What is characteristic for the concept of political equality, writes Isaiah Berlin, is that it "needs no reasons." Only in an unequal society do people need to give reasons for it, for there equality is not taken to be a self-evident starting point of politics (Berlin 1999, 84). We may think of Locke in this context. When he justified political equality in the seventeenth century he did so against the backdrop of a highly unequal society, and he therefore had to give reasons for something which we in modern democracies tend to take for granted: That all human beings have an equal right to authorize the laws under which they live (Locke 1988). Still, recently an increasing number of people around the world have started to tell us the same thing as Locke did. They argue that political equality should be seen as the premise on which all legitimate politics is based. The fact that this has to be argued for may seem a bit worrying. Why is this need to point out the obvious? Are we to conclude that the burden of justification has changed, and that contemporary societies have come to move in a more unequal direction?

If one takes the broader picture of global politics into account, it is not implausible to draw this conclusion. Not only is there gross inequality between countries, groups, and individuals in political, social, and economic terms, But many democratic theorists also express deep resignation about the possibility of finding a global remedy to such inequalities. They point out that while global inequalities do exist, and make up a significant problem for contemporary political life, one cannot extend the demand for political equality beyond the nation-state without falling prey to conceptual stretching. The reason is that there is no common or public good
in global politics, and therefore no people who could take on the task of establishing the institutions needed to realize it in practice. The conditions needed for the institutionalization of political equality beyond the nation-state are simply missing (e.g., Dahl 1999; Miller 2007).³

In this chapter, I will argue that this conclusion is too premature, and that in order to come to terms with the contemporary deadlock in the debate on political equality it is necessary to start at another end. Instead of focusing on the existence or nonexistence of a people in global politics, democratic theorists concerned with reviving political equality under contemporary political conditions ought to ask a different question: Why is it that political equality ever since the American and the French revolutions has been regarded as a "self-evident truth," and this to such an extent that even those who contest its power are forced to speak in its name?³ With this overall question in mind, I will make three arguments.

In the first part, I show that political equality has normative power, and by normative power I refer to the simple but forceful understanding articulated by Berlin: It needs no reasons. The significance of this normative power is twofold. It defines inequality as a problem for society, and it puts the burden of justification on those who wish to claim otherwise. In the second part, I argue that the critical question for democratic theory is how to uphold the normative power of political equality in a time of global institutional change. To that end, I examine two common attempts to theorize political equality in the literature, with reference to reason and will. Seen as attempts to uphold the normative power of political equality, I argue, both options suffer from serious problems. If the appeal to reason runs the risk of changing the burden of justification in a way that undermines the normative power of political equality, the turn to will is over-inclusive insofar as it cannot discriminate between democratic and nondemocratic forms of rule. In the final part I suggest a third approach. This approach consists in revitalizing Montesquieu’s classic enquiry into the "principles" behind different forms of governments, and asking for the public commitment that has to be enacted in order for the normative power of political equality to remain in force. The intention of this move is to refute the widespread assumption that extending political equality beyond the nation-state would fall prey to conceptual stretching. On closer inspection, this assumption seems highly questionable. What is significant for the concept of political equality since its birth in the American and the French revolutions is precisely its ability to travel across established classes of people.
The Normative Power of Political Equality

Equality is a relational concept. It makes little sense to say that two persons are equal unless one specifies the dimension along which they are being compared. Human beings consider themselves equal, and therefore also comparable along the lines of many different dimensions. The dimension may be something like tallness or human dignity, in which case one says that two persons are equally tall or equally worthy of moral respect. When one speaks of political equality, the relevant dimension for comparison is political authority. We say that two persons are politically equal when they have an equal right to authorize the laws under which they live. In this section, I will examine the normative power inherent in this rule of political equality, and I will do so through an interpretation of the familiar debate on democracy and difference. Let me begin, however, with the idea of rule itself.

The basic idea of a rule is that similar cases call for similar treatment, or that like cases should be treated alike. According to Berlin, this formula means that all rules by definition entail a measure of equality, and this is true irrespective of whether they are democratic or not. The rule that says that tall persons are permitted to cast five times as many votes as short persons creates an obvious inequality from a democratic point of view. However, it is still a matter of equality. The reason is that the rule ensures equal treatment within each of the two defined groups. No tall person may have more votes than any other tall person, and the same goes for short persons (Berlin 1999, 85). In a democratic society, tallness is not regarded as a relevant category when it comes to authorize laws. On the contrary, it is taken for granted that all citizens should have an equal vote irrespective of their natural or social qualifications. Democracies are in this respect cultivating blindness toward differences, or what Aristotle calls numerical as opposed to proportional equality (Aristotle 1996, 1301b, 1317b). The idea is that as citizens we should all be treated in an identical manner. Everyone should count as one, and no one more than one.

Rules do not only entail that similar cases call for similar treatment. They also imply that any exception to this rule calls for justification. As Berlin points out, it follows from a rule that the burden of justification is on those who break the rule, and not on those who comply with it. If one breaks a rule, one is immediately asked to speak up and explain oneself, and not doing so is considered irrational. Similarly, to give reasons for obeying a rule is unnecessary: “Rules are their own justification” (Berlin
1999, 85). In a democratic society, the rule is that all citizens should count equal when it comes to authorizing common political affairs. This usually goes without saying, and one does not have to give reasons for it. What needs justification are exceptions to this rule. For example, someone who thinks that one should introduce graded votes in relation to how much property citizens own or how well educated they are has to explain why one should deviate from what is considered self-evidently right, namely, that all citizens should have an equal say in political affairs irrespective of who they are.

These two aspects of rules—that similar cases call for similar treatment and that deviations from this rule call for justification—summarize a common view on political equality. "Given that there is a class of human beings," Berlin writes, it follows that all members of this class "should be treated in a uniform and identical manner, unless there is sufficient reason not to do so" (1999, 82). However, if the rule of political equality has been an established part of democracy since its birth in the late eighteenth century, it has not gone uncontested. The most controversial question concerns whether or not it is able to foster democratic political change, and this question has provoked numerous debates on the relationship between democracy and difference in terms of gender, class, race, culture, and sexuality (e.g., Benhabib 1996; Kymlicka 1995; Phillips 1993; Tully 1995; Young 1990). The suspicion is that by merely focusing on the formal level one fails to see the way in which the rule itself may be complicit in sustaining inequality among different groups in society. The persistence of inequality within developed democracies testifies to the relevance of this argument. At the same time, it is important to see that the critique leveled against the formality of political equality often embodies an element of conformity to the rule that it criticizes. Rather than violating the rule of political equality, it reinforces its normative power.

To see this, we shall look at two lines of critique that are common in this debate on democracy and difference. To begin with, it is often objected that while the rule that accords similar treatment to similar cases serves to uphold equality between different groups, this is not all it does. Treating everyone equal in fact assists in creating a condition of inequality in society. The trouble is that while all citizens may be equal in formal terms this understanding is applied onto a society, which itself is unequal in structure, be it in terms of gender, class, race, culture, or sexuality. The result is that while all citizens count equally in formal terms, the rule that
bestows equal treatment to all citizens in effect makes itself blind to social, economic, and cultural differences in society. In the words of Przeworski, “The rules of the game treat everyone equally, but this only means that the outcome of the game depends on the resources participants bring to it” (Przeworski 2010, 92). Accordingly, by treating unequal citizens equally, it does not reduce differences in power, resources, and status among them. On the contrary, it reproduces inequalities that already exist in society, and what is more, it does so in the name of democracy itself.

The most famous critique in this regard is made by Marx. In “On the Jewish question,” Marx argues that political emancipation through the state and its notion of “the rights of man” is a lost cause. If one wishes to attain equality one cannot focus on the formal rules themselves. One must look to the structure of the society on which they are based. For, he writes, although the state “abolishes distinctions based on birth, rank, education and occupation when it declares birth, rank, education and occupation to be non-political distinctions,” these distinctions do not thereby disappear. On the contrary, they are allowed to live on and flourish precisely because they are deemed nonpolitical. Instead of nullifying the factual distinctions that exist among different groups in society “the state presupposes them in order to exist” (Marx 1992, 219–220). By interpreting inequalities as exceptional rather than as systemic it protects a society of privileges. For Marx, the only way to attain political equality is therefore to problematize the distinction that allows such inequalities to thrive, namely, the distinction between state and society.

This leads up to a second critique against the rule of political equality. Rules, as we have seen, are self-justified insofar as they place the burden of justification on those who break them rather than on those who comply. This aspect of rules could be particularly troubling in the face of what we have just said about rules replicating inequality. If the rule that says that all citizens are equal reproduces inequality, this means that the groups who suffer the most, and therefore wish to change their situation also are the ones who have to give reasons for their view. The burden of justification is on them, rather than on those whose positions are favored by the rules. For example, it is up to women and their sympathizers to show why a system of quota is a legitimate exception to the rule of political equality, or up to workers to show why the legal system works in favor of the property-owning classes. Considering this, rules run the risk of creating a double injustice. The problem is not only that underprivileged groups are the ones
who have to prove their case. In disputing the rule that creates inequality, they must appeal to the source of their own oppression. Herein resides a dilemma. Since rules by definition are self-justified, it would seem as if discriminated groups never will have right on their side.

How is one to achieve political equality under these conditions? One way to remedy the two problems just mentioned would be to extend the demand for equality to all spheres in society. Just as we in politics hold that everyone should count equally, one could argue that all human beings should be treated in an identical manner in every aspect of human life. By extending the demand for equality to society itself one would be able to target the problem more directly. For instance, one could claim that school children should be treated equally by the teachers independent of their skills, or that all human beings should have equal pay for the work they carry out regardless of what they do. Still, few theorists are prepared to go along with this view. The reason is that perfect equality is seen not only as incoherent, but also as politically dangerous. It encourages a totalitarian view of society. As Raymond Geuss argues, equality requires that we are equal in some respects, and unequal in others. For if we were equal in all respect, we would in fact be indistinguishable from each other, and there would therefore be no ground for comparison. We would not be different, but equal, but we would in fact be the very same thing (Geuss 2008, 76–77).²

In most democratic societies, such a view of political equality is regarded as unacceptable. The fact that rules reproduce existing inequalities, and that they put the burden of justification on those who are discriminated have instead been viewed as problems that ought to be addressed and accommodated within the democratic constitution itself. Accordingly, while it is acknowledged that rules may have the effect of reproducing inequality, this does not mean that one is prepared to abandon the rule, which says that similar cases call for similar treatment. Political equality is not achieved by waging war against rules. What is called for is instead a system of rules that makes differences between citizens subject to on-going democratic debate. The goal is a democratic constitution self-critical enough to see all inequalities as in principle open to doubt. Everyone should be able to contest what they take to be illegitimate inequalities that exist in society, and to recommend policies and instruments to forestall them.

Modern democracy is for this reason often taken to imply a combination of numerical and proportional equality. It is both a matter of vote and voice. If universal suffrage gives all citizens an equal right to vote, human
right to freedom of speech, opinion, assembly, and demonstration guarantees that different perspectives are given an equal chance to be voiced. It provides a different outlet through which citizens may contest and discuss their common rules. As Nadia Urbinati argues, accommodating these two perspectives is essential, for it means that modern democracies indirectly "acknowledge the fact that, although formally equal, citizens are not, and perhaps never will be, actually equal." Rather than seeing this as a failure, however, it is to the advantage of democracies that they incorporate conflict over the realization of political equality into the constitution. For by doing so, they "admit inequalities as a permanent threat to be detected and judged, voiced and amended." (Urbinati 2006, 43) They insert a counterfactual at the very core of democratic politics.

In a similar vein, it is often acknowledged that while rules are problematic insofar as they place the burden of justification on those who suffer from discrimination, this is not a reason for discarding them. Exceptions still call for justification. The received rule of democratic societies is that all citizens should be treated in an identical manner when it comes to authorizing common political affairs, and someone who wants to be treated differently therefore has to show why this exception should be accepted. Still, if democratic constitutions are blind to differences they are not blind to justifications. In most democratic societies, one distinguishes between proposals contesting the rule of political equality in the attempt to create a privilege, on the one hand, and proposals contesting it in the attempt to offset a privilege, on the other.

For example, when a group puts forward a proposal that says that wealthy people with high economic stakes should have two more votes than others it appeals to a principle that says that different citizens should have different say. It seeks to create a system of weighted vote based on economic status. When another group argues in favor of quotas or special rights for women it too calls for a system of weighted vote. In formal terms, there is no difference between the proposals. Both groups demand an exception from the rule "One person, one vote," and they do so with regard to dimensions which in a democracy should have no bearing on the right to vote: economic status and gender. Still, most people would probably deem the latter demand more valid than the former. This judgment is not by chance. It is based on the recognition that rather than seeking to create a privilege based on economic status the purpose of quotas and special rights is to compensate for a systematic privilege engendered by the rule itself.6 The point is that although the demand violates the rule of "one
person, one vote” it does so in a way that confirms rather than compromises its normative power.

It stands to reason that political equality must enjoy a self-evident status in society in order to be able to accommodate the aforementioned critique. Without confidence in the fact that political equality is a rule robust enough to shoulder the critique leveled against it, few theorists would be concerned with pointing to its discriminatory effects, or with demanding group rights. They would be on the other side of the equation. Like Locke, they would be preoccupied with proving to us why political equality is a rule worth striving for in the first place. Interestingly enough, such attempts to defend political equality can today be distinguished in the literature. If the past decades have witnessed intense debates on how to reconcile democracy with difference, the relationship between democracy and political equality has increasingly moved into the center of political theoretical concerns. The problem today is not only how to narrow the distance between formal and actual political equality within a given policy, which is the main concern in the debate on democracy and difference. The worry is that the growing inequality in many democratic countries, coupled with the asymmetry between decision makers and decision takers in global politics has changed the terrain of politics in such a way that it has compromised the rule of political equality itself.

This concern is raised by a number of scholars coming from different political traditions. According to Robert Dahl and Adam Przeworski, the problem today is that while there is a universal rhetoric of democracy in contemporary societies the conditions for its realization are unfulfilled. We may therefore, as Przeworski puts it, “be seeing a new monster: democracy without effective citizenship”. (Przeworski 2010, xiv; Dahl 2006) In a similar vein, Sheldon Wolin warns against a managed form of democracy in which national governments “are legitimated by elections which they have learned to control” (Wolin 2008, 47), and more global oriented theorists such as Daniele Archibugi, James Bohman, David Held, Nancy Fraser, and Raffaele Marchetti point to the difficulty of upholding the rule of political equality within a national political setting when politics itself is globalization (Archibugi, Held, and Marchetti 2010; Bohman 2007; Fraser 2008). Against this background, the professors task among democratic theorists is to find ways by which to either strengthen existing rules, or to formulate new ones that stand a better chance of upholding political equality under altered political circumstances. The critical question is how
to do so. How should democratic theory uphold the normative power of political equality in a time of global institutional change?

**The Limits of Reason and Will**

In what follows, I will look at two different ways to theorize political equality in the literature, with reference to reason, on the one hand, and will, on the other. The aim is to show that while turning to reason and will may be relevant for democratic theory in many contexts, it takes on a specific significance in relation to the problem discussed in this chapter, which is how to uphold the normative power of political equality. The merit of the rule of political equality, as we have seen earlier, is that it defines inequality as a problem for society, and that it puts the burden of justification on those who claim otherwise. In this capacity, it has been able to advance the position of many marginalized groups in society against political domination. If one wishes to come to terms with growing inequality in domestic and global society, one ought therefore to be attentive to this normative power of political equality, and ask what the turn to reason and will is "doing" in relation to it (Arendt 1998, 5).

One way for democratic theorists to uphold the normative power of political equality would be to do as Locke once did, and offer reasons for why one should treat everyone as equals. This approach comes natural to political theorists. Faced with the growing asymmetry between decision makers and decision takers in domestic and world politics, there arises a need to explain the virtue of democracy. Many political theorists therefore seek to mobilize support on behalf of political equality by convincing others of its desirability. The reasons on offer may differ. For some theorists, equality is founded on the status of human beings as equal before God, and treating other human beings as inferior to oneself is therefore equivalent to violating the divine order. Others would perhaps defend political equality with reference to all human's capacity for reason, or with the claim that all human beings are intrinsically equal. For yet another group, political equality must be defended in more instrumental terms, for example, as the most efficient means to reduce poverty, to uphold peace, or to give each their due. Nevertheless, the main idea is the same. When the rule of political equality cannot be institutionally guaranteed, reason steps in to take its place. It serves as a guardian of what is deemed right or expedient, namely, that everyone should count equal in the authorization of political affairs.
Still, if this response seems uncontroversial the previous discussion suggests otherwise. Political equality, as we have seen, needs no reasons. Only inequality does. The problem is that unlike prerevolutionary theorists who justified political equality against the backdrop of a society characterized by widespread societal acceptance of hierarchy and rank, contemporary defenders of political equality start out from a different position. Owing to the outcome of the democratic revolutions in the late eighteenth century, they are prone to engage in political thinking from the historical experience and expectation of democracy in mind. Accordingly, if Locke had to convince his contemporaries about the virtue of political equality, today's defenders of political equality can to a higher extent count on its acceptance. With this in mind, the justification of political equality becomes more ambiguous. The trouble is that it runs the risk of changing the burden of justification in a way that is detrimental to its preservation. By justifying political equality as the basis of society—by giving reasons for what needs no reasons—one indirectly admits that political equality has become the exception rather than the rule. Instead of being that which goes without saying, it calls for justification.

This ambiguity is often overlooked by democratic theorists. Yet, it is central to the enterprise of upholding the normative power of political equality under conditions of global institutional change. Let me give an example. In recent years, some scholars have started to doubt that political equality is an ideal that can sustain the shift from the national to the global. As a result, they suggest new ideals by which to render powerful decision makers to account for their actions and decisions. One such approach consists in arguing that democracy can do without equal decision-making power. Calling for a more "realistic" ideal of democracy, it urges us to replace the principle of equality with a principle of proportionality. The basic idea is that instead of following the motto that everyone should have equal power in determining the direction of political affairs, "power should be distributed in proportion to people's stakes in the decision under consideration" (Brighouse and Fleurbaey 2010, 137; MacDonald 2008; Shapiro 1999). In short, different stakes should generate different say.

This is a classic case of a rhetorical redescription. By making something that normally counts as a vice in democratic theory—graded political influence based on interests or stakes—into a democratic virtue it seeks to change the terrain of argumentation (Skinner 1997). To distribute power according to stakes is what many countries have witnessed prior to the democratic revolutions in the late eighteenth century, and something that
therefore must be distinguished from the discussions we saw in the previous section on democracy and difference. The idea with proportionality is not to compensate for a privilege engendered by the rule of political equality, which is what special rights and quota for discriminated groups is about. Nor is it an attempt to generate new boundaries on the basis of who are affected or have a stake, and therefore to create new "classes" of peoples in which political equality may then prosper. The idea of proportionality is to change the rules themselves in such a way that differentiation rather than equalization of power is the guiding principle of a democratic society (Näsström 2010, 2011). Against this background, it is no wonder if many theorists feel compelled to speak up in favor of political equality. The basic tenet of democracy, namely, that everyone should count equal in the authorization of political affairs apparently no longer goes without saying.

One theorist who has sought to defend the rule of political equality against this idea of proportionality is Raffaele Marchetti. As he argues, it is not merely because I have a stake in a certain decision that I am entitled to vote: "Political decisions may or may not directly affect me, and yet I should still be entitled to have a say on discussions and decisions that have general consequences that affect the public as such" (Marchetti 2011, 33; see also Agnè 2006). This is no doubt a convincing argument, seen in relation to both the history and normativity of democracy. However, there is something more going on in this context than a mere dispute about the meaning of democracy. The trouble is that the principle of proportionality, and the "reality" it is supposed to represent has changed the terrain of argumentation in such a way that the burden of justification now falls on those who want to defend political equality. When this happens, it does not matter how convincing the argument in question is. The point is that the position from which one reasons now proves the argument wrong, for it tacitly admits that inequality has become the self-evident starting point of politics. What the example illustrates is that democratic theory needs to pay attention not only to the validity of arguments, but to the conditions under which they are claimed. To give reasons for political equality is not merely a way to defend it against its critics. It is also a way of conveying that its normative power no longer holds sway.

But if turning to reason cannot defend political equality without running the risk of compromising its normative power, what could? An alternative option by which to theorize political equality has recently been suggested by Robert Dahl. According to Dahl, rules are indeed
indispensable for democracy. They function as a kind of counterfactual, "A standard to which we ought to aspire, and against which we can measure the good or value of what has been achieved" (Dahl 2006, 8). Still, if the rule of political equality serves as a standard by which to judge the achievements of contemporary democracies, the gap between the rhetoric and reality of political equality has in recent years changed the terrain of politics. The problem is that although most democratic countries still hold on to the rule of political equality, it has become "virtually irrelevant" as a lever against inequality (Dahl 2006, x). This is where the turn from reason to will becomes important. The aim of On Political Equality is to show that while the rule of political equality still stands, and institutional reforms to foster political equality are in place in most developed democracies, these rules and reforms cannot survive unless citizens foster and embrace them. As Dahl puts it, "We have the ways. Do we have the will?" (Dahl 2006, 104).

With this question in mind, Dahl enquires into the relationship between democratic institutions and the human passions underpinning them. The central point he makes is that while the demand for political equality has greatly advanced around the world since the late eighteenth century, one has yet to understand the human drives that make people act in its favor. For "even if most members of the demos continue to believe in the desirability of these fundamental rights [to political equality], they may fail to undertake the political actions that would be necessary to protect and preserve those rights" (Dahl 2006, 17–18). In the attempt to capture the driving force behind political equality, Dahl therefore wants to give a "respectable role for emotions" and this leads him to a discussion of human emotions such as envy, empathy, and compassion (Dahl 2006, 56). In short, the claim is that what political equality needs today is not justification. It needs motivation.

It takes a crisis for someone who has dedicated himself to the theoretical defense of political equality to turn to the realm of emotion, and Dahl does not conceal that he is worried. As he argues, contemporary developments in world affairs pose extraordinary challenges for democracy. The gap between the ideal of political equality and its actual realization is huge, even in those democratic countries that publicly confess to its name. Part of this problem is to be found in the prevalence of the market economy, which, apart from generating vast inequality in resources between citizens, draws them into a game of "competitive consumerism" with deep-going consequences for their personal and social life, and one should add, to their
natural environment (Dahl 2006, 63–67, 104–120). To keep insisting on the ideal of political equality under these circumstances is not enough, and this is probably why Dahl turns to the role of motivation. As he argues, the question of "why we ought to pursue political equality" must be separated from "why some persons actually do seek that end" (Dahl 2006, 31–32). The relevant question today is not whether political equality is a desirable goal; for it certainly is, but how to conceive of the human drives that make it so:

My point, then, is simply that human beings are naturally endowed with a sensitivity to the unequal distribution of rewards to others whom they view as comparable to themselves in relevant ways. Whether...we describe this sensitivity by the aseptic term inequty aversion, or use earthier language like jealousy or envy, what a human being sees as unfairness or injustice will often arouse strong emotions (Dahl 2006, 39).

The merit of discussing political equality through the lens of motivation is that it redirects attention from the philosophical to the societal conditions of democracy. Instead of asking what justifies the rule of political equality, it turns the question around and asks what political equality requires of us. What does it take for human beings to prioritize political equality over competitive consumerism? In this way, we are invited to discuss whether it is the human capacity for reason, egoism, compassion, envy, or anger that makes human beings foster political equality. According to Dahl, it is inequty aversion (or envy) that at the end of the day comes to the defense of political equality. The reason is that it makes human beings sensitive to the status of others. The role of politics is therefore to mobilize this powerful human emotion against the efforts of the privileged strata of society, which always seek to preserve their positions. If this attempt to bring about the gains of political equality comes across as a futile enterprise in the face of growing economic and social inequality, Dahl argues that history proves otherwise: "Over the past two centuries, through much of our world these gains have exceeded any before achieved in all human history" (Dahl 2006, 49).

To say that human beings are naturally sensitive to inequity is probably not wrong. As Dahl points out, many parents of two or more children recognize the spontaneous feeling of wrongdoing that unequal treatment often provokes among siblings. The child's cry against the parents—"It's not fair!"—is perhaps the most evident manifestation of this natural aversion of human beings toward inequity. Still, by stressing the significance of emotions Dahl draws the attention of democratic theory away from
the political to the natural realm. This move is not unproblematic. There is one major problem with Dahl's attempt to associate a natural emotion with a particular democratic institution, and calling attention to this problem is essential if one wishes to uphold the normative power of political equality in times of global institutional change. The problem is that while the human feeling of envy or inequity aversion may indeed exist, it is politically over-inclusive insofar as it cannot discriminate between democratic and nondemocratic forms of rule.

This point comes to the fore if one takes a closer look at the description given by Dahl. When Dahl describes the natural drive of human beings to reduce inequality among "those regarded as comparable to themselves in relevant ways" he does not describe an emotion particular for democracy. Comparison is indeed a necessary component of equality. One cannot say that two persons are equal without comparing them in one way or another. Recall from the first section, The Normative Power of Political Equality, however, that while equality always entails a moment of comparison, all comparisons are not democratic. They may support other forms of governments. For example, in an oligarchic system, there may be a rule that says that all individuals with a certain rank are permitted to cast five times as many votes as common people. This rule strives to reduce inequality insofar as no one in this group may have more votes than any other, and the same goes for the group of common people. Relevant comparisons are thus made. Still, the rule is not for that reason democratic.

To uphold the rule of political equality, it is therefore not enough to stress the natural drive of human beings to reduce inequality among comparable others. The problem is that this emotion cannot discriminate between democracy and other forms of governments. The fact is that there is nothing in the human inequity aversion described by Dahl that prevents democracy from turning into a government in which some "equals" are destined to rule over the rest. To understand what is needed to uphold the rule of political equality in times of global institutional change one has to ask more critical questions. The decisive question is who counts as comparable in a relevant way. Throughout much of recorded history, human beings have indeed been insensitive to inequity. They have demanded that like cases should be treated alike. Politically speaking, however, they have interpreted "like cases" in a very narrow way. They have been comparing themselves with people whom they consider belonging to their own natural or social class. The men have been comparing themselves with the men,
the nobles with the nobles, the farmers with the farmers, and the common people with the common people.

Taking this into consideration, the relevant question is not whether human beings are sensitive to inequity, for this, it could be argued, they are in all types of governments. What is called for is greater attentiveness to how this human drive for inequity aversion is able to travel across established classes of people. Why is it that after the American and the French revolutions it became legitimate for ordinary people to compare themselves with the nobles, and ask for the same political rights as they enjoyed? Or, how come that women who throughout human history have been forced to live in the political shadow of their husbands, suddenly could rise up against their subjection and have the audacity to compare themselves with men? As history shows, it is not only the monarchical, aristocratic, and authoritarian forms of governments that seek to draw a circle around the privileged classes in society, and then refuse comparisons across them. Even democracies fall short in this respect.

Ancient democracy is a good illustration of this point. It reveals that it is fully possible to endorse a rule of political equality without asking critical questions about the class of human beings to which it applies. In Athens about 400 BC, all citizens were considered equal, and this was true to such an extent that one was prepared to use the lot to circulate offices among them. Athens is therefore considered to be one of the most democratic societies ever. However, this description only holds true if one relies on a pre-given understanding of the relevant class to whom equality applies, namely, the class of citizens. The fact is that there were also women, slaves, and migrants who did not have a say in political affairs, and the reason for their exclusion is that they were not considered comparable in a relevant way.

A Third Approach: Public Commitment

So far we have looked at two different ways of upholding the normative power of political equality, by reference to reason and will. As we have seen, both options suffer from serious problems. The turn to reason changes the burden of justification in a way that runs the risk of undermining the normative power of political equality. By offering reasons for the desirability of political equality, it tacitly acknowledges that inequality has become the new default position in politics. Equality, and not inequality, is what calls for justification. The turn to will suffers from a different problem. The
trouble is that mobilizing human beings' natural sense of inequity aversion 
as a remedy against inequality is bound to be over-inclusive. It does not 
discriminate between democratic and nondemocratic forms of rule.

At the same time, the normative power of political equality cannot be 
entirely self-justified. It would make democrats into passive bystanders in 
politics, not passionate defenders of what is right. Accordingly, there must 
be some basis to the claim that everyone should count equal in the author-
ization of political affairs. In what follows, I will sketch a third approach. 
This approach consists in revitalizing Montesquieu's classical enquiry into 
the difference between forms of governments, and asking for the public 
commitment needed to sustain the normative power of political equality. 
In political theory, Montesquieu is perhaps best known for his notion of the 
separation of power into the legislative, executive, and the judiciary. What 
is less discussed, yet of interest here is his analysis of the difference between 
forms of governments, and more specifically, the role that "the principle" 
plays in maintaining the normative power of a certain form of government. 
Let me therefore begin by briefly recapitulating what Montesquieu means 
by the principle of governments, only then to go on and show how this 
focus changes the direction of the enquiry.

According to Montesquieu, there are three forms of governments, 
monarchies, republics, and despotic governments, and each form of gov-
ernment has its own nature and principle. The nature of a government 
refers to its institutional structure, or "that by which it is constituted": the 
king in a monarchy, the people in a republic, and the tyrant in a despotic 
government. The principle refers to its underlying public commitment, or 
"that by which it is made to act": honor in a monarchy, public virtue in 
a republic, and fear in a despotic government. The point is that different 
governments are guided by different principles of commitment, and that 
one cannot have the one without the other (Montesquieu 2002, II–III). 
However, if the nature of a government is relatively easy to understand, the 
principle of honor, public virtue, and fear is more difficult to pin down. 
The reason is that while these principles are action-guiding—they guide 
societal action in a way that favors a certain form of government—they 
are neither regulative ideals nor natural human motivations. They have a 
more political status.

First of all, it is important to see that while the principle described by 
Montesquieu guides political action, it is not of the regulative kind. It 
does not tell us what ought to be. The principle of fear, for example, is not 
prescribed in a despotic government. Nor is virtue a law laid down in the
NOMNATIVE POWER OF POLITICAL EQUALITY / 173

republic. Fear and virtue are rather to be understood as the public commitments that drive us to support their case. In this respect, the principle has an essential role to play in the enactment of a certain form of government. Instead of justifying a despotic and republican government, the principle of fear and virtue constitute their condition of possibility. They have to be there in order for the government in question to persist. Without fear, for example, the despot would be deprived of its power. Or without public virtue, the people would let their private interests corrupt the power of the republic. The central point is that a government is not merely a legal order, but a political form "engaged in its own life, in its own conditions of existence and survival" (Althusser 2007, 46). It follows that the principles of fear and virtue are essential to the persistence of a certain form of government. As Montesquieu argues, a despotic government and a republic "ought to be directed by these principles, otherwise the government is imperfect," that is, otherwise it will cease to exist as a particular form of government (Montesquieu 2002, III, 11).

Secondly, while the principle is action-guiding it does not offer an account of human motivation. What is original about the principle is that while it signifies human emotions such as fear, virtue, and honor, Montesquieu does not take them to be equally important for all societies. Like individuals, all societies are home to a mixture of competing emotions and aspirations. However, there is always a particular commitment in society, which—through various means such as institutions, laws, manners, and educational policies—spurs the others in a direction favorable to the government in question: "In a word, honor is found in a republic, though its spring be political virtue; and political virtue is found in a monarchical government, though it be actuated by honor" (Montesquieu 2002, xvi). The principles of fear, virtue, and honor are thus not psychological emotions, but public commitments bound up with, and sustained by, particular forms of governments. They are profoundly political insofar as they refer to that which makes each of them tick.

The legacy of Montesquieu is controversial, and political, historical, and legal scholars disagree whether his thinking offers a defense of liberal, republican, or monarchical government. However one characterizes Montesquieu’s legacy, it is clear that he never experienced the democratic revolutions in the late eighteenth century. When Montesquieu enquires into the difference between forms of governments, he is therefore not referring to the kind of government that we have become accustomed to since the American and the French revolutions. What we described earlier as the
rule of political equality—a government based on vote and voice—is not part of his study. This raises an intriguing question. For if the nature of this particularly modern version of the rule of political equality has been widely debated by legal and political philosophers, and its empirical and historical conditions have been studied at length by political and social scientists, comparably little attention has been devoted to understand the principle that underpins it. If honor, virtue, and fear are the guiding principles of a monarchical, republican, and tyrannical government, what principle guides modern democracy? Or differently put, what is the public commitment that has to be enacted in order for the normative power of political equality to sustain in a time of global institutional change?

At this point, some readers may object, and argue that we already know the answer to this question. What it takes for political equality to prosper is commitment to the common or public good. This view often divides into two groups that at times are difficult to tell apart. To some theorists, the commitment needed for political equality to thrive in times of global institutional change is cultural. Allegiance to nationhood or cultural identity is then regarded as the activating principle behind the rule of political equality, for it is only through such commitment that discriminated groups are prepared to play by the rules and follow the decisions of the majority (Grimm 1995; Michelman 1999; Miller 1997, 2007). To others, the commitment needed is more political. What is important is the allegiance to certain political ideas, and the emphasis is therefore on "constitutional" as opposed to national patriotism. What matters is commitment to the public discourse generated by the constitution, and the universal values of equal treatment that it entails (Benhabib 2009; Habermas 1998, 2001).

These two views are widespread in contemporary debates on transnational democracy. When pressed on the activating principle behind the rule of political equality, many political theorists are prone to adopt the one or the other view. However pervasive, there is something anachronistic about them. Why should the modern rule of political equality be animated by the principle that guides a republican form of government? This is the question that Hannah Arendt raises in her study of the American and the French revolutions. As she argues, the enthusiasm for the republican heritage among the men of the revolution is clearly "out of tune with the modern age" (Arendt 1965, 196). Nevertheless, by recalling the Roman example the revolutionaries saved the republican heritage from falling into oblivion, and thereby also justified it as part of democracy's own heritage. They conveyed a picture that still holds a powerful grip over the public
imagination, namely, that the modern rule of political equality is animated by love of country or law.

According to Montesquieu, every form of government has its own nature and principle, and one cannot have the one without the other. This means that unless the principle of a government is acted upon and nourished by the citizens, the nature of this particular form of government will cease to exist. Conversely, unless the principle is fostered by laws, institutions, and educational policies, the public commitment needed for the government to sustain will be corrupted. Considering this, I will end the chapter by raising some critical questions about the link that currently is forged between the rule of political equality, on the one hand, and the republican principle of commitment, on the other. As I will argue, associating the rule of political equality with national and constitutional patriotism runs the risk of making democratic theorists demand the wrong thing, and as a consequence, to draw wrong conclusions about the possibility of extending the rule of political equality beyond the nation-state.

Today few theorists deny that democracy is challenged by globalization. The contemporary world is perceived to be more interconnected and interdependent than ever, and this means that the reduction of democratic political life to the territorial nation-state has turned into a democratic problem. Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that citizens and noncitizens around the world are affected by actors and institutions over which they have no democratic say, and that this power asymmetry creates a democratic deficit. At the same time, it is often argued that the conditions needed to rectify this democratic deficit are missing. The reason is that, while there are powerful actors and institutions operating at the global level, there is not yet a global people to hold them to account. How to deal with this democratic dilemma has created a divide in the literature on global politics (Näsström 2010):

On the one hand, there are those who argue that the concept of political equality cannot be stretched to accommodate the global context. There is a limit to how far it can travel without losing its essence. For these theorists, the absence of a common or public good at the global level is the main obstacle to a democratic recuperation of global institutions. They argue that while global institutions like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization may be valuable in furthering democracy and human rights, they are not legitimated by a global people. Nor are they likely to be so in the foreseeable future, which is why we should be careful in our attempt to "democratize" them. The conclusion is that, while global institutions may
in some way be responsive or accountable to the will of the global public, they are not authorized in a democratic way. Rather than clothing the institutions in the mantle of democracy, one should therefore call them by their proper name, "bureaucratic bargaining systems" (Dahl 1999, 33).

To others, this position is too rigid. It takes the experience of the nation-state as a democratic horizon for the future, and thereby overlooks what is potentially novel about the present situation. To give excluded individuals and groups equal voice in global political affairs, one cannot wait for a people to be formed on the global level. What is called for is therefore conceptual innovation. Rather than presuming that we know what democracy is, and then use it as a blueprint vis-à-vis global institutions, it is argued that we should turn our democratic worries into a positive research question and ask what democracy could mean under contemporary conditions. The contention is that unlike national institutions, global institutions do not have to be anchored in a people in order to be democratic. They can be authorized in other ways. In the words of John Dryzek, we ought to recognize that "Experimenting with what democracy can mean is an essential part of democracy itself" (Dryzek 2000, 135; see also MacDonald 2008, 66).

Following this divide in the literature, one gets the impression that political theorists have to choose between two equally unsatisfactory positions. Either, one sticks to the rule of political equality, yet confines it to contemporary nation-states. Or one takes democracy beyond the nation-state, yet abandons political equality as its basic premise. But are these the only options at hand? What both sides of the divide have in common is that they build their arguments on a certain assumption, namely, that political equality is sourced in a common or public good. It is this assumption that leads skeptics of global politics to conclude that political equality beyond the nation-state is unrealistic: It lacks the unity necessary for democracy to prosper. Similarly, it is this assumption that leads theorists concerned with rectifying global power asymmetries to give up the demand for political equality and engage in more issue-driven forms of political engagement under the umbrella of global governance. What both groups overlook is that the concept of political equality is far more stretchable than democratic theory currently makes us believe. Ever since its birth in the American and the French Revolution, it has been able to travel across established classes of people.

To begin with, democracy has been able to find support among large numbers of people without any kind of common ground, be it social,
political, or religious. In this respect, the reference to national and constitutional patriotism appears ill-suited to understand how modern democracy has been able to maintain and develop its form in response to new political challenges. Commitment to country and law seems more geared to understand the working of a small republic than a modern democracy. As Montesquieu himself foresaw, love of the laws and the country "can take place but in a small state, in which there is a possibility of general education, and of training up the body of the people like a single family" (Montesquieu 2002, 37). In contrast to republics, modern democracy is a form of government that encourages comparisons across natural, social, and political classes of people. Apart from being associated with struggles among underprivileged groups such as workers and women to be counted as equals in the rule of society, it has incorporated foreigners into the political realm. In addition, it has triggered and inspired new democratic revolutions around the world.

This ability of political equality to stretch across established classes of peoples calls for reflection. In contemporary democratic theory, it is commonplace to argue that the revolutions in the late eighteenth century gave birth to a new form of democratic government, one that is unprecedented in the way it has developed and extended to include ever more people. Ever since, human beings have associated political equality with the activity of democratizing the societies in which they live. It has become synonymous with "the effort to raise distinct aspects of political, social and economic arrangements to the exacting standards which democracy implies" (Dunn 2005, 16). To contest unjust structures of power, human beings have compared themselves with others to whom they at first seem to have little in common, and political equality has as a result traveled from class to class, and from country to country. Why should this traveling of the concept of political equality stop short at the national border? Has contemporary democratic theory perhaps misunderstood the principle behind the normative power of political equality? The point is that we have good reasons to ask this question (Näström 2007, 2011).

Conclusion

Political equality is not easy to come by. Throughout much of the recorded history, the idea that human beings are political equals would, as Dahl writes, "have been widely viewed by many as self-evident nonsense, and by rulers as a dangerous and subversive claim that they must suppress" (Dahl
2006, 1). Considering this, it becomes important to understand how political equality is able to take hold of the minds and hearts of people, and more important still, how it may continue to do so. How does one defend the normative power of political equality in a time of global institutional change? In this chapter, I have argued that such an undertaking requires that one moves beyond a discussion of what justifies or motivates political equality in favor of a more thorough revitalization of the classical enquiry into the difference between forms of governments. What is called for is an analysis of the public commitment, or in Montesquieu's terms, the principle behind the institutionalization of political equality. Only by asking this question, I have argued, can we understand how it became legitimate to claim that political equality is self-justified, and that anyone who wishes to argue otherwise is the one at a loss for an answer.

Notes

2. For conceptual stretching, see Sartori (1970).
3. In its most well-known formulation, this view is expressed in the famous 'words of the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." This formulation is often regarded as paradoxical for, while arguing that all men are created equal by virtue of a higher decree, it is the founding fathers themselves who "hold" this truth to be self-evident.
4. I thank Jane Mansbridge for calling my attention to this passage in Berlin, which is central to the argument made in this chapter.
5. For a similar critique against an excessive democratization of society, see also Berlin (1999, 90–96), Montesquieu (2002, 111), Williams (2005, 98).
6. This is not to say that everyone would accept quotas and special rights. These are controversial instruments.
7. On this point, see also Sennett (1998), Bauman (2011).
8. For references to older and recent debates, see Richter (1977), Geenens and Rosenblatt (2012).
9. See also Nussbaum (2002).
10. See also Müller (2007).

References

NORMATIVE POWER OF POLITICAL EQUALITY / 179


