

Workshop on “Normative and empirical approaches to short-termism”

Université catholique de Louvain, May 26 and 27, 2014

Convenors: Axel Gosseries and Iñigo González-Ricoy

1. Summary

The workshop on “*Normative and Empirical Approaches to Short-termism*” took place at the Université catholique de Louvain in May 26-27, 2014. It included 18 experts (8 speakers, 7 discussants, and 3 chairs) working on the phenomenon of political and economic short-termism—including political scientists, social psychologists, economists, and philosophers—and who discussed recent advances in their respective fields. It brought together empirical and normative approaches to the problem of short-termism in the face of long-term problems (such as global warming, overpopulation, and a raising pension burden) that require long-term policies to ensure that the rights of future generations are respected. The workshop addressed the phenomenon of short-termism from three different yet interrelated standpoints. (The goals achieved are specified in section 3 below.)

First, several papers presented in the workshop unpacked the idea of short-termism. They addressed the following questions: What is short-termism and which are its main determinants, political and otherwise? How should short-termism be defined across a diversity of domains (e.g. economic, political) and issues (e.g. climate change, research and development, demography, education). In what sense is short-termism related to other germane yet different phenomena, such as time discounting or time preference? Which are the main factors determining citizens time horizons and their willingness to endorse long-term (e.g. environmental) policies?

Second, some of the speakers presented recent advances on the issue whether, and under which conditions, is short-termism morally wrong. Among the addressed questions were the following: Can short-termism be justified under some conditions, such as future uncertainty or expected increasing prosperity? Could political short-termism be a mechanism to signal reputation under conditions of political distrust? Which are the time horizon that policies should adopt with respect to different domains and intertemporal problems?

Finally, a number of papers presented in the workshop explored institutional proposals to overcome the problema of short-termism and to achieve an adequate allocation of costs and benefits across time. Some questions that were addressed were the following: Are democratic institutions, when properly functioning, appropriate enough to address the problema of short-termism? Can institutional mechanisms, such as constitutional entrenchment, ombudsmen for future generations, or youth quotas, better enlarge the time horizon of political decisions?

2. Description of the scientific content of and discussion at the event

The workshop was divided into two days, in which eight papers on the phenomenon of short-termism were presented by experts in their respective fields, including political science, law, social psychology, and philosophy. Each presentation was followed by an extended comment by a discussant and plenty of time for discussion. Below, a summary of the papers that were presented follows. The names of the speakers as well as those of the discussants and chair of each presentation are specified.

John O’neill (Manchester University): “Hume and our relations to posterity”

Hume has had a significant place in recent debates on the nature and extent of the obligations that current generations have for future generations. His claims about the circumstances of justice are taken to show that his position implies that there exist no obligations in justice to future generations. His claims about the limits of human imagination are taken to show that he held an agent relative ethic which entailed that what obligations we might have are weak obligations. In this paper we defend two claims. The first is that both of these views about the implications of Hume’s position for an account of obligations to future generations are false. Both are founded on mistaken accounts of Hume’s views. There is clear evidence in Hume’s writings that he did believe that we had strong obligations to future generations. The second is that by placing Hume’s work in the context of current debates on future generations, these accounts of Hume’s views fail to recognise either the nature of the debates to which he was contributing or their continuing significance. Hume’s contributions to discussions of future generations confronting two dimensions of the civic humanist response to commercial society that are found in both its defenders and critics: the mobilisation of landed property through commerce and the rise of public credit. Both dimensions had a clear inter-generational dimension, landed property as a condition for intergenerational concern, public credit as a way future generations could be burdened by current generations. Landed property passed down across generation provided a link of across generations that for the civic humanists was potentially broken by the mobile property of commercial society. Public credit made possible by the growth of finance allowed current generations to displace burdens into the future. Both point to an institutional dimension of concern for future generations that are to be found in the republican tradition which have been largely lost in more recent debates in liberal political theory.

Chair: Marcus Düwell (Utrecht University)

Discussant: Christopher Hamel (Ghent University)

Alan Jacobs (University of British Columbia): “Short-termism and political uncertainty: a report of experimental evidence.”

If governments want to provide more of a valued social good – from education to health care to infrastructure – they must typically impose sacrifice on citizens, in the form of higher taxes or lower spending in other areas. Moreover, the costs must usually be imposed before the benefits are delivered, and the benefits may be substantially delayed in time. In this paper, we investigate the sources of citizens’ attitudes toward intertemporal pain-for-gain policy tradeoffs. We examine why citizens often reject policies that impose costs in exchange for popular future benefits, and we seek to

identify conditions that enhance or diminish citizen acceptance of such policy bargains. The paper proposes that citizens' attitudes toward policy tradeoffs are influenced by uncertainty about whether the future benefits will be delivered as promised. Further, we theorize that this uncertainty depends on which institutional actor within a polity will be responsible for implementing the tradeoff. We test a set of institutional hypotheses using data from three online survey experiments administered to large representative samples of the U.S. voting-age population. The findings suggest that citizen support for pain-for-gain bargains depends significantly on the institutional allocation of authority and that these institutional effects are, as hypothesized, mediated by uncertainty about the delivery of policy benefits. The results further suggest that institutions that constrain decision makers (such as trust fund budgetary rules) enhance citizen acceptance of costly investments in broadly valued social goods.

Chair: Marcus Düwell (Utrecht University)

Discussant: Laura Sudulich (ULB)

**Videoconference by Kym Irving (Queensland University of Technology):
"Overcoming Short-termism"**

Sylvie Loriaux (Laval University): "Moral Demands in an Uncertain World"

This paper aims to clarify the impact of uncertainties on the content, the nature and the very existence of global duties, and to specify from this perspective how the normative issues raised by spatial distance compare to those raised by temporal distance. To this end, I will start by identifying those kinds of uncertainty that have, explicitly or implicitly, been assumed to play a key role in the global justice debate. Noteworthy among them are those related to the causes of global injustices, to the global consequences of particular actions, to the way other global agents are going to behave as well as those inherent to so-called 'imperfect' global duties. I will then discuss each kind of uncertainty separately, focusing on a) its alleged normative consequences, b) its distinctive 'global' source, and c) the possibility of its being addressed. I will conclude with some reflections on the peculiarities of what can be called 'short-sightedness' compared to 'short-termism'.

Chair: Zoé Lejeune (University of Liège)

Discussant: Siba Harb (KU Leuven)

Iñigo González-Ricoy (Universitat Pompeu Fabra): "Constitutional entrenchment of Future-oriented Provisions"

This paper considers the constitutional entrenchment of future-oriented provisions (FOPs), e.g. environmental or fiscal, as a means to enlarge the time horizon of political decisions and achieve an appropriate allocation of costs and benefits across time. It firstly unpacks the main types, formulation, content, and enforcement mechanisms of FOPs. It then discusses their ability (i) to insulate the entrenched provisions from high discounting and time inconsistency in public policy-making; (ii) to increase the degree of policy certainty, thus improving citizens' willingness to endorse long-term policies; and (iii) to credibly signal their salience, thus coordinating citizens around focal points with a larger time horizon, and influencing their beliefs and values due to the expressive function of law; and (iv) to increase the degree of deliberation, both horizontal among

citizens and vertical among citizens and state institutions, about long-term policies. It finally discusses the democratic legitimacy of constitutionally enshrined FOPs, and their ability to cope with unforeseeable contingencies.

Chair: Zoé Lejeune (University of Liège)

Discussant: Axel Gosseries (UCL)

Dominic Roser (University of Oxford): Tweaking overly short-termist institutions

There is broad concern over current politics being oriented too much towards the short-term. One remedy consists in speaking to the conscience of policymakers and asking them to opt for more long-termist policy outcomes. Another remedy consists in redesigning institutions such that they have mechanisms built in that weaken the bias for short-termism inherent in human nature. There is currently quite some interest in this second type of remedy, i.e. in an "indirect" remedy which focuses on "tweaking" procedures rather than directly on outcomes. In this talk I will criticise some assumptions behind the proposals for tweaking institutions towards long-termism. First, many who advocate for decision mechanisms that produce more long-termist policy outcomes use a fairly short-termist definition of the "long term" and arbitrarily exclude concerns with the "very" long term. Second, it is often crudely assumed that we are doing too little for the future. This crude assessment does not take into account that we are in many ways doing more than enough for the future, in other ways too little and in some ways dramatically too little. The core challenge thus consists in being long-termist "in the right way" rather than in simply being "more" long-termist. This also means that redesigning political institutions cannot simply operate with the goal in mind of doing "more for the future" but must rely on an detailed account of how exactly we currently fall short of intergenerational justice. Third, it is often assumed that tweaking institutions must have the goal of making current policymakers more attentive to the interests of future generations. However, we often benefit future generations not as a result of giving attention to their interests but as a side effect of reaching other goals. Therefore, tweaking institutions towards better long-termism is just as much about harnessing the positive long-term side-effects of reaching other goals as it is about making current policymakers deliberately aim at benefiting future generations.

Chair: Danielle Schwartz

Discussant: Kata Fodor (Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights,
Secretariat of the Ombudsman for Future Generations)

Michael Mackenzie (Harvard University): "Democratic Institutions and Long-Term Decision-Making."

The claim that democracies are incapable of effectively dealing with long-term problems, such as climate change or budget deficits, has a certain intuitive plausibility. Politicians are often focused on winning the next election, voters and other powerful groups often act on their own short-term interests, and future generations (who will be affected by our actions or inactions) cannot make their voices heard in our decision-making processes today. This claim – which might be called the “democratic myopia thesis” – has been studied extensively over the last four decades. This paper seeks to bring some conceptual clarity to the debate about the democratic myopia thesis. Drawing on various sources, I argue that it is possible to identify (at least) five distinct

versions of the thesis: 1) the short electoral cycles argument; 2) the myopic voter argument; 3) the powerful actors argument; 4) the complexity argument; and 5) the absence of future generations argument. When these five versions of the argument are examined separately, and on their own terms, the democratic myopia thesis becomes both clearer and more nuanced. I argue that standard versions of the thesis are based on misunderstandings about what democracy is meant to be in theory and how it works in practice. Certain versions of the argument are more relevant to specific types of long-term issues and less relevant to others. Other versions rely on empirical claims that cannot be straightforwardly maintained. Most accounts of the thesis overemphasize some features of democratic systems (such as electoral processes), and underemphasize the potential of other democratic practices, such as deliberation or forms of trusteeship representation, that might help us negotiate long-term issues and intergenerational relations. Several versions of the argument rely on a model of democracy in which existing preferences and expectations are registered but not actively shaped through democratic activity. To the extent that we can further clarify the theoretical terms of this argument, we will be in a better position to both conduct more precise empirical investigations, and build institutions designed to address or mitigate specific aspects of the problem.

Chair: Danielle Schwartz

Discussant: Ivo Wallimann-Helmer (University of Zurich)

Juliana Bidadanure (University of York): "Better Procedures for Fairer Outcomes: Can Youth Quotas Increase our Chances of Meeting the Demands of Intergenerational Justice?"

The article I will present evaluates the impact that the introduction of youth quotas in parliaments could have on two key challenges of intergenerational justice: (A) the long-term challenge of meeting our duties towards future generations and (B) the shorter-term challenge of fairness for current younger generations. I highlight two different types of quotas: (i) age group quotas and (ii) birth cohort quotas and assess their respective potential role in bringing us closer to objectives (A) and (B). I assess some potential objections and, against these, I argue that there are strong reasons to believe that youth quotas in parliaments can improve our chances to meet both objectives and that we must seriously consider their implementation.

Chair: Danielle Schwartz

Discussant: John Pitseys (UCL)

3. Assessment of the results and impact of the event on the future direction of the field

Previous scientific background:

- Very reduced amount of academic literatura—both normative and empirical—on the phenomenon of short-termism.
- Poor knowledge of the empirical determinants of citizens' short-termism.
- Growing body of literature on intergenerational justice that has not been yet succesfully applied to issues inetergenerational decision-making.
- Little interaction between scholars working on the subject from different fields.
- Absence of systematic discussion of existing institutional proposals to tackle the problema of short-termism.

Goals achieved:

- Greater conceptual clarification of the notion of short-termism, both political and economic. This will be crucial for better operationalization of the notion in further empirical and normative work.
- Better knoweledge of the determinants of short-termism within social psychology and behavioral political science.
- Clearer knowledged of the potentials and limits of a number of institutional proposals (e.g. youth quotas, environmental constitutional provisions) to better address long-term issues.
- Creation of a network of scholars from various fields working on the subject of the workshop within the wider network of the ESF ENRI Project "Rights to a Green Future."
- Possibility given to PhD students working on the subject to interact with more experienced researchers.

Future directions on the subject:

- More systematic analysis of intertemporal problems in political and economic decision-making, both empirical and normative.
- More frequent interaction between scholars from different fields.
- More comprehensive discussion of existing institutional proposals (youth quotas, ombudspersons for future generations, constitutional clauses, etc) to address systematic problems of democratic institutions to better grasp intergenerational problems and to enact long-term policies.

4. Final programme of the meeting

Monday, May 26

14:15-15:30h John O’neill (Manchester University): “Hume and our relations to posterity”

Chair: Marcus Düwell (Utrecht University)
Discussant: Christopher Hamel (Ghent University)

15:30-16h Coffee break

16h-17:15 Alan Jacobs (University of British Columbia): “Short-termism and political uncertainty: a report of experimental evidence.”

Chair: Marcus Düwell (Utrecht University)
Discussant: Laura Sudulich (ULB)

17:15-17:45h Videoconference by Kym Irving (Queensland University of Technology): "Overcoming Short-termism"

18:30h Dinner

Tuesday, May 27

10-11:15h Sylvie Loriaux (Laval University): “Moral Demands in an Uncertain World”

Chair: Zoé Lejeune (University of Liège)
Discussant: Siba Harb (KU Leuven)

11:15-12:30h Iñigo González-Ricoy (Universitat Pompeu Fabra): "Constitutional entrenchment of Future-oriented Provisions"

Chair: Zoé Lejeune (University of Liège)
Discussant: Axel Gosseries (UCL)

12:30-13:30h Lunch break (served on site)

13:30-14:45h Dominic Roser (University of Oxford): Tweaking overly short-termist institutions

Chair: Danielle Schwartz
Discussant: Kata Fodor (Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, Secretariat of the Ombudsman for Future Generations)

14:45h-15:15h Coffee break

15:15-16:30h Michael Mackenzie (Harvard University): "Democratic Institutions and Long-Term Decision-Making."

Chair: Danielle Schwartz

Discussant: Ivo Wallimann-Helmer (University of Zurich)

16:30-17:45h Juliana Bidanure (University of York): "Better Procedures for Fairer Outcomes: Can Youth Quotas Increase our Chances of Meeting the Demands of Intergenerational Justice?"

Chair: Danielle Schwartz

Discussant: John Pitseys (UCL)

5. List of participants

1. Juliana Bidadanure (University of York)
2. Marcus Düwell (Utrecht University)
3. Kata Fodor (Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights, Secretariat of the Ombudsman for Future Generations)
4. Iñigo González-Ricoy (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)
5. Axel Gosseries (Université catholique de Louvain)
6. Christopher Hamel (Université Libre de Bruxelles)
7. Siba Harb (KU Leuven)
8. Kym Irving (Queensland University of Technology)
9. Alan Jacobs (University of British Columbia)
10. Zoé Lejeune (University of Liège)
11. Sylvie Loriaux (Laval University)
12. Michael Mackenzie (Harvard University)
13. John O’neill (Manchester University)
14. John Pitseys (Université catholique de Louvain)
15. Dominic Roser (University of Oxford)
16. Danielle Schwartz (Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne)
17. Laura Sudulich (Université Libre de Bruxelles)
18. Philippe van Parijs (Université catholique de Louvain)
19. Ivo Wallimann-Helmer (University of Zurich)