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Voters' moral burdens, political equality, and resistance to far-right populism

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ABSTRACT

In some contexts, voters on one side of the political spectrum may need to compromise their moral convictions more than voters on the other side, by voting for a lesser evil to defend democracy from an imminent populist threat. Such threats typically come from the far-right at present. This paper offers an account of political equality – defending the *Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle* (EMBP) and the *No Double Burdens Principle* (NDBP) – to theorize such differential moral burdens as a *pro tanto* egalitarian wrong. My account distinguishes such morally objectionable comparative burdens from other, non-comparative, unobjectionable burdens of moral compromise that are part of normal democratic politics. EMBP prohibits burdens of moral compromise that fall disproportionately on voters with a particular reasonable political conviction in the long term. NDBP prohibits that these moral burdens fall disproportionately on those voters who have taken the bulk of the burdens of (fighting) injustice. The paper argues that both far-right populism and a democratic counter-populist strategy against it – which I call restorative populism – infringe both EMBP and NDBP. Nonetheless, the paper shows that voters should vote for the lesser evil if that is necessary to defend democracy even if the moral burdens of lesser-evil voting fall disproportionately on them – thus infringing their political equality. It argues, though, that there are times when such infringements of political equality *pro tanto* entitle voters to abstain or engage in protest voting instead of voting for the lesser evil.

KEYWORDS Democratic (self-)defense; ethics of voting and abstention; protest voting; populism; rescue; voting for the lesser evil

The rise of far-right populism across Europe and beyond, as well as the centrist coalitions that appropriate some of its tenets to hold the political ground or regain it, put many left-leaning voters in dire straits. These voters often face lesser evil voting situations that impose considerable moral burdens on them: should they compromise their left-leaning politico-moral

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ideals by voting for such a centrist coalition that represents feasible electoral resistance to far-right populism at the given moment, or should they refuse to compromise their ideals this way but thereby fail to help resist the populist far-right here and now?

This dilemma can manifest itself as a choice between pursuing one's own reasonable moral ideals versus the aim of defending a highly imperfect but still functioning democracy. In some cases, the relevant choice arises between two options on the ballot. For example, left-leaning French voters had to choose in the first round of presidential elections in 2022 between the lesser evil of a centrist candidate (Emmanuel Macron) with a genuine prospect of prevailing over the greater evil who may well have threatened democracy (Marine Le Pen), and a more ideal candidate who fell closer to their moral convictions but had a considerably lower chance of winning (Jean-Luc Mélenchon). In other cases, such as the US presidential election of 2024, left-leaning voters arguably had to choose between compromising their moral convictions by voting for a centrist lesser evil candidate to contribute to democratic defense (Kamala Harris) versus not voting at all. This paper concerns both kinds of cases. However, what matters for my inquiry in these cases is neither that they involve a moral compromise, nor that such compromises occur regularly, nor that they are occasionally or often severe. Moral compromises are not generally morally objectionable in democratic political life. They are part of the normal functioning of democracy (Bellamy, 1999; Rostbøll, 2017). Yet these cases often form part of a series of choice situations that recur election after election, where the burdens of moral compromise disproportionately fall on voters of the same political conviction.

There are various moral reasons for lesser evil choices – but here I am interested in those choice situations where lesser-evil voting is considered to contribute to defending democracy against a populist threat. Populism may take various political shades but it is currently far-right populism that threatens democracy in Europe and North America – hence I will focus on this variant. Far right populism threatens many different values, such as substantive justice, international peace, and further social and political achievements, including liberal human rights protections or checks and balances to political power. Yet in this article, my focus is on far-right populism as a threat to democracy specifically.

Far-right populism may be born out of the deficiencies of existing democracies (Malkopoulou, 2020, p. 279) but it often becomes a threat to their very existence, denying even minimally understood democratic values and institutions such as accountability, political pluralism (Müller, 2016), legitimate opposition (Kirshner, 2022), and competitive elections. While not all far-right populist parties are overtly threatening democracy, their anti-pluralist commitments provide good reasons to regard them as threats to democracy rather broadly. Such threats may be more or less

imminent in particular cases. Although voting is not the only means to defend democracy (and typically not sufficient in itself, in the long term), it can be instrumental in defending it and even in rescuing it in the right circumstances – for example, by preventing far-right populists from taking positions of power that would help them pursue their anti-democratic agenda against weak checks and balances. Lesser-evil candidates stepping up to defend democracy in such cases are typically on the political right, more or less close to the center. Hence far-right populism often presents a specific form of the above dilemma for left-leaning voters. Should they support their ideal parties and candidates who are (currently) unable to prevent the victory of the populist far-right (or, where such ideal option is absent, even abstain from or boycott elections), or should they vote instead, yet again, for morally highly objectionable candidates or parties (the lesser evil) that have a chance of defending democracy?¹

The guiding intuition that I examine in this paper is that it is unfair if it falls disproportionately on voters of a particular political conviction to face this dilemma – time and again. I offer an evaluative framework that helps voters decide whether and when they should vote for the lesser evil to defend democracy, despite the unfairness they face. My aim is not to argue for all-things-considered moral judgments. However, my argument illuminates both what such voters' frustration gets right, normatively speaking – and when and why these moral considerations of unfairness are of lower priority.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I examine and reject theoretical attempts to dismiss or minimize the moral burdens of voters' choice situations, such as regarding the latter as bad moral luck. Instead, I argue that if voters face differential moral burdens in voting over an extended period, this threatens their political equality. Second, to defend that claim, I present and justify two political egalitarian principles: The Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle and the No Double Burdens Principle, and clarify their relevance to voting in ideal and non-ideal circumstances. I then show how these apply in imperfect democracies at two different levels of idealization: well-ordered democracies vs. highly non-ideal ones. In the latter type, democracy itself needs defense from the populist far-right. Third, I argue that populism in its antiliberal, anti-pluralist form as well as in its restorative form – i.e. as a well-intended strategy of popular front-building to defend and restore democracy, often in reaction to far right populism – contribute to the differential moral burdens of voters on one side of the political spectrum: these days, the left. However, drawing the implications for the ethics of voting, I will show that if reasonable left-leaning voters should vote for a lesser evil to defend democracy from far-right populism, they should do so despite the unfair moral burdens that infringe on their political equality. I also establish, nonetheless, the conditions under which citizens as voters need not and cannot contribute to defending democracy. Finally, I address the objection that reasonable left-

leaning voters cannot endlessly be required to take the moral burdens of rescuing democracy when this task is no longer the exception but the rule.

The moral burdens of voting well

Ethicists of voting, who otherwise disagree on much – such as Jason Brennan and Julia Maskivker – nonetheless widely agree that how well one votes in an election is an adequate subject of moral evaluation (e.g. Brennan, 2011; Elliott, 2023; Maskivker, 2019; Ridge, 2021). It is also widely accepted that voting well means voting to realize the common good, or to promote justice or minimize injustice (Brennan, 2011; Maskivker, 2019, but cf.; Lever, 2016). The differences between these conceptions of voting well are irrelevant for my argument. However, I will assume that voting well requires voting in compliance with some weighty moral requirements, and that requirements of justice and rescue are among these.

Voting well can be morally burdensome: voters often have to make considerable compromises to their moral convictions (Spang, 2023), face dilemmatic moral decisions, and vote strategically for candidates or parties that they judge to be morally objectionable or morally inferior to other options (Blais, 2000; Eggers & Vivyan, 2020; Geisz, 2006; Ridge, 2021). Specifically, 'lesser evil' type choice situations abound in democratic elections (Maskivker, 2019, pp. 147–152): to avoid the electoral victory of a candidate or party that stands for a greater injustice (the greater evil), voters may need to vote for a candidate or party whose platform represents a lesser injustice and who has a reasonable prospect of winning (the lesser evil), instead of a candidate or party with a more just policy platform (the ideal option, closest to the voters' moral convictions) – either because there is no such ideal option or because even if there is, it has no reasonable prospect of winning.²

The relevant moral burdens of lesser evil voting, as I understand them, are subjective: they concern compromising one's moral convictions (whether these convictions are objectively right or wrong) rather than violating objectively right moral norms. Such subjective moral burdens are potentially objectionable for the ethics of voting, but only conditionally: namely, only if they concern compromises to reasonable moral convictions. The extent of the burden depends on how far the lesser evil choice is from one's reasonable moral convictions.³

The morally right course of action, unfortunately, is often burdensome. Voting well is no exception. Indeed, democratic citizenship routinely requires us to compromise our convictions – for example, by obeying laws that we find unjust (Rostbøll, 2017; Rostbøll & Scavenius, 2018; Spang, 2023). It therefore seems clear that citizens can be required to shoulder moral burdens when voting – at least when considering each voter's moral burdens *non-*

comparatively, given her beliefs and the choices with which she is confronted, and disregarding whether anyone else bears similar moral burdens.

My interest, however, is in the *comparative moral burdens* that voting well can place on individuals and their implications for the ethics of voting. It might, of course, simply be a matter of bad circumstantial moral luck (Nagel, 1976) that some voters – but not others – happen to find themselves in a bad time and place where unfortunate factual circumstances trigger a duty to vote for the lesser evil and against their best convictions.⁴ Yet in a given election, voters' duties – regardless of their moral convictions – are objectively the same: all should vote for the lesser evil (whether or not they realize it) if a critical mass of their fellow citizens are expected to vote for the greater evil. So, objectively, there is no unequal bad circumstantial moral luck involved.

Voters across Europe and North America often face differential subjective moral burdens in voting, though, based on their political views, because not all voters feel the moral pull of lesser evil voting. Some may see – no matter how mistakenly or unreasonably – either the greater evil or – perhaps erroneously but not unreasonably – the lesser evil as their (subjectively) ideal candidate. Voters in either group suffer no subjective moral burdens of compromising on their own convictions: the former (mistakenly) see no reason to vote for the lesser evil, whereas the latter see no reason not to. By contrast to both, other voters suffer subjective moral burdens of compromise in voting for the lesser evil. Reasonable right-leaning voters may be less burdened with what they see as lesser evil voting situations than reasonable left-leaning voters in these regions.

Is the differential character of those burdens grounds for moral concern and, if so, why? After all, we can be morally required to compromise our ideals even if others are not. Nonetheless, as I will argue, significantly unequal moral burdens raise distinctively *political egalitarian* concerns that cannot be reduced to general, non-political concerns with moral equality or the incidence and distribution of moral luck in politics.

Two principles of political equality and the moral burdens of voting well

What, if anything, does political equality imply for the comparative burdens that people can be required to shoulder in order to vote morally well? It certainly does not always require that voters bear exactly equal moral burdens of voting well. Political egalitarian concerns with the differential burdens facing voters are relational, rather than directly distributive: they concern voters' equal political status, which is not unconditionally threatened by differential moral burdens. For example, not all sincere convictions about political morality are compelling, and fellow-citizens have no duty to agree

with our convictions. Hence, as voters, citizens may have to compromise with others to be politically effective and some of them may (and even should) have to compromise more than others.⁵ This does not threaten equal political status.

Political equality is fundamentally concerned with citizens' equal political status as co-rulers. This entails – or so I will argue – that we should accept what I will call *The Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle* as a demand of political equality. That principle holds that the moral burdens (absolute and comparative) that voters face when compromising their moral convictions should be in accordance with their *equal political status* as co-rulers. Hence, differential burdens can only be justified when they are consistent with this equal status. There are at least two political egalitarian reasons to uphold this requirement.

First, political equality entails a constitutive moral concern with equality. If voters in a democracy are tasked to realize justice together (Kapelner, 2022), and they have reasonable conceptions of justice, they can be members of equal status in the political community only if no group of them who share the same reasonable political convictions need to take disproportionate moral burdens in realizing justice compared to others with different reasonable convictions. Democratic decision-making is inevitably also about resolving moral disagreements – thus, it cannot be entirely free of moral burdens, as noted above. But for the same reason, it can be seen as a genuinely collective enterprise of realizing justice only if its moral burdens are not distributed very unequally among voters with reasonable conceptions of justice along political faultlines, at least in the long term.

Relatedly, the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle mediates between the collective duty of realizing justice and the moralized interest in being at home in the world (Christiano, 2008, p. 61). While taking part in discharging the former collective duty, voters with a reasonable conception of justice should also be able to feel at home in the political world where justice is realized with fellow voters. Thus, it matters whether and how often they need to compromise *their own* reasonable conception in the long term in exercising their political agency.⁶

Second, political equality entails an expressive concern with equality. If voters engage in collective self-government (Lovett & Zuehl, 2022; Stilz, 2016), and they have reasonable conceptions of justice, then the disproportionate distribution of significant moral burdens in realizing these would, over time, express disrespect for those who take the bulk of these burdens, given their reasonable conceptions of justice (cf. Schemmel, 2021). If the relevant moral burdens are distributed very unequally along the lines of reasonable moral disagreement in politics, such distribution means that some can only effectively contribute to collective self-government through voting by making severe compromises to their own moral convictions, whereas others can do so without such compromises. If such a disparity

persists in the long term, it expresses that individuals who hold some reasonable conceptions of justice (and corresponding political views) as well as the movements turning them into collective political action are owed less respect than others who hold other reasonable conceptions.⁷ In effect, the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle is a principle of reciprocity. It does not require reciprocity in citizens having their way but in making moral compromises.

Both political egalitarian concerns underlying the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle assume that voters' conceptions of justice are reasonable – hence, a legitimate subject of democratic arbitration among them – although potentially wrong. If a voter tries to realize an unreasonable conception of justice, making it disproportionately burdensome for her to pursue it is not morally objectionable in a democratic community tasked to realize justice or exercise collective self-government. Nor does it express disrespect for the person concerned. For instance, Nazi convictions are difficult to pursue in a well-ordered liberal democracy. Ideally, voters with such convictions have to compromise their convictions significantly and persistently more often than others. Yet this is not a concern for political equality, as these convictions are unreasonable.

As any requirement of political equality, the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle has implications for the design of democratic electoral institutions. While these institutions cannot redistribute moral burdens, they can mitigate or exacerbate them if they obtain objectionably unequally. Some voting systems generate subjectively more or less dilemmatic choice situations for some voters than other voting systems – for example, ranked choice voting alleviates the moral burdens of strategic lesser-evil voting compared to first-past-the-post voting systems (see Maskivker, 2019, p. 243). Thus, there are institutional solutions to 'level up'—i.e. to alleviate the moral burdens of voting well for everyone. The Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle does not prevail over all other moral considerations that guide the design of electoral institutions – or even over egalitarian ones among them.⁸ But it should be among those guiding the design of electoral institutions.

Beyond the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle, political equality has a specifically non-ideal principle governing moral compromise. The existence of specifically non-ideal political egalitarian principles is familiar from the literature on affirmative action in the political domain (Bengtson, 2022; Mráz, 2021, 2023). Yet less saliently, at least one non-ideal political egalitarian principle concerns the distribution of moral burdens. What I call the *No Double Burdens Principle* holds that it is unfair if the burdens of moral compromise in voting well disproportionately fall on precisely those who have been the victims of political and social injustices (henceforth: injustices) and/or have fought against these injustices or struggled against attempts to undermine the common good. The principle is ultimately grounded, as its ideal counterpart, the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle, in political equality.

It relies on the assumption that it is incompatible with the equal political status of citizens if a certain group of them *both* undertakes disproportionately more of the burdens of injustice and/or the burdens of mitigating or eliminating injustice, standing up against unreasonable fellow-citizens and parties threatening democracy or justice more broadly, *and* in that struggle, the same group has to compromise disproportionately more on their reasonable politico-moral convictions than fellow-citizens with a different political outlook.

Unlike ideal principles of political equality, non-ideal principles make reference to which political agents are related to injustice and how. For affirmative action, it matters which political agents have been victims of historical or present-day injustices (Anderson, 2010; Mráz, 2021). For a non-ideal egalitarian concern with moral burdens, by contrast, it matters both which agents have been victims of injustices and which ones are (or are associated with) the political fight against them. For instance, if in a given context, left-leaning voters have been the primary agents of fighting injustice and threats to democracy specifically, then it is unfair to disproportionately subject them to the moral burdens of voting well. Unlike what Elizabeth Anderson (2010) calls the compensatory model of affirmative action (p. 135), the No Double Burdens Principle cannot meaningfully require electoral institutions to *redistribute* burdens – for example, it cannot impose, as a corrective measure, differential moral burdens on some voters who have not been victims of injustice or associated with or voted for political forces historically engaged in fighting injustices. However, analogously to what Anderson (2010) calls the integrative model of affirmative action (pp. 148–149), the non-ideal principle requires that we establish and maintain institutions and social practices that relieve the disproportionate moral burdens of voters who have taken the bulk of (fighting) injustices.

But we have yet to see the action-guiding implications of these political egalitarian principles for individual voters. For that, we first need to consider how these principles apply to voting in different democratic contexts.

Moral burdens and political equality in well-ordered vs. highly non-ideal democracies

How do the political egalitarian principles discussed above – the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle and the No Double Burdens Principle – apply in different contexts? Let us first consider what I will refer to as *well-ordered democracies*: in such democracies, imperfect as these may be, a sufficiently wide range of political actors accept democratic ideals so that democratic institutions are not threatened, and most voters pursue reasonable conceptions of justice or the common good in voting.

In such circumstances, the moral weight and urgency of avoiding any greater evil are lower. Thus, voters morally committed to an ideal candidate – or a conception of justice not represented by any candidate – have less reason to compromise their moral convictions by voting for a lesser evil. In fact, even if voters compromise, this may not be so burdensome for any voters in a well-ordered democracy. Thus, even if the moral burdens of compromise disproportionately affect voters on one side of the political spectrum, they are not so severe as to threaten the affected voters' equal political status. Hence, no conflict arises between political equality and the moral reasons to vote for the lesser evil because political equality is not even at risk. Moreover, if the greater evil is objectively less objectionable (i.e. not so great), there is less reason – and arguably no duty – to vote against it. Then, a further reason why political equality and the moral reasons or duty to vote for the lesser evil do not conflict is that the latter apply only weakly, or not at all, in well-ordered democracies.

For example, assume (with some idealization) that Sweden was a well-ordered democracy in the second half of the 20th century. For most of this period, Social Democrats were in power. Assume that reasonable right-leaning voters thought they had good reason, perhaps regularly, to compromise their own convictions and vote for the Social Democrats to avoid some greater evil – and assume this was not the case for reasonable left-leaning voters. Yet the compromises were not so severe as to undermine equal political status because of the reasonableness and hence relative closeness of the different parties' platforms – and these compromises were not so pressing, either, assuming the greater evil was not so great. Thus, the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle was not infringed at all. Further, the No Double Burdens Principle did not even get triggered, as it would have required a historically sustained, disproportionate moral burden of voting well, falling on those suffering and/or fighting against injustice.

By contrast, the context that I will refer to as *highly non-ideal democracies* is characterized by sufficiently large numbers of political actors – parties and voters – who actively support democracy-undermining, unreasonable political decisions in them, and institutional design that does not reliably protect democracies against these outcomes. In such a context, as political actors act on unreasonable conceptions of justice or in bad faith, moral burdens systematically fall on a subset of the electorate with particular political views, repeatedly facing them, and them disproportionately, with the need to compromise their convictions in order to prevent elections resulting in democracy-threatening outcomes.

This is one of the present-day complaints of democracy-supporting, reasonable left-leaning voters in several elections in Europe and North America, from France and Hungary to the USA. In a very skewed political race, reasonable conceptions of justice compete with unreasonable far-

right ones – and out of the arguably reasonable conceptions, substantively right-centrist conceptions are often the ones with a genuine prospect of electoral victory – though sometimes represented by parties that used to be associated with more social democratic agendas earlier. In such contexts, as reasonable voters should also compensate for unreasonable voters' omission to pursue reasonable conceptions of justice, reasonable left-leaning voters may need to make considerably more severe moral compromises in voting for the lesser evil candidate than reasonable right-leaning voters, in an effort to realize justice and mitigate injustices – and defend democracy, in particular. These more serious compromises may exacerbate an already existing crisis of unequal electoral representation exploited by far-right populism (Malkopoulou, 2020): left-leaning potential voters even have to overcome differential, disproportionate moral burdens too in voting (well), which may plausibly deepen their disaffection. If, in other circumstances, it is reasonable right-leaning voters who take disproportionately more of these burdens, the following analysis can be applied to their case as well, *mutatis mutandis*.

The disproportionate burdens infringe both the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle and the No Double Burdens Principle. If reasonable left-leaning voters suffer disproportionately more moral burdens in discharging a duty of lesser evil voting, the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle is infringed. In the long term, such a distribution of the moral burdens of upholding justice is incompatible with the ideal of realizing justice together in a democratic community. It also expresses disrespect for reasonable left-leaning voters as it offers them little to no practical opportunity to act on their conception of justice as a contribution to collective self-government. Setting aside their own reasonable conception of justice, they must habitually compromise their moral convictions in elections, in the face of recurrent battles of a lesser evil alliance against the greater evil. Moreover, if it is reasonable left-leaning voters who have been the historical agents of fighting injustices in the given context, and/or they have taken the bulk of injustices, then their disproportionate moral burdens also infringe the No Double Burdens Principle. Indeed, in the political history of Western Europe and North America, it has been arguably the political left that pursued justice most emphatically through challenging the structural bases of injustice throughout the modern, capitalist history of these regions.⁹ (If it were right-leaning reasonable voters to take disproportionate moral burdens, then the No Double Burdens Principle would not be infringed, but only the Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle, given the political history of Western Europe and North America.)

What follows, then, for the ethics of voting in such highly non-ideal democracies? To answer that question, we need to examine how populism contributes to (which) voters' moral burdens in this context.

Populism and voters as rescuers

I focus here specifically on the non-ideal circumstances of the rise of populism – especially far-right populism – and its significance for the ethics of voting. I argue that such populism can push reasonable voters into the role of rescuers of democracy (cf. Malkopoulou & Norman, 2018) – and thereby also partly determines their duties as voters. For my purposes, two approaches – a liberal and a more radical democratic conception – of populism will be helpful to distinguish.

On the liberal conception, populism is antiliberal and anti-pluralistic by definition (see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, Müller, 2016, Urbinati, 2019). Populist political forces on this approach characteristically make a representative claim on behalf of The People but exclude a large part of the political community from The People. They do not recognize political pluralism as legitimate, and hence threaten pluralistic, liberal democracy. In our times, the rise of right-wing antiliberal populism in Europe and North America often generates lesser evil choice situations for voters. If the electoral victory of far-right populists is very likely and imminently threatens democracy (thus constituting a greater evil option), then preventing them from winning becomes a moral priority in elections. In the short term, that is typically possible only with a wide and centrist alliance or coalition – a ‘popular front’ – against the populist far-right. Such an alliance is characteristically seen as a lesser evil by more idealist, reasonable left-leaning voters who fall further from the center. Thus, in the short term, such left-leaning voters can only contribute to defending democracy through voting by taking the bulk of the burdens of moral compromises.

Reasonable right-leaning and left-leaning voters are not necessarily – or even typically – symmetrically affected by such circumstances. The right-wing populist threat is imminent and serious precisely because of the radicalization of the right side of the political spectrum (Wodak, 2015), accompanied by a shift of the political spectrum to the right. This is why centrist coalitions hope to defeat the far-right with right-centrist platforms (cf. Kurella & Rosset, 2017).¹⁰ Thus, far-right populism creates disproportionate moral burdens for reasonable left-leaning voters. This differential burden is an infringement of political equality, as explained above.

It is not only antiliberal, anti-pluralistic populism that contributes to this distribution of moral burdens, but also another conception of populism which is often deployed in reaction to antiliberal populism. What I will refer to as ‘restorative populism’ is less of a political ideology and more of a political strategy, originally proposed by the radical left (see, e.g. Laclau, 2007; Mouffe, 2018; cf.; Kaltwasser, 2012’s ‘corrective populism’). It involves making a representative claim on behalf of a large enough population to

create a popular front and challenge existing political hegemonies. While originally offered as a counterhegemonic strategy for the radical left by Laclau and Mouffe, it can, and has, become the political strategy of right-centrist alliances to defend democracy against antiliberal far-right populist forces – whether the latter are already in power or only aspiring for power.¹¹

These two, very different conceptions of populism are not morally equivalent, as restorative populism is not anti-pluralistic by definition – neither in its original, radical leftist version, nor in its right-centrist form. Yet both impose burdens on reasonable left-leaning voters by pressing them to vote for larger, morally suspect coalitions. More idealist, reasonable left-leaning voters, or simply reasonable left-leaning voters who have been victims of injustices, are offered wide alliances that are difficult not to feel morally alienated from – alliances that are highly likely to compromise their moral integrity. Both far-right populism and right-centrist restorative populism as a reaction to it create weighty moral reasons for lesser-evil voting – and while these reasons apply universally, they predictably create disproportionate moral burdens for left-leaning voters, who may feel compelled by such reasons but have to heavily compromise to comply with them.

Such burdens, when they occur systemically, infringe reasonable left-leaning voters' political equality. But does that justify relaxing the moral demands that the ethics of voting imposes on them? To decide, we need to look at our last piece of the puzzle: duties of rescue and the moral significance of unfairly distributed burdens of rescue.

Duties of rescue and moral slack-taking

Citizens of democracies should contribute to defending democracy in general – but whether they should vote with that purpose in mind depends on whether democratic defense becomes a matter of rescue. To rescue somebody or something is to defend them or it by averting a significant, imminent threat to them or it. If lesser-evil voting against far-right populism is a means of rescuing democracy, that is a weighty reason to vote for the lesser evil. Duties of rescue have a special moral status: they enjoy priority over a number of other moral concerns. Hence, it is crucial to see whether voters' duties to vote for a lesser evil are indeed duties of rescue – and if so, what follows with regard to the unfairness of the moral burdens some of them need to bear as rescuers.

Rescue or urgent aid are due only if the following conditions are satisfied (Maskivker, 2019, pp. 140–141; Stemplowska, 2019, p. 150). First, the threat to be averted should be morally significant. If anti-pluralist populists are likely to undermine democratic institutions – including fundamental political rights – and these efforts are made in the context of weak democracy-protective

institutions, or they are steps taken already in the context of advanced democratic decline, this condition is met. Second, the threat must be imminent rather than long-term or indirect because it is its imminent nature that justifies the special burdens of a duty of rescue. This assumes that far-right populist parties plan to undermine democratic institutions within the electoral cycle. If these two conditions are not met, democracy may still need to be defended but not rescued.

Third, voters must be in an adequate position to provide help to avert this imminent threat (Maskivker, 2019, p. 136). In other words, voting for the lesser evil should be an effective means to avert the threat. For this to be the case, several conditions should be met. Voters need to be sufficiently numerous to form a successful electoral alliance against far-right populist challengers. The lesser evil party should be able to attract these voters. The electoral process should retain its integrity, and far-right populists should respect the outcome of the election.

Fourth, electoral participation should also be a necessary means of rescuing democracy. Voting should not be only one of the several effective means but the only available or morally least costly means for voters to defend democracy. This condition turns, to a large extent, on the robustness and unity of the party threatening democracy, as well as on the robustness of counter-majoritarian institutions and the prospects of successful post-electoral civic contestation against antidemocratic changes (Weyland, 2024). If these institutions and civic contestation are unlikely to suffice to avert the antidemocratic threat, then voting to prevent the victory of the far-right populist party seems necessary to defend democracy. Otherwise, even if there is a duty to defend democracy, citizens can discharge it in other ways, and the duty to vote to rescue is a disjunctive duty at best.

Fifth and finally, the costs of rescue should not be unreasonable (Maskivker, 2019, pp. 37–38; 74). Although the material costs of voting well are often negligible, the moral burdens of voting well for the lesser evil are non-negligible by assumption and should not be excessive. Nevertheless, the costs are not required to be low.

When these different conditions are met, the duty to rescue democracy applies to those voters too who take disproportionate moral burdens in discharging it compared to other voters for whom voting to defend democracy is considerably less burdensome – as well as to those who mistakenly or deliberately vote for the democracy-threatening populist far-right. However, can this *pro tanto* duty of rescue be relaxed or undermined due to the unfairness of how its moral burdens are distributed? After all, the costs (i.e. the moral burdens) of defending democracy through voting could be even lower, or even nil, if more voters – including right-leaning voters – also contributed to the cause (cf. Lever & Volacu, 2018). Moreover, the need to rescue democracy might not arise in the first place if others did their share in

realizing justice together within a political community. Thus, the moral burdens imposed on reasonable left-leaning voters are an example of *taking up the slack*: i.e. accepting a more-than-fair share of the burdens of a collective, morally significant enterprise (Miller, 2016; Stemplowska, 2019, p. 150). Are voters disproportionately burdened by rescue required to take up this slack? That is, are they required to vote for the lesser evil to defend democracy here and now?

The literature on the ethics of refugee admissions can help to illuminate the problem of prioritizing between duties of rescue and the fairness of (potential) rescuers' burdens. A prominent view in this literature holds that if one's burdens of contributing to urgent aid or rescue arise (partly or entirely) out of others' morally objectionable conduct and are unfair, this by itself does not relax or undermine one's duty to contribute to the rescue (Stemplowska, 2016, p. 594). The reason is that it would undermine the point of a duty of rescue to allow fairness and egalitarian considerations to prevail over it.¹² In other words, the argumentative effort has to focus here on establishing whether an act of democratic defense against far-right populism is a form of rescue. If it is, prioritizing between rescue and fairness to rescuers requires little further argumentative effort.

Implications for democratic defense through voting

What are the implications of the foregoing for voters who would need to take unfair moral burdens in voting well against the far-right populist threat in highly non-ideal democracies?

As we have seen, voters have no duty to defend democracy by voting for the lesser evil if this is unlikely, or unnecessary, to halt the election of the greater one – namely, the far-right populist party—, or if the threat of such a victory (to democracy) is not imminent. They may have weighty moral reasons to vote for the lesser evil, nonetheless – for example, to prevent other severe injustices of the populist far right, or as part of an expressive repudiation of the latter, or to pre-empt threats to democracy before they become imminent. However, as duties of *rescuing* democracy would not be at stake in such cases, it is *pro tanto* permissible for left-leaning voters, given the unfair burdens they would incur by voting for the lesser evil, to *abstain* or *vote for the candidate closest to their moral and political ideals*. Where urgent rescue is needed (of people or institutions), abstention or an unwillingness to compromise in voting can both be morally wrong. By contrast, they may be morally permissible, all else equal, in less morally urgent situations, if taking up those duties would mean shouldering disproportionate moral burdens.

The argument I have presented offers, then, a *pro tanto* moral reason not to engage in abstention as protest, nor protest voting against the lesser evil, nor voting for more ideal candidates on the left who have no reasonable

prospect of winning against the populist far-right (i.e. the greater evil). Reasonable left-leaning voters, especially more idealist ones or victims of injustices, may feel morally compelled to abstain in choice situations like this or vote for their ideal candidate even if they have no prospect of winning – and even if that increases the prospect of the greater evil winning. And they indeed have a *pro tanto* justified complaint: *Why them again?* My account illuminates that it is *pro tanto* unfair and incompatible with their status as political equals that the moral burden of the duty to rescue ultimately falls disproportionately on them. Yet that complaint, while well-grounded, is not sufficient to undermine the duty to rescue, when the latter applies.

This does not settle whether reasonable left-leaning voters in these situations should, all things considered, vote for the lesser evil. The competing considerations covered here – political equality vs. a duty of rescue – are weighty and significant, but they are not the only ones that bear on this question. For one, left-leaning voters may be worried that the election they are considering participating in is no longer a democratic election—e.g. it offers a less-than-legitimate choice set, or that it serves non-democratic functions such as acclaiming the greater evil (Yudin, 2022). Accordingly, they may be worried, sometimes justifiably, about ‘legitimizing’ an illegitimate election. Still, the foregoing is meant to offer a strong *pro tanto* consideration in favor of a duty to vote for the lesser evil in the highly non-ideal circumstances of the looming far-right populist threat to democracy.

However, a further complication is internal to the normative framework of this paper. The moral weightiness of the duty of rescue is most convincing when the factual circumstances triggering it are temporally limited. But what if the need to rescue is not the exception but becomes the rule? Can reasonable left-leaning voters be required to take the moral burdens of rescue without any end in sight, for several consecutive elections? This framing of the concern seems to be closer to the phenomenology of left-leaning voters in an age of growing far-right populism and continuous democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016). Defending democracy is not a one-off act of successful rescue – conclusively averting a threat – but a long-standing task that recurrently requires sacrifice from various actors. Without adequate non-electoral action taken between elections to defend democracy, voters encounter rescue situations repeatedly. The main concern here is that on a deontological account, the duty of rescue cannot be endless. The longer or the more recurrently the need for rescue obtains, one might object, the stronger the case for arguing that the costs of rescue are unreasonable – and hence no duty of rescue applies (anymore).

To assess the force of the objection, we should consider how such voting situations come about. If the duty of rescue is repeatedly triggered at elections, one may ask if at least some of the voters complaining of the moral

burden have not actually contributed to the recurrence of this burden – for example, by omitting to act on their duty to realize justice between elections, by means such as political organization and mobilization. Such omissions could well make voters liable to bear the moral burdens of a dilemmatic electoral choice in lesser evil voting situations, reducing the moral weight of these burdens as the costs of rescue in a given context – even if they recur. We then have a weaker case for applying the No Double Burdens Principle to voters who are liable to bear those burdens – yet victims of injustices are an exception, shielded from such liability. This counts against regarding the moral burdens of at least some (but not all) reasonable left-leaning voters as unreasonable costs of rescue and hence as undermining their duty of lesser-evil voting.

Further, the case against abstention is even stronger, despite the recurrence of the need for rescue, if continued electoral participation is an effective means of defending democracy in the long term. If voters abstain or vote for ideal candidates without any chance of gaining office, they can be perceived as no hindrance at all to the far-right populists' anti-democratic agenda. They may engage in protests but if they do not electorally contest the far-right in the most effective ways, the far-right sees no impediment in pursuing its agenda (cf. Elliott, 2023; Mill, 1861).¹³ Finally and generally, the moral burden of voting for the lesser evil is not typically the kind of burden that makes it impossible for one to live an autonomous life or to shape, revise and execute one's life plan (cf., e.g. Raz, 1988). Thus, a major deontological consideration that generally supports a temporally limited duty of rescue is irrelevant to the kind of electoral rescue that left-leaning voters (too) are asked to engage in repeatedly.

None of this is to deny the continued unfairness and political inequality involved in a situation where left-leaning voters should take the moral burdens of rescuing democracy through lesser evil voting against rising far-right populism. That said, if the duty of rescue applies in the first place to the situation at hand – which varies case by case – then it entails a *pro tanto* duty of lesser evil voting, despite the unfair distribution of the moral burdens involved in complying with it.

Conclusion

This paper makes normative sense of the complaint of reasonable left-leaning voters who are repeatedly expected to vote for a right-centrist lesser evil to avoid the electoral victory of the greater evil: the rising populist far-right. I have argued that voters so situated can have a morally sound complaint against this expectation, grounded in political equality. It is incompatible with voters' equal political status in the collective venture of realizing justice or collective self-determination if, in the long term, significant moral burdens of

voting well fall disproportionately on voters with a particular reasonable conception of justice. Moreover, it is especially unfair if these burdens fall disproportionately on those who have taken the bulk of the burdens of injustice or the struggles against it. While moral compromises are not inherently objectionable in democratic decision-making, reasonable left-leaning voters in Europe and North America at present bear a disproportionate share of burdensome compromises as they repeatedly find themselves in lesser evil voting situations – mostly due to the populist far-right.

Yet I have shown that the unfair distribution of voters' moral burdens is not always sufficient to relieve voters from a duty to vote for the lesser evil if the latter duty is grounded in a duty to rescue democracy from the populist far-right's imminent threat. When this is the case, it falls on reasonable left-leaning voters too to discharge this duty through severe compromises. The account outlined here stops short of offering an all-things-considered case for lesser evil voting in such situations – but it allows us to recognize the moral grounds of the reasonable left-leaning voter's complaint and to adjudicate between its grounds and one crucial countervailing moral consideration.

Parties and candidates often abuse the moral language of rescue. My account illuminates why a political elite that has failed to address the social, economic and political root causes of far-right populism may strategically abuse the morality of rescue. In many cases, a failing political elite portrays lesser evil voting as a duty of rescue only to shirk responsibility for the continued threat of far-right populism and shift all responsibility for it to voters. My argumentation does not support such a denial of the responsibility of political elites for these developments. If there is no need to rescue democracy, or the lesser evil parti(es) merely pose as rescuers, my argumentation implies that it is unfair to expect some voters to vote for the lesser evil. When lesser evil parties call on voters to vote for them in consecutive elections, the repeated nature of the request does not undermine the duty of rescue but raises the suspicion that these parties abuse the morality of rescue to hold on to power.

The Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle condemns the disproportionate moral burdens of voting well, whether they fall on reasonable left-leaning or reasonable right-leaning voters. Not all actual political actors on the left are reasonable and pro-democratic, and in principle, choice situations could arise where the far-left poses a threat to democracy, creating disproportionate burdens for right-leaning voters, who should make significant compromises by voting for a left-centrist lesser evil. The No Double Burdens Principle likewise condemns if the moral burdens of defending democracy and mitigating injustices fall disproportionately on those who have been suffering injustices and/or seeking justice all along, whoever this group happens to be. Thus, my account generalizes, in principle, beyond the situations discussed. However, the expository focus on left-leaning voters is not entirely

contingent. The history of modern democracy is accompanied by capitalist economic and social elites' attempts to overturn democratic politico-moral progress – and such attempts are historically associated with the far-right.

Finally, despite its normative focus, the present paper also gestures towards an empirical research agenda. Inequalities of representation and participation may correlate not only with socio-economic status but also with the differential moral burdens of political participation. The moral reasons to rescue democracy may not provide *all* eligible voters with sufficient (or even similar) levels of motivation to vote, given the unequal distribution of moral burdens. Yet more empirical evidence is needed to assess whether these burdens could partly explain the levels and distribution of electoral participation in contexts of democratic backsliding.

Notes

1. Three caveats are due. First, in principle, right-leaning voters could face a similar choice situation if the lesser evil relative to the far-right greater evil were a social democratic, left-centrist option. However, currently, this is not the prevalent case in European and North American contexts – hence my expository focus on left-leaning voters. Second, nonetheless, my argument is applicable to potential similar threats, if any, from the far-left, affecting right-leaning voters, in a different place and time. Third, in some contexts, the populist far-right takes on board some welfarist demands that also align with left-leaning voters' conceptions of justice. Voters may, then, face a different choice situation: by refusing to vote for the far-right, they compromise some of their own leftist convictions too. By voting for a centrist lesser evil, they opt against the only party committed to welfarist policies – sadly, the far-right. Although this is not how I frame the choice situation I focus on, my findings apply to such cases too, *mutatis mutandis*, as they also involve *pro tanto* unfair compromises that left-leaning voters should take to contribute to defending democracy from a far-right populist threat.
2. It alleviates but does not eliminate the moral burdens if voters can make *more* choices – i.e. when electoral systems *also* allow them to cast a ballot for their ideal candidate or party – as long as they still should contribute to a lesser evil option too, for example, on another ballot.
3. An anonymous reviewer objected that if voters can eliminate the injustice of their own subjective moral burdens by changing their moral beliefs, then subjective burdens cannot be the appropriate object of moral concern. First, however, politico-moral convictions cannot be (rationally) changed at will – ideally, they form part of a system of moral beliefs, and sometimes even our political identities. Second, it is common to be morally concerned with subjective burdens even when they result from false moral convictions. Accounts of conscientious objection concerned with moral integrity illustrate the point (e.g. Wicclair, 2017).
4. Maskivker, (2019, pp. 137–138) refers to Lockean 'duties of time and place' when arguing for a duty to vote.

5. An anonymous reviewer notes that the subjective burdens of more idealist voters can also arise because of their too otherworldly views.
6. Voters may not have a morally relevant positive interest in ‘correspondence’ between their own judgments and collective political decisions (Kolodny, 2014, p. 327). Yet they have a morally relevant negative interest in avoiding that they *disproportionately less frequently* have an opportunity than some of their fellow citizens to exercise their political agency by voting for parties or candidates who substantively represent their best judgments.
7. The point is not to aim for equality of views but of persons, and for relational rather than merely distributive equality of persons. In other words, the idea is *not* that each possible reasonable conception of justice should be equally morally burdensome to hold. The relational Egalitarian Moral Burdens Principle *may* entail a *pro tanto* distributive requirement that it should be equally morally burdensome (subjectively) for each person with a reasonable conception of justice, over a long term, to participate in political decision-making. Yet it is not committed to this implication in all circumstances.
8. Political egalitarian requirements may conflict with one another as well. See, e.g. Mráz (2023).
9. I will assume this historically contentious point for the sake of the argument – if readers disagree, they can productively pursue the implications of my argument for a different political force.
10. Even if some right-leaning voters consider it burdensome that they can only get their way on some issues by voting for the populist far-right, this burden carries no moral weight. Moral compromises matter morally only if they involve compromising on reasonable conceptions of justice (which some right-leaning voters may indeed have) for the sake of realizing justice by morally permissible means. The latter necessary condition is not met in this case.
11. Two qualifications are due. First, restorative populism so understood is a theoretical ideal type of political strategy. While the term might seem interchangeable with ‘left populism’ (esp. following Mouffe), not all restorative populists are left populists (right-centrist restorative populists arguably include PiS’s successful challenger, Donald Tusk, in Poland; or Fidesz’s recent challengers in Hungary: Péter Márki-Zay in 2022 or Péter Magyar in 2024–2025; or Friedrich Merz of the CDU/CSU countering far-right populist AfD in Germany in 2024), and not all who call themselves left populists engage in restorative populism (e.g. Jean-Luc Mélenchon is arguably a counterexample). Second, far-right, anti-pluralist populism is not always countered by right-centrist restorative populism. Nonetheless, when it is, it unfortunately adds to rather than eases the burdens of more idealist, reasonable left-leaning voters.
12. For a contrary view, see Miller (2016).
13. Abstaining or voting for the ideal candidate instead of tolerating a lesser evil for a long while can also be a form of protest against inadequate representation. This is a significant consideration that I take up elsewhere. My focus here is only on the conflict between the unfair moral burdens that compromise political equality and the duty of rescue.

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