

**DEMOCRACY AND PLANNING FOR THE LONG-TERM:
THE CASE FOR BETTER REPRESENTING THE
CURRENT GENERATION**

by

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Abstract

Climate change and other long-term problems have proven to be particularly difficult for democracies to address. Why is that? One explanation favoured by some political theorists, is that future citizens do not have a voice in the democratic process. Several innovative institutional mechanisms have been proposed to address this issue of representation. There is, however, a risk in making this argument. It provides justification for an elite few to use the rights of future citizens to trump the rights of current citizens. This essay argues that this is neither desirable nor necessary. Through an analysis of the polling and rhetoric surrounding climate change in the United States, this essay argues that b. Interestingly, this insight leads me to support many of the same institutional mechanisms these theorists propose, but for an entirely different reason: they help us get closer to what current citizens want. The power of this argument is not only that it is more accurate, but also that it replaces an imaginary interest group with a real one.

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To my parents and (unborn) grandchildren

Introduction

Can democracies plan for the long-term? The conventional answer is no. Most observers assume democracy to be myopic (Thompson 2010, 2005; Mank 1996). According to Dennis Thompson (2005: 246) for example, “democracies are systematically biased in favour of the present.” Indeed there seems to be a whole host of long-term problems that aren’t being addressed by democracies. Perhaps the largest and most systematically threatening is climate change. Decisions we make today will affect the climate for hundreds of years to come. Our record on doing what it takes to solve this problem is dismal. There are numerous other concerns where decisions we make today will have impacts long into the future. Many environmental issues such as loss of biodiversity, deforestation, degradation of the marine environment, and even genetic engineering, all have impacts that are either irreversible, or at least felt in the long-term. Although we are making limited progress in some of these areas, we are far from considering the full long-term consequences of our current actions.

Planning for the long-term is, however, not just an environmental issue. Alan Jacobs lays out several specific examples where if we made effective decisions today we would be better off in the future. For example, a study by Lochner and Moretti (2004) suggests that a program that would keep at risk male youth in school for an additional year would return annual yields of 19.5% on the initial investment.¹ Similarly investing in preschool could yield long-term benefits of up to \$5.67 per \$1 invested (Nores et al. 2005). As Jacobs (2011) points out similar long-term benefits could be attained in areas as diverse as self-reproducing natural resources, disaster preparedness, public health, and of course climate change. Despite perhaps being preferable to other available alternatives,

¹ These returns would come in reduced spending in the criminal justice system.

current liberal democracies are underperforming on all these issues. Indeed this by no means is an exhaustive list, but merely meant to demonstrate the wide area of where policy is not living up to the potential benefits it could bestow.

Surprisingly, why democracies fail to deal with the long-term has received relatively little attention in the literature (Sprinz 2009). Those that do focus on the relationship between democracy and planning for the long-term tend to focus on the issue of representation (Thompson 2010, 2005; Eckersley 2004). Generally speaking, the explanation of these theorists for why democracies fail to plan for the long term is because future affected parties do not have a voice in the political process. Thus democracies, which to date have focused solely on representing the current generation, are hopelessly underequipped to plan for the long-term. In order to fix this, these theorists have put forward several proposals to try to represent future generations.

These approaches are imaginative and to an extent convincing, but they do not get around the fundamental problem: all politics occurs (and forever will occur) in the present. Politically speaking these theorists are only convincing to the extent that they reflect the desires and wants of their present readers. Even putting in representatives for the future will require the demands of the current generation, or at least sections of it. There is simply no way around this problem.

The good news is that current generations actually care a great deal about the future. With reference to climate change policy in the United States, this essay will demonstrate that the core assumption that democracies fail to plan for the future because citizens are nearsighted is in many cases false. Indeed all indications are that the current generation cares more about the future than elected officials are responsive to. This essay

will argue that the reason elected officials fail to address long-term problems has less to do with a misguided desire of the present generation, but rather the opposite: it is a failure of these officials to reflect the values of its present citizens. Once you frame it in these terms it is no longer a question of how you can augment or change the desire of current generation, but rather, why is it that people's preferences are not being represented by the political system? Or perhaps even crisper, where are we not democratic enough?

To make this case this essay consists of five parts. Section one will unpack the issue of representation and why certain theorists want representatives of the future. Section two will point out that in order for these ideas to be put into practice they will require a current constituency. This may be either an elite, or a broad based constituency. I identify several problems in going with the elite model. Section three will look at the implicit assumption that ordinary citizens do not care about future generations. With reference to the case of climate change in the United States this section points out that in all likelihood citizens actually care more about the future than politicians are responsive to. Section four will explain more systematically why elected officials may be less responsive to the long-term desires of the public than they ought to be. In particular I will consider three explanations: 1) retrospective voting, 2) concentrated interests demand immediate extraction, and 3) lack of trust in government. This current underrepresentation will form the basis of my theoretical argument that in order to protect future generations we need to find better ways of representing the current generation. The fifth and final section will take this new line of reasoning and look at some of the solutions proposed by those theorists that want representation of future generations. Interestingly this new reasoning leads me to support many of the same proposals, but for

an entirely different reason. That is, these proposals are useful because they get us closer to current citizens' desire to protect the future generation.

Before I begin a brief note on my terminology. Although much of the literature on this subject is vague on how many generations into the future we should try to represent, for the purposes of this essay I will be referring to issues where either the problem or solution proposed will take at least one generation (roughly 30 years) to fully materialize. In other words one future generation should be represented. This is a long enough time frame that future generations clearly are affected, but is still short enough that at least in certain cases we can reasonably predict that the actions we take today will lead to outcomes by that time. Climate change perhaps is the paradigmatic case study, although certainly this applies to many other issues as well. The term long-term planning, which I use throughout this essay, refers to the same time frame.

1. One Explanation: Future Generations are Not Represented

Should we care about future generations? There is a large literature in philosophy about whether or not future generations should be considered to hold equal weight as the current generation (Gosseries and Meyer 2009). This debate stretches back all the way to Thomas Jefferson and has received significant attention since. There are many complex issues which deserve special attention that cannot be covered here; however, most philosophers considering this issue think we have at least some obligation to future generations, despite them not being physically present yet (Ibid).

Recently political theorists have begun to address this question. Generally these theorists look at the current definition of popular sovereignty and find it lacking. According to Thompson (2005: 245) the common assumption of what popular sovereignty is that “the people, usually understood as a majority in a specific territory, should have the power to enact the laws by which they are to be bound, or to elect the representatives who will enact those laws.” This definition tends to not consider the temporal dimension of representation. As Thompson (Ibid) questions: “within any given jurisdiction, should the present majority or should future majorities be sovereign?” This is a powerful question with many complicated implications. Although it is unclear what the precise balance should be, at least according to Thompson it is clear that current liberal democracies do not give enough representation to future generations. As Thompson (246) puts it, “the claims of future popular sovereigns are... systematically undervalued because future citizens do not have a voice in the present decisions that will affect them.”

How do you fix this problem? According to Eckersley (2004: 87) we need to “extend our limited understanding of the category of subjects excluded from any meaningful representation or participation in the liberal state.”² One of the great strengths of democracy is to incorporate many different interest groups (Young 2000). What Eckersley is suggesting we need to do is redefine what we consider interest groups that deserve representation. This of course has been done many times before. In the U.S. in the 1800s women and African Americans did not constitute valid separate interest groups. Incorporating them into democracy required recognizing their independence and legitimacy as such groups. This made our system more democratic, not less. As Robert Goodin (1996: 837) points out, the “democratic slogan of the modern era firmly enjoins *equal consideration* of interests... [and] it is simply no longer acceptable to disregard certain interests, simply on account of whose interests they are.” Of course representing future generations is much more difficult than extending the franchise to women and African Americans. As Eckersley (2004: 113) points out, it raises complex “moral, epistemological, political, and institutional challenges.”

The fundamental theoretical and practical challenge is how to represent a group or individual that is not here yet. Robert Goodin argues this may not be as problematic as it initially seems. Indeed, we routinely allow certain interests to be represented by someone else. Even in modern democracies we allow the interests of parents to speak for the interests of their children. Although they may not be perfect representatives, “there is nothing illegitimate in the social arrangements that lead to their interests being politically incorporated within and subsumed by someone else’s” (1996: 843). In cases where for

² In fact Eckersley believes we need to extend representation not only to future generations, but to all living organisms.

whatever reason the person herself cannot represent those interests we must rely on this form of representation. As he puts it:

Assuming the interests of those people deserve to be taken politically into account at all (and it seems hard to argue that they do not), and given that those people (by reason of immaturity or nonexistence) are unable to speak for themselves, someone else simply has to speak for them (Ibid).

Although Goodin (Ibid) acknowledges this is only “decidedly second-best” it is the only possible option in this case.³

This of course still leaves the question of who would actually represent these future generations? One controversial answer comes from Andrew Dobson. Dobson (1996) suggests that a select number of seats in parliament should be reserved for representatives of the future that come from, and are voted in by, the ‘environmental sustainability lobby.’ That is these future representatives would be elected by those that have shown that they care about future generations. As Kristian Ekeli (2009) points out, there are numerous problems with this proposal. First it assumes that the environmental sustainability lobby is uniquely positioned to figure out the interests of future generations, which may or may not actually be accurate. Second, it gives members of the environmental sustainability lobby two votes, which contravenes a core assumption of modern democracies that one person should have only one vote. Finally it is unclear who would actually be counted as part of the environmental sustainability lobby. Dobson’s proposal is interesting in that he identifies a specific plan, but precisely in being so

³ It is important to note, that of the theorists outlined in this section, Robert Goodin has thought the most clearly about how representing future interests should work in practice. He argues future generations are an ‘encapsulated interest’ of the current generation. His approach to better represent those interests is to develop deliberative models that allow for better expression of those ‘encapsulated interests’. This is similar to the thesis of this essay, but differs in that the driving desire is still to try to represent future generations adequately. In contrast, this essay does not view future humans as constituting a separate interest group.

specific the difficulty of trying to figure out who would represent future generations becomes evident.

Another proposal comes from Dennis Thompson. Thompson suggests that we need to establish a trustee with “a specialized duty toward the unrepresented, independence from other political authorities, and specific powers over the legislative agenda” (2011: 32). The role of this trustee is not to ensure the broad well-being of future generations, but rather to ensure that democracy will be possible in the future. Thompson is not specific on who precisely that trustee would be. Indeed he suggests a trustee could take place in numerous different forms. He suggests two specific models (an Independent Commission, and a Citizens’ Assembly), but he is actually less concerned with the precise model than with the need to develop an institution that protects the democratic rights of future citizens.

A third proposal is put forward by Bradford Mank. Mank (1996) argues that current methods of protecting future generations are insufficient (in fact he goes into great detail why neither Congress, the President, nor the EPA are sufficient). Rather Mank (1996: 488) prefers the creation of a Superagency “that would have the explicit authority to act on behalf [of future generations].” This Superagency would have “at least limited paternalistic or countermajoritarian powers to protect future generations” (Ibid: 496). The difference between the EPA and this Superagency is that the authority of the Superagency rests on the claim of representing future generations. Of course how one determines if this agency is remaining true to its constituents is somewhat of a mystery.

There are several other proposals that I do not have space to further extrapolate on here (Ekeli 2009; Partridge 2003; Weiss 1989). What most of these solutions have in

common though, is that they propose an institutional way to try to represent future generations. They work by limiting what the current generation can do. The justification for these reforms is that future generations deserve at least some protection as a separate interest group. Little or no attempt is made by these theorists to situate these policy proposals in the present and ask why current constituents with actual power would choose to implement these policies. Rather they take an abstract notion –future citizens deserve representation– and use it as the basis for these reforms.

Although not entirely relevant to this essay, it is interesting to note that this approach of trying to represent future generations by theorists is actually gaining some traction in practice. World organizations have noted this theoretical problem. The World Commission on Environment and Development that reported to the United Nations in 1987 for example stated, “we act as we do because we can get away with it: future generations do not vote; they have no political or financial power; they cannot challenge our decisions” (1987: 8). Even the proposals for institutionalization have met with some limited success. In fact, a Commissioner for Future Generations, licensed to intervene in the proceedings of the parliament, was briefly in place in the Israeli Knesset and is seriously contemplated elsewhere (Ekeli 2009; Beckmann 2008).

2. All Politics Occurs in the Present

Most of the debate has focused on whether or not it is possible to represent future generations and, if so, what the best way of doing so would be. Although this is an important debate that involves many complex theoretical and practical challenges, it is a debate of secondary importance. There is a big difference between being able to represent future generations and having a desire to do so. No one has asked where the political impetus for changing the current system would come from. Since we are hopelessly trapped in the present, the extent to which these approaches are convincing is the extent they appeal to the current generation's desire to protect future generations. To the extent that current citizens do not believe this, these theorists' argument and ability to institute someone representing future generations is undermined.

There are two possible ways that these suggested reforms could be instituted. One is that an elite, or perhaps even more constrictively a philosopher King, forces this new value onto the public as a whole. I believe some theorists are calling for precisely that. As Robyn Eckersley (2004: 95) points out "unlike liberals, green theorists are more prepared to countenance restrictions on a range of freedoms that are taken for granted, particularly those freedoms relating to investment, production, consumption, mobility, and the use of property." In the literature considered for this essay, the tendency towards elitism is mainly present through an absence of mentioning how current generations will be involved in the process of instituting these reforms. In fact, the starting point that future generations need representations gives those that want such representation a justification for trouncing the rights of current citizens.

This of course is highly problematic. For one it is possible that those trying to represent future generations may be seriously wrong. The literature is filled with eco-authoritarians in the late 1970s warning that if we do not take drastic actions our standard of living will fall dramatically (Humphrey 2007). Over time many of their claims have proven to be dead wrong (Ibid). Had we acted on the advice of these people in order to protect future generations then we would be worse off today. With high levels of uncertainty about the future in many cases it is unclear who will be right and which section of the elite to trust.

A second reason this approach is problematic is that these representatives of the future may reflect more the interests of the elite enforcing these plans than the broad based masses. For example, it is easy to argue that society needs less consumption to protect future generations from an elite perspective. Most of the elite already have everything they could possibly need in order to ensure their survival and success of their children. The general public may however have very legitimate reasons for why they do not want to trade-in future benefits for current ones. A single mother struggling to put food on the table for her children may very legitimately favour increasing consumption currently to protect her offspring (and her future generations). The complexity of trying to figure out what is in the interest of future generations would leave a lot of room and possibility of abuse and would risk undermining very important current interest groups. In short going about it in this way risks undermining all the things democracies are good at.

The second way of trying to institute these reforms is by arguing that a majority of the current generation actually want that. That is, citizens of democratic states believe

that long-term issues that affect future citizens are not being addressed through the current political process and want that to change. This, however, is an entirely different starting point than that future generations ought to be represented, and thus means of institutionalizing this philosophical value need to be found. Rather than a philosophical argument about what ought to happen, it is a democratic argument about better trying to represent what citizens want.

For theorists that care about future generations, at first sight this approach of implementing these institutional changes may not be satisfying. No longer is a philosophical argument strong enough, but planning for the long-term is subject to the fickle wills of the majority. In fact at first sight these institutional changes are subject to the same wills that have led to a lack of long-term planning in the first place. How could we possibly rely on the current generation if they have to be proven to be so bad at planning for the long-term?

The following two sections look a little more closely at the assumption that the reason long-term issues are not addressed is because future citizens are not represented. Rather than a lack of representation of future generations, I argue that in many cases it is a lack of accurate representation of the current generation that leads to short-term planning.

3. Citizens Have a Weak but Noticeable Desire to Plan for the Long-term

Reading the theorists outlined in the first section, it is easy to assume that the reason we need representation of future citizens is because current citizens cannot be trusted to look out for the long-term. However, as Thomas Princen (2009) points out there is a contradiction here. Somehow those theorists that advocate for planning for the long-term do not fall into that common mold. Indeed “little reason is given for the apparent enlightenment [that allows them to want to plan for the long-term]: some have it, some do not” (18).

It turns out that the assumption that citizens are inherently short-term thinkers is inaccurate. Rather as Psychologist Robert Emde (1994: 437) points out:

“Future-oriented processes are basic and pervasive human biopsychosocial capacities.... They do not suddenly appear as a class of behaviors at a certain time in either ontogeny . . . or development . . . nor do they usually require task-specific features for their activation . . . [Rather] variations in future-oriented processes appear to be more in their ‘use’.”

Or as Princen (2009:18) puts it:

“There is no biological or psychological evidence to suggest that humans are unable to deal with the future, including the far future. Legacy is part of the human condition.”

This is not to suggest that humans value the future as much as the present, but rather that they are capable of thinking about the future and value it relatively highly. Although most humans apply a discount rate to the future (that is they value the future slightly less than the present), studies in discount rates reveal some interesting characteristics about the rates people apply. First, humans discount the immediate future much more than they discount the distant future (Karp 2004). That is they care much more whether they will receive a benefit this year versus the next, rather than in 29 years versus 30 years from now. This means that the longer we plan into the future the less high

of discount rate we choose. Second, people tend to discount certain things, such as the environment, far less than money. Indeed numerous studies indicate that in certain cases individuals apply discount rates of as low as 0% (Johannesson & Johansson 1997; Dolan & Gudex 1995; Redelmeier & Heller 1993). Third, people tend to apply a different rate for social investments and private investments (Sozou 2009). We discount future social benefits less than future private benefits. This makes intuitive sense. Although one's own lifetime is always limited, one's legacy is not. People care about leaving something for future generations, and in order to do so they prefer a social discount rate that is lower than the one they apply in their own private lives. These three factors indicate that depending on the policy area, citizens in general would demand of public policy makers to apply relatively low discount rates to many long-term problems.

This basic ability to value the future seems apparent in even some of the more intractable long-term problems. To demonstrate this I will briefly look a little closer at the polling and rhetoric behind perhaps the most important and difficult long-term issue: climate change legislation in United States. Although I would like to cover this issue more broadly (and indeed the polling data supports my claims on a more global basis) due to space constraints, I have chosen to focus on this particular case study because 1) the global significance of the country, 2) it is the country with the most available data, and 3) because the political debate around climate change has been particularly fractious. This one case study is of course not necessarily proof that this framework applies to all long-term issues, although the more theoretical analysis in the next section does indicate the findings are more broadly applicable.

Given the fractious political debate around climate change in the United States, the polling behind it is actually surprising. According to a recent survey done in partnership between the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and George Mason University, 72 percent of Americans actually think that climate change should be a very high (12%), high (28%), or medium (32%) priority for the president and Congress. (Leiserowitz et al., 2012b). Furthermore 92 percent of Americans think that developing sources of clean energy should be a very high (31%), high (38%), or medium (23%) priority for the president and Congress (Ibid). Although the Yale survey is the most detailed recent survey, these general findings are consistent across polls despite variation in the wording of the questions. Both Gallup and Nielsen polls show that Americans concerned with climate change outnumber those unconcerned by significant margins (Jones 2011b; Nielsen 2011).

Despite broad-based concern about climate change, which is a stance that clearly shows concern for the long-term, it is important not to confuse opposition to climate change policies with an absence of caring for the future. All rhetoric indeed suggests otherwise. The public debate about whether or not we should do something about climate change actually has little to do with how we relate to the future. The anti-climate change lobby intuitively understands this. Rather than challenge whether or not we should protect the future they focus on two things. First they attack the scientific consensus position that climate change is caused by humans. Some of the largest corporations, including notoriously ExxonMobil, took precisely this tack by funding organizations skeptical of climate change science (Monbiot 2006). The purpose of this is not to challenge the notion that we should care about the future, but rather to seed doubt about

whether climate change legislation would actually leave us better off in the future. Indeed another recent survey done by the Yale and George Mason project shows how successful this has been. Of those that want the least action on climate change, 72% were either extremely sure (17%), very sure (35%), or somewhat sure (20%) climate change is not occurring (Leiserowitz et al. 2012a).

The second line of attack is that environmental legislation will cost jobs and harm the economy. Although some of this may be arguing that the present cost are not worth the future benefits, that argument generally is not explicitly made. In fact when an explicit argument about the future is made it is precisely the opposite: a growing economy is necessary to protect the interests (including environmental interests) of future generations. In other words this may be simply a disagreement about what is best for the future. However, even if it is merely a rhetorical, the deference to the idea that we ought to do what is best for the future is notable.

So far the evidence is consistent with the theory. A majority of Americans think climate change is a problem. A minority is sceptical, but not necessarily because they don't want politicians to plan for the long-term. Admittedly, however, there is a big difference between being concerned about an issue and actually doing something about it. It may be that most people care about climate change, but when faced with any real trade-off they will choose to focus on the more immediate concern. This certainly is true, but here the polling suggests that people are willing to consider some real trade-offs.

The Yale survey asked several specific questions that implied a direct trade-off. Surprisingly more than two-thirds (68%) agree that the U.S. should make either a large-scale or medium-scale effort to reduce climate change even if this has large or moderate

economic costs (Leiserowitz et al. 2012b). A strong majority even support a proposal with specific costs: 61% of respondents indicated that they agree with requiring utility companies to produce at least 20% of their electricity from renewable energy sources even if household costs increase by \$100 a year (Ibid.). Gallup too has been asking a question relevant to this for many years. From 1985 until 2007 when asked whether the environment or economic growth should be given a higher priority, a majority of citizens chose environmental protection (Jones 2011a). Admittedly, this number has fallen slightly below 50% in recent years (Ibid). This is likely due to the economic recession, which may have focused individuals' attention on the dire immediate situation and appears to be an anomaly in the long-term data. Interestingly there is a reverse anomaly that occurred after the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, again indicating the importance of focusing events (Ibid).

What is surprising is that despite these clear majorities in favour of tackling issues of climate change this is not generally reflected in what elected representatives advocate for. I am not aware of single notable public official that publicly supports environmental legislation over economic growth. This is despite the majority of citizens holding that opinion. Something is getting lost in translation. This leads to the question: if the polls that the majority of respondents are concerned about climate change and planning for the long-term are correct, why isn't more being done? Why isn't there a political party that represents long-term solutions?

The problem is that polls are not necessarily good predictors of how popular a specific program will be when proposed by politicians. To see this I will briefly turn to another case-study: climate change legislation in Australia. Like in the U.S., in Australia

polling suggested the population wanted action on climate change. A survey done as a collaboration by Griffith University, the Australian Government, and the National Climate Change Adaption Research Facility (NCAARF) in 2010 indicated strong support amongst several important measures: 90% of Australian respondents believed that human activities were playing a causal role in climate change and 66% of Australian respondents that they were “very concerned” or “fairly concerned” about climate change, with an additional 22% indicating some level of concern (Reser et al. 2012). In October of 2010 a plurality of Australians were even in favor of a carbon tax: 46% of Australians were in favor while 44% opposed. The same result was found in a follow up poll 3 months later (Nielsen 2012).

What is different in Australia is that Prime Minister Julia Gillard has taken this on as her signature issue and has developed and put into effect a revenue neutral carbon tax. It is instructive to look at how polling has changed as this policy has been put into effect. The tax officially started on July 1 of this year, but the policy has been under serious consideration since Julia Gillard came into office. During this period polling in favor of a carbon tax has steadily decreased. The most recent Nielsen poll indicates that only 33% support a tax whereas a strong majority (62%) oppose it (Grattan 2012). There has even been some speculation that Gillard will face a leadership challenge because of the unpopularity of her signature issue (Carlton 2012).

There are many potential reasons for this decline in support. I will briefly touch on specific possible reasons here, before considering these from a more theoretical perspective in the next section. One reason is perhaps the initial polling was inaccurate. In surveys citizens often overstate a certain opinion in order to impress the person

conducting the survey. Although this certainly is problematic, it does not explain the change in opinion. Another potential reason is that voters weren't willing to pay with their pocketbook what they supported in theory. This too seems initially plausible, but it does not make sense once you consider the design of the policy. The policy is a revenue neutral shift in the way taxes are collected. Indeed as it is currently being implemented the policy will "see the vast majority of people be fully compensated for the price increases, and many will actually end up better off" (Carbon Tax Facts 2012: 5). Another explanation is that perhaps more information made citizens change their minds. That too is, however, not a full explanation. Studies in the U.S. show that more information does not necessarily lead to more or less support for climate change. These studies show that as education on the subject increases, Democrats become more concerned about it whereas Republicans become less concerned (McCright and Dunlap 2011; Hamilton 2011). This is likely due to the variety/quality of information they get (McCright and Dunlap 2011).

Although it is impossible to prove precisely why there was a decline in support, two issues seem most relevant to the decline in popularity. First those most affected by the policy (which are the industries responsible for paying the taxes) have vehemently opposed the legislation. Utilizing their abundant resources they have played an outsized influence in the campaign. In particular they have been very good at pointing out specific examples of where prices will rise and jobs will be lost (Burrell 2012). This has focused attention on the cost, instead of the benefits, which are much harder to define. Second, although Julia Gillard campaigned on addressing climate change, one of her specific promises prior to the election was that she would not do so through a carbon tax (Carlton

2012). The carbon tax thus represents a clear break in trust, which of course makes it even more difficult for her to sell to the public. I will extrapolate in more general terms on these two reasons in the next section.

In summary, there is no psychological evidence that humans are necessarily short-term thinkers. Indeed the opposite is true. This is reflected in the most important issue of our time: climate change. Both in the United States and in Australia (and, as a global Nielsen survey reveals, most everywhere in the world (Nielsen 2011)) polls indicate that citizens want the issue of climate change to be addressed. As the Yale survey (and others) show a clear majority favoring action, yet as the Australian case warns this does not necessarily mean that when politicians propose those solutions, voters will actually support them. In general polls may overstate a weak desire of a public that is not necessarily well-informed about a topic and whose opinion can be easily swayed. Nevertheless the trend is clear. The polls and rhetoric around climate change suggest that there is a preference that something be done, and at least in theory citizens are willing to consider economic trade-offs. However, in practice, when these changes are proposed by politicians that general desire to do something about the long-term may evaporate.

4. An Explanation for why Elected Officials Underrepresent Long-term Interests

In the previous section I looked at both broad evidence for the fact that humans are capable and desire to plan for the long-term, as well as the empirical evidence surrounding perhaps the most important long term issue. This section looks at explanations for why this general interest is likely underrepresented in the political process. There are numerous reasons for why competitive elections can lead to results that are biased towards present extraction. Before I get into that reasoning, I would like to eliminate one possible explanation that I think runs counter to the central thesis of this essay (and counter to what has been previously observed).

The most pernicious explanation for why the current political systems do not represent long-term interests is that politicians inherently are more short-term planners than their citizens. That is politicians are somehow different from the average citizen that cares about the long-term, and thus will act differently. I do not think there is any reason to believe this is the case. Indeed most evidence suggests otherwise. Alan Jacobs (2011) for example sets up a model that hypothesizes precisely the opposite. In Jacobs model those involved in public life, which in many cases is relatively low paying in comparison to similar private sector jobs, will more likely care about societal and long-term issues. Indeed Jacobs finds broad empirical evidence that this is indeed the case. In the case studies he analyses, Jacobs (Ibid: 29) finds that in order to pursue long-term objectives “elected officials must face a relatively low risk of losing office as a consequence of imposing investment’s short-term costs on voters.” The fact that in the absence of electoral pressures politicians plan for the long-term suggests that they, like others, will plan for the long-term when it is possible to do so.

This also fits broadly with a common observation that one reason politicians do not plan for the long-term is due to frequent elections (see for e.g. Sprinz 2011). Indeed we routinely see elected officials delay painful decisions, or perhaps a little more subtly delay the painful consequences of their decisions. This occurs with issues both big and small. Studies have shown that during election years governments engage in more economy expanding activities than in non-election years (Nordhaus 1975; Tufte 1978; Drazen 2000). This has more generally become known as the ‘political business cycle.’ This sort of behaviour does however raise a puzzling question: if both politicians and citizens care about long-term issues, why do competitive elections lead politicians to delay painful decisions that would make us better off in the long-term? To answer this question we must look at three broadly observed characteristics of the election cycle: retrospective voting, the outsized influence of concentrated interests, and lack of trust in government.

1. Retrospective voting

Choosing how to vote is not a simple act. It is impossible to be fully informed on all aspects of a specific campaign and all policy issues important in that campaign. Not only that, but the amount of time that most voters spend informing themselves about these issues is usually quite limited. Indeed, “decades of public-opinion research have yielded overwhelming evidence that most voters possess little political knowledge” (Jacobs 2011:41). The only way to process these vast amounts of information is through mental shortcuts. Depending on how those shortcuts are made the incentives for politicians change.

Perhaps the easiest and most pervasive mental shortcut is to judge an incumbent politician based on a simple question: ‘Are we better off than when his/her term started.’ This is often explicitly encouraged by politicians. Ronald Reagan for instance asked voters this question when running against Jimmy Carter in 1980. He famously asked precisely the same question four years later (Hill 2008). Voting based on the short-term record of a given politician or party, which is termed retrospective voting, on its face seems particularly problematic for long-term planning. If voters base their votes on past performance this will encourage politicians to try to pass laws and policies that produce results within the limit of their time in office, which in turn causes a systematic bias towards the present. As William Nordhaus states even a “perfect democracy with retrospective evaluation of parties will make decisions biased against future generations” (1975: 187).

There is a large literature on this issue of retrospective voting. By one estimate, there have been over 500 studies conducted on one subfield alone: economic retrospective voting (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2009). Although there is some conflicting evidence, on balance it seems that economic conditions affect the results of elections (Ibid). In particular bad economic conditions tend to harm the chances of incumbents to be re-elected. Even where the evidence is mixed on whether or not citizens vote based on past economic conditions, politicians nonetheless believe that to be the case and thus act based on that belief (Fiorina 1978).

It is difficult to see a way to completely circumvent the issue of retrospective voting. As Jacobs points out “on average, past policy losses should have the cognitive upper hand against future gains ” (2011: 45). This is simply human nature. However, it is

important not to confuse retrospective voting with a value. Just because a voter bases her decision on past performance does not mean that she values the past over the future.

In fact in all likelihood these voters are simply using the past as a way to judge what they can expect from the future. Even with economic retrospective voting there is little evidence that voters are trying to get as much for themselves as soon as possible. In fact as Roderick Kiewiet and Michael Lewis-Beck (2011) point out even when a voters personal finances were deteriorating, if the economy is doing well that voter tends to have a preference for the incumbent candidate. This is true vice versa as well. Even when a voter is personally doing well financially they tend not to support the incumbent candidate if the economy as whole was doing poorly. This is actually strong evidence that voters are simply using broad economic measures as a way to evaluate a candidate, rather than just looking at their own immediate self-interest. This is certainly not a vote for the past over the future, nor is it necessarily a vote to favour the short-term over long-term, but the net result is that politicians find it within their interest to expand in the short term even if it has some long-term consequences.

Since retrospective voting is not a value, but merely a mental shortcut, it is conceivable that in certain scenarios this would not bias policy decisions towards the present. In fact depending on the type of retrospective voting the voter engages in, the politician may be incentivized to plan for the future. To see this let us look at a simple example. It is a very different to vote retrospectively based on unemployment numbers versus based on the size of the government deficit during that party's time in office. One favours stimulating the economy immediately; the other favours reducing the deficit for

the purported reason of not saddling future policy makers (and generations) with debt.⁴ Indeed there seems to be immense national variation on how citizens choose to vote retrospectively. For example, it has been argued that the reason the Australian National debt is so low (as of 2011 it is 27% of GDP) is because deficit spending is a particularly salient topic during election cycles (see for e.g., Stiglitz 2010). This suggests that although retrospective voting cannot be avoided altogether, using metrics (and focusing events) that speak to the impact of policy on future generations means that retrospective voting could actually benefit future generations.

That being said it seems likely that in most cases retrospective voting leads politicians to make short-term decisions simply to survive the next election. Their job depends on showing citizens that they are better off now than when they started office. The easiest way to do so is to show immediate results. Although long-term metrics could be used to make that case, this is complicated case to sell to citizens. As will be shown in the next two subsections this will be especially difficult in scenarios where concentrated interests favour immediate extraction and trust in government officials is low.

2. Role of Concentrated Interests

A second important factor to consider is the role of concentrated interests in policy development. Of course moneyed concentrated interests have an outsized influence on the policy process. This is due to the capacity hire lobbyists who work through back channels to advocate for specific reforms, and through the capacity to engage in more broad based public relations such as funding political candidates, think

⁴ To be sure reducing government deficit may not actually be beneficial for future generations. In certain cases running a deficit may be necessary to protect future generations from other concerns. Nonetheless, I would suspect that the main motivation for those who do not want the government to run deficits is to ensure that this money does not have to be paid back in the future.

tanks, and scientists. Robert Paehlke (1989: 200) puts this succinctly: “policies favour the most organized interest groups, whose members tend to be wealthy and tend to seek concrete, economically self-interested, and immediate gains.”

The private businesses (and unions) that are most engaged in particular policy battles are generally in the market of providing private benefits. They seek to return a profit to their stakeholders. When they engage in lobbying they will have to justify why they are spending money in this area. This means that they will want something immediate in return. Although there certainly are private businesses with priorities other than just money, in most cases profit is still the primary objective. This may be changing with the development of ideals of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and ideas surrounding the Fourth Sector, but in general it would take a pretty wide-eyed promoter of CSR to believe that currently in most companies long-term public issues are outweighing concerns of profitability.

To be sure, pursuing the profit-motive is not necessarily antithetical to planning for the long-term. In certain cases the interests of private companies are in line with the greater long-term public good. For example, it is likely that the private interests of an alternative energy company align with long-term public interest. These firms to argue for more present extraction in ways that support their industry, but in this particular case they happen to line up with the long-term interest of the country as a whole.

The fact that concentrated interests seek more immediate extraction is understandable and to an extent unavoidable. The problem is that the other side, the citizens that want planning for the long-term, are diffuse interests (Eckersley 2004). The general desire to have a society that looks out for the long-term is precisely that: a general

desire. In certain cases certain firms and organizations will become the voice of that desire, but it is much harder to mobilize resources when the vast majority of citizens are “only diffusely and imperceptibly affected by much state action” (Jacobs 2011: 41). This is especially the case with long-term issues where the results of current actions will not be visible for many years to come. This imbalance between the two sides is less problematic in areas where predominant industrial interests are in line with long-term goals of society. It, however, certainly is a problem where current predominant industrial interests are out of line for what is good for society as whole over the long-term. I believe we are seeing precisely this in regards to climate change.

The case of climate change legislation in the United States is again instructive in this regard. The Center for Public Integrity has recently tallied up the numbers of lobbyist hired to represent the interests of stakeholders in this area: 2780 lobbyists are at work in Washington DC (Lavell 2009). That means lobbyists outnumber members of Congress more than five to one. Some of these lobbyists represent interests that are in line with the long-term. There are roughly 160 lobbyists that work on behalf of environmental groups, as well as 230 lobbyists that work on behalf of industries such as alternative energy, venture capitalists, and investment firms seeking to benefit from tighter control on greenhouse gas emissions (Lavell 2009). These voices provide some balance, but are clearly outnumbered (by 5 to 1) by the roughly 2000 lobbyists representing major industries looking to slow down legislation or looking for a specific handout (Ibid). The balance of resources clearly is in favour of those seeking immediate extraction. These lobbyists are hired precisely because they are effective, and one would expect this imbalance in resources to stretch beyond simply the number of lobbyists hired.

In summary, although it is impossible to provide a full tally of where concentrated interests stand on all long-term issues, it is quite conceivable that when each industry seeks to acquire as much profit as they can in their respective fields this will lead to over-exploitation in the present. This certainly is the case with issues such as climate change where the majority of concentrated interests are engaged in industry that is harmful to society as a whole over the long-term. In these cases the general desire by citizens to plan for long-term will likely be skewed by these concentrated interests, and will likely be skewed towards present extraction.

3. Trust in Government

The final element that complicates both retrospective voting and the role of concentrated interests is the issue of trust in government. Let us briefly assume (as Alan Jacobs (2011) does) that public officials are interested in pursuing the long-term interest of society as a whole. Whether or not their vision can be implemented in the face of retrospective voting and the outsized influence of concentrated interests will depend crucially on whether or not citizens trust their public officials.

To see this let us briefly look at what trust is and why it is important. Political theorist Mark Warren (1999a: 311) identifies the issue of trust in public life most concretely:

“Trust... involves a judgment, however tacit or habitual, to accept vulnerability to the potential ill will of others by granting them discretionary power over some good. When one trusts, one accepts some amount of risk for potential harm in exchange for the benefits of cooperation –whether these benefits come directly from other persons or from reliance on abstract systems that coordinate efforts over distances of time and space.”

One of the reasons long-term issues are so difficult to tackle is that the amount of time efforts have to be coordinated is long, and thus the degree of vulnerability one has to

accept is high. It makes sense that if one does not trust government one would want to accept as little vulnerability as possible, and thus one would prefer a limited government that can show the results of their actions immediately. If one does trust government one would be more inclined to give officials more leeway in both the issues they can tackle, and the length of time it takes for the effects of those actions to take place. This means in order to allow public officials to tackle issues such as climate change a high level of public trust is required.

The relationship between democracies and trust is however quite complicated. As Bernard Barber (1983) points out an important innovation of democracies is the insight that we cannot fully trust the ruling class to act in everyone's interest and that they need more broad based oversight. This of course is one reason we vote. On the other hand as Warren points "the fact that democracy requires mechanisms that help produce a decent political life in the absence of less than complete trust does not mean that democracy can do without trust" (1999b: 2).

The fact of the matter is that public officials are not always doing what is best for the long-term interest of society. Complete trust would likely be misplaced; however, wherever trust is less than complete the harder it is for politicians to do something about the long-term issues we care about. This is a delicate balancing act. Anything less than full trust will require short-term ways of reviewing performance. Although, as I indicated in the section on retrospective voting, there are better or worse ways of doing so, anything short of full trust will likely lead to short-term actions in order to achieve the appearance of progress. Although this leaves one with less planning for the future than

we desire, it is important to note that this is merely the logical outcome of rational actors following their reasonable assumption that elected officials cannot be fully trusted.

4. Other factors and conclusions

There are of course numerous other factors and variations across political systems that lead to different degrees of long-term planning. For example, there may be differences in how coordinated market economies and liberal market economies can address different aspects of climate change (Mikler 2009). There may also be differences between presidential and parliamentary systems. In some cases other specific institutional features may encourage action. Miranda Schreurs and Yves Tiberghien (2007) for example hypothesize that in Europe competition between different levels of government sped up the adoption of climate change policy. In addition there are numerous non-systemic features, ranging from the role of particular policy entrepreneurs, to uncontrollable focusing events such as the recent draught in Australia.

Acknowledging that their immense national variation, this section suggests that in all countries where trust in government is not complete and retrospective voting occurs long-term interests will be underrepresented. This is particularly the case with issues where a majority of concentrated interests have demands that are not in line with the long-term interests of society. Although certain countries deal with these issues better than others, to one degree or another this analysis applies in most, if not all, developed democratic countries.

Conclusion. A Different Theoretical Approach: Addressing Long-term Goals by Better Representing the Current Generation

Al Gore (1992: 170) once remarked: “The future whispers, while the present shouts.” This quote is often used as support the claim that we need to represent future generations through institutional mechanisms. To me this interpretation misses the power of this quote. If you look closely at the quote you realize that –despite an absence of any such institutional mechanisms– the future is already whispering. It is whispering in citizens, politicians (and academic theorists) alike. But, as the previous section has shown, Al Gore is right: this whispering is often not enough to counter the shouting demands of the present.

Interestingly, the above analysis suggests that we may want to support many of the same proposals that those advocating for the representation of future generations want us to institute. The reasoning behind why to do so, however, is entirely different. For example, the role of trustee of the future under my analysis would not be to represent future generations, but rather to focus the current generation’s attention on issues that matter for future generations. In other words the trustee of the future could counter some of the framing effects that favour present extraction. Similarly it may make sense to have a Superagency that watches out for the long-term, not because it has the authority to act on behalf of future generations, but because the current generation demands it. In other words this Superagency could become an extension of Pierre Rosanvallon’s (2011) observation that the bureaucracy does and should reflect the desires of the people.

It is, however, important to get the reasoning behind these institutional changes right. This new reasoning can help us exclude some of the solutions proposed. For example, if most citizens care about future generations it makes little sense to restrict the

voting in of representatives' of the future to the 'environmental sustainability lobby.' Indeed to the extent that this move would harm trust in government this even may be counterproductive. Rather Kristian Ekeli's (2009) counter proposition that we should let the general public elect both present and future representatives begins to make a lot more sense.

Despite agreeing in general with many of the institutional reforms recommended by those seeking to represent future generations, it is important to note where this new justification theoretically diverges. This approach does set concrete limitations that may be considered unimaginative or problematic. It completely subordinates the interests of future generations to the interests of the current generation. Furthermore it allows for no justification, no matter how convincing, that we need to disenfranchise the current generation in order to protect future generations. The (imaginary) voting rights of future generations cannot trump the real and measurable desires of the present generation. This is certainly a limitation, but it may not be as limiting as these theorists assume.

The power of the insight that citizens care about future issues is that it replaces an imaginary future interest group with a real one. In other words this limitation is also an opportunity. In addition to supporting many of the proposals that those theorists that try to represent future generations support, this new framework provides justification and impetus for a whole series of reforms that would make democracy stronger and better able to plan for the long-term.

For instance, if concentrated moneyed interests skew politics towards present extraction it may make sense to try to limit the influence of money in politics. There are many ways to do so, and this by no means is a new solutions. The insight here is merely

that, not only would this likely lead to a more vibrant democracy with a more diverse set of views adequately represented, but it would likely also lead to better long-term planning. Similarly the new and developing field of deliberative democracy likely has a lot to contribute. Perhaps there are more deliberative ways to structure democracies that help express and explore long-term desires. Finally anything that justifiably raises the trust in government will likely be good for long-term planning. This of course involves the slow and difficult process of building better and more responsive institutions.

Much of the work to date on long-term planning suggests that we need to somehow circumvent the short-sightedness of the people. I think we need precisely the opposite. Rather than circumvent the people we need closer and better representation of the people. There is plenty of work to be done on this front. In the end, for better or for worse we are trapped in the present. Rather than fight this fact we should embrace it. Embracing it more fully and figuring out how to better represent the current generation will leave future generations better off for many years to come.

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