questions, because they give me the opportunity to clarify some important issues. The first question concerns the role of judicial review within my participatory conception of deliberative democracy. The structure of the book, culminating as it does with a discussion of judicial review may, against my own intentions, be misleading. I definitively do not recommend that we entrust constitutional courts alone with doing the “heavy lifting” of ensuring that principled reasons for laws and policies are advanced in the public sphere. I agree with Wolkenstein that other sites and political actors—not only political parties and social movements but, of course, also parliaments, civil society organizations, the media, and the citizenry as a whole—play an essential role in ensuring that questions about fundamental rights are put on the political agenda and made sufficiently salient to generate and maintain political debate in the public sphere. The point of showing the democratic significance of the institution of judicial review is not to elevate legal contestation to a special status in the exercise of self-government. This is not because I think that some other exercise of political rights (e.g., voting) is more special. Rather, it is because no single exercise of political rights can have genuine democratic significance in the absence of all the others. In the absence of a mobilized civil society and a receptive public sphere, legal contestation would hardly have any democratic effect at all. Conversely, voting in the absence of effective opportunities for political and legal contestation would hardly count as an exercise in self-government for persistent minorities. These are just two examples. However, the idea of mutual reinforcement holds for all opportunities, venues, and sites of political participation.

This leads me to Wolkenstein’s second concern, namely, the lack of explicit attention to more “conventional” democratic agents like movements and parties. In the book I endorse Habermas’s feedback loop model of political participation. In this model political parties play a unique mediating role between the citizenry and the state. Along with social movements, nongovernmental organizations, the media, and other political actors, parties also contribute to the generation of considered public opinion—which is the ultimate source of legitimacy of political decisions. Following this model, my participatory conception of deliberative democracy requires these actors and forums to aim at generating considered public opinion, rather than influencing the political system through shortcuts that bypass citizens’ deliberation in the public sphere. It is true that I do not analyze political parties in the book. But this is not because I do not consider them essential contributors to democratic self-government. It is because properly addressing the problems they currently face goes beyond the scope of the book. In my view, there is a mismatch between the national level at which political parties operate and the transnational and global nature of the problems that need to be addressed to protect the fundamental rights and interests of citizens. Whereas a few transnational courts already exist (e.g., regional human rights courts), we do not yet have transnational political parties (e.g., European political parties) that could articulate global political programs whose implementation would effectively tackle the most urgent problems that citizens face worldwide: climate change, the current pandemic, the economic downturn, and so on. Addressing the current crisis within political parties is crucial, but it would require nothing less than expanding my participatory conception of deliberative democracy into a global participatory democracy.

**Perspectives on Politics**

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In *Rethinking Party Reform* Fabio Wolkenstein addresses a difficult question: How can political parties be reformed and lifted out of their current state of crisis? His answer is that parties should be organized in a more democratic way. In particular, he articulates and defends a deliberative theory of party democracy in which internally democratic and participatory parties play a crucial role in mediating between citizens and the state. Wolkenstein develops this view by applying the insights and innovations of recent research on deliberative democracy to the analysis of political parties in a way that I find both creative and compelling. His book fills a lacuna in deliberative democracy scholarship, which has been insufficiently attentive to political parties, even though they are (and will likely remain) very powerful democratic actors. The deliberative model articulated in the book draws on an empirical study of partisan activism and intraparty deliberation among members of two major European Social Democratic parties, and it contains interesting proposals for the institutional reform of political parties. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in the future of political parties and democracy in general.

The book has six chapters. In the first chapter Wolkenstein defends a party-centered conception of popular sovereignty in which the exercise of self-rule requires political parties that are internally democratic. On this view, inclusive and participatory political parties strengthen the role of citizens in political decision-making by channeling their interests and ideas into comprehensive political agendas that citizens can identify with and can come to endorse as their own. Political parties of this kind supply citizens with effective channels to actively shape and influence political decision-making on an ongoing basis, which is essential for collective self-rule.
By contrast, approaches to popular sovereignty that disregard the way in which political parties mediate between citizens and the state cannot explain how citizens can genuinely come to see themselves as the authors of the laws to which they are subject. A salient example is a direct or radical approach in which the exercise of popular sovereignty requires direct participation of the entire people in political actions such as voting or referenda. However, Wolkenstein argues, because the citizenry as a whole cannot be permanently engaged in making all political decisions, this view necessarily relegates the citizenry’s capacity for self-rule to the opportunity to make a few sporadic decisions—for example, by referenda—while leaving the bulk of political decision-making to others. A similar problem besets “indirect” approaches to popular sovereignty wherein the exercise of popular sovereignty amounts to citizens electing representatives to act in their name while rendering any other participation between elections superfluous.

After Wolkenstein establishes that parties are crucial for the exercise of genuine popular sovereignty, he then turns his focus in the second chapter to the question of how parties should be organized to provide effective channels of inclusive participation and engagement. The answer is that parties need to be more internally deliberative. This is a challenging claim to defend, because it is often assumed that deliberation requires the inclusion of all points of view and that it is therefore essentially incompatible with partisanship. This challenge may explain why deliberative democracy research has thus far failed to focus on political parties. Wolkenstein convincingly shows that partisan deliberation can be good deliberation. Although intraparty deliberation is based on some shared ideals, aims, and policies, commitment to this shared platform may actually require transformation of the official party line over time precisely to better achieve these shared political aims. This can empower the party base insofar as it allows them to criticize exclusionary aspects of the official party line. Moreover, the transformative capacity of deliberation allows for the inclusion of different perspectives as they evolve over time and of new concerns, needs, and varying expectations of citizens who could be attracted to the party’s shared political project and lend their support in elections. Wolkenstein proposes a variety of institutional mechanisms to make partisan deliberation participatory so that it can empower the party base—for instance, he discusses problem-oriented partisan forums, partisan deliberative networks, and deliberative party conferences.

This approach may sound plausible in theory, but is it feasible in practice? The fourth and fifth chapter provide interesting examples of how deliberative failures could be avoided through small-scale reforms of party branches such as training moderators, “linking” individual deliberative groups together, or increasing the group’s influence over decisions.

As an advocate of a participatory conception of deliberative democracy, I find Wolkenstein’s deliberative conception of intraparty democracy very interesting and convincing. However, I fear that his approach to party reform is too limited to effectively address the current crisis eating away at national political parties. Indeed, the framing of the book seems a little bit like false advertising. The reader expects proposals for party reform that would lift parties out of their current crisis—but the book actually offers something different. It offers a theory of party organization that justifies the need for and desirability of intraparty democracy. This is a very plausible claim. More intraparty democracy would undeniably be a positive development. The problem is that it is not a solution to the substantive and agential problems that underlie the crisis that political parties currently face.

In the introduction Wolkenstein mentions the two most salient problems that national parties face: their inability “to offer voters real political choice, having become ideologically indistinguishable from one another” and the fact that they are “out of touch with citizens, having ossified into self-serving clubs of a ‘political class.’” This suggests that political parties are unable to perform their essential mediating function of aggregating and articulating social demands in feasible political programs that can be translated into public policy (pp. 1–2). However, this substantive concern with parties’ deficient political programs and agendas is soon set aside. Instead, the book only addresses procedural concerns. Indeed, by the end of the introduction, it becomes clear that the reforms the book provides would help “avoid the problems of elite domination and co-opting a more or less discredited system” (p. 5). Certainly, this is one way that parties are out of touch with their citizens, but the more central deficiency—the substantive or “ideological” concern about the deficient content of parties’ political programs because of their “limited room for manoeuvre” (p. 60) at the national level—is not addressed at all. Support for political parties is in dramatic decline, above all, because they lack political programs that can effectively address the problems threatening citizens’ fundamental interests and needs. Rethinking party reform requires us to address the “hollowing out” of national parties—their declining ability to shape autonomous policies because of transnational constraints imposed by the global economy within which states are embedded (see A. Schäfer and W. Streek, Politics in the Age of Austerity, 2013).

This omission, however, is one that Wolkenstein’s approach cannot afford. On this approach it is essential
that parties fulfill a unique mediating function between citizens and government. This is why parties should be reformed instead of eliminated. However, if the reason parties cannot fulfill their function is because they are out of touch with citizens—that is, if establishing stronger “links” between the citizenry and the government is the main concern—then eliminating the “middleman” (parties) would seem to be a better option. A much better solution to the problem seems to be offered by the lottocratic alternative, in which parties and elections are eliminated altogether and assemblies of randomly selected citizens are allowed to directly implement citizens’ demands. Instead of having to constantly counteract parties’ oligarchic tendencies, why not simply establish deliberative mini-publics as the institutions that mediate between the citizenry and the government?

If Wolkenstein’s claim that we need to reform parties instead of eliminating them is justified, it must be because parties fulfill a more specific function than just providing a “linkage” between the citizenry and government. Other institutions such as mini-publics could also serve such a function. This more specific “intermediary” function is often mentioned, but it is never the focus of analysis. The fundamental difference between political parties and deliberative mini-publics is that parties are capable of articulating and pursuing comprehensive political programs, whereas randomly selected citizens lack the ability, expert knowledge, and continuity over time that are needed to do so. However, this difference is substantive rather than procedural. The crucial intermediary function is not simply about inclusion, participation, and internal democratization. Rather, it is about having the capacity to articulate well-informed, comprehensive, and feasible political programs that can be translated into binding public policies that successfully address citizens’ needs and demands, precisely because they are ecologically, economically, and socially sustainable in the long run. This is what we need parties for, and it is also why parties are currently in crisis: national parties are apparently unable to offer actual solutions to the many transnational and global problems that threaten the fundamental interests and needs of citizens. If parties are to fulfill their unique and essential mediating function once again, then the elephant in the room that needs to be addressed is the inability of parties to offer voters real political choices. Moreover, without speaking to concrete proposals that would restore parties’ unique capacity to articulate comprehensive political programs that can successfully address the most important needs and interests of their constituents, the party-centered conception of popular-sovereignty cannot make a convincing case against lottocratic conceptions of popular sovereignty.

At one point, Wolkenstein very briefly addresses this issue and indicates that, if parties were equipped with inclusive deliberative mechanisms, the party leadership could explain the constraints that impede the realization of some important political aims to their base and that this could in turn induce deliberation about how the party should move forward in light of such constraints or whether other changes would be required to overcome them (p. 60). This seems to me a promising starting point for exploring whether Wolkenstein’s deliberative theory of parties could fruitfully address the central problems that parties currently face and offering the types of reform proposals that might address those problems.

Response to Cristina Lafont’s Review of Rethinking Party Reform

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— Fabio Wolkenstein

I am grateful to Cristina Lafont for her thoughtful and generous review of Rethinking Party Reform. Lafont rightly observes that the book focuses primarily on the reform of intraparty decision-making procedures. And she is also right to question whether democratizing these procedures can actually mitigate the crisis that political parties currently face.

If I understand correctly, Lafont worries that my proposals for democratizing parties internally cannot solve the biggest problem plaguing contemporary parties—that their programs and agendas are increasingly ideologically empty and alike— because that problem is caused by factors that are purely exogenous to parties. Accordingly, parties struggle to present citizens with real political alternatives, because international institutions, such as the European Central Bank, the European Court of Justice, or the International Monetary Fund, and the imperatives of the global economy, more generally, severely limit their room for maneuver. Reforming and democratizing parties cannot make these external constraints vanish, so that will not help parties depart from the ideologically vacuous status quo.

Now, there is much truth in this observation. It would be absurd to deny that national governments and parties are constrained by a range of institutions and forces that operate beyond the state. But neither is the power these institutions and forces exercise over parties absolute, nor is reducing their power a task that party reform alone could fulfill. Let me take these points in turn.

First, although one must not underestimate the impact of international institutions and global capitalism on national parties’ policy agendas, it is equally misleading to think that parties have lost all or nearly all control over their agendas. There still exist parties that self-confidently implement agendas that go decidedly against the demands of international agencies (a recent example is the Portuguese Partido Socialista, which rejected the austerity policies mandated by the EU and IMF); there also exist long-standing parties that manage to renounce the exchangeable centrist