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Against reviving republicanism

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abstract The strategy of this article is to consider republicanism in contrast with liberalim. We focus on three aspects of this contrast: republicanism’s emphasis on ‘social goods’ under various conceptualizations of that category; republicanism’s emphasis on political participation as an essential element of the ‘good life’; and republicanism’s distinctive understanding of freedom (following the lines developed by Pettit). In each case, we are skeptical that what republicanism offers is superior to the liberal alternative and indicate the grounds for that skepticism.

keywords republicanism, liberalism, social goods, political participation, republican freedom

I. Introduction

A story current among a growing coterie of political theorists begins with Aristotle’s Greece and Cicero’s Rome as the twin foundations of a republican tradition that then is re-established in the high Middle Ages and flourishes in the Renaissance, especially in the Discourses and other writings of Machiavelli. Harrington and the Commonwealth’s-men of the 17th century deploy it in resisting monarchical tyranny, and it crosses the Atlantic to fuel the American...
Revolution and infuse the institutional recommendations of the *Federalist Papers*. Ironically, at the zenith of its accomplishment, republicanism is superseded and swallowed up by the classical liberalism of Bentham, Mill, and Constant. In the political debates of the 19th and 20th centuries, liberalism, either in its classical or welfarist incarnations wields the cudgels against socialism, conservatism, nationalist revanchism, and other contenders. Except for occasional historical nods, republicanism became a vanishing presence.

What makes the story of more than antiquarian interest, according to its narrators, is that the great wave of post-Lockean liberalism, although undoubtedly a progressive force within political evolution, failed adequately to incorporate several of the genuine achievements of republicanism. Accordingly, the liberal order we have inherited is impoverished. Three alleged losses are prominently featured in this literature: (1) concern for a common good that stands over and above the various subjectively preferred ends of individual citizens; (2) active participation in political life by the citizenry at large, or at least a substantial cross-section thereof; and (3) recognition of a sense of freedom as non-domination that transcends the shallow negative freedom of liberal noninterference. Not all of these strands are equally prominent or even present in the proposals of each of the contemporary republicans, and it is not clear that they are mutually compatible. However, if there exists a tradition of civic republicanism that merits revival, it will be in virtue of at least one of these three alleged deficiencies within liberal thought. Otherwise there will certainly be reason to attend to republican forebears so as better to ascertain the distant and proximate sources of liberal constitutionalism, but not thereby to improve it.

To set our cards on the table: we are unconvinced by the neo-republicans’ diagnoses of liberal deficiencies. To the extent that these accounts of where liberalism separates itself from the republican tradition are accurate, we find the difference in each case to the advantage of liberalism. Where republicanism looks appealing in hindsight, the attractiveness is due precisely to the fact that it is indeed a wistful hindsight through which it is being viewed; republican polity up close and personal is distinctly less appealing. Either republicanism is non-threatening because it is little more than a somewhat archaic rhetorical skin for a body of modern liberalism or, if substantively distancing itself from liberal precepts, is overtly oppressive to a troubling degree. The remainder of this article aims to make that verdict credible. Section II takes up the republican plea on behalf of common goods, Section III for republican participation, and Section IV for freedom as non-domination. None convince; each carries considerable worrisome freight.

A word about procedure: the article’s targets are various republican views, not specific neo-republican authors. Citations of theorists are meant to be illustrative rather than interpretive. (To some extent we have to relax this procedure in Section IV, because the theory of liberty as non-domination receives its single prominent treatment in the work of Philip Pettit.) Our primary task is to assess
the prospects for a revived republicanism and only secondarily to estimate its current condition. Apologies are hereby offered in advance for any misinterpretations of the positions of particular scholars.

II. Common goods

Liberal society may be maximally well attuned to the pursuit of private self-interest, but according to republican critics, it is impoverished precisely because of its fixation on *individual preference* to the disregard of *interests that citizens hold in common*. A civil order is more than an aggregate of persons brimming over with particular individual wants; it is *social* in a deep sense. That is because, alongside the private goods picked out by individual preferences, there exist common goods in which people share in virtue of their status as citizens.\(^4\) We cannot compute an index of achievement for a polity by calculating an intensity-weighted sum of individuals’ episodes of desire satisfaction, for such a procedure leaves out what they pursue together.

Is liberal politics deficient as charged for its failure to acknowledge and promote common goods? That will depend on what is meant by ‘common goods’. This is a normatively laden term and so, unsurprisingly, it is taken up by proponents of significantly different views. The existence and normative status of common goods in one sense may be unproblematic, in another dubious. Moreover, the question of meaning has direct implications concerning the relationship between individual preferences and common goods so understood. To the extent that common goods are reducible to that which serves individual interests, then it is not the case that a political theory acknowledging only individual goods has omitted something important; rather, it is commendably parsimonious with regard to its ontological commitments. Accordingly, we proceed to identify and then evaluate four senses in which goods might be understood as common.

II.1. Strongly irreducible social goods

We might say that \(G\) counts as a common good for society \(S\) if (1) \(G\) is good for \(S\) and (2a) \(G\) is not good for all or most of the citizens of \(S\) or (2b) \(G\) is good for \(S\) irrespective of whether \(G\) is good for the citizens of \(S\). For example, daunting military prowess is, let us suppose, a good for Sparta such that its possession places Sparta in the upper 1 percent of the polis-of-distinction roster and ensures that Sparta will shine in song and story so long as historical memory endures. However, the exigencies of the garrison state render the lives of most individual Spartans bleak. Moreover, even if Spartan warriors do rather well for themselves in terms of sacking, pillaging, and the other pleasures of war, the good of the society that is Sparta is independent of these individual satisfactions.

As a matter of metaphysics, it can be questioned whether societies are the sorts of entities capable of having goods in a nondervative sense (that is, as over and above some functional relation among the goods of the various citizens that make

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it up). It is not necessary to pursue that issue here, however, because even if there
do exist strongly irreducible social goods as characterized above, they are irrele-
vant to rational political activity. That is because there is no special reason for a
citizen of S to value G, the putative good for S. S is, on this account, an entity for
which matters can go well or less well, and the individual citizen of S is also an
entity for which things go well or less well. However, there is no special con-
nection between their farings. Citizens have reason to act to enhance those ends
that constitute valuable conditions for themselves, but they do not have similar
reason to act to enhance that which is alien to themselves. They can reasonably
endorse the slogan, ‘Everything for the Spartans; nothing for Sparta!’

It might be objected that this gets wrong the relationship between people and
their political communities. We neither are nor can be, at least in the normal
course of events, detached from our social environment. People whose societies
stagnate will fail to thrive. Indifference to the well-being of the polity is not an
endorsable option. Besides, it is empirically ascertainable that most people do
invest a considerable share of their affections in their homeland and in the
particular communities in which they have been nurtured. Their history or land-
scapes matter to them precisely because they are their own. Except for the
deracinated few, people reject as artificial a sharp distinction between social and
personal goods. But although this may indeed be an accurate characterization of
natural human affections, it is to shift the basis of the discussion. The value of G
is now being justified in terms of the projects and prospects of individual human
beings. It is insofar as one is personally invested in the continuing glories of
Sparta that one has reason to act on behalf of that end. The only respect in which
G is characterizable as a common good is that it is an end that happens to be
shared by many individuals. The conclusion can be presented as a dilemma for
the republican proponent of the understanding of common goods as irreducibly
social: if G is strongly irreducible, then it is rationally dispensable; if citizens
have reason to act on behalf of G, then it is not strongly irreducible.

II.2. Common goods as public goods

Economists standardly distinguish between private and public goods in terms of
their modes of consumption. A good is said to be public if its consumption by one
person does not preclude or diminish similar consumption by others and if it
cannot be made available to one person without thereby being made similarly
available to all others within the relevant domain. These conditions are called,
respectively, ‘non-rivalry’ and ‘non-excludability’. National defense is a para-
digmatic example of a public good. Amy being defended does not entail less
defense for Ben; to supply defense to one is to supply it to all. By way of dis-
tinction, eating an apple is a paradigmatic private good. Public and private are
not, strictly speaking, binary values, but rather opposite poles of a continuum
from not at all rivalrous nor excludable to completely rivalrous and excludable.

Republican attention to the common good can be expressed, then, as privi-
leging the provision of public goods over private goods. Because they are non-
rivalrous, procurement will tend to bring citizens together rather than pull them
apart. Because of non-excludability, public goods will be thought of as those
which we enjoy together rather than as exclusively mine or thine. Furthermore,
the technology of public goods provision renders them distinctly political. Public
goods will tend to be (drastically) underprovided through market mechanisms
because no single producer is able to capture their full value. If they are to be had
in adequate measure, collective provision is required. By whatever means the
polity raises funds and decides how to allocate scarce resources, it will be giving
effect to public judgments concerning benefits and burdens that fall on indivi-
duals not as players in the market acting singly, but as citizens enrolled in a
common venture.

Construed in this manner, common goods are indeed a proper object of con-
cern for a republican polity. They are no less central, however, to liberal orders.
According to Locke, the manifold ‘inconveniences’ of the state of nature are
remedied by establishment of common judgment through which all are secured
inestimably valuable law and order services.5 This is the central public good
afforded by a civil order, but it is not the only one. Government, argues Adam
Smith, is necessary for:

erecting and maintaining those publick institutions and those publick works, which
though they may be in the highest degree advantageous to a great society are, however,
of such a nature that the profit could never repay the expence to any individual or small
number of individuals, and which it, therefore, cannot be expected that any individual
or small number of individuals should erect or maintain.6

The reason that it is proper for the state to be active in the procurement of public
goods is that market provision becomes inefficient in circumstances in which
non-rivalry and non-excludability obtain. But what justifies the allocation of
resources is, as with items traded on markets, the private preferences of indivi-
duals. Common goods understood as public goods are not, then, correctives to the
sovereignty of private preference; they are simply a particular instantiation of it.

There is an ambiguity in saying that a public good is one valued in common
by all individuals in the relevant domain. Consider the public good of clean air.
Conceivably, it is the case that what each citizen values is clean air in our town
for all to breathe. But no such solidarity is necessary to render clean air a public
good. Rather, it is public if Amy values Amy breathing clean air, Ben values Ben
breathing clean air, Chris values Chris breathing clean air, and so on, and if;
additionally, things stand such that one of these personal preferences will be
fulfilled if and only if all the rest are fulfilled. In that case, there is no one end
that is valued by all citizens and thus held in common. A world of radically indi-
vidualist preferences is as compatible with public goods provision via political
means as is one in which individuals display depths of fraternity with each other.
Therefore, attention to common goods understood as public goods fails to effect
any separation between republicans (or communitarians) and individualistic liberals.

II.3. Inherently social goods

One may value the performance of an activity in virtue of its being shared with others. For example, one may prefer to attend a concert rather than listen at home to a CD performance not because the acoustic properties of the former are superior, but because one values the end: listening to music alongside others. Concert-going thus understood is an inherently social good. Unlike the economist’s public goods, the necessity of collective provision is not dictated merely by the state of available technology. Rather, the logic of the good is such that it cannot be enjoyed unless it is enjoyed with others.

Inherently social goods can be thought of as midway between the two previously examined candidates for common good status. Unlike irreducibly social goods, they do not affirm the existence of trans-personal entities possessed of goods or bads of their own. But unlike public goods, it is not merely a contingent matter that they involve shared consumption (and provision). To value concert-going is not to hypostatize the audience as an entity for which two hours of well-presented Beethoven are good over and above the enjoyments of the various people in the concert hall seats. Neither, though, is it the case that Amy’s enjoying the music is logically separable from Ben’s enjoying the music, Chris’s enjoying the music, and so on, if what they value is listening together.

If national defense is the paradigmatic public good of the economist, friendship is the ethicist’s paradigmatic inherently social good. Activities engaged in with one’s friend are enhanced not only in virtue of technical features (for example, chess is a better game with two players than when one person by turns moves the white and black pieces), but because doing it together is a component of the end. When Amy plays chess with her good friend Ben, Amy values playing chess with Ben, values playing chess with Ben who values playing chess with Amy, values playing chess with Ben who values Amy valuing playing chess with Ben, and so on. We may say that they are strongly implicated in their shared activity, implicated in the sense that the participation of the other is contained within that which is valued. A strong case can be made that an individual’s life, no matter how otherwise resplendent, is radically deficient if it lacks the inherently social good of friendship. Shared concert-going is less important than friendship, but far from negligible. The same holds for other activities a defining feature of which is that people are implicated in one another’s ends.

Republicanism is on solid ground insofar as it claims that a polity within which inherently social goods are abundant is thereby a better polity. In what way, though, does this constitute a criticism of liberalism? Liberals can respond that the order they favor is maximally conducive to the flowering of inherently social goods. After all, the liberty that is prized within the tradition is a liberty to cooperate with willing others. Friendship is not only the paradigmatic inherently
social good, but it is one that can only be achieved through voluntary means. If Amy is coerced to be Ben’s ‘friend’, then whatever else she is, she is not Ben’s friend. To be sure, liberalism does not privilege either friendship or concert-going over other arrangements that individuals might choose for themselves, but neither does it labor either with barriers.

Despite the complete absence of explicit affirmation by prominent liberals or libertarians, critics of liberalism are wont to declare that it embraces ‘atomistic individualism’. Rhetorical merits aside, the characterization is distinctly problematic. Liberals lend moral weight only to the preferences and interests of particular individuals (as opposed to infra- or supra-individual entities), but it is in no way a precept of liberal theory that these preferences be self-regarding. Projected ends that make essential reference to other persons and their pursuits are not only licit, but expected to play central roles in people’s lives. They may be said to be atoms, in the sense that they are the fundamental units of normative significance, but most of them are strongly reactive, inclined to form significant molecular bonds with others of complementary valences. Among the liberties endorsed by liberalism is one to listen to concert music in the company of others similarly inclined. To be sure, a preference for solitary listening is afforded equal status, but it is hard to argue that this represents a flaw in the theory. That there exist important goods that are inherently social is one proposition; that all pursuits worthy of protection are inherently social is quite another, and we would be surprised if republican opponents of liberalism would care to take on the burden of defending that latter claim.

In one respect, however, liberals are less friendly to the promotion of inherently social goods than are republicans. Recall the preference to listen to music in the company of other listeners. It comes in two distinct varieties. A preference to listen to music among others who in turn wish to listen among others differs from a preference to be accompanied by others, not caring what brings them there. Perhaps concert attendance is heavily subsidized or nonattendance fined or convicts allowed to fulfill community service requirements by sitting through concerts. It is open to republicans to promote a common good understood as inherently social by nudging reluctant others through concert hall doors. Liberals may not do so.

We are unaware of any republican proposals to dragoon concert-goers. But while this particular common good is absent from manifestos, advocacy on behalf of compulsory national service terms or mandatory voting is common. People are to be brought together to realize their nature as citizens engaged in common cause with other citizens – whether they do so willingly or otherwise. To these proposals liberals demur. But that is not because they disvalue common goods. Rather, for liberals cultivation of inherently social goods is constrained by a requirement of free assent. Otherwise, what constitutes an inherently social good for some is an inherently social bad for others. (‘50 more hours of Bartok and I’m finally a free man again!’) There is, then, a substantive normative divide
between liberals and republicans concerning which means are permissible for promoting inherently social ends. We believe, but will not argue here, that coercing enlistment in common causes invidiously exploits those who prefer instead to pursue various private ends. At any rate, liberals need not be embarrassed by their rejection of republican encomia to forcibly imposed common goods.

II.4. Social capital as common good

Largely in response to recent work by Robert Putnam, theorists posit the existence of a sort of socially valuable stock constituted by dispositions to associate with others in mutually beneficial ways. Following an economics nomenclature that first recognized parameters of physical capital and then human capital, social scientists have dubbed this social capital. Social capital is created and replenished by webs of association in which individuals reinforce their propensity to trust one another. Societies rich in social capital tend to flourish along various measurable dimensions (material wealth, civil order, political efficiency, and so on), while those societies in which social capital is attenuated present a grimmer visage. Because transaction costs are steep, opportunities to interact profitably with others are limited.

Social capital is a problematic analytical tool. Theorists have been unable to devise fully satisfactory accounts of what precisely social capital is or how it can be measured. Explanations of social phenomena in which social capital is an independent variable often present themselves as circular: things go well, it is said, because social capital is abundant, yet the entire evidence for the abundance of social capital is that things are going well. But even if the machinery of social capital theory is underpowered, the idea of a dispositional stock that lubricates transactions is appealing insofar as it supports a conception of social capital as a common good. It is common in virtue of being associative and a good in that it promotes desired transactions among persons. Perhaps at least part of what republicans have in mind when they invoke common goods is cultivation of social capital.

Two preliminary points: first, to the extent that social capital is valued by individuals for the goods it can deliver, a general public goods argument of an essentially liberal-consistent form might be mounted for its support. The very terminology of ‘social capital’ suggests that what is envisaged is useful because it is an input into other social processes (lower transaction costs and the like). Second, even if it were desired for its own sake by individuals, there may be an argument for collective support that liberals could recognize and endorse. Further argument would be needed to explore that possibility. We pass over these issues to turn to what we take to be the point central to this article. It is far from obvious that republican institutions are friendlier to maintenance of social capital than are those of liberalism. As explained by Putnam, social capital is the by-product of associational activity that people undertake for reasons quite other
than an intention to generate social capital. To cite his most well-known example, people who have a zest for bowling and join in leagues to pursue that pastime do more than develop an enhanced facility for converting 7–10 splits. They also habituate themselves to interacting comfortably with others. They develop trust relations that are exportable beyond the world of fellow keglers and that facilitate varied interactions. However, if people bowl alone, then their recreation lacks such benign side effects. There is nothing distinctive about bowling in this regard. Whether taking the form of fraternal organizations, PTAs, charities, devotional assemblies, or recreational clubs, a multitude of interlocking associations goes a long way toward socializing individuals to live successfully as citizens. Note that social capital is generated as a by-product of activities into which people insert themselves for their own private reasons. Bowlers do, after all, enjoy bowling. They do not have to set aside that taste in order to pursue this common good. Indeed, if they were to do so, if bowling leagues were filled with people who were sacrificing an evening by listlessly rolling balls down alleys because social scientists had persuaded them that they would thereby be performing a civic duty, then there would be no expectation of collateral benefit. Not enjoying the activity, neither would they relish the company.

These observations prompt the following speculation: if an important common good is essentially a by-product, then a political order explicitly designed to generate that common good is likely to be less successful at the task than is one in which individuals enjoy a wide-ranging liberty to pursue their private preferences with willing cooperators. Social capital is mostly, if not entirely, a by-product. Therefore, concern for ample reserves of social capital is given better effect through liberalism’s neutral state than by a republican regime empowered to impose from on high preferred social ideals. It may not be coincidental that the abrupt decline in US social capital that Putnam finds to have taken place since the 1960s coincides with the burgeoning of Great-Society-type social welfare programs. However successful these may have been in meliorating social problems (we are not inclined to offer a rosy assessment), insofar as they supplant voluntary associations of people acting on their private preferences, the effect on levels of social capital is negative. Because social capital theory is an immature area of inquiry, caution is called for in drawing implications for political philosophy. Further research is surely needed before the hypothesis can be affirmed with greater confidence. What can be maintained at this point, though, is that the status of social capital as a common good does not favor republicanism in its debate against liberalism.

III. Political participation

As each election season draws near, the public is routinely treated to warnings from a punditry alarmed by the shockingly low rate of citizen participation in political affairs. While special interests invest massive quantities of time and
energy in electoral contests, ordinary citizens are largely detached from the process. Political party membership is dwindling, and active engagement in advocacy or demonstrations is very much a minority taste. Mailing a modest check to a preferred candidate or cause puts one well over the median of political involvement. Even the simple act of voting is eschewed by approximately half of the eligible electorate. Against such a background of uninterest and non-involvement, there may seem to be ample grounds for republican apprehension concerning the health of the body politic. These apprehensions come in two varieties: instrumental and intrinsic. We take these up in order.

III.1. Two worries about participation

The instrumental argument emphasizes potential threats to citizen welfare and the democratic nature of the regime posed by low levels of participation. If government is not, in more than an honorific sense, by the people, how justifiable is confidence that it will be for the people? Individuals who neglect their perquisites as citizens risk being marginalized by the workings of a decision-making procedure in which they play no significant part. Instead, politics will become the province of those possessing a particular axe to grind – an axe that may shave all too closely the wallets or liberties of the apathetically uninvolved. Even if rulers and political operatives can (counterfactually) be relied on to be benignly motivated in their other-regarding activities, the regime that results is less than adequately democratic. Tocqueville observes that the central ideal of democracy is citizen equality, but when some choose on behalf of others who play essentially no role within processes of governance, what results is erosion of democratic equality. If there is reason to prize democratic institutions and the character of citizens that support and sustain these institutions, a judgment with which even lukewarm liberals presumably concur, then political participation is to be endorsed as a means to democratic ends.

That endorsement, some republicans will urge, is insufficiently robust: political participation ought to be regarded as intrinsically valuable. They are inclined to appeal to a broadly Aristotelian understanding of human beings as political animals and will observe that living together with one’s fellows is not something undertaken merely as a vehicle for ulterior ends, but rather is a (major) component of living well. Political community is friendship writ large. No genuinely human existence is possible apart from the bonds of political association. Differ as we might with regard to particular talents and personal preferences, we share a human nature comprised in no small measure by our capacity to assume the station of citizen. Of course, there have always been individuals, under some regimes a decided majority, who are precluded from attaining that rank due to vagaries of choice or fortune, but lack of full political status is always to be accounted a misfortune. To be less than a citizen is to achieve less than a flourishing life. However much they disagree about other matters, neo-republicans and liberals agree in regarding the preceding few centuries’ extensions of
active citizenship to previously disenfranchised groups (slaves, women, religious dissenters, the working classes, and so on) as political progress. (Which developments are to be categorized as political regress is apt to be a more contentious issue.) To participate in political deliberations is not, on this account, entirely or even primarily a means conducive to achieving those private ends to which one is drawn. Rather, it is itself for most people an activity indispensable for adequate expression of their nature as human beings. The primary problem with procedural liberalism’s low levels of citizen engagement, then, is not a danger of tipping into authoritarianism; that may or may not be. Rather, it fundamentally stunts their lives as citizens — if, indeed, an apathetic, detached mass deserves that honorable title.

We are persuaded by neither instrumental nor intrinsic participationist lines. Although no knockdown refutation will be proffered here, we present five reasons for skepticism concerning the participationist challenge. The first two tell against the instrumental strand; the last two against the intrinsic value of participation. The middle discussion is germane to both.

**III.2. Inefficient participation**

We readily concede that it would be disastrous for the fate of the democracy if the proportion of the population involved in meaningful political deliberation were as small, say, as that so occupied in North Korea. However, to maintain that a critical mass of civic involvement is requisite for the success of a free order is not to commit oneself to the view that more participation is always better than less. Perhaps only a modest proportion of the populace needs to be engaged in political activity to promote the general welfare. More strongly, the general welfare may be better promoted by prevailing low levels of activity than it would be with either considerably less or considerably greater participation. If this hypothesis is correct, politics will resemble numerous other activities to which people lend their attention. Here is another batch of hypotheses: the number of people who grow crops, practice dentistry, perform in choral societies, or study the philosophical foundations of republicanism is roughly optimal; that is, deviations in either direction by more than an order of magnitude would have deleterious results. There can indeed be too much of a good thing — and, of course, too little. This is not true of all good things: for some activities a norm of universal participation is best. refraining from interfering with the life, liberty, or property of others is one example; regularly flossing one’s teeth is said to be another. The appropriate question, then, is whether vigorous political participation is, as instrumental participatory republicans would have it, something the more of which a society has, the better off that society is. It is no answer at all to observe that there exists a participation floor such that below it vital social goods are gravely imperiled. The same is true for crop production (and philosophizing?).

One prima facie reason to favor minimally adequate over maximal levels of participation is because political activity exacts opportunity costs measured in
terms of alternative activities forgone. ‘Too many evenings’ was Oscar Wilde’s estimation of the opportunity cost of socialism; the observation applies with equal force to republican dealings. Hours that one spends attending legislative committee hearings and distributing broadsides door to door are hours not available for practicing arpeggios or playing with one’s children. These are very real costs, and so it is misleading to contrast political engagement with citizen apathy. The more appropriate contrast is between possible modes of activity where pursuing one more intensively is to pursue another less intensively or, perhaps, giving it up altogether. Even if political activity is valuable (either instrumentally or intrinsically), it is not the only valuable thing, and we can see no reason to suppose that public engagements always or for the most part should trump private engagements.

But second, it should not be supposed that the products of political activity are generally positive. Pursuits that are predominantly self-regarding and undertaken for the pleasures they afford are typically benign. A sufficient justification for bowling may be that it is enjoyable for the bowler. If the attraction fades, then so too does the value. To be sure, even self-regarding pursuits are criticizable if pleasures experienced by the agent are accompanied by significant harms; rolling balls down an alley is less controversial than shooting up heroin in an alley. However, activities that generate significant consequences for others, and especially for non-consenting others, stand in need of higher standards of justification. A requirement that the performer demonstrate possession of relevant skills may be in order. Neurosurgery offers great benefactions, but not when performed by clueless amateurs. Some things are worth doing only if performed above a competence threshold.

What of political activity? Our not-very-helpful answer is: it depends. Many people believe that all who are eligible to vote should cast ballots on election day. We do not accept this judgment. A more modest claim is that those who receive some satisfaction from voting should do so. Although, no doubt, it is possible to invent exceptions, this is basically plausible as a general principle. A major reason why that is so is the inconsequentiality of any single ballot in a large electorate. No matter how uninformed or even pernicious one’s electoral choice might be, the chance that it will swing the result is infinitesimally small. The properties of voting are much like those of bowling: worthwhile for those who fancy the activity, otherwise not. But other modes of political activity are more consequential than voting. Intense advocacy for candidates or policies has a better chance of actually influencing the body politic, and holding public office yet more so. Statesmanship is no trivial calling, either with regard to the magnitude of its effect on others or the depths of expertise requisite for success. Therefore, the principle that suggests itself is that significantly consequential political engagement should be the province of those who have acquired a sufficient level of expertise such that they have a better than fair chance of advancing rather than retarding public welfare.
Attention to the production function of majoritarian decision-making reinforces this conclusion. Suppose, for example, that recycling of newspapers and aluminum cans is socially beneficial. Some people will be in a position to do a lot of recycling, some only a modest amount. But every little bit helps, and so it is plausible to maintain that we should all pitch in and do our part, no matter how modest. But now consider municipal decision-making concerning how to allocate public resources between newspaper and aluminum-can recycling (and between all kinds of recycling on the one hand, and money for schools and hospitals on the other hand). Here it is not at all plausible that more participation in setting policy is better than less. What is important is apt decisions, not the number of people who toss in their (more or less uninformed) opinions concerning how to prioritize these tasks. Even if all else is equal (the greater the number of inputs, the greater the chance of coming up with the correct decision17), inequality of input quality dominates quantity. A small coterie of experts typically is worth more than any number of uninformed tyros.

It might be argued in response that this is a reason for citizens to educate themselves concerning the issues of the day such that their expressed preferences will carry epistemic weight. However, here the opportunity cost consideration becomes acute. A quick skim of the *Dummies’ Guide to Recycling* does not suffice to render one expert in waste management, nor does a university course in cultural pluralism produce great insight in questions of distributive justice. In political practice as elsewhere, genuine mastery is not secured on the cheap. We do not doubt that it would be possible to generate much enhanced levels of political awareness in the citizenry, but at what cost? Do we really want pilots to spend less time on take-off techniques and surgeons to stint on practicing suture tying so that they can devote the odd hour or two to the consideration of foreign policy? Instrumentalist considerations suggest otherwise.

### III.3. Potential versus actual participation

There are various reasons apart from general apathy why citizens may not actively participate in political processes. They may care deeply about decisions made on high, but be afraid publicly to question what the Central Committee is up to. Alternatively, they might despair of the possibility of positive change. But it is also possible that they are broadly satisfied with the course the ship of state is taking. They are pleased to leave (the drudgery of) political decision-making to those so inclined just as long as events proceed reasonably well, and ‘reasonably well’ may incorporate considerable latitude if the representative citizen understands that politics is a complicated domain in which the truth of counterfactual conditionals can rarely be ascertained with much confidence and where those who are steering the ship give the appearance of possessing at least as much competence and concern as oneself. Unlike autocracies, in a liberal democracy the choice largely to absent oneself from political involvement is indeed a choice – and it is one that can be revoked.
Perhaps the most eloquent and powerful slogan that resounds within liberal democracies is the call to ‘Throw the rascals out!’ Elected officials serve, if not at the pleasure, then at least at the absence of gross displeasure from their constituents. If malfeasance or incompetence is seen to have risen to intolerable levels, then even those who are most single-mindedly attentive to private ends may be roused to object, either by casting an oppositional ballot or through means yet more activist. The knowledge that currently complacent citizens will not inevitably remain so is itself a spur to political actors to moderate their activities in order not to rouse the sleeping giant. In this manner, even the apathetic and disengaged are important political actors, albeit in potentia. This suggests that the availability of avenues of access to political participation is more important than participation per se. As with the constable on the street corner, the more the threat of action suffices to render its actuality unnecessary, the better. A hypothesis worth exploring is that the optimal quantity of citizen involvement is a mean between extremes. Too much citizen zeal to leap into the political fray and set things right provides an environment hospitable to the proliferation of demagogues and swindlers; too little zeal, and the greater the susceptibility of the regime to takeover by aspiring tyrants. Good government requires something in between. While the precise optimality point may be unknowable, judgments should reflect the fact that the more extensive the investment of citizen time and energy in matters political, the fewer resources remain for other (private) productive uses.18

III.4. Polis and megalopolis

Republicanism is a self-confessedly nostalgic theory. It looks back with affection at the enclaves of free, self-governing citizens of ancient Greece or Renaissance Italy. Aristotle and Machiavelli are central inspirational figures. A source of counter-inspiration, though, is Thomas Wolfe, or at least his book title You Can’t Go Home Again. It may have made some sense to invoke notions of civic friendship among cooperating citizens of small republics whose population was numbered in the low five figures and in which women, slaves, and the baser classes were excluded from civic identity, but to suppose that this model is scalable to national entities of the magnitude of the USA, or one of its component states, or even one of the larger cities of a component state is to allow nostalgia to turn into fantasy. For better or worse, the epoch of a tight-knit cooperative band of brothers (an epoch in which sisters need not apply) is irretrievable.

That is not to say that there is a dearth of opportunity for political participation under conditions of modernity, or even that such opportunities are fewer in number. (The opening of political access to formerly excluded groups suggests the contrary.) It does mean, though, that the nature of these opportunities is different. It is implausible to think of the political realm as one in which an active citizenry is united in a common enterprise in pursuit of common goods. Rather, there is a multitude of remotely interconnected niches housing diverse groups of
actors trying to advance political ends that differ one from another just about as much as their private ends do. The Topeka Hispanic Senior Citizen Coalition for Access to Health Care manifests precious little commonality with the Bring God Back into the Schools Committee. Both are political insofar as they attempt to hook into and then utilize some piece or other of governmental machinery, but such minimal connectedness does not amount to very much. It does not establish a relationship among compatriots that, even stretching the concept to the point of unrecognizability, can be described as a form of friendship. Nor is it plausible to say that these individuals are all united, whether they realize it or not, in an endeavor to advance a common good. More realistic is to acknowledge that politics is an industry or, more precisely, family of industries on a par with other industrial groupings. As with manufacturing, entertainment, or personal services, politics constitutes a genus of enterprises in which individuals pursue their various ends through a broad diversity of means. Political actors do not thereby constitute anything like a family or fraternity, nor are they necessarily more (or less) other-regarding than people who pursue alternative vocations. To deny some fundamental qualitative difference is not to denigrate the practice of politics, but, perhaps, to demystify it.

III.5. Sociality and solidarity
Let us accept for the sake of argument that human life in the absence of political community would be bad either after the manner of Aristotle or Hobbes, or both. It follows that political activity is instrumentally valuable. This is not a conclusion holding out much comfort to republicans, though, because the most that can be affirmed is that some people ought to be politically active. No further inference to the optimality of political engagement by all or most or even many citizens holds. However, if it can be argued that political activity directly manifests some human good, then the thesis that more participation is ipso facto better than less may be revived. What is needed to give that argument wings is some specification of the identity of the good in question. In this regard, Aristotle is a considerably more promising candidate for enlistment in republican ranks than is Hobbes. On Aristotle’s account, human beings are characterized as essentially social, while the utility function of Hobbesian man looks to be egoistic. If it is through engaging in political deliberation with our fellows that we give fitting expression to this nature, then participation is intrinsically valuable. This line of thought is suggestive, but imprecise. Political participation is held to manifest the intrinsically valuable trait, sociality, but it is unclear whether participation is being advanced as a necessary condition for the adequate realization of sociality or a sufficient condition. In this subsection, we indicate why we do not find it to be necessary; in Subsection III.6, we offer our doubts concerning sufficiency. Throughout, we accept, at least for the purposes of this article, that sociality is indeed intrinsically valuable.

The obvious objection to political participation as being necessary for achiev-
ing the good of sociality is that there are a myriad of nonpolitical ways in which human beings come together. They do so as friends and lovers, as members of sports teams and congregations of faith, as colleagues in philosophy departments, as imbibers in neighborhood pubs, and, yes, as transactors in the market. It is not obvious that these are practices inferior to seeking votes. Some people will engage in them wholeheartedly and in deep fellowship with their comrades, while others will do so in an arm’s-length, perfunctory manner. That is true for politics as well. The point is that there is nothing special about political participation. From all that can be derived from Aristotelian philosophical anthropology, caucuses are neither better nor worse than congregations, clubs, and companies.

The objection that is liable to be posed is that politics enjoys a special status not shared by these other forms of sociality because it, unlike them, encompasses the whole. It is what brings all citizens together in universal, not particularized, solidarity. It has been argued above, however, that under modern conditions this is just not so. Nor, for that matter, was it true for the population of a Greek polis, in virtue of the radical exclusion of many. An accurate expression of the traditional republican credo could be: ‘Solidarity for the few; subordination for the many.’ Pace its defenders, including Aristotle himself, the polis was not the acme of human sociality – far from it. Both then and now, the ties of sociality on offer are particular not universal, local rather than global.

It might be responded that these so-called private alternatives to politics are themselves political. Clubs, churches, and corporations have to engage in processes of deciding how they will act together for common ends. They are constrained, but also empowered, by constitutive and operational rules. There is internal role differentiation and special authority vested in presidents, captains, or deacons. They may not go to war against other entities as states do (although a Yankees–Red Sox series offers a rather convincing simulation!), but these associations are through and through political in their doings. Even the nuclear family, as Aristotle observed, is the prototype of all political entities.21

The anti-republican will not reject this conclusion, but rather embrace it, for what it concedes is that if there exists a human good unique to political participation, then it is a good that can be achieved in venues far distant from polling booths and precinct caucuses. Political participation is on offer everywhere this side of the hermit’s pillar, and it is complementary to rather than competitive with actions taken in furtherance of private preferences. The republican critique of liberal privileging of the private over the public has come full circle and turned on itself.

III.6. Compulsion and character
The preceding subsection has conceded to politics (understood in the narrow sense) an intrinsic value no greater than, but also no less than, that inherent in other forms of human cooperation. That, though, may have been to concede...
too much. There is at least one reason to judge that politics is a human activity inferior to those with which it has been compared: politics fundamentally expresses itself via a grammar of compulsion. That is not true of every particle of political activity. Citizens in the USA (but not Australia\textsuperscript{22}) are at liberty to choose whether to vote, and in both countries are free to order the candidates as they prefer. In addition, theorists of the liberal strand of politics are wont to offer models in which the basic structure of the political order is presented as arising out of freely tendered consent: if not actual and overt consent, then perhaps tacit or hypothetical. Without wishing in any way to downplay the significance of these outposts of voluntariness, we note that they serve a subordinate justificatory role, and what they justify is coercion.

There are things we do with each other that cannot, except sardonically, be described as social activities. A mugging requires the participation of a mugger and muggee, yet the operation is an instance not of social, but rather of antisocial, behavior. That is because the participation of the victim is involuntary. Doing \emph{to} others is not the same as doing \emph{with} others, and the intrinsic merits of the latter do not attach to the former. Rather, they are transformed into demerits. It would be ridiculous to jump forthwith to the conclusion that political compulsion is on all fours with a street corner shakedown (and thus a mug's game?). Nevertheless, the onus of justification weighs much more heavily on coercive than on consensual activity. Unless there is some overriding reason \emph{to} coerce others, there is an overriding reason \emph{not} to coerce. Different theories of political authority will prompt different judgments concerning those circumstances in which coercion is justified, but any remotely plausible theory will acknowledge that the justificatory bar is set considerably higher for force than for voluntary concurrence.

A tradition into which republicanism taps takes it to be evident that the calling of the political actor is higher than that of, say, the door-to-door salesman. To us this is far from evident. The vendor of goods knocks on doors, but stops short of bashing them down. He offers his wares for sale, but more or less cheerfully takes no for an answer. Bargains are proposed, but not imposed. Offers made are offers you \emph{can} refuse. Put in this light, 'mere merchandizing' and 'honorable statecraft' seem in need of an adjective switch. The dignity that attaches to cooperation with willing others is absent from compulsion. Why, then, should politics possess the cachet that trade lacks? Alternatively, to approach the question from a slightly different angle, what sort of person will value political vocations? Here are three possibilities.

If given half an excuse, people will think well of themselves and what they do. Physicians are apt to praise the practice of medicine, artists the production of paintings and sculpture, and teachers the value of education. Each is likely to maintain that not nearly enough social resources are invested in health care, art, or education. A disproportionately large number of the people who pronounce on the instrumental or intrinsic value of the practice of politics are themselves either practicing politicians or meta-politicians, theorists for whom the study of politi-
cal phenomena is central to their own lives. By and large, they believe that they have not chosen unwisely in turning their attention in this direction, and they are apt to believe that those who fail to do so are underinvesting in political activity. It is not surprising that republican manifestos for greatly enhanced political participation issue from professional political theorists rather than from the great unwashed masses, and it is hardly more surprising that the latter are unmoved by these manifestos. Why should they be? Their lives revolve around different centers and, by their accounts, they find the spin satisfactory. From a perspective of wry detachment, one can judge the human propensity to overvalue as a good for everyone that which is nearest and dearest to oneself as an amusing, if not altogether benign, foible. So if not exactly a reason, that it is one’s own life constitutes an inducement to overvalue the political life. Closeness distorts one’s field of view. Because political philosophers are not only in the business of politics, but also of philosophy and thus of truth, it is incumbent on them to make allowances and adjust. But this is easier said than done. Even Aristotle, the author of Politics, elevates political activity to a position inferior to no other, except, perhaps, the pursuit of disinterested theoretical inquiry. Not coincidentally, he also authored Metaphysics.

A second type of person who is apt to find political activity inherently valuable is someone for whom the ubiquity of compulsion within politics is regarded not as a liability, but rather as an asset. To make others dance to one’s own tune can be exhilarating. Furthermore, to care about some cherished ideal is to care about its realization. Persuasion is both slow and uncertain. It may be deemed a mark of sincerity not to be daunted by obstacles to the good, but rather to blast them out of the path. A wise man (or if not really a wise man, then perhaps a worldly-wise one) observed that one cannot make omelettes without cracking some eggs. It may seem that no avenue is as direct a route to glorious achievement as politics, especially if one is inclined to confuse achievement with efficacy. One may take oneself to be exercising compulsion in order to confer a great benefaction on others, perhaps by forcing them to be free. It is easy to see why for this temperament the political siren song will be irresistible. It should be no less easy for the rest of us to see that we have ample reason to demur.

The third type of person will concede that compulsion is an evil, but, on occasion, a necessary evil. Human beings have not (yet) developed a social technology of amicably and productively living together under thoroughly non-coercive structures. Thus, compulsion, although never good in itself, is sometimes a necessary means to various goods. Its minimization is, all else being equal, desirable. Therefore, a cogent reason for exercising political power or participating in practices that determine who will wield the levers of power is that one has some facility in avoiding unnecessary coercive activity. Such a person accepts that some political engagement is instrumentally valuable, but resists the conclusion that it is good in itself, let alone the highest good. We know of no better depiction of this type than that offered by Plato in his discussion of the
supremacy of the philosopher kings. Their chief qualification for office is not their undergraduate curriculum of mathematics and sciences nor even, we believe, their postgraduate glimpses of the Form of the Good. Rather, it is because they dislike political life and reluctantly embark on it (for a limited term) only so that those with more zest for politics will be excluded. It is no small irony that this quintessential expression of an anti-republican credo is presented in a book entitled Republic.

IV. Liberty as non-domination

The preceding discussion invoked an understanding of compulsion as compromising the liberty of others by interfering with their choices. This conception of liberty as noninterference has not gone unchallenged in the republican literature. Isaiah Berlin distinguishes between negative and positive liberty, the latter understood as the exercise of self-mastery. Berlin’s characterization of positive liberty is notoriously problematic. It bears some affinity to Benjamin Constant’s liberty of the ancients, a freedom to participate fully in civic affairs, itself distinguished from modern (negative) liberty. Some republicans take their bearings from either Berlin’s positive liberty or Constant’s ancient liberty, while downplaying the normative significance of negative liberty. They are not discussed in this article (except insofar as the egg-cracking omelette makers are espousing a brand of positive liberty). Instead, we turn to an important recent recasting of republican liberty by Philip Pettit.

Pettit observes that Berlin’s negative–positive dichotomy does not occupy all the logical space in the conceptualization of liberty. That is because it includes (positive) self-mastery, but not the absence of being mastered by others. There is room, then, for a notion of liberty as not being subject to the arbitrary will of others. Pettit refers to liberty so understood as ‘non-domination’. Although this may sound like a variation on negative liberty, it differs significantly. According to Pettit, one may suffer domination by another who never actually interferes with one’s activities. For example, the underling who acts at the sufferance of a master may never experience interference, either because the master happens to be benevolent or because the lackey is adept at avoiding those activities that might induce the master to interfere. But because the master can intrude at any moment should he be of a mind to do so, the underling is subject to the arbitrary will of another. On Pettit’s account, it is not interference, but rather vulnerability to arbitrary interference, that constitutes domination. Interference, however, that is not arbitrary is not inimical to liberty as non-domination. Individuals who enjoy a fair opportunity to give expression to their interests which are then suitably tracked by the decision-making apparatus of the polity are not deprived of liberty when their preferences are countermanded. They are interfered with, but not dominated.

At the risk of oversimplifying Pettit’s subtle and extended discussion, we can...
say that the essential difference he finds between republican and liberal visions of society is that the former exemplifies more interference, but less domination. This is, according to Pettit, to the good. Although being interfered with in one’s preferred activity may always count as a negative circumstance, such interference is justifiable even from the agent’s own perspective if it is preceded by equitable consideration of the weight of those overridden preferences and accompanied by opportunities after the fact to contest determinations that appear to have gone against one’s interests. To live under the threat of arbitrary intrusion by others is, however, a significant evil even if no interference occurs. It is to be burdened with the status of a subordinate rather than coexisting with others as their moral equal. Unlike mere negative liberty, republican liberty is, in Pettit’s term, ‘resilient’; it extends beyond the actual world into possible worlds.

It will be convenient to appraise the two strands of Pettit’s theory separately, first addressing the contention that interference just so long as it is contestable is not morally objectionable and, second, that liberalism’s negative liberty is inferior because it lacks resilience. We shall argue that neither side of the case for liberty as non-domination succeeds.

IV.1. Consent, control, and contestation

It is not an infringement of republican liberty to interfere with someone’s preferred mode of activity just so long as interests are tracked and adverse determinations are contestable. Noteworthy in this conception is the absence of any requirement of consent. To be sure, those over whom political control is exercised may come to agree to the propriety of the processes operating on them, but this is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the achievement of republican liberty. (It is not sufficient because servile persons might come to accept, even welcome, domination by their masters.)

Pettit’s republicanism builds democratic constitutionalism into its basic structure. Individuals who are deprived of the franchise or accompanying civil rights are dominated in that they are subject to determinations which they themselves have no part in making. Because pure majoritarian democracy allows stable majorities to ignore as ineffectual the votes of minorities and arbitrarily impose the majority’s will on them, constitutional protections are necessary in order to ensure that the few are not dominated by the many. Judicial and other mechanisms for review provide avenues for revisiting and readdressing impositions that would otherwise constitute domination.

Liberals too endorse a constitutional democratic politics. What then makes Pettit’s version distinctively republican? Three features suggest themselves. The first is semantic. In a Pettit republic, the determinations of democratic majorities bring about far fewer restrictions of individual liberty than is the case in liberal democracies. That is not because political rule is exercised with a lighter hand; just the reverse. Rather, it is because republicans decline to classify most impositions on individual preferences as liberty restricting.
But second, the revised conception of liberty is more than purely semantic. It affords much greater scope for state exercise of compulsion. Within a liberal understanding, it counts against the imposition of a policy that it impedes the negative liberty of citizens. That burden is defeasible. Individual liberty does not always trump political policy, but it is a non-negligible constraint on what the state may do. So too is individual liberty a constraint for republicans, but in a sense that lends no weight to interference as such. By way of response to the citizen who complains, ‘You’re forcing me to do what I don’t want to do!’ an entirely adequate answer for the republican is ‘Yes, but your interests were given due consideration by the legislators/regulators.’ If true, that certainly is better than nothing, better, that is, than the authoritarianism exercised by regimes that simply ignore citizen interests, but it does not negate the disvalue of being restrained from one’s preferred mode of activity. One is benefited primarily by having one’s interests met, not by having them put into a calculus in which they are outweighed and negated.

Republican liberty is compatible with extensive paternalistic control. Because the official requirement is to consider the interests of citizens, not their preferences, there is no limit to the state’s authority to override individuals’ preferences, just so long as it is deemed to be in their best interest to be deflected from the desired activity. If, for example, the republican regime is convinced that adherence to traditional modes of life (or, as discussed in Subsection III.6, to private rather than public projects) bespeaks false consciousness, stubborn resisters can justifiably be ‘forced to be free’. Republican theorists might object that this is to overlook individuals’ weighty interest in the practice of autonomy. Because it can be presumed that those whose private preferences are routinely overridden fail to enjoy an adequate measure of autonomy, republican regimes will generally respect self-regarding action. However, people who live ‘inauthentically’ or with little critical self-awareness can also be deemed to fall short with regard to autonomy. This neglected interest can legitimately be served by directing people toward greater reflection. Moreover, autonomy is one interest among many, and so it may be overridden by an indefinite range of paternalistic reasons. This is not to maintain that Pettit and his companions in republicanism explicitly feature greater levels of state paternalism as a plank of their ideological platform – here, as elsewhere, particulars of the republican agenda are vague. So it may seem that imposition of the ‘paternalist’ tag is, if not unfair, then unduly speculative. But we ask: how could liberty as non-domination not give ample shelter to paternalism? To downplay the negative moral significance of interference with people’s preferences is to countenance interference for the sake of other values, including people’s own good. A Pettit-type republican should, therefore, embrace the ascription of paternalism as a badge of honor. To the extent that this is resisted, it is because a lingering, un-acknowledged tinge of liberalism is distorting the natural implications of the theory.
If it is legitimate to override individuals’ preferences for the sake of their own good, it is no less legitimate to do so for the sake of other persons’ interests. What is it to give an interest the full consideration it merits if not to afford it neither more nor less weight than it possesses relative to all those other interests that enter into deliberative decision-making? Intrusion into private pursuits is in principle justified whenever the benefit thereby accrued by some exceeds the burden imposed on others. Republican politics is, then, uncomplicatedly consequentialistic; it will not be trammeled by a Millian principle of individual (negative) liberty or rights as trumps over utilitarian conclusions. As such, republicanism is susceptible to Rawls’s objection against utilitarianism that it does not take sufficiently seriously the separateness of persons. Again, though, we ask: how could it be otherwise? Several strands of republicanism converge in decrying the excessive individualism of liberalism. The criticism is front and center in republican encomia to the common good and civic participation. Somewhat less obviously, it is also entailed by republican non-domination. By playing down the normative significance of interference with individuals’ preferred modes of private activity, pursuit of the good is effectively socialized. What counts, morally speaking, is not noninterference, but, rather, satisfaction of interests – everyone’s interests. These are all duly thrown into the optimization hopper; identity of the particular bearer of the interest is excluded as irrelevant because what matters is the magnitude of the interest, not to whom it attaches. If republican constitutionalism limits the power of majorities to impose their will on minorities, that will be because social utility is thereby better served, not because of any hocus-pocus about the inviolability of individuals. Republicans are not, in Rawls’s sense, respecters of persons. If consistent, they will take this characterization to be a feature rather than a bug.

A third point that follows directly from the preceding two is that republican government will be big government. It is unconstrained by the prerogatives of individuals. Even if it should often turn out in practice that the social good is deemed to be best served by free markets and noninterference in people’s private lives, that is a contingency of the social environment, not a morally deep fact. That the state is untrammeled by superstitions such as individual rights will be welcomed by republicans. But for those who find even mildly attractive liberalism’s rejection of unbounded government (and concomitant opposition to extended paternalism and the summing of burdens and benefits across persons when formulating policy) the republican platform is distinctly unattractive.

IV.2. Republican liberty: resilient or restrictive?
Liberalism’s attachment to liberty as (actual) noninterference is, claims Pettit, impoverished because it fails to acknowledge the disvalue to individuals of being vulnerable to (possible) interference. A liberty worthy of the word will be resilient, truly free men and women are not subject to arbitrary intrusions by others. That is what republicanism puts on offer.
We do not dispute the desirability of a liberty that is secure across possible worlds. What is in doubt, though, is its realism. Flesh and bone are inherently fragile. To live among other people is to be vulnerable to arbitrary encroachment by muggers, thieves, road-raging motorists, and jealous lovers. Telemarketers interrupt quiet evenings at home, proselytizing brethren knock on one’s door to proffer salvation, and spam artists fill up email boxes. This side of the apocalypse, government is unable to render citizens immune from such aggravations. At most it can legislate against some of the more egregious intrusive activities and then vigorously enforce those laws. That is, it can protect before the fact via policing and other protective practices and vindicate disrespected rights after the fact by responding forthrightly against actual intrusions. This is, of course, part and parcel with the operations of liberal regimes. Even a liberalism as austere as Nozick’s acknowledges the propriety of imposing restrictions on risky activities that might threaten to trespass on the morally protected space of individuals, and the considerably less austere liberal order of the USA imposes numerous constraints on potential intrusions. For example, before individuals are allowed to drive on public roadways they are required to demonstrate a minimal level of facility to operate a motor vehicle and are required to be insured against harms they might inflict on others. More controversially, they are allowed to protect themselves against would-be intruders via a permission to own firearms and to employ deadly force in warding off attackers. How might a republican regime do more? Pettit invokes examples of employees and wives who have not (yet) suffered harmful intrusion, but who are nonetheless dominated by the employer or husband who possesses a power to interpose arbitrarily. The nature of the envisioned intrusions is not set out in any detail. (Presumably the reader’s background knowledge of the literature of class and gender oppression is taken to provide an adequate context.) That is unfortunate, because it renders obscure the circumstances taken to separate republican from liberal institutions. Certainly, the latter afford considerable protections to workers and wives. Bosses may not send around their goons to rough up workers, nor are husbands at liberty to bash wives. Of course, episodes of physical violence nonetheless do occur, but the best that any feasible regime can do is to attempt to deter these before the fact and punish them afterward. The worker or wife is at liberty to dissolve a relationship that has become oppressive by quitting the job or by divorce. Admittedly, there are often costs to be borne, but that is the nature of transactions in non-imaginary worlds. Moreover, these costs are not one-sided: when mutually beneficial relationships sour and then die, both parties are made worse off. Despite similarities in the relationships between employer and employee and between husband and wife, the differences are of greater interest. Each relationship displays both economic and affective components (employees, for example, typically care one way or another about their work environment), but while dollars are the primary coin of the realm in the workplace, affectional ties or their absence are the primary determinant of domestic success. Therefore what poli-
tics, republican or otherwise, can achieve will differ between these two realms. Although the state can and should impose restrictions on physical intimidation by one spouse over another, it is powerless to erase the vulnerability of one to another. To be bound by significant emotional ties to another is in no small measure to have put one’s fate in that person’s hands. Accidents (disease and death) befalling one party profoundly affect the other, as does withdrawal of affection. The only preventive measure that could avert such risks is to avoid all intimate relationships and to place one’s affections in deep freeze. This is a cure far worse than the disease. In the domain of human relations, vulnerability is not a flaw, but rather a mark of achievement. External agencies may have a role in limiting damage when good affairs go bad, but it would be insanely hubristic to adopt a goal of rendering people immune to the arbitrary will of significant others. Let us, then, interpret charitably the republican understanding of domi- nation to exclude vulnerabilities of affection. Rather, it primarily targets suscepti- bility to coercion via physical force and economic worsening. So, for example, in the marital realm republicans will come down heavily against spouse bashing and will also provide mechanisms via which antagonistic parties can separate one from another and equitably settle property divisions. We do not see, however, that this differs in principle from liberalism’s position on domestic law. Of course, particular republicans may differ from particular liberals in their views concerning what sort of social policies ought to be adopted to assist the soon-to-be or recently divorced, but this does not amount to a divide between the two understandings of liberty and the respective politics founded thereon.

The employment nexus affords a more revealing juncture between the competing views. Republicans will identify two asymmetries in the relationship between employers and employees that render the latter especially vulnerable. (1) Bosses are just that. They enjoy an authority over workers concerning terms of employment. In any firm, there are more and less desirable jobs that one might hold and more or less enjoyable conditions under which those jobs are held. Superiors exercise domination over workers via the implicit threat to withhold plums from those who are deemed insufficiently compliant. The other side of the authority coin is servility, and republican liberty will not abide it. (2) In an employment-at-will regime, those who enjoy a prerogative to hire also enjoy an ultimate authority to fire. Because workers evidently value the jobs they hold over alternative positions, they are vulnerable to arbitrary worsening of their status. Even in apparently congenial workplaces, this is an implicit sword hanging over the heads of workers. To ease these twin vulnerabilities, republicans will insist on imposing stringent due-process requirements on employers’ capacity to render employees worse off (or to withhold from them benefits to which, in fairness, they are entitled). Contestability, then, is not only a feature of the political apparatus, but is also brought into workplace decision-making. This is not, except in a loose sense, economic democracy, because majority voting has little or no place. Instead, let us call it ‘economic republicanism’.
Liberals will object that the platform of economic republicanism distorts the
degree of asymmetry between employer and employee and thus the vulnerability
of the latter. They will concede that the economic republican has provided an
utterly convincing indictment – of feudalism. But employees within a capitalist
order have other options than meekly bowing to the authority of the firm. They
can, should they choose, take their labor elsewhere. Indeed, they may do so at
will. Even in the absence of the slightest tincture of oppression in the work-
place, they are at liberty to withdraw their labor, either to take it elsewhere or to
enjoy a greater measure of leisure. Against this employers enjoy no due-process
rights to hold unwilling workers to their labors. It would be outrageous to main-
tain that they should be granted such power. On what grounds, then, can it be
argued that a free society should vest the corresponding right in workers?

The most plausible basis for relaxing employment-at-will in one direction, but
not the other, is that there exists a vast disparity in bargaining power between
employers and employees. A firm that has thousands of employees will only be
marginally diminished by the departure of one employee, but for most workers
the job they are fired from is the one and only job they have. Their lives are
severely impacted by being involuntarily separated from their primary source
of income. The formal freedom-of-contract symmetry between employer and
employee is belied by the actual circumstances of economic (in)security for
workers.

We have some sympathy for this line of argument. It is intolerable that indi-
viduals be confronted with ‘Take it or else!’ choices when the ‘or else’ amounts
to languishing in destitution. But against such dire eventualities liberals offer a
different prescription. Historically, they have opposed grants of monopoly,
restrictions on worker mobility, and other practices in restraint of economic com-
petition. Republicans write as if the economic world is exceedingly narrow, one
in which employees are tied to employers by bonds of economic necessity.
However, in a modern capitalistic economy there are thousands of employers to
whom one is free to offer one’s services. If local opportunities are slim, workers
can pick up stakes and seek their fortunes elsewhere. Knowing that workers are
free to move on, firms’ attention to their own self-interest constrains them to
compensate adequately those in their employ. Such compensation will be both
financial and embedded in the amenities of the work environment.

This is not to advance the ludicrous claim that workers are not vulnerable to
being rendered worse off by capricious decisions of those above them in the
corporate hierarchy. Transaction costs incurred in moving from one venue of
employment to another can be considerable, and these include the unwanted
severing of affectional ties to persons and place. It is, however, to maintain that
the single most important antidote to imperious and arbitrary inflictions of harms
by employers on employees is the existence of vigorously competitive labor
markets. Therefore, it is worth noting that governmental imposition of require-
ments of elaborate due process in employment relationships and costly penalties
for firing workers diminishes the vitality of those labor markets. These may not be adequately accounted by casual observation because, while it is relatively easy to quantify the number of workers who are downsized, it is much less easy to determine how many potential workers fail to be upsized because companies are dissuaded from hiring due to apprehensions about the costs of releasing workers who are subsequently found to be unsatisfactory. At the very least, then, liberalism protects workers’ interests in ways that economic republicanism does not, and vice versa.

This difference in approach reflects much that is at stake in the republican–liberalism debate. To invoke once again the Hirschman vocabulary, liberalism sees exit as the primary cure for potential domination; republicanism takes voice to be the more desirable response. Indeed, if conditions of voice satisfy appropriate moral strictures, then interference does not count for republicans as a genuine liberty infringement at all. Hence Pettit’s emphasis on liberalism (with its Hobbesian origins) as promoting the ‘freedom of the heath’ – as distinct from freedom within society. It is highly relevant that in the Hirschman taxonomy voice is connected distinctively with loyalty, an especially highly prized feature of republican society (and not always for pacific reasons). The republican’s instincts in any situation in which liberty is an issue is to look for remedies of voice, the liberal’s is for remedies of exit. This can, in principle, be a source of distortion on both sides. Perhaps, liberals overlook institutions of voice too readily in some cases. However, it cannot be too heavily emphasized that voice and exit differ in one critical respect. When I choose to exit, I exercise my own judgment. Providing more plentiful and more attractive exit opportunities invites individual choice. However, when I operate through the institutions of voice I appeal to the judgments of others. That is so whether those others take the form of the bench of an industrial court or a set of voters (even a set of which I happen to be a member) operating under majority rule. It is misleading to refer to freedom secured via exit as the ‘freedom of the heath’; casting off an existing relationship to take up an alternative is not to exit from society in toto, just from the particular problematic association.

There is more. In the absence of any legal restrictions on employment-at-will, employers and employees may nonetheless contract to establish limitations on the power to fire. Employees will value such provisions because they bring greater security and stability to their working lives. Employers will value such provisions if more secure workers are better workers and, especially, if employment security is a benefit for which employees willingly forgo some income they could otherwise secure. In a competitive environment, we will therefore expect to see a range from zero to extensive of due-process procedures attached to jobs. All else being equal, there will be a tradeoff between income and security, and because various individuals will prefer different levels of tradeoff, they will tend to sort themselves out into different fields of employment consistent with their valuations.
An example might make this point clearer. At the University of Virginia, professors are afforded extensive rights of due process. Typically, in their sixth year of employment, newly minted assistant professors assemble a massive dossier that is extensively scrutinized at three levels (and rubber-stamped at a fourth) in a tightly rule-bound process. They then are either granted indefinite tenure or released after a terminal year. Once awarded tenure, they may not be fired except for extraordinary reasons, and then only after yet more rigorous application of due process. These individuals make a good living, sometimes a very good living. By way of contrast, the men’s basketball coach enjoys no such procedural safeguards. Should his team falter, or even if it does not, he can be summarily dismissed by the director of athletics. As this is being written, a run of mediocre seasons leaves the local punditry speculating when, not if, the axe is going to fall. This is bad for the coach, but making it less bad is that during his reign at the helm he has enjoyed a salary multiples higher than that of any professor, higher even than that enjoyed by the university president. He also had the foresight to bargain to insert into his contract a lucrative buyout option. 38

Who is better off, the professor secure in a tenured seat or the coach on a hot seat? It is not for us to say. More importantly, we maintain that it is not for the state to say. Rather, it ought to be open to individuals to sort themselves out in more or less risky lines of employment. Again, there will be imperfections in this market, but it is more responsive to personal predilections than a one-size-fits-all model imposed by (an arguably arbitrary or domineering) republican ideology. Liberty as noninterference is more responsive to individual diversity than is liberty as non-domination, and it thereby is more responsive to people’s self-perceived interests.

V. Conclusion

We have surveyed three versions of republicanism or, rather, three types of theories that get designated republican. Although there exist various interconnections, what mostly unites them is opposition to liberalism. 39 Therefore, the primary orientation of this article has been less to explore the subtleties of republicanism than to offer responses from a liberal perspective to charges lodged by republicans. This enterprise is made difficult by the amorphous state of contemporary republican theory; there does not exist a republican tract possessing anything like the philosophical authority of Rawls’s A Theory of Justice or, in a different key, Nozick’s Anarchy, State and Utopia. If one should emerge, then a re-evaluation will be in order. We doubt that even then it would suffice to displace liberal loyalties. Republican ideals of common goods, extensive political participation, and liberty as non-domination may be theoretically sharpened, but we do not see how they can be purged of the liabilities exhibited in the preceding three sections. That is not to deny that adoption of republican precepts is reasonable for some theorists; those who are convinced that political involvement is

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the height of genuinely human activity, that capitalism and individuals’ absorp-
tion by private interests are degrading, or that wide-scale paternalism is morally
unexceptionable. Republicans who embrace these distinctive features cannot be
accused of incoherence. But what they characterize as important additions to
political thought are seen by liberals as unfortunate subtractions.

Philosophy lives on disputation. Since the collapse in theory and practice of
socialism, political philosophy has been in search of a worthy contender against
liberal theory. Communitarianism and various postmodernist fancies have had
their innings, but neither looks to be a good bet for the long haul. Although
republicanism boasts an ancient and honorable pedigree, we do not see it
proving more formidable. The central debate continues to take place between
different liberal strands; the rest is peripheral.

notes

We would like to thank the participants in an April 2005 conference on Republicanism
sponsored by the Murphy Institute of Tulane University for discussion of an earlier
version of this article. Special gratitude is owed to Scott Arnold who followed up that
meeting with extensive queries and corrections.

1. Among the significant tellings of this tale are Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy:*
   Participatory Politics for a New Age (Berkeley: University of California Press,
   1984); Richard Dagger, Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican
   Liberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Phillip Pettit, Republicanism:
   A Theory of Freedom and Government (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997);
   J.G.A. Pocock, The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the
   Atlantic Republican Tradition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975);
   Michael Sandel, Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public
   Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Quentin Skinner,
   ‘The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives’, in
   Philosophy in History, edited by R. Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner
   (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 193–221; Quentin Skinner,
   ‘The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty’, in Machiavelli and Republicanism,
   edited by G. Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University
   Quentin Skinner, ‘On Justice, the Common Good and the Priority of Liberty’, in
   Dimensions of Radical Democracy, edited by C. Mouffe (London: Verso, 1992),
   pp. 211–24; Charles Taylor, ‘What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty’, in Liberty,

2. How best to designate this convergence of lines of political thought is itself
   controversial. If ‘republicanism’ has any primary signification in contemporary
discourse, it is as a view in opposition to established monarchy. Because that is not
the sense intended in the political philosophy literature, the rubric is sometimes
altered to ‘civic republicanism’. That, however, may be taken to refer to the politics
of a particular era, especially that of Renaissance humanism, which in turn raises
questions about distinguishing civic republicanism from civic humanism. That distinction may have become philosophically important because of Rawls classifying the former as compatible with political liberalism, while rejecting the latter as a comprehensive theory. See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 205–6. In what follows, we adopt the simplifying locution of ‘republicanism’ and do not attempt to differentiate between versions that do and do not conflict with Rawlsian political liberalism.

3. We prefer the plural form so as not to presume on behalf of republicanism a unitary conception of the good.

4. So even Pettit, whose theory is pitched around a putatively reclaimed conception of freedom rather than a theory of value, introduces his republicanism as an attractive alternative to a libertarianism that, in his rendering, tends to ‘think of the people as an aggregate of atomized individuals – an aggregate without a collective identity – and they represent the state as ideally nothing more than an apparatus for accommodating individuals in the pursuit of their atomized concerns’. See Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, p. 9.


8. Or at least, that is a component of the concert experience each cherishes such that it would be a less satisfactory consumption episode if others were not present also to consume it. There are two distinguishable cases here. One is that in which Amy, Ben, and Chris all have enhanced enjoyment when present at a concert played to a full house (‘Feel the energy!’), but are not especially concerned with the personal composition of the audience. The second is the case in which each prefers the presence of specific others. In both cases, however, Amy’s enjoyment is conceptually separate from Ben’s and Ben’s from Chris’s: there is, in particular, no presumption that each of them will derive equal enjoyment from the shared experience.

9. That case is, of course, made surpassingly well by Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books VIII and IX.


12. Michael Sandel maintains that ‘given our nature as political beings, we are free only insofar as we exercise our capacity to deliberate about the common good, and participate in the public life of a free city or republic’. See Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, p. 26. Other influential pleas along republican lines on behalf of appreciably enhanced citizen participation are offered by Hannah Arendt, Benjamin Barber, Richard Dagger, Quentin Skinner, and Charles Taylor. Although we recognize that their platforms differ substantially, no
attempt is made here to categorize the arguments of individual theorists along the instrumental–intrinsic dimension.

13. Some accounts make an exception for those of an exceptionally theoretical or pious wont.

14. Although here too opportunity cost considerations are relevant.


16. This paragraph is being written in Arizona, where a few elections back, an auto salesman possessing the ingratiating charm conducive to success in that profession, but no other discernible excellences of intellect or character persuaded himself and a plurality of fellow Arizonans that he ought to occupy the office of state governor. After two years of abject bungling, he was removed from office by impeachment. Even committed republican participationists will have a difficult time arguing that Evan Mecham’s heightened level of political activity was a good thing either for himself or his fellow Arizonans.

17. This is one way of understanding Condorcet’s Jury Theorem, holding that a very large number of independent voters, each of whom is only slightly more likely to judge correctly than incorrectly, is overwhelmingly likely to yield a majority in favor of the correct result.

18. It should be clear that this general rule (that is, allow as much or as little participation as the citizenry desires) is no argument for restricting the franchise or other modes of political activity. The threat of electoral backlash requires for its efficacy the option to vote, to petition, to organize, and to reject. But it only requires the exercise of that option when that is what circumstances demand. It is simply a mistake to suppose that circumstances demand it all the time.

19. It might be maintained that widespread political activity, no matter how disparate its particular manifestations, itself constitutes a common good. This is to trade on an ascription of intrinsic value to political activity, an understanding examined below.

20. Even with Hobbes, however, the designation of ‘atomistic individualism’ is dubious. Recall that the plight of people in the state of nature is not only that their lives are poor, nasty, brutish, and short, but that they are, first and foremost, solitary. All of these liabilities are to be negated via political covenant.


22. The Australian case is of some relevance to the republicanism debate. Compulsory voting is for the most part uncontroversial in Australia, and although there are occasional contrary rumblings from minority quarters, the vast bulk of Australians seem to think that anything other than compulsory voting would represent a departure from ‘true democracy’. Some years ago, a person was convicted for encouraging citizens to cast an invalid vote, and this despite the fact that ‘informal’ voting itself is not illegal. On the other hand, the idea that people who do vote should be required to demonstrate some minimal competence or knowledge would be widely regarded as deeply objectionable.


26. A republican might object that making people do what they prefer not to do does
not count as compulsion just so long as republican strictures have been followed in the process. It only counts as compulsion, the objector maintains, if it proceeds in arbitrary fashion. Perhaps this is yet another purely semantic distinction that should not occasion debate. Nevertheless, we are reluctant to cede all normatively potent terms to republican revisionism; we have granted liberty as non-domination for the sake of argument, but wish to hang on to more standard meanings of words such as ‘compulsion’, ‘coercion’, and ‘control’. Still, if it should appear that our usages amount to the imposition of semantic domination, the reader should feel free (in a negative liberty sense?) to qualify these terms with the adjective ‘liberal’.

27. Alternate brands of liberalism separate here. For liberals of a more libertarian persuasion, the constraint weighs heavily indeed; for egalitarian liberals who situate themselves somewhere near the neighborhood of Rawls, much less so.

28. However, an unusually forthright acknowledgment and endorsement of extensive coercion for people’s own good as citizens is offered by Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*.

29. At most, rights or other constraints on state interference are acknowledged to the extent that they conduce to consequentialist optimization. Proponents and opponents of utilitarianism have generated a vast literature on the topic; to pursue it further here would be a distraction from the main line of argument.


32. It very well might do less. A right to keep and bear arms for personal protection, beloved of 18th-century republicans, is conspicuous by its diminished role in the screeds of their contemporary disciples.


34. The anthem of worker mobility is Johnny Paycheck’s country classic, ‘Take this Job and Shove it!’ A somewhat more nuanced treatment of the subject is offered by Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

35. In practice, worker mobility is often restricted by national boundaries. A reflective liberalism will, therefore, be chary of bars both to emigration and immigration. Presumably, republicans, who place a great deal of weight on the status of citizenship, will be much less receptive to the vulnerabilities of noncitizens even when these are indeed conducive to domination.

36. In the 1980s, when it was widely predicted that corporate Japan was the wave of the future, one of the aspects of the Japanese economic system most frequently admired by western observers was the practice of employment for life. After a decade of economic stagnation, this practice garners fewer plaudits, in part because it has been increasingly abandoned by Japanese firms. Furthermore, it is anecdotally salient, if not more so, that France, Germany, and other advanced economies affording much greater protections to workers against being fired than does the USA also feature much higher rates of persistent unemployment.


38. That firing has now taken place. Newspapers report that the ex-coach takes with him some $2 million.
39. Even this has to be qualified because some theorists advocate a republicanism that is, they maintain, also liberal. See, for example, Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism.*