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What kind of power can citizens exercise beyond the state? Globalizing democracy through representative claim-making

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Abstract

Across the developed democracies, there has been a rise in populist nationalism and anti-globalization sentiment aimed at reasserting sovereignty through the state. This article develops the concept of discursive power as an alternative basis for citizens to project their voice and influence into global politics. Discursive power arises from the framing role of ideas in orienting citizen judgements to the possibilities for acting beyond the state, as a precursor to deliberative forms of persuasion and agreement. Discursive power is 'democratic', we argue, when it enables those affected by global issues and problems to conceive of themselves as collective agents capable of responding. Generating discursive power outside the state, however, requires informal representatives to serve as interlocutors. Drawing on recent theories of representation, we describe how the claims of non-state actors could support the production and mobilization of citizens' discursive powers across borders. Our analysis underscores the importance of claim-making for progressive responses to globalization centred on the judgements of citizens. We conclude by surveying several challenges for democratic discursive power at the transnational and global levels and suggest some background institutions and practices to enhance this power.

Keywords: discursive power; representative claim-making; constructivism; democratic theory; transnational democracy; globalization; populism

How should citizens respond when the kinds of democracy that can be organized through territorial states are no longer sufficient to control the forces of globalization? Accounts of transnational and global democracy emphasize the role of global civil society as a pathway to global democratization.[1] Yet the rise of anti-globalization sentiment across established democracies highlights a disconnect between these possibilities and domestic publics.[2]

[1]Dryzek 2012; Macdonald 2008; Tallberg and Uhlin 2012; Scholte 2011.
[2]Zürn 2024.

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On the one hand, despite the retrenchments driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, the globalization of environmental issues, trade, finance, digital communications, security, and cultures will continue to impact people's lives and livelihoods long into the future, fuelling popular demands for more control. On the other hand, globalization weakens popular sovereignty by shifting many powers and sites of decision-making beyond democratic states, such that popular control seems increasingly out of reach. While nostalgia overstates a past when popular sovereignty was intact,[3] it does capture the fact that global integration reduces the autonomy of states and their ability to act in ways that are intelligible and legitimate in the eyes of their citizens.[4] If global civil society is to offer an alternative route to democratic empowerment, then we need to identify how the organizations and networks of which it is comprised could similarly orient the judgements of citizens, such that citizens can see themselves as agents capable of exercising influence across borders, even in the absence of the state.

The view that citizens are powerless without the state frames a political field in which populists from both the left and right can mobilize for hardened borders in the name of defending democracy.[5] Brexiteers appropriated the language of democracy to argue against the policies imposed by an 'undemocratic' European Union (EU), and for a reempowered United Kingdom (UK) that could make laws and policies owned exclusively by UK citizens.[6] In the United States (US), multilateral agreements like the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) are the target of similar backlash.[7] Democracy, on this view, requires withdrawing from globalization so that the sovereignty of the people can be represented and served through the re-centring of decisions in national governments and their sub-national units.

Yet although the forces of globalization may sometimes stall, they are unlikely to be reversed, at least not without significant costs to economies, innovation, pluralism, domestic liberties, and international responsibilities of peoples to address global and local injustices.[8] In this article, we seek to shift this debate by foregrounding the disorienting effects of globalization on citizens and their judgments. Previous work on the democratizing potentials of global civil society has focused on how to draw citizens into global politics but takes for granted citizens' capacities for judgement. Less attention has been given to the question of how citizen judgements should be directed and supported, such that citizens come to think of the state as only one of many possibilities for exercising democratic agency.

To address this oversight, we concentrate on the latent discursive powers that can be activated through citizens' engagement with the representative claim-making of global civil society actors, thus scaling individual-level powers to a global scope. Such powers count as democratically legitimate, in our view, just to the extent that they (a) involve citizen judgement; (b) link citizen judgement to representative claim-makers in ways that enable citizens to both authorize representatives and hold them accountable; and (c) are in principle open to and exercised by any

[3]Cf. Tuck 2020.
[4]McKean 2020; Rodrik 2018.
[5]Mansbridge and Macedo 2019; Moffitt 2016; Urbinati 2019.
[6]See, e.g., Tuck 2020.
[7]Cf. Keohane et al., 2009.
[8]Bohman 2007; Dryzek 2010; Young 2000.

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who are affected by forces of globalization. We use the term 'citizen' to refer to individuals generally in their political capacities rather their juridical state-based status.[9] We consider powers to be 'democratized' when they map onto the ways people are affected by globalization, an approach to democratic empowerment that has been theorized as the 'all-affected principle,' in part to help conceptualize what 'democracy' might mean in a globalized world.[10] Conceptually, our contribution lies in theorizing the processes through which representative claim-making can orient citizens to global issues and problems. Practically, we are interested in how citizen powers that are already familiar within democratic states might convert into global influence through organizational ecosystems that have the potential to project discursive power through representative claim-making. To be clear, discursive powers are *already* being exercised by global elites and activists, although these powers are often unequally distributed. Our aim here is to theorize the mechanisms through which discursive powers are deployed, so that we might better understand how they might then be democratized.

That representative claim-making can be a vector for democratic empowerment is not, of course, a new argument – indeed, it is now well-developed in the context of state-based democracy.[11] But the current challenges to democracy from globalization require a return to theory, so that we can identify how certain democratic powers might extend across borders. We do this by opening the black box of what goes on when citizens encounter claim-makers at the transnational and global levels, to explain how these engagements can, over time, orient citizens towards democratic empowerment beyond the state. The upshot of our analysis is to clarify the mechanisms involved in harnessing the discursive power of citizenship through claim-making, as an alternative vector for global democracy.

The article unfolds as follows. In the first section, we contrast the kind of powers that citizens have through voting with *discursive power*, which emphasizes how the effectiveness of communicative forms of influence depends on a common orientation to the structure of a discourse. In the second section, we note that discursive power emerges through the communicative mobilization of constituencies around shared understandings of common interests and struggles, which can and often do cross borders. In the third section, we combine the concept of discursive power with recent theories of representation.[12] Representative claim-makers can bring discursive power into being by calling forth latent constituencies – activating and engaging citizen judgements – across jurisdictions and beyond states. In the fourth section, we identify the conditions under which these processes take on democratic characteristics, focusing on how authorization and accountability function from the standpoint of citizen judgement. In the fifth and sixth sections, we discuss several kinds of challenges for this vector of global democracy and suggest some institutional responses. When discursive power is supported, citizens can meet the challenges of globalization without following populists in tying

[9]Our usage thus departs from narrow, legalistic definitions of citizenship tied to membership in a particular country and embraces the Latin roots of the term – picking out any free person who regards themselves, and is regarded, as a member of the larger human community, which historically may or may not have been a state (e.g., 'a citizen of the world').

[10]See Fung and Gray (2024) for a comprehensive overview and debate on the all-affected principle.

[11]See, e.g., Montanaro 2018; Saward 2009.

[12]Disch 2011; Rehfeld 2018; Saward 2010.

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the democratic project to de-globalized nation states. And when those who are affected by globalization are empowered to respond directly to global forces, we can speak of democracy beyond the state.

Citizen powers in constitutional democracies

Ideally, citizens in constitutional democracies have a variety of powers through which they can influence collectivities. Many of these powers are rooted in constitutionally defined and equally distributed political rights, including voting, freedom of speech and association, and rights of petition. Some of these powers are directly influential. The right to vote, for instance, is enabled as a power that can be exercised through competitive elections, as well as other kinds of collective decision-making processes, such as ballot measures. By voting, citizens can exert a bit of equal influence, which they can use to have their say in selecting or removing leaders, parties, or governments – or sometimes in the direct enactment of policies. Ideally, the vote enables citizens to authorize their elected representatives to govern (or oppose) on their behalf, when they cannot do it themselves.[13] The vote also functions as an accountability device in subsequent elections, enabling citizens to either reauthorize or remove their representative, or (for losing voters) to register their opposition.[14]

Put this way, we can understand why the default orientation of citizens is to the state as a means of democratic empowerment.[15] Though state-focused vectors of empowerment like the vote are subject to well-known inequalities and biases that limit their democratic potentials,[16] they nonetheless comprise a powerful framework of democracy-defining ideals. Globalization becomes *disorienting* for citizens as it erodes these state-based features. What citizens can do with their votes – their most direct power – is defined by what their state (and its sub-jurisdictions) can accomplish. Domestically, the power of the vote depends on organized sites of authorization, accountability, and collective action – characteristics mostly missing at the global level. Of course, if citizens are sufficiently organized and aware of global forces, they can push their elected governments to project influence into transnational and international regimes – shaping trade, environmental, and security arrangements, for example. But the primary pathway for this kind of democratic empowerment is through the state, and thus people's horizon for understanding how to act in transnational and global contexts is limited to the state. It is for this reason, perhaps, that many theories of global democracy continue to appeal to state institutions and practices explicitly: either to enforce representative relationships;[17] or, as a model for designing formal mechanisms of representation in international institutions and organizations, such as the EU or the World Bank.[18]

[13]Pitkin 1967, 233–35.

[14]Manin et al., 1999.

[15]Here, we follow McKean's definition of orientation as an anchoring frame that 'identif[ies] the features of our lives that we should regard as most salient for judgements about how to act within it' (McKean 2020, 10). The importance of orientation thinking in politics can be traced back to Kant ([1786] 1991).

[16]E.g., Gilens 2012; Bagg 2024.

[17]E.g., Kuper 2004.

[18]E.g., Kuyper 2016; Macdonald 2008.

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These are important kinds of extensions where they can be made to work for citizens. Brexit notwithstanding, the EU is one of the most viable and impressive experiments in decoupling popular sovereignty from national sovereignty in order to bring the forces of globalization to heel on a quasi-statist model. Nevertheless, the relationships of authorization and accountability that bind political decision-makers to citizens are diluted as states enter into multilateral agreements that enable common markets, trade, migration, or security arrangements, or that address pressing global problems such as poverty, human rights, or climate change. Vote-based citizen powers become thinner and thinner as chains of principal–agent relationships lengthen. As Brexiteers complained, voters lose their capacities to control decisions and policies when their governments cede control to state-like multinational organizations like the EU.[19]

Even as citizens' influence is diluted, the effects of globalization are proximate and immediate yet difficult to comprehend. Lower-end jobs are off-shored while higher-end jobs that follow globalization are captured by more educated and well-connected citizens.[20] Lower-skilled jobs come under wage pressure from low-wage countries. Immigration changes the character of communities and may introduce unwelcome competition into labour markets. Economic winners from increased trade cluster at the top of the income spectrum. It is no wonder that many citizens in the developed democracies see a solution in reasserting national sovereignty against the forces of globalization.[21] In our view, the reactive character of populist movements underscores a socially uneven erosion of citizen powers exercised through voting and oriented toward the collective uses of the state.

Discursive power

Progressive (rather than reactive) responses to globalization will need to harness a different kind of citizen power: *discursive power*. In contrast to casting a ballot, opportunities for public framing, communication, debate, argument, and persuasion are multiplying as a consequence of globalization.[22] Individuals from one country can now communicate directly and nearly instantly with individuals from another. They can build networks, circulate information, organize protests, conduct media campaigns, or lobby multinational corporations and foreign governments. They can reinterpret taken-for-granted features of politics shaped by global forces and develop a new orientation towards them. There are state-based institutional conditions that make this possible: discursive powers depend upon protected spaces for speech and association. But such powers can exceed, as it were, these origins.

To be sure, discursive powers operate in domestic contexts as well. And, of course, there is nothing in the existence of these powers *as such* that makes them 'democratic': discursive powers can be (and are) unequally distributed, both domestically and globally – a point to which we return below. What makes the concept of discursive power important to theorize in its own right, however, is that it may offer another means of addressing those who have been stranded by globalization and

[19]Tuck 2020.
[20]Nye and Donahue 2000; Rodrik 2018.
[21]Streeck 2017.
[22]Dryzek 2010.

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the erosion of the state. More specifically, we argue that discursive power has democratic potentials that can be made accessible to, and thus usable by, citizens seeking to directly project their influence across borders as an alternative to the state.

In theorizing the nature and reach of discursive power, we are building on extensive scholarship documenting the many ways that civil society groups can enlist citizens to independently shape domestic decisions and policies and do so because citizens are attracted to a cause or purpose – a dynamic that was first theorized by Tocqueville.[23] Somewhat less attention has been paid to the question of how such groups might similarly empower citizens to act at a transnational or global level.[24] The logic, however, is similar: individuals can pool their energies and resources for a common cause, usually because they are *persuaded* by organizers that the cause is worth their investment of time, money, skills, and intelligence. Hannah Arendt noticed that there is also a communicative form of influence that can be tapped, 'when men join themselves together for the purpose of action.'[25] Exercising this influence, moreover, requires nothing besides an informal agreement among participants. The results are organized capacities for collective action that can, in principle, emerge without formal state institutions beyond political and civil rights.

Emphasizing the 'discursive' nature of this citizen power over and above its communicative origins, draws attention to those features of discourses that frame issues, and in so doing provide an anchoring lens that can transform latent global constituencies (people having common problems, interests, concerns, or moral intuitions) into self- conscious constituencies, often cutting across differences in language and culture. This approach finds empirical support in a now vast and growing literature on issue-framing in political psychology.[26] Framing, particularly elite framing that draws on hegemonic discourses, can result in elite manipulated public opinion. Research has shown, however, that citizen conversations that counter elite framing can lead to more self-consciously held and evaluated views.[27]

Self-conscious constituencies can be oriented through shared discourses in ways that generate power – hence the term 'discursive power.' But the concept should not be seen as replacing more familiar notions of power centred on communicative influence. What the concept of discursive power does, instead, is highlight the work of issue-framing and constituency formation that is common to all politics, but especially important for democracy beyond the state.[28] Discursive constituency formation constructs lifeworld problems, tensions, intuitions, and resources into

[23]See Warren 2001, ch. 6.

[24]Cf. Scholte 2011; Tallberg and Uhlin 2012.

[25]Arendt 1963, 175; see also Habermas 1977, 1996.

[26]Chong and Druckman 2007.

[27]Druckman and Nelson 2003.

[28]Discursive power, as we develop it, thus differs in crucial ways from earlier conceptions of communicative power put forward by Arendt and Habermas. Communicative power refers to organized collective capacities generated through persuasion. Discursive power is a more encompassing concept, focused on the ways that shared discourses can structure and enable communication as such. In this article, we are interested – in a way that Arendt and Habermas are not – in theorizing 'framing' and 'linking' functions of discourses, particularly when deployed through claim-making as a precursor to attempts at communicative power. Discursive power should also be distinguished from ideas of 'discursive representation', which refers to the direct representation of discourses (e.g., 'the human rights discourse') (see Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008). In contrast, our focus is on the nature and logic of influence generated through the

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shared frames, which in turn enables organization through the establishment of a common orientation to understanding the world and the opportunities for influencing it.[29]

We favour the concept of discursive power precisely because it centres the framing role of ideas in orienting (and reorienting) citizens to alternative possibilities for collective agency. As we have noted, the discourse of the state provides a default orientation to global politics. But in a world in which the state is one of many points for voice and influence, attending to discursive power is essential to understanding the formation of new constituencies. In particular, the concept of discursive power can explain how the judgements of citizens could be combined to provide shared orientations to global issues – creating the ideational scaffolding, as it were, for new organizations to develop. It can capture the framing and linking functions of ideas in connecting multiple sites of communicative action over great distances, even in the absence of state institutions.

So defined, discursive power differs from the coercive powers that states can mobilize, or the incentives leveraged by economic actors. The effects are felt primarily in the construction of commonalities that can transform latent constituencies into active ones. Shared orientations can lead to the coordination of pressure, demonstrations, information, boycotts, self-help, and other forms of influence with global reach. While discursive power may seem 'soft' when compared to the power of coercion or wealth, its impacts should not be underestimated. Protests and demonstrations, for example, can undermine a state's legitimacy and diminish its coercive capacities. Likewise, boycotts that damage the reputations of corporations can inflict the pain of losing market share.[30] Positively, discursive power can guide and legitimate state power, and induce economic actors to attend to their social and political externalities.

More relevant, for our purposes, is the fact that shared discourses can traverse borders with comparative ease in ways that can connect citizens in one country to those with similar struggles or grievances in another country. While the powers of states and (often) economic actors are tied to a particular place, there are few such constraints on communication – and thus on discursive power – at least in places where civil and political rights are protected, or at least not actively suppressed. Ideas can translate into discursive power through the disparate activities of global actors, including activist groups (like Oxfam and Global Justice Now), social media (like Twitter or 'X'), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) (like the Worker Rights Consortium or the Fight for $15), or even governance regimes that came into existence for the purpose of trade and development but have evolved to assume other purposes (as the European Coal and Steel Community developed, in part discursively, into the political project of the EU). International civil society organizations already can and do bring discursive power into existence by providing social infrastructure for the circulation of information, norms, and values.[31]

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discursive orientation of citizen judgements, which manifest as forms of 'power to' and 'power with' (in contrast to 'power over').

[29]This formulation also allows us to connect earlier theories of communicative power to the discursive features of more recent theories of representation. We return to this point later in the article.

[30]Grant and Keohane 2005.

[31]Risse 2000; Schmidt 2008.

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In theory, then, discursive power is less bounded and potentially more far-reaching than other forms of power that have already been well-theorized. In global financial regulation, labour rights, economic development, trade, and many other issues, it is not surprising that the most promising democratization strategies begin by moving across borders to connect and frame domestic policy debates in one country to those in other countries.[32] These kinds of developments are evidence of discursive powers at work – powers that we argue could be harnessed to address the democratic deficits that globalization creates if given adequate prompting.

Discursive power and representative relationships

Because global contexts are characterized by scale and distance, discursive powers will need to be framed and activated by informal representative relationships beyond the state in order to be available to citizens. By themselves, citizens rarely have the opportunity to project discursive power beyond borders. But the international realm is now full of political entrepreneurs making representative claims outside of the state. When these claims are successful – when they resonate – they can orient citizens to interests, values, and lifeworld circumstances that they share with others, thereby transforming latent constituencies into potentially effective constituencies, usually issue by issue.[33]

Why are representative claim-makers so uniquely suited to cultivating citizens' discursive powers? In part, because claim-making is a discursive exercise by its very nature. Most theorists focus on the purely *representative* functions of claim-making, while neglecting the larger discourses that these claims draw citizens into. Recent approaches to theorizing representation, however, have helped to bring this neglected feature into view.[34]

According to Andrew Rehfeld, to be a representative is to possess a status that entitles one to exercise the right of speaking and acting on behalf of others.[35] Voting, deliberating, negotiating, leading, and so on, become acts of representation only when they are performed by someone who is *recognized* as a representative. This kind of status is not a natural fact, but rather follows from the beliefs of an audience. Representative status can, of course, be granted through formal mechanisms like elections. But, more relevant for representative relationships beyond the state, it can also be established informally, as when a self-appointed representative successfully gains recognition,[36] or even when a person or organization has a representative status attributed to them without seeking this role.[37]

[32]Gould 2014; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Zürn 2018.

[33]Bohman 2007.

[34]Disch 2011; Saward 2010, 2014. In the literature on democratic theory, these recent approaches are often said to reflect a 'constructivist turn' to understanding political representation. We avoid using the constructivist label here so as not to confuse this recent body of work with the separate, longstanding constructivist paradigm of international relations. Our thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing us to clarify this point.

[35]Rehfeld 2018.

[36]Montanaro 2018.

[37]Cf. Rubenstein 2014.

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Some theorists have worried that elite claim-makers can so mould citizens' opinions and judgements that they undermine any democratic benefits.[38] Representatives are not just in the business of faithfully reflecting their constituents' views. Instead, they actively seek to steer opinion, using language that depicts 'a constituency *as* this or that, as requiring this or that, as having this or that set of interests.'[39] As Lisa Disch notes, this formulation makes it seem as if 'citizens' capacity to form preferences depends on the self-interested communication of elites.'[40]

These concerns are empirically plausible, as political entrepreneurs try their very hardest to make claims that call forth and mobilize constituencies. And, as we noted, discursive powers are unequally distributed in domestic and global contexts, not unlike other forms of power. As scholars of representation observe, however, open competition among claim-makers can mitigate these issues at a systems level – a view that is longstanding in democratic theory,[41] and finds backing in empirical studies of framing effects on public opinion.[42] What tends to be missing in this debate is an account of representative communication from the standpoint of citizen judgement (which we address in this section), and its implications for authorization and accountability (which we address in the next section). Since the discursive power of representation requires the engagement of individual citizens, its democratic potentials should be assessed at this level.

The approach to representation that we develop here builds from the observation that the *decision to be represented* – to accept a representative claim – is itself a political judgement, one that presupposes that each person understands the significance of what's being asked of them when they enter a representative relationship.[43] Representative claims are not just appeals or assertions of status. They convey a picture of existing social and political arrangements, the values these arrangements should promote, and the opportunities that exist for individuals to become involved.[44] In engaging with a representative claim, then, individuals gain new sets of orienting frames, through which they can evaluate their experiences – not just as 'citizens', but now also potentially as 'partners', 'members', 'supporters', 'affected parties', and so on, each of which leads to a different conception of one's agency in relation to others. In this way, representative claim-making may generate discursive power *on its own*, through the orientation of citizen judgement.

To be sure, such claim-making does not replace the need for further deliberation about what to do collectively. It just provides some of the preconditions, by transforming latent constituencies into active ones that are now able to engage in the kinds of discussions out of which collective organizations and actions may follow. The more claim-makers there are for citizens to engage with, the greater the critical leverage citizens will have to form preferences and plans that are authentically their own, and to challenge claims that they disagree with, even in contexts where capacities and resources are otherwise unequal.

[38]Schweber 2016.
[39]Saward 2010, 71.
[40]Disch 2011, 101.
[41]Dahl 1970; Schattschneider 1975.
[42]Chong and Druckman 2007.
[43]Warren 2019.
[44]McKean 2020, 43.

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So, how does this process of representative claim-making look from the standpoint of citizens' judgements? We can answer this question in part by borrowing from the philosophy of language. According to Robert Brandom, speakers and audiences are continually engaging in practices of linguistic 'scorekeeping'.[45] Scorekeeping tracks the deontological commitments and entitlements implied in our use of specific words and expressions. To make a representative claim is to undertake (implicitly) a commitment. One assumes a special kind of responsibility in their audience's judgement for the claim being made. Even in the absence of formal authorization, citizens may infer that a representative is committed to speaking in their name, or advancing their interests, and is indeed entitled to do so simply through their words alone. The representative should know what they are committing to in making a claim and be responsible for upholding their commitments. Representatives invite their audience to trust that, if challenged, they could demonstrate 'entitlement to a claim by *justifying* it, that is, by giving reasons for it.'[46] If a representative is taken at their word, then the commitment between this representative and the represented can be cashed out as discursive power. The mutual reward for the reciprocal commitment implied in a representative speaking on behalf of the represented, is that the representative can then enlist the resources on offer from the represented – money, organization of votes, volunteer labour, boycotts, pressure and protest, and so on – all to further their cause.

One of the less remarked features of globalization, as we've argued, is its *disorienting* consequences for citizen judgement.[47] People feel powerless to control global market forces, for instance, in part because they have no conception of how the world economy operates and the ways that their agency is implicated. Empirical scholars of international relations likewise find that, when public knowledge of complex issues like global trade is lacking, citizens will often try to orient themselves by basing their judgements on criteria such as prior familiarity with the actors involved – think, for example, of the World Bank or World Trade Organization (WTO) – and their reputation as reliable interlocutors.[48]

Our focus on the shared framing established by representative claim-making leverages these kinds of observations. In global politics, citizens can judge the claim-maker, and not just the content of the claim. If citizens base their decisions about representation partly on *who* is doing the claiming, they can critically orient themselves by 'putting a face' on global issues or problems that are otherwise impenetrable. When citizens accept a claim, moreover, they also accept the ideas and discourses inferred by that claim, in a way that connects their experiences to like-minded others. The latent discursive power of citizens resides in these grants of entitlement and should be felt by a representative claim-maker as binding even at the transnational and global levels.

To illustrate this logic, imagine you are stopped by an activist for an international labour movement while walking down the street. The activist informs you that a neighboring country is proposing to raise their minimum wage for workers and that your country should do the same. 'Companies are making billons, and yet

[45]Brandom 1994, 2000.

[46]Brandom 1994, 174, emphasis in the original.

[47]See also McKean 2020.

[48]See Bearce and Cook 2018; Milner and Tingley 2015.

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we are on wages that make it impossible to keep a roof over our heads and offer no job security. Your help is needed.' Implicit in this message is an anchoring frame. The activist is *inviting* you to make this inference – to attribute to her organization a commitment that, if you contribute, then 'we' will raise the minimum wage. She might not say, 'My organization speaks for those concerned about global economic justice.' But her use of the words 'our,' 'wages', 'job security,' and 'help,' all hang together in a way that gives an image of yourself as a member of this larger constituency. But how can you base your judgement on the activist's words alone? Doesn't she have an incentive to exaggerate or mislead? Should you take the information you're being given as reliable? These internal deliberations are not passive. You may not have heard of the global fight to raise the minimum wage before, may not be aware of all the facts, but perhaps you *do* know the organization making the claim – its mission and reputation. You therefore make a judgement – whether to reject the activist's representative claim as unwarranted or irrelevant, or to sign-on and contribute.

In our view, informal representative moments such as these can orient citizen judgement and, in doing so, draw out latent discursive powers. This can happen in two ways. One is *epistemic*, involving consciousness-raising. Representative claims can aim to tell citizens something about the world. They can provide an interpretative lens with information that helps citizens to break down complex issues and topics to facilitate the formation of public opinion and support. A second way is *coordinative*, linking judgements together through a shared discourse. A representative claim – 'I represent *x*…' or 'Speaking as an *x*, *we* believe that…' – is also a claim that can be taken up by citizens, and challenged, debated, and acted upon by those who agree with it.[49]

It follows that when citizens accept a representative claim, their contributions (time, money, labour, votes, advocacy, etc.) can be mobilized as means of political influence that can project across borders. But just as important – albeit less noticed – are the transformations at the level of citizen judgement. Participants gain new orientations to global politics, and may suddenly view themselves as collective agents with powers that extend beyond borders.

If, as we're arguing, discursive power outside the state must be generated through claim-making, then the opposite also holds on our view. Groups that eschew representation will often fail to build discursive power across borders. The populist Yellow Vest movement in France, for example, protested deteriorating economic conditions for the working class because of globalization. But a feature of the movement was that there should be no authoritative representatives, and that everyone should speak only for themselves – a strategy that limited both the domestic and transnational impacts of the movement over the longterm.[50] As the political scientist and civil rights activist Jo Freeman noted long ago, some form of representation is always necessary to overcome the 'tyranny of structurelessness' that inevitably leads to movement failure as time goes on.[51]

[49]Warren 2019; Montanaro 2018.

[50]Hayat 2021.

[51]Freeman 1972. Some scholars erroneously reduce Freeman's arguments to a cautionary tale about how movements can come to be dominated by elites. But Freeman also provides an analysis of the democratic structuring of movements, noting that 'delegation' is an essential feature to overcome the tyranny of structurelessness.

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In contrast, by mobilizing discursive power through their representative claims, INGOs and other kinds of transnational organizations have enabled citizens to influence governments on policies as diverse as global climate change, international labour standards, fair trade policies, access to healthcare, foreign aid, the banning of land mines, and international criminal justice. Claim-based representation becomes particularly important for empowering citizens in contexts characterized by scale and distance, where the tendency towards disorienting structurelessness is at its greatest.

Discursive power as democracy?

The remaining question is what would render discursive power *democratic* at the transnational and global levels. This question has two parts. First, can citizens, as agents, exercise influence through the orienting claims of their informal representatives, in a way that is empowering across borders? Second, can citizen empowerment be distributed proportionally, according to the extent to which different citizens are affected by global forces?[52] We address the first part of the question in this section, while leaving the (much greater) challenge of the democratic distribution of powers to the sections that follow.

With respect to the first part of the question, we have been arguing that discursive power mobilized by representative claim-makers has democratic potentials beyond the state just to the extent it supports the exercise of citizen judgement in the acceptance or rejection of claims, thereby orienting citizens to new possibilities for action. By analogy to voting in competitive elections, when citizens can authorize representatives to speak and act on their behalf, and then hold them accountable for doing so, discursive power can function democratically.

This approach to locating democracy within domains of informal representation is sketched out in earlier theories.[53] But, as we noted in the last section, these analyses tend to focus on systems-level qualities that work against elite manipulation by checking the ability of elites to monopolize the framing of claims, such as the extent of political competition between claim-makers or the broader information environment in which elites are operating.[54] We are adding a focus on the agency of citizens sometimes overlooked in systems approaches.[55]

In particular, we focus on citizen judgements to authorize representative claim-makers in global civil society and to hold them accountable. These moments of citizen judgement can be theorized more closely by comparing them to the kinds of judgements (ideally) involved in the formal procedures institutionalized in constitutional democracies.[56] Table 1 distinguishes four classes of reasons that citizens might have for accepting the claims of an individual or organization as representing them. On our model, citizens' acceptance will vary depending on the formal or informal nature of the claim, and the source of their acknowledgement or support. With formal electoral representation, for example, there are established procedures for selecting representatives, namely, the casting and counting of

[52] Fung and Gray 2024.
[53] Saward 2009; Urbinati and Warren 2008; Montanaro 2018; cf. Kuyper 2016.
[54] Disch 2011; Saward 2009.
[55] Owen and Smith 2015.
[56] See also Urbinati and Warren 2008; Montanaro 2018.

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Table 1. Four reasons for citizens to judge that a representative is authorized

	Who is making a representative claim?	
Why accept?	Formal representative	Informal representative
Authority	Ia. 'Has procedural authority': Claimant has the right to command based on their office, as well as the sanctions and resources it controls.	IIa. 'Has qualified authority': Claimant has special competence, experience, expertise, or status that warrants deference.
Persuasion	Ib. 'Persuades to support': Claimant offers arguments, evidence, or reasons to be endorsed or supported in their representative role.	IIb. 'Persuades to recognize': Claimant offers arguments, evidence, or reasons to be recognized and accepted as a representative.

votes. Elections thus establish the procedural authority of an elected representative to legislate on their constituency's behalf (Table 1, Ia).

Of course, democratic elections should be competitive, meaning that winning representatives often do not speak for their constituency as a whole – they simply speak for the subset of constituents that they've persuaded to support them. For this reason, even a formal representative will invest considerable time communicating with their constituents between elections, soliciting their judgements, justifying themselves, and in general, bolstering the discursive power that can be marshalled in support of their agenda (Table 1, Ib). For their part, citizens should be oriented to their elected representative *as voters* and be accustomed to evaluating their representative's claims through this frame. The point is that acting or speaking with the authority status of 'representative' isn't simply about the right to command. It requires ongoing processes of mutual justification that anchors shared viewpoints. So even formal representatives depend upon discursive power, insofar as their speech must connect with supporters to sufficiently motivate them to turn out.

Much the same logic extends to informal representative claims at the transnational and global levels. An individual or organization may acquire the status of a representative due to their perceived authoritativeness as a trusted source of values and information, or competence to achieve the mission they claim (Table 1, IIa). Such authorization may be publicly signalled through donations, memberships, or attendance at protests and rallies, all of which indicate – albeit imperfectly – that the claims of the informal representative have been accepted, and that its supporters identify themselves with its actions (Table 1, IIb). Conversely, if an informal claim is contested, ignored, or rejected, its authority fails.[57]

By linking authoritative representation to citizen judgement, we can also conceptualize what accountability looks like from the citizen's point of view. Table 2 maps the corresponding justifications for believing that a representative is not just authorized, but also accountable. Within government and formal electoral institutions, citizens are (ideally) aware of their power to sanction politicians seeking re-election, which in turn incentivizes politicians to submit to public debate and

[57]Cf. Gray 2023 for a worry that representative claim-makers may sometimes read into the silence of passive publics, taking this silence as authorization when it is not.

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Table 2. Four reasons for citizens to judge that a representative is accountable

	Who is being held accountable?	
Why accept?	Formal representative	Informal representative
Sanctions	Ia. 'Is procedurally accountable': Claimant can be sanctioned or removed from office due to unsatisfactory performance.	IIa. 'Is reputationally accountable': Claimant can diminish in standing and resources based on public reputation.
Assurance	Ib. 'Assures support is warranted': Claimant offers arguments, evidence, or reasons to justify continued support of their official role as a representative.	IIb. 'Assures recognition is valid': Claimant offers arguments, evidence, or reasons to justify their continued reputation as a representative.

scrutiny (Table 2, Ia). A broader notion of accountability closely follows.[58] Prudent representatives don't just wait to be questioned. They proactively explain their decisions to anticipate criticism and demonstrate that they are representing their constituents' interests (Table 2, Ib). In this way, electoral competition instills confidence that representatives will remain aligned with citizens, through the threat of sanction, while also fostering two-way communication.

Accountability in contexts of informal representation, however, requires that citizens must conceive their relationship to global claim-makers as one in which justifications can be demanded and, indeed, are owed, if the relationship is to remain a representative one. The primary incentive that informal representatives have to remain accountable is their reputation (Table 2, IIa), which has its bite in the willingness (or unwillingness) of citizens to believe what they are being told and to take it as an authoritative guide for their actions. When informal representatives such as global civil society actors fail to follow through on their missions, offer false or misleading information to supporters, or otherwise abuse their power and authority, they can incur reputational costs that can reduce memberships, harm finances, and damage public influence as key supporters abandon them in ways that undermine their representative claims – and, in turn, their capacities to organize discursive power.[59]

For many informal representatives, the potential reputational damage of not answering critics and dissatisfied members pushes once more in discursive directions, especially when it feeds into a larger public narrative. Citizens must be supplied with evidence to believe that their interests are being well-represented, and that the organization can respond and reform (Table 2, IIb).[60]

As noted earlier, it is generic to claim-making – and language-use more generally – that we are capable of holding others accountable for their speech – and,

[58]Mansbridge 2019.

[59]Grant and Keohane 2005.

[60]Informal representatives, on the other hand, have incentives to address citizens as 'partners', 'contributors', or 'members' to whom accountability is owed and, in general, to frame their claims in ways that reinforce citizens' self-identification with a shared point of view. The result is a discursive orientation of citizens to a set of roles that fits their opportunities for agency at the transnational and global levels.

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more specifically, for the commitments and entitlements that speech presupposes and implies.[61] Discursive power becomes a democratic empowerment when combined with resources that citizens can use to convert speech-based accountability into costs and benefits for the representative organization. In electoral democracies, votes perform this function insofar as they increase a candidates' election tally. But in nonelectoral settings – informal representation beyond the state – the activities of joining and exiting take centre stage as individuals 'vote with their feet', as it were. Informal representatives, including foundations, non-profits, advocacy groups, and INGOs, gain status by persuading people to join them and contribute their resources. So, if these claim-makers drift away from their audiences and constituencies, people can say 'no' by exiting, and perhaps giving reasons for their exit – in extreme cases, going public.

While our theory answers the problem of how to orient citizen judgement to democratic possibilities outside the state, it also implies that more attention be given to the wider organizational eco-systems that enable citizens to adopt a critical stance to prospective claim-makers. Citizens will be aided in their judgements of informal representative claims by NGOs that facilitate accountability, such as Charity Navigator in the US and Charity Intelligence in Canada, as well as some government oversight of organizations that have public contracts or claim tax-free status. We should think of these organizations and others as creating the kind of discursive environment that incentivizes claim-makers to follow through on accountability and guard their reputations.[62]

In sum, by theorizing claim-making and discursive power, we can identify a vector for democratic empowerment beyond the state that doesn't require the reactive reassertion of national sovereignty. The representative claims put forward by nongovernmental actors in global civil society can anchor citizens in a shared discourse that can be cashed out in organization, advocacy, and pressure that extends beyond borders. What enables this kind of power, we have argued, are the functions that discourses can play in orienting citizen judgements across different sites of collective action. The influence wielded through discursive power has democratic potentials to the degree it engages and supports citizen judgement through the acceptance or rejection of representative claims and, with this, the addition or subtraction of individual contributions to the cause.

We can see these democratic possibilities operating, not just in successful exercises of discursive power, but also in high-profile failures in the INGO community, such as when the Red Cross redirected money intended for earthquake relief in Haiti to its organizational administration and other missions, contrary to its claims.[63] When the scandal broke, outraged citizens in the US and EU demanded an explanation and successfully campaigned to hold legislative hearings, in a way that enforced accountability. Similarly, transnational movements to legislate for workers' rights in the Global South have been crucial to getting multinational corporations and governments to take responsibility for their supply chains and negative societal impacts.[64] The general point is that when discursively established

[61]Brandom 1994, 2000.
[62]Hirschman 1970; Montanaro 2019; Warren 2011.
[63]Rubenstein 2015.
[64]See Gould 2014; McKean 2020.

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authorization and accountability are effective, citizen powers can be projected beyond the state to increase democratic voice and influence in global governance.

In keeping the focus on individual-level judgements, we can also spotlight democratic deficits that may exist *within* INGOs.[65] Oxfam, for example, does a good job representing members and donors, but struggles to move beyond benevolent paternalism with respect to its recipient constituencies.[66] Likewise, a challenge for INGOs like the Fight for $15 will be to empower recipients' voice, despite asymmetrical resources and differing domestic contexts – a problem now widely recognized among transnational labour organizers.[67] Similar logics can be elaborated for many other issues: labour and environmental riders to trade agreements, the Paris Accords (which depends much more directly on discursive force than do trade agreements), and certification campaigns in the forestry, seafood, and clothing industries. Generally speaking, where transnational organizations develop, we can formulate questions about democratizing the loci of collective decisions and actions that they enable.

Thus, the upshot of this mapping exercise is that it provides a heuristic with which we can identify and assess relationships of democratic authorization and accountability, from the citizen's perspective. This perspective is largely missing in existing scholarship on representation. But it is especially important for our argument, since the democratic potential of discursive power requires citizens to be oriented to, and persuaded to identify themselves with, informal claim-makers capable of framing and coordinating actions across borders.

Challenges for discursive power as democracy

Although we have theorized how tapping the discursive power of citizenship could orient citizens to democratic possibilities beyond the state, we have also emphasized that this kind of power does not, by itself, produce 'democracy.' In this section, we identify and discuss five kinds of challenges that can undermine the democratic potentials of discursive power. Two are failures of inclusion, while three more involve failures of citizen judgement. We present these as problems suggested by our theory, without commenting on their empirical likelihood. In the next section, we suggest how the failures we identify could be addressed.

Inclusions of those affected

In focusing on democratic potentials of discursive power, we have in mind the sort of influence that comes from thinking and acting in solidarity with distant others who are similarly affected. But in a globalized world, projections of discursive power are not, of course, inherently democratic. For instance, citizens may wield their influence in ways that can amount to paternalism with respect to others who are affected, as is often the case in international aid and advocacy.[68] Oxfam,

[65] To be fair, these deficits are also in many cases recognized by INGOs themselves, especially those that seek to empower highly vulnerable populations.

[66] Montanaro 2018.

[67] McKean 2020.

[68] Montanaro 2018; McKean 2020.

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for example, does not just represent those who donate (and who have capacities to authorize and hold accountable), but also their recipient constituencies (who usually lack these capacities). The Global Fight for $15 represents low-wage workers facing vastly different challenges in their respective countries. By proxy, such organizations enable citizens in one place to connect with those in other places – but not necessarily in democratic ways. Solidarity requires mutual attentiveness and the identification of shared interests, not just a one-sided benevolence. It may be that 'democracy' across borders in situations in which people are unorganized, dispersed, and poorly resourced is a tall order. Democracy beyond borders is not just about democratic possibilities of discursive power, but also about the distribution of individual-level capacities for judgement, and the opportunities within the global political ecosystem for individual judgments to find representation.

This said, representing people who do not yet form active constituencies may be a step toward democracy, simply through the identification, publicization, and sometimes organization of people into a constituency capable of action. The key, we have argued, is whether a representative claim connects with the judgements of those affected in a way that enhances their agency. If, for example, a representative claim can raise the consciousness of a marginalized or otherwise vulnerable group, or connect their struggles to ideas and resources from citizens elsewhere, then this can be a discursive basis for building democratic capacities. But discursive power, exercised by dominant groups, can subvert the judgements of those affected, as well as enhance them.

Another inclusion problem involves projections of discursive power that use 'democratic' language but are inherently exclusive of those affected by state policies and transnational forces. In Europe, far-right nationalist populists like Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders have gained transnational followings, in part by claiming to speak for 'Europe's peoples' in a way that draws boundaries around an ethnonationalist *demos* to the exclusion of immigrants and minorities.[69] The orientation that follows from these claims functions to preclude consideration of the rights and standing of affected interests that fall outside their ethno-nationalist vision. It reinforces a world where sovereignty is state-bound and some people are second-class, while ignoring the relationships of power and interdependency that tie the fates of communities together.[70]

If a claim fails to address those affected, or is intended to exclude them, then its democratic qualities disappear. Conversely, representative claim-making generates *democratic* discursive power when it is addressed to those affected by interconnectedness, such that the forces affecting (say) the off-shoring of jobs or problems such as climate change that displace people in sub-Saharan Africa, are made explicit, and those subject to these forces are included in processes of collective judgement and action. In our view, a claim does not need to represent every possibly affected interest, but its deployment should not undermine the democratic rights and standing of some as a consequence of attending to others.

[69]Moffitt 2016.

[70]For an appraisal and debate about how globalization impacts the principles of democratic inclusion, see Fung and Gray 2024.

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Class and status biases in voice

The prospects of harnessing the democratic potentials of discursive power in global politics are even more challenging when we consider the deep inequalities that can exist in capacities for citizen voice and participation – within and across states, as well as between relatively free democracies and authoritarian states. Even in established democracies, studies paint a stark picture of the challenges that many citizens face in trying to participate in democratic politics (with important variations among countries), including persistent socioeconomic inequalities, patterns of prejudice and discrimination, as well as status- and class-based political disaffection.[71] In authoritarian regimes, these effects are magnified, with transnational and international representatives less free to operate, information less free and available, and resources harder to come by. These barriers will often be higher for non-elites, who will have fewer resources to evade authoritarian controls.[72]

These are not problems unique to discursive power, and they are certainly not unique to contexts beyond the state. Disparities in education, status, class, age, race, gender, and access to organizational resources show up in any context open to influence. Still, representative claim-making in post-statist contexts may magnify these biases: relative to voting in domestic contexts (already biased), the discursive power that motivates organizing, or donating time and money, is costlier to use. Over the long-term, persistent social and economic inequalities will be reflected in who is able to use and project discursive power.[73] The result may be a globalized world that is easier to navigate and influence for elite citizens – but not a more democratic one. The challenge is how to equalize access to the discursive powers made available by claim-making, such that poorer and less privileged constituencies can develop the necessary orientation and capacities for agency, despite their structural disadvantages. A promising development is the rise of poor-led transnational movements in the Global South. Take La Via Campesina, which has had notable success in representing the interests of landless rural workers and slum dwellers, culminating in the 2019 passage of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants – a document with significant implications for both domestic and international laws when it comes to agrarian reform, food security, and collective housing rights.[74] These developments suggest that the discursive power of claim-making can indeed orient marginalized communities to acting transnationally and empower them to positively transform their circumstances, even in the face of opposition from multinational corporations and other obstacles.

Deceptive and manipulative rhetoric

Much of our argument hinges on public understanding of global issues and far-reaching interdependences. But, as we have noted, the complexities of the international system put the average citizen at a considerable disadvantage when it comes to detecting lies and misinformation about it and deciding whose claims to trust. Consider the United Kingdom's 'Brexit' referendum on membership in

[71] Gilens 2012; Schlozman et al., 2018.
[72] Smidt et al., 2020.
[73] See Kuper 2004.
[74] See Deveaux 2018 for an in-depth analysis.

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the EU. In the build-up to the vote, the Vote Leave campaign was widely criticized for making false claims. 'We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our National Health Service instead.'[75] The referendum passed with 52 percent support, dramatically reducing citizens' power beyond UK borders. It is likely that misinformation provided the margin of victory.

Insofar as harnessing the discursive power of citizens hinges on the successful coordination of supporters and followers across multiple sites, there may be strong incentives for claim-makers to play fast and loose with the truth. This is especially true at the transnational and global levels, where credible sources of information that are publicly verifiable can be in short supply. Theoretically, the problem is that deceptive and manipulative claims rely on non-transparent inferential structures that bypass citizen judgements.[76] Through deception, representatives can hide false premises, causing supporters to make inferences they otherwise would not. Manipulative claims go one step further. They draw a conclusion and present it as the only choice. The Brexit campaign is a prime example. When proponents of Vote Leave lied about Britain sending £350 million a week to the EU, the (false) implication was that by voting 'leave', citizens would also be voting for more spending on healthcare and other domestic priorities, which was patently untrue.

To be sure, these are dangers that accompany all forms of representation (formal and informal), whether they occur in a domestic context or a transnational or global one. Still, a model of democratization that builds on discursive power and claim-making should be especially attuned to these risks, as credible speech is central to democratic representation.

Priming and framing effects

Besides outright deception or manipulation, subtler ideological distortions may pose a challenge for the democratic exercise of discursive power as we have theorized it. A key component of our argument is that the claims made by formal and informal representatives can be an orienting anchor for linking the judgements of citizens together in new ways. But political psychology suggests that word choice and different ways of framing an idea or question can be more or less effective for getting the citizens to sign on.[77] In principle, there is nothing wrong with making some considerations more salient than others in a discussion. This is basic to persuasion. But strong framing that taps into pre-existing biases may also mask implicit commitments or narratives that an audience would otherwise not endorse.[78] Claim-makers can sometimes activate inferential processes in their audience without having to spell them out. When they do, citizens can be left with a misleading understanding of the world as it actually exists, potentially short-circuiting the kinds of democratic authorization and accountability outlined in our model.

[75]Fishwick 2016.
[76]Neblo 2015, 71–75.
[77]Chong and Druckman 2007.
[78]Calvert and Warren 2014.

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Motivated reasoning

There is also good evidence that suggests that 'not any frame will move opinions simply by repeating its message.'[79] Rather, citizens evaluate what a representative tells them according to how well it fits with their prior beliefs and expectations, discounting information that does not. People who already feel strongly about an issue, or have existing partisan loyalties, will make every effort to maintain their opinions by seeking out confirming proof. They will dispute information that does not fit with their worldview, and attribute greater strength to claims that match their ideological leanings.[80] Motivated reasoning is also a stable predictor of a range of other views citizens may firmly hold, such as support for foreign aid, free trade, mitigating climate change, or the perceived credibility of the claims of international institutions like United Nations or WTO.[81] The problem that motivated reasoning presents is not that discursive power isn't being projected, but that the claims upon which it is based secure uptake because of strongly held prior beliefs that go unscrutinized, producing 'blind followers' as Eric Beerbohm aptly puts it.[82] So, the democratic use of discursive power is going to require that citizens be exposed to multiple, competing claims and orientations, such that they can think through the same problem through different lenses, and avail themselves of different courses of action.[83] This may be difficult to achieve in our present global environment.

Supporting the democratic potential of discursive power

Discursive power, then, will not always favour democracy. But laying out the challenges helps to identify strategies to mitigate them in ways that would widen the path for democracy at the transnational and global levels. What can be done to enhance the discursive power of citizenship across borders? Is it possible to democratize the relationships between domestic publics and global civil society in a way that could justify citizens looking beyond the state for democratic empowerment?

One implication that follows from our theorization of discursive power, is that pursuing democracy at the transnational and global levels is not just about supporting the 'right' kinds of organizations or coming up with better strategies for engaging citizens directly. If discursive power is to supplement state-based powers of citizenship, we need to focus on the background conditions for discursive power to flourish. In this final section, we highlight eight classes of institutions relevant to establishing the sort of eco-system that would favour democratic discursive power at the global level.

Institutions that support the freedoms necessary for discursive power

As we have argued, the ability of informal representatives to mobilize citizens' discursive powers depends on the rights of citizens to argue, deliberate, and organize. Within democratic states, the participation of citizens is secured (ideally) through constitutional rights (e.g., freedom of conscience, speech, and association),

[79] Chong and Druckman 2007, 651
[80] Lodge and Taber 2013.
[81] See Milner and Tingley 2015.
[82] Beerbohm 2015, 650.
[83] Druckman and Nelson 2003.

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and related economic entitlements (e.g., education and income security), which protect domestic public spheres and enable activism in civil society.[84] By providing these guarantees, constitutional democracies can serve as platforms for projecting the discursive power of citizens into international organizations and institutions. It is doubtful, for example, that contentious global protests like those accompanying the WTO meetings in Seattle could be possible without the (often flawed) securities that democratic states provide.[85] This said, institutions designed to protect and support discursive power need not be nation-state based. Indeed, one of the least appreciated aspects of the UK's withdrawal from the EU is its withdrawal from the European Court of Justice – a transnational judicial mechanism that secured for UK citizens and representatives the standing to challenge unjust decisions and policies from abroad.[86] This kind of institution aligns with the idea that, when effectively oriented, the discursive power of citizens can be marshalled to connect multiple sites of organization together – for example, by allowing for transnational legal challenges where domestic courts otherwise have limited reach. These are possibilities for citizen empowerment that a retreat into the state cannot provide.

Institutional contexts that enable exit from representative claim-making

Closely related, when citizens have a diverse range of choices among 'suppliers' of representation, there is a higher probability that they will be able to project discursive power through their chosen representative. Global Justice Now, the Worker Rights Consortium, Amnesty International, and thousands of other organizations and representative claim-makers, provide the informal channels for the discursive power of citizenship to flourish beyond the state. Whatever its faults, the EU has also proven indispensable for establishing networks for informal representation that link citizens through shared missions, including a European Anti-Poverty network of over twenty organizations working on issues of labour rights, domestic violence, and racism at the European level.[87] Transnational and global public spheres that allow for a variety of prospective representative claim-makers multiply the opportunities for citizens to think differently about their institutions and circumstances.[88] The possibility of exiting one representative relationship for another – and simultaneously engaging with multiple claims – makes it more likely that citizens can find representatives that express precisely the position they desire, and less likely that citizens will be manipulated by discursive framing effects. For their part, representatives who must compete for members and like-minded followers have incentives to attend to their constituents, and to be responsive to their preferences and interests in ways that promote democratic accountability (as we noted above), even in the absence of electoral institutions.

[84]Saffon and Urbinati 2013; Warren 2001.
[85]della Porta and Tarrow 2005.
[86]Keohane et al., 2009.
[87]EAPN 2020.
[88]Warren 2011.

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Institutions for direct communication between claim-makers and citizens

Venues that enable citizens to test and challenge the claims of representatives directly are also necessary for transnational democracy promotion. These venues may include board meetings, public hearings, media criticism, and online exchanges, or domestic and international forums and other events, such as those sponsored by the International Labour Organization (ILO).[89] While the contributions of these background institutions are well-recognized, they are seldom framed as essential for the cultivation of citizens' discursive power across borders. Yet insofar as representative claim-makers depend on citizens for resources and endorsement, they have incentives to create spaces for public voice and feedback. Venues that multiply these points of contact should help support autonomous citizen judgements, pushing back against epistemic bubbles that increase vulnerability to manipulation, framing, and the other dangers that we noted earlier.

Institutions that disseminate information about claim-makers

Good judgements depend on good information. For the discursive power tapped through claim-making to function in ways that are democratic, citizens need accurate, reliable, and up-to-date knowledge. Good journalism remains essential, though its reach and credibility are currently challenged, particularly by right-wing populists. Global organizations like Transparency International and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) make it their mission to provide audiences with unbiased sources of information, through independent monitoring and oversight to enforce standards for products and services – not just in developed democracies, but in democratizing states as well.[90] In other cases, competition between nongovernmental organizations working in the same policy space – the Red Cross and other disaster relief agencies, for example – has a similar effect: incentivizing these organizations to evaluate each other, and to publicly disseminate relevant facts and data. States can also play an indirect role here. One recent example is the 2011 Open Government Partnership, a transnational initiative launched by eight founding governments – Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, the UK, and the United States – to make government data more readily available to emerging transnational publics through access to information requests.[91]

Institutions that encourage public transparency to monitor claim-makers

Again, and closely related, citizens can make better judgements if representatives are transparent about their causes, organization, and financing. In the non-profit sector, organizations like Charity Navigator rate the transparency and effectiveness of NGOs, making it easier for citizens to decide who to trust to represent them.[92] But perhaps even more significant has been the gradual opening of global institutions to groups from civil society. Over half of the World Bank's development projects are now required to solicit public input and oversight from local

[89]Dryzek 2010, ch. 9.
[90]Grant and Keohane 2005; Rubenstein 2015.
[91]See Fung 2013.
[92]Charity Navigator 2020.

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nongovernmental organizations and advocacy groups. Likewise, the WTO now invites IGNOs and other representative claim-makers to observe its ministerial meetings and submit legal briefs on trade disputes on behalf of their constituents.[93] Transparency and the free flow of information enables civil society groups to provide alternative orientations to citizens, framing their circumstances in terms of humanitarianism, solidarity, or justice, in contrast to nationalist withdrawal. Were these trends to continue, they would substantially improve the ability of citizens to understand claims, decisions, and actions undertaken in their name and how their efforts fit in the larger coordination of activities across multiple contexts.

Institutions that incentivize claim-makers to guard their reputations

As we have argued, the democratic credentials of claim-based representation is in part established by reputations and credibility built through linguistic 'scorekeeping'. Both formal and informal representatives have incentives to build and protect their reputations and justify themselves to citizens. Citizens, in turn, can use reputation as a cognitive shortcut when deciding to engage with a representative. The success of this model, however, will depend on the background contributions of media and civil society groups in tracking the claims that representatives make, for instance, by fact checking, and separating arguments from speakers in ways that allow the inferential structure of claims to more fully become the focus of citizen judgements. Where peer to peer accountability exists among representative organizations committed to guarding their reputations, citizens should be better equipped to make good judgements and to detect false or misleading statements.[94]

Institutions that support counter claim-making from below

A final – and in some ways more difficult – question is how to compensate for inequalities in voice and circumstance that are likely to be magnified by a reliance on elite claim-makers to engage citizens' discursive powers. Short of ensuring that countries uniformly equalize education, status, and income, the ability of representatives to mobilize the discursive powers of citizens is likely to remain uneven. There is, however, some experimentation in consolidated democracies to tackle these inequalities through devices such as deliberative mini-publics, which can be used to generate alternative claims and discourses for disadvantaged citizens to base their judgements on, in addition to those being supplied by politicians, advocacy groups, and other elites.[95]

A mini-public is a citizen body constructed through near-random or stratified sampling, and thus not a product of the biases of self-selection or election. Citizens who are representative of the demographic of a relevant public can be brought together to deliberate about global issues and policies and to make recommendations for governments to follow, or to contest the work being done by civil society organizations that are out of touch.[96] The participants in mini-publics thus

[93]Tallberg and Uhlin 2012; see also Scholte 2011.
[94]Grant and Keohane 2005.
[95]Setälä and Smith 2018.
[96]E.g., Niemeyer 2020.

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become, in effect, representatives themselves – charged (typically) with issuing advice on behalf of a broader constituency of their peers. Owing to the selection process, deliberative mini-publics are much more likely to represent those who are disadvantaged by education, income, and other well-known biases. But more to the point for our purposes, the recommendations of mini-publics can also orient the judgements of fellow citizens in the broader public sphere, with the benefit that these claims are being produced by people 'like me'. Although research remains thin, when deliberative mini-publics have penetrated public awareness, citizens have seemed to place a high degree of trust in them, preferring this kind of informal representation to conventional representation by elected politicians.[97] And importantly, because of their deliberative design, these institutions push back against the priming, framing, and motivated reasoning common to political entrepreneurs. While still relatively uncommon, deliberative mini-publics are increasingly used in the OECD countries, enough so that the OECD recently issued an extensive report on these new 'deliberative representative institutions' and their increasing prominence as a basic component of the background infrastructure of democracy.[98]

To be sure, these kinds of institutions are still hard to imagine beyond the state, largely because they require well-motivated organization that is uncommon in international politics. But they are not impossible.[99] In 2021, a diverse group of scientists, activists, academics, and practitioners launched a global citizens' assembly to be held in conjunction with the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow. The initiative drew from a representative sample of 100 citizens, who were connected to larger local and regional assemblies throughout the world, to include perspectives seldom heard from in climate policy debates. The assembly's final report challenged the idea often put forward by politicians that public opposition is the main barrier to meaningful climate action.[100] In 2007, a Deliberative Poll called 'Europolis' was conducted in the EU to solicit public input on questions of immigration, with similarly counter-intuitive results.[101] Meanwhile, a post-Brexit experiment suggested that if UK leaders had used mini-publics to guide pubic voting, they could have avoided the disempowering outcome of the Brexit referendum, insofar as this device would have provided a trusted proxy for citizen judgements and votes that couldn't be as easily captured by manipulative elites with their own agendas.[102]

Conclusion

Across developed electoral democracies, we are seeing shifts towards populist anti-globalization movements. Globalization seems to undermine the sovereignty of states, and the capacities of citizens within these states to control their destinies. Yet a world in which states retreated from global entanglements would be poorer and less secure. The imperative for democratic theorists is clear: we must identify

[97]Warren and Gastil 2015.
[98]OECD 2020.
[99]See Dryzek et al., 2011; Smith 2013.
[100]Mellier and Wilson 2023.
[101]Fishkin 2018.
[102]Renwick et al. 2018.

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the vectors through which citizens might project their influence beyond borders. In this article, we have focused on one kind of power – discursive power – that can have global reach when mobilized through informal claim-making. Previous work has focused on the purely *representative* functions of claim-making. But our argument is that claim-making can also provide an alternative means of orienting citizens to global issues and problems, enlarging the self-conceptions of citizens and their options for exercising democratic agency beyond the state.

In our view, it is precisely the lack of alternatives that has led the state to become synonymous with democratic voice and influence by default. Yet democratic empowerment does not require reasserting state sovereignty by withdrawing from globalization. Engagement with claim-makers can transform citizens' perceptions of themselves, others, and their relations to existing institutions, in ways that challenge the standard view that democracy is achievable only within the state. The discursive power generated through claim-making contributes to democracy by orienting citizens towards what they share with distant others, facilitating the organization of affected interests. Discursive power arises from the framing of common struggles and values such that latent constituencies can become potentially active ones. It is actualized when claim-makers succeed at mobilizing citizens across multiple countries or sites of governance. But its effects may run far deeper and expand our horizons for what democracy can look like in global affairs.

In theorizing discursive power, we are not imagining something that doesn't already exist. Discursive power has been, and continues to be, exercised by citizens within constitutional democracies. But since discursive power travels through the spread of ideas, it has the potential to go global in ways that other citizen powers do not. For theorists of global democracy, we have suggested that the challenges are twofold. First, we must figure out how discursive power can be transformed through representative claiming-making into a reliable tool for citizens to extend their reach at the transnational and global levels. And second, we must identify the ways in which the democratic potentials of discursive power might be supported beyond the state.

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