

In Defense of Voting Method Publicity

Aylon Manor¹

University of Maryland

Abstract: The ideal of publicity plays an important role in contemporary legal and political philosophy. Yet, to date, it has not been brought to bear on the question of voting method choice. This paper aims to fix this. I argue that voting method publicity is a well-motivated requirement which reveals tradeoffs inherent to democracy between procedural and epistemic equality. I further explore the implications of voting method publicity to the normative status of plurality voting and its possible alternatives.

Keywords: publicity, voting theory, social choice, political equality, electoral reform
plurality voting

Introduction

The ideal of universal and equal suffrage is typically considered to be the cornerstone of democracy. Yet, when it comes to the institutional realization of this ideal, we find that democracies vary widely in terms of the method they use to translate the votes of citizens into political outcomes. Democratic theorists thus have good reason to articulate normative desiderata to guide our choice between alternative (yet still democratic) voting methods.

To give compelling answers to the question of voting method choice, theorists draw on two main analytical perspectives. The first—social choice theory—treats voting methods as mathematical functions, examining the formal properties of different methods. This perspective is useful insofar as certain mathematical properties are thought to capture normatively significant features of group decision-making. The second analytical perspective—democratic theory focused on electoral reform—situates the question of voting method choice in a particular social and political context. The context relevant to this paper’s discussion is present-day American politics. This second perspective is useful insofar as there may be substantive, context-specific social and political goals which could be hindered or facilitated through the choice of voting method.

¹ amanor@umd.edu

The above perspectives generate various considerations for and against different voting methods. For example, economists Partha Dasgupta and Eric Maskin (2004, 2008) apply the tools of social choice theory (building particularly on the work of Arrow 1951) to argue for the "robustness" of majority rule.¹ They conclude, on the basis of that analysis, that majority rule is a fairer system than all of its alternatives. A different perspective on the matter is offered by legal scholar Lani Guinier. Guinier (1994) claims that majoritarian systems unfairly disadvantage persistent minorities. She argues in favor of cumulative voting as a better system to represent and advance the interests of persistent (particularly racial) minorities.

Notwithstanding differences of the above kind, both perspectives are chiefly concerned with procedural equality. The first interprets this equality independently of any background social conditions. The second interprets this equality in the light of such background factors. The primary purpose of this paper is to show that the ideal of democracy, as it applies to voting methods, involves not only *procedural* equality but also *epistemic* equality. I will argue that Voting Method Publicity (VMP), the degree to which the voting method is equally understood by citizens, is a key democratic desideratum. In so arguing, I bridge philosophical discussions of publicity with political discussions of electoral reform. The theoretical upshot is to clarify the ideal of democracy and the tradeoffs between procedural and epistemic equality therein. The practical upshot is to provide a new consideration for and against different voting methods on offer.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section presents an analytical framework for characterizing different publicity requirements and the normative arguments in their defense. Following that, I present the requirement this paper defends: voting method publicity. I situate VMP in relation to other publicity requirements in terms of both content and justification. I draw out the relation between VMP and democracy via the notion of epistemic equality. I note the distinctiveness of epistemic equality in relation to both procedural and substantive desiderata. Having presented the main argument, I turn to address two notable objections to VMP: that it expresses disrespect for the intellect of some citizens and that it leads to a *reductio* given the complexity of governing modern technological societies. Having presented and defended VMP, I turn to draw out its practical implications. Most notably, I suggest that VMP offers a *pro-tanto* justification for the use of plurality voting. I further explore the implications of VMP to some

proposed alternatives to plurality. I conclude by reflecting on the normative significance of epistemic equality to a just polity.

Publicity: an Analytical Framework

The goal of this paper is to present and defend a publicity requirement that applies to voting methods. But what are publicity requirements? Put differently, what do philosophers and other normative theorists mean by the term ‘publicity’? This question brings into view a conceptual challenge captured by Brian Kogelmann’s observation that “publicity means many things to many people” (Kogelmann 2021a, p. 34).

In light of this situation, it is useful to begin our discussion by laying out an analytical framework through which we can generate a taxonomy of publicity requirements proposed in the literature.² This conceptual exercise will then allow us to get a clearer sense of where VMP fits within the broader normative discussion of publicity. The main tool in the analytical framework I present here is a tripartite method for characterizing publicity requirements. Characterizing a requirement, under this framework, requires answering three questions. The first is what I call the question of *object*: what is the item (or set of items), to which the publicity requirement applies? The second is what I refer to as the question of *constituency*: what group of people constitute the relevant “public” vis-à-vis the requirement? The third and final question is what I term the question of *relation*: what epistemic relation has to obtain between the constituency and the object in order to satisfy the publicity requirement?

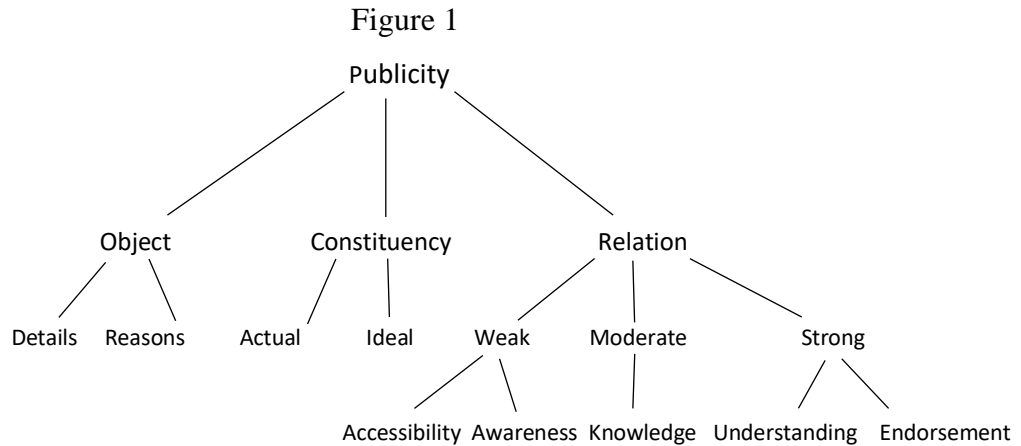
Let us now look at how each of these three questions can help us compare and contrast different publicity requirements proposed in the literature. Starting with the question of object, we can roughly categorize publicity requirements as applying to two types of objects: *details* and *reasons*. Publicity of details concerns the *content* of rules, decisions, and actions. Publicity of reasons concerns the *considerations* that inform or motivate rules, decisions, and actions. For example, legal theorists have argued that the rule of law requires that the details of laws and regulations applying to a society be made public to members of that society (Fuller 1963; Hayek 2007). Legal theorists have also argued for judicial publicity—the idea that judges should sincerely reveal the considerations informing their verdicts (Shapiro 1987). Similarly, democratic theorists have argued that various *details*, such as budgetary allocations (Musso et al. 2006), the proceedings of legislatures and committees (Postema 2013, 2017), and the content of

representatives' ballots (Lever 2007), should meet standards of publicity. Meanwhile, political philosophers have also argued that the *considerations* informing or justifying governmental institutions and their decisions should be made public (Rawls 1971; Waldron 2001; Williams 1966). Some have even argued that strong publicity requirements apply to religious practices and beliefs (Hobbes 1994, p. 242; Rousseau 2019, Book IV, ch.8).

Next, we turn to the question of constituency. In the case of legal theory, the public is typically defined as all competent adults who fall under the relevant jurisdiction. Depending on the content of the requirement (in terms of object and relation), the constituency might be narrowed to relevant specialists (say patent lawyers). John Rawls, a notable proponent of publicity, famously defines the relevant constituency as all members of the polity who hold reasonable comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1993). How to interpret the Rawlsian notion of reasonableness is a question I will not address here.³ An important distinction to draw, *vis-à-vis* the question of constituency, is between the *actual* and an *ideal* public. Kant, Rawls' philosophical forbearer, likewise argued in defense of a publicity condition applying to rules and institutions. Unlike Rawls, however, Kant's notion of publicity has been interpreted as a *hypothetical* test institutions must pass. The Kantian test employs an ideally rational and moral public as the relevant constituency (Davis 1992). All the notions of publicity I will be exploring in this paper depart from Kant in addressing the actual public as their constituency.

Finally, we turn to the question of relation. Here we can break things down along a continuum which goes from less epistemically demanding requirements to stronger ones. The weakest epistemic relation, *vis-à-vis* publicity, is that of accessibility. Requirements of accessibility are met iff the constituency has access to the object, in the sense that they can, if they so choose, become informed about it. Put differently, accessibility is satisfied so long as the object is not kept secret from the constituency. Another relatively weak epistemic relation with regard to publicity is that of awareness. The constituency can be defined as being aware of an object iff they know of its existence and potential relevance to certain things. A stronger relation is that of knowledge, where the constituency knows the details or reasons to which the publicity requirement applies. Stronger than knowledge is the relation of common knowledge, where the constituency knows the details or reasons, knows that other members of the public know them, and knows that other members know they know them (Celano 2013). Closely related to knowledge is the notion of understanding. I will say more about the distinction between the two

(knowledge and understanding) later on. Finally, we might mention the notion of endorsement, a relation that plays a role in the Rawlsian public reason notion of publicity.⁴ Figure 1 depicts the above framework for characterizing publicity requirements.

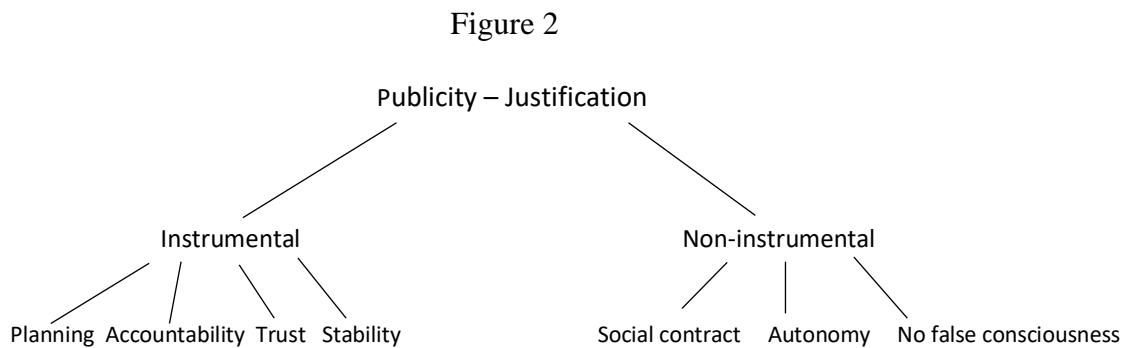


Having gotten a handle on the characteristics of different publicity requirements, we now turn to examine the kinds of normative arguments that have been offered in their defense. These arguments can be broadly categorized into two types. *Instrumental* arguments claim that publicity should be achieved as a means to net some other thing of value. *Non-instrumental* arguments claim that publicity is a valuable end in itself.

We have previously mentioned the idea that laws and regulations should be made public. A central instrumental argument in defense of this requirement is that satisfying this form of legal publicity helps individuals plan and pursue their goals in a way that aligns with the rules of their society (Hayek 2007, p. 114). A non-instrumental argument for this same requirement claims that the laws and regulations governing a society form an implicit contract between the state and its citizens. Knowledge of the terms of a contract is a necessary condition for the contract to be binding. Consequently, citizens should know the rules governing their society (Fuller 1963).

In the context of democratic theory, we mentioned publicity requirements involving political transparency. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, the originators of utilitarianism, give instrumental arguments in defense of such institutional publicity. They contend that transparency at the level of legislatures and executive agencies yields increased accountability of

representatives and officials, as well as increased public trust in these institutions (Bentham 1999, pp. 30, 37; Mill 2015, pp. 227, 323). Both Thomas Hobbes and John Rawls argue for publicity of the reasons informing political institutions on the instrumental ground of increasing institutional stability (Waldron 2001, Garthoff 2016, p. 292). Rawls, going beyond Hobbes, offers non-instrumental arguments for publicity. Publicity, construed as endorsement, enables persons to live under rules and institutions they approve of, realizing their autonomy in the Kantian sense of the term (Rawls 1993, p. 77). Publicity, construed as knowledge, means people are not subject to ideologies, understood as what Marx referred to as forms of false consciousness (Rawls 2001, p. 121). Figure 2 depicts the above typology of normative justifications for publicity.



This section presented a general framework through which different publicity requirements can be categorized and understood. We saw that each such requirement is made up of three components: an object, a constituency, and a relation between the two. We unpacked each of the three components by pointing to further distinctions: details vs. reasons, actual vs. ideal public, and different grades of epistemic relations. We also explored arguments theorists have offered in defense of their respective publicity requirements. The main distinction drawn here was between instrumental and non-instrumental arguments for publicity. With this conceptual terrain covered, I now proceed to present and motivate VMP.

Voting Method Publicity

As the name indicates, the object of this requirement is voting methods. A voting method is a rule or function that receives the ballots of voters as input and produces as output a determination of a winner/s from the set of candidates or alternatives on the agenda. The constituency of this

requirement are all eligible voters in a given election. The epistemic relation required between the voting method and the voters is that of understanding. As promised, I will now delve a bit deeper into the notion of understanding and examine how it relates to that of knowledge vis-à-vis publicity requirements.

In specifying the variety of epistemic relations, I mentioned both knowledge and understanding as among the “stronger” relations that might be required between constituency and object. These two notions (knowledge and understanding) are, of course, the focus of many discussions in the epistemology literature. For our purposes, however, we need not attempt a deep conceptual analysis of the terms. The reason I introduce the distinction between the two is in order to note something important about the kind of object a voting method is.

Publicity of the voting method falls, under this paper’s framework, as publicity of details (as contrasted with reasons). However, voting methods are peculiar kinds of details, in the following sense. A voting method is a type of mechanism/social technology for group decision-making. Viewed as such, it becomes clearer why the relation of understanding is more apt than that of knowledge vis-à-vis voting methods. Compare, for example: “I *know* the Google search engine algorithm” with: “I *understand* the Google search engine algorithm”. The language of understanding seems more natural when we are talking about mechanisms. In some sense then, we could further subdivide publicity of details into publicity of non-mechanistic information and publicity of mechanistic information. Another important aspect of the notion of understanding, one that contrasts it with that of knowledge, is the fact that it admits of degrees.⁵ One can have different levels of understanding about some object or mechanism. I will say more about this scalar aspect of understanding later on.

Now that we have characterized the notion of VMP, I can proceed to present the normative case in its defense. The first thing we might observe is that VMP bears some similarity to the notion of legal publicity we have previously discussed, i.e., publicity of laws and regulations. The object of both of these notions are rules, and their constituency is in both cases the group of individuals to which the rules apply. Observing this similarity leads naturally to wondering whether the normative arguments in defense of legal publicity equally apply to VMP.

While similar in certain respects, the arguments for legal publicity do not apply in the case of voting methods. The reason for this has to do with the kind of rules to which the two requirements respectively apply. Legal publicity applies to what is sometimes called ‘operational

rules’, rules that apply to everyday decisions, interactions, and situations. VMP applies to what could be called ‘constitutional rules’, rules that govern the process by which operational rules are enacted.⁶

The instrumental argument for legal publicity is that satisfying the requirement enables persons to rationally plan and pursue their goals. This argument works when we are talking about operational rules because such rules could meaningfully impact and alter persons’ plans. However, when it comes to rules about the voting method, or other constitutional rules, the rules are unlikely to bear on the plans persons make.⁷ Consequently, the instrumental argument from planning does not seem compelling vis-à-vis VMP.

The non-instrumental argument for legal publicity is that the laws and regulations involve an implicit contract between the state and its citizens for fair treatment. This argument rests on the fact that operational rules involve threats of the use of force. This makes appealing the idea that persons subject to these threats know the rules according to which they operate. However, when it comes to constitutional rules, the concept of an implicit contract between state and citizens is not as compelling. The contractual notion is perhaps apt in a different sense. Publicity of the voting method could be viewed as part of a social contract between citizens (as opposed to a violence wielding state and its subjects). This moves us closer to the normative case in defense of VMP which is, indeed, non-instrumental.

Electoral Publicity and Stability

Before I turn to present the non-instrumental argument for VMP, it is worth reflecting on the *instrumental* significance of the publicity of the *electoral process*.⁸ As I use the terms, the voting method is a component of the electoral process, namely the part that algorithmically translates ballots to electoral outcomes. The broader notion of the electoral process encompasses various other aspects such as the rules governing candidate and voter eligibility, campaign finance, and the particular ways in which voting itself is administered.

The degree to which the electoral process is transparent/opaque could bear significantly on social and political stability and/or polarization. Recent events in the US make this connection evident. While electoral conspiracy theories will always be on offer, their degree of uptake in the population and in major political parties may plausibly be thought to be correlated to the degree

of electoral transparency. Put differently, theories about the “steal” following the 2020 presidential election were partly fueled by the opacity of electoral administration.

The above reasoning generates an instrumental case for electoral transparency. One (though certainly not the only) aspect of this transparency is the publicity of the voting method. We have thus located an instrumental case for VMP resting on the value of social/political stability. While not without merit, I put these stability-based arguments to the side. The focus of this paper is to show VMP to be a constitutive element of democracy. I therefore focus, in the rest of the paper, on the non-instrumental case for VMP to be described below.

The Case for Voting Method Publicity

My argument for VMP aims to ground the requirement in the ideal of political equality. My primary claim is that adopting a voting method that some significant group of citizens cannot realistically be expected to understand violates the ideal of political equality. To lay some of the relevant background to my argument, I first review the role political equality plays in arguments for democracy.

As in the case of publicity, justifications for democracy come in two kinds. Instrumental justifications claim that democracy is desirable in virtue of the quality of the decision outputs it produces or in virtue of certain side-effects of the democratic process.⁹ Non-instrumental justifications claim that the democratic process itself is intrinsically valuable independently of its decision outputs or associated byproducts. The most straightforward of these justifications is to claim that democracy is intrinsically valuable and that its value is *sui generis*. However, as Ben Saunders (2010, p. 153) notes, such a claim is unconvincing to non-democrats. The more dialectically promising alternative is to ground democracy in some other shared value.

Democratic theorists propose several ways of tying democracy to some other source of value. Some argue that democracy is the only social arrangement that respects the individual autonomy of persons (Gould 1990). Along similar lines, deliberative democrats and public reason theorists argue that democracy alone can produce laws and policies that meet the requirement of public justification/are the object of an overlapping consensus among the citizenry (Rawls 1993; Cohen 2002). A different justificatory path is taken by republicans who argue that democratic arrangements are necessary to realize the ideal of freedom as non-

domination (Petit 1997, 2013). Finally, egalitarian democrats argue that democracy alone respects the equal status of each member of the polity.

My argument for VMP follows the fourth and final way of defending democracy mentioned above. It is therefore worthwhile to unpack and examine the egalitarian case for democracy in greater detail. A leading exponent of this line of argument is Thomas Christiano. In *The Constitution of Equality* (2008), Christiano argues that democracy (and a set of liberal rights) are grounded on the ideal of public equality. A key premise in his argument is the idea that social justice requires not only that people be treated fairly but also that people be able to see that they are treated fairly. Consequently, the ideas of publicity and transparency figure centrally in Christiano's defense of democracy. Democratic arrangements are justified, in his view, because they *publicly* treat citizens as equals for the purpose of collective decision-making.

Christiano's defense of democracy ties together the requirement of institutional publicity with the ideal of political equality. More specifically, publicity is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the realization of political equality. Yet, when we turn from questions regarding the scope of suffrage to questions regarding the method of aggregation, normative theorists pay little attention to the issue of publicity. Stated differently, voting theorists focus more on whether a given method treats voter inputs fairly/equally and less on whether ordinary voters "see" that it does so. Theorists thereby implicitly assume that the democratic ideal of political equality, as applied to voting methods, is fully captured by the notion of *procedural* equality.

Extending the reasoning behind Christiano's egalitarian argument for democracy, my claim is that procedural equality of the voting method fails to fully capture the ideal of political equality. Procedural equality, I claim, is one of two elements relevant to upholding political equality. The other element we should consider is what I call *epistemic equality*. Epistemic equality requires us to design our voting method so that members of the polity stand in an equal epistemic relation to the method. The ideal of epistemic equality is captured by the requirement of VMP.

To see why VMP needs to be satisfied to affirm political equality, consider the situation in which publicity is not satisfied. In this case, voting is (by hypothesis) free and fair. All citizens are eligible, perhaps even encouraged to take part in the electoral process. At the same time, voters can be divided into two groups along a major epistemic fault line. One group of voters

partake in a process they understand, they play their role in a political mechanism they find intelligible/transparent. A second group of voters provide their inputs into some decision-making black box (from their perspective) that will somehow convert all inputs into a political outcome. It is true that, in some formal sense, all citizens participate equally in this process; this is what procedural equality captures. Nonetheless, this epistemic division erodes the degree to which democratic voting affirms political equality. Put differently, it is natural to interpret an electoral system that fails to satisfy voting method publicity in non-egalitarian terms.

A related way of thinking about the relation between VMP publicity and political equality is through the notion of human dignity. In taking each person's perspective into consideration, the democratic process signals respect for the rational nature of each member of the polity. I am suggesting that respecting the dignity of citizens requires not only taking their input into consideration but also making sure that they understand the process into which they provide their input. Taking a person's expressed preference into consideration signals that we acknowledge that person's ability to reason about their own interests (or those of others they care about). Making the aggregation process understandable to that person signals that we acknowledge that person's ability to reason about the rules by which we make collective decisions.

Making the decision procedure understandable may not seem essential in terms of respecting people's capacity to reason about particular choices. Nonetheless, reasoning about the procedure itself exemplifies an important aspect of human rationality. In our more reflective moments, we turn from thinking about particular choices to thinking about the framework within which we are called to make such choices. Being unable to take this reflective step backward is epistemically limiting. Moreover, observing that one's supposed "equals" freely engage in such reflection that stands beyond one's capacity may be diminishing.

Tuck's Argument for VMP

Before turning to address some objections to the above argument, I want to clarify its relation to an argument presented by Richard Tuck in *Free Riding* (2008).¹⁰ As noted previously, the epistemics of voting methods are seldom discussed in the extant literature, a notable exception being Tuck's aforementioned book. Tuck argues, contra the standard view in economics and political science, that voting (for the purpose of bringing about an electoral outcome) is

instrumentally *rational*. His primary contention is that agents may rationally seek to contribute to the causally efficacious set of votes necessary to surpass the threshold required for electoral victory.

An upshot of Tuck's argument relevant to our discussion is that the rationality of voting depends on the likelihood that one's vote will be in the causally efficacious set. Translated in terms of agents' perspectives, the rationality of voting depends on the *perceived* likelihood that one's vote will be causally efficacious. This, in turn, relates the rationality of voting to the epistemic relation between citizens and the voting method. In particular, assuming the veracity of Tuck's argument *and* the desirability of making voting instrumentally rational, there is reason to favor more understandable voting methods, i.e., VMP.

Tuck's argument for VMP differs from mine in that his rests on the value of rationality while mine on that of equality. For reasons I will not enter into here, I find Tuck's argument wanting.¹¹ The important point to note, dialectically, is that Tuck's argument is entirely complementary to my own. If one finds Tuck's view persuasive, my argument offers additional considerations in favor of VMP, increasing its normative significance relative to other voting method desiderata. If one finds (as I do) Tuck's view unpersuasive, my argument remains intact as a distinct reason to include VMP in the set of desiderata used to select between voting methods on offer.

Objections and Replies

Having presented the argument for VMP, I now turn to respond to two important objections. The first I will call the *intellectual disrespect* objection. The second I will refer to as the *publicity reductio* objection. I will address the two objections in turn.

Intellectual Disrespect

This objection runs as follows: you claim that requiring VMP rests on the idea that we ought to respect the capacity of citizens to reflect not just on the issues of the day, but also on the rules through which we decide such issues. Yet, you end up claiming that there is reason to favor otherwise inferior methods solely because some citizens will not be able to reflect on them. Does this not defeat the entire point of dignifying their rationality? Is it not disrespectful to in effect say to someone: method A is better than B, but we will go with B because you're not smart

enough to understand the workings of A (and why it's superior to B)? This objection suggests that the ideal of respect for persons points away from VMP and toward a focus on other procedural and substantive desiderata.

In response to this objection, it is key to distinguish between judgments about a person's cognitive *endowment* and judgments about a person's incentives/opportunity *cost*. What the disrespect objection gets right is that VMP, as defended in this paper, does involve expressive content about citizens' ability to reason about complicated voting rules. The objection goes wrong, however, in assuming that 'ability' necessarily refers to judgments about citizens' rational capacities/cognitive endowment. Instead, 'ability' could be interpreted as referring to the *cost* citizens would have to incur in order to understand the voting method used in national elections.

A political insider living in DC and a farmer growing corn in Iowa of equal cognitive endowment face substantially different opportunity costs when it comes to understanding the workings of an elaborate voting method. The reason to adopt a simple voting method for national elections need not be that the corn farmer is too simple-minded to understand more complex methods. Rather, we want the political insider and the corn farmer to participate fully as equals, not just procedurally but also epistemically, and this is best achieved by including VMP as a relevant method selection consideration.

Moreover, even if differences in cognitive endowment are assumed to exist, a person's cognitive endowment intersects with their opportunity costs in various intricate ways, in turn shaping their overall trajectory in life. Thus, to say that understanding of a complicated method is more costly to persons of lower cognitive endowment is not necessarily to say that the increase in costs is explained directly and solely by reference to those endowments.

Publicity Reductio

The objection runs as follows: If political equality requires that all members of the polity equally understand the process, why limit the requirement to the voting method? Doesn't consistency imply that the entire political process, voting and otherwise, ought to be intelligible/transparent to all citizens in a manner that satisfies the publicity requirement? Yet the processes by which a complex modern society is governed could never be rendered transparent to the citizens at large, making the normative requirement clearly infeasible/undesirable.¹²

Addressing this reductio necessitates introducing a conceptual distinction articulated by Anthony McGann in *The Logic of Democracy* (2006). McGann suggests that we, as democratic theorists, should:

Separate the democratic process into two sets of procedures. First there are seat allocation rules, whereby the votes of the population are translated into seats in decision-making bodies, such as legislatures or executives. Second, there are social decision rules, by which these bodies make binding decisions. (p. 8)

Using McGann's distinction, my claim is that voting method publicity is normatively required in the case of seat allocation rules, not in the case of social decision rules. This gets us back to the constituency question. The notion of voting method publicity, as I have characterized it, included the entire citizenry (adult and competent) as the relevant constituency. The reason for this is that this is the group of people who play that specific role (determining seat allocation) in the political process. Ordinary citizens typically do not play any direct role in the case of social decision rules.¹³ The normative logic of requiring voting method publicity does not, therefore, extend to all parts of the political decision-making process. One could, in fact, argue that publicity is required in the case of social decision rules, by amending the constituency to be not all citizens but elected/appointed officials. Indeed, this would be the logical way to extend the normative principle of publicity to all parts of the political process. In simple terms: those in charge of deciding should understand how that decision is made.

To round out this point, we could also think of varying the epistemic conditions that need to be met to satisfy the publicity requirement vis-a-vis different parts of the political process. For example, when it comes to social decision rules, ordinary citizens need not understand the rules according to which such decisions are made, but it might be the case that the rules in question should be accessible to any citizen who wishes to inform herself about them. Indeed, a belief in accessibility as a normative requirement on constitutional information is widely held.¹⁴ How exactly to delineate different publicity requirements in terms of object, constituency, and epistemic relations, is a complicated theoretical task I will not engage in further. The upshot of noting this theoretical complexity is that it renders the reductio objection noted above implausible.

The above reply to the reductio objection is, however, subject to the following rejoinder: you claim that the justification for VMP is non-instrumental. Yet, the principle that those deciding should understand the decision procedure seems most plausible on *instrumentalist*

grounds. It is instrumentally valuable for participants in decision-making to understand the decision procedure so that they can adjust their inputs accordingly. How, then, is the normative connection between decision-making participation and decision-procedure understanding to be cashed out in *non-instrumental* terms?

Here, as is sometimes the case in moral philosophy, I cannot do much more than reiterate the deontic intuitions this paper's argument rests on in different words. I offer the following stylized micro example to pump such intuitions.

Dinner: A group of ten friends who are all PhD students agree to go out for dinner to celebrate the end of term and all the grading it involves. In their small college town, there are only five restaurants capable of seating a party of ten. The students agree to pick the restaurant through democratic vote, leaving open the question of what specific voting method to use. As it happens, one of the students: Alisha, is writing her dissertation on voting methods. Two other students—Macy and Gerald—though not working on voting per se, are interested and well-versed in the mathematical theory it involves. The remaining seven students are in the humanities and have little to no interest in or prior knowledge of voting theory and its mathematical components.

Having studied the topic in depth, Alisha proposes the group use a complex voting method (which we'll call Y). Alisha points out that her research indicates Y is the best method to employ given the decision-situation. Macy and Gerald approve of Alisha's proposal and eagerly await learning more about the workings of Y. Alisha, Macy, and Gerald reassure the other seven friends in the following way: "look, all you have to do is rank the five restaurants from your most to least favored. The result Y produces will best reflect what a fair outcome is given everyone's preferences."

What can the remaining seven friends say to Alisha, Macy, and Gerald who favor using Y to pick the restaurant? They could try to object on *instrumentalist* grounds, claiming that they need to understand the method in order to vote in the manner best fitting their aims. This response may or may not hold much water. Alternatively, they could try to object on *non-instrumentalist* grounds as follows: "look, you may be right that Y is the "best" method for picking a restaurant. But we are all friends and equals here. We would all feel more like equals if we used a method we all equally understand."

To me, the non-instrumentalist reply captures an important and distinct aspect of equality, an aspect not fully captured by the usual notion of procedural equality. Like all non-instrumental justifications, however, there are undoubtedly some who do not share such axiological intuitions. As noted above, we have hit normative bedrock.

Voting Methods: Comparative Normative Analysis

The previous two sections defended VMP as an important factor to consider in choosing a voting method for the purpose of political elections. The aim of this section is to explore the implications of VMP for the issue of electoral reform.

Currently, the US utilizes Plurality Voting (PV) as the method for deciding national (and most subnational) elections. Strikingly, however, PV is typically regarded as markedly inferior to various other methods discussed in the literature. From the social choice perspective, it is observed (among other things) that PV is inexpressive (Wodak 2019, Maloy 2019), is not Condorcet consistent (Darlington 2017), and is susceptible to vote-splitting/spoilers (“Correcting the Spoiler Effect”, FairVote). From the democratic theory perspective, it is argued (among other things) that PV hinders the potential for multiparty competition (Disch 2002, Drutman 2019) and for the effective representation of the interests of racial minorities (Guinier 1994). In addition to these theoretical critiques, it has also been suggested that the rise and victory of Donald Trump in the republican primaries of 2016 are directly attributable to the use of plurality to determine the party’s presidential nominee (Maskin and Sen 2016, 2017; Maloy 2019, pp. 131-166).

The above listed flaws of PV raise a puzzle and a worry. The puzzle is to explain the prevalence of PV given its normative inferiority. The worry is that, given the monumental obstacles involved in voting method reform, we can expect to live under a relatively terrible electoral system for years to come.

A puzzle of the above form, i.e., why do we have institution I_1 when experts widely agree that $I_2 \dots I_n$ are preferable, can frequently be answered by appeal to the ignorance and/or perverse incentives of those who designed or continue to support I_1 . Yet, it is good philosophical practice to separate the partial reasons on the basis of which persons are motivated to establish/maintain an institution from the impartial reasons that could be used to justify that institution. The fact that certain institutions are established/maintained for flawed reasons perhaps bears on the moral

status of its creators/supporters. It is not, however, determinative of the institution's normative status.

Normative theorizing may also bear on the above-described despair of continuously living under bad institutions. An obvious function of such theorizing is that it allows us to critique existing institutions and propose possible reforms. Yet, another, not often highlighted, benefit of such theorizing is that it allows us to see the value of current institutions, thereby reconciling ourselves to living under them.

The later benefit is articulated by Rawls in Part I of his *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001). Rawls identifies four roles of political philosophy. The third one on his list he calls 'reconciliation' which he describes as follows:

political philosophy may try to calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history by showing us the way in which its institutions, when properly understood from a philosophical point of view, are rational, and developed over time as they did to attain their present, rational form. (p. 3).

An upshot of this paper's argument is that it brings into view a positive, and hitherto underappreciated aspect of PV, namely its simplicity. The rule: 'the candidate with the most votes wins' is the simplest rule consistent with democracy. From the standpoint of VMP, and the ideal of epistemic equality which underlies it, PV is a normatively attractive voting method. Looked at from this particular normative lens, we can solve the puzzle of plurality's prevalence. We can likewise, following Rawls, "calm our frustration" of living under a PV system.

Notwithstanding the above remarks, a major theoretical question remains, namely: how should we think about the tradeoff between VMP and other voting method desiderata? In addition to this normative question, there is also an empirical question regarding the extent to which different methods satisfy VMP. Let me address these two issues in turn.

Normative Tradeoffs

The fact that certain methods do well in terms of VMP might be of little significance if we conclude that VMP is heavily outweighed by other normative considerations. The following is an argument for why VMP is a comparatively significant voting method desideratum.

Whatever normative benefits a method holds, these benefits will not be evident to someone who does not understand how the method works. For such voters, the situation is akin to being told: "this magical black box is the best! All you and your friends need to do is enter

your preferences and it will spit out a good/fair result based on these inputs”. Even if it is objectively correct that the method provides these benefits, the reasons underlying this conclusion remain mysterious from the subjective perspective of such voters. For them, endorsing the method relies on epistemically trusting those who understand its workings. As I have previously argued, from the standpoint of political equality, this creates an unwelcome epistemic division among voters.

One way of interpreting the upshot of this argument is to claim that it shows VMP to be lexically prior to all other voting method desiderata. This conclusion would lead us to pursue normative voting theory along the following lines. First, we want to identify what methods, out of the set of all methods, satisfy VMP. Then, having identified that subset of methods, we can explore their pros and cons vis-à-vis procedural equality and other substantive desiderata. This strategy is structurally similar to how we might pursue political theorizing in the light of arguments such as Christiano’s. First, we identify the set of political arrangements, out of all possible political arrangements, that satisfy core democratic requirements. Then, having identified this subset of arrangements, we may ask how well they each do in terms of other normative desiderata such as maximizing GDP, maintaining order, and preserving the environment.

Although I think there is some plausibility to giving VMP lexical priority over other voting method desiderata, I do not find this view as compelling as the “democracy first” position. The reason for this is that, as has been argued in this paper, epistemic equality is only a *component* of political equality. More to the point, voters can be unequal, vis-à-vis voting methods, in at least two basic ways. They can be epistemically unequal in their understanding of the method and also be procedurally unequal in terms of the method’s registration/reflection of their political preferences. The aspiration for political equality, therefore, does not support granting one of the two aspects lexical priority over the other. Furthermore, voters (including lower understanding ones) might reasonably accept some epistemic inequality in understanding of the voting method if it delivers other important benefits, such as those enumerated previously in this paper.

The above located tradeoff between epistemic and procedural equality may not merely be a theoretical possibility. Empirical research on the responsiveness of the American political process to the preferences of ordinary citizens raises major questions as to the de-fact presence of

procedural equality. Political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014) describe the US as a “democracy by coincidence, in which ordinary citizens get what they want from government only when they happen to agree with elites or interest groups that are really calling the shots” (p. 573).¹⁵

The pertinent question—assuming the veracity of Gilens and Pages’ findings—is whether lack of responsiveness can be attributed—in some meaningful part—to the use of single winner plurality voting. If we were to assume that it can be, we would have a clear case where the benefits of increased epistemic equality are outweighed by the costs in terms of procedural equality. The ideal of democracy—translated into institutional terms—consists in striking a balance between epistemic and procedural equality.

Lack of lexical priority results in a normatively complex picture. VMP, our argument suggests, is an important desideratum. Our choice of voting method should therefore be partly guided by considerations of publicity. Nevertheless, it should *not* be guided by such considerations alone or prior to other desiderata. This normative complexity underscores the need to examine how well different voting methods do in terms of satisfying VMP and other normatively attractive properties. The brief survey that follows shortly attempts to gain some traction on this question.

Degrees of Understanding and Degrees of VMP Satisfaction

Before turning to the normative assessment of different methods, we need some framework through which to think about the “understandability” of voting methods and thus their status vis-à-vis VMP.

I propose the following three tier classification of understanding vis-à-vis voting methods. At one end of the spectrum is the state of *zero understanding*. This is the complete black box situation. A voter with zero understanding of the voting method will be unable to determine the winner of an election based on a voter *profile*, even if she is given ample time to do so.¹⁶ Furthermore, if given both the winner and the voter profile, such a voter will not be able to produce any explanation for why that particular profile results in that particular winner. At the other end of the spectrum is the state of *complete understanding*. A voter who has complete understanding can, if given a profile, determine the winner of an election. Such a voter can also explain why a particular winner was selected based on a particular profile.

Between the two ends of the spectrum is the state of *partial understanding*. If given a voter profile, a voter with partial understanding might make some educated guesses about who the method declares the winner based on that profile. Similarly, when given both a winner and a profile, a partial understanding voter might be able to produce a partial explanation for why that particular winner was selected based on that particular profile. By ‘partial explanation’, I mean that this voter might be able to point to some general, if not quite precise, principles. Put differently, part of the explanation might be handwavy, incomplete, or imprecise, but it nonetheless broadly tracks some of the aspects of the voting method.

It is also important here to distinguish between two ways of conceptualizing the *degree* to which a voting method satisfies VMP. The first looks at the total *sum* of voting method understanding. On this way of conceptualizing things, an increase in the degree to which some group of voters understands the method (say from partial to complete understanding) necessarily increases the degree to which the method satisfies VMP. The second way of conceptualizing satisfaction of VMP looks at the *distribution* of voting method understanding. More equal distribution of understanding among voters better satisfies VMP.

The first, sum-based interpretation of VMP satisfaction is potentially congenial to certain instrumental justifications which may be offered in defense of VMP. The non-instrumental case for VMP defended in this paper, however, supports the second way of conceptualizing VMP satisfaction. Recall that the argument for VMP here presented rested on the ideal of political equality (through epistemic equality). Thus, from the standpoint of VMP, so understood, “leveling down” the understanding of some voters may increase the degree to which a method satisfies VMP. Conversely, an increase in the understanding of some voters may reduce the degree to which the method satisfies VMP.

Methods and Desiderata

Plurality Voting (PV), as noted, seems best from the standpoint of VMP. In terms of the above framework, PV results in all voters having complete understanding of the method. One way of seeing this is to think about what a non-theorist might say if asked to come up with a democratic method for deciding an election between three or more alternatives. It is likely that PV would be the first method that comes to this person’s mind, indicating its intuitiveness and understandability. A method one comes up with immediately is likely to be one that meets the

epistemic condition of complete understanding. As noted, however, PV has several, much-documented flaws. Given the assumption that VMP is not lexically prior to other voting method desiderata, it is reasonable to explore some alternatives to PV.

One important set of alternatives to PV are the Condorcet-consistent methods. Condorcet consistency is a normatively significant property. Indeed, there is plausibility to the claim that Condorcet consistency is the most important property to satisfy from the standpoint of procedural equality. The reason, as Darlington (2017) and others observe, is that Condorcet consistency captures the ideal of majority rule, arguably the cornerstone of democratic decision-making.

Some notable examples of Condorcet consistent voting methods include Schulze Beat-Path (Schulze 1997), Tideman Ranked Pairs (Tideman 1987), and the recently developed Split Cycle (Holiday and Pacuit 2020). The above remarks suggest a strong reason to consider these methods as potential alternatives to PV. However, when viewed from the standpoint of VMP, it is unclear how understandable these methods would be to the electorate at large.

The rule: ‘select the Condorcet winner as the winner of the election’ is not as simple as the standard plurality rule. For one thing, it requires the use of ranked ballots and the comparison of candidates against each of the other candidates in a head-to-head. In terms of our two “tests”, if given a profile, some portion of voters might not be completely sure how to apply the Condorcet rule. If given a winner and a profile, they might not be able to produce a precise explanation for why that winner was selected based on that profile.¹⁷

The Condorcet rule might not be as easily comprehended and applied by voters as the standard plurality rule but this potentially slight decrease in voter understanding might not seem overly worrying in terms of publicity and epistemic equality. More worrying, however, is what these methods say when no Condorcet winner exists. This indeed is what differentiates between the three aforementioned methods (Beat-Path, Ranked-Pairs, Split-Cycle). The rules used to determine the winner of profiles without a Condorcet winner add a considerable layer of complexity to these respective methods. The level of complexity in question is likely to place some substantial group of voters in the zero-understanding bracket (with respect to such profiles). The gains in terms of procedural equality therefore come at a significant price vis-à-vis epistemic equality. Consequently, opting for one of the Condorcet consistent methods seems to normatively depend on the expected frequency of no Condorcet winner profiles and on the

normative value we assign to considerations of publicity and epistemic equality. Moreover, if opting for Condorcet consistent methods relies on an overwhelming frequency of profiles with a Condorcet winner, the utility of theorizing the minute details of different variants is, for the purposes of democratic theory, diminished from a practical standpoint.

Another important set of methods which could replace PV are what are sometimes referred to as ranking methods or scoring rules. Examples here include Borda Count, Plurality with Runoff, and Ranked-Choice Voting (also known as the Hare Rule or Instant Runoff). I will focus my discussion on the latter two methods because both are used in major political elections around the world and have been argued to be desirable replacements for PV.

Let me begin with Plurality With Runoff (PWR), a method famously employed in France's presidential elections. Though perhaps not as intuitive as PV, it is safe to assume that PWR fully satisfies VMP, i.e., all voters have complete understanding of the method. To fully understand PWR, voters need only know the 'top two candidates advance' rule, coupled of course with 'the candidate with more than 50% of votes wins' rule. Both rules pose no substantial challenge in terms of understandability.

The choice between PV and PWR, given their full satisfaction of VMP, turns on other normative factors. This paper will not enter into these further analyses. The upshot here is simply to observe that moving from a PV to a PWR system concedes nothing in terms of VMP and the epistemic equality it captures.

Turning next to Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV). RCV is arguably the most important alternative to PV as it has been both implemented in several US locales (Maine, Minneapolis, San Francisco, NYC) and has received support from theorists (Drutman 2019, Maloy 2019) and activist organizations (FairVote). It is thus worthwhile to spend more time on evaluating RCV (as compared to other methods reviewed in this survey).

The relative prominence of RCV has led to some empirical work on various aspects of it. In terms of voter understanding of the method, the results seem to indicate a move from PV to RCV does involve a decrease in voter understanding, particularly among older and less educated voters. Notably, this decrease in understanding, contra Jacobs and Miller (2013,2014), is not correlated with race/ethnicity. In terms of some specifics, Neely et al. (2005) use survey data in San Francisco to assess voter understanding of RCV. They find that 52% report understanding RCV "perfectly well", 35% report understanding it "fairly well", and 11% of respondents say

they “did not understand entirely” the method. Donovan et al. (2019) likewise utilize survey data to compare voter understanding between PV and RCV cities. Their results similarly indicate voting method understanding being lower on average in RCV locales.

Switching from PV to RCV does seem to involve incurring some normative costs in terms of VMP. However, this conclusion is tentative and subject to revision as more empirical data comes in. More importantly, other normative factors could make RCV all-things-considered preferable to PV. That said, Nielson (2017) utilizes a controlled experimental setup to gauge voters’ attitudes toward RCV, PV and their relation to fairness. The author finds that participants in the RCV treatment group were “no more likely to think that these elections produced a fairer outcome” (p. 555), and that “the vast majority of respondents, no matter what their survey treatment, preferred plurality or majority elections because they resulted in the fairest outcomes” (ibid.). Given such attitudes and the potential loss in epistemic equality, RCV may not be as normatively attractive as it initially appears to be.

A final set of voting methods to be considered are those typically referred to as grading methods. Examples here include Score Voting, Cumulative Voting, and Approval Voting. Without entering into their precise details, we can give the following comparative analysis of Cumulative Voting (CV) and Score Voting (SV). From the standpoint of publicity, CV seems preferable to SV. The rule ‘the candidate with the most points wins’ is significantly simpler than the rule ‘the candidate with the highest mean score wins’. As teachers of statistics often observe, the notion of a statistical average can be both unintuitive and difficult to compute. Voters may only attain partial understanding of SV in terms of the two “tests”. Meanwhile, all that is required for fully understanding CV is to comprehend the operation of summing up a candidate’s total points across all ballots. To the degree that a polity is debating between CV and SV, publicity seems to tip the normative scale toward the former.

Turning finally to Approval Voting (AV), there can be little doubt that AV fully satisfies VMP. Indeed, this is no surprise given the similarity between AV and PV (compare: she with the most votes wins/she with the most approvals wins). The choice between AV and PV, therefore, does not turn on consideration of publicity. Further, AV has received favorable judgment from experts. In a vote among voting theorists for their preferred method, AV came in first, PV coming in last (Laslier 2012). AV thus appears to be a promising alternative to PV. Importantly,

from this paper’s perspective, it is an alternative which involves no normative risk vis-à-vis VMP.

Conclusion

Though it plays an important role in legal and political philosophy, the notion of publicity, prior to this paper, has not been considered with regard to voting methods. This paper offered a non-instrumental case in defense of voting method publicity. A key philosophical idea which emerged in the course of this discussion is the ideal of epistemic equality and its distinctiveness in relation to procedural equality. Tradeoffs between understandability and other normative desiderata are of growing importance in an increasingly complex world and society. Fruitful philosophical work can be done to explore the relation between equality, respect for persons, and institutional simplicity.

In addition to the more abstract discussion, the paper examined the implication of VMP to the choice between various voting methods discussed in the literature. In the first place, recognition of the normative significance of VMP can help us appreciate some of the normative rationale behind our current system, i.e., PV. As for potential alternatives to PV, our analysis identified several promising options (from the VMP standpoint), among them: Plurality with Runoff, Cumulative Voting, and Approval Voting. It likewise underscored the normative import of empirical work on voting method understandability. If nothing else, it is my hope that the paper shows voting method selection to be a normatively rich area worthy of greater philosophical attention.

Notes

¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to the work of Dasgupta and Maskin.

² For lengthier overviews of the notion of publicity see Kogelmann (2021a, 2021b) and Gosseries & Parr (2021).

³ For such an attempt see Boettcher (2004).

⁴ For a classic exegesis of these aspects of Rawls see Weithman (2001).

⁵ This point could be contested by reflecting on expressions such as “I know it well”. Regardless, the key point is that the relation between persons and a social technology (like a voting method) is best thought about in scalar terms.

⁶ For a classic analysis of the import of this distinction to institutional design see Buchanan and Tullock (1962).

⁷ An anonymous reviewer points out that understanding of the method and subsequent prediction of the winner could bear on certain financial plans persons and institutions may make (e.g., expected tax hike). For the most part, however, understanding of the method for national elections is not essential to formulating one’s plans in life. Method understanding may however be instrumentally significant for political insiders, yet they (given their incentives and opportunities) can presumably be expected to know and understand these rules.

⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the significance of this aspect of voting publicity.

⁹ The prime example of the former is the literature on ‘Epistemic Democracy’, see Landemore (2017). An example of the latter is J.S Mill’s claim that democratic deliberation and participation cultivates important virtues, see Mill (2015, ch.3).

¹⁰ I thank an anonymous reviewer for referring me to Tuck’s work.

¹¹ The reasons I am unconvinced by Tuck’s argument are well captured by Brennan (2009) and Kuhn (2010).

¹² Kogelmann and Stich (2021) point to similar tension between the ideals of public reason and the realities of the administrative state. See also Luban (2002).

¹³ They do so in the case of referendums, which are typically structured as a simple yes/no proposition settled by majority rule, thus clearly satisfying the requirement of voting method publicity.

¹⁴ For contrasting views about the place of an accessibility requirement in the public reason tradition see Vallier (2011) and Tyndal (2019).

¹⁵ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to the work of Gilens and Page and to the particular passage quoted in the text.

¹⁶ Following Pacuit (2019, sec. 1.1), I use the term ‘profile’ such that “a profile for a set of voters specifies the ballot selected by each voter.”

¹⁷ That being said, the mode of presentation could matter here as well. For example, Condorcet winners could be more easily identified via a margin of victory graph as opposed to a standard vote tally.

¹⁸ This is not denying the utility of theorizing about these methods for purposes of voting in other contexts (e.g., committees).

¹⁹ For more details see Pacuit (2019, sec. 2.1).

²⁰ See Coll (2021) for a recent survey data analysis with similar findings.

²¹ For more details see Pacuit (2019, sec. 2.2)

²² For a classic social choice text delineating some favorable properties of AV see Brams and Fishburn (1978).

Acknowledgments

I thank Brian Kogelmann for his comments on earlier versions of the paper.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on Contributor

Aylon Manor is a PhD candidate in the department of philosophy at the University of Maryland at College Park. He works on democratic theory and institutional design. Manor has also published articles in *Episteme* (2022), *Social Theory and Practice* (2021), and *Res Publica* (2022).

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