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# The Representative Disconnect: Theoretical Frame and Empirical Dimensions

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## Abstract

Concepts such as ecology and disconnection are useful to provide a comprehensive response to the malaise of representative democracy. The article explains these concepts in relation to the interactive nature of democratic representation. It also identifies three analytical levels of the representative disconnect: governance, social intermediation, and the affective level. On the basis of this theoretical framework, the article maps an empirical phenomenology of the representative disconnect. A preliminary examination of data drawn from a survey of representative elites and the general public suggests that the pessimism permeating many interpretations of the crisis of representative democracy may be tempered by some empirical evidence. Negative attitudes persist; however, they do not necessarily preclude the possibility of renewed alignment among the actors operating within the representative ecology.

## Keywords

affective disconnect; governance; interactive representation; intermediation disconnect; representative disconnect; representative ecology

## 1. Introduction

For the past 60 years, a specter has haunted modern democracy—the crisis of representation. Given the persistence of the crisis, one is tempted to treat its specter with either despair or indifference. Crisis or no crisis, a term too often overused (see Koselleck, 2006), there is no denying that there is a general malaise in regimes of representative democracy. This was the starting point for our Horizon research project REDIRECT. In essence, we took the present situation to be characterized by both endogenous and exogenous "transformations" rather than a crisis, or collapse; and we used the idea of a "representative

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disconnect" as a heuristic tool to capture those transformations that tend to undermine the viability and legitimacy of democratic representation, but not necessarily the more structural changes, or evolutionary processes, requiring the necessary functional adjustments and adaptation of the political system. In this article, we provide a summary view of the theoretical framework of our analysis, and the mapping of the empirical dimensions of the disconnect.

## 2. Democracy and Representation

To understand the representative disconnect, we first need to make sense of representative democracy as a form of government. It is always difficult to provide a historical narrative of large socio-political processes. There are also multiple histories to be told. One of our assumptions is that *modern* representative democracy is a specific form of democratic governance, with its distinctive characteristics, which tends to combine the principles of democratic government with the institutional machinery of political representation. Indeed, these two aspects are often in tension, and the history of representative democracy is also a history of conflicts between elitist and egalitarian conceptions of such a compound. Moreover, while ancient democracy was very much limited in its extension and often denigrated, modern representative democracy gradually spread over a large number of states, making a strong claim for legitimacy on the basis of its congruence with ideals of liberty, equality, solidarity, and self-rule (albeit in ways that remain contested, and often exclusionary).

John Dunn has argued that the success of modern constitutional representative democracy is due less to the "appeal of its constitutive ideas" and more to its "practical viability" as a form of governing and subjugation of citizens to rule and order (Dunn, 1993, pp. 245–247). Such practical viability is the result of a "particular compound of economic, social and political arrangements" (Dunn, 1993, p. 246). If practical viability is important, we need to consider this compound of arrangements seriously, even though such arrangements are historically contingent. We can define this compound of aspects as the conditions for the socio-historical embeddedness of representative democracy. One important condition for modern representative democracy was the formation, from the early modern period to the start of the 20th century, of the modern nation-state, of its administrative and legal apparatus, and the constitutional separation between statehood and governing. The former ensured that the provision of order and solidarity within the community (state functions) could be distinguished from decisions about policies and the political direction of the community (governing functions). This made it possible for modern democratic politics to be a competitive activity, within a generally cooperative context. Such distinction also provided a stable constitutional context (the rules of the game) within which a "civilized" form of politics (ballot not bullet) could take place (Mastropaolo, 2023, pp. 74–75; Przeworski, 1999). Moreover, as a result of social struggles, the state as a national community became the instrument for extending solidarities beyond localities and across social groups, at the same time as widening the scope of citizenship rights, from civil and political to social, thus supporting a redistributive idea of social justice.

The development of autonomous forms of civil society was also an important basis for what Benjamin Constant called "the liberty of the moderns" (Constant, 1988); and, as suggested by Habermas (1962), this was the basis for the formation of the modern public sphere, a relatively free space for the diffusion and critical exchange of opinions and ideas. Both civil society and the public sphere are therefore conditions of and constitutive elements for the functioning of the system of political representation, and for political liberty at large.

Finally, industrialization and the capitalist economy greatly influenced the way in which representative democracy took shape in the modern developed countries, particularly Europe and the North Atlantic area. Despite its many controversial elements and social costs, the economic success associated with capitalist and market-based societies has been instrumental for the success and international appeal of the form of constitutional representative democracy and market-based economies operating in countries with higher levels of development in the 19th and 20th centuries. Economic prosperity and its various indexes have become central to the political stability of, as well as the political competition within, representative democracy as a political regime. The development of working-class politics and parties, and more generally of struggles for civil and working rights, have contributed to the democratization of politics. Their spill-over across society, classes, and other groups, particularly women's movements, has been instrumental to the universalization of the democratic franchise. On the other hand, industrialization and the consolidation of class interests have been crucial elements in shaping the forms and institutions of social and political representation, of parties, and of political ideologies, all of which have become central features of modern representative democracies, particularly throughout the 20th century (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

The social embeddedness of regimes of representative democracy (cf. also Merkel, 2004, 2019) is important for understanding how it originated and evolved, but remains a historically contingent factor, which does not necessarily characterize its principles, nor does it determine its modus operandi. Its institutional embeddedness, on the other hand, plays a more constitutive role in its functioning and legitimacy. Very often the institutional core of representative democracy is identified with elections and the electoral system (cf. Merkel, 2004). We suggest that, besides the electoral regime, there are other important institutional features that are required for modern representative democracy to function in ways that are both effective and legitimate. The REDIRECT analytic framework, therefore, takes the *institutional* embeddedness of representative democracy as comprising both elections and other institutional features like those identified by Manin (1997), namely: the autonomy of political judgement (exercised by representatives and the political system at large); the conditions required for the exercise of freedom of opinions and political competition; and the way in which public deliberation functions as a trial by discussion propaedeutic to decision-making. We go further, as suggested by Urbinati (2006), by including advocacy (also in the form of virtual and discursive representation) as another aspect of the system of democratic representation.

If we look at these constitutive features of the institutional system of democratic representation, we can reconstruct the legitimating principles on which they stand. First, the principle of authorization, traditionally embodied in regular elections. Second, the principle of relative autonomy of the political system from the more immediate social demands and construction of social interests and the advocacy and mediatory role played by political representation (cf. for instance Manin's emphasis (1997) on the independence of judgment of parliaments and parliamentarians, or more generally on the role that institutions and political parties have in mediating social interests and contributing to the formation of political opinion and judgement). Third, value pluralism and partisanship on which the competitive aspect of democratic representation rests. Fourth, the principle of deliberation as an essential legitimating moment for decision-making.

Although these principles underpin the institutions of representative democracy, many people question whether the latter arrangements remain effective means of legitimation. Do elections really work as moments of authorization and accountability? Do legislative assemblies express the unified will of the people and their common interests? Do modern mass media allow for fair, open, and deliberative public

discussion? These are not questions about the principles themselves, but about which institutional arrangements are fit for purpose, and whether the institutions and practices of representation meet the fundamental democratic criteria of inclusion and empowerment (Castiglione & Pollak, 2018). In other words, whether the governing functions of *who* governs, *how* they govern, and on *what* basis they govern follow inclusive, open, and empowering kinds of processes, free from the dominion of particular groups, individuals, or corporations.

## 3. A New Theory of Democratic Representation?

Social and institutional embeddedness are important to explain the conditions within which representative democracy works and how it functions. But they do not address the central question of what we mean by political representation and democratic self-government, and whether it is possible to reconcile them. These questions are philosophically and analytically complex. Here we offer a few suggestions on how to reconcile them, building on the revival of interest in representation in political theory over the last 20 years or so. Before that, work in political theory was more interested in alternative models of democracy, questioning the democratic nature of representation itself. More recently, political theorists have looked at political representation anew, rather than treating democratic representation as a second-best option to direct democracy. This is what we can call the "representative turn" in democratic theory (Castiglione & Pollak, 2018, p. 3; Näsström, 2011).

The first wave of reflection on the democratic quality of representation is associated with the re-evaluation of the idea of *descriptive* representation, which Pitkin (1967) conceptually identified, but also sidelined as something outside the central scope of political and democratic representation. For Pitkin, descriptive representation embodied a passive form of politics, therefore denying citizens' capacity for judgment, while establishing representation merely on the basis of their descriptive characteristics. Starting with the late 20th-century re-evaluation of identity politics, and with feminist critiques of politics, an idea emerged of democratic politics as a politics of presence (Phillips, 1998), in which descriptive representation could play an emancipatory role.

The other, more recent wave is partly connected to the emergence of the "constructivist" turn (Disch, 2019; Saward, 2010), which captures important aspects of how political representation operates. It emphasizes the artificiality of political constituencies, the entrepreneurial function of political representatives, and the way in which their "representative claims" (Saward, 2010) contribute to shaping the self-understanding of the represented. This fresh look at the meanings (including symbolic ones) and the mechanism of representation offers a more dynamic view of the relationships and the political processes that constitute political representation, while expanding the scope of political representation from formal to more informal settings (Castiglione & Warren, 2019).

More recently, there has also been the development of a more systemic view of representation, something not entirely new, but something shifting the emphasis of legitimacy from simple dyadic relationships, resting mainly on elections and parliaments, to a broader conception of the overall process of democratic representation. This broader conception rests on the idea that representation takes place through a complex web of institutions, relationships, practices, discourses, and the way they all acquire a *public* meaning. From such a perspective, representative democracy is not a form of government resting entirely on

formalized and state-centered mechanisms and institutions (e.g., elections, parliamentary assemblies, territorial constituencies, institutional division, and balance of power), but is something rooted in societal practices, activities, and expectations. This more systemic idea of democratic representation (Castiglione, 2020; Mansbridge, 2023; Rey, 2023) is gaining currency in the theoretical literature and is somehow connected with what has happened in discussions about systems of deliberative democracy (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012).

The intersection of state-based and societal, formal and informal representation is captured by Saward (2011), when he talks of the formal as the "comparatively *settled* world of representative practices in the state," while the informal is "the comparatively *unsettled* world of practices in civil society" (Saward, 2011, p. 74, emphasis in original). But the crucial point, as he also suggests, is that these two worlds are not simply living in parallel universes. Instead, they are interdependent, based on mutual exchanges, feed into each other, and often merge with one another. If representative democracy can be conceptualized as a series of interlocking processes that come to form the "institutional system" of representation, then democratic representation can be considered as the wider variety of societal practices of representation through which democratic demands and instances are given expression.

Given the intrinsic interconnection between the formal and the informal, the political and the social, we argue that we should understand democratic representation as a kind of ecology within which the institutional system of representative democracy operates. In other words, we should understand the societal and state-based processes of representation as interlocking aspects of an ecosystem. The interplay between these two areas provides the grounds for political trust and legitimacy in democratic societies. In order to understand how democratic representation works, it should be studied comprehensively by assessing how the more institutional parts of the representative system—legislative assemblies and other legislative powers, parties and the party system—interact with other processes, forms, and political agents operating within a broader representative ecology, which includes civil society and advocacy organizations, interest and professional groups, the old and new media, social movements, specialized discourses, and the knowledge and practices emerging from other institutions of the state and society at large. It is in the interaction between the institutionalized system of representative democracy and the representative ecology, that identities, discourses, and opinions are formed, mobilized, and made politically relevant and democratically legitimate.

## 4. The Representative Disconnect and Its Phenomenology

The previous sections have offered a comprehensive, though synthetic, view of the nature of modern representative democracy and of the ecology of democratic representation as more systemic and interactive kinds of processes. The image proposed here is at the level of ideal theory. No one expects that this is how representative democracy works in the real world. But it provides a useful model to judge whether and how the institutions and practices of democratic representation work in a way that may broadly satisfy two important criteria of collective self-government: fairly equal *inclusion* of the citizenry in the political life of the community, and their relative *empowerment* with respect to important collective decisions affecting their individual and communal lives. If the overall sense in the community is that there is neither general inclusion nor collective empowerment, *democratic* representation is not working. The present sense of malaise suggests as much.

So, what is the nature of what we have labelled the "representative disconnect"? By it we mean a multidimensional phenomenon of regression of the demos–kratos linkage involving institutional, behavioral, and affective components, which risks undermining the trust in and legitimacy of the overall system of democratic representation. By stressing the possible erosion of such linkage, we wish to emphasize the core features of democratic representation, which follow from the previous analysis. First, democratic representation involves an *interactive* conception of the relationship between citizens and their representatives. Without such a connection, political representation is not *representative*. Second, the linkage provided by democratic representation rests on the formation of a *governing capacity* of institutions and political representatives, receptive to the instances and perspectives of the citizenry, and accountable to them. Without a clear effect on governing, democratic representation is *hollow and ineffective*. Third, democratic representation involves both some *active and affective involvement* of the citizenry as well as their participation in the opinion formation and consent-building processes. Without such involvement, democratic representation is not *democratic*. It is from these three sets of processes that the interactive relation between citizens and political representatives can give rise to a broadly shared political judgement over the main political decisions made collectively.

The most obvious manifestation of the disconnect is, of course, the weakening of the intermediation links (institutions, processes, practices) between citizens and representatives. This is only one aspect of the disconnect, whose causes and manifestations are not exclusively located in processes of institutional and social *intermediation*, but also involve the *governance and accountability* dimension, and the *affective* dimension. These three dimensions are not entirely separate. The causes of the disconnect in each of them are often the result of the same kind of social, cultural, or institutional transformations. Moreover, one dimension of the disconnect can also be affected by changes in another dimension. Despite such close interrelation, we can analytically distinguish them and analyze them separately. Here we can only summarily indicate the headlines of a phenomenology of the disconnect across these three dimensions.

### *4.1. The Intermediation Disconnect*

As already suggested, the process of political intermediation functional to democratic representation involves a more institutionalized system (elections, parliaments, other representative institutions, and parties), as well as a more general ecology (involving social and opinion formation institutions, organizations, and other moments of aggregation and mobilization). It is widely recognized that, in 20th-century democracy, parties play the central role in this intermediation process, or what Peter Mair has called the "zone of engagement" of modern representative democracy (Mair, 2013, p. 16). Historically, this central role was based on the position of parties at the intersection of institutional politics and civil society. The gradual move of parties from such intermediate position to becoming more clearly part of the institutional machinery has meant a shift to more instrumental logics of power, and the weakening of parties' socializing and expressive functions. The reasons are both endogenous (internal transformation of parties, like the emergence of "cartel parties," and the increasing professionalization of party machinery) and exogenous (like the social detachment of parties, or the increasing technical complexity of political decisions and their scaling up) to parties and party systems. As a result, political trust in parties and politicians has been dramatically eroded. In the case of elections and parliaments, the main cause of the disconnect is the sense that these institutions have lost their effectiveness as instruments of political action (elections) or as places of real governance (parliaments), partly as a result of the rescaling of politics. Finally, dramatic changes in the

media and communication systems, as well as the re-organization of work across productive and service sectors in the economy, have impacted the relationship between civil society and the political system. These changes have increased inequalities between different groups in their access to social and political forms of intermediation and representations of their interests and grievances. Social and political representation has also become more individualist and less based on forms of collective involvement and mobilization.

### *4.2. The Governance and Accountability Disconnect*

From a governance perspective, the most obvious disconnect follows from two interlocking processes: On the one hand, representative institutions have gradually lost effective power (Merkel, 2004); on the other, there has been an increasing process of insulation of politicians as they have become part of the social elite (Mair, 2013). Paradoxically, this process has gone hand in glove with the "personalization" of politics, which seems to establish a more immediate relation between politicians and citizens, but in reality constructs an entirely artificial relationship between citizens as "spectators" and politicians as symbols or "celebrities," and not as other citizens whose role is that of governing.

Moreover, the waning power of directly representative institutions changes the architectonic principles on which representative government historically and conceptually rests, providing opportunities for indirect and less democratically controllable institutions to gradually seize power of legislation. This process too often results in either distrust or apathy towards representative politics. Social insulation of the high echelon of politicians can also increase this sense of distrust, fomenting anti-political sentiments. More generally, the rescaling of political decision-making towards supranational institutions or private and corporate powers results in the "hollowing out" of democratic politics, as Mair (2013) characterizes it.

### *4.3. The Affective Disconnect*

The final dimension of the representative disconnect is what we call the "affective disconnect." This comprises practical and emotional detachment from politics, because it is considered neither important nor having any effect; in some cases, because it is regarded as unfair and a sham. In representative democracies, the disaffection with politics in general takes the specific form of disaffection with representative democracy specifically, as in the early decades of the 20th century, criticism of democracy and its parliamentary form combined. Since the start of the 21st century, the affective disconnect has manifested itself through diffuse feelings of rejection and resentment against politicians and the political world. In a sense, none of this is new. Detachment from politics has often been seen as apathy. Rejection of politics has traditionally been characterized as anti-politics. Both of them have been seen as a deficit on the citizenry's side, whether from a rational or a moral perspective. Looking at these phenomena as an *affective*, and not simply rational-moral, form of disconnect presents two novelties. From a more methodological and analytical perspective, it offers better instruments to understand political participation and involvement not simply as the result of either rational calculation or moral obligations, but as the product of a combination of reasons, emotions, and identification processes involving both citizens and elites and the relations between them. From a more substantive perspective, it enables closer consideration of the life experiences (the interconnection between political and life-world experiences) that may cause the increasingly negative and emotionally loaded attitudes (such as resentment, hate, deep mistrust) towards politics and politicians (Knops et al., 2024). Indirectly, this is also shown by the fact that people do not necessarily reject social activism but are

distrustful of political activism in particular. More generally, the growing affective disconnect can be read in two distinct but complementary ways. The first points to a disconnection between citizens and political representatives at an affective level: an emotional gap between them, between different ways of living the experience of democratic representation, or an incapacity of these two groups to connect emotionally. The second way suggests that the traditional languages and practices of democratic representation, more centered around formal institutions and the electoral process, tend to miss the significance of the affective dimension in politics. In either version, the affective disconnect raises the question of whether the current malaise with democratic representation comes from a dissatisfaction with politics itself and with its practices rather than mere apathy or rejection of collective ways of dealing with social problems. This is particularly relevant when considering the widespread impact of the current digital revolution and how this is affecting not only how we communicate but how we live in society: how the digital revolution affects citizens both in their active capacity, as part of the sovereign power, and in their passive capacity as individual rights-holding subjects in a democratic society. That democratic citizenship is threatened both as a political and a social status is central to the affective disconnect.

## 5. Translating the Framework Into an Empirical Dimensional Map

Having defined the theoretical framework of the representative disconnect, we now describe the indicators that the REDIRECT project has employed to explore its various empirical dimensions and to provide an overall picture of the phenomenon. Many of these indicators are already present in the comparative literature. However, the project's added value lies in overcoming the compartmentalization that characterizes specific fields of inquiry—such as electoral systems, political participation, democratic quality, and party politics—to provide a systematic assessment of the forms of disconnect currently affecting the representative ecology.

The research developed within the project (which included two surveys conducted on representative samples of public opinion and elected representatives in eight European countries) sought to measure the evidence of democratic disconnection corresponding to the three dimensions outlined above. The defining feature of these surveys was to combine at a systemic level—the level of representative ecology—the measurement of a plurality of indicators relating to different aspects of the democratic disconnection, seeking as far as possible to control its magnitude in both the attitudes of the public and the political elite.

Figure 1 illustrates how a multitude of concepts developed in the literature have been included in REDIRECT's multidimensional space of the representative ecology, translating them into a set of concrete indicators. A wide range of propositions concerning the factors that may indicate the causes of a marked disconnect across the three dimensions analyzed here can be tested through the analysis of data derived from the two surveys of citizens and elected representatives. The two surveys consist of CAWI interviews on public opinion and members of national and regional parliaments, fielded during 2025 across eight countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, and the United Kingdom. The mass survey, conducted in collaboration with a professional pollster, reached a fully representative target in terms of national representation, gender, and generational distribution, while the elite survey achieved a more modest overall response rate, although in line with recent similar studies. (The use of emails for surveys of politicians is in line with the literature, i.e., Butler, 2014. The final sampling frame consisted of about 8,000 subjects in total. For all the details, see Verzichelli et al., 2025.)

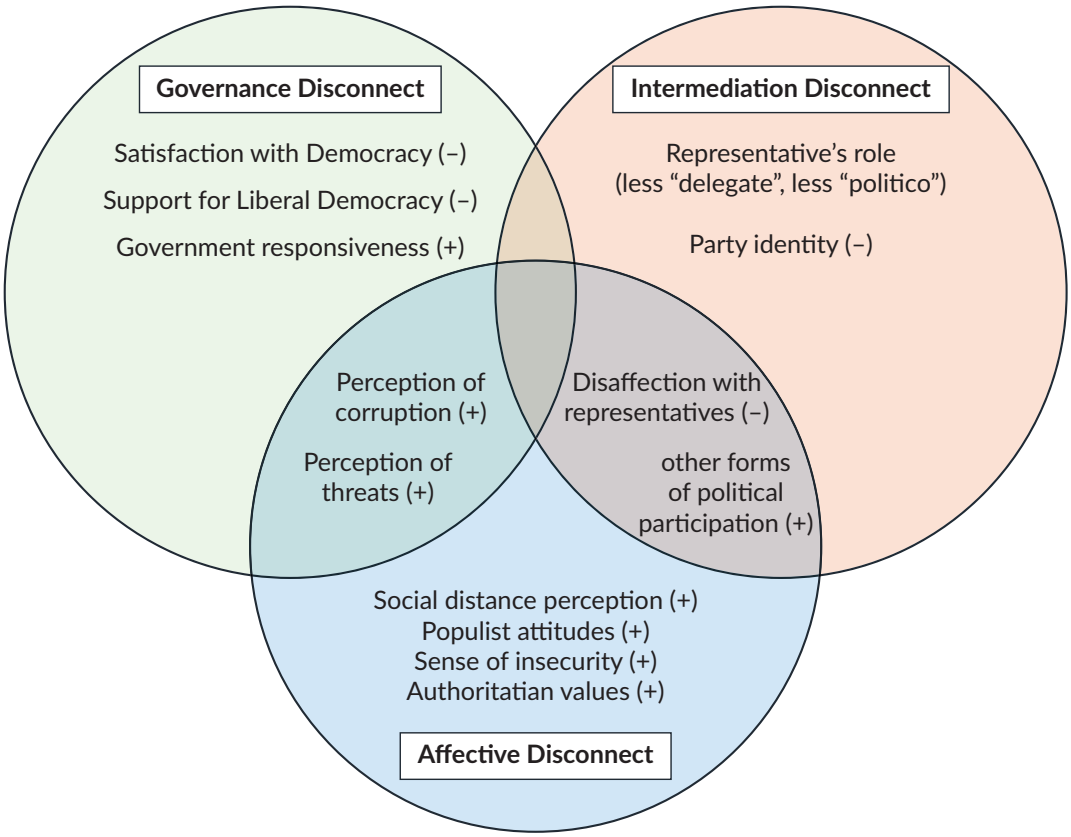



**Figure 1.** Dimensions of disconnect and empirical propositions.

The dimensions presented in Figure 1 encompass the key indicators for the empirical analysis of representative disconnect, many of which are examined in greater detail in other contributions included in this thematic issue. In some cases, we used sets of questions that were already present and widely used with success in the literature. In other cases, we identified new themes or adapted measures developed in the vast body of recent research on democratic backsliding, populism, and the crisis of representative democracy. For exposition purposes, we discuss the disconnects starting from the "governance disconnect," which in the more theoretical section we have associated with issues of accountability, but which, from an empirical perspective, is more difficult to identify with precision.

### *5.1. The Governance Disconnect*

The dimension here defined as *governance disconnect* is closely linked to the well-established concept of satisfaction with democracy, typically accompanied by a high level of support for liberal (representative) democracy. Therefore, both our datasets included the traditional question about democratic satisfaction (at the country level) and a set of questions measuring the support for the liberal vision of democracy (Claassen et al., 2024). Our proposition is based on the expectation of a relatively low level of satisfaction and support, particularly at the level of public opinion, which we know has long been sensitive to democratic disaffection (Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016). The indicator "support for liberal democracy" also includes the traditional questions on general attitudes of trust towards political institutions and, in particular, trust in the legislatures—which become the sacrificial victims of the decline in the quality of traditional democracies (Tormey, 2015). On the contrary, and in line with Mair's (2013) analysis, the perception of governance

disconnect is positively associated with the idea that democratic governments tend to be *responsive but not responsible* (this attitude is measured by a question posed both to elites and public opinions).

Mair's (2013) idea of a gradual reduction of a "zone of engagement" of party elites, and their consequent renunciation of a responsible use of the powers of public decision-makers, typically associated with the populist claims, may determine other kinds of attitudes we can control thanks to our datasets; for instance, support for the idea of a technocratic government (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020) and the legitimation of non-partisan or independent ministers (Costa Pinto et al., 2018; Emanuele et al., 2023). But we also consider other conjectures, that we can test using other questions/variables: the perception of a pervasive state of corruption in the governance system and that of a series of dangerous threats to a democracy that is still experienced as a structurally fragile entity. These perceptions, however, should be linked to the expectations of a different type of democratic governance and to a growing disconnect in the affective sphere.

### *5.2. The Intermediation Disconnect*

The indicators we used to explore the level of *disconnection from intermediation* also draw on a consolidated literature. For instance, the REDIRECT dataset allows us to explore the gap of congruence between the expectations of the political elite and the orientation of public opinion—a traditional problem of democratic representation (Lefkofridi, 2020) that has recently reached a critical level, especially due to the complexity of some issues, such as immigration (Pareschi et al., 2023). Moreover, the datasets include questions about the perceptions of the level of polarization reached in the whole society on salient policy issues (i.e., immigration, environment, role of NATO, redistribution, European integration; see Verzichelli et al., 2025, for the details), a phenomenon that the literature explains in terms of growing public perception of distance between "winners" and "losers" of the current historical conjuncture (Kriesi, 2025).

However, in this exploratory exercise, we employ another set of indicators from the REDIRECT datasets, aimed at capturing the representative disconnect at the level of social and political intermediation. These questions address the growing perception of representation as increasingly grounded in an individualistic focus and, at the same time, in a representative locus that has moved away from collective forms of mediation—following the decline of mass and class-based parties, as well as parties structured around deeply rooted value cleavages—in favor of forms of micro-territorial representation or highly specific functional constituencies, such as interest groups and professional organizations. These phenomena are reflected in the significant change in the classic concept of the representative role (Verzichelli, 2020). In particular, there appears to be a tendency to conceive representation in a way that goes beyond the classic model of the legislator as a "delegate," observing, in particular, the decline of delegation as understood according to the "political" model established with the mass integration parties of the 20th century.

Another key indicator in measuring disconnection within this dimension is the strength of party identification. In this case, since it was not possible to ask citizens and representatives the same question, we compared the level of party identity across two different items: one addressed to elected representatives, asking them how important it is to act on behalf of their party, and another directed at citizens, asking more simply, "How attached do you feel to the party you voted for?"

Two further, slightly different, couples of questions asked to citizens and representatives complete the set of indicators on the intermediation disconnect. The first measures the predisposition towards "other forms of political participation," assuming the commitment of the respondent to some kind of political intermediation. The second explores the opinions on the "declining reputation of politicians," thus measuring the overall sense of current disaffection toward representatives. However, these indicators also affect the emotional and affective sphere of the macro-phenomenon studied here. Of course, this last conjecture is linked to the general implication—that of the weakening of party identification *at large*—studied by a host of comparative works in recent decades, which has led to rethinking the elite selection functions of the parties themselves, in order to strengthen the relationship between these actors and contemporary democracy (Poguntke & Hofmeister, 2024).

### *5.3. The Affective Disconnect*

By introducing the questions on corruption and threats (speaking to the governance disconnect) and those on the declining reputation of political representatives (speaking to the intermediation disconnect), we have thus entered the affective sphere of disconnection, which presents other interesting sub-dimensions to be transformed into empirical propositions and then into indicators.

The expectation of a significant presence of (negative) emotions and political disaffection towards democratic institutions and values is obviously at the heart of this dimension. This is the strongest conjecture associated with this analytical dimension and, at least for the political elites, the most unlikely: the justification of authoritarian values now seen as "salvific," or at least as an acceptable price to pay for preserving competitiveness and prosperity in advanced political systems.

A couple of questions about the sense of insecurity—a specific question about social insecurity asked to citizens, and a more general question about the effectiveness of a threat of insecurity asked to the representatives—are also included among the indicators of this dimension, where we have included the expectations regarding the appeal of attitudes associated with the populist "thin ideology" (Mudde & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2017) and, consequently, with anti-elitist orientations that are at odds with the logic of representative democracy. In the REDIRECT datasets, these attitudes are measured through a range of indicators that have been previously validated in other studies and are designed to assess levels of populism among both political actors and voters (we used a reduced version of Akkerman's scale, Akkerman et al., 2013).

Finally, we included in the analysis of affective disconnection the data gathered thanks to the set of questions on "social distance" which ask the respondents how comfortable they feel in a series of situations of interaction with people with different political attitudes.

## 6. A Preliminary Picture of Representative Disconnection

Let us complete the work of linking the theoretical framework we have used to study representative disconnection with the empirical analysis we can pursue thanks to the elite and mass surveys conducted as part of the REDIRECT project. This is, of course, an ambitious but exploratory exercise. The analysis is limited to the descriptive examination of a series of distributions, without undertaking multivariate analyses or introducing bivariate controls for nationality and the main sociodemographic variables. The primary

purpose of this exercise is to provide a map of the regularities emerging across the many indicators of representative disconnection, thereby helping to refine the tools of empirical analysis and identify the main challenges that such an analysis entails.

Figure 2 provides a synthetic representation of the positioning of the two groups of respondents across a set of scales including the indicators described above and referring to the three dimensions of representative disconnect. The radar chart summarizes several attitudinal measurement scales, reoriented so that the value of 10 represents the highest potential level of "disconnect" for each dimension. Consequently, the value 0 would represent the ideal perfect balance of respondents within the representative ecology.

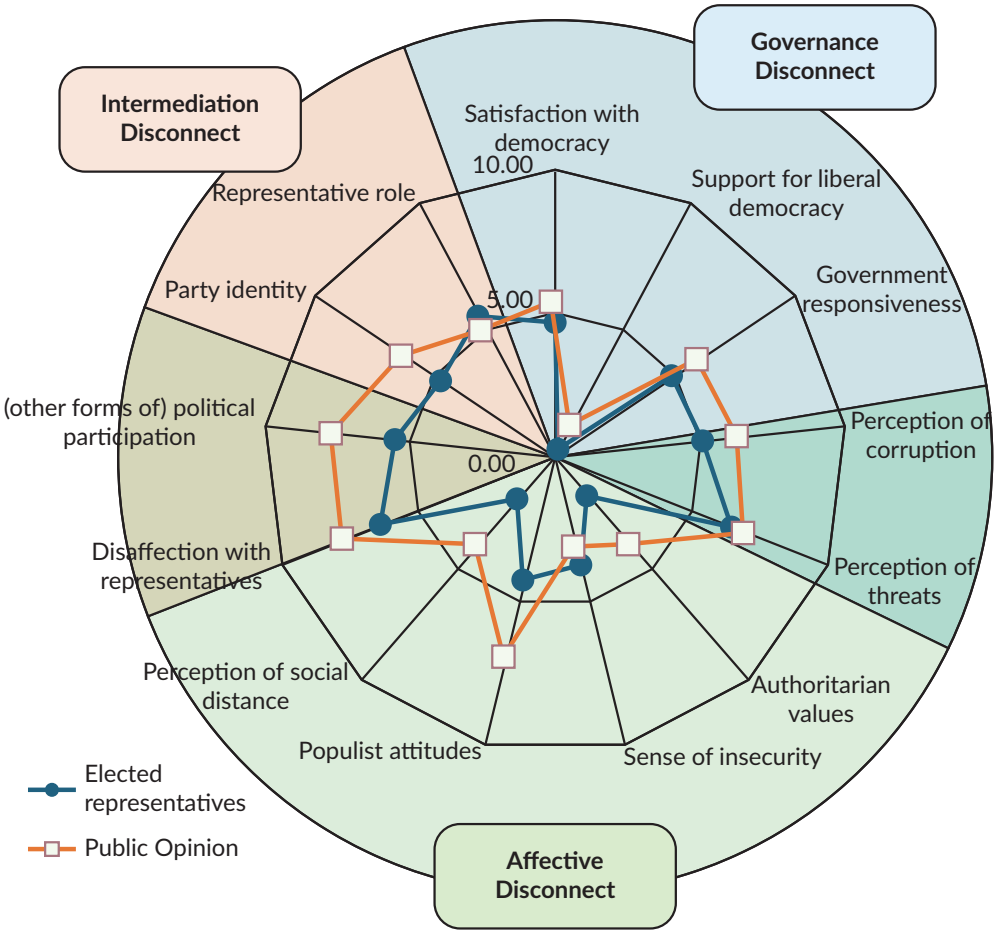



**Figure 2.** A sketch of representative disconnection.

Overall, a fairly uniform pattern of disconnection emerges in both sets of actors surveyed, although it is clear that the public is more affected than the elites. Only in two of the 13 indicators summarized in the figure does the average score found in the sample of elected representatives turn out to be higher (and therefore more "disconnected" from the idea of representative democracy), showing the same trend observed at the mass level. In general, the two sets of actors share a similar orientation. On closer inspection, however, it is possible to find important differences, especially in the indicators that deal with the emotional sphere of democratic disconnection. Let us resume the most significant elements of variance following the same sequence among the three dimensions analyzed above.

Support for democracy and other indicators related to governance show a consistent trend, even if the intensity of the deviation from the ideal point of balance in representative ecology is quite different between one indicator and another. The question regarding support for liberal democracy finds a high response in both groups, but clearly more pronounced among elected representatives than among the public (the difference in terms of support is 0.82). This is not a disagreement on the democratic principle—both scores are clearly in the high range—but rather a stronger normative attachment on the part of representatives, who are close to perfect support. The central interpretation is therefore one of shared democratic commitment, although more pronounced within the elite. With regard to the democratic principle that the opinions of ordinary people should prevail over those of the political elite, however, there is a significant difference: While the public scores significantly high (7.69), the score of elected representatives is much closer to the midpoint (5.47, with a difference of 2.22 points), indicating that citizens attach much greater weight to a conception of democracy centered on the people and, therefore, critical of elites. This is one of the clearest signs of substantive divergence in the democratic imagination.

More evident is the public's discomfort with the attitudes of elected officials, particularly when respondents are asked to express their views on democracy in their own country and on the need for governments to be (more) responsive. The public average exceeds the midpoint of the 0–10 scale, which in this exploratory exercise is taken as the critical threshold of disconnection. Perceptions of corruption and the average assessment of a few issues presented to respondents as potential threats to democracy also show a similar pattern: Both the representative elite and (especially) the public are, on average, above the midpoint of the scale. In particular, with regard to the perception of corruption, the public reports higher levels than elected officials (6.44 versus 5.24). In substantive terms, this suggests that corruption is perceived as a more serious or salient problem among citizens, consistent with broader patterns of dissatisfaction and distrust. However, this comparison should also be interpreted with caution, as the measure for elected officials is derived from a cumulative proportion (reported on an equivalent 0–10 scale), while the public data are a direct average.

When analyzing the indicators of disconnection at the level of intermediation, we can use the indicator relating to different forms and understandings (trustee vs. party-delegate) of representation. The question asked whether representatives should follow their own judgement or align themselves with party voters when the two positions conflict. On this question, both groups are close to the midpoint of the scale, indicating a mixed conception of representation rather than a purely delegated or purely trustee model. Not surprisingly, elected representatives are (slightly) more oriented towards the trustee model (5.57 vs. 5.09). This is a modest but significant difference: Representatives seem slightly more comfortable with independent judgement, while citizens do not strongly demand strict obedience to voters' preferences.

The different model, in line with the image of a more "disconnected" public, emerges when we analyze distrust in political parties. Here, elected representatives score significantly lower than the public (5.33 vs. 3.69). The data highlight how the public ends up in the upper half of the scale, well beyond the critical point of disconnection. This is a substantial and politically relevant gap: Representatives still maintain evident, albeit fragile, trust in party organizations, while citizens do not share this attitude.

A similar picture emerges when we analyze two other indicators that are certainly related to the sphere of intermediation, even though they are also included in the affective dimension of our scheme: These are the responses to the question of whether citizens should have the opportunity to validate or contribute to the

most important political decisions through referendums, and the more general question, included in the set of indicators of populism, which asked for a degree of agreement with the statement, "The views of ordinary people should prevail over those of politicians." As expected, the public's position appears to be more pronounced towards the maximum potential point of disconnection than that of the elite, a fact that is nevertheless rather concerning.

Coming to the other indicators of the affective dimension, the comparison between the two items that we identified as measures of the sense of insecurity shows a moderate numerical difference (3.82 for the elite versus 3.10 for the public), with both values in the lower half of the scale (and therefore less exposed to "disconnection"). This indicator is one of the two exceptions to the general model, which sees the public as consistently feeling a greater sense of disconnection than the representatives do. However, the comparison should be treated with caution, as the two measures are not conceptually equivalent: The first captures a specific attitudinal position on immigration, while the second aggregates broader perceptions of insecurity and social vulnerability.

One of the most significant differences highlighted by this exercise, in comparing the attitudes of the public and elites, concerns the attitudes relating to the populism scale. Public opinion scores significantly higher than elected representatives (7.03 versus 4.29). This is a very large gap.The score of elected officials is in the middle range, while that of the public is clearly high, indicating much stronger support among citizens for populist frameworks and claims. In substantive terms, this signals a significant divergence in the political worldview and is probably one of the strongest indicator of the tension between the representative vision of the voters and that of politicians.

A related item—concerning the affective as well as the intermediation dimension of the disconnect—is the support for democratic representation, provided by the answer to a direct question about the importance of being represented. Once again, the disaffection among the ordinary people is higher than that expressed by the political elite, albeit with a smaller gap in comparison to the populism scale. Both groups give this principle a relatively high score, which is important: There is no disagreement that popular opinions matter in democracy. The difference concerns the relative weight given to the principle of representation.

As for the assessment of authoritarian/technocratic alternatives to representative democracy (government by a strong leader not bound by parliament and elections, government by experts, government by the military), elected officials score very low, while the public scores higher but still below the midpoint (3.94 vs. 1.75). On average, both groups are more opposed than in favor of such alternatives, even though representatives are much more critical of them. This is substantively relevant, as it suggests that, although support for non-democratic options among citizens is not high, the public still appears to be significantly more open to them than elected officials.

Overall, the model suggests that elected representatives tend to be more institutionally anchored (more oriented towards the rule of law, more trusting of parties, more strongly opposed to authoritarian alternatives, and slightly more oriented towards the trustee model), while the public attaches greater importance to popular primacy and anti-elite claims (higher populism, greater emphasis on the prevalence of ordinary people over elites, higher perception of corruption, and less trust in parties). The indicators associated with the affective dimension generally appear to display a lower magnitude of disconnect.

However, this may be explained by the greater use of negative emotions, as opposed to more familiar positive expressions—such as trust, identity, or pride—which are central to the indicators employed for the other two dimensions.

At the same time, both groups share a strong commitment to democracy and a high perception of the main threats. The central conclusion is therefore not one of simple disconnection, but rather of different normative equilibria within a broadly shared democratic terrain.

## 7. Conclusion: Crisis or Fragility of Representative Politics?

Although more theoretical and empirical work is needed to assess the extent of the representative disconnect, something can be said at this preliminary stage. As expected, the present discontent seems more pronounced among the public than among elected representatives. This might be interpreted in the image of a half full/half empty glass, and therefore of either moderate optimism or moderate pessimism.

On the side of moderate optimism, it would seem that neither the representatives nor the represented have given up on the basic idea that democratic representation is a legitimate and generally preferred form of governance. As argued by Tormey (2015), the politics of representation is under considerable strain, politicians are distrusted, and there is increasing dissatisfaction with party politics; but there is also a widespread conviction that there is no real democratic alternative to the politics of representation. Although there are signs of a move towards what Manin (1997) calls "audience democracy," such transformation seems to be more apparent than real—a change in the way in which politics is perceived, rather than a change to how politics effectively works, or to affective links to political ideas and action. In other words, representative politics does not seem to be in terminal crisis.

On the side of moderate pessimism, democratic representation does not appear to be in a healthy state. As Pitkin (1967) suggested, democratic representation is a "fragile institution." The current social transformations are further testing such fragility, and it is likely that, without a revitalized ecosystem, democratic representation may eventually become dysfunctional, losing citizens' trust and support.

In the short and medium term, the more likely scenario is that of fluctuating phases. A return to higher levels of interactive participation is possible—indeed necessary—for the preservation of democracy. But democracy without forms of intermediation and representation is unlikely. Representative institutions and networks of intermediation are essential to democratic forms of government in modern society. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the reconnection of the fabric of democratic representation can happen without some contribution from political parties. Parties are like the *convitato di pietra* (the stone guest) in the banquet of 21st democracy. If they are ignored as an unwelcomed guest, like the stone guest in the final scene of Don Juan, they will eventually bring the democratic *libertino* to its downfall.

For too long, political theory has ignored political parties in the analysis of democracy, apart from the recent attention given to partisanship (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2020; White & Ypi, 2016). For its part, empirical research has lacked imagination in its analysis of what has gone wrong with party politics. Repairing the representative disconnect must involve a redefinition of political parties' role in democratic political intermediation.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

REDIRECT survey data are not publicly available at this time due to an embargo period. However, all replication materials, including coding scripts and model specifications, are publicly available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/8F9DE and can be applied to the survey dataset once it is released online at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EDM75 (upon completion of the project and, in any case, no earlier than 31 January 2027).

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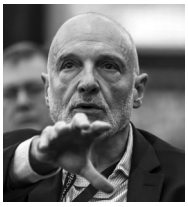
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