

# *The two faces of political parties: How they can both promote and hinder Rawls' public reason*

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**ABSTRACT** This article explores the impact of political parties on a Rawlsian model of public reason. Political parties possess the potential to play a vital role in promoting public reason by connecting the background culture and the public political forum, identifying and systematizing the diverse array of opinions within a pluralist society. They can translate comprehensive doctrines into shared public values, advance electoral programs that articulate a reasonable political conception of justice and construct the deliberative arena necessary for public reason. However, it is crucial to recognize that political parties can also undermine public reason. They may prioritize sectarian interests over shared ones, appeal to non-liberal or perfectionist values, perpetuate misinformation, succumb to the influence of monetary donations, or adopt a closed-minded and rigid ideological stance. Achieving the ideal of public reason necessitates political parties striking a delicate balance between advancing their own agendas and respecting a practice of public justification.

**KEYWORDS** John Rawls; legitimacy; political parties; public reason.

**RESUMO** Este artigo explora o impacto dos partidos políticos num modelo Rawlsiano de razão pública. Os partidos políticos têm o potencial de desempenhar um papel vital na promoção da razão pública, conectando a cultura de fundo e o fórum público político, identificando e sistematizando a diversidade de opiniões numa sociedade pluralista, traduzindo doutrinas compreensivas em valores partilhados, promovendo programas conceção política razoável da justiça e construindo a arena deliberativa necessária à razão pública. No entanto, é fundamental reconhecer que os partidos também podem comprometer a razão pública. Podem dar prioridade a interesses sectários em detrimento de valores comuns, apelar a valores não liberais ou perfeccionistas, perpetuar a desinformação, ceder à influência de donativos monetários ou adotar uma posição ideológica fechada e rígida. Para atingir o ideal da razão pública, é necessário que os partidos políticos encontrem um equilíbrio delicado entre a promoção das suas próprias atividades e o respeito por uma prática de justificação pública.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** John Rawls; legitimidade; partidos políticos; razão pública.

# Introduction

This article investigates the complex relationship between political parties, public reason, and political legitimacy within the context of John Rawls' political liberalism. It recognizes the vibrant diversity of worldviews present in modern constitutional democracies, where political parties play a central role. Political parties are responsible for aggregating the interests of like-minded individuals, engaging in deliberation within legislative assemblies, and advancing policy proposals and laws. To achieve political stability and legitimacy in the face of a plurality of worldviews, Rawls' theory of political liberalism provides a compelling framework. Rawls emphasizes the importance of public reason as a mechanism for establishing legitimacy in a constitutional democracy. Public reason requires political decisions that can be, on fundamental matters, justifiable to all citizens, and it calls upon public officials and citizens, including political parties, to base their decisions on shared reasons rather than personal beliefs (Rawls, 1997).

However, Rawls' treatment of political parties and their relationship to public reason remains limited in his work. The dynamic nature and inherent antagonism of partisan politics are not thoroughly explored. This scholarly gap raises important questions about how political parties, driven by electoral competition, can reconcile their partisan interests with the demands of reasoned discourse and shared justification. Understanding this interplay is essential for determining the specific duties and guidelines that political parties should uphold to honour public reason while pursuing their political objectives.

Section 1 of the article provides an in-depth examination of Rawls' theory of legitimacy and public reason, and particular emphasis is placed on the significance of participatory intersubjective debate as a fundamental aspect of the latter Rawlsian model of public reason. It also examines the limited attention given by Rawls to the role of political parties and it explores the works of other authors, such as Matteo Bonotti (2017) and Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2006; 2020), who show how Rawls' theory of legitimacy allows for sufficient partisan contestation and deliberation within a liberal democratic framework.

In section 2 a dialectical methodology is adopted to analyze the impact of political parties on Rawls' model of public reason. The argument is that, in order to delineate the appropriate orientations and constraints for political parties within the realm of public reason, it is

imperative to first comprehend the intricate relationship between parties and the fundamental concept of public reason. By exploring how parties ideally operate and how parties currently operate in liberal constitutional democracies, an ideal of public reason aligned with Rawls' realistic utopia can be formulated.

Section 3 aims to synthesize the significant mechanisms performed by political parties in relation to public reason. It explores the interplay between the aggregative and deliberative functions of parties, acknowledging the challenges involved in reconciling these aspects. The argument put forth is that, when faced with a trade-off between these functions, political parties should prioritize the deliberative virtues of public reason over the singular goal of aggregating votes and winning elections. It asserts that any justificatory guidelines, or moral duties, associated with public reason, should duly consider and prioritize the deliberative function.

## 1 Rawls political liberalism, public reason, and political parties

According to Rawls, the existence of diverse and conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines within a democratic society is acknowledged as *the fact of reasonable pluralism*: free institutions, alongside the free practical reason of their citizens, will naturally and inevitably generate a variety of doctrines and views, some of them reasonable and comprehensible and, simultaneously, irreconcilable (1996, pp. 36-7).<sup>1</sup> The challenge lies in integrating the idea of collective self-rule and legitimate democratic governance in the face of deep disagreements on matters of morality and justice.

Rawls starts with basic assumptions on the nature of liberal constitutional democracies: he sees a society as a fair system of cooperation, persons as free and equal citizens, as well as reasonable and rational; he sees a permanent pluralism of reasonable comprehensive doctrines, and that political power is always the power of the citizens as a collective

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1 Comprehensive doctrines are comprehensive worldviews that provide a framework for making sense of the world, including beliefs about what is valuable and how we should live. Comprehensive doctrines can be religious, philosophical, or moral, and they can be quite different from one another (Rawls, 1996, p. 59). Rawls argues that in a diverse society, it is unlikely that all citizens will share the same comprehensive doctrine.

body.<sup>2</sup> Given these basic assumptions, by what principles and ideals is the coercive power of the state justifiable to all citizens? Rawls' answer lies in the *liberal principle of legitimacy*, connected with a criterion of reciprocity:

Our exercise of political power is proper only when we sincerely believe that the reasons we would offer for our political actions- were we to state them as government officials- are sufficient, and we also reasonably think that other citizens might also reasonably accept those reasons (1997, p. 771).

Political legitimacy hinges on the use of public reasons when exercising political power on fundamental matters.<sup>3</sup> Public *reasons* are those that meet the criterion of reciprocity, meaning that they are sufficient to support what we argue for and can be reasonably accepted by others in a reciprocal manner. For Rawls (1997, p. 771), “the idea of public reason specifies at the deepest level the basic political values” meaning that a process of public reasoning demands reasoning from political values because these values are distinct from other social or associational ones that are not shared by all. Hence, public reason can be formulated in two ways: in a negative formulation, it means that political decisions on fundamental matters cannot be justified based on one's own comprehensive doctrine, including religious, philosophical, or contentious scientific beliefs. Instead, they must be based on reasons and values that “might be shared by all citizens as free and equal” (1997, p. 771), irrespective of their comprehensive doctrines. How do we know which ones are shared reasons? In a positive formulation, public reason requires individuals to provide justifications for their political decisions based on fundamental values that are already implicit and shared in the public political culture of a democratic constitutional society. Reasonable citizens commonly

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2 Society is seen by a scheme of social cooperation because citizens don't view the social order as having “a fixed natural order” or as having an “institutional hierarchy imposed by religious or aristocratic values” (Rawls, 1996, p. 15). Furthermore, Rawls departs from the fact that people are free because they are not naturally subject to other people's moral or political authority, and equal because they are equally situated with respect to this freedom from the natural authority of others (1996, pp. 18-9). Reasonability and Rationality are two moral powers every person can possess when engaging in society. By reasonable Rawls means the ability to propose and follow fair terms of cooperation that others can also accept and follow. By rational Rawls means the ability to judge and deliberate means and ends, how these are adopted, prioritized, and affirmed (1996, pp. 48-54).

3 Fundamental matters are questions on constitutional essentials, such as what rights and liberties should be included in a constitution, and matters of basic justice, which are questions related to the basic structure of society and its basic economic and social justice. On why public reason doesn't apply to ordinary law see Rawls (1997, pp. 215, 231, 232).

accept these values and are not controversial or based on personal beliefs that some citizens may reject.

Public reasons thus encompass both a constructive and positive aspect, emphasizing fundamental values implicit in constitutional democratic societies, while restricting the use of reasons from comprehensive doctrines in political justifications. Rawls elaborates further, introducing the idea of reasonable political conceptions of justice and how we can reason from them:

A citizen engages in public reason, then, when he or she deliberates within a framework of what he or she sincerely regards as the most reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others, as free and equal citizens, might also reasonably be expected to endorse (1997, p. 773).

Since the basic assumptions from which Rawls started can be interpreted in different ways, there is a possibility of different reasonable political conceptions of justice. Therefore, there is a pluralism, not only of comprehensive doctrines, but also of political conceptions of justice. Rawls identifies three main elements that characterize these conceptions: a list of the basic rights, liberties and opportunities, an ordering of these values so that they are protected from other claims, and principles, standards and guidelines of inquiry that guarantee that citizens can enjoy these freedoms. Furthermore, these conceptions should present a completeness and an order of values that can give a systematic answer to most of the problems of society (Rawls, 1997, p. 777).

This means that public reason refers not only to the type of reasons but also to a practical way of collective reasoning between different reasonable political conceptions of justice that is oriented toward the basic political and moral values of constitutional democracies. Even though comprehensive doctrines are irreconcilable, and so we shouldn't appeal to reasons grounded on them because not all citizens share them, we can share reasons of another kind, "public reasons given in terms of political conceptions of justice" (Rawls, 1997, p. 805).

When we compare Rawls' treatment of the liberal principle of legitimacy in *Political Liberalism* (1996) and «The Idea of Public Reason Revisited» (1997), we observe a notable difference. In the latter work, Rawls introduces the criterion of reciprocity as a condition for the legitimacy of collective power, which was not explicitly mentioned in the for-

mulation of this principle in *Political Liberalism*. Simultaneously, Rawls sets aside the notion of accordance with a constitution.<sup>4</sup> I argue, following Langvatn (2016), that the legitimacy, expressed through the criterion of reciprocity, is now founded on a practical, deliberative process where we exchange reasons, still as citizens of a constitutional democracy, but reasons that meet a certain threshold for us and for others, leaving behind the idea that what matters is the accordance of reasons with a constitution because the constitution is an evolving project too. This displays the intersubjectivity and the participant perspective, turning public reason more responsive to the needs and interests of citizens in a pluralistic society, while still being oriented to the basic-political moral ideas and values of a democratic constitutional society.

Distinct from the idea of public reason is an *ideal of public reason*. By accepting that legal and political imposition should be publicly justifiability through some type of reciprocal acceptability of reasons, we require some type of prescriptive duty to fall on the agents who deliberate and exercise political power to guarantee they follow this idea. Rawls (1996, p. 217) presents the duty of civility as the moral obligation that agents must “explain to one another [...] how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason.” This means that when agents advocate for certain policies on fundamental matters they should see if their interpretation is the most complete and sufficient and should explain to others why their point of view supports the shared political values of their democratic constitutional society (Rawls, 1996, pp. 225-7). This ideal applies in differentiated levels depending on the agent who is deliberating, on the forum of deliberation, or on the matter that is being discussed (Rawls, 1997, pp. 768-9).

Rawls focuses on legitimacy in constitutional liberal democracies, and political parties have been at the core of how this type of regime has been organized. However, his theory doesn't focus on how political parties, with their divisions and antagonism practices, relate to legitimacy. How can parties, who represent different worldviews, promote shared values? Usually, deliberative theories of democracy, like the one Rawls advocates for (1997, pp. 772-3), see the vote as an expression of

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4 The liberal principle of legitimacy, in *Political Liberalism*, is expressed in the following way: “our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational. This is the liberal principle of legitimacy” (Rawls, 1996, p. 217)

the “duty, of democratic citizens, to express their impartial judgments of what conduces to the good of all people” (Freeman, 2000, p. 375) and partisan loyalty and identity as an obstacle to this type of impartiality and reflection.<sup>5</sup> Rawls, in his case, tried to distance his theory from ordinary politics, arguing that “questions of strategy are not to be confused with those of justice” (1999, p. 203), that we shouldn’t derive what is just from the rivalrous relations or the intense feelings of politics, indicating some type of awareness and disappointment at the actual and ordinary practice of democratic politics. It was only in the last decades that authors have filled the gap, showing how the “great game of politics”<sup>6</sup> is essential to the “realistic utopia”<sup>7</sup> Rawls proposed, and relating the circumstances of justification from a public reason perspective with political parties (White & Ypi, 2016; Bonotti, 2017). These authors claim that Rawls’ theory needs political parties as part of the ideal of democracy because parties represent the political-institutional expression of reasonable pluralism and allow for the right type of contestation and disagreement, the “politics for the right reasons.”

We could interrogate the relevance of Rawls’ theory of public reason in our present political reality, given the vast differences between the political contexts of when the theory was formulated, and the complexities we face today. In environments marked by intense discord and irrationality, advocating for reasonableness within political parties might not suffice as an adequate response. If in fact a sizeable number of citizens aren’t complying with public reason, what does that suggest? Should we simply accept that we’re bound to fall short of this attractive ideal, or might we consider different ways of preserving the central idea? I want to highlight that this article is centered on exploring how the Rawlsian theory of political legitimacy intersects with the internal goals of political parties, specifically their electoral pursuits. This analysis aims to elucidate how the actions taken by these parties can either support or undermine the principles advocated by Rawls. Rather than to show the superiority of Rawls’ theory between competing one’s

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5 Partisan identity and loyalty are referred to as partisanship, “political orientation of citizens who stand with a party” (Muirhead, 2006, p. 714)

6 The term “great game of politics” refers to ordinary politics, parties and partisanship and the rivalry of partisan politics marked by power struggles (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2006, p. 99).

7 Rawls’ theory is sometimes referred to as a “realistic utopia” because it captures his practical side, for instance, his ability to look at the reasonable irreconcilable pluralism present in modern societies, with his commitment to the ideal of a just society, it’s a “blue-print for a building that can, in fact, be built” (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2006, p. 99).



or to offer immediate solutions to contemporary challenges, my focus lies in contributing to the ongoing discourse surrounding Rawls' theory and its applicability in today context, particularly in understanding how the ordinary function of political parties can cope with this model. However, I still want to argue that finding a balance between ideal theoretical constructs, like Rawls' theory of public reason, and its practical application in real-world political scenarios is essential. While having a normative basis for guidance is crucial, it is equally important to link these theoretical frameworks with tangible examples and practices to ensure not only normative soundness but also relevance.

Rawls, particularly in his later works, introduced concepts like the proviso, *declaring* and *reasoning from the conjecture*, which are methods of discussion that acknowledge the challenges faced by reasonable parties when confronting radical opposition and that can help public reason even though they are not part of it. In declaration, individuals express their own comprehensive doctrine, and show how it aligns with a reasonable political conception of justice. In conjecture, individuals conjecture about other people's basic doctrines, to show that a reasonable political conception can provide a basis for those doctrines. These additions to his theory demonstrate an effort to bridge the gap between idealized principles and the complexities of contemporary political realities. And when we truly face unreasonable citizens or parties, we know that "there are limits to what public reason can accomplish" (Rawls, 1997, p. 806). Therefore, we should focus on the soundness criterion that an ideal theory can bring to the table, combining it with the relevance criterion so that the theory is not broadly indifferent to the way citizens think and reason about important political matters. This should help us move beyond a mere agreement for the sake of convenience (like a *modus vivendi*) and aim for stability based on valid reasons. This approach ensures that our theories aren't just practical but also provide a compass for societal growth and stability.

In the next sections, I will address how the ordinary functions and mechanisms performed by political parties, whether positive or negative, impact this ideal of public reason. And, following Chapman (2021), I will contend that the recent emphasis in democratic theory on the merits of developed partisanship has obscured crucial inquiries regarding the extent to which partisanship should be considered as only an ideal, without reference to the negative dynamics' parties can also perform. We need a balance between anti-partyism, which has been ingrained in



democratic theory for so long, and the recent tendency to overly idealize political parties.

## 2 How political parties promote public reason

In what specific ways political parties can be vital in the realization of the Rawlsian idea of public reason and legitimacy in a constitutional liberal democracy?<sup>8</sup> I argue that political parties can have five positive effects on this idea.<sup>9</sup>

Parties *can be a bridge between the public political culture and the background culture of society* (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2006, pp. 103-4).<sup>10</sup> In Rawls' theory, the *background culture* is the culture of civil society, the space outside the basic structure of society where we find all types of groups and associations, whether they are religious, educational, scientific or professional (1997, p. 768). They have their own way of reasoning about their means and ends and are conducted by non-public reasons (Rawls, 1996, pp. 220-2), such as their religious beliefs, their cultural traditions, or their personal values. In contrast, the *public political culture* comprises "the political institutions of a constitutional regime and the public traditions of their interpretation (including those of the judiciary), as well as historic texts and documents that are common knowledge" (Rawls, 1996, pp. 13-4). How are these two domains connected? The public political culture imposes laws and regulations on the background culture of society (Rawls, 1997, p. 791), and civil associations or groups can provide non-public reasons in the public political forum if they respect *the proviso*. The proviso allows comprehensive doctrines to enter the public political discussion reasons provided that

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8 My aim is not to provide a full list on how parties contribute to public reason, nor to talk about the value of political parties for other fields, such as the representation theory (even though some points connect). My aim is solely and mainly to understand and explore the relevant mechanisms parties, ideally, can perform that help construct a society's shared public reason.

9 My aim is also to delineate the various mechanisms through which political parties can actively promote public reason. However, it's essential to note that outlining these methods doesn't imply an assumption that parties will automatically adhere to them. The extent to which parties embrace these methods will hinge significantly on how we define the obligations or duties imposed on them. As previously mentioned, comprehending these obligations necessitates a prior understanding of the patterns we wish to virtuously promote and those we aim to eradicate.

10 This is sometimes referred as the "linkage" function of parties (Lawson, 1988) or as the "partisan connection" (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2012).

“in due course proper political reasons...are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support.” (Rawls, 1997, p. 784).

However, most groups, like the Catholic Church or a professional sector, do not aim directly at exercising political influence, and do not organize around political participation, even though occasionally they might participate, making it very burdensome for them to know when the constraints of public reason are expected of them. In contrast, political parties are structured around political participation and seek to attain or already possess legislative powers. Consequently, they have the responsibility of mobilizing voters, operating between the background culture and the public political forum. Through parties, citizens can both identify with the social or civil groups they belong and with a platform that connects them to the public political sphere.

Partisanship is a bridge formed by identification with a political position and its public reasons, on the one hand, and identification with supporting interest or identity groups in the background culture, on the other. (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2006, p. 104).

As Sartori (1976) wrote, “parties are the central intermediate and intermediary structure between society and government.” (p. ix). In Rawls' theory, the realms of background culture and the public political forum are characterized by distinct modes of reasoning. Political parties, by virtue of their connection to both these spheres, possess the capacity to mediate between them.

More than merely serving as mediators who organize and promote interests and values and provide a pathway between the political culture and the background culture of civil society, *parties can discover and define relevant differences in the diverse array of opinions held by individuals*, thereby clarifying the differences between the unstructured mass of diverse opinions (Rosenblum, 2008, pp. 307-8). Based on Bernard Manin's analysis in *The Principles of Representative Government* (1997), Rosenblum argues that representatives from political parties play an active role in shaping political preferences rather than simply reflecting pre-existing citizen views. Parties have the ability to propose new lines of division and influence citizens, determining the range of matters for discussion and decision, and providing a reasonable slice of the vast

array of considerations that cannot be covered by individual citizens or philosophy alone.

I argue this process is important for public reason because political parties can identify the different pieces of the Rawlsian puzzle such as different comprehensive doctrines, the shared political values in democratic societies, and differentiate between conceptions of justice that interpret those values differently. Comprehensive doctrines, shared political values, and conceptions of political justice, are all sub-unites necessary to construct the model of a well-ordered society envisioned by Rawls and political parties can help in the process of identifying and systematizing this existing pluralism. To take a specific example, ALDE - Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Group- is a pan-European political party that is dedicated to promoting liberal values. The party has members from across Europe and is one of the major political forces in the European Parliament. The party has been influential in discovering and defining the differences between the diverse array of opinions held by individuals who identify as liberals or centrists, clarifying the differences between classical liberalism and social liberalism.

Furthermore, parties can endeavor to demonstrate that a portion of the electorate is associated with a new and distinct social division that is deserving of protection (Manin, 1997, p. 226). This can also be helpful to public reason which, from a Rawlsian perspective, is dynamic because “the forms of permissible public reason are always several. Moreover, new variations may be proposed from time to time and older ones may cease to be represented” (Rawls, 1997, p. 775). The definition of what constitutes reasonable political justifications for exercising power over fundamental political matters may shift: for example, issues related to gender orientation may become more prominent in public discourse, leading to a redefinition of what counts as a reasonable discourse for fundamental matters. The right to change gender is a matter of constitutional essentials as it relates to the basic rights and liberties of citizens. Political parties can play a crucial role in highlighting and elevating such issues within the political sphere. Their advocacy serves to bring these matters into public consciousness and potentially into the legislative process, making them significant within the framework of constitutional essentials.<sup>11</sup> Parties can present the new cleavage found in society and advocate in its name following public reason demands.

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11 I find it important to remember that Rawls' later account of public reason, as discussed in section 1, is more closely associated with the actual practice of deliberation. Through

The most important contribution parties can make to public reason is that *they can translate comprehensive doctrines into public reasons*, thereby also contributing to an overlapping consensus (Bonotti, 2017, pp. 99-123). According to Rawls, citizens should work out by themselves how their comprehensive doctrines relate to the political values of a reasonable political conception of justice (1996, p. 140). I argue that political parties' constant presence in civil society enables them to be informed about different worldviews. Typically, they are closely connected with one or two particular comprehensive doctrines- for instance, one political party can be more connected with the Catholic Church, while another can be more connected to professional associations. However, if parties want to win elections, they need to obtain votes and, therefore, they must accomplish one demand pointed out by Bonotti (2017, p. 100): "they must appeal both to their members and supporters, on the one hand, and to the broader public, on the other hand." This can motivate partisans to be committed to speaking to a wider and general public and, therefore, to relate the comprehensive groups they are most connected with public values all can share.<sup>12</sup> I also argue that many of the most active partisans are typically citizens with expertise in the political domain, or at least an inclination and interest to devote time to it, and therefore they can enable parties to have this ability to interpret and translate reasons drawn from comprehensive doctrines into language and arguments that are accessible and relevant to a broad range of citizens. They can do so by emphasizing the aspects of the doctrines that are compatible with the basic moral and political values, such as liberty, equality, and fairness, and relying on commonly accepted principles and evidence-based arguments to support the group's positions. Therefore,

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this process, individuals seek to understand what is mutually acceptable to all citizens, who are viewed as equal and free members of a society that operates as a system of social cooperation. It is not solely concerned with conformity to the constitutional essentials, as these may evolve over time. Consequently, political parties have the ability to propose new values or ideas through public reasoning that may not be explicitly covered by the Constitution.

<sup>12</sup> Partisans are typically individuals aligned with a specific political party, advocating for its beliefs and goals. Academics debate the classification boundaries of partisans: usually, elected representatives from parties, non-elected party members, and avid or sympathetic supporters constitute the spectrum. The more delicate question remains open on whether these avid or sympathetic supporters qualify as partisans. This taxonomy is important as those considered partisans bear the responsibility regarding the obligations or duties of public reason. In this article, I won't present an exhaustive ideal model of public reason or delve into defining who I perceive as partisans. However, I believe it's crucial to highlight that different partisans should have varying degrees of obligation concerning public reason. Those holding more power, like elected representatives, should bear a greater responsibility for upholding public reason.

political parties not only have the motivation but also the capability to relate comprehensive doctrines with public reasons.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, as I have mentioned, the indeterminacy of Rawls' proviso can make it hard for citizens or groups to know when and how they should present public reasons as their participation in politics is occasional and they are not organized around it. Political parties hold a distinct advantage over individual citizens or groups in introducing comprehensive doctrines and, later, show why these support the shared political values of a constitutional society. This advantage is due to the increased presence of political parties in both the media and political debate, allowing them to reach a wider audience and showcase their views more effectively. With ample sites for public discussion and discourse, such as their own social media platforms, political parties can more readily engage with the background culture and demonstrate their fulfillment of the proviso. This has positive reasons as it makes citizens mutually aware of each other religious or moral doctrines and how their worldviews have "allegiance to the democratic ideal of public reason" (Rawls, 1997, p. 785), helping to build a more civic and comprehensive society.

In relating comprehensive doctrines to public reasons, parties can *propose complete programs that satisfy the features of a political conception of justice*. Rawls' model of public reason favors more than a one-party system because it acknowledges different reasonable political conceptions of justice. Parties can be the embodiment of such a pluralism, presenting reasonable and complete political conceptions of justice, by having a wide-range agenda setting that distinguishes them from single-issue movements, where different values are linked and ordered in their broad manifestoes and party programs (Rosenblum, 2008, p. 260). By presenting general and complete interpretations of political values

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13 The relationship between political parties' drive for electoral success and their potential to align comprehensive doctrines with public reason constitutes an area worthy of exploration. While acknowledging that parties can have various methods to engage a broader audience, one's better than others, it's also pivotal to recognize the possibility of doing so by appealing to shared liberal values and, thus, promoting public reason. Furthermore, the considerable political expertise inherent in active partisans, particularly elected representatives, who typically possess a profound understanding of politics, bolsters the plausibility of parties promoting public reason. If we can demonstrate a compelling incentive for parties to adhere to shared liberal values—such as their desire to resonate with a wider audience—and if we can validate the ability of elected representatives to facilitate this translation process, then we can assert that political parties can act as promoters of public reason without sacrificing their electoral objectives. This standpoint challenges earlier criticisms that argued political partisanship inherently clashed with the concept of public reason. Once more, whether parties choose to adhere to this mechanism depends on additional factors, but at least we can see that the process of public reason can be compatible with the internal demands of political parties.

parties are distinctive from factions that only represent partial interests or organizations that only target a single issue (White & Ypi, 2010, p. 811). As Bonotti (2014, p. 321) says “They provide heuristic tools which anticipate predictable patterns of policymaking and offer ‘packages’ of policies and measures which partisans intend to implement.”

### 3 How political parties compromise public reason

Through a dialectical analysis of political parties' empirical dynamics, I aim to challenge their essentiality in Rawls' model of public reason. This examination helps identify the dynamics that may undermine public reason, leading to the construction of effective guidelines for parties to prevent such actions.<sup>14</sup>

I argue that, *if a party behaves like a faction, it harms public reason shareability demands and the completeness that a reasonable political conception of justice should have.* The concept of a faction refers to a group within a larger organization, such as a political party within the large organization of the state, that has a particular interest or goal that opposes the interests or goals of the larger organization. Pro-party theorists try to distinguish political parties from factions, stating that a faction “addresses a partial constituency”, “exhibits no concern to justify its program to the community in toto” (White & Ypi, 2011, p. 383), and “pursues partial interests unrelated to the common interest of a community” (Bonotti, 2017, p. 10). It’s undeniable that parties are indeed partial organizations inside a community, they are representative of the different perspectives in society. However, the difference between them and factions is that parties can “promote the interest of the whole political community rather than factional and partial interests” (Bonotti, 2017, p. 104).

However, when political parties become too closely identified with specific interest groups, they can prioritize these interests over other shared values and ignore the concerns and perspectives of other members of society or of other values, trying to maximize the interests of

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14 For an empirical investigation into negative aspects carried out by political parties, Chapman (2021) is a valuable source. Her study specifically focuses on marginal partisanship, affective polarization, and identity convergence, which pose challenges to the normative theory of parties. I'll elaborate on some points Chapman made that directly affect the idea of public reason and political justification.

its members or the groups they support at the costs of the interests or values of the wider society. They stop concerning about giving justifications that all the electorate or other parties could reasonably agree with and focus on those groups who agree with them or whom they want to advance, ignoring or even demonizing those who do not share their views. This is especially important since, as Rawls says it, “we seek a shareable public basis of justification for all citizens in society, giving justifications to particular persons and groups here and there until all are covered fails to do this”. (1997, p. 800). Besides behaving like factions when they speak only to a partial constituency, parties are also factions they present party programs or manifestoes that only represent partial interests of society. When they only try to advance partial interests that are not interwoven in a political conception of justice, they don’t represent complete political conceptions of justice, and, in the absence of this completeness, they don’t present “an adequate framework of thought in the light which the discussion of fundamental political questions can be carried out.” (Rawls, 1996, p. 777).

White and Ypi (2016, p. 384) state the case of a “farmer’s party” who only tries to maximize agrarian interests and justify policies taking this interest into account, while not addressing the whole of the political community. This party behaves more like a faction unless “it integrates these interests into a wider normative vision involving claims that can be generalized.” As Sartori puts it, “although a party only represents a part, this part must take a non-partial approach to the whole” (Sartori, 1976, 23; see also Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2006), and this, in public reason, means presenting reasons we sincerely believe others, and not only our group, can share as free and equal members, and presenting a complete and reasonable political conception of justice. Parties that only appeal to particular interests rather than abstract principles and try to maximize these partial interests in an unreasonable order of values for the sake of winning office do not fit in the Rawlsian perspective of public reason. These parties are “mere interest groups, petitioning the government on their own behalf” (Rawls, 1999, p. 195). Therefore, if a party behaves like a faction, speaking only to a sectarian constituency and seeking to maximize only partial interests, failing to present a complete political conception of justice, undermines public reason.

Another way to think about factionalism is to understand how individuals are socialized into partisan beliefs. As shown by Chapman (2021, pp. 395-6), many times, the ideal of an active partisan is blurred



with affective polarization, where partisans can only see and fight for their part of the story. Considering how social and partisan identities form significantly influences the existence or reduction of factionalism within parties and across party systems and impacts the process of public reason.

*A political party, even if it advances a general view of the public interest, may not be based on shared liberal values (e.g.: libertarian or communist parties) or, a party could even adhere to liberal values, such as autonomy or equality, but fail in its justificatory practice for not being freestanding from comprehensive doctrines (e.g.: a perfectionist party), undermining the process of public justifiability.* According to Rawls, a political party that advances a general view of the public interest but is not based on a liberal freestanding political conception of justice, fails to meet the requirements of public reason (1997, p. 774). For instance, in the case of libertarianism, it emphasizes individual freedom and individual autonomy to the exclusion of other values that are important for a just society of free and equal citizens. Libertarianism “does not combine liberty and equality in the way liberalism does; it lacks the criterion of reciprocity and allows excessive social economic inequalities as judged by that criterion.” (Rawls, 1996, p. lviii). Since Rawls’ reasonable political conceptions of justice are those that ensure all citizens can make effective use of their basic freedoms (1997, p. 774), these conceptions must present decent distributions of wealth and income, and a libertarian party fails in that.

In other cases, a political party that adheres to liberal values, such as equality of opportunities and individual autonomy, but fails to give reasons rooted in a political conception of justice freestanding from comprehensive doctrines, such as a perfectionist party, also fails to meet the requirements of public reason. This is because the party's justifications are part of a comprehensive doctrine that not everyone in the public sphere shares. In the case of a perfectionist party, the party's political positions are based on the idea that the state should promote a particular vision of the good life or pursue a specific moral or philosophical agenda. Unlike liberal political parties’ freestanding from comprehensive doctrines, which seek to establish principles that can be acceptable to all citizens, a perfectionist party seeks to promote a particular vision of the good life or pursue a specific moral or philosophical agenda. Therefore, perfectionist parties can be problematic in a pluralistic society, where citizens hold a wide range of different moral and

philosophical views. Rawls' second feature of a reasonable political conception of justice demands we give a special place to the basic rights, liberties, and opportunities, especially for them to be protected from perfectionist values (1997, p. 774). A political conception of justice shouldn't be presented or derived or be a part of any comprehensive doctrine (Rawls, 1996, 12) and, as a result, the perfectionist party's political platform cannot be publicly justified because it relies on values and principles that are not reasonably acceptable to everyone.

For instance, in the United States, many conservative politicians have used religious justifications to oppose abortion rights and same-sex marriage. Former Vice President Mike Pence has been a vocal opponent of abortion and has many times cited his Christian faith as the basis for his opposition.<sup>15</sup> To meet the requirements of public reason, political parties must base their justifications on shared liberal values that are acceptable to everyone in the public sphere and avoid relying fundamentally on comprehensive doctrines that not everyone shares.

To advance their political agendas or to discredit their opponents' views, *political parties may engage in the spread of false or misleading information*. They can deliberately misrepresent facts or statistics, choose the metrics that benefit them while ignoring other important data, and use misleading or complex information to manipulate public opinion. By doing so, I argue, they can harm the guidelines of inquiry that are vital to a political conception of justice and to public reason.

Rawls states that the *guidelines of inquiry* are "principles of reasoning and rules of evidence in the light of which citizens are to decide whether substantive principles properly apply and to identify laws and policies that best satisfy them." (1996, p. 224). These guidelines are what allow us to reason and weigh the shreds of evidence necessary to determine if our laws and policies are satisfying our substantive principles. Rawls states that to have this type of reasonable inquiry citizens must have some civic political virtues, such as "reasonableness and a readiness to honor the (moral) duty of civility" (1996, p. 224). This means that

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15 E.g. Mike Pence in an interview with the NBC News. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PyRFloTqmA>. It may be worth noting that Rawls discusses the concept of "witnessing" and "reasoning from conjecture" as methods of discussion that help public reason even though they are not part of it, there are two other forms of discourse that can be used in political discussions. One is declaration, where individuals express their own comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, and show how it aligns with a reasonable political conception of justice. The second is conjecture, where individuals conjecture about other people's basic doctrines, to show that a reasonable political conception can provide a basis for those doctrines. However, Pence's argumentation does not constitute an example of these methods.

partisans, when deciding what policies or laws satisfy their substantive values, should use, in good faith, guidelines of inquiry that are reasonable and that can explain and give reasons others can understand and reasonably accept.

However, when partisans deliberately ignore important evidence, misrepresent facts, or turn to emotive language to gain support for their policies, they act in bad faith, violate these political virtues and guidelines of inquiry, and harm public reason. Take the case of both the Trump and Bolsonaro administrations on their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the ways in which these administrations undermined public reason was by selectively choosing data that supported their positions while disregarding or suppressing data that contradicted them. For example, the Trump administration reportedly pressured the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to downplay the severity of the pandemic and to provide data that supported the administration's agenda.<sup>16</sup>

Rawls is explicit that, when it comes to the forums where public reason applies, we are only to appeal to “presently accepted general beliefs and form of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial” (Rawls, 1996, p. 224).<sup>17</sup> This means that, when engaging in public discourse, on fundamental matters, partisans should rely on information that is widely accepted or at least available to the general public. They should not use complex or esoteric arguments that are only accessible to a select few. They should use plain and simple language that is accessible to all citizens, and that is based on widely accepted principles and methods of science. And they should not select only data that advances their propositions. This implies partisans ought to engage in good faith reasoning, being prepared to defend their political conception of justice and their policies using guidelines and principles they think other citizens, as free and equal, may reasonably be expected to endorse (Rawls, 1996, p. 226).

Moreover, *the influence of powerful interest groups and wealthy donors on political parties can pose a serious threat to public reason.* When

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<sup>16</sup> See Suran (2023).

<sup>17</sup> Within the Rawlsian framework, there's a body of literature exploring whether scientific propositions require agreement solely among experts or demand broader citizen consensus beyond intra-scientific agreement. For a comprehensive examination of this issue, see Jønch-Clausen & Kappel (2015). I won't deeply delve into this debate, but my core argument is that, at the very least, partisans shouldn't distort scientific data to align with their preferences. Doing so disrupts the guidelines of inquiry essential for the process of public reason.

political parties rely heavily on funding from these groups, they may feel pressured to prioritize their interests over those of the broader population. Moreover, the involvement of these groups can preclude public discussion, as their financial influence can drown out opposing voices and limit the range of viewpoints that are heard in the public sphere. When political parties succumb to the influence of wealthy donors, particularly during elections, it weakens public reason by undermining the core ideas of free and equal citizens and of society as a fair scheme of cooperation. These foundational ideas are crucial elements of public reason, and their compromise erodes the integrity of the political legitimacy.

Rawls states that public deliberation should be “set free from the curse of money” otherwise politics will be “dominated by corporate and other organized interests who through large contributions to campaigns distort if not preclude public discussion and deliberation” (1997, p. 772).<sup>18</sup> I interpret that this can be part of the reason Rawls argues that public reason should also apply to members of political parties in their political campaigns to win elections (1996, p. 215), as it is when campaigning that parties need and receive more private funds.

Partisans, both when running for office or when in government, should see each citizen as free and equal, and draft or support policies on fundamental matters that guarantee a fair scheme of social cooperation. Public reason entails this reciprocity between free and equal citizens and, it is my interpretation that large donations from corporations or other organized interests to political parties can give some groups or individuals greater access to these platforms than others, leading to a concentration of power and influence that can undermine the status of citizens as equal persons. When wealthy donors have more influence over policy decisions than ordinary citizens, it can lead to policies that favor the interests of the few over the general citizens. This undermines the idea of citizens as equal persons because it gives some people more say in how society is run than others, based solely on their ability to donate money. This can create a situation in which some people are “more equal” than others, harming the grounds of public reason.<sup>19</sup>

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18 Rawls also talks about public funds when it comes to maintaining the fair value of the equal political liberties (1996, pp. 357-8).

19 What I find it crucial to emphasize is that when political parties lack adequate public funding for their electoral campaigns, they heavily rely on private financing, significantly increasing the potential for corruption. Certainly, within a Rawlsian liberal framework, it is the duty of political parties to resist the influence of wealthy donors instead of calling for a complete ban on private funding in politics. However, this form of corruption stands

Moreover, these donations can debilitate the idea of society as a fair scheme of social cooperation because they can create a bias in favour of the interests of the donor, leading to policies that benefit them over the community's shared values. *Fair terms of cooperation* are those that each participant may reasonably accept, even at the cost of their own personal interests, provided that everyone else likewise accepts them (Rawls, 1997, p. 770). In other words, fair terms of cooperation must be reasonably acceptable to all parties involved and should not unduly advantage or disadvantage any particular group. This means that all those "who are engaged in cooperation and who do their part as the rules and procedures require, are to benefit in an appropriate way, as assessed by a suitable benchmark of comparison" and that "the benefits produced by everyone's efforts are fairly distributed" (Rawls, 1996, p. 16). When corporations or other organized interests make large donations to political parties or candidates, it can undermine this idea of fair terms of cooperation and the subsequent criterion of reciprocity. This is because these donations can give the donors undue influence over policy decisions, leading to policies that favor their interests over the interests of other members of society or other shared values, undermining public reason by not showing terms all can reasonably accept.

There are so many alleged cases of illegal and corrupt private funding during electoral periods. For instance, in the follow-up of the Watergate Case, eight major corporations confessed in court to make illegal contributions amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars from company funds to support President Nixon's re-election campaign. They claimed varied interests behind these contributions: to amplify their influence in discussions, to ensure their concerns weren't overlooked in future negotiations related to their businesses, and to mitigate potential adverse consequences from bills or policies that the party might pass, which could impact them negatively.<sup>20</sup> However, it's important to stress that proving a direct exchange of private funding for specific legislative favors can be intricate, often requiring extensive investigations, evidence collection, and legal proceedings. For instance, The Entity for the Accounts and Financing of Political Parties (ECFP) in Portugal faces significant limitations in supervising political party funding. In 2018 it declared that

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as one of the critical ways through which political parties can undermine public reason. Therefore, addressing this possibility is pivotal for any ideal of public reason.

20 See Jensen (1974, Jan 6), documenting the case, or "Nixon Fund Panel Must Face Court" (1973, January 12), also reporting the tribunal case.

procedural sanctions for irregularities in party accounts before 2015 as time-barred, highlighting issues with timely scrutiny.<sup>21</sup> The dependence on private funding for elections, coupled with the lack of oversight in this realm, poses significant threats to public reason. Political parties have the potential to undermine public reason when they engage in this practice. Consequently, any framework of rules or guidelines designed to encourage political parties to foster public reason must address and consider this issue carefully.

Finally, political parties, to dissociate themselves from the rest of the parties, *often promote rigid and inflexible ideologies that are not open to a cooperative dialogue or revision, fostering a groupthink mentality where members are discouraged from considering cooperative or alternative perspectives*, making it difficult to find common ground. It will be normal for political parties to have different interpretations of what constitutes the basic principles of justice, that's why Rawls accepts a reasonable pluralism even on political conceptions of justice. However, to arrive at decisions that are based on a shared understanding of what is reasonable and just, Rawls requires that citizens "are to cooperate politically on a basis of mutual respect" (2001, p. 91). The basic institutions, such as the Legislative power, should encourage cooperative virtues of the political life such as:

the virtues of reasonableness and a sense of fairness, and of a spirit of compromise and a readiness to meet others halfway. These virtues underwrite the willingness if not the desire to cooperate with others on terms that all can publicly accept as fair on a footing of equality and mutual respect (Rawls, 2001, p. 116).

But when political parties are too rigid in their ideology, they can treat other parties' programs as unreasonable (even when they are not), they can only appeal to the righteousness of their views and not to reasonability, leading to a breakdown in respectful dialogue and a tendency to view opponents as enemies rather than as fellow citizens who hold different views. This undermines openness, the willingness to compromise, and to find solutions that are reasonably acceptable to all parties involved. Even though respect and openness in dialogue don't necessarily lead us to an agreement (Rawls, 2001, p. 36), partisans should

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21 See Entidade das Contas e Financiamentos Políticos (2022, Sep 16).

still present these virtues. Moreover, Rawls' public reason requires that citizens be willing to revise their views in light of new evidence or arguments. Public reason, in Rawls' late formulations (1997, p. 772), is the result of a deliberative process where "political opinions may be revised by discussion...these opinions are not simply a fixed outcome." When political parties are unable to have this open dialogue, they can lead to a tendency to hold onto fixed positions even in the face of new evidence or arguments. This can make it harder to arrive at decisions that are based on sound reasoning and evidence, leading to a fragmented public discourse where each party pulls in their own direction, not being willing to revise their views.

One example of a cooperative scheme can be found in the Climate Solution Caucus. In 2019 a group of Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives formed the Climate Solutions Caucus, which aimed to bring Republicans and Democrats together to find solutions to climate change. The caucus was made up of an equal number of Republicans and Democrats and required members to join in pairs. This ensured that each member had a partner from the other party with whom they could work closely and develop a working relationship. These examples show that, despite the differences between political parties, there can be successful efforts to find common ground and work together on important issues. It requires a willingness to engage in open and honest dialogue, to respect the views of others, and to be willing to compromise and find solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved. And although this deliberation is not necessarily about fundamental and constitutional matters, where public reason applies, it can open doors for new values or changes in a constitution and can be an example of the kind of debate we should have on fundamental political issues.

## 4 A synthesis of what public reason should impose on political parties

By identifying the contradictions between the thesis that parties can help public reason, and the antithesis that they can hinder, we can establish, dialectically, a synthesis that allows us to arrive at a new understanding of what drives parties in either direction.

I argue that it is possible to identify an underlying unifying factor that affects political parties' impact on public reason. Specifically, this



factor pertains to the party's focus on either deliberation or aggregation of interests.

I see the *aggregative function* of political parties as their ability to aggregate the interests and preferences of individuals and groups into policy platforms. In this sense, parties can collect the policy preferences of their members and supporters and use that information to develop a comprehensive set of policy proposals that they can offer to the electorate. By doing so, parties help to simplify the political process and provide voters with a clear choice between competing policy alternatives.

The *deliberative function* of political parties, on the other hand, refers to their ability to serve as a forum for deliberation and debate. Parties allow citizens to discuss and shape policy ideas within a broader political community. This function helps to foster democratic participation and engagement and ensures that policies are responsive to the needs and preferences of citizens. By engaging in political discourse and debate, parties can help educate the public on important issues and provide a platform for the expression of diverse viewpoints that should deliberate to arrive at decisions that are in the best interests of all citizens.<sup>22</sup>

However, how to link these two functions was always problematic. Muirhead argued that since “the primary function of parties is to win office rather than to reflect on public questions, parties are potential problems for the deliberative enterprise.” (2010, p. 129). Theorists like Muirhead talk of a paradox between deliberation and aggregation that arises because the two goals can sometimes conflict with each other. We can see that the promotion of faction-like behavior in political parties is motivated by the aggregation of their own sectarian interests, prioritizing and maximizing them over the broader public interest. Similarly, fostering misinformation serves as an aggregative motivation, as parties manipulate information to gain an electoral advantage. Furthermore, presenting a spirit of non-dialogue and non-revision is a clear manifestation of aggregative motivation, as parties prioritize their ideolog-

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22 We delineate multifaceted roles political parties assume within distinct models or perspectives. For instance, White and Ypi (2010) posit that parties serve normative, motivational, and executive functions within a deliberative framework, Biale and Ottonelli (2019) frame them in terms of epistemic, motivational and justificatory functions. All these are important functions, reflected in numerous examples within this article. However, I contend that framing their parties' operations in terms of aggregation versus deliberation offers a pivotal lens for comprehending in a more summarized way the core challenges they confront (the need to mobilize voters vs the need to be loyal to democratic values). It is in understanding how parties can reconcile or oppose these two functions that we glean critical insights into their evolution and their impact on public reason and political legitimacy.

ical purity or the aggregation of their base's interests, disregarding the broader public interest and the virtues of deliberation.

What I want to demonstrate is how political parties' motivations can vary between aggregative and deliberative focuses. Based on this thorough examination of the dynamics exhibited by political parties, it becomes evident that the dynamics that obstruct or hinder public reason are frequently driven by the parties' relentless pursuit of securing additional votes to emerge victorious in elections while leaving aside important deliberative values such as an openness to sincerely listen to the other side, to give transparent information or to present a reasonable and complete political conception of justice.

Consequently, I posit that an ideal of public reason necessitates to emphasize prioritizing thoughtful deliberation over the desire to win office. More precisely, I posit that when parties are confronted with trade-offs between these two different functions, they should prioritize the deliberative virtues necessary for a process of public reasoning and public justification, and they should see their electoral support as a second-order consequence of their ability to uphold the shared political moral values of constitutional democracies. By adopting such measures, we can effectively ensure that political parties make positive contributions to the realm of public reason and actively foster a more deliberative approach to political decision-making.<sup>23</sup>

However, let me make clear that I argue that neither pure aggregation nor pure deliberation is sufficient for arriving at political decisions within a democratic framework. Deliberative democracy requires an element of aggregation, which political parties can help provide. Conversely, aggregative democracy should aspire to a quality deliberation that prioritizes the interpretation and realization of the basic political moral values of society. In contemporary literature, scholars such as Cohen and Manin have emphasized the role of political parties in the deliberative process. Cohen, in his case, argues that independent, publicly funded political parties can contribute to democratic deliberation by providing organizational resources and keeping the focus of political

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23 This synthesis is not intended to be a complete model of an ideal of public reason as it acts more as a binding guiding line any model should follow. For a more complete model see, for instance, Bonotti (2017), where he suggests that political parties are guided to uphold public reason, while ordinary citizens are not required to maintain those duties. Elected partisans are expected to prioritize public reason and engage in robust discussions, ensuring others do the same. Non-elected partisans have more freedom to connect with constituents and address nonpublic concerns. My goal is not to present a comprehensive model or evaluate Bonotti's proposal. Instead, I stress the need for any model to preserve the deliberative virtues of public reason without sacrificing them for electoral support

debate on matters of general concern (1991, pp. 31-2). Similarly, Manin contends that political parties are crucial in overcoming the “bounded” nature of deliberative processes by focusing discussion and debate on a subset of possible solutions to political disagreements (1989, pp. 356-7).

If neither aggregation alone nor deliberation alone is enough, and if they can need to be linked in a balanced way, it means that these functions are not antagonists, where the deliberative function is “the good one” and the aggregative function “the bad one”, but both are actually interdependent. Parties can admit the possibility of better and worse judgment but need to make room for a sincere and genuine deliberative element, and even though they can deliberate, citizens need to understand that the ineradicability of reasonable disagreement needs to include an aggregative component. This interconnectedness may be balanced in a healthy way or not. For instance, to aggregate votes, political parties need to appeal to a broad audience and convince them to support their platform. However, this doesn’t necessarily entail they advocate through shared reasons, they may resort to tactics that are detrimental to public reason, such as turning to emotional and irrational language or engaging in demagoguery to appeal to the masses.

My argument is that, to reconcile these functions, make them work together in a way that is loyal to democracy, and promote public reason, parties must prioritize the quality of deliberation in their decision-making processes when trade-offs are present. Ultimately what I’m stating is that parties have a responsibility to ensure that their methods of aggregating votes do not come at the expense of public reason. While aggregative functions, such as campaigning to a broader audience, may be necessary for successful vote aggregation, they also run the risk of undermining public reason if, by doing so, they promote polarization or misleading messages. It is essential to consider the potential negative consequences of privileging one function over the other. Political obligations must be crafted to ensure that the parties’ deliberative and aggregative functions operate in a manner that is compatible with public reason. This requires an understanding of the complex trade-offs between the benefits of reaching a broader audience and the risks of promoting a message that may be incompatible with public reason.

Political parties should prioritize virtuous, transparent, informed, and reasonable deliberation over mere aggregation of votes through dynamics that hinder public reason. This implies that the aggregation of votes, while important for party success, should be regarded as a second-

ary outcome. The primary focus must be on unwavering commitment to democratic principles and upholding public justification. Political parties have a broader role beyond electoral victories, as they represent and advocate for citizens' interests, propose reasonable conceptions of justice, and help translate comprehensive doctrines into public values, thus ensuring the overlapping consensus. By prioritizing public justification, parties prioritize the collective welfare and broader public interest over short-term electoral gains. They engage with citizens, foster meaningful dialogue, and transparently justify their policy proposals. This approach ensures that their actions are grounded in democratic ideals and contribute to a healthy democracy. While vote aggregation remains important, it should be seen as a byproduct of parties' commitment to democratic principles and public justification.

The real challenge lies in figuring out how to encourage this kind of approach within political parties. One way to do this is by starting with discussions within the party itself.<sup>24</sup> It seems logical that it would be easier for parties to have meaningful discussions and exchanges of ideas, that comply with public justification demands, within their group before branching out to engage with other parties. This step-by-step approach, beginning with internal discussions and then moving towards larger interparty dialogues, seems like a promising way to encourage better and more inclusive deliberation in politics. Biale and Ottonelli (2019) conceptualize “reflexive control” as the capacity of citizens to consciously and deliberately regulate or modify their behavior, decisions, or processes based on careful consideration, analysis, and self-awareness. They apply this concept to intraparty deliberation, defining it as depending on both the capacity of partisans to have a critical understanding of the “main reasons that constitute the basis of democratic decisions” and “a similar understanding in their fellow citizens” (2019, p. 506), presenting thus an intellectual and an affective dimension where they can think critically of their own decisions but also engage in a type of exchanging of reasons between them, validating the reasoning of others. This concept closely aligns with Rawls' latest notion of public reason, which extends beyond the mere quality of

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24 We can talk about intra-party deliberation, which involves discussions and decision-making within a single political party, such as when party members debate on their electoral program or internal policies. On the other hand, we can also have inter-party deliberation which refers to conversations and negotiations between different political parties, like when multiple parties discuss some bill in parliament or engage in discussions to form a coalition government.

the reasons presented and emphasizes the significance of active debate, acknowledging the perspectives of the participants involved. Hence, within intra-party deliberations, as partisans engage in this process of critical and reflective thinking among themselves, it lays the groundwork for justifying the party's objectives with reasonably acceptable arguments, challenging varying interpretations of policies with transparency and an open-minded approach. Essentially, when parties foster such an environment among their members, they cultivate a culture of public justification. This culture equips them not only to engage in this manner within their own party but also facilitates similar constructive exchanges with other political entities or parties where they may feel more encouraged to prioritize thoughtful deliberation. Of course, other issues are also relevant: the way the electoral system is set up (Bonotti, 2017, pp. 143-149), the way parties socialize their members and affective polarization (Chapman, 2021, pp. 395-6), or even the way we conceptualize the idea of democratic representation, often hinging on the varying roles assigned to elected partisans in the decision-making process, delineating distinct relationships with citizens (Mansbridge, 2003). Trying to frame these issues in connection with the delicate balance between deliberation and aggregation, and finding a healthy trade-off between these two aspects, is one of the essential ways to think about all the complex nuances of our democratic systems.

## 5 Conclusion

This article examined the role of political parties, as representatives of citizens, and their worldviews within the realm of public reason. Drawing on John Rawls' political liberalism, the thesis argues that political parties play a crucial role in democratic societies by engaging in partisan contestation within the boundaries of public reason. Parties should, at the very minimum, translate comprehensive doctrines into public values and represent reasonable political conceptions of justice, grounded in shared political values. This approach fosters a dynamic exchange of ideas and respects the liberal principle of legitimacy within a constitutional liberal and democratic framework. However, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that recognizes both the theoretical significance and practical complexities of political parties, the article also highlights the empirical dynamics we see in current liberal

democracies that undermine public reason, such as faction-like behavior, promoting illiberal values, spreading misinformation, prioritizing private interests, or engaging in non-dialogue and non-revision.

I contend that, in the context of trade-offs, parties ought to prioritize deliberative values and processes that promote Rawls' principle of legitimacy and justifiability as their primary focus. The aggregation of votes necessary for their success should be regarded as a secondary outcome resulting from their commitment to democratic principles and their ability to uphold public justification. Any ideal, set of duties or guidelines for a Rawlsian model of public reason, to be effective, while maintaining its aspirations, needs to relate to political parties' deliberative and aggregational functions.

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