial, but we can at least say that it is wrong to undermine political equality, as political inattention does. In all of these cases, moreover, we can fulfill our duty with the reasonably inexpensive habit of being attentive to politics.

Assuming for the moment that there is a duty to be attentive to politics, therefore, we must ask how far it extends. If control of one's moral economy is an essential human interest—as a cornerstone of the pursuit of the good life—we may think we have a right to it, enforceable against efforts to make us pay attention to anything not of our choosing. Though the harms caused by inattention are important, they could be seen to compete with this right to control one's moral economy. For some, politics will, on reflection, be a distraction from how they want

to live. If they have a right to control their own moral economy, this seems to either preclude that all individuals have an individual moral obligation to be attentive citizens or suggests that any such obligation is defeasible when it conflicts with one's pursuit of the good life. The crucial point is that even if all of this is granted and we reject an individual duty to be interested in politics, it leaves in place the democratic state's obligation to take steps to promote attentive citizenship.

This is because both of the main arguments above make attentive citizenship a constitutive part of justice. It is not just a useful tool for maximizing the efficiency of democratic institutions, nor a supererogatory civic virtue—it is *necessary* for the political liberties to have their fair value, and so for political equality and for just terms of social cooperation. In terms of the latter, a scheme of social cooperation could potentially recognize a right to control one's moral economy, but it could only do so within the context of a system that also limited that right in order to cultivate political attention. Likewise, what it means to be politically equal must include both a limited right to control our moral economies and a duty to be politically attentive.

Coercive Means for Making Attentive Citizens

If attentive citizenship is necessary for justice—because of its role in securing the fair value of the political liberties, political equality, and an equitable share of means for pursuing one's idea of the good life—coercion is likely justified to bring it about. This section lays out the case for coercion and considers some subsidiary questions arising from unique features of using it to promote political attention.

Coercion is often thought of in moralized terms as intrinsically wrongful, reflecting many of our everyday intuitions and usages of the concept (Anderson 2015). One way this wrongfulness has been understood is in terms of the violation of the rights of the persons coerced (Wertheimer 1987). In the case of attentive citizenship, the right at issue would likely be one guaranteeing control over one's moral economy since it constitutes a cornerstone of one's pursuit of the good life and so serves an essential human interest. Coercion aimed at cultivating political attention may seem to violate this right, and so would be wrongful.

The problem with conceptions of coercion that assume it is intrinsically wrong is that they are parasitic upon all-things-considered moral judgments that the particular act of coercion is wrongful (Anderson 2015). But this begs the question. Even if we grant that individuals have a right to control their moral economies, this right might be limited in ways that allow for society to make reasonable demands upon one's attentive resources for the sake of especially vital ends. In this case, coercion would not be wrongful and may even fail to properly count as coercion if our conception requires that it be wrongful.

The equality and justice arguments above are meant to show how attentive citizenship serves two vital social purposes. If those arguments are sound, then even the use of (coercive) threats by the state are legitimate means of pursuing those purposes. Yet we might doubt whether coercion actually could bring about attentive citizenship. It is, after all, a stable habit of paying attention to politics and so is not outwardly observable in a straightforward way as is, for instance, paying one's taxes. It might be difficult to imagine how the democratic state could bring it about without resorting to such dystopian means as extreme forms of surveillance, brainwashing, or re-education.

This raises a question about coercion that is rarely asked: to what extent, if at all, does the justification of coercion depend upon its efficacy? There is a straightforward sense in which it can depend on it. If coercion is straightforwardly incapable of bringing about a particular action—say, a genuine declaration of religious belief—it would be gratuitous and perhaps even cruel to use it in that case, even if the action in question were of extreme importance. Coercion to no purpose due to a lack of efficacy is rendered effectively unjustified by its ineffectiveness.

We might worry that coercion to promote attentive citizenship would be ineffective since it is likely to trigger what psychologists call *reactance*, or an aversive behavioral and affective response against threats to one's freedom (Brehm 1966). Reactance can cause efforts at mass persuasion to boomerang, eliciting the very behaviors it intended to discourage (Brehm and Brehm 1981)—meaning, in this case, intentional ignoring of politics. Coercion aimed at cultivating attentive citizenship is especially likely to trigger reactance because, as mentioned above, attentive citizenship is not an easily observable behavior, so non-compliance is easy to accomplish and difficult to detect. Reactance is also likely because it is linked to the subjective importance of the threatened freedom—which in the case of controlling one's moral economy is especially high—and the intensity of the threat, which is also high due to the involvement of coercion (Brehm and Brehm 1981).

If coercion for the sake of promoting political attention caused *universal* reactance, then it would be a case of straightforward incapacity as above and would stand effectively unjustified, despite all that has been said about equality and justice. Yet such unanimity of effect is unlikely. Heterogeneous effects—that is, effects which differ from person to person—are likely to be a fixture of coercive policy enforcement in most times and places such that some reactance is always to be expected. But compliance is also to be expected. In the absence of social scientific evidence regarding the likely distribution of reactance and compliance, there is little reason to think that the former would overwhelm the latter to an extent tantamount to universal reactance. If so, reactance is unlikely to extinguish the justifiability of coercion used to bring about attentive citizenship.

Moreover, we might think that reactance in this case would actually be less problematic than elsewhere. As mentioned above, attentive citizenship is compatible with political apathy where it is based on a considered rejection of politics. If citizens come to *intentionally* ignore politics—as they would in the case of reactance against attentive citizenship—rather than do so unthinkingly as many do now, it is an improvement since they have at least made a choice regarding the (dis)use of their political agency.

If therefore coercion is likely to be authorized, are there limits to the means the state may use? The goal of bringing about the habit of being interested in politics in all citizens does not authorize all possible means. We cannot violate other vital liberal democratic values in pursuing it. This excludes, at a minimum, extreme means like brainwashing and re-education out of basic respect for the integrity of the person and freedom of conscience. The most coercive option likely to be consistent with liberal democratic values is requiring adults to occasionally attend a civic education course of some kind, perhaps akin to driver school. Citizens could perhaps have this requirement waived if they presented proof of having voted, since voting is often a good indication of political attention (Elliott 2015). Requiring citizens to turn out to vote could also work to encourage attentive citizenship insofar as it encourages citizens who expect to vote to spend some time during election season considering politics (Elliott 2017). One can imagine

other, non-coercive means to promote attentive citizenship as well, such as nudges and persuasion. Although nudges in particular raise many interesting questions, we cannot consider these other means here. Further work is required on means for generating attentive citizenship.

Conclusion

I have argued that the democratic state is obligated to cultivate attentive citizenship and that it may use means up to and including coercion to do so. This is because attentive citizenship is a necessary part of securing the fair value of the political liberties and so political equality and social justice. One implication of this argument is that democratic states wrong their citizens when they fail to promote attentive citizenship since they thereby sanction the predictable growth of political inequality and injustice.

With respect to the ethics of participation, the argument for the necessity of political attention suggests that citizens need not always be actively participating, but also cannot be totally apolitical. If a central question in the ethics of participation is whether we should participate in politics, the answer suggested here is: not always. This may seem to indicate agreement with Jason Brennan, who argues we ought to refrain from participation when we have reason to think our participation would make the collective political decision worse, as when we are poorly informed (Brennan 2011). Yet Brennan's view will likely lead to poor representation of the most vulnerable citizens because they are also disproportionately politically disengaged, poorly educated, and ill-informed about politics and since representatives have little incentive to care about the interests of citizens who are disengaged. All citizens should be attentive to avoid this possibility. Attentive citizens may ethically refrain from participation, but only in special circumstances: when they are attentive to politics and find their interests well represented. Thus, we should agree with Brennan that citizens need not always participate actively in politics, but for a different reason and in markedly different circumstances.

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