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A defense of specialized citizenship

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Abstract

What does it take to be a good democratic citizen? Many scholars emphasize that being a good citizen is difficult because there is so much citizens should know to participate responsibly in politics. These critics implicitly assume that citizens should aspire to be "omnicompetent citizens:" fully informed about the issues of the day, candidates' stances on them, and relevant scientific knowledge. In this article, I advance an alternative, less demanding standard of good citizenship in which citizens focus their political concern on just a few issues, or even a single one. I defend this model of specialized citizenship from the objection that it licenses myopic and irresponsible decision making by citizens with two complementary arguments. The first draws from the work of Bernard Williams to demonstrate the ethical permissibility of citizens making decisions based on even single issues when they implicate citizens' fundamental commitments. The second argument suggests that such seemingly blinkered decision-making may, when operating systemically, improve democratic decision making via a division of labor between citizens specializing in different issues. I conclude that there may be less of a tension between the demands of ordinary life and those of a flourishing democracy than previously thought.

Keywords

Democracy, citizenship, competence, specialization, Bernard Williams, demandingness, attention economy, issue publics, epistocracy, ethics of voting

What does it take to be a good democratic citizen? Some say it takes quite a lot—more in fact than most people can provide—because there is so much citizens should know to participate in politics responsibly. This conclusion can trace its lineage back to an ideal of

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citizenship that Walter Lippmann called omnicompetent citizenship. Omnicompetent citizens are fully informed about all the issues of the day, public figures' stances on them, as well as relevant social or natural science. They then use this knowledge to calculate optimal political participation, choosing the best candidates to support in elections as well as the best strategies for deploying their time and resources in other participation.

This ideal of omnicompetence has a great deal of facial validity—after all, who could deny that people should be well informed about the factors going into decisions that shape their and others' basic well-being? Yet omnicompetence is obviously quite demanding of ordinary citizens, busy as they are with the rest of their lives (Elliott, 2023). Since Lippman's day, critics have ratcheted down the expectations of citizens—lowering the bar of competence—and yet have still concluded that citizens fail to clear it (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Jones, 2020; Schumpeter, 1942; Somin, 2013). These criticisms have different upshots yet all imply that citizens failing to live up to a demanding competence standard represents an important failure on their part. Put in its strongest terms, one might even argue that citizens lack the (moral) right to participate irresponsibly in politics—meaning they are morally barred from it—even if they have the legal right to do so (Brennan and Hill, 2014).

Do democratic citizens, then, have the *right* to be less than omnicompetent citizens? Instead of needing to know about everything, can citizens perhaps specialize their citizenship to just one or a few issues? In this article, I consider whether there is a minimally demanding alternative to omnicompetence for the epistemic and ethical expectations of citizens that is nonetheless defensible. I conclude that there is such a vision of specialized citizenship that can be justified on both ethical grounds and because of its contribution to the salutary functioning of democracy.

In defending specialized citizenship, I am *not* arguing that just because omnicompetence is highly demanding that we should abandon it. That is a misuse of the demandingness objection (Goodin, 2009). Rather, I take the difficulty of omnicompetence as a reason to explore the epistemic, ethical, and philosophical credentials of alternatives in search of one that is justifiable while also less demanding. I contend that there is a model of specialized citizenship wherein citizens focus their interest in politics in ways that run contrary to omnicompetence (and its less demanding offshoots) yet are ethically justifiable and at least potentially responsible as part of a wider cognitive division of labor in society.

I field two complementary arguments to make this case, one justifying specialized citizenship as a permissible exercise of political agency and one showing how such specialized citizenship could redound to democracy's benefit. The latter systemic argument suggests that citizens focusing on just a few issues to make political decisions is not a lamentable failing, if a permissible one, that we must tolerate, but rather the core of a politics that strikes an attractive balance between ordinary everyday life and democratic flourishing.

The article is structured in four sections. The first section outlines omnicompetence and the second develops the challenge it poses to specialized citizenship. The third section advances the ethical argument for specialized citizenship, while the fourth advances the systemic argument based on an issue-specialized division of labor.

Omnicompetence and the empty forum

In this section, I explain the ideal of omnicompetent citizenship and highlight its potentially dire implications for democratic inclusion. I seek to make clear how that ideal, combined with the high stakes of politics, has been leveraged by critics to raise the difficulty and moral riskiness of responsible political engagement such that many or even most would seem to do well deserting democratic politics entirely. If you're too busy or stupid to participate in line with omnicompetence's expectations, the implication goes, then perhaps you should avoid politics altogether.

Modern competence-based critiques of democracy are usually grounded in rational choice theory or analytical philosophy, and so neglect historical context. But it is worth briefly considering the origins of those critiques in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as political theorists grappled with two developments: the spread of democratic regimes and the growth of state capacity. Democratization meant that politics practically concerned a wider circle of people than before. While everyone in society has always been affected by political decisions, the right to authoritatively affect those decisions, as by voting, was novel in these new democratic regimes and helped consolidate a new civic culture that valued active citizenship. At the same time, socialist and other reform movements pushed new issues—like child welfare, occupational and consumer safety, urban planning and sanitation, and perhaps most importantly, the division of wealth and power between labor and capital—onto the political stage. Addressing these social questions forced states to build or adapt bureaucratic capacity to service society (Friedman, 2019).

A few political theorists surveying this altered landscape saw in it a terrible challenge for democracy's citizens. Walter Lippmann, an influential American public intellectual, elaborated a vision of democratic citizenship for this new democratic-technocratic world which reveals the danger. He argues that modern democracy requires a great deal of citizens, more in fact than they can possibly give. Democracy in the modern age demands "the appetite of an encyclopaedist and infinite time" from citizens because one must know "about city problems, state problems, national problems, international problems, trust problems, labor problems, transportation problems, banking problems, rural problems, agricultural problems, and so on *ad infinitum*" in order to make informed choices (Lippmann, 1993: 13–14).

Lippmann (1993: 10) takes himself to be an above-average citizen, and admits that even he is completely unable to meet these demands:

> …[A]lthough public business is my main interest and I give most of my time to watching it, I cannot find time to do what is expected of me in the theory of democracy; that is, to know what is going on and to have an opinion worth expressing on every question which confronts a self-governing community.

Lippmann's point is that for the people to take a meaningful role in directing the government's burgeoning set of activities, citizens need to have informed opinions about the questions the community faces. But there are too many serious problems in modern

societies for anyone to become meaningfully informed about them all. He continues, "…I have not happened to meet anybody, from a President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omnicompetent citizen" (Lippmann, 1993: 10–11). Not even the most seemingly capable individuals, Lippmann suggests, measure up to this standard, which he dubs the *omnicompetent citizen*. The omnicompetent citizen must learn about everything and come to defensible all-things-considered judgments about every issue and problem facing the community, and this is obviously—even comically—beyond the capabilities of everyone.

Later theorists would help fill out this standard more fully and would often articulate dire worries about its implications. In a frequently cited passage of *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter claims that when individuals who are capable of making rational decisions in markets turn their minds to politics and voting, they "drop down to a lower level of mental performance" due to two fixed features of the political decision environment: the lack of individual decisiveness and a resulting dearth of feedback and learning (Schumpeter, 1942: 262). Here, Schumpeter highlights the incentive problem that allegedly prevents voters from informing themselves about politics, a problem that has subsequently been formative for broad swathes of political science (Downs, 1957). This adds a new wrinkle to the challenge facing voters since Lippmann ignores this incentive problem, emphasizing instead that the technical problem of choosing amidst modern complexity is insurmountable in itself. Schumpeter's addendum enables critics to say that even if citizens could technically handle the complexity of politics, they systematically lack the *incentive* to do so. The implication is that voters do not have the incentives *or* capability necessary to be good decision makers, rendering their active participation in democracy dangerously incompetent.

Contemporary critics have added a further moral dimension to the challenge. Libertarian-inclined critics of democracy like Ilya Somin and Jason Brennan, among others, have argued that because an individual's participation in politics involves the exercise of power over others, it imposes an additional moral burden to the already hefty epistemic demands of good citizenship (Brennan and Hill, 2014; Somin, 2013: 5). Because democracy gives ordinary citizens a share of political power and because political power is power over others (often involving coercion), democratic citizens must be immensely diligent with how they vote and otherwise use their power. Exercising power over others, these critics emphasize, is morally serious and must be deployed with utmost care. Failing to take care puts citizens at serious moral risk of contributing to harm or the wrongful exercise of coercion. This responsibility makes it incumbent upon citizens to be certain that the policies and candidates they support are justified. However, as we've seen, achieving that degree of certainty is beyond the ability of basically everyone because of the complexity of modern politics.

Even if we soften the requirements of omnicompetence, the burden is still extraordinary. Somin explores four standards of citizen competence derived from democratic theory which all fall short of omnicompetence and concludes that citizens demonstrably lack the knowledge to comply with any of them (Somin, 2013: 47–62).

Thus, even if we lower the threshold in any of these ways, responsible citizens must still strive toward a standard of informedness that seems to lie largely beyond the limits of human nature, or at least of what most are typically able to achieve. One implication of this conclusion is that whenever we find ourselves with more time or resources on our hands, we have strong reason to devote them to improving our political judgments, as by seeking out more information.

This brings us to an initial challenge to democratic citizenship created by omnicompetence. The ideal of the omnicompetent citizen conveys what would be needed for citizens to participate with perfect responsibility in modern democratic politics. Yet even a softened version is so remote from the capacities of actual citizens that responsible participation eludes their grasp. This raises the implication that there is only one alternative for diligent citizens: political passivity.

Due to its impossible epistemic demands, the only way to avoid participating in politics irresponsibly is not to participate at all (Brennan and Hill, 2014). Since they cannot meet the high epistemic burdens of participation and presumably wish to avoid the moral risk attendant to doing so in an uninformed or epistemically unsound way, citizens should simply ignore politics. The ideal of omnicompetence, therefore, offers us the prospect of a political realm emptied of citizens, or at least of those citizens who care enough to take their obligations seriously.

Omnicompetence and specialization

How are we to assess this prospect of an empty forum? At the risk of stating the obvious, it's not good for democracy. In this section, I'll explain why it's a problem and then outline how exactly this danger should move us to look for an alternative to the ideal of omnicompetence (and its associated approximations). I then sketch one such alternative called specialized citizenship and highlight how the challenge of omnicompetence manifests against it. This will set up the task for the following two sections which will answer that challenge, and in the process justify specialized citizenship as a defensible mode of being a democratic citizen.

It may seem obvious that a democracy with fewer citizens paying attention to politics or participating in its decision-making processes is worse than one with more. Yet there is a substantial tradition of thinking about how democracy might benefit from the absence of some of its citizens (Elliott, 2023: 30–37). For example, Huntington (1975) argues that the political quiescence of some groups helps stabilize democracy by preventing "demand overload" and a subsequent vicious cycle of declining legitimacy and state capacity. Why, then, would it be a problem for citizens to avoid politics?

One reason is that inclusion is likely the most important democratic value, and inclusion means widening the scope of active, attentive citizenship to all who are eligible. Inclusion comes first among democratic values because the main alternatives among core democratic values—collective self-rule and political equality—can exist within restricted electorates or even aristocratic classes, as was the case in democratic Athens and many other closed regimes down through the ages (Elliott, 2023: 86–90). We would no more call an ancient Athens revived in our own day—where only ~15% of

the population is enfranchised, with women excluded entirely—a democracy than we would a military dictatorship.

Moreover, inclusion must mean that citizens are at least attentive to politics since nothing else effectively makes citizens a real part of democratic politics. Before someone can undertake intentional political action of any kind—thus becoming an active citizen—they must first attend to politics to form that intention. The minimal core of what it means to be a democratic citizen is thus to pay attention to politics. When citizens avoid politics, therefore, they contradict the fundamental values of democracy and fail to fulfill the most basic requirement of democratic citizenship.

Another reason citizens avoiding politics is a problem is that, although Brennan et al. imply that everyone falls short of the demands of responsible citizenship, they nonetheless seem to think that there are some who are up to the epistemic challenge—usually, well-educated, "rational" people like themselves (Brennan, 2016). Yet as soon as we allow responsible participation to be possible for some, we draw a line through the citizen body dividing those qualified for democratic citizenship from those who are not. This is in itself a considerable problem when we care about inclusion and equality, but there is a further instrumental concern arising from the patterned nature of this exclusion.

Even if we allow that formal education is not necessary to belong to this epistemically responsible elite, it will nonetheless be the case that it will disproportionately exclude society's disadvantaged members for the mundane but potent reason that they are virtually all too busy with the business of life to build up the necessary expertise. Social disadvantage often operates by soaking up the "bandwidth" of attentional and material resources people possess to meet life's demands (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013). Unequal busyness means some citizens will always have less time in their lives to devote to politics (Elliott, 2023: 5–6), with the implication that society's most disadvantaged members are the most likely to lack a voice in a political sphere reserved for those with the leisure to acquire deep political knowledge. Without their presence, the ordinary biases and perspectival limitations that beset every human being—absent any nefarious intent—will predictably lead the rational elite to make policy that fortifies their comfort and neglects the concerns and preferences of everyone else, particularly the busy and disadvantaged.

A final reason to see citizens dropping out of politics as a problem is that it contributes to harming the social groups to which absent citizens belong. By avoiding politics, an individual reduces the political voice of all the groups to which they belong. In addition to this direct, mechanical reduction of groups' influence, apolitical individuals help spread the social norm among their groups that avoiding politics is a possible and acceptable choice for people like them. Such expectations can spread selectively through social networks like a contagion, generating social milieus where political involvement is decidedly rare (Christakis and Fowler, 2013). This compounds the impact of individuals' avoidance of politics on the political influence of their groups. The reduction in the voice of the group predictably and systematically opens it up to harm from political actors who will lack incentive to concern themselves with the group's well-being. Not only might they neglect the group's needs and concerns, but they could actively exploit them or

allow others to do so in exchange for their support. Without the restraint of political push-back proportional to the group's size, everyone in politics will come to understand that they can ignore or exploit inattentive groups.

This danger is a sort of inverse of the risk of misusing political influence due to ignorance discussed above, and it is generated by the avoidance of politics which that risk causes. Political influence is like energy in that it is never created or destroyed, it merely circulates and changes hands. When a group's political voice subsides because many of its members come to ignore politics, the relative volume of others' voices rises—as the influence of the former wanes, the latter's waxes. This contributes to the risk of harm to the group's interests in an analogous way to how uninformed participation risks contributing to bad policy. Ignoring politics is thus no prophylaxis against moral risk. We cannot escape our responsibility for how our actions—and inaction—impacts others.

The upshot of these arguments is *not* a refutation of omnicompetence and the challenge it levels. It is rather that we have strong reason to search for alternatives to omnicompetence to avoid these unpleasant implications. I must be clear about this: just because omnicompetence is difficult (or even impossible) due to its demandingness *does not* itself constitute a proper objection to it (Goodin, 2009). This is a common error in political theory, particularly that with a realist bent. A highly demanding ideal or principle is no less true, attractive, or required just because it is demanding (Estlund, 2020). True justice, democracy, etc. may simply lie beyond our reach (Levy, 2017: 111–16). If omnicompetence or something approximating it were the only defensible form of democratic citizenship, then we might be forced to grapple with its implications wherever they lead us even to undemocratic conclusions, as have many previous critics (Brennan, 2016; Jones, 2020; Somin, 2020).

In lieu of taking that well-trod path, however, I aim to explore whether there is some alternative model of citizenship that is defensible but substantially less demanding than even the softened standards of omnicompetence explored by critics like Somin. Such an alternative would not be justified *because* it is less demanding, but rather on independent grounds. I aim to provide an argument showing both the free-standing attractiveness of this alternative as well as the substantive unsuitability of omnicompetence for creatures like us.

The alternative I propose to explore is *specialized citizenship*. Whereas the ideal of omnicompetence entails that we have information about and opinions on every political issue, as well as every candidate and party's position on every issue, specialized citizens only concern themselves with a small subset of issues. Instead of constructing an all-things-considered judgment based on making tradeoffs between every issue, specialized citizens reach political judgments about how to vote or otherwise participate based on the handful of issues they deem most important or pressing. This vastly reduces the amount of information specialized citizens need to seek out and simplifies the decision task regarding what political groups and causes to support.

Omnicompetent citizenship and specialized citizenship occupy two ends of a spectrum of what citizens are expected to know to participate responsibly in democratic politics. Omnicompetence, as we have seen, encompasses the entire universe of possibly relevant

information, as well as the processing ability to identify optimal political choices. Specialization entails choosing, at the limit, just a single political issue, learning a little something about it, and choosing how to participate in the narrow light of that issue. Though other critics have sought alternatives to omnicompetence that are less demanding, all of these have been formulated with reference to it and none approach the minimalism of specialized citizenship. Specialized citizenship lowers the bar of what's expected from citizens to unprecedented depths.

The ideal of omnicompetence generates a specific challenge for specialized citizenship. Whereas the decisions of omnicompetent citizens are made with information bearing on all the relevant considerations, specialized citizens make decisions not just on less than all the facts, but by ignoring many plausibly relevant considerations. How could one know whether a particular consideration was important until and unless one considered it? Specialized citizens myopically ignore all but a small set of issues. How could such myopia possibly be defended? It seems guaranteed to result in shortsighted decisions, likely with copious unintended consequences (Somin, 2013). When making decisions that may affect others, specialized citizenship seems especially irresponsible, embracing that particular moral risk with both arms. To state, then, the challenge to specialized citizenship sharply: how could it be ethical to neglect or ignore almost all issues? How could intentional myopia in our conduct and internal deliberations as citizens ever be permissible?

The ethical argument for specialized citizenship

I advance two complementary arguments for specialized citizenship that respond to this challenge. The first concentrates on individual ethics, explaining why it is ethical for individuals to focus the exercise of their political agency on just a small set of issues, or even at the limit, a single issue. The second argument anticipates a worry resulting from such focus, which is that it might generate systematic myopia in democracy. Shifting perspective to the democratic system, this second argument outlines how a division of labor among citizens specializing in different issues can, when aggregated, contribute to democratic decisions being more informed. The rest of this section outlines the ethical argument for specialized citizenship, while the next section explains the systemic division of labor argument.

We are ultimately interested in the question of how one should behave as a citizen. We want to know: how should I use my freedom and resources—my agency as a political actor—in politics? For any given individual, this question cannot be answered absent reference to what that individual cares about. Williams (1981) calls the particular set of values, principles, or commitments that guide an individual's choices and actions their "motivational set." We cannot answer the question of how we should use our agency without a motivational set because that set marks out some lines of action as choiceworthy. There are usually more actions open to us than we can pursue, and only some of the actions open to us further, or are consistent with, the elements of our motivational sets. The exercise of our agency as citizens thus requires that we be guided by our motivational sets.

This first step of the ethical argument merely highlights a key structural feature of agency. Agents act, but not all actions are equally worth choosing. Picking which ones are most choiceworthy requires reference to the agent's motivational set. Yet the connection between one's motivational set and one's agency is not merely conceptual. Maintaining that connection authentically is also a normatively important quality.

Integrity names the quality of successfully maintaining the connection between one's motivational set and one's actions. Someone with integrity acts consistently with the principles they affirm and the commitments they make. One lacks integrity when the things they do bear no relationship to what they profess to value—hypocrites, for instance, lack integrity. Those suffering from weakness of will or akrasia also often lack integrity. Whereas hypocrites affirmatively act in ways counter to their professed values, akrasiacs simply fail to act consistently with their values. People who have integrity have the courage of their convictions and follow them through in their actions.

What makes integrity important is its connection to agency; integrity is a precondition of agency. Without a connection to our motivational set, every action will appear just as good as another. Our agency would be cut loose from its moorings, rendering the choice between actions meaningless and undermining our ability to choose. Existentialist writing often depicts this as a kind of alienation that involves a lack of drive to do anything and a loss of interest in those around us and the world in general. Agency without grounding in commitments dissolves or is at least severely weakened, becoming ennui or anomie. Without a basis for choice, how could we choose?

If we care about agency at all, therefore, we must recognize integrity to be necessary to it. But what does this have to do with specialized citizenship? If we assume a degree of political socialization,[1] some elements of our motivational set will be tied up with particular political issues, groups, and projects. Being personally committed to equality, for instance, might move us to support marginalized groups pressing for civil rights. Believing abortion to be a matter of bodily autonomy and personal choice might obligate us to oppose a political movement seeking to ban it. Having a family member suffer from lack of access to medical care might mobilize us into the cause of universal health insurance. Our agency as political actors—as citizens—therefore often comes packaged together with special concern for particular political issues.

What I just said could be interpreted as merely a descriptive statement—as a matter of fact, our political agency is tied together with political projects that concern particular issues. But that might be a bad thing. The ideal of omnicompetence would certainly suggest so. That ideal might recommend to us that we diversify our concerns or relocate the locus of our concern to a less parochial level and comprehend a wider perspective. At the limit, it would seem to counsel that we take a society-wide perspective that considers all issues equally and on their comparative merits to every other issue, giving no group or individual special consideration.

This is the kind of perspective that Williams (1973) associates with utilitarianism in his classic critique of that approach to moral philosophy. For Williams, utilitarianism

involves putting on the green eyeshade of the accountant and dispassionately weighing all the likely outcomes of pulling the causal levers within our grasp and choosing those generating the greatest social good. The key problem with this approach, Williams argues, is that in deciding how to act, we are expected to put out of consideration the particular ties and commitments comprising our motivational sets. That *I* am especially committed to equality or have a mother who died because she couldn't afford health care should matter *not at all* in how I decide to deploy my agency as a political actor. I must decide and act not as if I were myself, with all my human encumbrances, but as a kind of calculating utilitarian god. None of us should act as if we are ourselves, in our particularity.

Williams argues that behaving this way alienates us from our commitments and values—from our motivational sets—because our actions no longer reflect them. By opening up an abyss between our most basic commitments and our actions, Williams (1973: 117) concludes, the utilitarian approach to moral action constitutes the most literal possible attack on our integrity.

This argument can be translated directly in terms of omnicompetence. The ideal of omnicompetence also requires that we set aside our particular commitments in favor of the global picture, generating a similar evacuation of practical concern from the things we individually and particularly care about most. It too, then, is an attack on our integrity as political actors; it too can undermine our agency as citizens by weakening the ties between our motivations and actions. As a result of all this, I suggest we *must* have permission to prioritize the issues that are tightly connected to our fundamental commitments. Doing so is a condition of maintaining our integrity and political agency—and thus of our ability to act politically at all.

This may sound rather abstract, so let me try to make it more plausible with an illustrative example. Consider an issue that impacts a loved one: say affordable healthcare. Love for particular people is a common core commitment making up individuals' motivational sets. Part of what it means to love another person is to recognize things affecting them as important. Even when there are other pressing issues in politics, we naturally concentrate concern on those affecting our loved ones. This is key. What it means to love someone includes focusing attention and concern on what affects them. If we didn't prioritize those issues in our economy of concern, what would our love be worth? Love for others presupposes special care for and attention toward them and the things affecting them. As Anderson (1993: 2) writes:

> People who care about something are emotionally involved in what concerns the object of care. Parents who love their children will normally be happy when their children are successful and alarmed when they are injured. They will be alert to their needs, take their welfare seriously in their deliberations, and want to take actions that express their care. These all express the way loving parents value their children.

Anderson enumerates how love for particular people shapes our concern and attention. The way we value our loved ones involves engagement with the things that impact them, positively or negatively.

Applied to politics, this insight allows us to say the following: because political issues impact those we love—by supplying or making scarce things they need, by making the educational or financial resources enabling their success available or not, by securing them against injury or not—we will naturally prioritize the issues impacting them in our practical reasoning as citizens. Our integrity as agents hinges on maintaining this connection. So, if a public policy issue affects a loved one, we are and *must be* allowed to regard it as important and to focus our attention and agency on it. To do otherwise would be a negation of the commitments that undergird and structure our agency, threatening our integrity and our agency's very coherence.

If this argument is correct, even a seemingly minor political issue could justifiably become the focus of one's attention and agency if it affects a loved one or is otherwise tied up with the fundamental commitments constituting our motivational set. Omnicompetence thus cannot be the only permissible way to be a democratic citizen, nor any of its approximations. All of them aspire to an indifference that is ultimately inconsistent with our nature as embodied agents. Specialized citizenship, whereby we focus on a small set of issues, or even a single one, *must* be ethically permissible and legitimate when it is an expression of one's core commitments. Our agency—and thus our ability to act in politics at all—requires it, as does our political integrity.

Two clarifying points are essential here. First, nothing I have said elevates the *contents* of our motivational sets above reproach. There are surely many commitments that are wrong or unjustifiable, and so should not constitute the focus of our political agency. This opens an important space for debate and reflection about what kinds of commitments can justifiably serve as such a focus. Yet it does not undermine the permissibility of specialized citizenship so long as there are any justified foci for agency, of which loved ones are meant to be a paradigmatic example.

Second, though some readers may be thinking of specialized citizens as single-issue extremists, here a different picture emerges. Rather than zealots, specialized citizens can be seen as people who are reflective about the issues they choose to focus on and can explain why they're important. This explanation, moreover, need not comprise a comprehensive treatise of political philosophy or set of tradeoffs, but rather an appeal to the absolute value of each human being. Specialized citizens would remain anchored by their principled interest in their chosen issues, eschewing the unseriousness of political junkies who slavishly chase the issue *du jour* and hastily cobble together a view on it that just so happens to allow them to keep the same set of political opponents they had yesterday. Specialized citizens' views on their issues of concern would remain unaffected by their partisanship—indeed, their partisanship would follow parties' positions on them. This is distinct from the conventional picture of partisan reasoning, whereby citizens adopt their political views from co-partisan leaders. Insofar as such deference is difficult to justify, specialized citizenship as an ideal has much to offer.

None of this, moreover, abolishes the original problem of myopia as a *systematic* worry about the effects of specialization. That problem remains. I contend that this ethical argument establishes the permissibility of specialized citizenship, but it does not demonstrate that omnicompetence wouldn't be better. It could be that even though

we have permission to be specialized citizens, doing so nonetheless licenses irresponsible conduct with potentially bad consequences for democracy. Specialized citizenship could therefore be a *lamentably* permitted form of democratic citizenship, one likely to be a source of moral-political tragedy as myopic citizens doing what they are allowed to do make blinkered decisions leading to collective disaster.

If this is so, it might be that we should try to overcome the parochialism of our commitments and the blinkered judgments of importance associated with it even if we are not required to do so. Though we are permitted to be specialized citizens, perhaps we should try to be more than that.

The systemic argument for specialized citizenship

There is another argument for specialized citizenship that can respond to this concern by showing how specialized citizens can, working together, improve democratic decision making. This argument posits a division of labor between specialized groups of citizens who help concentrate socially available information and make it salient for elected representatives, leading to more informed decisions. It can therefore be considered a complementary argument to the ethical one from the previous section. That argument establishes the permissibility of specialized citizenship independent of its democratic consequences. But if one thinks political-ethical permissibility depends on systemic consequences, that argument will not be enough. The argument here explains why accommodating specialized citizenship need not threaten the systemic functioning of democracy but may instead improve it. What follows draws heavily from my earlier argument for the epistemic advantages of issue specialization (Elliott, 2020) which highlights features of the systemic functioning of democratic institutions, in line with a growing body of work in democratic theory (Chapman, 2022; Ganghof, 2021; Herzog, 2018; 2023; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012).

When individuals specialize their attention to politics by focusing on an issue, they become part of what Philip Converse termed that issue's "issue public" (Converse, 1964; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023). This means there might be a tax policy issue public, an abortion issue public, a housing policy issue public, etc., each composed of those citizens (and civil society groups[2]) who concern themselves with that issue. It is extremely important *not* to conflate issue publics with special interest groups. Although interest groups do indeed help comprise part of any given issue public, issue publics contain everyone interested on the issue on every side of that issue—so the abortion issue public would include both pro-life and pro-choice groups, for instance. Because they contain virtually all the disagreement that exists at a given time over each issue, issue publics are neither unitary nor even collective actors in the sense that they do not pursue any single agenda. Parts of issue publics may pursue policy agendas, but they ordinarily do so in competition with or opposition to other parts of that same issue public.

Because members of issue publics are by definition interested in the issue, each member notices and remembers information that they encounter in the social information environment about it. As Zaller (1992: 42) explains, "the greater a person's level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and

comprehend—in a word, to receive—political messages concerning that issue." When someone is interested in an issue, they are more likely to effectively receive information about it. Members will moreover often shape their media diets to include specialized outlets and forums focused on their issue of interest, where information about it is especially abundant. The issue public as a whole therefore comes to function as a sieve of the information environment (Elliott, 2020), as members going about their daily lives capture and retain socially available information about the issue.

Issue publics will also normally circulate and discuss that information among themselves in specialized media, organizations, and online spaces in what is called "enclave deliberation" (Karpowitz et al., 2009). Enclave deliberation occurs within partially closed or quasi-public spaces among social subgroups, often marginalized communities. When members of issue publics meet each other in specialized forums, the enclave deliberation that ensues will tend to spread and scrutinize the information that members have encountered about their issue. One of the most common and well-studied functions of deliberation is to improve the preferences of deliberators by making them more informed (Elster, 1986; Fishkin, 1996, 2009). Enclave deliberation among people who are abnormally informed about their issue will, therefore, likely improve the quality of the preferences of issue public members. This makes issue publics into deliberative arenas of relatively informed contestation within which socially available information is concentrated and processed, improving the preferences of members by making them more informed.

One worry about enclave deliberation is that it may encourage a cascade toward the extreme by becoming an echo chamber, causing members to have worse rather than better preferences (Sunstein, 2009). Yet extremism cascades require the deliberative context to be *homogenous*, while issue publics are composed of all sides to an issue. The diversity of issue publics thus prevents them from moving as a mass toward an extreme. That said, *parts* of issue publics could succumb to these dynamics; I discuss this possibility below.

The information capturing and processing that occurs in issue publics helps make issue publics and their members into relative experts on their issue. Compared to a randomly selected member of the public, a member of an issue public will know more about their issue and will have preferences regarding it that are formed with more information. This does not mean members are infallible, nor that they have optimal views. Recall that everyone who cares about an issue is included in the issue public. That means everyone on every side of the issue is part of the issue public; members of issue publics thus do not substantively agree and cannot all be correct. But all sides are likely to avoid certain rudimentary mistakes that those lacking an acquaintance with the facts might make. They are experts solely in the sense that they know more about their issue and have more informed preferences than other members of the public. But virtually all the socially available information about the issue will be concentrated in the issue public as a whole and be reflected one way or another in their preferences.

One concern highlighted by Michael Hannon about bias among knowledgeable citizens is relevant here. Drawing from a rich body of empirical evidence, Hannon (2022) argues that citizens who are well informed about politics also tend to be subject to

strong cognitive biases—such as motivated reasoning—that render the quality of their decision making questionable. Hannon's argument might seem to raise doubts about the quality of the preferences of issue public members since they are also intensely interested in the same way generally politically interested people are, only regarding their own issue or set of issues.

Yet Hannon is explicitly most concerned about partisans, and it is possible that attachment to parties differs from attachment to issues in ways that are relevant for the activation of biases. Parties are, after all, social groups, and human sociality, in the form of both explicit and implicit demands for loyalty and solidarity, commands an immense power over our thoughts and conduct—often not unreasonably so (cf. Woodard Forthcoming). However, interest in a political issue may not as readily activate these same dynamics due to the relative absence of group affinity.[3] Though its origins may be linked to particular commitments and individuals, being interested in an issue and seeing it as important seems primarily to be a cognitive phenomenon, one that can, in a substantial number of cases, actually override "tribalistic" partisan imperatives to bias our views toward those of our partisan group (Elliott, 2020: 392; Levendusky, 2009: 113).

More generally, however, bias of this kind is not especially worrisome. First, the claim for the quality of preferences here is relatively weak; they are only posited to be formed with more information. There is no suggestion that they are correct, particularly since issue public members disagree with each other. It is rather that their disagreements are likely to occur over different, more information-rich ground than that between people who know nothing about the issue. Second, as I discuss momentarily, issue publics aren't deciders in the sense of making policy decisions. Rather, they provide input, usually in competition among parts of the issue public, to representatives who are the ones making decisions. This competition likely makes the bias at least partly self-correcting and the indirectness of the influence may actually reduce bias insofar as the stakes are lowered compared to a context where authoritative decisions are being directly made.

If issue publics have all this information and improved preferences, how are these brought to bear in politics to improve democratic decision making? The main[4] answer is through elections and representation; they link the relative expertise of issue publics to public policy. The reason is because specialized citizens within issue publics focus their attention *and agency* on this area of policy—so they vote based on it too. Empirical studies of representative behavior confirm that they know that there are groups who are especially interested in specific issues and that those groups vote on the basis of those issues (Elliott, 2020: 390; Kingdon, 1989: 32). Because of this knowledge, representatives' desire to win election moves them to propose policy on that issue which appeals to the preferences of these specially concerned groups. Popular cynicism about the state of interest group politics, particularly in the United States, often portrays this sort of responsiveness as identical with the hegemony of special interests, to the detriment of the common good. But when we think of "specially concerned groups" as groups of citizens especially interested in an issue—that is, issue publics—the picture changes. Policy that aligns with the preferences of issue publics will naturally reflect

the information within it, making it relatively more informed than if it reflected the less informed preferences of the mass public.

Thus, representatives interested in reelection make policy that reflects the preferences of issue publics because members of issue publics vote on the basis of policy positions and performance on the issue rather than social group or partisan motives. This makes policy better in the sense that it is more informed by socially available information about the issue, and less likely to be driven by policy-free intergroup animosity. Notably, this does *not* make the policy generated in this way correct, or the best possible. Issue public specialization operates as a Hayekian epistemic mechanism, aggregating and making salient socially available information as Hayek (1945) argued prices in markets do. It is *not* a Condorcetian mechanism, which would select the correct answer or optimal policy (Estlund et al., 1989). Policies made in line with issue public preferences will tend to be those that a relatively well-informed person would not consider simply ignorant, even if that person substantively disagreed with it.

This last point requires some explanation. To speak of the "preferences of issue publics" as I did above might seem to contradict the disagreement I emphasized within issue publics. Since issue publics are not univocal but rather reflect the full span of opinion about the issue existing at a given time, the issue public as such would not have preferences. So how could representatives make policy that appeals to it? The answer is that representatives would ordinarily take a position siding with a section or part of the issue public and make policy informed by that part's specific position on the issue. But—crucially—that policy would also be informed by the facts such that even members of the issue public opposed to that section could recognize it. To put it differently, representatives will pursue policy that falls within the scope of policies taken seriously by members of the issue public, even if many members do not substantively agree with them. For example, during the Cold War, those interested in US foreign policy periodically disagreed among themselves about the merits of containment versus rollback as policies against communism, but almost nobody who knew anything about the realities of nuclear war considered a policy of first strike reasonable. The latter policy was not taken seriously by the foreign policy issue public and so no representatives seriously pursued it as policy. This case illustrates how policy informed by issue publics will be more informed but not necessarily ideal, as of course both containment and rollback could be criticized on a variety of grounds even if they were both superior to first strike.

Since representatives offer policies which appeal to only parts of issue publics, and such parts may be subject to extremist dynamics, the worry about extreme policy reemerges. Here the remedy lies in representatives who are positioned between issue publics and the mass public and must make policy that balances between the possibly extreme demands of (parts of) issue publics and mass publics who tend to abhor extremism. A candidate offering extreme policies may not only alienate moderate supporters, but also trigger furious countermobilization by the *other* parts of the issue public. Representatives thus have several incentives to avoid extreme policy.

There are ways extreme polarization might break these moderating processes, again driving extreme policymaking. Yet such dynamics are a problem for many normative

democratic theories and are likely to generate far more serious problems than those contemplated here. Extreme polarization is thus a different issue, and the problems it generates are not specific to my account.

To sum up, elections give representatives and candidates incentive to appeal to the relatively well-informed views of issue publics. Elections make the information concentrated in issue publics relevant to decision makers in ways that help improve the quality of public policy. One important question remains: how are the policies appealing to multiple issue publics reconciled? After all, trading off different issues to come up with an all-things-considered view is one of the most difficult tasks of the omnicompetent citizen. Moreover, Somin (2013: 107) emphasizes that empowering issue publics could enable rent seeking as issue publics seek to extract concentrated benefits for themselves by externalizing diffuse costs on the rest of society. Setting aside that this concern collapses the distinction between issue publics and special interests, the worry is that because issue publics are specialized, they do not seriously consider the merits of other views and will generate myopic policy.

There are two responses to this worry. The first is that issue publics do not, on this account, have autonomous control over their area of policy. They do not directly set policy. Rather, elected representatives who are accountable to the wider electorate do. This is an important distinction because representatives, and the political parties they usually belong to, must construct policy platforms that trade off issues and set priorities. Parties, then, and candidates competing in campaigns, reconcile the demands of multiple issue publics. They create the policy mix that typically includes some of what part of an issue public wants, bidding for their support while generally seeking not to enrage and counter-mobilize other parts of the issue public. This tempers inclinations toward rent seeking.

The second response is that even if issue publics were tantamount to special interests, the multiplicity of competing groups with different views within issue publics helps to preserve their information-improving qualities. As Esterling (2004) explains, interest groups typically invest in expertise and technical knowledge about their issue and then strategically share that information with representatives when the information furthers their interests. Yet interest groups are usually in competition for influence. So, when one group does not share information that is damaging to their interests, another group with different interests but similar information will often share it, ensuring that it still makes its way to policy makers in line with the overall issue public argument. In short, an internal proliferation of interest groups helps to ensure that issue publics operate in line with my argument since at least some will tend to have incentive to share costly information with representatives and candidates, thereby stymying issue publics' capacity to extract rents (Elliott, 2020: 394).

One might however doubt the adequacy of specialization across the mass public, or worry about pathologies of attention, such that the right issues aren't attracting the public they deserve. For example, one might worry that an issue public could emerge as politically dominant and monopolize policymaking so that other issues receive neither political attention nor policy resources. This scenario suggests an egalitarian critique akin to those leveled against interest group pluralism: dominant issue publics would

be unfairly favored in a democracy of specialized citizens just as organized groups are favored in pluralism (Schattschneider, 1960).

Yet this critique conflates issue publics and interest groups. As discussed above, issue publics contain disagreement and so lack preferences, unlike interest groups. Nor could one issue public secure comprehensive control over policymaking to the exclusion of other issue publics since the policy remit of any issue will be limited, leaving room for the influence of others in their own issue domains.

Moreover, it's not clear what a "politically dominant" issue public would consist of. If it meant one dedicated to an issue that is of paramount concern to a majority of the citizenry, it's unclear why equality with other issue publics would be called for by democratic principles. When an issue is considered important by a larger portion of the public, it seems appropriate that it garner more attention. Yet so long as candidates cannot win every election with supporters of just one side of a single issue public, others will also matter politically—and they will matter, moreover, in rough proportion to their prevalence in the population, since it is electoral strength and not organized lobbying might that matters—squaring with democratic equality.

If this overall argument is right, specialized citizenship may contribute to informed democratic decision-making. This is counter-intuitive, however, since the original worry was that specialization was myopic and would harm the quality of democratic decisions. What we've seen is that there is a division of labor via issue specialization between different issue publics, each of which surveils, deliberates about, and bases how they vote on one particular policy. This division of labor ultimately aggregates up to informed decisions via the core institutions of representative democracy. Combined with the ethical argument, this systemic argument suggests that not only is specialized citizenship permissible for individuals, but it may even be beneficial for democracy.

Conclusion

The core challenge of this inquiry is a collision between the ethics of ordinary life and the understandable impulse to optimize our institutions and behavior. Epistemic democracy and instrumental defenses of it celebrate democracy on the condition that it delivers good policy (Landemore, 2012; Schwartzberg, 2015). There is I suggest a fundamental tension between the optimizing impulses of utilitarian-inflected political theory, including epistemic and instrumental accounts of democracy, and ethical standards of permissible conduct that fall short of ideals. I aimed to justify a permissible standard less onerous than omnicompetence (or its approximations) because it is more compatible with our ordinary commitments and not obviously worse for democracy. Meanwhile, optimizers smitten with omnicompetence want to aspire to higher performance from democratic citizens.

In this light, one aim of this article's argument is to throw up a roadblock to certain steps theorists have recently considered to reach those heights of performance. If specialized citizenship is potentially compatible with democratic flourishing, then radical reforms such as lottocratic restructurings of power might have less to be said for them (Guerrero, 2014; Landemore, 2020). Likewise, epistocratic reforms that seek to disempower ordinary citizens in favor of elites have less to recommend them (Brennan,

2016; Jones, 2020). Indeed, insofar as such reform projects seek to reshape the coercively binding rules of the political game, they might be seen as attempts to make higher performance from at least some citizens *required* for healthy politics. Yet if what I've said about specialized citizenship is true, such projects face a higher justificatory burden since it seems the limited, myopic citizens comprising most democracies today might be capable of more than they've been given credit for.

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Notes

1. Political scientists have long known that political interest is an important mediator for coherent political preferences, meaning that those who pay more attention to politics have more firm and fully formed political views and those views tend to better cohere with contemporary standards of ideological consistency (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Prior, 2018). This finding suggests that political attention, and the political socialization it brings about, enables citizens to better map their motivational sets onto the politics of their day.
2. While Converse thought of issue publics as composed solely of members of the mass public, I propose we think of them more capaciously to encompass both the members of the public and also activist elites, such as civil society and interest groups.
3. Political science on issue attachment among issue publics remains in its infancy despite the age of the core insights. Recent methodological advances promise some progress, however (e.g. Gershkoff, 2006; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023; Velez and Liu, 2023).
4. There is a secondary effect on public policy via issue publics' role as the source of information shortcuts for the wider mass public. Information shortcuts help citizens behave as if they were fully informed about an issue and, as society's relative experts, members of issue publics are usually the source of such shortcuts. These cues help shape public opinion on the issue, which can then affect election-interested policymakers. See Elliott (2020, 389–90).

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