ABSTRACT. This paper argues that the contrast between direct and representative democracy is less important than that between simple majoritarianism and deliberative i.e., public reason centred, democracy, as only the latter is sufficiently sensitive to the problem of domination. Having explored a range of arguments in favour of direct democracy it is argued that moves in this direction are only warranted when the practice of public reasoning will be enhanced. Both symbolic representation and delegate democracy are rejected in favour of substantive measures to formalise communication between voters and representatives and permit the formal contestation of political decision on the ground that these will provide stronger defences against domination within the political system.

KEY WORDS: democracy, participation, public reason, representation, accountability, domination, majoritarianism, justification

Since Rousseau, we have been presented with a stark contrast between ‘genuine’ direct democracy and its pale imitation, representative democracy. While the Rousseauian ideal must remain out of reach for modern mass democracies, it nonetheless continues to haunt the agenda for the reform of our democratic institutions: representation may be an immoveable reality, but we should at least try to approximate the ideal of direct democracy as far as possible.¹ In seeking to effect a more favourable compromise between representative and participatory models of democracy,

¹ I take it this is consistent with the views of Baker et al., Equality (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004). While the authors make it clear that they take themselves to be arguing for a version of indirect democracy, I will indicate below why I believe the delegate model they adopt is much closer to direct democracy than they believe. John Baker et al., ‘Equality: Putting Theory into Action,’ Res Publica 12/4 (2006) 411–433, pp. 421–423.
Baker et al. are not alone: deliberative democrats have for a number of years now been exploring ways to open our existing institutions to citizen participation and deliberation. While Baker et al. are clearly sympathetic to some features of the deliberative project, I will suggest that it requires a less demanding view of popular participation than they envisage, although it involves a richer conception of political equality.

There are both pragmatic and normative considerations which count against the view that we should aim to maximise direct popular participation. The central question is not how directly we participate in decision-making but whether our decision-making procedure exposes us to domination, i.e. arbitrary interference in our lives. I shall suggest in what follows that non-domination through the rule of public reason provides the best available account of political equality and that it requires increased popular participation only to the extent that this promotes the practice of reason-giving. This leads me to question the value of the reforms to representation proposed by Baker et al. increased representative diversity and, in particular, the move to the delegate model of representation.

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND THE PROCEDURAL PROBLEM

Participation may be direct or indirect: direct participation involving direct involvement in collective decision-making, while indirect participation may take the form of (1) electing representatives who will themselves participate in decision-making on one’s behalf, and/or (2) involvement in attempts to influence those representatives during their term of office. While Rousseau envisaged direct democracy requiring citizens to assemble in a particular place for

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4 As Pettit has developed his republican conception of freedom, he has come to note its affinities with political liberalism’s conception of public reason. Philip Pettit, ‘Deliberative Democracy, the Discursive Dilemma, and Republican Theory,’ in James Fishkin and Peter Laslett (eds), Debating Deliberative Democracy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 138–162.