



HAVING
Too
MUCH

PHILOSOPHICAL
ESSAYS ON
LIMITARIANISM

EDITED BY
INGRID ROBEYNS



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10. A Neo-Republican Argument for Limitarianism

Elena Icardi

1. Introduction

Initially put forward by Philip Pettit (1997), freedom as non-domination represents the core ideal of neo-republicanism.¹ Under this construal, being free from domination means not being exposed to anyone else's capacity to interfere without being able to control it—both vis-à-vis fellow citizens and vis-à-vis the state (Pettit, 2012). With respect to the latter, freedom as non-domination entails that each citizen should enjoy an equal opportunity for political influence.

This requirement appears to be jeopardized by the presence of very wealthy citizens in a democracy (McCormick, 2011; 2019). The super-rich enjoy extra chances because they are able, for instance, to unfairly invest in political campaigns and/or influence public opinion by funding social media, think-tanks and so on (Christiano 2012; Cagé 2018). They also have independent power, both in the economic sphere (Christiano 2010; 2012; see also Knight & Johnson 1997) and in the shape of social capital (Robeyns 2017; see also Timmer 2019), which allows them to

1 By “neo-republicanism”, I mean the strand in contemporary political philosophy which has revived the republican tradition as an alternative to mainstream liberal thought, with freedom as non-domination being its core ideal as opposed to freedom as non-interference (Skinner 1984; Pettit 1997). Although several thinkers refer to it simply as “republicanism”—Dumitru (2020) is one of them—I prefer to use “neo-republicanism” to avoid any confusion with the republican tradition itself and to indicate such a specific contemporary stance.

have an impact on public decision-making even though they do not really invest in it.

Furthermore, this power can only be limited in a minimal way by formal institutional constraints (Christiano 2010; 2012; Robeyns 2017). When some people possess so much more wealth than others that they have access to the above-mentioned privileges, formal barriers can indeed do little to prevent this. In this respect, it seems to me that rather than endorsing procedural solutions for protecting democracy from the domination of the wealthy, as neo-republicans have generally done (e.g., McCormick 2011), substantive limitations should be envisaged.²

Limitarianism, as recently advanced by Ingrid Robeyns (2017), could provide neo-republicanism with such limitations. According to Robeyns, excessive individual wealth should be restrained, and one of the reasons she offers for doing so is to safeguard the democratic process. There thus seems to be a *prima facie* case for why limitarianism would be beneficial to neo-republicanism.³ We should ask, therefore, whether it can be argued that if one supports freedom as non-domination, one should endorse a limitarian threshold. And if so, what forms this threshold should take, and why.

In what follows I argue that limitarianism should indeed be advocated within neo-republicanism. Since (a) freedom as non-domination is grounded on citizens having an equal opportunity for political influence, and (b) given both the disproportionate influence of the wealthy and the insufficiency of formal constraints, this equality of opportunity can only exist if excessive individual wealth is limited, (c) freedom as non-domination requires excessive individual wealth to be limited, and this task can be achieved by setting a limitarian threshold. My view of this threshold, however, is different to that of the first

2 Note that a growing focus on substantive proposals has made its way into the neo-republican panorama—see, for example, Richard Dagger’s *civic economy* (2006), Stuart White’s analysis of property-owning democracy (2016), and Tom O’Shea’s *socialist republicanism* (2020). Yet the question of whether they stand as alternative or complementary proposals and which one better suits neo-republicanism goes beyond the scope of this chapter. It seems to me that the answer to these questions would not negate any aspect of the thesis that it is worth adding limitarianism to the neo-republican toolkit.

3 Casassas and De Wispelaere (2016) already enumerate limitarianism as one of the ways in which neo-republicans could set an economic ceiling to prevent the wealthy from having too much political power. Nevertheless, they do not explore this option in depth.

advocate of republican limitarianism, Adelin-Costin Dumitru (2020). In my opinion, such a threshold should limit the resources people need to have disproportionate opportunities for political influence, instead of withdrawing only the resources that people do not need to fully flourish. That is to say, the limit should be put at the level at which the wealthy dominate the public decision-making process by enjoying the above-mentioned privileges. This chapter argues in favour of this kind of limitarian threshold.

To do so, the chapter is organized as follows. First, I analyse the reasons why freedom as non-domination requires excessive individual wealth to be limited. Second, I argue that, despite the fact that freedom as non-domination requires excessive individual wealth to be limited and this task can be achieved through limitarianism, a limitarian threshold grounded in the idea of full flourishing does not suit this task. Finally, I discuss a different kind of threshold, which is independent of the value of flourishing and which I claim to be a precondition of the democratic requirement grounding neo-republican freedom.

2. Neo-Republicanism and the Problem of Elites

To understand why neo-republicanism requires excessive individual wealth to be limited, let us introduce, first of all, the idea of freedom as non-domination. It is well known that freedom as non-domination was first described by Philip Pettit in his *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997) and was then developed in later works, such as *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (2012).

According to Pettit's account of republicanism, a person is free from domination when she is not exposed to anyone else's arbitrary power (Pettit 1997). Formulated differently, she is not dominated when she is not exposed to anyone else's uncontrolled capacity to interfere with her choices (Pettit 2012).⁴ Notice that interference itself is not necessary for domination to occur. What matters is the *capacity* to interfere that is grounded in the asymmetry of power that people acknowledge exists

4 Pettit replaces the term "arbitrary" (1997) with the word "uncontrolled" (2012) as an explicit attempt to avoid having "misleading connotations" or "a value-dependent or moralized term" in his definition (Pettit 2012, p. 58). Nonetheless, the word "uncontrolled" should not be understood as having a substantially different meaning from "arbitrary", so I use them interchangeably in this chapter.

among them. To clarify this point, Pettit suggests the well known image of what he calls “the slave of a kindly master” (Pettit 1997, p. 35)—I will use the term enslaved person and enslaver in what follows. Even if by being “benign and permissive” (Pettit 1997, p. 32) the enslaver does not directly intervene in the enslaved person’s life and allows them to do whatever they want, the enslaved person remains dominated given that the enslaver can hinder their life at any time and that they have no control over this. It is such an uncontrolled capacity to interfere, i.e., the possibility of choosing whether to interfere or not and how to do so, rather than interference itself, that should be ruled out.

People should therefore be protected from such an uncontrolled capacity to interfere if they are to be free from domination. That is, individuals should be secured a position as equals so that they can “look others in the eye without reason for the fear or deference that a power of interference might inspire” (Pettit 2012, p. 84).⁵ They should be granted an equal status by the state for this purpose. To avoid the state’s interferences from being a source of domination themselves, though, another requirement must be added: people should not only be granted an equal status to one another (horizontal non-domination), but they should also enjoy control over the government’s decisions (vertical non-domination).⁶ This form of shared control is in itself justifiable by neo-republicanism, since “if the citizenry control state discretion in a suitable manner [...] then the imposition of a social order on those citizens will not take away from their freedom” (Pettit 2012, p. 160).

But what does citizenry controlling the state mean? In Pettit’s terms, having control means both having “some influence over the process leading to the result” and using that influence “to impose a relevant direction on the process” (Pettit 2012, p. 153). Therefore, first of all, citizens controlling the state means that each citizen should have an equal influence on governmental decisions. However, this cannot entail that each citizen should participate equally in the public decision-making process (Pettit 2012, p. 169), nor that each citizen should have the same probability of success in influencing it (Scanlon 2018, p. 80). For example, citizens might have a different level of willingness to take part in politics

5 This is the so-called “eyeball test” (Pettit 2012).

6 Both what Pettit calls *dominium* (i.e., the horizontal dependency on fellows) and what he defines as *imperium* (i.e., the vertical imposition of the governmental will) would hence be prevented (Pettit 1997, p. 36).

or have different abilities as orators, and such factors should not be seen as undermining the neo-republican principle of equal influence.

What equally shared influence requires, therefore, can only be equal access to the system of popular influence: an opportunity for participation in that system that is available with equal ease to each citizen (Pettit 2012, p. 169).

In other words, if citizens are to have control over the public decision-making process, each citizen should have an equal opportunity to influence it.⁷

While people being granted an equal status to one another is a matter of social justice, this requirement of having an equal opportunity to influence politics is a matter of political legitimacy. Moreover, on Pettit's account, these two domains seem to stand in a hierarchical relationship: political legitimacy comes first, and social justice comes second (Pettit 2012, pp. 24–25; pp. 130–132). If citizens do not enjoy equal opportunities to influence the law-making process, their horizontal equal status will be arbitrary as well because they will be surrounded by laws over which they do not have true control. In Pettit's words:

A failure in political legitimacy would compromise the robustness of freedom more deeply than a failure only in social justice. Where a lack of social justice alone would make us vulnerable only to our fellow citizens, a lack of political legitimacy would make us vulnerable on two fronts (Pettit 2012, p. 24).

When citizens cannot control public decisions, they are dominated in both the vertical and the horizontal sense.

Citizens might, for instance, be treated as equals by their queen, thus experiencing an equal status to one another, but if they do not enjoy any opportunity to take part in the queen's decision-making process concerning public matters, such an equality of status will only occur if she has enough goodwill to allow it. In that case, they will be exposed not only to the actual vertical domination of their queen but also to the potential horizontal domination of their fellows, since their equal status to one another could change at any time depending on the queen's

⁷ See also Poama and Volacu (2021) for a similar conceptualization of equal opportunity for political influence. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this text to me.

arbitrium. As this example illustrates, horizontal non-domination thus cannot be robustly secured without vertical non-domination being secured first. Although it is important that citizens are treated as equals by the state, what matters the most for neo-republicans seems to be that citizens enjoy control over the state's choices. In this respect, political legitimacy should be considered to be the prior condition if freedom as non-domination is to be ensured (Pansardi 2015).

Yet such a prior condition is jeopardized by the presence of economic elites in a democracy. Although Pettit seems to overlook this problem, John P. McCormick has recently stressed it, noting that

historical and empirical research affords us ample evidence to suggest that the wealthy have always been, and invariably will continue to be, an imminently dominating force within democracies (McCormick 2019, p. 127).

Contemporary democracies show clear proof of this by being generally biased towards the interests of the wealthy.⁸ However, since McCormick believes that people should be left free to run their own business(es), thus accumulating different amounts of wealth, he addresses the issue of the wealthy dominating democracy by focusing on redrawing the democratic procedure itself rather than on limiting their riches.⁹ By contrast, in my view, the threat posed by economic elites cannot be procedurally thwarted, because very rich people seem to enjoy a disproportionate political influence (Scanlon 2018, p. 82) that evades formal institutional constraints.

This happens for two reasons. On the one hand, wealth represents a proxy that can be used to gain extra opportunities to influence politics. Economic resources can be translated into political influence through several different mechanisms, which can be both direct, for example financing political campaigns, and indirect, for instance funding social media platforms and/or think-tanks so as to impact public opinion and/

8 For empirical studies see, for instance, Gilens (2005); Bartels (2008); Gilens & Page (2014); Piketty (2013); Cagé (2018).

9 McCormick theorizes what he calls "Machiavellian democracy", which is a democracy that is made up of "class-specific institutions", i.e., assemblies wherein non-wealthy citizens can speak for themselves and take decisions among themselves (McCormick 2011, p. 13). I do not have space here to go into depth about McCormick's proposal, but it seems to me that his proposal meets the same problems that I will address later in this section regarding overall formal solutions.

or common knowledge (Christiano 2012; Cagé 2018). On the other hand, wealth provides its owners with a broader set of privileges that grant them further possibilities to affect the public decision-making process even without investing in it. This is the case, for instance, with a certain type of education and/or influential networks that people have thanks to their money—what is more generally called “social capital” (Robeyns 2017, pp. 9–10; Timmer 2019, p. 1337)—but also with the so-called “independent power” that rich people have in the economic sphere and that inevitably reflects on the political one (Christiano 2012). Wealth can certainly be both an instrument for gaining political influence (either directly or indirectly) and an instrument for acquiring all those non-wealth-related factors which also affect equal opportunities to influence politics.

Furthermore, formal measures fail to prevent this problem. First of all, tracking all the mechanisms through which wealth can be an instrument for gaining political influence does not really seem to be feasible. And even if it were feasible, one might ask whether this would be desirable given that “[t]he enforcement of procedural protection might involve potentially problematic invasions of privacy, insofar as it might require close monitoring of the spending patterns of the advantaged” (Schemmel 2011, p. 378). What seems even more problematic is that even if formal measures were both feasible and desirable for preventing money from translating into political influence, this would still not be enough to solve the problem. Such solutions would not tackle the above-mentioned independent ways in which wealth creates unequal opportunities for political influence.

Even if there is a formal separation between economics and politics, rich people can determine the success or failure of policies. Consider, for instance, the case of taxation. If the top marginal tax rate rose, affluent citizens could decide to move their capital to other countries where more favourable tax codes apply. To avoid this outcome, governments could refrain from raising the top marginal tax rate in the first place, in this sense “[g]overnments must make decisions with an eye to what powerful economic entities do in response to those decisions” (Christiano 2012, p. 8). Therefore, even if affluent citizens do not take part in the policy-making processes, they will inevitably influence them through their threats or promises (Knight & Johnson 1997; Christiano

2010). Thus, formal barriers cannot prevent the wealthy from having unfair chances to influence politics.

Substantive solutions should therefore be envisaged. As Christian Schemmel points out, these solutions would be both “less intrusive”, since they do not entail any monitoring of individuals’ spending, and “more effective”, because they solve the root of the problem. A suitable analogy is disarmament, which would be a better way of avoiding the issues related to weapons than “leaving the weapons in the possession of the advantaged, and merely prohibiting their use” (Schemmel 2011, pp. 378–379). However, it is important to note that what should be restrained is not individual wealth in itself, but rather that amount of wealth which leads to access to the above-mentioned mechanisms and privileges that are capable of circumventing formal constraints. Formulated differently, the problem is not that some have more wealth than others, nor that they can invest their wealth in politics, but rather that some have so much more wealth than others that they enjoy boundless, unfair opportunities to influence politics.¹⁰ Therefore, if we want the prior condition for freedom as non-domination, i.e., political legitimacy, to be ensured, what should be limited is excessive individual wealth.¹¹ In the next sections I will investigate how this could be done.

10 Similarly, Schemmel affirms that the problem does not arise “as long as plutocracy is avoided and the rich are not also the powerful, across the board, who use the political system merely to pursue their own interests” (2011, p. 379).

11 Suppose Apolitico is very rich, whereas Politico is not. Politico is so interested in politics that he invests all his resources in it, while Apolitico has absolutely no interest in politics; hence, although he has much more money than Politico, he does not invest any in this purpose. In the end, Politico will have greater political influence than Apolitico even if Apolitico is richer than him. Yet it seems to me that Apolitico is not dominated by Politico since in principle they enjoy equal opportunity to influence politics, Apolitico simply decides not to take it—recall that what is problematic is not that people have a different likelihood of success but rather that they have unfair opportunities to have an influence (Scanlon 2018). By contrast, and this might be counterintuitive, Apolitico does dominate Politico: even if Apolitico chooses not to take advantage of his greater opportunities to influence politics because of his wealth, he does have such opportunities. As the kindly master, Apolitico might decide never to intervene in politics, but his resources provide him with the uncontrolled capacity to do so—and, as we have seen, domination is a matter of capacity rather than of actual interference. Thus, it seems to me that for the sake of non-domination we should limit Apolitico’s fortunes rather than restraining Politico’s investments. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this example to me.

3. Limitarianism and the Problem of Flourishing

Ingrid Robeyns's limitarianism (2017; 2019; 2022) could provide neo-republicanism with such a limit. Limitarianism is a theory which argues that excessive individual wealth should be limited, and one of the reasons Robeyns offers for doing so is that it would protect democracy against the disproportionate political influence of the super-rich (Robeyns 2017, p. 5).¹² Moreover, the rationale looks similar to the one I have just analysed. Since the democratic ideal of political equality appears to be undermined by the presence of very wealthy citizens in a democracy—who can undeniably enjoy greater opportunities to influence politics because of their wealth—and formal constraints fail to overcome this issue, the wealth of these citizens should be limited. Put differently, to protect the democratic ideal of political equality, excessive individual fortunes should be restrained.

More precisely, Robeyns believes that what should be restrained is “surplus wealth”, i.e., the wealth that individuals possess above what she calls the “*riches line*”: “the level of wealth accumulation at which, at some point of increasing wealth, there is no additional contribution of additional wealth to one’s flourishing” (Robeyns 2022, p. 254, italics in the original). While under a certain level of wealth people might have valid reasons to keep their money for themselves so as to achieve their own life goals, above that level of wealth different conceptions of justice might admit that the benefit people could gain from their money is negligible, i.e., it is a “surplus” that they can live without. Robeyns certainly recognizes that the limitarian threshold does not necessarily coincide with such a so-called riches line—indeed, “[d]ifferent reasons for limitarianism could point to different limitarian thresholds” (Robeyns 2022, p. 254); in particular, she admits that the democratic argument might call for a relative limitarian threshold that is different from the one drawn in relation to the value of flourishing. However, she stresses that

12 The other reason is meeting “unmet urgent needs” (Robeyns 2017, p. 5). In short, the wealth of the super-rich should be limited to collect the resources needed to meet certain contemporary unmet urgent needs, such as poverty. Although Robeyns does not exclude the possibility of there being further reasons to endorse limitarianism, she adheres to the two arguments she previously puts forward, notably “the democratic argument” and “the argument from the unmet urgent needs” (Robeyns 2017, p. 5). This chapter focuses only on the former in relation to the reasoning discussed here.

there would nonetheless be “something special about surplus money for democratic purposes, which is that the opportunity cost in terms of flourishing for those who spend it on political influencing (thereby undermining political equality) is zero” (Robeyns 2022, p. 257). That is, people do not really experience any loss when they invest their surplus wealth in politics, so they are more likely to do it. It therefore seems to me that a limitarian threshold for political equality that corresponds to the riches line, i.e., limiting surplus wealth—the wealth people do not need for their full flourishing—is still desirable. Hence, I will focus first on this version of limitarianism.

The question that arises now is would such a version of limitarianism suit neo-republicanism? In other words, would such a limitarian threshold based on the riches line prevent those belonging to the economic elites from dominating the democratic process—which, as mentioned above, represents a dangerous, if not *the* most dangerous, threat to neo-republican freedom? According to Adelin-Costin Dumitru (2020), the answer is affirmative. Dumitru first introduces limitarianism within neo-republicanism because limitarianism “concentrates in a single theoretical umbrella the answers that can be given to [two neo-republican] intuitions”: the “intuitions against extreme wealth” on the one hand, and the “sufficientarian intuition” on the other (Dumitru 2020, pp. 386–387).

In his view, limitarianism should be advocated within neo-republicanism, firstly as a complement to the latter’s sufficientarian claim regarding material independence, namely the idea that to be free from domination, a person must own at least the relevant resources that are needed to be self-sustaining, otherwise she will depend on the arbitrary power of others to do so.¹³ Limitarianism would indicate from where the necessary resources to provide everyone with such a minimum could be collected. Furthermore, it would allow the collection of those resources without violating anyone’s rights.

This is because limitarianism would tax and redistribute that part of an individual’s wealth that does not contribute to helping that individual lead a flourishing life, *i.e.* a part that is irrelevant from the standpoint of justice (Dumitru 2020, p. 387, italics in the original).

13 As Dumitru himself recognizes, this idea is quite common among the proponents of freedom as non-domination; see for example, Pettit (1997; 2007; 2012); Raventós (2007); Lovett (2009).

In this respect, limitarianism would be the most adequate tool for promoting the goal of sufficiency.

Nonetheless, this is not the only way in which limitarianism would contribute to freedom as non-domination. According to Dumitru's account, limitarianism would also be beneficial to neo-republicanism because it would "ensure that the super-rich could not use their money in order to eschew the republican policies implemented in a country" (Dumitru 2020, p. 391). In other words, limitarianism would also be beneficial to neo-republicanism because it would avoid the wealthy having a disproportionate political influence, as discussed in the previous section. In addition to freedom as non-domination requiring a bottom threshold for material independence, therefore, freedom as non-domination would require an upper threshold, which would permit both the identification of which resources should be collected to meet the sufficiency goal and the preservation of democracy from the elites' unfair political power. Moreover, in relation to the version of limitarianism I sketched above, Dumitru argues that such an upper threshold should be drawn in relation to the idea of full flourishing so as not to violate anyone's rights. This is what he calls "republican limitarianism" (Dumitru 2020, p. 377).

Although I am sympathetic to Dumitru's view, I believe that limitarianism should be introduced within neo-republicanism first and foremost for this latter reason, since what we are looking for is a way to overcome the problem of economic elites in politics. Furthermore, it seems that neither formal institutional constraints nor sufficientarianism can protect citizens' equal opportunity in politics from the wealthy's unfair influence. An economic minimum for individuals would perhaps be necessary to grant everyone an independent say on public matters (Raventós 2007, p. 64). But this would not be sufficient to ensure them equal opportunities for political influence: "even if all citizens had access to *sufficient* means [...] richer citizens, who are able to spend more, would have significantly greater chances" (Scanlon 2018, p. 82, italics in the original). Hence, an upper economic limit should be advocated to prevent the wealthy from dominating the democratic process. This does not mean that fixing such a limit cannot help to achieve the sufficientarian goal, nor that this would not also decrease the horizontal domination (or *dominium*) of citizens by their very rich fellows. What I argue, however, is that

this limit should be fixed first to counter their vertical domination (or *imperium*). In this respect, though, Dumitru's specific proposal for republican limitarianism is problematic, because when it comes to protecting democracy from the disproportionate influence of the super-rich, the idea of full flourishing is a non-starter.

This is because, as Tammy Harel Ben-Shahar brilliantly highlights, the point at which political equality is undermined by excessive individual wealth does not necessarily coincide with the point at which individuals fully flourish (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, p. 9). People under the riches line might still have enough wealth to enjoy boundless, disproportionate opportunities to influence politics. Moreover, this could be true even if these opportunities came with some costs in terms of flourishing. For some people it may be more important to influence the course of politics than to fully flourish, and some may even consider political power to be part of their flourishing and decide to invest their money in increasing their chances of getting it (Volacu & Dumitru 2019). In other words, although such individuals would not possess what Robeyns calls surplus money, i.e., they would not have more resources than those necessary for their complete flourishing, those individuals would still have more opportunities to influence the public decision-making process because of their wealth. A limitarian threshold that coincides with the riches line would thus prove to be ineffective for protecting the democratic ideal of political equality from the disproportionate influence of the wealthy.¹⁴

It should be noted that the fact that the riches line does not necessarily coincide with the point at which people enjoy greater opportunities for political influence because of their wealth does not mean that the riches line *must* be set at a higher level. It simply means that it *might* be—and, if it was, that this would be problematic for the purpose of protecting

14 A similar objection can be found in the work of Volacu & Dumitru (2019). The two authors argue that setting an upper limit to individual wealth would prove ineffective, as nothing below the set threshold would prevent individuals from funding the political process and thus gaining more influence through their financial means—which is what Dick Timmer calls the “efficacy objection” (Timmer 2019) and which I discuss elsewhere (Icardi 2022). Yet, under their construal, the problem seems to be that people below the riches line can still invest their wealth in politics. Instead, I argue that the problem is that people under the riches line could still possess enough resources to enjoy unequal opportunities to influence politics. As mentioned above, wealth investments in politics are not problematic *per se*, but they are problematic when they provide some people with disproportionate chances for political influence.

democracy from domination by the wealthy. In other words, what this argument suggests is that the level at which individuals fully flourish and that at which they enjoy unfair opportunities for political influence are distinct and that a priori we do not know which one happens to be higher than the other. Hence, if we want to leave people with enough resources to fully flourish, we *risk* leaving them with enough resources to dominate the democratic process too, thus undermining freedom as non-domination. It therefore seems that to protect neo-republican liberty from the wealthy's vertical domination, we should give up the idea of defining the limit in terms of full flourishing and, instead, set the threshold where that kind of domination materializes—which is similar to what Harel Ben-Shahar envisages for political equality in general (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019).¹⁵

However, one might argue that the surplus condition stands as a necessary condition to justify the limitarian threshold. Excessive individual wealth can be limited above the riches line precisely because it no longer contributes to individuals' flourishing. A trade-off therefore seems to be needed: to realize freedom as non-domination we should limit the wealthy's resources to prevent them from enjoying disproportionate political influence, but since we cannot deprive people of the resources they need to fully flourish, the limitarian threshold should coincide with the riches line, thus limiting only surplus wealth.

This trade-off looks problematic for at least two reasons, though. Firstly, because the limitarian threshold would not be the same for the two separate outcomes of fully flourishing and not having an unfair political influence, the riches line, which is nothing but the limitarian threshold when defined in relation to the value of full flourishing, would not guarantee a solution to the problem of economic elites in politics. Besides, as argued above, formal measures appear unable to come to the rescue. Notwithstanding this problem, one might say that freedom as non-domination, which, let us remember, is based on such a political legitimacy requirement, should not be considered as the only value at stake. This seems to be Dumitru's thesis: "freedom as non-domination

15 Note that I am not arguing that the idea of full flourishing should be given up in general; this idea might still be valuable in other respects. For example, I do not address the question of whether defining the limit in terms of full flourishing would suit the argument of unmet urgent needs (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019; Icardi 2022).

does not exhaust the realm of justice” (Dumitru 2020, p. 395). Namely, there are other values that should be taken into account, such as individual flourishing.

The notion of flourishing thus provides us with this second threshold. Above the point of non-domination, inequalities do not matter, up to a cut-off point at which any money someone might still own will not help her flourish anymore (Dumitru 2020, p. 396).

Secondly, however, it seems to me that, *contra* Dumitru, from a neo-republican perspective it would not make sense to trade freedom as non-domination for the sake of flourishing. This is not only because, for neo-republicans, freedom as non-domination overall is the ultimate value, but also because being free from domination represents the prior condition that has to be secured for people to flourish. As a matter of fact, if people are to shape and pursue their own lifegoals and beliefs, they should not, first and foremost, be exposed to anyone else’s arbitrary power. Of course, there are other conditions that allow people to achieve self-realization, e.g., their abilities, health, material means and so on. But as a matter of justice, freedom as non-domination should be safeguarded first, because if you are not free, even if you are able and healthy and/or you have the means to do something, you can only do it *cum permissu*—by experiencing the same uncertainty as an enslaved person who has a “kindly” enslaver. In this respect, freedom as non-domination should be understood as a primary good in Rawlsian terms, namely something that everyone would like to have to achieve their other aims (Pettit 1997, p. 91). Hence, for a neo-republican, it would be pointless to withdraw less resources than the amount that is needed to ensure freedom as non-domination in order to protect people’s possibility of fully flourishing, because in the neo-republican view, their possibility of flourishing relies on their freedom as non-domination in the first place.

At this stage, from the neo-republican perspective, there would be only one reason left for establishing a limitarian threshold in relation to the idea of fully flourishing. Dumitru does not explore this option since he generally regards full flourishing and non-domination as two distinct goals. But a neo-republican could, instead, consider them as strictly linked to one another. If full flourishing was constitutive of freedom as non-domination, we would have a reason not to withdraw the resources people might need to fully flourish even though leaving people with those resources might undermine freedom as non-domination in other

respects, for instance by providing some people with disproportionate opportunities to influence politics. On this account, being free from domination would not only entail the absence of anyone else's arbitrary power, but also the presence of a certain set of opportunities to achieve self-realization (Qizilbash 2016, p. 26).

If we leave aside questions concerning why, for instance, someone's full flourishing should in this case be given priority over improving everyone's flourishing *tout court* (Harel ben-Shahar 2019, p. 10),¹⁶ we can focus on the fact that this reading is incompatible with Pettit's understanding of freedom as non-domination. Although according to Pettit reaching "personal self-mastery" (Pettit 1997, pp. 81–82) without being free from domination appears to be impossible, he believes that one can be free from domination with or without reaching one's "personal self-mastery", because freedom as non-domination is an issue of status rather than of realizing opportunities. What really matters is that people have equal power independently of the number of choices that are open to them.¹⁷ This does not mean that no options should be secured as a matter of freedom as non-domination. As mentioned above, people should be allowed at least a minimum level of resources so that everyone is granted the relevant material independence. Nonetheless, how many options a person has above such a minimum does not seem to be a matter of domination any longer. As Kyle Swan puts it lucidly,

[p]roviding more than would secure such independence would certainly promote the beneficiaries' capabilities, their real or effective freedom to achieve well-being, since more valued beings and doings would be open to them. But none of this does anything to open up choices where they had previously been subject to domination (Swan 2012, p. 445).

In conclusion, freedom as non-domination does not entail individual flourishing, although it stands as the necessary—albeit not

16 If we admit that flourishing is constitutive of freedom as non-domination, we might wonder, with Harel Ben-Shahar, "why we should prioritize obtaining full flourishing for one (the rich), instead of using the resources for improving flourishing for those who are significantly less flourishing" (2019, p. 10). That is, if flourishing is so important, why shouldn't we argue that the super-rich's wealth should indeed be redistributed to grant everyone a certain level of flourishing?

17 Here lies the difference between what Pettit calls "structural egalitarianism" and what he calls "material egalitarianism". The former means enjoying the same power and is needed for freedom as non-domination, while the latter means enjoying similar bundles of options and is not needed for freedom as non-domination (Pettit 1997, p. 113).

sufficient—condition for it since it provides people with the possibility to freely shape and pursue their own life goals. It follows that rather than denying someone’s possibility to fully flourish, establishing the limitarian threshold for the sake of freedom as non-domination, i.e., putting it where excessive individual wealth jeopardizes the requirement of political legitimacy, would ground it. Hence, from the neo-republican perspective, the trade-off would be pointless. The next section investigates what this limitarian threshold that is independent of the value of flourishing should look like.

4. A Limitarian Threshold for Freedom as Non-Domination

To sum up, for freedom as non-domination to be secured, people should enjoy equal opportunities to influence the public decision-making process. The concentration of wealth in the hands of few people (i.e., the existence of socioeconomic elites in a democracy) jeopardizes such a prior condition for neo-republican liberty. Moreover, since formal constraints fail to sufficiently protect this condition, what should be limited is excessive individual wealth itself. However, when it comes to ensuring freedom as non-domination within democracy, such a limit should not be established with reference to the idea of full flourishing, as is the case with Robeyns’s riches line, which has been retrieved by Dumitru. This is because freedom as non-domination and flourishing are not only two distinct values but they can also conflict with one another. Besides, for neo-republicans it would not make sense to trade their fundamental value—freedom as non-domination—for the sake of another value such as flourishing. Thus, the limitarian threshold should be drawn so as to protect only freedom as non-domination.

Nevertheless, if both the bottom threshold and the upper threshold were established in relation to the idea of freedom as non-domination, according to Dumitru, “the sufficiency and limitarian threshold would be identical” (Dumitru 2020, p. 395). This is because, in his view, freedom as non-domination can instruct us only about the bottom threshold. Namely, when it comes to distributive justice, the sole requirement of freedom as non-domination would be material independence: once material independence has been granted to everyone, material inequalities would no longer be a matter of domination. Hence,

according to Dumitru, from the neo-republican perspective it would be impossible to identify any further threshold without referring to other values, such as the value of full flourishing. In this respect, if overall resources were so scarce as to be hardly sufficient to grant everyone material independence, for the sake of freedom as non-domination and freedom as non-domination only, it seems plausible to assume that all of the resources that people do not need for their self-sustainment could and should be redistributed with the aim of granting everyone material independence. It follows that in this situation, the upper threshold would collapse into the bottom one, or the upper threshold would not exist. This contradicts my insight that we can establish a limitarian threshold for the sake of freedom as non-domination without referring to the idea of full flourishing.

However, I believe that this problem arises only when the limitarian threshold is introduced within neo-republicanism firstly as a complement to sufficientarianism, as Dumitru mainly holds. By contrast, if the limitarian threshold is advocated as a solution to the elites' boundless political power, as I suggest, this problem would not arise given that there are reasons to think that what allows the economic elites to enjoy boundless political power is that those belonging to such elites own *much more* wealth than others. Let's think about the above-mentioned case of taxation increases causing capital to be sent to another country. If your capital is only slightly larger than that of your fellow citizens, your threat to move it if there is a tax rise will suddenly lose its weight, i.e., you will not have any problematic independent power concerning the success or failure of that policy (Knight & Johnson 1997; Christiano 2010). Formal separations between politics and economics would therefore prove to be effective in similar cases. As a matter of fact, to enjoy disproportionate opportunities to exert a political influence because of your wealth despite formal constraints that aim to prevent you from doing so, you should own *much more* wealth than your fellow citizens. On the one hand, no-one would enjoy greater power than their fellow citizens if everyone possessed similar resources—no matter the extent of those resources.¹⁸ On the other hand, no-one would enjoy this power boundlessly if they had slightly more resources than others

18 This is the reason why many advocates of limitarianism envisage a relative threshold; see Harel Ben-Shahar (2019); Ali & Caranti (2021); Caranti & Ali (2021); Icardi (2022).

(Icardi 2022). Again, it is not economic inequalities in themselves that undermine democracy, but *stark* economic inequalities (Pansardi 2016).¹⁹ Thus, the aim of protecting democracy from the elites' domination would provide the grounds for a limitarian threshold which is different from the sufficiency line despite not relying on the idea of full flourishing. In this respect, it seems to me that contrary to what Dumitru assumes, the upper threshold would differ from the bottom threshold even if both are grounded on the idea of freedom as non-domination.

When it comes to preventing the wealthy from dominating the democratic process, the limitarian threshold should be both relative to what citizens own on average, and relatively high compared with what citizens own on average since it should be put at the point at which individual wealth represents a threat to democracy and formal measures can only have a minimal effect on it. If excessive individual wealth is not limited, some people will always be able to enjoy disproportionate chances to influence politics because of this wealth, thus dominating the public decision-making process. This does not mean that the limitarian threshold would be sufficient to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity for political influence. Laws formally granting citizens political equality are necessary too, and power asymmetries other than those resulting from economic inequalities should be addressed to secure neo-republican liberty. Furthermore, limiting the power of lobbyists and corporations should probably be envisaged as well.²⁰ Nevertheless, given the difficulty of insulating political power from economic power, limiting excessive individual wealth appears to be a necessary means to granting political legitimacy,²¹ and limitarianism is a good way of doing so.

19 For empirical works on this matter see, for instance, Dahl (1998); Gilens (2005, p. 786).

20 For reasons concerning space, I will not elaborate on this issue. But, as I suggest elsewhere (Icardi 2022), different solutions might be envisaged to decrease these entities' power: where some might be inspired to exercise limitarianism, for example by limiting the wealth of private firms, others might depart from it. Nonetheless, limiting excessive individual wealth could have some beneficial effects, for instance it would reduce the purchasing power of individual shareholders, thus decreasing the concentration of power in their hands.

21 Regarding the idea that limiting economic inequality plays an instrumental role in political equality, see Ronzoni (2022). According to her, "distributive equality is, at closer scrutiny, used as a proxy for *political* equality [...]: we are concerned with

This leads to a further impasse. If the limitarian threshold should preserve the democratic process, it follows that where such a threshold should be put cannot be decided by this process itself. Because the democratic process would precede the introduction of the economic limit, it would be biased towards the interests of the wealthy, who would still enjoy a greater influence on the democratic process because of their wealth (Caranti & Ali 2021, p. 96). In other words, given that formal constraints can do little to prevent the super-rich from having unfair opportunities to influence the public decision-making process, the choice of where to put the limitarian threshold, if made democratically, would inevitably favour the super-rich's preferences. Excessive individual wealth should therefore be limited *ex ante*, and such a limit should represent a precondition of democracy.

However, such a limit that is implemented *ex ante* risks being a source of domination in another sense, namely by being established without citizens having any control over it and therefore being arbitrary in the neo-republican sense. It seems to me that the impasse just described is only apparent, though. If excessive individual wealth *inevitably* undermines citizens' equal opportunities to influence the public decision-making process, far from threatening political legitimacy, restraining it would grant it. Accordingly, I agree with Pamela Pansardi when she says that a more equal distribution of resources "is not to be understood as a goal that democracy should promote, but rather as a procedural requirement for the realization of the ideal of democracy as non-domination" (Pansardi 2016, p. 103).²² In the same way in which everyone should be granted "equal access to the system of popular influence" (Pettit 2012, p. 169) as a precondition of citizens enjoying control over the state, everyone should be prevented from having too much.²³ This is because if someone had too much, formal constraints

material inequality because it so easily translates into power inequality" (Ronconi 2022, p. 748, italics in the original).

- 22 I read the term "procedural" in the quotation not in the sense of meaning non-substantive but in the sense of being a (substantive) requirement for the very democratic procedure.
- 23 I set aside the question of how this *ex ante* limit should be set. My insight is that empirical studies should instruct us about the level at which individual wealth allows its owners to gain boundless uneven opportunities; that is where the limit should be put. Besides, this top-down process should be followed by a bottom-up one. In line with Pettit's idea of "individual contestability" (Pettit 1997; 2012), each citizen should have the possibility to contest this choice. More precisely,

could not prevent them from gaining extra chances to influence politics because of their wealth; hence, they would enjoy greater control over the public decision-making process—that is, they would dominate it; thus, freedom as non-domination would be undermined.

As I see it, then, if one advocates limitarianism for neo-republicanism, one has to consider the former as an ideal theory: excess individual wealth should not be limited only in the world as it is, but also in the world as it should be. This differs from Robeyns’s understanding of limitarianism as a non-ideal theory (Robeyns 2017) that would apply to “the present and nearby possible worlds” (Robeyns 2022, p. 251). According to her, limitarianism would represent a proposal for worlds characterised by the present or similar injustices, while in my view it would be part and parcel of the ideal world to which we should aim as a matter of justice. For a neo-republican, such an ideal world is distinguished by the fact that everyone enjoys freedom as non-domination, and, as I have been arguing, this outcome appears to be impossible without limiting excess individual wealth—even in the most ideal of democracies, if some people had too much, they would dominate the public decision-making process thanks to their wealth. Therefore, if the democratic process is to be preserved from the super-rich’s domination, their wealth has to be limited *ex ante*. Under this construal, perhaps the limitarian threshold would not qualify as a solution to the present problem of economic elites—not least because it would be far too late to intervene *ex ante*—but it could certainly become a key feature of ideal democracy in a neo-republican normative outlook.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, freedom as non-domination requires excessive individual wealth to be limited. Given that the wealthy enjoy a disproportionate opportunity for political influence because of their wealth and formal

citizens should be able to contest the extent of the limitarian threshold, as well as its implementation and so on—with the economic limit in place, their public decision-making would no longer be unavoidably biased towards the interests of the wealthy. By contrast, citizens should not be able to contest the threshold itself, namely they should not be able to remove it—in the same way in which citizens can amend the democratic system without being able to remove the condition of equal opportunity of influence. Nevertheless, further work seems to be needed to better grasp this top-down, bottom-up process.

institutional constraints cannot adequately address that problem, limiting excessive individual wealth stands as a necessary condition for the democratic requirement grounding neo-republican liberty, and this condition can be achieved through a limitarian threshold. Thus, limitarianism should be advocated within neo-republicanism.

However, the threshold should be put at that point at which individual wealth jeopardizes citizens' equal opportunity for political influence, instead of corresponding to Robeyns's riches line and limiting the wealth that individuals do not need to fully flourish, as Dumitru upholds. Moreover, unlike for Dumitru, this threshold would not coincide with the level at which everyone is materially independent since people must possess many more resources than their fellows to enjoy greater chances of influencing politics because of them. Since such an economic limit is a precondition of political legitimacy, it would not be a source of domination itself. Moreover, unless we envisage a democratic system on a global scale, this precondition would hold only within state borders.

Where exactly the limit should be put remains an open question. This seems to be a question for empirical studies, which should inform us about how much individual wealth actually represents a danger to democracy. Another open question concerns what exactly should be limited. Which kind of economic resources threaten the proper functioning of the democratic process? Should we worry about individuals' incomes, their wealth, or what they inherit? These too seem to be questions which require further empirical work to be done—the guiding criterion to answer these questions being to what extent these kinds of economic resources have an adverse effect on the vertical dimension of freedom as non-domination.

Nevertheless, this chapter focuses on the normative reasons for introducing limitarianism within neo-republicanism. This should be done to prevent the economic elites from dominating politics and therefore the threshold should be set where this risk materializes. Interestingly, freedom as non-domination then offers a further argument for limitarianism that is independent from the controversial value of full flourishing but is still compatible with the overall presumption that up to a certain level people would be permitted to keep their resources for themselves.

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