

The Politics of Non-Existence

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Abstract

This article argues that the representation of future generations is likely to remain inadequate because of the lack of accountability mechanisms characteristic of representative relations among contemporaries. Two problems pertaining to the representation of future generations and their interests are distinguished, namely misrepresentation and negligence. Misrepresentation refers to ill-informed, biased, and purposive interpretations regarding the interests of future generations, whereas negligence involves future interests not being properly considered in policymaking. While these two problems are often intertwined, misrepresentation is a problem of epistemic and normative judgments, whereas negligence is a motivational problem. The interests of future generations are especially likely to be neglected in cases of so-called intergenerational conflict, that is, situations of welfare tradeoffs between present and future generations. Inclusive democratic deliberation is a remedy for misrepresentation, but its capacity to address negligence may be more limited. Finally, the article remarks on the role of future-regarding deliberation in representative democratic systems.

Keywords

accountability; deliberation; future generations; institutional design; intergenerational conflicts; representation

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the problems pertaining to the political representation of future generations. The underlying problem here is that some of those who are potentially significantly affected by decisions are not present in the processes where those decisions are made. As Phillips (1995, p. 13) has expressed in her *Politics of Presence*: “When policies are worked out *for* rather than *with* a politically excluded constituency, they are unlikely to engage with all relevant concerns.” Phillips argues that the (physical)

presence of individuals is an important factor in explaining how democratic processes can deal with the views and interests of those individuals.

Even in principle, the people of future generations cannot be directly included or heard in political processes. Future individuals do not have agency, a presence, or a voice, and yet they appear to have relevant interests that should be represented and considered in democratic decision-making. While there seem to be moral grounds for the representation of future generations, there is a lack of formal and informal accountability characteristic to representative relations between contemporaries. What is more, future generations are not monoliths but consist of various types of people with different and even potentially conflicting interests, which further complicates their representation.

This article distinguishes between two different types of problems pertaining to the representation and consideration of future generations and their interests in political decision-making. The first problem, misrepresentation, is primarily epistemic and normative in character, namely ill-informed perceptions and flawed judgments regarding the interests of future generations. The second problem, negligence, is motivational in character, which means that future interests are not sufficiently taken into account in democratic decision-making.

The main argument of this article is that, while these problems are often intertwined and both are caused because the people of future generations do not yet exist, distinguishing between the two helps when thinking about potential remedies to the issue of short-termism in representative democratic systems. I argue that inclusive deliberative processes can facilitate more future-regarding policymaking by correcting misrepresentations of future interests. At the same time, some specific measures may still be needed to ensure representation of the interests of future generations in these deliberative processes.

In the following sections, I explain why the non-existence of future generations causes misrepresentation and negligence. Thereafter, I discuss how the potential interests of future generations might be represented and taken into account in processes of inclusive deliberation. Finally, I make some suggestions on how to strengthen the role of such deliberation in democratic systems.

2. Future Generations in Democratic Theory and Practice

It is not at all self-evident that democratically made decisions are fair to everyone involved in making them, and the risks of injustices are even higher for affected individuals who do not belong to the demos. Consequently, it is important to explore how democratic procedures and institutions could be developed to avoid gross violations of the interests of those who are not included in decision-making. In democratic theory, the all-affected principle suggests that the interests of all those who are significantly affected by political decisions should be considered when making decisions (e.g., Näsström, 2011). While there are moral grounds for the consideration of these interests, the role of the all-affected principle in democratic theory and practice remains debatable. After all, democracy is about democratic self-government whereas the all-affected principle is a principle of justice.

The practical application of the all-affected principle in democratic decision-making seems complicated. The identification of affected groups is epistemically complex, especially because of the indirect and

unintended consequences of political decisions. Moreover, the all-affected principle seems to entail that the weight of different interests and concerns in political processes is dependent on substantive considerations, which is in conflict with more procedural understandings of democracy based on political equality. When it comes to the temporal extension of the all-affected principle to future generations, understood as people who do not exist yet, there are even deeper philosophical disagreements (e.g., Heyward, 2008).

At the same time, there are widely held concerns about intergenerational justice, which emphasize our moral obligations to future generations (e.g., Gosseries, 2008b). Unlike justice among contemporaries, the idea of intergenerational justice cannot be understood in terms of reciprocity (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, pp. 52–55, 155–163). However, intergenerational justice may be conceptualized on the basis of the notions of impartial justice (Barry, 1997; Hubin, 1976). Abstract and counterfactual concepts of impartial justice, especially the Rawlsian veil of ignorance, can therefore be helpful in understanding the prescripts of intergenerational justice and in imagining and considering the interests of future generations (Reiman, 2007). From this perspective, while non-existent future generations do not yet have any actual interests, they may have potential interests that should be taken into account (cf. Heyward, 2008).

In the context of democratic decision-making, future generations should be understood in terms of those who are potentially significantly affected by policy decisions. In this respect, the identification of future generations seems to be tightly related to the all-affected principle. Because of the differences in time spans and scales of causal consequences of policy decisions, “future generations” to be affected by energy policies may be quite different from those to be affected by a social security reform, for example. From this perspective, it may be asked whether abstractions such as “future generations” are helpful in actual policymaking, or whether it would be more important to develop the capacities of democratic processes to anticipate and consider possible future consequences of various policy choices. In fact, there are already many institutional designs that account for the long-term consequences of policies and the potential interests of future generations. Expert bodies have been established to advise policymakers about the long-term consequences of policy choices, and foresight techniques have been developed to help policymakers make projections and scenarios regarding possible futures. Obviously, the further we look into the future, the levels of uncertainty and unpredictability increase.

From the perspective of intergenerational justice, however, it is not sufficient that policymakers can make good assessments regarding the future impacts of political decisions. In addition to making judgments about how policy choices might affect the potential interests of future generations, policymakers should also be able to weigh conflicting interests against each other, including those of current and future generations. In short, policymakers should make normative judgments about the weight of the potential future interests against other competing interests.

While any political regime faces difficulties in weighing future generations’ interests, this article focuses on how the institutions of representative democracy fare in this respect. The basic problem is that the potential interests of future generations are likely to be misrepresented and neglected in representative systems. Future generations do not have political rights, agency, or democratic representation. Therefore, the problems of intergenerational justice in representative systems seem to stem from a lack of inclusion and participation. In many ways, problems related to the representation of future generations and their interests are even more profound than those related to affected groups outside geographical boundaries.

Using Phillips's (1995) terms, there are no prospects for "politics of presence" when it comes to people who have not yet been born, and their interests can only be represented in terms of "politics of ideas." Non-existent future generations who will be affected by current decisions seem to pose the ultimate and, perhaps in some respects, an unsurmountable challenge for democratic inclusion. Because of the non-existence of future generations, their interests *need to be represented* by existing political actors. At the same time, the non-existence of future generations rules out the formal or informal accountability mechanisms that help ensure adequate representation of current interests.

In what follows, I distinguish between two different types of shortfalls in representation that are likely to arise in the case of future generations and their interests. First, there is a risk of misrepresentation. Second, the interests of future generations often remain neglected in public discourse and decision-making. In the context of representative democracies, both misrepresentation and negligence—together or separately—can lead to policy choices that may appear to be deficient from the perspective of intergenerational justice.

3. (Mis)Representing the Interests of Future Generations

Generally speaking, making judgments about the potential interests of future generations entails different types of cognitive processes. First, there is the need to process information about what the world might look like in the future and about the possible consequences of various policy alternatives. Certain techniques can help clarify the causal consequences of policy choices, such as environmental impact assessments and cost-benefit analyses. Foresight methods, including scenario techniques, can increase our understanding and aid in our imagination of how the world will be in the future (e.g., Hara et al., 2019). Second, there is also the need to anticipate future generations' interests and perspectives, keeping in mind that our knowledge about the future is always uncertain, tentative, and prone to various biases.

While such processes of forecasting and anticipating are complicated enough, they are not sufficient for democratic decision-making, which requires making normative judgments regarding the relative weight of claims made in support of competing current and future interests. Because of the non-existence of future generations, the ways in which future generations and their interests should be construed or represented in the context of democratic decision-making remains debatable. Since future generations are obviously not here to debate or negotiate with, current generations must imagine future situations and interests. However, such processes of "deliberation within" (Goodin, 2000) seem to work as a rather poor substitute for deliberation with real people.

The interests of future generations cannot be represented in the way we usually understand democratic representation, which means that policymakers cannot be responsive to the opinions or preferences of future generations, and future generations cannot authorize political decision-makers or hold them formally accountable in elections. However, future generations can and—from the intergenerational justice perspective—should be represented in politics in some other sense. According to the constructivist interpretations of representation, political actors can make "representative claims" (Saward, 2010). Making a representative claim is a performative act, which, unlike electoral representation, does not depend on formal authorization or accountability mechanisms. Therefore, making representative claims on behalf of future generations simply means a situation where an individual political actor or a collective publicly expresses what the concerns or interests of future generations might be. For example, the youth climate movement

often makes representative claims on behalf of future generations in public discourse. While these claims made by the young climate activists seem quite legitimate, there are relevant concerns about both the moral and the empirical legitimacy of representative claims appealing to future generations and their interests.

While the legitimacy of representative claims made on behalf of future generations cannot depend on formal mechanisms of authorization and accountability, the validity of such claims can be scrutinized in public discourse. However, specific complications arise in the public scrutiny of representative claims made in the name of future generations. First, representative claims made on behalf of future generations and their interests are based on some kind of foresight—good or bad—about the future, as well as reconstructions of the interests of the people in those circumstances. Future interests are more tangible when they pertain to the interests of current generations, for example, our own or perhaps our children's future, while the interests of the people living more than 100 years from now may be harder to imagine. Second, representative claims made on behalf of future generations are likely to be affected by various subjective factors such as self-interest, personal experiences, and world views. In this respect, the risk of misrepresenting future generations and their interests in political rhetoric seems immense, and there are plenty of examples of misinformed and flawed representative claims made on behalf of future generations.

Third, and most importantly, compared to representative claims made on behalf of contemporaries, mechanisms of informal or discursive accountability are deficient in the case of future generations. From the normative perspective of democratic theory, all representative claims should be subject to mechanisms of discursive accountability, especially reciprocal relations of public justification and scrutiny (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). When representative claims are made on behalf of currently living people, mechanisms of discursive accountability help avoid misrepresentation. Obviously, these mechanisms are often inadequate, especially in the case of marginalized groups. However, in the case of representative claims made on behalf of future generations, mechanisms of discursive accountability are *necessarily* deficient. Because future generations cannot be present in the public discourse, they cannot play an active role in discursive accountability relations, for example, by assessing or criticizing claims made on their behalf.

However, there may be other conceptualizations of discursive accountability more applicable to the representation of future generations. Dryzek and Niemeyer (2008) define discursive accountability as representatives needing to justify their positions in terms of the discourse they represent. However, Dryzek and Niemeyer's conceptualization does not provide any straightforward guidance here. There is no specific discourse to capture the interests or viewpoints of future generations, but rather multiple and competing discourses. At the same time, there is no way to validate whether discursive representations authentically stand for the positions of future generations. This, in turn, leaves room for elusive, biased, and even opportunistic representations of the interests of future generations (e.g., Gosseries, 2008a).

Consequently, representative claims made in the name of future generations may appeal to universally acceptable goals (e.g., maintaining a living environment) or goals that are disputable (e.g., maintaining certain cultural values) or plain immoral (e.g., re-establishing imperial powers). Admittedly, it may be self-serving dictators rather than democratically elected representatives who are responsible for the most questionable representative claims made on behalf of future generations and their interests. In representative democracies, both discursive accountability among contemporaries and formal electoral accountability may help avoid the most distorted claims and correct obviously biased interpretations. However, even in

well-functioning democracies, there are risks of misinformed and self-serving rhetoric related to future generations.

4. Neglecting the Interests of Future Generations

In addition to misrepresentation, there is a risk of negligence regarding future generations and their interests. Overall, negligence in this context can be understood as the lack of appropriate consideration of the interests of future generations in policymaking. There are different types of negligence. First, negligence happens when issues or arguments that would be relevant from the perspectives of future generations are not present on the political agenda—Future generations and their interests are not represented at all. Second, policymakers can demonstrate negligence by not being sufficiently informed about the future consequences of certain policy choices, or by not performing “due diligence” with respect to policy consequences in the future. In these cases, negligence gives rise to ill-informed and poorly justified interpretations of the interests of future generations. In other words, what looks like misrepresentation may, in fact, be negligence in disguise, which confirms that these two problems are often intertwined.

Third, it is not sufficient that the potential interests of future generations are articulated and represented in the democratic process. These interests also need to be weighed and, if relevant, taken into account in policymaking. An obvious case of negligence is when the interests of future generations are well articulated and even found relevant in political discourse, and yet they are ignored or dismissed in actual policymaking. These interests may be ignored under pressure by, for example, powerful interest groups or even the majority of voters.

The risk of negligence is especially obvious in cases of intergenerational conflicts (e.g., Hara et al., 2019), that is, when the welfare of future generations may require sacrifices—or investments—by current generations. Intergenerational conflicts can thus be understood in terms of welfare trade-offs between contemporary and future generations. While one should not consider “generations” as monoliths, there are obvious examples of such situations. Pension systems, climate change, and other environmental policies are typical examples of policy areas involving intergenerational conflicts. Moreover, investments in public goods such as education systems and traffic infrastructure also require current investments (mostly) for the benefit of future generations.

The main issue is, again, that some of those potentially affected, especially future generations, are not present in political decision-making or the public discourse preceding it. Therefore, they cannot articulate or defend their own interests. Moreover, because future generations do not have identities, their interests can only be expressed in abstract and statistical terms, which is unlikely to give rise to emotional reactions such as empathic concern (Small et al., 2007; Weber, 2006). Because future generations consist of “token” individuals (Heyward, 2008) or “statistical victims” (Landwehr, 2023) without specific identities, attributes, or agency, their interests are easy to disregard.

Certain institutional features of representative democracies enhance short-termism (Caney, 2016, pp. 144–145; Smith, 2019). Jacobs (2016) identifies “drivers” of short-termism in representative systems, which are associated with the key institutions and practices of representative democracy, such as electoral competition, regular changes of governments, and organized interest groups. Consequently, macro-political

processes in representative systems, including elections and bargaining, seem to amplify the tendencies towards negligence in democratic decision-making. As with misrepresentation, negligence is also likely to be more severe when it comes to non-existing and distant future generations.

There are ways for representative governments to be held accountable for negligence. For example, in climate litigation, representative governments have been legally challenged to revise their climate policies to consider the rights and interests of future generations (Oroschakoff, 2021). More generally, the youth climate movement has shown that children and young people can successfully mobilize and make governments accountable for negligence in climate policies. There have also been attempts to address the problem of negligence by establishing specific officials for future generations (see, e.g., Smith, 2019). Officials for future generations are expected to enhance the representation of the interests of future generations in political processes. Their purpose is to monitor policy-making processes, to voice future interests, and to make current policymakers discursively accountable for representatives of future generations (cf. MacKenzie, 2016, p. 34).

The role of officials for future generations can be further strengthened by the power to delay policy; this was exemplified by the position of the commissioner for future generations in the Israeli Knesset (2001–2006; Smith, 2019). However, the Israeli institution turned out to be short-lived since it lasted for only one parliamentary term. Officially, the abolition of the institution was based on questions regarding the legitimacy of the commissioner to represent the interests of future generations. However, the actual reason might have been that some of the commissioner's views went against some strong presentist interests. This example demonstrates how misrepresentation and negligence are often intertwined. Yet, these two concepts help disentangle different aspects—epistemic/normative and motivational—that lead to failure to consider the interests of future generations.

5. Inclusive Deliberation as a Remedy to Misrepresentation and Negligence?

To sum up the argument so far, by disentangling the problems of misrepresentation and negligence, it is possible to develop and assess potential institutional remedies for these problems. When it comes to the epistemic aspects of misrepresentation, there are calls for the enhancement of the role of foresight and the role of expert information on the long-term consequences of policies (Koskimaa et al., 2021). There is also a need to make normative judgments about the potential interests of future generations and their weight in political decision-making. Considering the motivational problem of negligence, the concretization of future events could enhance consideration of the potential interests of future generations (e.g., Weber, 2006). Moreover, there are ways of making current decision-makers discursively and even formally accountable to the institutional representatives of future generations.

From the perspective of democratic systems, it seems that no single political process can address all of the cognitive, normative, and motivational problems of future-regarding policymaking. However, it is necessary to take a closer look at the processes of democratic or inclusive deliberation, which can be expected to help in fair consideration of affected interests (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Phillips, 1995). While inclusive deliberation may occur in various formal or informal political forums, it is doubtful whether current institutions of representative democracy and their incentive structures are necessarily optimal for this purpose (see Section 6).

However, there are forums particularly designed for inclusive deliberation. Most notably, the design features of deliberative mini-publics, especially the random selection of participants, interaction with experts, and deliberation in moderated small groups, are expected to facilitate the inclusion of different viewpoints as well as informed deliberative processes based on mutual respect (see, e.g., Setälä & Smith, 2018). Participation in mini-publics also enhances openness to different arguments and viewpoints related to policy consequences, and therefore also has potential in terms of future-regarding policymaking.

There are at least three different mechanisms through which such inclusive forums of democratic deliberation can address the problem of misrepresentation and—at least to some extent—negligence (MacKenzie, 2016, p. 287). First, deliberative forums entail the consideration of relevant factual information about policy consequences, and this is likely to improve foresight on policy consequences in the future. Inclusive deliberation encourages participants to form more realistic assessments of impacts on various groups at different points in time, and of the harms and benefits that could result from policies. Various scenario techniques can be used in conjunction with deliberative forums to enhance the anticipation of how policies might affect future generations.

Second, deliberative forums are based on weighing competing claims against each other. Claims evoking the interests of future generations are weighed against each other and against those appealing to current interests. In deliberative processes, claims made on behalf of different groups of people, including future generations, are weighed according to their merits (e.g., Habermas, 1996). More weight is given to arguments referring to generalizable principles of justice (Elster, 1998), including intergenerational justice. Third, policy consequences are considered from a number of perspectives in deliberative forums, which broadens the capacity of participants to take the perspectives of other affected groups. There is some evidence that deliberation can enhance articulations of other-regarding or ethical preferences, that is, considerations outside of one's own narrow self-interest (e.g., Goodin, 1986). This encourages appeals to the interests of affected groups that are not directly involved in a deliberative forum, such as future generations (MacKenzie, 2016).

Admittedly, there are limits to the capacity to which deliberative forums can deal with future consequences of policies and the extent to which they can make judgments regarding representative claims made on behalf of future generations. First, the interests and viewpoints of future generations need to be somehow articulated and represented in a deliberative forum. Although representative claims appealing to future-regarding viewpoints and arguments are likely to arise in a deliberative process, there are no guarantees of this, especially when it comes to temporally distant future generations. Second, there are questions of the extent to which deliberation can help facilitate proper consideration of the interests of future others. It may be hard for deliberators to deal with complexities and uncertainties related to the effects of policies on future individuals and groups.

Third, intergenerational conflicts (e.g., Hara et al., 2019) undermine the motivation to consider the interests of future generations. Measures proposed to address intergenerational conflicts may even give rise to resistance or backlash (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010) because they may involve sacrifices in the short term. Moreover, this kind of resistance may remain unchallenged because future generations are not there to demand that their interests are properly considered in deliberative processes or that collective decisions are reasonable from their perspectives. For example, if claims made on behalf of future generations are against

the interests of a large majority of deliberators, they are unlikely to have much weight in the process. In the worst-case scenario, deliberators with their biases towards shared, presentist interests develop a high level of “group-think” (e.g., Solomon, 2006), developing social bonds and reinforcing each other’s cognitive and motivational biases towards the present.

In sum, although deliberative forums are likely to expand time horizons and evoke consideration of future interests, they may have limits in this respect. The non-existence of future generations, high levels of abstraction, uncertainties related to future events, and intergenerational conflicts are likely to undermine the prospects of proper consideration of the potential interests of future generations in a deliberative process. Therefore, even the most inclusive and carefully designed deliberative forums are vulnerable to presentist biases. To counter this, various measures to safeguard representation and consideration of future interests have been suggested.

Relevant literature contains proposals on how to evoke orientation towards the future among deliberators. Some of the proposals pertain to individual decision-making. Hansson (2007), for example, has put forward hypothetical retrospection for the moral assessment of options available in long-term choice situations. While the idea of hypothetical retrospection was developed to help individuals make more future-regarding decisions, it can also be applied in public deliberation on issues involving intergenerational conflicts.

There are also ways of enhancing the “politics of presence” that can guide speculation on future generations’ potential interests and perspectives. Scholars of deliberative democracy have argued that actual physical presence may be an important factor in strengthening understanding among individuals representing different social groups (e.g., Machin, 2015). The physical presence of future generations could be enhanced by including children or young people as stakeholders in deliberative processes on long-term decisions that will affect their lives (e.g., Harris, 2021). As involving minors in deliberative processes may give rise to ethical issues as well as issues of competence, deliberation among like-minded peers or “enclave deliberation” (Karpowitz et al., 2009) could be allowed to help minors articulate their views before deliberating in more inclusive forums. However, there is a more fundamental problem related to the idea of children and young people as representatives of future generations; namely, there are no guarantees that they are more future-regarding than adults. So perhaps, more than anything else, the mere presence of children in a deliberative process can evoke empathy for future others among deliberators.

When it comes to non-existing future generations, studies suggest that visualization exercises can enhance emotional engagement with future generations and promote understanding of the path dependency between generations (Honey-Rosés et al., 2014). Moreover, specific mental time travel exercises have been developed to evoke long-term consideration (for a review, see Cuhls, 2016). Hara et al. (2019) have developed a future design method where participants “travel” in time, that is, imagine themselves in the future without ageing. Through scenario exercises, participants create perceptions of policy consequences in the future. Furthermore, participants are encouraged to identify themselves with the interests and perspectives of future generations and to make representative claims on their behalf. There may also be elements of discursive accountability, namely, the requirement to justify one’s position to future others.

Hara et al. (2019) have applied this type of exercise in the context of a participatory deliberative process, where half of the participants were asked to take the role of future generations—they were even dressed up

in a specific manner—and to actively represent future interests in a deliberative process. The authors showed that such exercises can change policy priorities as well as reveal and articulate interest trade-offs involved in intergenerational conflicts. In this way, future design can help avoid negligence by creating a venue for reciprocal discursive accountability relations between representatives of current and future generations.

It is notable that methods for representing future generations, such as future design, should take place in the context of an inclusive deliberative process. Deliberation is essential to avoid misrepresentation because it can correct biased perceptions regarding the future and help participants make better judgments about the potential interests of future generations. The diversity of people involved in the deliberative process reflects the diversity of interests of those who live now and in the future, which allows weighing competing interests against each other. Embedding mental time travel exercises or other ways of representing future generations in inclusive deliberation therefore seems to be a good, and probably the only, way to approximate discursive accountability and mutual justification between different generations.

Table 1 summarizes the previous discussion on the problems of misrepresentation and negligence of future generations and their interests, the key characteristics of these problems, underlying issues, and possible remedies to them. Inclusive deliberative forums seem to be a potential remedy in all respects. They seem indispensable when it comes to forming informed and reflected judgments regarding the relative weight of the claims made on behalf of current and future generations. However, inclusive deliberation may not, as such, be quite sufficient to remedy all the problems, especially motivational problems causing negligence.

6. The Role of Future-Regarding Deliberation in Representative Systems

Representative democracies have institutions, such as parliamentary committees, that are expected to enhance inclusive deliberation. However, factors like party discipline and electoral accountability limit the

Table 1. Problems of misrepresentation and negligence and their remedies.

The character of the problem	Underlying issues	Remedies	The promise of deliberative forums
Misrepresentation: Epistemic and normative judgments	Lack of knowledge of policy consequences	Foresight on policy consequences in the future	Consideration of expert and foresight information
	Biased and purposive interpretations of future interests	Anticipation of future interests	Inclusion of affected interests
	Lack of (discursive) accountability to those affected in the future	Public scrutiny of representative claims	Processes of mutual justification
Negligence: Motivations	Self-interest, welfare trade-offs	Other-regarding considerations towards those affected	Evoking other-regarding considerations
	Lack of (formal) accountability to those affected in the future	Accountability relations to future others or their representatives	Weighing of competing interests (including future interests)

capacity of representatives to consider issues from the perspectives of all those affected by the decisions, including future generations. The democratic myopia thesis is based on the view that electoral accountability incentivizes elected representatives to appeal to (short-term) interests of potential voters in order to secure re-election (e.g., Jacobs, 2016). In contrast, there are no institutional incentives for elected representatives to consider the potential interests of future generations.

For this reason, future interests could be better represented and considered in deliberative forums where deliberators are not formally accountable for specific groups of currently existing people. This kind of unconstrained and inclusive deliberation can take place in specific institutional settings such as randomly selected deliberative mini-publics. When it comes to the protection of the interests of future generations in policymaking, deliberative mini-publics seem to have many benefits compared to current institutions of representative democracy (e.g., Smith, 2019).

Randomly selected forums for citizen deliberation can therefore be regarded as a vital component of a democratic system that aims to account for the interests of future generations. However, it is not clear what the role of citizen deliberation should be in terms of existing representative institutions and how they could be made more consequential in policymaking. To address such questions, MacKenzie (2016) suggests that representation of future interests should be ensured by institutionalizing citizen deliberation as a part of the representative system. He proposes the establishment of a randomly selected, “general-purpose” second chamber, which would scrutinize and evaluate all legislative proposals on the basis of specific posteriority impact statements. With powers to scrutinize and delay legislation, the randomly selected second chamber would make elected representatives discursively and (weakly) formally accountable to those representing future interests. In addition to the model put forward by MacKenzie, there are other possible ways of empowering deliberative forums. For example, there are proposals as well as actual examples of using deliberative mini-publics as agenda-setting institutions (Dahl, 1989, pp. 340–341; Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022), combined with oversight—or discursive accountability—functions with respect to elected representative institutions.

However, as pointed out earlier, even the most informed and inclusive deliberative forums may have limitations when it comes to considering future generations and their interests. One way to address these shortcomings would be to establish interaction between officials for future generations and deliberative forums (Smith, 2019), or, better still, in line with the future design, include multiple representatives of future generations within a deliberative forum. The inclusion of representatives of future generations would increase diversity in the representation of interests and foster the assessment of claims made on behalf of current and future generations. In order to enhance the proper articulation of the interests of future generations in the deliberative process, future-regarding deliberation should provide opportunities for “enclave deliberation” among the representatives of future generations.

While the exact shape of future-regarding deliberative forums and their role in representative democratic systems need further elaboration, it is worth pointing out that the empowerment of randomly selected forums does not mean that they would replace electoral representation. Rather, the purpose would be to design institutions and their connections so that these forums would foster discursive accountability and more future-regarding deliberation among elected representatives and among the public at large.

Admittedly, there are concerns that the empowerment and the institutionalization of randomly selected deliberative forums might give rise to external pressures and tendencies towards partisan thinking, which could weaken the quality of deliberation within these forums. Another concern is that strengthening the role of such deliberative institutions could decrease the legitimacy of electoral representation by undermining the authority of elected representatives. However, elected representatives are already steered and constrained in many ways by different institutions, such as constitutions, expert bodies, and courts. From the perspective of democracy, deliberative forums would be an improvement in comparison to such institutions because they would increase rather than decrease the scope of citizens' involvement in policy-making processes.

From an empirical perspective, combining representation of future generations with forums for citizen deliberation such as deliberative mini-publics might enhance the legitimacy of future-regarding policies. While there is a need for further empirical studies on this topic, there is already some empirical evidence that mini-publics can enhance the perceived legitimacy of unfavorable decisions (e.g., Germann et al., 2022). Moreover, studies suggest that people have more trust in mini-publics than in elected representatives (e.g., Warren & Gastil, 2015). At the same time, it is important to ensure that trust in deliberative forums should not be “blind,” but that their reasoning and arguments are accessible to public scrutiny.

7. Conclusion

The problem with democratic myopia is not that people do not care about the future, but rather that they may care about it in the wrong way or not quite enough. Consequently, the representation of the interests of future generations remains a challenge to the theory and practice of democracy. This article points out two problems in the representation of future generations and their interests: misrepresentation and negligence. Misrepresentation refers to the problem of epistemic and normative judgments about the interests of future generations, whereas negligence is a motivational problem.

These problems have the same root cause: Future generations cannot be physically present in the forums where political decisions affecting their lives are discussed and made. Consequently, there is a need for somebody to represent the interests of future generations, despite the lack of accountability mechanisms typical in representative relations among contemporaries. As a result, there is a heightened risk that claims made on behalf of future generations are misinformed, biased, or even opportunistic. Moreover, even well-justified claims made on behalf of future generations are likely to remain disregarded, especially when these claims are in conflict with strong presentist interests. While the problems of misrepresentation and negligence are often intertwined, this is not always the case. Therefore, disentangling them is useful, both analytically and in terms of institutional design.

There are various proposals to enhance the representation of the potential interests of future generations in policymaking and to compensate for the lack of physical presence. Randomly selected forums for citizen deliberation have been shown to correct biases in individual reasoning and to broaden horizons, and therefore, they are likely to be corrective also in terms of misrepresentation. From the perspective of future-regarding governance, strengthening the role of well-designed and deliberative forums seems to be an improvement over current institutions of representative democracy and their incentive structures.

However, deliberative forums as such may not be quite sufficient, particularly in addressing the problem of negligence. The capacity of deliberative forums to consider future interests could be boosted by certain elements of the politics of presence, such as time travel exercises, as part of the deliberative process. Such measures can further facilitate representations of future generations and their interests, as well as something that resembles processes of mutual justification between participants representing the present and the future. The political leverage of future-regarding deliberative forums could be enhanced by the institutionalization of discursive and formal accountability relations between elected representatives and deliberative forums.

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Conflict of Interests

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