

Debating Democracy: Concepts, Histories, and Controversies

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Abstract

Within academia as much as in political practice, democracy remains a contested concept. This issue focuses on the practices of the contestation of the concept of democracy—the debates, controversies, and contestations of democracy in theory, practice, and in historical perspectives. Special emphasis is put on the concept of liberal democracy—i.e. the form that democracy mostly takes nowadays. The key argument is that (liberal) democracy has always been contested as a concept, and it is still contested today. The thematic issue contains a selection of articles that analyse ways and modes of debating and contesting (liberal) democracy, from the past to the present.

Keywords

contested concepts; controversies; debates; history; liberal democracy

On the one hand, “democracy” is a concept that has been taken for granted quite some time in academia. Quentin Skinner spoke in 1973 of democracy as a “descriptive-normative concept,” the use of which tended to presuppose its acceptance (see Dunn, 2005). Both in academia and in everyday usage, most people seem to have a clear idea of what the concept means. When we look at current practices and debates on democracy, though, it becomes apparent that there are considerable differences in the actors’ interpretation of the concept.

On the other hand, and at a deeper look, within academia as much as in political practice, democracy remains a contested concept. Not only are there different understandings and definitions of democracy that are used, but there is also increasing concern about a crisis—or crisis symptoms of democracy—in a worldwide perspective. And indeed, looking back at the decades after Fukuyama’s famous claim from 1992 regarding the “end of history” and the alleged victory of liberal democracy, there are reasons to be concerned.

This thematic issue takes stock of this situation, focusing on the debates, controversies, and contestations of democracy that take place in theory, practice, and in a historical perspective. As said above, special emphasis is put on the concept of liberal democracy. All articles share a joint methodological perspective: they answer to a framework of thinking and interpretation that regards political concepts not as something that can be taken for granted, but as factors and indicators (Koselleck, 1972) of changes and developments in the social and material world, and that takes the related debates as political activities that—in return—shape meanings and practices of democracy (Wiesner et al., 2017).

Against this backdrop, this thematic issue brings together articles that analyse how (liberal) democracy is and has been debated, contested, and conceptualized, inside and outside Europe, with regard to contemporary challenges, and regarding democracy and democratization beyond the nation state and in the European Union. This issue thus assembles articles that thematise past and current debates on, and challenges of, liberal democracy—be it in historical and academic debates (Aagaard Nøhr et al., 2025; Ballacci, 2025; Bonin, 2025) or in relation to voting (Yudin, 2025), the role of opposition (Haapala & Teruel, 2025), contestations of liberal democracy (Bayar & Radnitz, 2025; Smilova, 2025; Wiesner, 2025), the new supranational polity of the EU (Björk et al., 2025; Palonen, 2025; Wiesner, 2025), new forms of political exchange via AI (Fink-Hafner, 2025), and democratic deliberation (Ross, 2025).

The contributions underline that there is not one concept of democracy, but several different interpretations are possible. The historical meanings of the concept have been changing and contested over time. Liberal democracy is the version of democracy that is currently most often practised in representative democracies, but it is also contested. The contributions highlight how these contestations of (liberal) democracy have been happening or how they happen currently, what rhetorical strategies are being used, and what possible and often controversial interpretations of the concept in theory and practice are advanced. They discuss past and present conceptualisations and contestations of (liberal) democracy in theory and political practice, linkages between democratic theory and political practice, and the related political rhetoric and political debates.

We start out from the fact that (liberal) democracy has never been as unanimously supported as its defenders wanted us to believe. The term “contested” in this respect refers to a number of aspects: On one hand, democratic theorists, politicians, and citizens put forward different ideas about what democratic rule implies and requires, and how to interpret (liberal) democracy. These controversies have been taking place for decades, as several contributions in this thematic issue indicate (see Aagaard Nøhr et al., 2025; Ballacci, 2025; Bonin, 2025; Yudin, 2025). On the other hand, (liberal) democracy is contested in both theory and practice today, and both dimensions are frequently linked—this is also a point raised by several contributions (see Bayar & Radnitz, 2025; Björk et al., 2025; Haapala & Teruel, 2025; Palonen, 2025; Ross, 2025; Smilova, 2025; Wiesner, 2025).

Historically, “democracy” has been frequently described with different characteristics, such as representative, parliamentary, pluralistic, or even Western democracy. Each of them could be compared with “liberal democracy,” either marking quasi-synonyms for it or rather unifying previously opposed concepts in a definite political constellation. The root of their opposition was that “liberal” frequently referred to the rights and freedoms of individuals or minorities, whereas “democracy” emphasized election, voting, and popular participation (see Bayar & Radnitz, 2025; Yudin, 2025). Their compatibility consisted in the extension or universalization of rights and freedoms, which older liberals were afraid of and which

populist-type “democrats” were willing to restrict by the will of the majority (see Aagaard Nøhr et al., 2025; Ballacci, 2025).

To equate terms such as representative, parliamentary, pluralistic, Western or election, voting, and popular participation with liberal democracy has become a commonplace only after the Second World War. In that context, both “liberal” and “democratic” lost the character of party labels that they had previously had and turned into rhetorically appreciative concepts. Nonetheless, both concepts have retained their controversial potential, and “liberal democrats” is still used as a party name at least in Britain (on the actual uses see Bonin, 2025).

The contributions to this thematic issue not only show that the mainstream reception of what liberal democracy is is an outcome of the selective reception of different traditions of thinking (see Yudin, 2025). They also indicate that and how (liberal) democracy is currently contested and challenged both as a concept and in political practice, and that there are different sites of these contestations and controversies.

A considerable number of controversies take place within liberal democratic institutions themselves. There are debates inside and outside parliaments and institutions about what (liberal) democracy is or is not, what its benefits and pitfalls are, and whether it is to be judged positively or not. We currently face a wave of political actors that claim democracy for their purposes (Haapala & Teruel, 2025)—even though what they claim is not classical liberal democracy (Smilova, 2025). Moreover, there are political actors and movements of all sides of the political spectrum that criticise (liberal) democracy or use the political protections and arenas of liberal democracy in order to combat democracy itself (Wiesner, 2025).

These activities are usually linked to (re)interpretations of the concept of democracy. One example would be to promote concepts such as “illiberal democracy” instead (Smilova, 2025). This concept and the way it is used by Viktor Orbán indicate that (liberal) democracy, both as a concept and practice, is in particular challenged by autocratic politicians and states, by democratic deconsolidation, and democratic backsliding, when governments destroy liberal democratic norms and institutions. Mostly, these politicians have come into power via the channels and institutions of liberal democracy itself. Their strategies are based on various ways of claiming ideational and political influence and putting forward their arguments in debates, i.e., on politicisation (see Wiesner, 2025).

All this also refers to the fact that giving things a name can be part of politics of naming—there are different and historical changing practices and claims for legitimisation related to naming (as discussed by Palonen, 2025). As argued by Palonen (2025) in this thematic issue, European integration after the Second World War has served to build a new supranational polity, with new spaces and occasions for debating democracy. In the new EU polity, the application of political concepts has been constantly controversial. This holds for the founding period (see Palonen, 2025), more recent past (see Wiesner, 2025), and the ongoing plans of the European Commission to regulate new challenges to democracy, for instance by AI and social media (Björk et al., 2025; Fink-Hafner, 2025). In a broader sense, the discussion on liberal democracy today is conducted on the different institutional levels of the EU system, for instance by opposing supranational to national institutions, parliamentarism to presidentialism, the availability and status of constitutional courts, and the effects of different electoral systems.

All in all, the key argument of our thematic issue is underlined by all contributions—(liberal) democracy has always been contested as a concept, and it is contested today. The issue assembles a selection of articles that illustrate key past and current debates on liberal democracy. Nonetheless, there are aspects that would merit being discussed in further studies. It would be equally relevant to update the debates on the different understandings and concepts of liberty, in particular the dispute between liberty from inference and liberty as independence, as now thoroughly discussed and defended by Skinner (2025). Whereas illiberal regimes are opposed to both concepts of liberty, inside liberal democracies the confrontation between the two concepts is less visible but present. It regards for example to the question whether human rights signify a limit to politics, as liberty from inference presupposes, or manifest the political liberty as independence of a free person. There is, accordingly, room for further conceptual discussion on both liberty and democracy.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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