

# The Mutual Dependence of Institutions and Citizens' Dispositions in Liberal Democracies

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**Abstract.** In recent centuries liberal democracies have amassed a remarkable record of performative excellence. But contemporary statistical evidence points to an ongoing and startling decline in the civic involvement of their citizens. In this article I use the problem of civic nonparticipation to unpack the interaction of institutions and the dispositions of citizens in liberal democracies. Currently the approach that political philosophers take to the civic nonparticipation problem is dominated by an institutional priority view. I develop a mutual reinforcement alternative to the institutional priority view. By mutual reinforcement I mean the idea that the successful operation of institutions and the dispositions of citizens in liberal democracies tend naturally to reinforce each other's orientation toward liberal-democratic ends. I conclude the article by noting that mutual reinforcement provides us with a more productive way of thinking about issues of civic participation than institutional priority.

**Key words:** institutions, dispositions, liberal, citizens, democracy.

"The basic structure is the primary subject of justice because its effects are so profound and present from the start." (Rawls 1999, 7)

In recent centuries liberal democracies have amassed a remarkable record of performative excellence. They are on many accounts the most stable and popular forms of modern governance. But contemporary statistical evidence points to an ongoing and startling decline in the civic involvement of their citizens. Today the citizens of liberal democracies are participating in fewer civic associations, engaging in fewer public discourses about their fundamental political and moral values, and are ordering their daily lives with less and less frequency around the conviction that their civic participation contributes to the construction of a productive social order (Putnam 2000, 31-47, 277-84).<sup>1</sup> Citizens do not generally enjoy public involvement, do not believe that public involvement is valuable to their personal formation as human beings, and do not think that they personally can make a political difference in countries of so many millions.<sup>2</sup>

Political philosophers are generally agreed that the increasing rate of civic nonparticipation is a problematic trend (Putnam 2000, 402-14). The reasons that they have given for why it is problematic are numerous and varied. One reason is that civic nonparticipa-

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1] Putnam's analysis concentrates on America; see also Elstain 1995, 1-36; and Dagger 1997, 132-53. Similar trends have appeared outside of America, so it is appropriate to apply my comments in this article to liberal democracies in general. See Putnam 2002.

2] Among the practical political activities from which citizens are increasingly abstaining are voting in general elections, personally holding or running for political office, and participating in the operation of political parties. See Galston 2007, 631-34; 2004, 263-66; and 2001, 217-34.

tion causes citizens to lose track of their interests and rights – non-involved citizens understand significantly less about the importance of public events for their own views and well-being than do their more civically active counterparts. Another reason is that civic nonparticipation causes the political views of citizens to grow chaotic and uninformed. Non-involved citizens are less capable than their more active counterparts of productively absorbing political theories and developments into their overall worldviews; they also tend to be more distrustful and estranged than is warranted by the political situation. Still another downside of civic nonparticipation is that it deprives the public sphere of insightful viewpoints and diminishes the overall functional effectiveness of liberal democracies (Galston 2007, 636-38).

The various practical explanations that political philosophers have offered for the rise of civic nonparticipation have included such diverse things as generational changes, increasing occupational responsibilities, urban and suburban sprawl, isolated lifestyle patterns, and the development of television, mass entertainment, and leisured activities (Putnam 2000, 277-84). Certainly explanations which concentrate on practical social factors are productive initial approaches to the issue. But behind and beneath such explanations are deeper categories which shape our views of civic participation.

In this article I will use the problem of civic nonparticipation to unpack the interaction of institutions and the dispositions of citizens in liberal democracies. Currently the approach that political philosophers take to the civic nonparticipation problem is dominated by an institutional priority view. On this view institutional establishment ought to precede the development of the dispositions of citizens in the construction and analysis of liberal democracies.<sup>3</sup> As a first step in my argument, in sections one and two, I will expose the limitations of the institutional priority view by applying John Rawls' formulation of it to the civic nonparticipation problem.

As a second step in my argument I will develop in section three a mutual reinforcement alternative to the institutional priority view. By mutual reinforcement I mean the idea that the successful operation of institutions and the dispositions of citizens in liberal democracies tend naturally to reinforce each other's orientation toward liberal-democratic ends. I will conclude the article by applying the mutual reinforcement view to the civic nonparticipation problem and by noting that mutual reinforcement provides us with a more productive way of thinking about issues of civic participation than institutional priority. My overall thesis is that prudence entails an approach to liberal democracies that views institutions and dispositions as interacting in a way that is reciprocally determining and that meets the concerns of civic defectors. Throughout the article I will work at two different levels of inquiry – at an abstracted and idealized level, and at a practical and

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3] Putnam implicitly views civic non-involvement from such a perspective when he lauds institutional initiatives like community libraries, coastal shipyards, and evangelical megachurches. (2003, 34-54, 55-74, 119-41). Others more explicitly view the cooperation of citizens as being influenced by government institutions, and as dependent on institutional engineering (see Rothstein and Stolle 2003, 191-210; Husseune 2003, 211-30; Hall 1999, 417-64; and Tarrow 1996, 389-97).

realistic level. I will argue that such a two-tiered investigation is justifiable and that the ideal-level commitments of philosophers in fact play a significant role in shaping their approach to real-world issues.

### I. THE RAWLSIAN INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITY VIEW

John Rawls is the most prominent contemporary proponent of the institutional priority view. Rawls' arguments for the priority of institutions (or as he calls it, the 'basic structure') are made in the context of his discussion of the fundamental principles of justice: "For us the primary subject of justice is the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation." (2000, 7)<sup>4</sup> In justice as fairness the basic structure is depicted as a framework for the determination and preservation of the fundamental principles of justice.

As is evident from a listing of the social institutions that Rawls includes in the basic structure, the normative stipulations of the basic structure do not pertain to the everyday choices of citizens (1999, 8).<sup>5</sup> Rather, the basic structure encompasses only general institutions like "the legal protection of freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, competitive markets, private property in the means of production, and the monogamous family [...]" (6). Rawls' intention in prioritizing the basic structure is to concentrate first on explicating the part of society that he identifies as the most fundamental, influential, and official.

Rawls views himself as prioritizing the basic structure in a sequentially primary sense: "on this view, a theory must develop principles for the relevant subjects step by step in some appropriate sequence." (1993, 258)<sup>6</sup> An established basic structure which sets as fixed a particular understanding of the classical questions of social justice is and ought to be the initial sequential consideration in the construction of the well-ordered society. On my interpretation Rawls intends at least three things by his sequential prioritization of the basic structure: first, to assert that the construction of the formal and fixed core of the well-ordered society ought chronologically to precede the construction of the rest of society; second, to establish the basic structure as a creative and conceptual source for the

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4] For some of Rawls' other articulations of the priority of the basic structure cf. 1977, 159-65; 1978a, 48-52; 1978b, 47-71; 2005, 257-88; and 2001, 52-57.

5] A lengthy discussion of the scope of the basic structure has descended from G.A. Cohen's critique of the sustainability of justice as fairness in the absence of a just social ethos. See especially Cohen, 1997, 11, 17-19; and Murphy 1999: 251-91.

6] Elsewhere in the same work Rawls characterizes what he is doing as "starting with the basic structure and then developing other principles sequentially." (259-60); still elsewhere in the same work Rawls characterizes the idea underlying his sequential prioritization when he says that "It may be possible to find an appropriate sequence of kinds of subjects and to suppose that the parties to a social contract are to proceed through this sequence with the understanding that the principles of each later agreement are to be subordinate to those of all earlier agreements [...]" (262).

development of the informal conventions and mores of the society; and third, to suggest that the construction of a just basic structure is a necessary condition for the health of the society. I will in what follows attempt to complicate Rawls' prioritization of the basic structure, in light of this three-part interpretation of his intentions.

## II. RESPONSE TO THE RAWLSIAN INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITY VIEW

Rawls' prioritization of the basic structure has provided contemporary political philosophers with an immensely productive way of thinking about the infrastructures of liberal democracies. As such it might be thought that Rawls has equipped his theory with tools which are sufficient to resolve the civic nonparticipation problem. But in reality justice as fairness is not particularly well-prepared to approach high-percentage civic defection. In this section I will sketch a background for this claim by investigating the difficulties in Rawls' prioritization of the basic structure.

An inspection of the considered judgments of persons, which Rawls makes one of the key conceptual sources for the decision-making conditions of the original position, is sufficient to demonstrate that Rawls is not prioritizing the basic structure in the sequentially primary sense in which his comments on the subject seem to suggest. Rawls represents the original position as a reflective equilibrium between, on the one hand, our widely-held considered judgments about the appropriate way to construct contractual circumstances, and, on the other hand, the principled grounds upon which social contracts are characteristically built.<sup>7</sup> So at least half of the theoretical support for the basic structure comes from our reflective opinions about the kinds of limitations that are appropriate to place on decision-making situations.<sup>8</sup> For Rawls a reflective equilibrium is reached when the principled and historical understanding of the contract coincides with persons' agreement about the appropriate way to go about social decision-making.

How widespread is the general agreement which Rawls references when he constructs the original position? Close inspection, I think, demonstrates that the agreement is not as broad as might be thought from the descriptive claims that Rawls makes about it. In fact, it turns out not to be a general agreement at all, but rather an agreement among persons whose dispositions have already been shaped by a particular social tradition. Consider as evidence for this claim the understandings of freedom and equality that inform the construction of Rawls' original position. Rawls depicts the parties in the original position as being free to select principles of justice in the absence of externally-given

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7] "It [viz. the original position] represents the attempt to accommodate within one scheme both reasonable philosophical conditions on principles as well as our considered judgments of justice." (Rawls 1999, 18-19; bracketed text is mine)

8] "I assume, for one thing, that there is a broad measure of agreement that principles of justice should be chosen under certain conditions. To justify a particular description of the initial situation one shows that it incorporates these commonly shared presumptions." (Rawls 1999, 16)

ends.<sup>9</sup> He depicts them also as possessing equality because they are moral persons “having a conception of their good and capable of a sense of justice” (1999, 17).<sup>10</sup>

Such views of freedom and equality arise from the heart of the liberal-democratic social tradition. That tradition, broadly construed, defines freedom as the ability to think or act in the absence of externally-given hindrances and ends (rather than, say, the ability to perform complex functions after having undergone a course of cognitive or moral development, or the ability to select a course of ethical action in accordance with the will of God).<sup>11</sup> It defines equality as the like status that all persons possess as persons, rational agents, or moral beings (rather than, say, a like status held only by persons who possess a certain natural excellence, or who are nobly born, or who manifest other intrinsic characteristics that set them apart from others).<sup>12</sup> So there are good reasons to think that the views of freedom and equality that inform Rawls’ construction of the original position are primarily or even exclusively associated with the liberal-democratic tradition. Rawls himself confirms such an observation when he describes his project as offering “a conception of justice which generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction” (1999, 10) the staple commitments of key liberal-democratic thinkers..

It is not in itself controversial to note the embeddedness of the original position in the liberal-democratic tradition – many other Rawls observers have said as much (and Rawls himself obviously recognizes it). Yet in spite of the overall familiarity of the claim, there is an entailment that flows out of the claim that has perhaps *not* been sufficiently emphasized by Rawls interpreters, at least not in the context of the civic participation of citizens. This entailment is as follows: once Rawls’ assertions about his sequential prioritization of the basic structure are considered in light of the embeddedness claim, it becomes evident that Rawls is not in reality prioritizing the basic structure in the sense in which we characteristically conceive of something as being ‘sequentially’ primary (i.e. the chronological, creative, and conditional senses that I have tried to capture with my three interpretations of sequential priority). In reality what Rawls is sequentially prioritizing are the norms of liberal-democratic contractual establishment and the dispositions of liberal-democratic persons. Contractual and dispositional considerations are not the first aspects of justice as fairness to which Rawls devotes his reflective attention, but they *are* the chronologically first considerations to inform Rawls’ construction of justice as fairness. They are a

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9] “I assume that the parties view themselves as *free* persons who have fundamental aims and interests [...]. *free* persons conceive of themselves as beings who can revise and alter their final end [...] they [...] have final ends that they are in principle *free* to pursue or to reject [...].” (Rawls 1999, 131-32; italics are mine).

10] Elsewhere Rawls says that “It seems reasonable to suppose that the parties in the original position are equal [...]. [By this is meant] equality between human beings as moral persons, as creatures having a conception of their good and capable of a sense of justice. The basis of equality is taken to be similarity in these two respects.” (Rawls 1999, 17; bracketed text is mine)

11] See Mill 1989 [1859], 71; see also Berlin 2002, 166-218.

12] See for a general account of this kind of equality Dworkin 1981, 185-246.

pre-reflective body of knowledge for Rawls' claim that an abstracted hypothetical situation constrained by a veil of ignorance is an appropriate location for persons to conduct fundamental social negotiations.

There are two further things that I mean besides chronological, creative, and conditional precedence when I say that the dispositions of liberal-democratic persons are ultimately sequentially prioritized in the construction of justice as fairness. The first thing is that the dispositions of liberal-democratic persons are a pre-existing *social validation* of the original position.<sup>13</sup> The opinions of such persons are a pre-existing court of informed reflection which views the proceedings of a social contract as a valid means of collective decision-making. Prior to Rawls' development of justice as fairness, persons in the liberal-democratic tradition had already come to believe in the validity of a contractual arrangement among free and equal rational agents as an appropriate way to determine fundamental social principles (even if the contractual tradition had temporarily fallen dormant in the twentieth century). Rawls acknowledges this and designs the original position to tap into it as a pre-existing idea.

The second thing that I mean is that the dispositions and opinions of liberal-democratic persons are a pre-existing *imaginative source* for the conceptual material that Rawls includes in justice as fairness. The idea of using a contractual device to make social decisions has descended to us from countless attempts by past liberal-democratic philosophers to develop similar decision-making locations. Perhaps the philosophers of the past were not as successful at devising contractual theories which captured all of the goods and ideals that are captured by the original position, but certainly their efforts laid the creative groundwork for its view of the operation of contractual circumstances. Thus the opinions and dispositions of the participants in the liberal-democratic tradition function as an implicit but sequentially-prioritized imaginative basis out of which Rawls develops the original position.

If the opinions of members of the liberal-democratic tradition are ultimately sequentially prioritized in Rawls' construction of the basic structure, and if the basic structure is *not* in reality sequentially prioritized, what is Rawls doing when he says that it is and makes other, similar claims like "the basic structure is the first subject of justice" (1993, 257) and "it is perfectly legitimate at first to restrict inquiry to the basic structure?" (1977, 159) The answer, I think, is that the sense of prioritization that Rawls intends is more appropriately identified as a *methodological* rather than a sequential prioritization. The basic structure is prioritized as a technical means to the development of the well-ordered society: it is the first aspect of the social construction process upon which Rawls trains his intensive and reflective creative attention; the first aspect for which he finds it necessary to invoke complex and creative philosophical categories; and the first aspect in the explication of which

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[13] I am talking about *social* validity here and not about validity in the normative sense in which Sandel talks about it when he argues that the justification of contracts is a complicated interweaving of procedure and principle. See Sandel 1982, 119.



he engages in a dialogue with philosophical interlocutors. The difference between Rawls' sequential prioritization of the liberal-democratic tradition and his methodological prioritization of the basic structure is approximately the difference between an assumption and a procedure: an assumption is prioritized in the sense that it is the knowledge or justificatory condition without which a theory is incapable of being formulated, whereas a procedure is prioritized in the sense that it is the technical means by which the practical elements of a theory unfold. Both assumptions and procedures are important players in the development of a theory, but an assumption serves as a chronological, creative, and conditional basis of a theory in a way that a procedure does not.

There are two reasons why it is important to note that Rawls' prioritization of the basic structure is in reality a methodological and not a sequential prioritization. The first is that the dispositions of real-world persons play a far more prominent role in the construction of the original position than might initially be thought. Through the original position the dispositions of real-world persons influence Rawls' determination of the principles of justice and his subsequent explication of the well-ordered society. This identification of the remote causal role of the dispositions of real-world persons demonstrates to us that there is space in the initial stages of justice as fairness for the development of a more nuanced and reciprocal view of the interaction of institutions and dispositions in liberal democracies.

The second thing that is entailed by my argument concerns the application of justice as fairness to issues of civic participation. The argument establishes a framework from the perspective of which it is possible to show two things: first, that justice as fairness in its current form is not productively applicable to the civic nonparticipation problem; and second, that the assumptions that underlie justice as fairness point us toward a view of the interaction of institutions and dispositions that ultimately *is* productively applicable to the civic nonparticipation problem. I will unpack the details of this somewhat technical argument in the next section.

### III. JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS AND THE CIVIC NONPARTICIPATION PROBLEM

The application of justice as fairness to the civic nonparticipation problem is an enterprise that becomes perceptible to a Rawlsian when it is located within the Rawlsian's familiar conceptual categories. The most pertinent of these categories is Rawls' distinction between ideal and real political theory. Ideal political theory as Rawls defines it is predicated on the assumption that citizens are in full compliance with the principles of cooperation: "Everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions." (1999, 8) Real political theory, by contrast, is predicated on the assumption that citizens are only partially compliant with such principles. Rawls identifies justice as fairness as an ideal rather than real political theory, and says that "[T]he reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides, I believe, the only basis for the systematic grasp

of these more pressing problems [of real theory].” (1999, 8; bracketed text is mine)<sup>14</sup> He is, of course, fully aware that there are no real-world political regimes whose citizens are universally compliant with the principles of cooperation in the way that is assumed by justice as fairness.

The civic nonparticipation problem concerns the partial compliance of citizens and occurs at the level of real rather than ideal political theory. As such, any discussion of how a Rawlsian would approach it is speculative. Nevertheless, there are reasons for thinking that such an enterprise would be profitable and that a Rawlsian would be comfortable engaging in it. The appropriateness of applying justice as fairness to the civic nonparticipation problem is evident from a consideration of the original position as a device of representation. Rawls intends for the original position to model real-world social conditions and to yield results that influence the further development of such conditions.<sup>15</sup>

The kinds of knowledge that are available to participants in the original position are generalized rather than particular or concrete. The conditions that inform the decision-making conditions of the original position are described by Rawls as the circumstances of justice: “As far as possible, then, the only particular facts which the parties know is that their society is subject to the circumstances of justice and whatever this implies.” (1999, 119) Central to the circumstances of justice is the idea that real-world social decisions are made in conditions of interpersonal conflict and moderate scarcity.<sup>16</sup> The circumstances also model the idea that the motives of participants are self-interested: “The intention is to model men’s conduct and motives in cases where questions of justice arise.” (112) The fact that Rawls intends for the original position to be a device of representation for real-world social conditions does not in any way diminish its hypothetical status. The circumstances of justice are distinguishable from the more particularized forms of knowledge that are available to persons who are situated in such real-world social conditions. Among the kinds of knowledge that the circumstances do not model are the comprehensive world-views of citizens, the natural distribution of talents and advantages, hereditary legacies, and the availability of natural resources (118). Yet the fact that such particularized kinds of knowledge are not intended to inform the original position does not belie the status of the original position as a model that is drawn from real-world conditions and that is applicable to the civic nonparticipation problem (104).

On a stronger view, the application of the justice as fairness to the civic nonparticipation problem is an obligatory enterprise and not merely an appropriate one. As Rawlsian observer Liam Murphy has noted, an ideal-level political theory like justice as fairness ought to have acceptable implications both for the level at which it is conceived and also

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14] For Rawls on ideal theory, see in the same work pp. 8-9, 245-46.

15] “It is natural to ask why, if this agreement is never actually entered into, we should take any interest in these principles, moral or otherwise. The answer is that the conditions embodied in the description of the original position are ones that we do in fact accept.” (1999, 19)

16] For Rawls, “the circumstances of justice obtain whenever persons put forward conflicting claims to the division of social advantages under conditions of moderate scarcity.” (1999, 110)



for the non-ideal level as well (at the very least, it ought not to have demonstrably unacceptable implications for the non-ideal level) (1999, 279). None of us will ever in practice experience the political conditions of ideal theory. Our own actions and the actions of our neighbors will always to some extent resist the prevailing norms of our society. So any ideal-level political theory that we intend to accept as providing us with real-world normative guidance ought to be capable of illuminating political issues which assume only partial compliance (278-79). On such a view it is obligatory to apply an ideal-level theory like justice as fairness to the civic nonparticipation problem because it is paramount to expect from ideal-level theories a certain amount of routing assistance in the determination of real-world courses of action.

The most likely conceptual tool with which a Rawlsian would tackle the civic nonparticipation problem is the civic education plan that is developed in the third part of *Theory of Justice*.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of this plan is to develop in persons a reflective attachment to the principles of justice (Rawls 1999, 404). The plan elevates persons from a natural state of moral immaturity (a state in which they are unaware of the reasons why they are compelled to abide by moral principles) to a state of moral maturity (a state in which they are capable of reflectively endorsing the principles of justice for reasons that are wholly their own). Its core idea is that it is natural for a just basic structure to develop corresponding dispositions in persons: “we acquire a desire to act justly when we have lived under and benefited from just institutions.” (Rawls 1999, 399) There are three stages in the plan through which persons must ascend on their way to moral maturity: At the first stage, parents and other social authorities instill in children the morality of authority. Children at this stage obey without comprehension the ethical injunctions of their parents and social authorities. At the second stage, social institutions instill in citizens the morality of association. Persons at this stage abide by the norms of their social associations and derive their identities as moral persons from these associations. At the plan’s third stage, persons acquire the morality of principle – they come to understand the purposes of the principles of justice and endorse the principles for their own sake. The end-result of the civic education plan is a state of congruence between the dispositions of persons and the aims of the well-ordered society. The likely way in which a Rawlsian would apply the plan to the civic nonparticipation problem would be to support the development of a curriculum that is informed by the plan and to argue for the effectiveness of such a curriculum in promoting the participation of citizens in the public sphere.

Rawls’ description of moral maturation in the well-ordered society is an elegant and inspirational ideal which is accurate in many ways to the social conditions of contemporary liberal democracies. Yet the ability of the Rawlsian education plan to be productively applied to the civic nonparticipation problem is diminished by the fact that the plan is

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17] The plan is likely to be used because it is Rawls’ attempt to connect the right with the good, institutions with dispositions, and the basic structure with the general expansion of the well-ordered society. See Rawls 1999, 405-19; Note that everything that I say in this argument is consistent with what Rawls says in *Political Liberalism*.

an instrument of a mono-directional view of the procession of transformative influence in liberal democracies.<sup>18</sup> According to this view the current of transformative influence in liberal democracies can and ought to flow in one direction only – away from the institutional infrastructure. Rawls takes this view when he depicts the basic structure as influencing the development of the general society in its regulation of the informal ethical and economic interaction of citizens, its influence on the social relations of families and friends, its shaping effect upon public discussions, and most of all in its alteration of the dispositions of citizens through the instrument of Rawls' civic education plan.

On the mono-directional view that informs Rawls' theory of justice the reciprocal influence of citizens upon the basic structure ought to be minimal and non-transformative. The only significant reciprocal impact that Rawls allows citizens to exert upon the basic structure is stabilization.<sup>19</sup> The four-stage practical sequence that Rawls employs to implement the principles of justice in society does provide a rudimentary sketch of the influence of citizens upon constitutional construction, practical legislative initiatives, and judicial rulings (1999, 171-76). But Rawls certainly does not envision the efforts of citizens as bringing about transformative changes in the theoretical framework that informs the basic structure or in the nature of the practical sequence by which the principles of justice are socially implemented. Nor, for that matter, does he really want the efforts of citizens to impact such fundamental elements of social construction, since citizens are situated in an information-rich social location that compromises their ability to impartially select principles of justice. Thus while the Rawlsian attempt to lay out the institutional infrastructure beforehand has certain advantages, the ability to involve citizens in the determination of their fundamental political values is not one of them.

The difficulty of applying Rawls' educational plan (or, for that matter, any other aspect of justice as fairness that is influenced by the mono-directional view) to the civic nonparticipation problem is that the plan does not offer its participants the opportunity to contribute to the further development of their fundamental political values. There is no creative reward for persons who have ascended through the stages of the plan and have placed themselves in a position to help in the ongoing evolution of the norms of the liberal-democratic tradition. Consider again the standard forms of belief and reasoning that are employed by contemporary civic defectors.<sup>20</sup> Central to all of these beliefs is the idea

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18] The mono-directional view, as I interpret it, permeates all of the aspects of justice as fairness that develop out of the principles of justice. So other aspects of justice as fairness would be similarly prevented from being productively applied to the civic nonparticipation problem.

19] "Since a well-ordered society endures over time, its conception of justice is presumably stable: that is, when institutions are just those taking part in these arrangements acquire the corresponding sense of justice and desire to do their part in maintaining them." (Rawls 1999, 398) For Rawls the well-ordered society is permanently stable once its citizens have absorbed "... a sense of justice or a concern for those who would be disadvantaged by their defection [...]." (435); Rawls' discussion of stability occurs in the same work on pp. 434-41.

20] To repeat, the beliefs that civic defectors acknowledge as fueling their abandonment of the public sphere are (1) that their individual political efforts are incapable of making a difference, (2) that their

that public participation ought to be a momentous and fulfilling undertaking. The opportunity to participate in the determination of one's fundamental political values would be momentous and fulfilling indeed.

But the Rawlsian view is unable to promise civic defectors such an opportunity, since its mono-directional understanding of the flow of transformative influence in liberal democracies is committed to the idea that fundamental political values are and ought to be beyond the reach of citizens. The Rawlsian view depicts the participation of citizens in the public sphere as being a matter of determining the appropriate practical implementation of already-selected principles of justice. At most what it is capable of offering civic defectors is the opportunity to determine the practical components of a preconceived ideal. Citizens who are denied the chance to determine their fundamental political values are denied a powerful reason for participating in public life. The overall meaningfulness of their participation in the public sphere is diminished, as is the significance of their immediate practical political activities (i.e. their legislative initiatives, judicial participation, public deliberation, etc.). So the inability of the Rawlsian view to offer citizens the opportunity to determine their fundamental political values provides them with more substantive grounds for defecting from the public sphere than would otherwise be the case.

The upshot is that justice as fairness in its current form diminishes the meaningfulness of participation in the public sphere. Its ability to be productively applied to the civic nonparticipation problem is undermined by its allegiance to a mono-directional view of the flow of conceptual influence in liberal democracies. The view is incapable of providing civic defectors with the fundamental goods they are seeking to achieve through public participation.

But the inability of justice as fairness in its current form to provide civic defectors with convincing reasons for participating in the liberal-democratic public sphere does not mean that it is in principle unable to serve as a template for a more appropriate depiction of the interaction of institutions and dispositions in liberal democracies. On further inspection justice as fairness actually contains within it conceptual antecedents for a more productive response to the reasoning patterns of contemporary civic defectors.

#### IV. MUTUAL REINFORCEMENT AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITY

My claim that the opinions and dispositions of persons are in fact sequentially prioritized in Rawls' construction of the basic structure does not mean that I think that dispositions ought in principle to be prioritized over institutions in the construction and operation of liberal democracies. A closer inspection of the assumptions that inform the construction of justice as fairness demonstrates that Rawls' sequential prioritization of dispositions is really just a single link in a complex chain of reciprocal influence that in-

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participation in the public sphere is no longer a meaningful enterprise, and (3) that the public sphere would function just as effectively without them.

stitutions and dispositions exert upon each other in the unfolding of liberal-democratic sentiments over time. The historical reality is that the development of the dispositions of the liberal-democratic persons to whose opinions Rawls appeals has been in large part a product of the influence of an institutional infrastructure. For centuries before Rawls made this appeal, liberal democracies had grown in size and strength and had developed powerful social institutions (market economies, political forums, the legal protection of freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, marriage and informal relational ties, etc.) to reinforce their citizens' commitment to liberal-democratic ends. By the time that Rawls developed justice as fairness in the late twentieth century, the citizens of liberal democracies had been convinced for centuries that free and equal contractual situations among rational agents were appropriate ethical decision-making locations. So although the dispositions of liberal-democratic citizens are locally sequentially prioritized in the development of justice as fairness, the dispositions of such persons are in reality the product of centuries of liberal-democratic institutional influence.

The evident historical impact of liberal-democratic institutions upon the dispositions of the persons whose opinions inform the construction of justice as fairness demonstrates that the issue of ultimate directional influence between institutions and dispositions in liberal democracies is far more muddled than my investigation of justice as fairness has so far suggested. In this section I will propose that a productive way to understand this complicated descent of reciprocal influence is as a relationship of mutual reinforcement. By this I mean that successfully-operating institutions and dispositions in liberal democracies tend naturally to reinforce each other's orientation toward liberal-democratic ends. On the mutual reinforcement view neither institutions nor dispositions ought to be systematically sequentially prioritized in the construction and operation of liberal democracies. Institutions and dispositions ought rather to be seen as intertwined in a complex relationship of reciprocal determination in which both exert an influence upon the other. The question of ultimate sequential priority causes both institutions and dispositions to recede into the primordial distance, as it were, with each one lining up chronologically behind the other.

The mutual reinforcement view is arguably a more appropriate depiction than the institutional priority view of the interaction of institutions and dispositions in liberal democracies: it arguably describes in more appropriate detail the actual interaction of institutions and dispositions, and it likewise prescribes in equally more appropriate detail a normative ideal of the way in which institutions and dispositions ought to interact with each other. The ability of the mutual reinforcement view to provide such a compelling descriptive and prescriptive account indicates that it is more able than the institutional priority view of providing real-world guidance about the operation of liberal democracies. Consider as an example of the descriptive efficacy of the mutual reinforcement view the ethically upright effects of a contemporary market economy upon the dispositions of persons. It is natural for a successfully-operating market economy to develop in its participants the virtues that promote its own flourishing and the flourishing of the overall value

system of liberal democracies. Among these virtues are *autonomy* in the planning and pursuit of market activities, *cooperativeness* with other participants in the achievement of common economic goals, and *decisiveness* in quickly and efficiently selecting among available market options. Persons whose dispositions have been positively impacted by market economies tend naturally to exert a reciprocal influence upon the market mechanisms that influenced them. Through *autonomy* participants regulate and filter their behaviors in accordance with socially-acceptable regulative norms. Through *cooperativeness* participants promote collective deliberation about social goals and are empowered to engage in uncomfortable but necessary specialized tasks. Through *decisiveness* participants prevent operational breakdowns and improve the efficiency of their transactions with producers and consumers. The reciprocal impact of virtuous participants upon the market economy is powerful enough to transform the very rules by which the market is regulated, and to influence in a profound and meaningful way their fellow participants' views of market operations. In the absence of external interference, the reciprocal impact of virtuous participants upon the market economy is sufficient to orient it more directly over time toward its fundamental ideals.

This account of the reciprocal influence of markets and the dispositions of persons is on the mutual reinforcement view a representative instance of the general tendency of persons who have been positively influenced by liberal-democratic institutions to act in ways that reinforce those institutions' fundamental ideals. The account exemplifies the ability of the mutual reinforcement view to provide us with a plausible explanation of the interaction of institutions and dispositions in real-world liberal democracies. If in real life the dispositions of virtuous citizens do exert a transforming reciprocal impact upon liberal-democratic institutions, and I think that it would be relatively easy to construct a series of similar empirical reflections to demonstrate that they do, then the mutual reinforcement view is better positioned than the institutional priority view to describe this reciprocal impact.

Rawls' emphasis upon the sequential unfolding of liberal-democratic moral principles indicates that justice as fairness, in spite of its ideal-level formulation, is intended to provide guidance on the development of real-world societies. But the Rawlsian view is poorly positioned to model the idea of a transforming reciprocal influence, since it depicts the institutional infrastructure as exerting a far more significant influence upon the dispositions of persons than the dispositions of persons exert in return upon the institutional infrastructure. Thus justice as fairness is not as descriptively equipped as the mutual reinforcement view to capture the idea of a transforming reciprocal impact that alters the ideals of liberal-democratic institutions over time.

On the mutual reinforcement view the reciprocal impact of virtuous citizens upon liberal-democratic institutions increases the efficiency, operational capacity, and structural harmony of those institutions. It also strengthens the orientation of those institutions toward fundamental liberal-democratic ideals. The reciprocal impact completes the reinforcement cycle and again places institutions in a position to reinforce the com-

mitment of their participants toward liberal-democratic ends. Repeated iterations of the mutual reinforcement relationship strengthen the respective orientations of institutions and dispositions toward liberal-democratic ends and promote in liberal democracies the greater internal structural cohesion that is characteristic of societies whose institutional and dispositional loci are both oriented toward the same goals.

In the absence of external interference, repeated iterations of the mutual reinforcement relationship would bring about permanently stable and healthy liberal democracies. But in real-life political situations there are almost always mitigating factors which diminish the functional success of the mutual reinforcement relationship. In the past century one such circumstance was the prevalence of large-scale social improvement movements (alcohol prohibition, franchise expansion, environmental protection, etc.). Such initiatives were frequently admirable for their correction of cultural injustices, but they also caused destabilizing disagreements among citizens about core liberal-democratic ideals. Other circumstances in liberal democracies which diminish the accumulating effects of the mutual reinforcement relationship are a large geographical size, a large population, and a diversity of comprehensive belief systems.<sup>21</sup> Thus the self-reinforcing stability of the mutual reinforcement relationship is regularly upset by circumstantial contingencies which diminish the reciprocal positive influence of institutions and dispositions.

In addition to being a more accurate modeling than the institutional priority view of the actual interaction of institutions and dispositions in liberal democracies, the mutual reinforcement view arguably prescribes a better account than the institutional priority view of the way in which institutions and dispositions *ought* to interact in liberal democracies. Its prescriptive account unfolds naturally out of its explanation of why some liberal democracies are healthier than others. All liberal democracies, including unhealthy ones, manifest the mutual reinforcement relationship to a minimal extent. But liberal democracies which do so in a robust manner are more functionally successful than their counterparts. A minimally-instantiated mutual reinforcement relationship promotes the stabilization of the political processes of a liberal democracy. A robustly-instantiated relationship exerts a far more substantial impact upon liberal-democratic political processes – it preserves civil freedoms, regulates the distribution of material resources, and develops a public sphere which is conducive to discussions of foundational political principles. Liberal democracies do not generally work well unless and until their institutions and dispositions exert a significant positive influence upon each other.

It is natural for liberal democracies to improve morally in response to the constructive interaction of their institutions and the dispositions of their citizens. The moral improvement is a move from a minimal to a robust instantiation of the mutual reinforcement relationship, from a lesser to a greater political self-consciousness, and from an inferior to

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21] All three of these conditions are capable of diminishing the reciprocal influence of institutions and dispositions upon each other – a large geographical or demographical size causes logistical problems; ideological diversity causes consensus difficulties.



a superior public flourishing. Consider as an example of such improvement the expanded realization of liberal-democratic principles that has occurred over the last three centuries. The improvement has taken place along two axes – the first of which is the spread of liberal-democratic principles to a greater number of peoples, and the second of which is a refinement of liberal-democratic principles among those peoples who already practice them. Upward development along the first axis has meant that many peoples are now enjoying a greater degree of individual and collective flourishing than they did under the illiberal regimes of the past. Upward development along the second axis has meant that such peoples are now endorsing a better and more refined version of liberal-democratic principles than they did three centuries ago.<sup>22</sup> Among the principles that are now more clearly understood as being central to liberal democracies are an acknowledgment of a universal right to religious liberty (where previously religious liberty had been restricted to certain groups), an extension of civil rights to minorities and other underprivileged groups (where previously only a limited number of citizens had enjoyed such rights), and an increasing recognition of a right to dignified working conditions and basic health benefits (where previously there had been no such recognition). Together the two axes of moral improvement have made liberal democracies among the most popular and stable political regimes in recent human history.<sup>23</sup>

The axes of moral improvement have been propelled upward in large part by the constructive interaction of institutions and dispositions. Over time the operation of the mutual reinforcement relationship has exerted an increasingly positive impact upon the political values of liberal democracies – one that preserves civil freedoms, stabilizes the distribution of material resources, and develops a public sphere that is conducive to foundational public discussions. On the basis of this natural positive impact it is reasonable to make the prescriptive claim that the mutual reinforcement relationship functions best when it is allowed to develop naturally. I mean by this that liberal democracies undergo their most rapid and permanent moral improvement when there is minimal external interference in the natural operation of their mutual reinforcement relationship. The moral ascent that results from the constructive interaction of institutions and dispositions is usually in itself sufficient to orient liberal democracies more directly and deeply toward their core ideals over time.

The key prescriptive move of the mutual reinforcement view is the claim that liberal democracies experience optimal moral development when the mutual reinforcement relationship is allowed to operate in a natural way. As a prescription the claim is markedly different from the Rawlsian claim that liberal democracies ought to unfold sequentially

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22] Liberal democracies are capable of becoming oriented toward more refined versions of liberal-democratic principles over time, as T.H. Marshall's account of the historical development of citizenship has shown (1997, 291-319).

23] With a few notable exceptions (Kerensky's White Russia, the Weimar Republic, etc.), all of which were impacted by substantial external factors, modern liberal democracies have not typically failed for internal reasons.

out of predetermined principles. On the Rawlsian view liberal democracies ought to be characterized by a mono-directional sequential unfolding in which moral principles are determined in a privileged decision-making location, the institutional infrastructure is organized to instantiate these moral principles, and the dispositions of citizens are educated to conform to the deliverances of the institutional infrastructure. The mutual reinforcement view is unlike the Rawlsian view in that it depicts liberal democracies as developing optimally through a natural (i.e. non-artificial) increase in the instantiation of liberal-democratic principles in their institutions and the dispositions of their citizens. As a prescriptive ideal the mutual reinforcement view is meant to be procedural and is not a derivation of substantive moral content. So it is continuous with the core Rawlsian value commitments for those who wish to see it as such. But as a prescriptive ideal it is certainly not intended to be continuous with the Rawlsian procedural pronouncement in favor of a mono-directional unfolding of liberal-democratic principles.

#### V. MUTUAL REINFORCEMENT: THE CIVIC NONPARTICIPATION PROBLEM REVISITED

In this article the civic nonparticipation problem has functioned as a catalyst for an investigation of the interaction of institutions and the dispositions of citizens in liberal democracies. The problem is in many ways a breakdown in this relationship, and as such it is appropriate for political philosophers to approach the problem from a particular understanding of how the relationship ought to operate. The dominant contemporary view is that the establishment of institutions ought to be prioritized over dispositional development in the construction of liberal democracies. But the limitations of the dominant view are evident when it is applied to the civic nonparticipation problem.

A more productive approach to the civic nonparticipation problem is to rethink the categories in terms of which we view the interaction of institutions and dispositions in liberal democracies. I have sketched the mutual reinforcement view as a more or less accurate account of this interaction. The grounding of the mutual reinforcement view in real-world political circumstances renders it more capable of interpreting a breakdown in the development of liberal-democratic sentiments than the institutional priority view.

The natural tendency of liberal democracies is to improve morally in response to the positive interaction of their institutions and the dispositions of their citizens. The civic nonparticipation problem is a breakdown in this natural tendency – one that has been caused by an accumulation of conditions over many decades, and one that must be countered by a restoration program. On the mutual reinforcement view the interference of the restoration program ought not to proceed from a perspective that is artificially external to the natural development of liberal-democratic values. By this I mean an interference that is descended from an abstracted and privileged normative location (i.e. like Rawls' original position). Such interference is designed to prevent liberal-democratic citizens from influencing the formation of their fundamental political values rather than to promote the reciprocal positive interaction of institutions and dispositions. It tends to diminish the

ability of liberal democracies to respond productively to real-world contingencies and to progress upwards along a path of moral improvement. Thus on the mutual reinforcement view it is reasonable at the outset to build into the restoration program the constraint that the requisite interference ought not to be inordinately disassociated from the natural development of liberal-democratic values.

The emphasis of the mutual reinforcement view on the mutability of liberal-democratic values highlights the interactive connection between institutions and the dispositions of citizens in liberal democracies. The instantiation of a certain set of values in liberal-democratic institutions causes the dispositions of participants in those institutions over time to be oriented toward such values (and vice-versa, in accordance with the principle of reciprocal influence). The natural reciprocity of institutions and dispositions makes it reasonable to conclude that breakdowns in the functioning of institutions are likely to be accompanied by breakdowns in the dispositions of the participants in such institutions. On the mutual reinforcement view the practical social factors which have been highlighted by contemporary political philosophers as the causes of the civic nonparticipation problem (i.e. television, work concerns, private entertainments, etc.) are the external and visible manifestations of a problem that also exists internally within the dispositions of citizens.

The failure of civic defectors to instantiate liberal-democratic values in their dispositions is on the mutual reinforcement view as much a part of the civic nonparticipation problem as is the external and visible breakdown in institutions. Prime examples of this failure are the cognitive defense mechanisms that civic defectors employ to justify their abandonment of the public sphere: citizens' cynicism and lack of trust in the operation of contemporary political processes, their belief that their personal involvement in the public sphere is not capable of making a significant political difference, and their failure to identify their personal interests with the overall interests of their society (Galston 2007, 625-26). Such cognitive defenses are indicators that the malformed dispositions of civic defectors no longer provide them with the resources to recognize the value of public involvement. The approach of the mutual reinforcement view to the civic nonparticipation problem places a much greater emphasis than the institutional priority view upon the dispositions of citizens. The equal value that it attributes to institutions and dispositions suggests that attempts to restore the moral improvement of liberal democracies ought not to concentrate exclusively on institutional infrastructure in the way that would be typical of a restoration program that is influenced by the Rawlsian institutional priority view. Rather, it suggests that political philosophers would more easily accomplish their restorative aims by targeting the malformed dispositions of civic defectors and by providing civic defectors with reasons they are capable of accepting.

The balance of this article is not lengthy enough to survey the many techniques by which political philosophers are capable of shaping the dispositions of liberal-democratic citizens. One technique that does deserve mentioning, however, is the particularly promising one of providing citizens with a goal toward which to concentrate their political efforts. Consider as an example of such a goal the idea that citizens have the right and the

ability to influence the development of their fundamental political values. If this goal were promoted in liberal democracies it would be sufficiently closely tied to the natural progress of liberal-democratic values to be an acceptable form of restorative interference on the mutual reinforcement view. It would, of course, be incompatible with the now-dominant Rawlsian assumption that the fundamental political values of liberal democracies ought to be beyond the ability of citizens to criticize or reject. But as a goal it would meet the objections of civic defectors and would promote a renewed interest among citizens in the central values of the liberal-democratic tradition – one that would be likely to lead to the improvement of such values over time.

The particular promise of the claim that citizens are allowed and equipped to influence their fundamental political values is its ability to meet the concerns of civic defectors and inspire them to return to the public sphere. The opportunity to influence the fundamental political values of one's society is a great and momentous good. As a good it is perhaps resonant enough to motivate citizens to reject the lure of private entertainments and the other forms of civic defection. At the very least, citizens who are given the opportunity to influence their fundamental political values are denied the excuse that the structure of the political process prevents them from personally making a difference. If such an opportunity were made available to liberal-democratic citizens, it would provide them with a compelling account of the operation of the public sphere and of their role in its ongoing development.

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