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POWER INVERSION DEMOCRACY

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17.1 One Person, One Vote

Electoral democracy is often defended as the political system that does best at respecting and instantiating important political values relating to equality, freedom, and self-government. There is a long history of debate concerning the conceptual contours, relative importance, and moral foundations of these values. One basic principle that can seem to encapsulate them: *one person, one vote* (every person gets a vote, every vote counts equally).

Here is a story about what makes that principle so attractive. The story begins with the idea that, because of the kind of creatures that we are, everyone is entitled to equal basic respect, and to equal consideration of our interests. It also begins with the idea that, for each of us, our proper condition is freedom – the ability to act, live, believe, and associate as we prefer, at least in so far as doing so is compatible with the freedom of others. One way of respecting freedom would be simply to have ‘each of us go our own way’. I stay out of your way; you stay out of mine. But we are social creatures. We need and want to interact with each other, working on beneficial group projects, and responding more effectively to common threats than we could on our own. But we don’t always agree on what to do. Given our disagreements, we could go our separate ways. Or we might require everyone to agree before doing anything, although that imperils our ability to do anything, if we can’t come to an agreement. In either case, reasons to work together remain.

Someone makes a suggestion: let's vote, with each vote counting equally! This confers equal respect; it respects equal consideration of each of our interests; and it gives us power in directing what we do – but only as much as is compatible with everyone having an equal amount of power. This avoids hierarchy and domination, where some of us are subordinate to others. With each person getting one vote, and with each vote counting equally, no one has more power than anyone else. This allows us significant freedom, too, particularly if we factor in the way in which working together, if we can manage it, can enhance everyone's freedom, as we fend off various threats to our liberty (including from each other). It allows us to work with each other, as equals, even through conditions of disagreement.

This is a common justificatory story about electoral democracy.

17.2 Familiar Departures from One Person, One Vote

Now, electoral democracy has required two significant modifications. The first is required because people being what we are, a majority of us might, each with our own equally counted vote, decide to restrict the rights or freedoms of a minority of us. We might take away core rights of a minority – the right to speak, assemble, travel, work, love, or vote – that would quickly alter the nice story told above, inscribing hierarchy and domination on the lives of the political losers, even while doing so via 'democratic' means. This concern might be met in different ways.

One response is to constitutionalize specific democratic commitments and rights, making it illegal or impossible to infringe those rights, so as to improve the chances of the system doing well by equality and freedom dynamically (over time) and pervasively (for all of us). Limiting what a democratic majority can do might require more than mere 'parchment barriers', and so constitutions have often been given additional strength by being protected by a constitutional court empowered with the ability to overturn democratically enacted legislation that infringes on specific constitutional rights. This introduces a distinct worry for our story, of course, as we might worry about this extra power accorded to members of the constitutional court. We might also ask ourselves what it is about them, or about the method by which they are selected, that makes likely their acting to protect the minority against the majority in the way required. Let us leave aside these concerns for the moment.

The second modification is required as the political community grows beyond the local village, small town, or sparsely populated countryside, and into large million-person polities, with corresponding intricate, complex, global problems that require extensive knowledge, time, and

engagement to address even minimally competently. If we each are asked to cast a vote – with all votes counted equally – on every political issue and piece of legislation, we should expect ignorance to pervade and disaster to result. Eventually, our inability to respond competently to the political problems that we face will erode equality (as some among us become powerful and unregulated in our dealings with others) and freedom (as our unsolved political problems impair and constrain our ability to live the lives that we would like to live). The response here is so old and familiar as to almost escape notice: move from voting directly on policy, to voting to elect some members of the political community to be our representatives. But notice how large a departure this is from *one person, one vote*. Now some members of our political community – the members of the legislature, the elected officials – have tremendously more power than others do. And most of us will have no vote at all on almost all large political decisions. We tolerate this, seeing it as compatible with equality and freedom, because, although we don't have a vote on the decisions, we do have an equal vote on the people who are going to make the decisions. But this is a fundamental transformation that should be recognized as such.

Notice that both modifications can be justified on grounds of equality and freedom – if we are concerned with those in a dynamic way. Constitutionalism is required to make sure that a majority of us don't use our equal power – combined with our greater numbers – to curtail the freedom and equal power of a minority. Representatives are required (it is suggested) to improve the chances that our democratic decisions are of high enough quality – responding sensibly to the problems that we face – to support our freedom and equality over time. Both modifications also have justifications that depart from equality and freedom. Constitutionalism also limits what a majority can do even to itself, on the ground that a majority can be in the grip of a bad idea and should be protected (like Ulysses from the Sirens) from pursuing it. Representatives are justified on epistemic grounds, suggesting that voter ignorance, combined with lack of time and attention, would make direct democracy, with all of us voting on everything, a series of bad choices bringing us to ruin.

There is a third departure from *one person, one vote* that is less ubiquitous but still common. Many systems are structured so that there are subunits – counties, provinces, states – that together constitute a national or federal polity. So, two senators are elected from Vermont, to represent Vermonters, and two senators are elected from California, to represent Californians. But there are 650,000 people in Vermont. There are 40,223,500 people in California. Given rules that equalize the number of senators to a national assembly (the US Senate), and that have each senator's vote counting equally in the legislature, we are left with another

inequality. Although a Vermonter and a Californian each gets to vote for only two senators, the electoral power of that vote is greatly diminished for the Californian, as there are many millions of other people also voting, diluting the power and value of one's individual vote in determining who the winner is likely to be or how one's vote affects the margins of support. Giving each political subunit equal national representation, regardless of population, is generally justified on the grounds of community freedom, focusing on the distinctive political communities that comprise the federation and the need for those communities to have their perspectives reflected equally in order to better preserve their local autonomy. But federalism principles of this kind are another departure from *one person, one vote*.

17.3 Unequal Power

I want to consider another departure from *one person, one vote*. The concern that motivates this departure begins, again, with equality. Sometimes people say that only with electoral democracy does everyone have equal political power. When they say things like that, they are thinking about *one person, one vote*, and the equal formal political power that it confers. But, as just discussed, we know that not everyone has equal political power. Justices and representatives have much more political power than the rest of us. We can tell a story in which we all play a role in handing them power, and so in that sense we all have equal power, but it is not a very convincing story. The more plausible story is that sometimes we are willing to tolerate significant differences in political power, because of the moral justification undergirding those differences in power. Not: there is no difference in political power.¹

But notice something else. Although we all have a vote, and all the votes count equally, there is still a remarkable variation in political power – even leaving aside Supreme Court justices and elected representatives. That is because political power extends far beyond the one highly specific moment at which we cast a ballot.

Consider political action – all the action taken by political and legal institutions, things like enacting legislation, issuing regulations, funding programs and projects, enforcing the law against particular individuals, and so on. Think, too, of political omissions as political action – legislation not passed, regulations not issued or enforced, projects not supported. We can then think of political power more expansively as the power to influence (causally) the direction, extent, timing, and substance of political action. Obviously, our justices, representatives, presidents, prime ministers, and others will have much more political power than an ordinary solitary voter does. If we think of the State as a ship to be steered, these few individuals

are the captain and crew, charting the course, making subtle and large choices about speed and direction, calling out instructions, stoking the fire, and in some cases getting a turn at the wheel. Many of the rest of us are just specks of dust on the deck, along for the ride.

But we must be careful here. Even beyond the ranks of judges and legislators, there are many others with significant political power and influence. This power operates on two interconnected channels. One is the power to affect political officials in power directly – who they are, what they believe, what incentives they are aware of and subject to. Who is supporting and influencing the captain and crew? Why do they do what they do? The second channel is the power to affect people in the political community (and thus to affect those in power indirectly) – what the members of the community believe and attend to, what they support, what they are worried about, what they have and lack, what they are willing to work toward or against, what they will accept and tolerate, and so on. These are the people who can affect the amount of wind in the sails or fuel in the furnaces, the quality and condition of the ship's hull, the content of the maps, and the accuracy of the compasses and gauges being consulted. Where the ship is going, how fast it travels, whether it is likely to reach any port at all – all are affected by more than just what is going on with the captain and crew.

Once we think of this more expansive political power and influence, we can see that electoral democracy includes far more inequality of political power than just whatever is tolerated in the use of justices and elected officials. We might offer taxonomies of the different dimensions of this power. Here are three that are significant and distinct, even if not always unconnected to each other.

Economic power – the ability to support political causes financially, to attach significant financial incentives and disincentives to various choices (inside and outside of political institutions); most basically, to be able to get people to do things by using one's money and other financial resources.

Social power – the ability to influence people to get them to do things or believe things on the basis of one's social position or social skill.

Epistemic power – the ability to influence what people believe and learn about (on ostensibly epistemic grounds), what evidence is available on a topic, and who is credited as a source of knowledge and epistemically valuable testimony.

When we notice the role that these kinds of power have as mechanisms of political power, it is easy to see that people are not all equally politically

powerful. Many of these more powerful people are known to us and are the frequent targets of complaint: paid lobbyists and the wealthy individuals and industries bankrolling them and funding political parties and political action committees; transnational mega-corporations and their leadership; media conglomerates and a wide array of television stars, social media ‘influencers’, and other celebrities. But we should think here also of community, civic, and religious leaders; professors and public intellectuals; doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists, and other professionals; and so on. Their degrees of power differential can vary widely. The local school district superintendent might have more power than the cook at the town diner. But both are, of course, radically less powerful than Bill Gates, Kylie Jenner, Rupert Murdoch, Elon Musk, Oprah Winfrey, or Jeff Bezos. Beyond these celebrity-level elites, there are many others whose names we don’t know, but whose wealth, occupations, education, and/or social position provide them with significantly more ability to exert political influence than others have. Many of those who have this ability do exert this kind of influence, by donating money and publicity; engaging in lobbying and political organizing; making decisions about what to teach, preach, report on; making decisions about how to run their businesses, which clients to take on, which people to hire and promote; determining whether to speak and what to speak about when communicating to significant audiences via social media; and so on.

The inequality of political power in these senses is familiar, even if it often goes unattended to by those extolling the egalitarian virtues of electoral democracy or the importance of *one person, one vote*. For many of these discussions, the focus is narrowly on the equality of political power that we have in the narrowly formal moment of voting. We see principles such as the following being defended.

EQUAL SAY (FORMAL). A political system does well by political equality to the extent that each person in a political jurisdiction is given an equal say in the selection of those individuals who will run the political institutions, where that is understood precisely as an equally counted vote in a free and fair election.²

But, of course, this conception of political equality is a massive downward departure from actual political equality as captured by a principle like this.

EQUAL POWER. A political system does well by political equality to the extent that each person in the political jurisdiction has equal power to determine what political actions will be taken by that political institution.³

EQUAL SAY (FORMAL) has the use of political representatives built into it, and it says nothing about having equal political influence either in the ‘non-formal’ elements of the selection of those representatives or in affecting what actions will actually be taken by the political institutions.

There are two common thoughts in response to noticing this gap. First, one might think that EQUAL SAY (FORMAL) is close to the best that we can realistically do in terms of political equality. Second, one might think that there is nothing wrong with *one person, one vote*, or with a political system that operates on that principle; the problem is in the surrounding social, economic, and epistemic inequality in our society. These thoughts are related. If our society suffers from dramatic inequality, no political system imposed on top of it will be free from the effects of that background socioeconomic inequality. This provides a powerful reason to address that background inequality; it provides a reason to mitigate some of those effects in the form of campaign finance reform of various kinds; but, the suggestion continues, it does not provide a reason to alter the basic structure of electoral democracy. I disagree.⁴

17.4 Power Inversion Democracy

A political system could be designed to do much better with respect to political equality and to come much closer to satisfying EQUAL POWER. Elsewhere (2014, forthcoming), I consider restructuring our political systems so that political representatives are chosen by lottery rather than election. I suggest that doing so would do better from a perspective of political equality (among other things), in part due to the inegalitarian situation described in the previous section, and the way in which eliminating elections would help to screen off some of the effects of background inequality.

Here, I want to consider a different, significant but somewhat more modest, alteration to the basic structure of electoral democracy. I see this alteration as more in the vicinity of the addition of constitutional limitations, the use of representatives and the rejection of direct democracy, and the embrace of effectively inegalitarian federalism principles. The basic idea is simple in outline. There are two parts. First, create a power ranking, according to which all members of the political community are given a power score that reflects their economic, social, and epistemic power. Second, apportion individual vote strength inversely with an individual’s power score. Call this *power inversion democracy*. The rest of this chapter will consider ways in which power inversion democracy might be implemented, along with arguments for and against it.

17.5 Power Inversion Democracy: The Details

The many ways in which power inversion democracy might be implemented correspond with, among other things, different ways of generating a power score, and different ways of apportioning vote strength inversely with that power score. We can distinguish between at least two broad families of methods for generating a power score: (1) fine-grained methods, using many detailed metrics and precise increments; and (2) coarse-grained methods, using a few broad categories and clusters.

On fine-grained methods, we try to identify many key markers or correlates of power, and then to track those in detail for individuals. So, for each individual, we might focus attention on employment and investment income, the total market value of all assets owned, credit scores, debt, neighborhood property values, months spent on unemployment in the past year, years of formal education, degrees earned, the ranking and endowment of the educational institutions from which they have degrees, social media accounts and followers on those accounts, peer-reviewed articles and books published, hours spent in membership and leadership roles in religious, political, educational, and media institutions and organizations, professional licenses and memberships in professional organizations, and so on.

On coarse-grained methods, we use a few markers or correlates of power, focusing on broader categories. So, we might focus on whether a person's income is above \$50,000/\$500,000/\$5 million; whether their personal wealth is above \$100,000, \$1 million, or \$50 million; which occupational category (if any) a person is in; whether they have a college degree, graduate degree; and so on.

For both kinds of methods, we need some way of taking each of these inputs and weighting them so that they can be combined into a standardized power score. In deciding what things to include in the score, and how to weigh those items, we could do better than my armchair lists, aiming for the power score to be informed by social scientific investigation regarding influence in political life. Trying to study and measure this kind of influence is not easy. But this is already a substantial topic in fields like political science and sociology.⁵ For both methods, there would be a question of how often to recalculate individual power scores – every year, every three years, etc.

Fine-grained methods are more costly – in terms of the effort required to gather and organize the information, and in terms of potential privacy invasion. But they are also potentially more accurate at capturing the details of power differentials within a community. Coarse-grained methods are easier to implement, but also less accurate, potentially missing out on important nuances in power differentials. If we try to build the relevant power score by using information from social science, we might learn that there isn't a large

difference between these methods, or it might help to guide us in choosing a few broad categories that correlate well with differential political influence. We could end up having the power score tied to the income and wealth that are already reported to the government for taxation purposes.

I won't try to settle what the best approach would be, which inputs should be included in the score, or how those inputs should be weighted. Those decisions should be made specific to a particular political context, informed by empirical work. I hope to have said enough to suggest roughly how this might be done.

Once a method to generate a power score is in place, there are questions of how to alter vote power in response to that score. One simple option would be to normalize the power scores over a political community so that everyone falls on a 1–100 point scale (lining everyone up in order of the power score and then partitioning the community into 100 equally sized groups), and then to invert the vote power, so that those with a power score of 100 get a vote with 1 unit of strength, while those with a power score of 1 get a vote with 100 units of strength. Other options are available. Power scores and vote power need not be put into an inverse *linear* relationship. The size of the scales could be made smaller than 100 or greater than 100, resulting either in a smaller or a larger 'correction' for differential power. These choices should be affected by the size of the political community (in terms of eligible voters); and the contours of the inequality that exists in the community (are most people within a relatively modest range in terms of their non-adjusted power score? is there an ultra-elite .001% of the community that wields a massively disproportionate amount of power? etc.); other mechanisms for redress of inequality; and so on.

For simplicity, imagine a political community roughly like the United States, with one hundred million eligible voters. Line up those one hundred million eligible voters, based on their fine-grained power scores. Divide those power score-ordered one hundred million people into 100 groups, each of 1,000,000 people, so that each of the most powerful 1,000,000 people gets a vote of strength 1, each of the next most powerful 1,000,000 people gets a vote of strength 2 ... all the way to the least powerful 1,000,000 people, each of whom gets a vote of strength 100. Representing just the extremes and the middle, we get this array.

<i>#Eligible Voters</i>	<i>Power Score</i>	<i>Vote Strength</i>
1,000,000	100	1
1,000,000	99	2
1,000,000	50	50
1,000,000	2	99
1,000,000	1	100

On this model, the bottom 1,000,000 people would have a combined vote strength of 100,000,000 points, which is roughly equal to the combined vote strength of the top 14,100,000 people. With this basic model of power inversion democracy in view, let us now consider some arguments in favor of it.

17.6 Equal Power Arguments for Power Inversion Democracy

Here is a short argument. Political equality in the sense of equal political power is morally significant – either a necessary condition of political legitimacy or an important moral consideration in the choice of political systems. In electoral democracies, informal power to influence political outcomes can vary significantly. This variance undermines equality of political power. Power inversion democracy counterbalances differences in informal power with differences in formal power. Therefore, power inversion democracy does better by political equality than *one person, one vote* systems, which provides a moral consideration in favor of it.

This argument begins with the idea that political equality is important and suggests that it requires something like EQUAL POWER. If doing well by political equality is morally significant, and if that requires doing well by a condition like EQUAL POWER, then power inversion democracy does better with respect to this morally significant thing.

A natural response is to point out that although power inversion democracy does better at political equality in one sense – equalizing actual political power – it is worse with respect to political equality in another sense – providing all with equal formal political power. This response can suggest that we appear to be at an impasse here, and it is not clear which is better, even in terms of political equality. I think that is a mistake, even if it is natural to feel an initial ‘ick’ reaction when encountering such an explicit departure from *one person, one vote*. Seeing why it is a mistake requires thinking more about why political equality does and should matter to us. I want to suggest that there are at least three distinct reasons why political equality matters: expression of equal respect, avoidance of unequal hierarchy, and equal consideration of interests. These reasons give rise to three distinct arguments.

17.7 The Expressive Egalitarianism Argument

Let us begin with expressive egalitarianism. One worry about departures from *one person, one vote* is that they might reflect or express a view that some are better than others, that some are more deserving of power over others, and that this constitutes an ‘invidious comparison’ that provides a *pro tanto* moral reason against such a system.⁶ An initial question asks

whether this worry also applies to the election of representatives. Surely some comparisons are being made, and it is suggested that the fact that the person has more electoral support is justification for their having power over others. But that doesn't seem like an invidious comparison. This suggests that the concern about expressive inequality is really about expressing the idea that some might be intrinsically more deserving of power than others are.

Once framed in that way, it is evident that power inversion democracy involves no expression of disrespect toward anyone, nor any invidious comparison or suggestion that some members of the political community deserve to have more power. Indeed, power inversion democracy reveals and expresses a stronger commitment to preventing some from ruling over others, aiming to equalize political power, and shifting formal political power as is necessary in order to do this. Another way in which it is evident that power inversion democracy does not involve expression of unequal respect is that, for any member of the political community, if their power score were to change then that person would also see a corresponding change in their voting power. And that is true for all of us, equally. So, the expressive egalitarian argument is at least neutral between power inversion democracy and systems that employ formal equality in the form of *one person, one vote*.

17.8 The Anti-Hierarchy Argument

This brings us to an argument in favor of power inversion democracy, related to the anti-hierarchy dimension of political equality. Recall that electoral democracy – and *one person, one vote* rules, in particular – was supposed to be a way in which we might work together, but without any of us coming to dominate or have asymmetrical power over the others. Arguably, since electoral democracy does not address background inequality of economic, social, and epistemic power – even with *one person, one vote* rules – it is not serving this end. Instead of being a mechanism for equalizing power and preventing hierarchy, it serves to obscure, legitimate, and reinforce hierarchy. The most powerful members of society can use their disproportionate ability to influence elections and elected officials as a means of inscribing their will on the political community, enacting laws that benefit their interests, and barring or undermining regulations that would thwart them, even if those regulations would greatly benefit the broader community. At the same time, those powerful members of society can divert resources away from the serious problems that afflict the least powerful – if doing so is in their own narrow interests. And it often *is* in their interests, since keeping people in subordinate positions, in or near

precarity, helps to create conditions of dependency and vulnerability, and makes people easier to exploit. Doing so also makes it harder for people to organize and to take advantage of their greater numbers to mobilize against the most powerful. This means that, contrary to what is often asserted, electoral democracy with *one person, one vote* rules does not prevent some from ‘ruling over’ others.⁷

By contrast, power inversion democracy confers significant differential formal political power to the least powerful, making it possible for them to use political institutions to blunt, mitigate, and potentially overcome these effects of background economic, social, and epistemic inequality. Those seeking election will have to spend considerably more time and effort in considering the problems of the least powerful and in thinking about what might actually improve their situation. Those who can deliver consistent improvements in the situation for the least powerful are likely to do well electorally, even if they largely ignore elite interests and preferences. When considering the question of equality in the sense of non-hierarchy and avoidance of domination and subordination, there is a strong case for power inversion democracy, at least under conditions of significant background socioeconomic inequality. We should want our political system to help us to lessen and even eliminate domination and hierarchy. Power inversion democracy does that better than *one person, one vote* democracy does.

17.9 The Equal Consideration Argument

A distinct suggestion is that political systems should be designed so that equal consideration is given to the interests of all members of the political community. Exactly what this requires is usually left underspecified. Equal ‘consideration’ conjures an image of politicians pausing to think (for an equal amount of time) about each member of the political community and how their interests might be affected by a political choice. But that’s not quite what is intended. Instead, it is something like this: in the complex calculus that is to result in political action, equal *weight* is given to the interests of each member of the political community. For any system, we might ask what mechanisms are in place to ensure this result. In standard electoral representative democratic systems, we might think that *one person, one vote* is the relevant mechanism. Elected officials will give each person’s interests equal weight in thinking about what to do because they care equally about getting each person’s support. But, for the reasons elucidated earlier, elected officials don’t care equally about getting each person’s support. If they get the support of a few – those with more economic, social, and epistemic power – they can use that support to ensure

electoral victory, by using that support to obtain the necessary votes (often through deception, misdirection, manipulation, and exploitation). Doing that might require *pretending* to care equally about the interests of everyone, but that is not the same thing. The interests of the powerful get more consideration than the interests of everyone else, and much more consideration than the interests of the least powerful.

This is a particularly bad result, given the reason for having political institutions in the first place. The most powerful members of our society have little need for much of what political institutions can provide. They can buy or otherwise obtain what they need and can insulate themselves from many of the most significant hardships concerning basic material needs like health, housing, clothing, food, water, education, transportation, recreation, and things like child care, safety, and personal protection. They do not need a state-provided social safety net. The least powerful, who are usually also the materially worst-off members of society, would greatly benefit from having political institutions that help provide stable access to these basic goods. When people extol the importance of ‘equal consideration of interests’, this should not be understood to mean that all people’s interests count equally, so that someone’s interest in a \$500 bottle of wine and a nice golf course count equally with another’s interest in affordable healthcare and lead-free drinking water. Instead, it should be understood to treat morally equivalent interests with equal consideration, so that your interest in housing, healthcare, and food is counted equally with my interest in housing, healthcare, and food. Given this picture of equal consideration of interests, it seems plausible that power inversion democracy comes much closer to securing genuine equal consideration of interests – rather than the distorted consideration of interests that one gets by ignoring inequality of informal political power.

17.10 An Instrumental Argument for Power Inversion Democracy

The arguments so far have focused on considerations that relate to equality. But there are other arguments in favor of power inversion democracy.

One suggested by the previous discussion focuses on the instrumental outcome-related benefits of power inversion democracy. By redirecting the attention of political representatives toward the concerns of the least powerful, we should expect improvements over time in what the political system delivers to those most in need. And those are the people for whom political action has the most marginal benefit, for whom political action is most likely to significantly improve their welfare. We should expect instrumental improvements both in simple utilitarian terms (given diminishing marginal utility) and in prioritarian terms. Think of what pandering might

come to look like. Rather than political representatives hobnobbing with the ‘fat cats’ of industry, securing them ever more advantages, they will be paying attention to the most disadvantaged members of society, trying to figure out what those people’s problems are and to redirect resources toward them. Political representatives would have much stronger incentives than they presently do not to look out just for the interests of the elite, and, as a result, it would make it more expensive for the elite to ‘buy off’ political representatives.

A reply to this suggestion, and a potential objection to power inversion democracy, might run as follows. If the worst-off have considerably more political power, this would not be instrumentally good, as the least powerful are also (often) the least well-educated, the most ignorant about politics, etc. Some are skeptical of even *one person, one vote* electoral democracy on these grounds.⁸ How much worse would power inversion democracy be? Here are three responses.

First, we should be wary of the quick equation of formal education (knowledge of economics, statistics, political systems, etc.) with the ability to identify problems and sensible responses to them. The least powerful might not have detailed ideas about what should be done in order to improve access to healthcare, housing, education, and so on (although they might), but they might be well-positioned to notice how various representatives or political parties are faring at improving those things over time. Drawing on the work of Sandra Harding (1993), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and others, we might invoke forms of standpoint theory in order to note that what one is able to notice and explain may be partly a function of one’s social position. The knowledge possessed need not be social scientific knowledge regarding the full complex structural causes of oppression and inequality. The knowledge might be more microscale, concerning how people are likely to behave under various circumstances, what obstacles might exist to limit a policy’s effectiveness, and so on. This might leave the least powerful in a somewhat better epistemic position with respect to issues that predominantly affect them.

Second, the current system dramatically privileges those with the most power, and those individuals have their own biases, affecting what they believe, know, and are inclined to care about. Citizens who demonstrate more knowledge of politics and information ostensibly relevant to political judgment are also more partisan, more closed-minded, more prone to engaging in motivated reasoning, and in these ways less rational.⁹ Charles Mills (2007) discusses ways in which ‘whiteness’ can be associated with systematic misperception, due to cultivated ‘white ignorance’ about many things, including historical facts about race and discrimination and injustice and oppression. These epistemic pathologies might not only afflict the

powerful, but there is reason to expect them to be particularly concentrated as one moves up the social pyramid.

Third, whatever the epistemic situation of the least powerful is at present, we should expect power inversion democracy to alter both the political education and political engagement of the least powerful, as – for the first time – those with an interest in political office would have a significant incentive to engage the least powerful through debates, advertising and outreach, campaign platforms that resonate with the concerns of the least powerful, etc. This might also motivate a considerable improvement in the quality of all institutions of public education – not just those primarily serving the relatively privileged. I have some optimism that this would result in steering the political ship in a better direction – better in terms of improving the welfare of the political community, and particularly that of the worst-off members of the political community.

17.11 A Fairness Argument for Power Inversion Democracy

A distinct argument in favor of power inversion democracy focuses on fairness, as supported by ‘veil of ignorance’ arguments. Imagine, for example, that you were behind a Rawlsian veil of ignorance, so that you didn’t know anything about your socioeconomic position, education, occupation, and so on, and that you were asked to choose the basic political structure. In such a position, would you prefer power inversion democracy, or *one person, one vote* democracy? It seems plausible that most people would prefer power inversion democracy. Why? Well, consider the different social positions and societies that one might be in.

Imagine, first, a society like ours (and like most) in which there is dramatic inequality in terms of background economic, social, and epistemic power. One might end up either at the top or at the bottom. If one is in a relatively powerful and advantaged social position, one doesn’t need political institutions to do all that much to address one’s needs. But if one is at or near the bottom in terms of power and influence, then having some mechanism – such as power inversion democracy – by which to address one’s urgent needs and improve one’s situation would seem highly preferable. One might be fortunate enough to be in a society in which economic, social, and epistemic power is roughly equal. In that case, if everyone had a similar power score, power inversion democracy would be very similar to, and perhaps identical to, *one person, one vote* democracy, providing no reason to opt for *one person, one vote* systems from behind a veil of ignorance. (This makes evident the importance of calibrating power scores so that they are responsive to how much actual inequality of power is present in a political community.)

Arguments of this form, noticing what we would prefer if we did not know our particular social position, encourage us to consider the perspective of the least powerful, and perhaps to help nudge us out of biases stemming from our own relatively advantaged social position.

17.12 Conclusion

Power inversion democracy takes seriously the idea that political systems should be designed to help prevent domination and hierarchy, that political systems should be designed to address the most pressing human needs of all members of the political community, and that doing these things effectively requires taking seriously background inequalities of power and influence. We should be wary of political systems that serve to obscure, legitimate, and reinforce hierarchy, and that consistently fail to address the most pressing human needs of the worst-off members of the political community. In many modern political communities, *one person, one vote* democracy has failed on all these counts. Perhaps it is time to consider alternatives.

Notes

- 1 For an attempt to tell a story somewhere in between these two, see Lovett (2021).
- 2 One can find various statements along these lines, such as from Christiano (1996: 233): ‘In order to elect a legislator on an equal basis, it is sufficient that each citizen have an equal vote’. Charles Beitz (1989: 133) suggests that what matters is that each citizen have a vote that is equal to everyone else’s, which enables each citizen to overcome as much resistance (in the form of other people’s votes) as any other citizen in the voting process.
- 3 Harry Brighouse’s excellent underappreciated paper ‘Egalitarianism and Equal Availability of Political Influence’ (1996) argues for what he calls ‘equal availability of political influence’. His work is the most sympathetic to concerns about unequal influence that I have encountered, although the institutional reforms that I will consider go beyond anything he discusses.
- 4 There is a third thought: EQUAL POWER is implausible, because even after we have addressed economic inequality and some forms of inequality in social and epistemic power, we might still expect significant differences in how much influence citizens are able to exert. If we allow people to interact with each other, as it seems like we must for it to be an open and free democratic choice, we should expect inequality of influence because of differences in quality of ideas and argument. For many egalitarians, inequality of political power is permissible if ‘no force but that of the better argument is exercised’, in Habermas’s (1975: 108) slogan. I leave aside these difficult issues about exactly how deep equality must go, as we are very far from the situation in which the only kind of unequal influence that remains is that which is attached to the quality of argument on offer.
- 5 See Gilens (2012).
- 6 Estlund (2008) introduces the ‘invidious comparison’ language.
- 7 See Kolodny (2014a, 2014b).
- 8 See Brennan (2016).
- 9 See, e.g., Lodge and Taber (2013).

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