

Must egalitarians condemn representative democracy?

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Abstract

Many contemporary democratic theorists are democratic egalitarians. They think that the distinctive value of democracy lies in equality. Yet this position faces a serious problem. All contemporary democracies are representative democracies. Such democracies are highly unequal: representatives have much more power than do ordinary citizens. So, it seems that democratic egalitarians must condemn representative democracies. In this paper, I present a solution to this problem. My solution invokes popular control. If representatives are under popular control, then their extra power is not objectionable. Unfortunately, so I argue, in the United States representatives are under loose popular control.

Keywords—democratic equality, popular control, relational egalitarianism, representation, representative democracy

1 Introduction

Equality, many people think, is the distinctive value of democracy.¹ The idea is that democracies realize equality in a sense that other political systems cannot. This idea is very attractive. In the first place, it's got a lot of surface plausibility. It seems right that the value of democracy is in large part an egalitarian value. In the second place, it explains some deep intuitions about what makes for a good democracy. It explains why everyone should get one vote. If some people had more than one vote, that would compromise equality. It explains why economic inequalities shouldn't translate into political inequalities. When the rich have more power than the poor, that compromises equality. It explains why lobbying is problematic. When those with special connections have more influence, that compromises equality. So the idea that equality is the distinctive value of democracy is very attractive. Let's call this idea democratic egalitarianism.

¹ Long ago, both (Rousseau, 1968, II.4) and (Tocqueville, 1988, 9,14) advanced this sort of thought. And it's currently going through a renaissance. Christiano (2008) and Wilson (2019) provide book-length defenses of it. Brighouse (1996), Kolodny (2014) and Viehoff (2019) provide paper-length arguments for it. Of course, it has its critics. See, for example, Arneson (2004). But many contemporary democratic theories have been won over by the idea.

But democratic egalitarianism faces a serious problem. All contemporary democracies are representative democracies. This will be very familiar to everyone. We elect officials. Those officials are in charge of the state. They make the laws, they make policy, they command the day-to-day workings of government. This gives them enormous political power. They have much more power than ordinary citizens. Is that objectionable? Is it as bad as dictators having such political power? Democratic egalitarianism seems to imply that it is. But then contemporary democracies can't realize the distinctive value of democracy. They're not structured in the kind of way so as to realize this value. And that's a surprise. Perhaps the United States doesn't realize much democratic value. But it's a surprise that this follows from its basic structure. And it's a surprise that this goes for fairer, more equal democracies than the United States. If democratic egalitarianism *really* implies this, then maybe it's not so attractive after all. Let's call this the problem of representative democracy.

In this paper I explore responses to this problem. I'll start by saying a bit more about democratic egalitarianism (§2). I'll then say more about the problem (§3). After that, I'll turn to existing solutions to the problem (§4). I think none of these solutions quite work. So, I'll suggest that the right solution invokes popular control (§5). If representatives are under the control of the people, then the extra power of representatives isn't objectionable. This not only provides a solution to the problem posed by representative democracy. It provides a distinctive egalitarian basis for valuing popular control. Finally, I'll look at how well, in light of this discussion, the United States, realizes democratic equality (§6). I'll present some evidence that representatives in the United States are under lax popular control. Thus, in theory, democratic egalitarians needn't condemn representative democracy. In practice, they should condemn various actual representative democracies.

2 What is Democratic Egalitarianism?

Democratic egalitarianism holds that democracies are egalitarian in a way that other political systems are not, and this makes them intrinsically valuable. I've claimed that this is an attractive idea. I think it is. But I'm not going to defend it at length. Many others have done so.² My interest is in a *problem* with the idea. It will, however, be useful to get to grips with some contemporary versions of the view. The two most prominent such versions are relational egalitarian and expressive views. So, in the next two sections, we'll look at these two kinds of democratic egalitarianism.

2.1 Relational Egalitarianism

According to relational egalitarian views, democracy facilitates egalitarian relationships. Without democracy, our relationships are doomed to be, in some way, objectionably unequal. So democracy's value inheres in the

² See n.1.

value of relating to one another as equals. Kolodny (2014) has presented what is probably the most influential such view. He focuses on the unattractiveness of inegalitarian relationships. In particular, he thinks social inequality is particularly objectionable. Social inequality obtains in a society of hierarchies. Caste societies and feudal societies are his paradigm examples. Some members of these societies have high social status. Some have low social status. They aren't societies of equals. Roughly, he thinks that social inequality consists in inequality in three things: power, de facto authority and consideration. He takes power to be an intuitive notion: although we might lack a fully adequate account of power, it's clear that some people have more power than others. He defines de facto authority as the propensity people have to obey your commands. The more likely people are to do as you say, the greater your de facto authority. Meanwhile, consideration concerns the likelihood that one invokes certain types of positive responses, such as respect or deference. The idea is that when some people have relatively more of these things they count as social superiors. And that's objectionable.

Democracy is meant to tamp down such inequalities. In particular, according to Kolodny (2014, 289), in democracies one has equal opportunity to influence political decisions. This directly diminishes inequalities in power. If everyone has the same ability to influence political decisions, then an important type of power—political power—is equalized. And it also diminishes inequalities in de facto authority. That's because, according to Kolodny (2014, 303), influence over a decision which is liable to be obeyed is itself a kind of de facto authority. So equalizing such influence equalizes this specific type of de facto authority. So democracy diminishes these inequalities. As a constitutive consequence, it diminishes social inequalities.³ And since social inequality is objectionable, democracy has a distinctive value.

That's one relational egalitarian view. A different view focuses on the attractiveness of egalitarian relationships. Perhaps Viehoff (2019) provides the best developed version of this view. He takes friendship and marriage to be paradigm examples of egalitarian relationships. And he thinks that such relationships require equality of power. For example, consider a two-person friendship. Suppose that one friend has more power over the character of their relationship. Then, there's something defective about the friendship. It fails to be satisfactorily egalitarian. Viehoff thinks that citizenship should be this type egalitarian relationship. So, if co-citizens don't have equal power over the character of their relationship, then it will not be satisfactorily egalitarian. That's bad, because (he says) egalitarian relationships are intrinsically valuable. The distinctive value of democracy is now straightforward. Democracy can uniquely ensure that the requirement of equal power is not violated. So, since these relationships are intrinsically valuable, democracy has a distinctive value.

³ What about consideration? Kolodny doesn't say whether democracy also constitutively reduces inequalities in consideration. I myself do not see any plausible argument that it would.

These are different views, but the differences won't matter for our purposes. The important commonalities are threefold. First, both rest on intuitions about the attractiveness or objectionability of certain relationships. Kolodny emphasizes the objectionability of the relationships between members of different castes. Viehoff emphasizes the attractiveness of relationships like friendship. Second, both think that the distribution of political power matters to these relationships. Kolodny thinks inequalities of political power partly constitute objectionable relationships. Viehoff thinks that such inequalities preclude attractive relationships. And, third, both think that democracy helps contribute to equalities of political power. These three thoughts ground the relational egalitarian version of democratic egalitarianism. The idea is that, intuitively speaking, equalities of power make our relationships better. And so democracy, by promoting such equalities, is distinctively valuable.

2.2 Expressive Egalitarianism

Let's turn to expressive views. These say that democracy facilitates the expression of equality. Without democracy, institutional arrangements are bound to express the superiority of some citizens over others: those who hold power. Christiano (2008) has been the most influential proponent of this view. He thinks we have a "pre-eminent" interest in being "publicly treated as an equal member of society" (2008, 251). However, so he argues, people are generally liable to weight their own interests more heavily than those of others. So, if some people have more political power than others, then their interests will be weighted more heavily than those of others. And—crucially—this is all widely known. Christiano suggests that this means that any system in which some have more power than others is one which will publicly express that the interests of some are worth more than others. That's because it is widely known that this system will tend to more promote the interests of the powerful. Hence any such system will violate our interest in being publicly treated as equals.⁴ The only system which satisfies this interest, then, is one in which everyone has equal political power. And that is just to say it is only democracy which satisfies this interest. So the distinctive value of democracy is that it (uniquely) facilitates the public expression of equality.

Christiano is not the only, or even the first, exponent of this sort of view. Brighouse (1996) also has a view like this. He claims that ensuring equality of political influence is "a requisite of expressing equal respect for our fellow citizens" (1996, 123). His evidence for this is our intuitions about small friendship groups. He points out that if we're deciding where to go for dinner or what movie to see, systematically giving certain friend's input more

⁴ See (Christiano, 2008, 90–91) for a succinct expression of this: "[V]irtually everyone in a society that fails to accord an equal voice to a group of people when matters of public law and policy are at stake knows that the interests of those people are going to be neglected...this implies is that a society that withholds the vote from some groups of people, or diminishes their political power in some clear way, is publicly expressing a lack of concern for those people."

weight than others counts as expressing unequal respect. So, on his view, democratic institutions help individual citizens express equal respect for their co-citizens. Some relational egalitarians have also emphasized expressive concerns. Anderson (1999) is perhaps the most prominent: she claims that the most fundamental test of any egalitarian theory is that ‘its principles should express equal concern and respect for all citizens’ (1999, 289). She thinks her own (relational egalitarian) account of equality meets this test. This is a theory which demands that we “seek to live together in a democratic community” (1999, 313). In other words, she thinks that democratic arrangements alone meet the expressive demands of justice.

Whether expressive or relational approaches are best also won’t matter for our purposes. Again, what matters is their commonalities. Both claim that democracy is distinctively valuable because it promotes equality of power. The relational views say that this makes our relationships better. Expressive views say that failures of this equality express something odious. So, both say that equality of power is valuable. This commonality is no coincidence. Democratic egalitarianism says that democracy equalizes *something*. That’s what democracy’s value is meant to consist in. And power, or something close to it, is a good candidate for that thing. It’s for this thought which representative democracy poses a problem.

3 The Problem of Representative Democracy

Let’s spell out the problem in more depth. Suppose it’s true that the distinctive value of democracy lies in equality of power. As we’ve noticed, all actually existing democracies are representative democracies. Representative democracies are characterized by a very *unequal* distribution of power. In such democracies some citizens—those with office—have far more influence over what government does than do others. Representative democracies grant legislators influence over the law and members of the executive direct influence over government bureaucracies.⁵ These inequalities in influence just are inequalities in power. So here’s the problem for democratic egalitarianism: the inequalities of power in representative democracies seem very different from such inequalities in non-democracies. But, at first glance, democratic egalitarianism seems to treat them the same. They’re all just inequalities of power. So it seems to condemn a system which should not be condemned. It seems to say representative democracy is objectionable to an extent that it is not.⁶

⁵ Here *influence* should be understood as a notion of partial, or contributory, causation. See Goldman (1999) for an account of this notion.

⁶ Dworkin (2000, 190–200) also discusses this problem. He uses it as a springboard from which to abandon democratic egalitarianism. Similarly, Landa and Pevnick (2020) take as their “point of departure” (2020, 2) the perspective that representative democracy cannot avoid the inequalities that democratic egalitarians find disquieting. Thus, they think that representative democracy should be justified as a way of “facilitat[ing] rule by a particularly competent subset of citizens” (2020, 1). This is also their view in Landa and Pevnick (*forthcoming*).

There're actually a couple problems here. First, there's a problem about absolute magnitudes. If representative democracy is really objectionable, then no remotely feasible institutional arrangement could realize democratic equality to any high degree. Yet that seems counter-intuitive. We might think that democracies like the United States and Brazil are deeply inegalitarian. But it seems to me that we shouldn't think Sweden and Switzerland are also deeply inegalitarian. So this should shake our faith in democratic egalitarianism. Second, there's a problem about comparative judgments. If representative democracy is really objectionable, then it becomes unclear why democracy is, in real cases, preferable to non-democracy. After all, in both cases power is very unequally distributed. Sometimes power will be more equally distributed in representative democracy. But it's far from obvious that this will always be so. Yet, intuitively, there is something intrinsically superior about even *representative* democracy. So, again, this should shake our faith in democratic egalitarianism. It now seems not to have captured what really matters about democracy. In either case, the virtues of representative democracy should make us less confident in democratic egalitarianism.

I've just put the point in terms of inequalities of power. But that isn't essential. Any other currency of equality also seems unequally distributed in representative democracy. Consider *de facto* authority. And suppose Kolodny is right to think that influence over political decisions gives one a type of *de facto* authority. Your representatives have much more influence over political decisions than do you. So they must have more *de facto* authority than you. Alternatively, consider *access* to power and *de facto* authority. I think that for any relevant notion of access, representatives must count as having more access to these things than ordinary citizens. Now it's true that ordinary citizens could become representatives. But it's extraordinarily unlikely that any particular citizen will succeed in doing this. And seriously attempting it incurs an enormous cost. This cannot count as access in the relevant sense: equally distributing *this* can't be all that equality requires.⁷ So representatives must have more access to power and *de facto* authority than ordinary citizens. More generally, whatever democracy is good at making equal, representative institutions seem to make extremely unequal. So, democratic egalitarianism faces a problem.

I've just said that the problem is a problem for democratic egalitarianism. But we might see it differently. We might instead think it's a problem for representative democracy. On this view, the virtues of representative democracy shouldn't shake our confidence in democratic egalitarianism. Instead, democratic egalitarianism should make us abandon representative democracy. If one is very confident in democratic egalitarianism, then perhaps one should see things this way. But I myself am not so extremely confident in democratic egalitarianism. I'm much more confident of the virtues of representative democracy than that equality is the distinctive

⁷ For suppose equally distributing access, so conceived, was all that equality required. Then making having the vote contingent on incurring enormous cost would be democratically unproblematic. But it obviously would be problematic.

value of democracy. So, if either democratic egalitarianism or representative democracy has to go, I'd drop the former. But readers are welcome to see this issue as a problem for representative democracy if they so prefer. The difference won't really matter in the rest of the paper. But I'll stick with seeing the problem as one for democratic egalitarianism.

4 Three Solutions

We'll now turn to what democratic egalitarians have said in response to this problem. But first, let's do a little more framing. What should a solution to this problem do? There are two possibilities. On the one hand, we might require that a solution show there's *nothing* objectionably inegalitarian about representative democracy. There is no problem whatsoever with representatives having power. On the other hand, we might merely require that there's something *less* objectionable about representatives having power than autocrats having power. Such inequalities might be irksome, but their badness is somehow ameliorated. The second suffices to solve our problem. It would mean some representative democracies might be somewhat egalitarian. And it would give us some reason to prefer democracy to non-democracy. So we're looking for a solution which just meets this requirement. Let's now look at what democratic egalitarians have in fact provided.

4.1 Christiano: Choice of Aims

Among contemporary egalitarians, Thomas Christiano has devoted most attention to this problem. Here's his picture: he thinks we can distinguish between the basic aims of society and the means it has for achieving those aims. This distinction, he thinks, gives us a solution to our problem. If citizens choose the basic aims of society, and representatives choose only the means to those aims, then the inequality of power between the two is not objectionable. He's advocated this throughout his work. Here are a few representative quotes:

The choice of aims model of citizenship is the view that citizens choose the ultimate aims that society is to pursue ... However citizens do not choose the means by which to bring about those aims (Christiano, 1996, 170).

As long as the legislative assembly proportionally represents the aims that citizens have chosen and the legislators are faithful to those aims while pursuing the appropriate compromises and means, the requirement of political equality can be met (Christiano, 2008, 105–6).

The basic picture that I want to draw here is that citizens are essentially in the driver's seat in the society as long as they choose the basic aims the society is to pursue. By 'basic aims', I mean all the non-instrumental values and the trade-offs between those values (Christiano, 2012, 33).

Let's flesh out this model a little more. The key distinction is between aims and means. Sometimes, this is interpreted as an essentially *psychological* distinction. On this view, human beings have basic aims. These are a type of psychological state, presumably a desire. What makes them basic is that our having these desires is not explained by our having other desires. In contrast, we also have non-basic aims. These are desires we have only because their satisfaction helps satisfy other desires. Something is a means when it's done on the basis of such non-basic aims. For example, some of us might have the basic aim to help others. And they might, as a consequence, form the non-basic aim to donate to Oxfam. So donating money to Oxfam is a means. Christiano's view has sometimes been interpreted as a claim about *representatives'* basic aims.⁸ As long as citizens can determine the basic aims representatives have, then the requirement of political equality is met. What's required is that citizens can choose what representatives, fundamentally, want.

But there's a second way to draw the distinction. And it's a way which seems to gel better with the quotes above. On this second way, it's a distinction between the *objects* of these psychological states. Some things just are non-instrumentally valuable. Some things aren't. The achievement of fairness, equality, liberty and whatnot is non-instrumentally valuable. The fact that the central bank sets the interest rate at 2% is merely instrumentally valuable. On this interpretation, we might say that citizens get to choose the aims of society just in case they get to choose which of these non-instrumental values representatives actually promote. Meanwhile, legislators choose the means if they get to choose which of the instrumental values they pursue in order to achieve these non-instrumental values. So, when citizens choose which non-instrumental values representatives promote, the requirement of political equality is met. But this doesn't mean that we must have influence over which of representatives' desires are more fundamental.

So there are two ways to flesh out the choice of aims model. But I doubt that either view provides a good solution to the problem of representative democracy. The first view is *too demanding*. We don't need influence over representatives' psychologies in order to count as their equals. Imagine we lived in a country where politicians were primarily interested in re-election. They only ever enacted policies because they thought such policies would help get them re-elected. But the people only supported policies which were good for them. And so they always got good policies, which they wanted. There's perhaps something imperfect about this situation. It would be nice if the politicians had less base motivations. But there's no real democratic problem here. The politicians aren't the superiors of ordinary citizens. The system does not express that their interests are worth more than others' interests. Yet the citizens, in this case, don't have the requisite control over the psychologies of their representatives. They can't determine what their representatives' basic aims are. So, on the first view, there is a democratic problem here. Hence, this view is too demanding.

⁸ See Ingham (2019, 109).

In contrast, the second view in *not demanding enough*. For consider, on this interpretation, who gets to choose what counts as an end and what counts as a means. The answer is: *nobody*. The distinction between aims and means is antecedently given. It's just the distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental values. Now suppose citizens want to reduce the unemployment rate. And suppose this is a mere means: a low unemployment rate is only non-instrumentally valuable. Then, on this second view, citizens should have no power over whether the unemployment rate gets lowered. And that's so even if this is what they care about most. It's just not a problem for legislators to completely ignore citizen preferences on the issue. Yet, intuitively, that does seem like a problem. It seems like a problem that citizens cannot themselves choose what they're allowed to have power over. If large majorities want to reduce the unemployment rate, in a good democracy legislators will try to reduce the unemployment rate. Hence this second view misses genuine democratic problems. It's not demanding enough.

We could say more about the choice of overall aims model.⁹ But I myself don't see how to interpret the distinction between aims and means so the model comes out as plausible. And I don't find the general approach promising: it seems to me odd to think that democratic theorists can make some distinction between aims and means, and it's only the former that citizens of democracies should have influence over. Citizens should get to choose what they have influence over. So, let's look at a quite different solution.

4.2 Viehoff: Sources of Justification

Daniel Viehoff, in recent works, claims that representatives do not count as our social superiors. And this, he suggests, is because 'whether unequal power constitutes relations of social inferiority or superiority depends on what justifies this inequality.'¹⁰ His idea is that there are different ways of justifying inequalities. He thinks of these ways of justification as the societal norms by the lights of which those inequalities are permissible. Some such ways are inegalitarian. We might, for example, justify inequalities by reference to some people's purported superior moral worth. Perhaps the power of medieval monarchs was justified this way. But some ways are not inegalitarian. We might, for example, justify inequalities by reference to their promotion of everyone's interests. Perhaps the power of experts is justified this way. And, he thinks, only the inegalitarian types of justification create social superiority. Only when someone's excess power is justified by, for example, their purported superior moral worth does this excess power make them a social superior. Why does this mean representatives aren't our social superiors? Because he thinks their power is not justified in one of the inegalitarian ways. Instead, it's justified by the fact that it conduces to the interests of ordinary citizens. So, they don't count as our social superiors. And this might be thought to provide a solution to the

⁹ Richardson (2003, 114–118), for example, suggests that, in practice, ends and means cannot be distinguished.

¹⁰ See Viehoff (2019, 28).

problem of representative democracy. It might be thought that, if representatives' power is not justified in one of the inegalitarian ways, then representative democracy poses no egalitarian problem.

Viehoff himself does not offer this as such a solution. He thinks that it is instead an issue for versions of democratic egalitarianism which rely on social equality. And it's an issue for these views for the same reason that make it an inappropriate solution to the problem of representative democracy. If it's really the source of justification which matters, then many non-democracies are consistent with the relevant type of equality. All that matters is that what justifies the extra power of the rulers is not a claim about their moral worth, but rather a claim that this arrangement aids the interests of everyone else. But it's certainly possible for non-democratic arrangements to be justified by their supposedly supporting citizens' interests. Indeed, there seem to be several actual cases like this. Anecdotally, if you ask ordinary Chinese citizens what justifies the rule of the Communist Party, they never say that it's the greater moral worth of party members. In my experience, they say two things. First, they reference performance legitimacy. They talk about the economic gains China has experienced in the last forty years. Second (less often), they say the Communist Party is the party of the masses. It represents the majority of working Chinese people. So, it seems this solution over-generates. It makes non-democracies sufficiently egalitarian. So it's not a good reply to our problem.

That's not to say there's nothing attractive about this view. I think there is. I think inequalities might be especially bad when justified by people's purportedly unequal moral worth. But, if we're to be democratic egalitarians, we can't think representative democracy has this sort of basis. Doing so involves abandoning the claim that equality is a value which democracies are especially well-positioned to realize. China realizes this value. So let's turn to a third solution.

4.3 Kolodny: Delegation Conditions

Kolodny provides a two-stage solution to the problem of representative democracy. He first suggests that there's a special type of relationship—delegation—which can make some inequalities unobjectionable. His examples are the relationship between doctors and their patients or lawyers and their clients. He then lays down some conditions which, he claims, are at least individually necessary, and presumably jointly sufficient, for such a relationship to obtain.¹¹ And he thinks that representatives can meet these conditions. So, he infers representative democracy needn't be objectionably inegalitarian. It's worth quoting him at length:

The difficult question, which is left as a task for other work, is what conditions such delegation must meet. Among these conditions might be (i) that the agent exercises powers that, as the

¹¹ He's not explicit on the sufficiency point. But if he doesn't think his conditions are jointly sufficient, then it's hard to see how he can infer that representation can be a delegation relationship.

agent accepts, belong to the principal, (ii) that the agent is answerable to the principal for that exercise, (iii) that the agent exercises those powers on behalf of the principal's interests and claims, (iv) that the agent exercises those powers with direction from the principal's expressed will, (v) that the agent is, or can be, replaced after a short, limited term, and (vi) that the principal controls the selection of the agent (Kolodny, 2014, 319).

I think these remarks point us in the right direction. But they're not satisfactory by themselves. The main problem is that he provides no explanation of why *these* are the conditions which make inequalities unobjectionable. That means this account is explanatorily incomplete. This matters for two reasons. First, it matters because we want an explanatorily satisfying account of why representative democracy isn't objectionably inegalitarian. A list of conditions does not constitute such an account. It does not explain why the citizen-representative relationships aren't objectionably egalitarian. Second, this makes it rash to be confident that these really are the right conditions. After all, there are other salient features about lawyer-client relationships he could have picked out. Here are two: (i) Lawyers don't wield coercive power over their clients. They can't pass laws which put them in jail. (ii) Lawyers have legal obligations to their clients. If they willfully act against their clients' interests, they're on the hook for major penalties. It doesn't seem implausible to me that these factors explain the permissibility of ordinary principal-agent relationships. In fact, on the theory I give in the next section, they plausibly play a big part in the matter. So we can't just be satisfied with Kolodny's brief treatment of the issue. His account is explanatorily incomplete. What we really need is an explanation of why some delegation relationships are not objectionably inegalitarian.

5 Popular Control

So democratic egalitarians do not, currently, have a good solution to the problem of representative democracy. Yet, as I've said, I think Kolodny's remarks point us in the right direction. In this section I'll offer what I take to be a development of these remarks. The underlying idea is that it is not inequalities of power *tout court* which impair democratic equality. Rather, it's inequalities of independently exercisable power. Power is independently exercisable when how it is exercised is only under the power-holder's control. How the power-holder uses their power is not under anyone's control except their own. But, when Kolodny's conditions are met, how representatives use their power will tend to be under other people's control. It will be under *popular* control. This means, roughly, that it will be under the control of the people. So representatives' power won't impair democratic equality. This solves the problem of representative democracy. It allows representative democracy to live alongside democratic equality. Insofar as how representatives exercise their power is under popular control, that power doesn't pose a threat to equality. Let's call this collection

of claims the popular control view. In the rest of the section we'll spell out this view.

We start with the underlying idea. The idea is that it's really distributions of independently exercisable power which matter to democratic equality. The distribution of power *tout court* is not important. How we support this idea depends on which version of democratic egalitarianism we endorse. Let's start with relational views. These views are based on intuitions about certain relationships. We intuit whether some relationships are good and bad. We then propose some general principles to explain why the good ones are good and the bad ones are bad. In §2.1 we saw that, in this way, some people have inferred that inequalities of power make up the bad relationships and some that equalities of power make up the bad relationships. But that inference is a little rash. This way of proceeding provides more support for the idea that only distributions of independently exercisable power matter to the quality of our relationships.

This is because there are many cases where inequalities of power, intuitively, aren't bad. These are exactly the cases Kolodny adduces. Consider what happens when you delegate power to your doctor or lawyer. This empowers your doctor or lawyer. But, intuitively, it doesn't degrade the quality of your relationship with them. But, if inequalities of power are bad *tout court*, then it should do exactly that. For your lawyer has a lot of power over your legal affairs. This should make your relationship with them less egalitarian. Yet, if it's really just inequalities of independently exercisable power which are bad, then empowering your lawyer needn't do this. Your lawyer doesn't have independently exercisable power. How they use their power is, in the good cases, under your control. If you want your lawyer to plead guilty, they'll do it. If you want them to plead innocent, they'll do that instead. And this is regardless of how they think you should plead. So, relational egalitarians shouldn't think inequalities of power *tout court* impair relationships. The full range of intuitive data doesn't support this. Rather, they should think that only inequalities of independently exercisable power impair such relationships.

This point goes on both Kolodny's and Viehoff's version of a relational egalitarian view. Kolodny focuses on intuitions about bad relationships. Caste hierarchies are his paradigm example of such a relationship. But you do not have a bad relationship with your lawyer. They aren't your social superior. So, someone with this focus should deny that inequalities of power *tout court* create relationships of superiority. They don't in the case of these delegation relationships. Viehoff focuses on intuitions about good relationships. Friendships are his paradigm case. But you can have a good relationship with your lawyer. Many people are friends with those to whom they delegate power. So, someone with this focus should deny that inequalities of power *tout court* preclude relationships of equality. Both types of relational egalitarian should, instead, think that it's the distribution of independently exercisable power which matters.

Now let's turn to expressive views. In particular, let's see how things play out on the most well worked-out such view: the one in Christiano (2008). Christiano thinks that, when some people have more power than

others, this will lead to their interests being weighed more heavily than those of others. And this, he thinks, means inequalities of power express that the interests of the more powerful are worth more than those of others. But that only seems plausible when that power is independently exercisable. Suppose I have a lot of influence over something, but how I use that influence is entirely under someone else's control. Then we shouldn't expect that my influence will promote my own interests. At least, we shouldn't expect this if we accept, as Christiano does, that people usually promote their own interests when they can. On this assumption, we should think that my influence will promote the interests of whoever is exercising the control. After all, it's they who ultimately decide what I do with my power. So, it's really only when I can exercise my power independently that it creates an expressive egalitarian problem. And so expressive egalitarians should think that it's not inequalities of power *tout court* which express that people's interests are of unequal worth. They should think that only inequalities of independently exercisable power express such inequalities.

So, both versions of democratic egalitarianism support the idea that it's really inequalities of independently exercisable power which are objectionable. We'll now flesh out this notion. Above, I defined independently exercisable power in terms of control. One has independently exercisable power just in case how one uses one's power is not under anyone else's control. So, fleshing out this notion just amounts to fleshing out the notion of control. This is a reasonably intuitive notion. We're all familiar with things being under our individual control. It's under your control whether you keep reading this paper. But you have no control over whether the sun rises tomorrow morning. This notion is scalar: you can have more or less control over things. You have a lot of control over whether you keep reading. You have some, but less, control over how long it takes to finish the paper. There's also an equally familiar notion of things being under a group's control. Apple's board has control over whether Tim Cook remains CEO. The angry mob has control over whether the castle gets razed. And this too is a scalar notion. Apple's board has a lot of control over Cook's tenure. It has less control over the company's next quarter profits.

Saying more about what control amounts to is thorny. It's natural to think it involves some sort of causal-counterfactual dependence. And, in particular, it's natural to think that this is causal-counterfactual dependence on preferences.¹² Consider two options: reading and not reading. You have control over whether you read insofar as you wanting to read would make you likely to read and you not wanting to read would make you unlikely to read. And, plausibly, you have perfect control when preferring to read makes sure that you read and preferring not to makes sure that you don't. Note that the preferences cause the readings (or likelihoods thereof). It's not just that whether you want to read and whether you read happen to co-vary. When you have control over something, your preferences have to exert causal pressure on the thing you control.

¹² Natural, not forced. One alternative is to think it is dependence on what you try to do.

To extend this to the group case, we have to ascribe groups preferences. This is intuitively unproblematic. It make sense to claim that Apple’s board prefers that Cook stick around. It makes sense to say that the mob wants to burn down the castle. So, we can say a group controls something when that thing varies with what the group wants. Now, how exactly to ascribe preferences to groups is controversial. And some people have thought that social choice theory, with its impossibility theorems, makes it impossible to ascribe a group preferences.¹³ But this seems to me a terribly counter-intuitive view. We ascribe preferences to groups all the time. Yet giving a general account of how to ascribe preferences to group is difficult. I’m not going to provide such an account in this paper. I think many accounts are viable.¹⁴ I’ll just assume that there’s some way to make sense of the notion that groups have preferences, and so a good way to make sense of a group controlling something.¹⁵ This should give us a good grasp on what independently exercisable power is. It’s just power the exercise of which is free from control—either by an individual or by a group.

But it’s not just any type of control which solves the problem of representative democracy. It wouldn’t do were representatives to be controlled by bureaucrats, judges or generals. This is because having control over those who directly wield power is itself a type of power. So, such control would give the bureaucrats, judges or generals much more power than ordinary citizens. This would push the bump in the carpet. It would ameliorate the inequality between representatives and citizens. Yet, simultaneously, it would exacerbate the inequality between citizens and bureaucrats, judges or generals. This is why, to satisfactorily solve the problem of representative democracy, control needs to be popular. It needs to be the people who wield control. So, we now move on to a final task: how should we spell out the relevant notion of *popular* control?

What we want here is the minimally demanding notion which reconciles democratic equality with representative democracy. One notion we could employ is just group control, where the group is the entire citizenry. On this articulation, a representative is under popular control when how

¹³ This is the view in Riker (1982, 238–41).

¹⁴ One straightforward suggestion is to adopt what’s sometimes called the utilitarian social choice function. We first sum the intensities of group members’ preferences for x over y . We then subtract from this the sum of the preferences for y over x . We say the group prefers x to y iff the result is positive and prefers y to x iff it is negative. A second suggestion swings on what norms are commonly accepted in a society. Scheffler (2018, 7–8), for example, suggests that we can take the norms of a group to reflect the desires of that group. So, it might be that the group prefers x to y iff the norms commonly accepted in that group dictate that x should be chosen rather than y . I won’t decide between these suggestions. But it is worth noting that this second suggestion would give us a notion of popular control coincident with the one in Pettit (2012, ch.5). Pettit thinks policymaking is under popular control insofar as it is constrained by such commonly accepted norms. So, if these norms reflect group desires, this can be construed as a view on which constraint by group desires is equivalent to popular control.

¹⁵ In truth, notions of popular control can be formulated which dispense with the need to ascribe groups preferences. Ingham (2019, 57–121) formulates such a notion. On this notion, representatives are said to be under control when the shared preferences of different majorities can, as long as held with sufficient intensity, determine what they do. This notion of popular control would, for my purposes, work as well as the notion in the text for articulating the idea of group control.

they wield their power causally depends on how the citizenry as a whole want that power wielded. This would put each representative under the control of a group. So it would reconcile their extra power with the demands of equality. But demanding this seems too stringent. It misses out the possibility of each representative being under the control of only their own constituents. This could surely count as a way of reconciling representative democracy with equality. So, we want a more minimal notion of popular control.

Fortunately, articulating such a notion is straightforward. Take any collection of equally powerful representatives. We can say that they are under popular control when a similar size group of citizens controls each of those representatives. And every citizen belongs to one and only one such group. Why the 'similar size' requirement? Well, I've claimed that partaking in the control of a representative is itself a type of power. And it also seems plausible that how powerful it makes you depends on how many other people you share that control with. So to ensure that control over representatives doesn't lead to inequality amongst citizens, we would have to guarantee a rough equality of the number of other people with which each citizen shared this type of control. And this is exactly what the similar size clause guarantees. Thus, we say that representatives are under popular control insofar as each is under the control of a similar sized group of citizens. The tighter is this control, the more are they under popular control.

This completes the solution to the problem of representative democracy. Let's sum it up. Democratic egalitarians can claim that it is just independently exercisable power which matters to democratic equality. And they can say that when representatives are under popular control, they are under a type of control. So, their power is not independently exercisable and so not objectionable. And because the control is *popular* this doesn't create some objectionable inequality in power elsewhere. It gives everyone an equal share in controlling their representatives. This allows us to reconcile the demands of democratic egalitarianism with the existence of representative democracy. And that just is to solve the problem of representative democracy.

Let me stress one thing. I said in §4 that solutions to the problem of representative democracy came in two types. One type says the relevant inequalities are not objectionable at all. The other says that they're less objectionable than corresponding inequalities in non-democracy. The solution I've offered is of the second type. This is because, I think, only perfect popular control would make such inequalities completely anodyne. But no representative democracy could achieve perfect popular control. They all make do with some level of control short of perfection. Thus actual levels of control, at best, *ameliorate* the objectionability of representatives' surfeit of power. They make it less objectionable than it would be were it not under any control. That doesn't make it totally anodyne. But it does give representative democracy a critical advantage over autocracy. So, it solves the problem of representative democracy.

Now we turn to some objections. The first objection concerns feasibility. One might doubt that we could achieve even decent levels of popular

control over representatives. For example, one might think that citizens don't really care about most of their representatives' exercises of power. And without such cares, the thought goes, citizens can't have control over such exercise. This thought is misguided. The key point here is that control can be *virtual*.¹⁶ We can exercise control without actively intervening. We can exercise control without having a preference on an issue. What matters is that, were we to have such a preference, policy would match that preference. Suppose, for example, we don't care what the interest rate is. We only care about macroeconomic stability. We might still have control over the interest rate. *Were* we to care about the interest rate, the rate would match the level we wanted. But this doesn't require we actually do care about the interest rate.¹⁷ This means the people needn't have definite preferences over the minutiae of government, in order to control their representatives. It just requires that, were they to have such preferences, their representatives would respond to them. So I think decent levels of popular control are indeed achievable.

A second objection concerns desirability. One might doubt that tight popular control over representatives is really that desirable. Probably the best basis for this doubt is a division-of-labor thought. Policymaking requires expertise. Making good policy requires even more expertise. Representatives, one might think, are in a unique position to build that expertise. But, one might think, they can only use that expertise to make good policy when they're not under tight popular control. So, tight popular control will exact a cost in good policymaking. And that makes it overall undesirable. Now, this doesn't mean that popular control isn't the best way to reconcile representative democracy to democratic egalitarianism. But it suggests that that reconciliation will come at a large instrumental cost. It will lead to worse policy. So, it saps the import of democratic egalitarianism. It will mean that we shouldn't strive for much democratic equality after all. Doing so imposes too terrible a cost on good policymaking.

This objection seem to me to overstate the conflict between popular control and legislative specialization. The point here again hinges on the fact that control can be virtual. This means that high levels of popular control are consistent with a lot of representative discretion. Representatives must yield when they disagree with popular opinion. But, when there is no popular opinion on an issue, there's nothing to which they must yield. Now on some publicly salient issues, the public no doubt has opinions. But on other less salient issues it's often doubtful whether the public has a view. The public doesn't have a view on every detail of policy. So, on this latter type of issue representatives can make the policies they think are best without impairing popular control at all. And here's the important point: the division-of-labor thought applies best to such issues. Representatives advantage in expertise is most important on the details of policy. Representatives may know best what interest rate will minimize unemployment. But ordinary citizens have all the expertise needed to know that unemployment

¹⁶ The point comes from Pettit (2012, 231).

¹⁷ Ingham (2016, 1076) uses a similar example in service of a similar point.

is bad. So, tight popular control is consistent with the clearest benefits of legislative specialization. The objection overestimates the conflict between democratic equality and good policymaking.

A third objection concerns foreign control. One might think that the view I'm defending implies that it would be unobjectionable were representatives under *foreign* control. For suppose representatives are under control of a foreign power. Then they do not have independently exercisable power. So, there is not an objectionable inequality between them and their fellow citizens. But such foreign control is surely still objectionable. To put the point vividly, consider the relationship between the United States and Cuba after 1898. The Spanish-American war of 1898 led to the United States occupying Cuba. And that led to the Cuban constitution, of 1901, enshrining the United States' legal right to intervene in Cuban affairs. The United States wasn't shy about exercising the right. American marines often found themselves in Havana. As a result, the United States exercised some control over Cuban rulers. This, on the view I've presented, ameliorated the inequality between those rulers and the Cubans they ruled. But this state of affairs was clearly deeply objectionable. Can the view I've presented account for that?

It can. This state of affairs might have ameliorated the inequality between the rulers of Cuba and the Cuban citizens. But it created an objectionable inequality between American citizens and Cuban citizens. We can spell out what was objectionable about this inequality in two ways. On a relational view, it put Americans in a position of superiority over Cubans. It created cross-national inegalitarian relationships.¹⁸ On an expressive view, it expressed that the interests of Americans were worth more than those of Cubans. It expressed inequalities of worth. Both are, plausibly, serious objections to this type of foreign interference. Both help explain why there's an egalitarian objection to colonialism. So, generally, it won't be anodyne for a country's representatives to be under foreign control. This will create an objectionable inequality between citizens of that country and those of another. So this objection doesn't seem to me to tell against the popular control view. The popular control view will condemn foreign control of representatives.

Yet this objection does bring out a feature of the popular control view. It implies that foreign control of representatives would ameliorate the inequality between those representatives and their fellow citizens. Is this implication untenable? I do not think so. I want to make two points on the matter. First, control is very rarely perfect. In particular, the United States only had very imperfect control over Cuban rulers. It controlled whether they expropriated American businesses. It didn't control whether they oppressed their citizens. So, there was still much objectionable inequality between Cuban rulers and ordinary Cubans. Second, this implication seems

¹⁸ Admittedly, each American only had a small amount of power over each Cuban. Is this a problem? It is not. Democratic egalitarians should think small differences in power can matter a lot. For, otherwise, they cannot explain why it's objectionable for some to have the vote and some not to have the vote. After all, in absolute terms, having a vote only gives each individual a small amount of political power.

to me plausible in many cases. Suppose you're arrested by an officer of an oppressive regime. But you know the officer has no choice but to arrest you. Were he to disobey his orders, then the regime would viciously retaliate against him. Here, your relationship with the officer isn't problematic. He's not independently exercising his power. It's your relationship with whoever gives him the orders which is inequalitarian. And that's well explained if it's only independently exercisable power which creates an egalitarian problem. So, I think that this feature of the popular control view is not untenable.

Collectively, I think this makes up a good case for the popular control view. It seems to me the best way to reconcile representative democracy with democratic equality. So let's now compare it to some other views. We'll begin with the other responses to the problem of representative democracy. I've depicted the popular control view as a fleshing out of Kolodny's remarks. The idea is that when conditions (i) to (vi) hold, then representatives will be typically under popular control. The most important factors here are, presumably, (v) and (vi): short terms where the citizenry controls the selection of new representatives can be expected to facilitate popular control. Now, of course, this may well not be the kind of view Kolodny had in mind. But it seems to me a charitable interpretation of what he says. In contrast, there's little connection between the popular control view and the sources of justification view. This means the popular control view escapes the latter's anti-democratic consequences. It might be that the extra power of the Chinese Communist Party officials is justified by its purported contribute to the public interest. But the officials are surely not under popular control. So, on the popular control view, their vast power poses an egalitarian problem.

The popular control view has an interesting relation to the choice of aims model. Often, the achievement of decent levels of popular control may *mimic* the satisfaction of the choice of aims model. This will happen when people in fact only care about the ends, and don't care about the means. Then popular control will be tantamount to the choice of aims rather than means. But there are nonetheless serious differences. People often do care about means. They often care, for example, how much unemployment there is. In such cases the popular control view requires that the people also have influence over these policies. The choice of aims model does not. So, the popular control view is more stringent. It requires more of the connection between the people and their representatives. This seems to me an advantage of the view.

Finally, let's compare the view with another view about the value of popular control. Pettit (2012) is perhaps the most influential contemporary advocate of popular control. He also thinks that popular control is crucially important in a democracy. But there is a critical difference. His worry is about freedom, not equality. He thinks that if the people don't have control over the exercise of political power, then the state will count as dominating them. By this, he just means it will be able to arbitrarily restrict their options. And the problem with this is not that it makes the state their superior. It's that non-domination is a valuable form of freedom. So the view I've

sketched demands roughly the same thing as Pettit's view: popular control over the exercise of political power. But the source of this demand is very different. For Pettit this demand flows from a respect for freedom. For the view I've presented here, it flows from a respect for equality. The point here is quite general. It's often argued that popular control is valuable because it protects some sort of freedom.¹⁹ The picture I've provided says it protects equality. So, it provides an egalitarian basis for valuing popular control.

This difference matters. Here's a straightforward objection to Pettit's view. Suppose that citizens have collective control over the state. Then it seems like they can arbitrarily restrict my options. And this seems just as bad as if the state were able to arbitrarily restrict my options. It doesn't matter that the thing doing the restricting is a group rather than an institution. I can be dominated by either.²⁰ So collective control doesn't free me from domination after all. It doesn't solve the central problem animating his project. But it does solve the central project animating the present project. After all, if I am right, perfect popular control means that no individual citizen counts as my superior. And a collective of citizens is not the right kind of thing to count as my superior. So popular control achieves equality, even if it doesn't achieve non-domination. So equality provides firmer ground on which to rest the value of popular control than does freedom.

Let's sum up. On the view I've developed, we solve the problem of representative democracy by invoking the notion of popular control. When representatives' use of power is under popular control, their having that power is not a problem. This means we can stick with democratic egalitarianism. And it also means we have an egalitarian basis for favoring popular control over representatives. In the next, final, section we'll explore the concrete significance of this discussion. We'll explore how much democratic equality the United States realizes, if popular control is necessary to realize such equality.

6 Democracy in America

I've just argued that popular control can reconcile representative democracy and democratic equality. But there remains the question of how well actual political system take advantage of this reconciliation. In this section, I'll look at the case of the United States. In particular, I'm going to explore two types of findings which suggest that, in the United States, representatives are not under very tight popular control. The first concern the poor match between voter preferences and how representatives vote. The second concerns voters' weak ability to hold representatives accountable for the consequences of their policies. Together, these suggest that, in the United States, representative democracy is not very well reconciled with democratic equality. This has two upshots. First, it seems to me a valuable pay-off of the popular control view. The view explains the import of some

¹⁹ See Christiano (1996, ch.2) for a critical discussion of such views.

²⁰ Simpson (2017) expands on a version of this point.

worrying findings in political science. Second, it means that the United States faces severe difficulties in realizing democratic equality.

6.1 Policy Match

Let's start with the match between representatives' vote and the policy preferences of their constituents. The best piece of evidence here is the association between the ideological tenor of congresspeople's roll-call vote and their constituents' preferences. There's a strong bivariate correlation between the two. But it weakens tremendously once one controls for party. More liberal districts are electing Democrats and more conservative districts are electing Republicans. But, conditional on legislator party, there's very little association between constituent ideology and how legislators vote. This suggests constituents are capable of *selecting* legislators who roughly conform with their views. But they are far less capable of controlling them once in office. Voters can pick the party of their representative. But, once in office, they can't push them very far from the party line. And, sometimes, this gives them a legislator who doesn't match their views very well at all. Legislators representing ideologically indistinguishable districts vote very differently when they belong to different parties. This suggests that constituents aren't controlling how their representative votes in Congress.²¹

There are two other, weighty, pieces of corroborating evidence. First, senators from the same state but of different parties vote very differently. So they can't both be responding to the prevailing preference in their constituencies. The prevailing preference can't direct both voting up a bill and voting down that bill. Second, when districts change party hands, the voting behavior of their representatives changes radically. Bafumi and Herro (2010) dub this "leapfrog representation". When a Democrat gets replaced by a Republican, or vice versa, this looks like one extremist getting replaced with another. The new representative has a radically different voting record. Now it's possible that constituents change their views radically in between elections. But that seems very unlikely. More likely is that congresspeople aren't particularly bound by what their constituents want. They are not under the control of constituents.

There's are other, less weighty, bits of evidence of this sort. First, there's the fact that, as Poole (2007, 435) claims, 'members of Congress die in their ideological boots.' What he means is that they don't seem to change how they vote throughout their entire career in Congress. That's hard to square with constituent control. Congressional careers are long. Districts change a lot over such a career. But their member of Congress does not seem to change with them. Second, there's evidence that electoral pressure doesn't make congresspeople more responsive to their constituents on policy. The evidence is that weaker congresspeople don't tack to the center and that congresspeople in their final terms—those not running for re-elections—

²¹ The clearest presentation of this argument, and the underlying evidence, is by Achen and Bartels (2016, 46–9).

vote in roughly the same way as they did in prior terms. They just vote less.²² This suggests that electoral sanction doesn't transmit much popular control to congresspeople on issues of policy.

That's not to say that constituents have no influence whatsoever on their congressperson. There's some evidence they do. For a start, there is a correlation between district preference and representatives voting behavior even when accounting for party. That could be the product of constituent influence. But the better evidence concerns re-districting. Every ten years, the United States redraws its congressional districts. Several researchers have found that, when their district changes, how members of Congress vote changes (Leveaux Sharpe, 2001; Hayes, Hibbing and Sulkin, 2010). But the effect sizes here are small. Their vote changes, but not dramatically. So this suggests that constituents have some impact on how their congressperson votes. But that doesn't mean that constituents have a large impact. Overall, the evidence suggests that representatives are not under very tight popular control at all.²³

The popular control view explains why all this matters. These findings suggest that how representatives exercise their power over policy is not much under the control of the public. Policy issues constitute a core set of issues over which representatives have influence. So this suggests control over representatives is relatively weak. On the popular control view, this is an egalitarian problem. It suggests the relationship between representatives and ordinary citizens cannot be one of equality.

6.2 Retrospective Voting

That's actually just a little too quick. After all, control can be virtual. And perhaps citizens just don't care about policy very much. Perhaps they care much more about unemployment and prosperity than they do about, for instance, the size of government. So perhaps lack of policy match tells us little about whether representatives are under popular control. Thus, let's see how much control citizens might have over what outcomes representatives pursue. We'll do that by looking at the most important mechanism by which they could achieve such control: retrospective voting.

Voters vote retrospectively when they vote to reward or punish incumbents for poor performance. This might achieve control by working on representatives' desire to be re-elected: representatives will push for the outcomes that voters want, the idea goes, because they'll be punished if they don't. In the rest of the section we'll discuss two important findings about retrospective voting. Namely, voters are myopic and blind. They're myopic in the sense that they vote on short-term issues despite caring about long-term issues. They're blind in that they often sanction representatives for

²² See Moretti and Butler (2004) and Lott and Bronars (1993) respectively.

²³ There's also some reason to be a bit cautious about this evidence. A lot of things change after a redistricting. You get a whole new session of Congress. And redistrictings don't come around that often. So it's hard to know exactly whether the change in district is driving the change in voting behavior or whether it is something else. Moreover the one study which has examined a mid-session redistricting finds no effect of redistricting on legislative roll-call votes (Lo, 2013).

things over which those representatives have no influence. Both seem to severely weaken the threat of electoral sanction. And that makes it less likely that what outcomes representatives push for is under much popular control. We'll discuss each phenomenon in turn.

Let's start with myopia. We'll just focus on economic outcomes.²⁴ Do voters punish representatives for not bringing about economic outcomes that they want them to bring about? To work that out, we need to know what economic outcomes voters want. People likely don't just want to be better off in the short-term (say, a six-month long period). They want medium to long-term prosperity.²⁵ But citizens do not sanction representatives who fail to promote such prosperity. They respond to short-term economic conditions instead of longer-term ones. The best evidence for this is from (Achen and Bartels, 2016, 146–76). They test what period of economic performance is associated with incumbent vote share. They find that an extra percentage of real income growth in the six months before the presidential election is associated with a big bump in incumbent popular vote margin: seven and a half percentage points. But income growth at other times isn't associated with any change in the incumbent's vote margin. So voters are not sanctioning representatives when they fail to promote voter preference for medium or long-term prosperity. Voters are only responding to economic conditions around the time they're voting.

Let's turn to blindness. There's evidence that voters routinely punish representatives for events over which representatives have little influence. The import of this is as follows: we suggested that representatives would have to respond to outcome preferences because of their fear of losing elections. However, if voters apply sanctions indiscriminately, then this reduces the ability of those sanctions to control officials' behavior. This is because sanctions are a significant threat to representatives' behavior only when they entail big expected welfare losses for the representative. But if the representative can be expected to be sanctioned *anyway*, then the threat of implementing sanctions for mismanaging the thing under their control won't impose a big expected welfare loss. This undercuts the reason we have to expect representatives' behavior to be under constituents' control. The threat of electoral sanction is not sufficiently weighty to force representatives to exercise their influence in favor of the peoples' ends.

Again, the best evidence for this has been gathered by Achen and Bartels (2016, 116–146). Incumbents, they reason, have no control over the weather. They might be able to make it metaphorically rain. But making it literally rain is beyond their purview. So they look at how, in the United States, incumbent vote share tracks rainfall. And they don't just look at this over the last ten or twenty or thirty years: they look at the whole 1897–2000 period. Very high and very low rainfall are each associated with lower incumbent vote share. In their telling, voters are punishing incumbents for bad weather. They're punishing them for droughts and floods over which

²⁴ Healy and Malhotra (2009) report similar finding for outcomes around natural disasters, as does Montalvo (2011) for those to do with terrorist attacks.

²⁵ Healy and Lenz (2014) provide evidence for this.

they have no influence. So American voters punish incumbents for things which they cannot affect. This suggests that electoral sanctions are not an effective means of ensuring representatives target the outcomes voters want them to target.²⁶

Combined with the previous discussion, on policy, this is evidence that representatives in the United States are under very loose popular control. According to the popular control view, this is an egalitarian problem. It means that representative institutions in the United States contravene democratic equality. This seems to me the most interesting, and important, upshot of the popular control view. It explains why certain worry-inducing findings really are worrying. And it helps us assess the quality of our actual democracies.

7 Conclusion

So, *must* egalitarians condemn representative democracy? I don't think so. They needn't condemn representative democracy, as long as representatives are under popular control. Popular control can ameliorate the inequalities created by representative democracy. This seems to me sufficient to solve the problem of representative democracy. We should not reject democratic egalitarianism because of our attachment to representative democracy. But this conclusion highlights a pressing practical problem. It seems that some actual democracies—the United States at least—fail to realize a very high level of popular control. So these actual democracies do not, in practice, make much use of this solution to the problem of representative democracy. Thus, egalitarians aren't bound to condemn any representative democracy whatsoever. But they may be bound to condemn deep aspects of real representative democracies.²⁷

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²⁶ A large, albeit contested, literature supports the view that voters vote blindly. See Healy and Malhotra (2013, 295–98) for a review. The most interesting criticism of this work, in my view, comes from Ashworth, Mesquita and Friedenberg (2018). They suggest that voters might respond to natural disasters—like floods and droughts—because they provide new information. Perhaps, before a natural disaster, voters can't directly observe the competence of either incumbent or challenger. But perhaps it's justifiable for them to assume that incumbents are more competent. And perhaps natural disasters let them directly observe the quality of incumbents. This might sometimes reveal that incumbents are incompetent. Thus, when voters vote incumbents out after natural disasters, they might be responding to surprising facts about incumbent incompetence. If this is what's going on, then that's good news: it undermines the worries about voter blindness in the text. But, having said that, Ashworth and his co-authors are yet to empirically corroborate this suggestion.

²⁷ Many thanks to Daniel Viehoff, Jake Zuehl, Arden Koehler, Chris Scambler, Robert Long and Beatrice Longuenesse for helpful discussion of this paper, and to two anonymous referees for comments which greatly improved the final version.

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