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The Centrality of Voting in Democracy: The Plebiscitarian Origins of the Idea

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Abstract

Democracy is often equated with voting, an assumption shared by many defenders, reformers, and critics of liberal democracy. This article explores the origins of the idea of the centrality of voting in democracy, arguing that current thinking about liberal democracy is heavily influenced by a nearly forgotten tradition of plebiscitary democracy. Originally conceived with a reverence for personalist leadership, this tradition sought to tame democracy. The article outlines three key stages in the development of the plebiscitary theory of voting. In the 19th century, the Bonapartist regime in France embraced the expansion of suffrage as a means to solidify monarchical power through popular acclamations. In the interwar period, thinkers such as Max Weber and Carl Schmitt, reflecting on the American and French mass voting experiences, developed a plebiscitary interpretation of voting and suggested a normative justification for a synthesis of democracy and monarchy. Later, plebiscitary theory influenced political science and its techniques for measuring democracy, notably through Joseph Schumpeter's minimalist view, which, as argued here, was shaped by plebiscitarian intuitions. The focus on elections and plebiscites is unlikely to revive democracy; instead, it may pave the way for powerful monarchical leaders who claim to rely on popular will.

Keywords

Bonapartism; Carl Schmitt; elections; Joseph Schumpeter; Max Weber; plebiscitary democracy; voting

1. Introduction

"Democracy is on the ballot"—this slogan is being echoed with increasing frequency from all sides today, as liberal democracy faces growing challenges. The formula implies an intrinsic and reflexive connection between democracy and voting, suggesting that the fate of democracy is being determined in the most democratic

way possible. It also conveys a more troubling idea: that democracy itself has the capacity to commit suicide. However, by identifying democracy with voting, it defines the essence of the regime: The ballot *is* democracy, and democracy *is* the ballot.

Both advocates and critics of democracy largely share the assumption that voting is central to the idea of democracy. As Richard Katz states in the opening line of his influential monograph on the subject, "Elections are the defining institutions of modern democracy" (Katz, 1997, p. 3). While it is widely acknowledged that voting alone does not encompass the entirety of democratic life (Schedler, 2002; Schmitter & Karl, 1991), the association between democracy and voting has become so entrenched in both popular parlance and in academic discourse that the conceptual centrality of voting often risks reducing democracy to the mere holding of free and fair elections.

Often, defenders, reformers, and critics of liberal democracy are aligned in their emphasis on the centrality of voting. Among defenders, the language of comparative politics tends to dominate, framing "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016) as the primary threat, typically understood as a diminishing likelihood of achieving transition of power through elections. Various democracy indices are used as empirical evidence to support the claims of backsliding, with these indices themselves placing heavy emphasis on elections as the key measure of democracy (Högström, 2013).

While defenders of liberal democracy prioritize elections, many reformers advocate for plebiscites, arguing that increasing the use of voting on issues—rather than on candidates—would curb the excessive power of representatives and foster "direct democracy" (Qvortrup, 2017). Political theory has largely focused on designing democratic institutions for more effective deliberation or sortition, but there is a growing wave of various plebiscitary innovations centered on direct voting (Hendriks, 2023). The call for the democratization of democracy is often framed as a need to replace or supplement one form of voting with another. Political leaders demanding "democratization," understood as more frequent popular voting, come from across the political spectrum: from Italy's Five Star Movement to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, from the Spanish Indignados to Germany's Alternative for Germany party. Despite their differing ideologies, these groups share a common promise to repair democracy through more voting. In the United States, there is considerable support for an initiative to introduce national referenda into the Constitution: According to polls (which themselves serve as a way to gauge popular will), this idea is consistently supported by two-thirds of Americans (Smith et al., 2010).

Critics of democracy from realist positions, in turn, focus on the unreliability of voting as a mechanism for decision-making. In their gloomy verdict on contemporary democratic aspirations, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels target "the central mechanism in the folk theory of democracy, elections" (Achen & Bartels, 2017, p. 317). While political science has extensively discussed the limitations of voting as the sole determinant of democracy, elections continue to be seen as its defining feature. As comparative political scientist Gerardo Munck observes, "Though proposals to overcome the limitations of a minimal, electoral definition of democracy abound, little progress has been made in following through on this statement by providing a clear alternative" (Munck, 2016, p. 1).

It is worth asking how we arrived at this point. How did popular thinking about democracy become so focused on voting? How did it come to dominate the democratic imagination? After all, voting was not central to the

classical concept of democracy. Aristotle (1995, pp. 174–175) famously described elections as oligarchical or aristocratic, rather than democratic institutions. While voting on issues was indeed a part of routine in the Athenian ecclesia, it was only one aspect, far less central than sortition, rotation, or active participation in deliberation (Hansen, 2016, p. 43). So why, then, did contemporary discourse on democracy become so centered on voting, whether in elections or referenda?

This article will address this question through the lens of intellectual history, arguing that today's mainstream conception of democracy has been profoundly shaped by an intellectual tradition that had compelling reasons to foreground voting. This tradition is the theory of plebiscitary democracy, a strand of political thought that flourished during the interwar period. Several thinkers contributed to the rise of this approach. While most of them combined plebiscitarian insights with other perspectives, the plebiscitarian view of democracy endorsed in their work can be identified as a distinct and influential intellectual current (Green, 2010; Pakulski & Körösényi, 2012). Although it later seemed to fade from prominence, it actually retained a powerful subterranean influence and continues to shape contemporary democratic imagination. I will argue that this tradition sought to tame democracy, and that the centrality of voting was viewed as a crucial element of the plebiscitarian strategy.

The argument presented here suggests that the emphasis on protecting and expanding voting may be part of the problem facing today's democracy, rather than a solution to its challenges, as it preserves the legacy of a political imagination that has historically sought to distance the people from power. In this sense, the article aligns with the growing body of literature that questions the value of voting for democracy. Some of this literature critiques elections, drawing on Bernard Manin's influential book (Manin, 1997), and advocates for a broader use of sortition (Guerrero, 2024; van Reybrouck, 2016). While Manin views contemporary elections as a continuation of the aristocratic tradition of selecting the best, this article suggests that the centrality of voting for contemporary democratic imagination largely reflects a heritage of plebiscitarian thinking, which was originally designed to instrumentalize the extension of universal franchise—often referred to as "democratization"—to further entrench monarchical rule.

Another strand of critical studies targets the purely aggregative logic of voting. Proponents of deliberative democracy have long emphasized the importance of prioritizing critical-rational discussion as the foundation of democratic life (Cohen, 2012). Despite the prominence of the deliberative approach in political theory, it often struggles to change institutional design in contemporary politics, partly due to the entrenched and widespread belief in voting as central to democracy. Nadia Urbinati highlights how the election-centered conception of democracy in minimalist theories—and their plebiscitarian radicalizations—limits the creative potential of democratic representation (Urbinati, 2006, 2014, Chapter 4). While proponents of these approaches differ in various ways, they share a common skepticism about equating democracy with voting. However, they rarely investigate how this identification came to be.

This article will be organized as follows. First, I will examine how voting became central to legitimizing monarchical rule in the Bonapartist regime in France. In an era when masses were entering the political arena through the rapid extension of voting rights, particularly in the United States and France, the Bonapartists were the first to recognize that the "democratization" of franchise could strengthen electoral monarchy, provided that democratic participation was effectively reduced to mere acclamation. Second, I will explore how voting was given a central place in democratic theory by the advocates of plebiscitary

democracy during the interwar period. I will highlight two key contributions from plebiscitarian thinkers: first, the concept of a deliberately crafted synthetic regime that strengthens itself by combining democratic and monarchical elements, and second, the understanding of voting as acclamation, a framework that can be applied equally to both elections and referenda. In the next section, I will demonstrate how plebiscitarian views influenced the dominant understanding of democracy, which is associated with the minimalist theory. Joseph Schumpeter will be presented as a key connection, both for his sympathies for plebiscitary rule and for his immense influence on subsequent empirical comparative studies and the democracy indices they popularized. Finally, I will draw several conclusions about the importance of disentangling democracy from plebiscitarianism in order to unblock our democratic imagination and prevent the further rise of plebiscitarianism, especially as conditions may become more favorable for it.

2. The Birth of Bonapartism from Universal Suffrage

The 19th century marked a pivotal moment in the history of democracy. A form of government once widely despised gained legitimacy within a few decades, eventually achieving the hegemonic status it still holds today. However, this transformation came at a considerable cost: In order to ascend to the throne of political regimes, the democratic Cinderella had to lose much of its revolutionary claim for political self-government. It became instead associated with the ideal of social equalization, culminating in the pursuit of equality of rights (Rosanvallon, 1995).

The rise of democracy became closely linked with the concept of democratization, understood as the extension of voting rights. This would become the central political battlefield for nearly 100 years. Although projects of extending the right to vote to the whole adult population emerged during the French Revolution, the real struggle began later and culminated in the achievement of nearly universal suffrage across most European countries after World War I, with notable exceptions such as Switzerland or Liechtenstein. The United States and France were the first large republics in the 19th century to grant nearly universal manhood suffrage, and their respective experiences—most notably connected by Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal analysis—greatly influenced theoretical thinking on mass democracy.

The American case warrants special attention as it highlights the connection between the extension of franchise and the gradual reclamation of the term "democracy." In the aftermath of the contentious 1824 campaign, which saw John Quincy Adams elected as the sixth president through a questionable procedure of contingent election in the House of Representatives, the United States introduced many practices and technologies that would shape contemporary democratic politics. The subsequent election marked a dramatic expansion of the electorate, with 23 out of 25 states holding a popular vote. The masses quickly moved to the forefront of political competition, and the ability to mobilize the popular vote became a vital political skill. Martin van Buren, Andrew Jackson's political strategist and future successor as the eighth president, earned the nickname "Little Magician" for knowing how to harness this new political force. "Political machines," as they were known in America, emerged to organize the masses for elections. These powerful, multi-layered structures were based on patronage and innovative techniques of cajoling the newly enfranchised electorate. Having secured the extension of suffrage in his home state of New York, where he established his first machine, the famous Albany Regency, van Buren played a pivotal role in promoting enlarged suffrage at the national level (Garofalo, 2001, pp. 45–48).

The 1828 election marked the first instance of something resembling party competition after a long calm known as the "Era of Good Feelings." Van Buren was building the foundation of what would later become the Democratic Party around Jackson. Despite James Madison's long-standing fear of factions, American politics began to embrace the development of political parties. Although the term "Democratic" was not fully adopted by the party until 1844, the word "democracy," once seen as controversial, began its gradual rehabilitation.

Jackson, a general and war hero, was a transitional figure, representing a shift from the era of charismatic military leaders like George Washington or Napoleon Bonaparte to an era where presidential charisma is largely shaped by the ability to win popular vote (Bell, 2020, p. 224). It was during Jackson's first presidency that Tocqueville arrived in the United States to compose his *De la démocratie en Amérique*, where he predicted the evolution of democracy as the extension of the popular vote. Tocqueville introduced the discussion of universal suffrage with a caution for the French:

> To no people can this inquiry be more vitally interesting than to the French nation, which is blindly driven onwards by a daily and irresistible impulse towards a state of things which may prove either despotic or republican, but which will assuredly be democratic. (de Tocqueville, 1875, p. 198)

When Tocqueville arrived in the United States, he was a trained *doctrinaire* liberal, firmly believing in meritocracy and skeptical of the empowerment of the masses. However, his views on universal franchise in *De la démocratie en Amérique* are surprisingly favorable. His appraisal was not driven by enthusiasm for popular self-government, but by two key considerations. First, he believed the extension of the franchise was an unstoppable process once it had begun. He argued that as parts of society gained the right to vote, it would increase the appetite for participation among others (de Tocqueville, 1875, p. 54). This realist view—that the genie of mass voting cannot be put back in the bottle—would later become central to plebiscitary thinking. Second, Tocqueville saw universal suffrage as a safeguard against partial associations claiming to represent the majority—a lesson he viewed as critical after the French Revolution. With all citizens voting, the power of political associations was diluted, and "extreme democracy obviates the dangers of democratic government" (de Tocqueville, 1875, p. 197). The changes to the American system in the 1830s led Tocqueville to conclude that "extreme democracy," through mass voting, helped prevent democratic excesses. Jackson's strongman-style relationship with the masses seemed to him a lesser threat than the potential for associations to disrupt the government with their demands.

In Tocqueville's home country, however, the right to vote was then limited to a small portion of the population that paid higher taxes, and the July Monarchy made only minor extensions to suffrage (this applied to national elections; local elections had lower voting barriers). The real change came in 1848, with the revolution that led to the instant and sudden introduction of universal male franchise—a breakthrough that even its most passionate supporters had not anticipated. In the spring, during the elections for the Constituent Assembly, there was widespread joy and a spirit of fraternity throughout France, fueled by this newfound political equality (Rosanvallon, 1992, p. 216).

Most importantly, all men over the age of 21 were enfranchised to directly elect the president. Tocqueville, as a member of the Drafting Committee for the Constitution, argued in favor of direct election (de Tocqueville, 1990). This position was surprising, given his earlier opposition to extending suffrage during the July Monarchy, when he believed universal suffrage should only be implemented alongside indirect election, similar to the

American Senate (which was elected by state legislatures at the time), rather than through the direct election of the House of Representatives (Englert, 2024, p. 83). However, Tocqueville now supported precisely direct election through universal male suffrage (Gannett, 2006, p. 219). He justified this shift by emphasizing the need to balance a unicameral parliament with a popularly elected leader, who would derive his legitimacy directly from the people; although he also pushed successfully for a clause limiting the president to a single consecutive term (Jaume, 1991). Tocqueville's fear of socialist uprisings likely played an important role in this reversal, as he supported Cavaignac's brutal suppression of the workers during the summer of 1848.

While radical Republicans sought to unite the entire nation, both rich and poor, in the republican ritual of voting, their hopes of consolidating power through elections were soon dashed. The spring elections to the Constituent Assembly had already resulted in unexpectedly strong showing for conservatives, particularly in rural areas (Crook, 2015). However, the most significant blow came in the presidential election of December, when Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte won a landslide victory in the first round. Although uncertainty surrounded his eligibility due to his Bonaparte family ties, Republicans in the Constituent Assembly ultimately dismissed Louis-Napoléon as too eccentric to be a serious contender, and the proposed amendment barring members of former royal families from running failed to pass. Napoleon's nephew skillfully capitalized on the newly established universal franchise. His family name helped forge a direct connection with the people, positioning himself as the embodiment of the nation and undermining the logic of representation that many supporters of universal suffrage had taken for granted. Tocqueville would later briefly serve as his foreign minister before rejecting the imperial takeover of the Second Republic and labeling the new regime as "imperial despotism" (Richter, 2004).

Although Bonaparte's victory was unexpected, it was far from unprepared. Long before his return to France from exile, Louis-Napoléon had developed a political vision that reinterpreted his uncle's legacy and placed voting at the center of his ideal political design. As early as 1832, in his *Rêveries politiques*, he suggested that political harmony in society could only be achieved when the will of the people resonated with the will of the one: If the one imposes his will, it is despotism; but if the one governs according to "the will of all," it is liberty. Yet, Bonaparte made it clear that the popular will manifested itself in presidential elections only through acclamation: "The people have no right of election, but only the right of approbation" (Bonaparte, 1854, p. 385). In reflecting on his uncle's government, he essentially introduced the concept of plebiscitary rule—a form of monarchy based on the newly emerging institution of the mass vote. While the plebiscites of Napoleon I saw minimal participation and were likely heavily manipulated (Crook, 2003), his nephew perfected the organization of plebiscites. He legitimized his coup d'état with two plebiscites in 1851 and 1852 and received popular approval for the amended constitution in 1870. In all these cases, much like his 1848 election, the people's role was to acclaim another Bonaparte, with turnout consistently around 80% and a resounding "yes" to Louis-Napoléon.

In his *Idées napoléoniennes* of 1839, Bonaparte directly proposed the idea of synthesizing monarchy with democracy:

> To sum up the imperial system, it may be said, that its basis is democratic, since all the powers are derived from the people; while the organization is hierarchical, since it provides different grades in order to stimulate all capacities. (Bonaparte, 1854, p. 114)

From his perspective, universal suffrage offered a novel way to lend democratic legitimacy to the monarchy. Rather than associating the right to vote with expressing preferences among multiple choices, he viewed it as a means to manifest the unitary will of the people, embodied in its ruler. This belief made Bonaparte a strong advocate for universal suffrage. When parliament rolled back voting rights for part of the population, the president vehemently opposed the decision and immediately restored those rights following his successful coup. This abrupt turn of events stunned the socialist thinkers who had advocated for a reform of the Second Republic, calling for a wider use of direct voting to replace parliamentary representation with direct legislation (Rubinelli, 2024). In fact, even liberal theorists, who introduced the concept of "liberal democracy" into French discourse at the time by emphasizing freedoms of the press and association, generally adopted Bonaparte's view that the exercise of popular sovereignty should be restricted to elections (Ghins, 2025).

The synthetic regime crafted by Napoleon III was solidified through a voting system. In addition to the plebiscites, it included regular local elections that also carried a distinct plebiscitarian character. One candidate in each election was always endorsed by the emperor, with the entire administrative apparatus mobilized to ensure his victory. Supporting this candidate meant indirectly supporting the emperor himself, which allowed Napoleon's plebiscitarian legitimacy to be constantly renewed between the "major" plebiscites (Hazareesingh, 2004).

Despite its considerable institutional success, Bonapartism remained an undertheorized phenomenon for a long time. While caustic critiques from figures like Marx or Hugo shed light on the nature of this new regime, they failed to address its normative appeal; ridiculing Napoleon "le Petit" did little justice to his political vision. However, the fact that Bonapartism was not merely a disfiguration but rather relied on a unique understanding of democracy did not go unnoticed by attentive observers. Anticipating the coming triumph of force and almost predicting the impending coup, Auguste Romieu made a compelling argument, engaging with Louis-Napoléon's frequent comparison of his uncle to Julius Caesar. Romieu (1850, p. 32) contended that the Roman Empire was, in fact, a democratic regime—more democratic than the Roman Republic. If mass voting was central to democracy, then Caesarist leaders seemed to be a natural product of democratic processes. Caesarists had a different, and arguably more efficient, conception of elections compared to Republicans.

3. Another Theory of Elections

The Second French Empire ultimately sealed its fate through a disastrous military adventure, which led many of Napoleon's admirers to abandon the Caesarist model. Under the French Third Republic, party politics were reinstated, and the popular presidential election was abolished, with the president instead chosen by parliament. Even so, this barely prevented the republic from descending into monarchy, as royalist factions failed to agree on a successor to the throne.

Meanwhile, the Bonapartist design garnered attention from many German theorists (e.g., Frantz, 1990; Roscher, 1888) in the second half of the century. As Heinz Gollwitzer demonstrates, Germany was uniquely positioned to be receptive to Bonapartist political ideas (Gollwitzer, 1987). Although military conflict and Bismarck's victory over Bonaparte led to widespread disapproval of the regime on the other side of the Rhine, German thinkers from various backgrounds were among the first to recognize Bonaparte's synthetic system as a true political innovation that captured the spirit of its age. This helps explain why Bonapartist

ideas were later adopted and developed in Germany, where French Caesarism gained more solid theoretical foundations and evolved into the theory of plebiscitary democracy. The post-World War I situation in Germany mirrored that of mid-19th-century France, prompting some German thinkers to look to the Bonapartist experience as they sought to design the new German Republic. Mass politics gained prominence with the radical expansion of suffrage, and there was no feasible way to reverse it. The electorate was extended almost to the boundaries we recognize today. In such unstable times, a pressing question emerged: How could a polity be effectively and responsibly governed in the age of mass politics?

That was precisely the question Max Weber grappled with in the aftermath of the war. He was doubtful about the state bureaucracy's ability to act responsibly and persuasively, fearing it would merely follow orders without initiative. Additionally, Weber harbored a profound distrust of the masses and their capacity to govern directly without mediation. His nominalist worldview led him to be highly skeptical of attributing action to vague social aggregates. The system, in his view, required a clear, identifiable political actor—someone with the courage to make decisions and chart a course for the nation. This had to be accomplished within the framework of mass politics, as Weber (1994, p. 81) believed that extension of franchise in Germany was inevitable and could serve as a potential counterweight to the rule of bureaucrats.

In line with his broader philosophical outlook, Weber insisted on the political resoluteness to take decisions, but also on making those decisions well-informed, based on robust debate where all value-laden viewpoints were aired and defended in polemical manner. He assigned science, as a cultural endeavor, an important role in providing "consistency, and hence also honesty" (Weber, 2004, p. 26) in a world plagued by the conflict between incompatible values. His wartime writings expressed hope for reforming the German parliament to enable critical discussions that would clarify the costs and opportunities of political choices, preventing the bureaucracy from presenting its actions as self-evident and apolitical (Palonen, 2010, p. 154). In his vision, parliament was to cultivate political leaders who were tempered by public struggles with opponents and capable of acting decisively: "The only persons with the training needed for political leadership are those who have been selected in political *struggle*, because all politics is essentially struggle" (Weber, 1994, p. 219, emphasis in original).

However, the inherent tension in Weber's thought between instrumental rationality and decisionism—the latter ultimately never rationally justifiable—found expression in the evolution of his political views. His post-war writings reveal growing concern about the quality of parliamentary government, which seemed increasingly dominated by narrow, factional interests. Weber was dismayed by the revolutionary outbursts in Germany and likely found the German National Assembly, elected in early 1919 under the newly expanded franchise, disappointing. He believed that the dire post-war situation in Germany required even greater concentration of decision-making power (Beetham, 1974, pp. 233–240; Löwith, 1988, p. 413). In any case, his vision of politics as a sphere for making value choices—choices that can never be fully rationalized but should be guided by an ethics of responsibility—led him to conclude that parliament, as a site for honest and responsible debate, was insufficient for providing for the decisionist component necessitated by the state. While he never renounced his belief in the value of parliamentary contestation, it clearly gave way in his writings to a fundamentally different design for governance (Stanton, 2016, pp. 332–333).

Weber's solution was to merge two distinct sources of political legitimacy into a single system: Alongside the legal-rational authority of parliamentary representatives and bureaucrats, a new level would be added—a

plebiscitary president with charismatic legitimacy. The crucial element was the direct connection between the president and the people, which would bypass both the bureaucracy and the parliament. The president's legitimacy would be rooted in acclamation—unambiguous, direct univocal support from the populace.

Weber drew on an established Bonapartist tradition (Weber, 1994, p. 221); however, he was influenced by the United States as much as by France. Another key source of inspiration for him was Moisei Ostrogorski, who conducted one of the first systematic studies of British and American democratic politics. Ostrogorski highlighted the role of American political machines, which were led by political bosses seeking to secure votes, and the concept of "machines" would become central to Weber's vision of plebiscitarianism. Ostrogorski focused on the concentration of power and, based on his empirical observations, concluded that the masses are unlikely ever to be granted the ability to govern:

> When it is said that the people is not capable of self-government and, therefore, that universal suffrage and parliamentary system are absurd, I am ready to admit the first point. But I find the conclusions drawn from it completely erroneous. The political function of the masses in a democracy doesn't consist in governing it—probably they will never be able to do that. As a matter of fact, it will always be the small minority who governs, in democracy as in monarchy. Concentration is a property of all power, this is a law of social order. However, it is necessary to keep the ruling minority threatened. (Ostrogorski, 1902, p. 397)

Ostrogorski's conclusions partially inspired the arguments of the German-Italian school of elitism, which contended that mass enfranchisement would likely reinforce oligarchic rule, though Ostrogorski himself remained more optimistic about democracy. Although Weber shared some of the early 20th-century elitists' views (Pakulski, 2012), in his writings this empirical criticism of mass democracy took a distinctly monarchical twist. From Ostrogorski's analysis of American democracy, Weber adopted the idea of a strong president whose legitimacy was grounded in acclamations secured through party structures controlled by political bosses who would benefit from the spoils distributed by the president. Echoing Ostrogorski's observations, Weber asserted:

> One must always remember that the term "democratization" can be misleading. The demos itself, in the sense of inarticulate mass, never "governs" larger associations; rather, it is governed, and its existence only changes the way in which the executive leaders are selected.…"Democratization," in the sense here intended, does not necessarily mean an increasingly active share of the governed in the authority of the social structure. (Weber, 2002, p. 568)

Weber's proposed constitutional design, which he championed as a member of the Constitutional Commission, included the office of the *Reichspräsident* and possibly the controversial Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which granted the president extensive emergency powers. Weber's exact role in the creation of Article 48 during the Constitutional Commission's proceedings is not entirely clear; however, his advocacy for a system with a strong president was outspoken and widely recognized (Baehr, 1989, pp. 23–24; Eliaeson, 2000, p. 142; Mommsen, 1974, p. 403). The *Reichspräsident* during the Weimar era held dictatorial powers in times of emergency and was responsible for resolving political crises, which were constant due to the increasingly fractious parliament. This was achieved through the exercise of veto power over bills and the authority to appoint the government. Essentially, the role was designed as an

extraordinary magistrate. And while Weber (1994, p. 305) suggested that the president should see "the prospect of the gallows as the reward awaiting any attempt to interfere with the laws or to govern autocratically," it is hard to identify constitutional restraints in his design that would prevent such actions, whether in parliament that the president overpowers or in the passive people he claims to represent.

With this dictatorial rule, Weber sought to introduce a responsible authority into the system—something he believed democracy was ultimately incapable of providing. The German state, in his view, needed to be steered by a strong leader who would take the responsibility for its historical destiny. The refusal to be led by such a figure, Weber argued, would have catastrophic consequences. As he put it, "The only choice is between a leadership democracy with a 'machine' and leaderless democracy, ruled by professional politicians with no vocation lacking those inner, charismatic qualities making somebody a leader" (Weber, 1994, p. 351). The idea of plebiscitary leadership contributed to Weber's development of the concept of a "non-authoritarian version of charismatic legitimacy" (Weber, 2002, pp. 155–156). Normally, charisma would serve as a basis for popular recognition of the leader's authority. In the case of plebiscitary rule, however, the relationship is reversed: The leader who receives acclamation through popular vote is then recognized as possessing charisma, thereby creating a sense of legitimacy. In other words, acclamatory voting can independently generate democratic charisma.

The idea of plebiscitary democracy and the interpretation of the Weimar Constitution as a plebiscitarian regime was further developed by Carl Schmitt in his *Verfassungslehre* of 1927. Schmitt took a more rigorous approach than Weber regarding the ontological status of the people. On the one hand, Schmitt (2014, p. 67) rejected the possibility of collective self-government, arguing that "the rule of the many over themselves means either the rule of some over the others, or the rule of an overarching third encompassing both." On the other hand, Schmitt, unlike Weber, did not dismiss the metaphysics of the popular will. In Schmitt's theory, the unitary people, as a substance beneath the political form, is manifested in acts of acclamation. Acclamation is the moment of real unity that regularly brings the people into being, preventing it from being relegated to a pre-constitutional fiction. It recurrently presents the legitimating power of the people as the foundation of political order, which exists alongside (*neben*) the formal constitution (Kalyvas, 2008, pp. 176–183). While Weber saw acclamation primarily as an instrumental tool for legitimating the leader, Schmitt (2008, p. 302) emphasized its ritualistic and solidifying nature.

Schmitt shared Weber's idea of constructing a synthetic regime that would combine the strengths of different ideal types. While Weber fused charisma with legal-rational legitimacy, Schmitt envisioned an alloy of monarchy and democracy. For Schmitt, democracy was fundamentally impossible due to its radical immanence and rejection of mediation, and thus, monarchy provided democracy with a transcendent source and a necessary element of representation. In turn, democracy served as a reservoir of legitimacy for monarchical rule: "In the Caesarist monarchy, as it was realized in Bonaparte's empire, the monarch is only a dictator on a democratic foundation" (Schmitt, 2008, p. 309). For both Weber and Schmitt, the distinction between democracy and dictatorship did not render them mutually exclusive. As any historian of the Roman Republic knows, dictatorship was an essential element of republican rule. Based on this, Clinton Rossiter later argued that dictatorship was indispensable for a viable democracy (Rossiter, 2017). In the plebiscitarian model, democracy is not only compatible with dictatorship but actively enables it through voting. Weber (1994, p. 342) referred to the plebiscitary ruler as a "dictator of the electoral battlefield," in contrast to the dictators of the past, who emerged from actual battlefields.

It is useful to distinguish plebiscitary democracy as a synthetic project from what political scientists today refer to as a hybrid regime. While both terms describe political systems that combine elements of different "pure" regimes, there is a significant normative difference. The concept of hybridity has been widely used in political science to designate regimes that are imperfect but notably stable (Levitsky & Way, 2010). What Weber and Schmitt envisioned, however, was a deliberately designed, robust political system. Far from being a midpoint between two opposing ideal types, it was supposed to create a perfect amalgamation of their strengths. Whereas the concept of "hybrid regime" refers to political regimes that are inherently imperfect and not normatively appealing, plebiscitary democracy was conceived as a model for synthesizing mass democracy and monarchy in an ideal form.

Plebiscitary politics has developed various techniques for manufacturing support over the last two centuries, particularly in recent decades. These include parties with digital memberships (de Nadal, 2023; Gerbaudo, 2019), mass gatherings characterized by participant passivity (Illés & László, 2024), and the thumbs-up/thumbs-down interfaces of contemporary social media (Dean, 2017). However, the most important insight from the theory of plebiscitary democracy concerns elections. Plebiscitarians emphasize that voting can take on a very special meaning—one of acclamation. In plebiscitarian contexts, for all participants—including voters, candidates, and election officials—voting is not about choosing between various alternatives that represent voters' interests. Instead, it becomes a call for a univocal "yes!" to the leader. Weber acknowledges that acclamation does not necessarily imply genuine support, as the primary goal is manufacturing legitimacy:

> Regardless of how its real value as an expression of the popular will may be regarded, the plebiscite has been the specific means of deriving the legitimacy of authority from the confidence of the ruled, even though the voluntary nature of such confidence is only formal or fictitious. (Weber, 2002, p. 156)

Elections take on the character of a plebiscite when voters perceive voting for one of the candidates as symbolizing the acclamation of the ruler. Weber stresses that in such cases, the term "elections" becomes inadequate, despite appearances, because what is actually happening is "not a choice between candidates but recognition of the aspirant's claim to power" (Weber, 2002, p. 667). Does this imply that when elections function as plebiscites, they distort the true meaning of the procedure? The plebiscitarian approach argues that, under conditions of mass voting, it is just as natural for voters to interpret the institution's meaning as a request for acclamation as it is to see it as a choice among alternative options (candidates). Indeed, as demonstrated by Napoleon III's use of elections, both newly enfranchised and experienced voters are often more inclined to interpret the list of candidates on the ballot through an acclamatory lens. The belief that voters, when faced with a ballot containing multiple candidates, are likely to perceive it as an opportunity to express preferences in a quasi-rational way—while a plebiscitary interpretation results only from a severe disfiguration of this "self-evident" understanding—rests on an assumption about voters' subjectivity that corresponds to elections held before mass enfranchisement. Plebiscitarians suggest that in a mass society, acclamation may actually be a more intuitive way for voters to make sense of the electoral procedure. As Schmitt astutely observes, acclamation frees people from the burden of making difficult choices with little possible gains. It is easier to accept what has already been decided:

> The majority of state citizens are generally inclined to leave political decisions to others and to respond to questions posed always such that the answer contains a minimum of decision. Consequently, they

> will readily consent to an accomplished fact. During these Napoleonic plebiscites, "no" would have meant insecurity and disorder, while the "yes" constituted only belated consent to an accomplished fact, therefore, the minimum of its own decision. (Schmitt, 2008, p. 134)

The plebiscitarian interpretation of voting transcends distinctions between referenda and elections, or between presidential and parliamentary elections. From a sociological perspective, this account relies on how political actors, including voters, interpret the vote. In other words, it hinges on the interpretive frame (Goffman, 1986; Shamir et al., 2015) they use to assign meaning to the voting procedure and their own role in it. Acclamations historically presupposed public gatherings, and the secret ballot of modern elections tends to stifle the effervescence characteristic of acclamations (Schmitt, 2008, p. 273). However, the presence of an absolutist leader, willing to relieve the masses of the need to make informed decisions and instead seeking simple assent, transcends this limitation. To the extent that the vote is perceived as a call for acclamation, a candidate's or party's name is interpreted as a "yes" by all participants, and it can be said that "election has become a plebiscitary procedure" (Schmitt, 2004, p. 89). Although such meaning is usually ascribed to the incumbent or ruling party, it is not exclusive to them; a challenger exhibiting monarchical qualities can successfully shift the interpretive frame.

While plebiscitary leadership is often more associated with presidential elections, legislative elections can also take on the meaning of an indirect plebiscite on loyalty to the ruler, particularly when the party is strongly dominated by its leader. The French Second Empire provides a formative example of how legislative elections can be redefined in this way, while Viktor Orbán's regime in Hungary shows that plebiscitarianism can be implemented in nominally parliamentary republics (Körösényi et al., 2020). This does not negate the normative distinction between parliamentary and presidential elections; rather, it highlights how a widely shared framing plays a significant role in shaping political outcomes. There is nothing inherent in the nature of legislative (or even local) elections that makes them immune to plebiscitarian reframing. The key insight from theorists of plebiscitarianism is that in the age of mass democracy, plebiscite may be actually the most natural way to interpret voting for many actors, as it presents voters with clear, pre-made decisions and assigns them a defined role in the acclamatory ritual.

Weber and Schmitt presented an ambiguous stance toward democracy in political theory. While openly skeptical of self-government, they nonetheless acknowledged the inevitability of democratic legitimacy in mass societies. To reconcile this with responsible rule, they sought to disguise monarchical or dictatorial authority within a seemingly democratic institutional framework. Voting, in this context, serves as a democratic façade, masking personalist rule and imbuing it with undeniable legitimacy.

This view of democracy as an unavoidable yet troublesome force that must be tamed and directed toward more constructive ends was not new to democratic theory. From the Old Oligarch, who observed ancient Athens, to Tocqueville and James Bryce, who analyzed modern America, many of the most pragmatic democratic skeptics recognized the resilience and inevitability of democratic institutions and sought ways to bring them under control. Plebiscitarian thinkers of the interwar period adopted this approach with elections as an embodiment of democratization. If the expansion of mass suffrage could not be undone, they argued, it should at least be repurposed. By focusing mass participation on voting, plebiscitarians developed a model where the masses, rather than directly intervening in governance, solemnly legitimize the true ruler.

While this school of thought gained particular prominence in Weimar Germany, discontent with mass society led political thinkers around the world in a similar direction. In the United States, Walter Lippmann, deeply influenced by the power of propaganda during World War I, concluded that a responsible government should incorporate a stronger technocratic component and restrict popular involvement to "the power to say Yes or No on an issue presented to the mass" (Lippmann, 1998, p. 230). He acknowledged that the only viable system of government in a mediatized mass society was "plébiscite autocracy," where decisions are made "by the interaction, not of Congress and the executive, but of public opinion and the executive" (Lippmann, 1920, p. 61). While notable parts of the American intellectual community were already inclined toward a realist view of democracy (Lowell, 1913, p. 69), the most significant boost to plebiscitarian ideas would come from across the Atlantic during World War II.

4. From Plebiscitarianism to Minimalism

Much like the Second Republic in France, the Weimar Republic met a tragic end. It gradually developed into the Third German Empire, with Hindenburg and later Hitler relying on plebiscites (for a discussion of plebiscites used by the Nazis, see Jung, 1995). Given its close association with the *Führerprinzip* of the Nazi era, the plebiscitarian doctrine was understandably viewed with deep suspicion. Yet, during this very period, it entered mainstream political science and became a significant part of the contemporary liberal tradition. It was revived by Joseph Schumpeter, who rebranded it within his minimalist view of democracy. While important work situating this approach within the plebiscitarian tradition has been done by scholars such as Green (2010, pp. 171–177) and Körösényi (2005; see also Körösényi et al., 2020), I will focus here on Schumpeter's perspective on elections. Schumpeter was, in many respects, indebted to Weber and Schmitt (the latter of whom had been his colleague in Bonn). He shared their skepticism of democracy and their yearning for a strong leader. However, in 1942, when he delivered his famous lectures on *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* in the United States, he was understandably in no position to endorse the *Führerprinzip*.

Instead, Schumpeter (2003, p. 269) offered his famous definition of democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." He immediately emphasizes several key implications of this definition; two of them deserve some consideration. First, it provides a clear criterion for distinguishing between democracies and non-democracies (which I will address below). Second, it highlights the crucial role of leadership in politics. Elections, in Schumpeter's view, are designed to solidify strong leadership, and "accepting the leadership" is the only way for a collective body to come into political being.

Schumpeter shares Weber's skepticism about the metaphysics of general will. He views it as part of what he calls the "classical doctrine of democracy," a set of beliefs he critiques as unrealistic and contradictory. As several critics have noted, the "classical doctrine of democracy" is a strawman that Schumpeter constructs himself. The combination of utilitarian and Rousseauian views he dismantles is difficult to attribute to any specific thinker (Mackie, 2009; Medearis, 2001). Schumpeter was likely attempting to capture a common, if flawed, understanding of democracy. For Schumpeter, the notion of a mystical collective entity that always knows its own good is a fantasy. However, like Weber, Schumpeter acknowledges the presence of the general will in contemporary political reality rather than dismissing it outright. Even if the ontological reality of the general will is questionable, the widespread belief in the existence of something akin to popular will in modern societies is undeniable. Therefore, rather than

rejecting it, a responsible government should learn to "manufacture" the general will. In a Gramscian twist, reminiscent of later theoretical developments in understanding representation as constitutive of identity (Disch, 2021; Laclau, 2020), Schumpeter argues that popular will is always a product of fabrication. The individual or group that is most successful in manufacturing the impression of acting in accordance with the popular will is the one who prevails in democratic political struggle: "The will of the people is the product and not the motive power of the political process" (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 263).

Most importantly, Schumpeter adopts Weber's acclamation view of elections. He consistently argues against proportional representation, criticizing its inability to provide for strong leadership and efficient governance. Schumpeter's understanding of elections is not about creating a peaceful means of managing elite competition, although it is often interpreted that way (e.g., Przeworski, 1999, 2018). He is not concerned with the electorate's role as a mediator in elite conflicts; in fact, he is quite explicit about the role he expects from voters: "Acceptance of leadership is the true function of the electorate's vote" (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 273). Nor is he interested in securing political equality through voting, as evidenced by his insistence that "unfair" or "fraudulent" elections do not exclude a regime from being considered democratic (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 271). For Schumpeter, "democracy [is] a method for selecting a Caesarist leader, as occurs in a plebiscite" (Urbinati, 2019, p. 1076). Unsurprisingly, he points to Napoleon I as an example of a dictatorial and immensely popular leader who contributed significantly to France's prosperity. Bonaparte could never have achieved that success "in a democratic way," Schumpeter argues, because the various factions of French society would not have granted him a sufficient mandate (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 255).

Schumpeter's influence on mainstream political science cannot be overstated. Through the conceptual shifts he introduced, the plebiscitarian foundations of liberal democracy have largely been obscured within the dominant tradition. There are several ways in which Schumpeter's plebiscitarianism contributed to the "electoralization" of contemporary democratic thought. While he did not coin the term "minimal democracy"—a concept likely introduced by William Riker in 1982 in his critique of popular sovereignty—Schumpeter's work played a crucial role in shaping its understanding:

> Social choice theory forces us to recognize that the people cannot rule as a corporate body in the way that populists suppose. Instead, officials rule, and they do not represent some indefinable popular will. Hence they can easily be tyrants, either in their own names or in the name of some putative imaginary majority. Liberal democracy is simply the veto by which it is sometimes possible to restrain official tyranny. This may seem a minimal sort of democracy, especially in comparison with the grandiose (though intellectually absurd) claims of populism. (Riker, 1988, p. 244)

Even before Riker, Robert Dahl identified two key factors distinguishing democracies from non-democracies ("dictatorships"): elections and political competition (Dahl, 1956, pp. 131–132). In this, he directly draws from Schumpeter, while also allowing for some level of responsiveness from political leaders. Although Dahl's vision of democracy is not Bonapartist, his indebtedness to elite theories of democracy has been subject to familiar criticisms (Dahl, 1958; Walker, 1966). However, by disregarding the motivations behind Schumpeter's minimalism and focusing on elections as the core of his definition of democracy, Dahl inadvertently opens the door for plebiscitarian theory to remain an underlying foundation of his concept of polyarchy. Dahl's polyarchy assumes that the economic model of competition, when applied to politics, will produce satisfying outcomes for the demand side (the electorate). He did not, however, consider the

possibility that such market-like competition in politics could result in extreme concentration of power, potentially paving the way for the rise of a dominant leader.

Samuel Huntington declared that the debate over the meaning of democracy had been settled by the 1970s, with Schumpeter emerging as the victor (Huntington, 1991, p. 6). Timing is crucial: This statement marked a pivotal moment in the study of democratization, providing the conceptual foundations that would shape the field of comparative politics for decades. As Schumpeter had proposed, comparative scholars embraced his definition of democracy because it offers a clear and straightforward tool for distinguishing between democracies and non-democracies. The cost of this approach is that regimes with strong leaders who concentrate all power but manage to generate acclamation through elections may appear nearly democratic (Pettit, 2017, p. 501). Dahl's definition of democracy became one of the key references for democracy measurements, alongside Downs (1957, p. 11) and Lipset (1960, p. 45), with their even more election-centric approaches, which explicitly draw on Schumpeter's theory.

The crisis of the democratization paradigm in the 1990s and 2000s, triggered by the rise of regimes where the institutionalization of elections did not lead to the consolidation of democratic rule, gave rise to concepts designed to describe quasi-stable conditions between democracy and authoritarianism. Terms such as electoral authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, or competitive authoritarianism emerged as part of this shift over the last two decades. However, despite frequent warnings from political scientists about the dangers of reducing democracy to elections (Diamond, 2002; Schmitter & Karl, 1991), the fundamental connection between the essence of democratic rule and elections has never been fully disentangled. As Skinner (1973) pointed out, the positive connotation of the term "democracy" tends to make particular institutions, like elections, viewed as inherently good by association. Even when the strange appeal of elections for anti-democratic leaders is examined, it is still commonly assumed that "elections are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for modern democracy. Such a regime cannot exist without elections, but elections alone are not enough" (Schedler, 2002, p. 37). The centrality of elections to the concept of democracy remains largely undisputed.

The field of comparative politics plays a crucial role in shaping popular conceptions of democracy for another important reason: It provides a mechanism through which plebiscitarianism enters public consciousness. For the average person, the most straightforward way to determine whether a country is a democracy is by consulting democracy indices. By implicitly accepting these measures, we also adopt the assumptions underlying them: Technologies of measurement are powerful tools that allow ideas to influence our thinking in ways that often go unchallenged. A comprehensive overview of democracy measures used in comparative studies would require a separate discussion, but it is sufficient to note that all major indices prioritize elections in one form or another. For example, the Freedom House index is divided into civil and political dimensions, with the latter placing strong emphasis on elections. Similarly, four of the five dimensions in the Polity IV index are closely related to elections (Högström, 2013). While these measures are rarely confined to evaluating a country's electoral performance alone, they still tend to treat elections as the essence of democracy.

Schumpeter's minimalist doctrine served as an important bridge, preserving and advancing the plebiscitarian tradition, ensuring its continued influence on the dominant understanding of democracy, even as its more controversial aspects fell into disrepute. By reframing the most provocative elements of plebiscitary

democracy, minimalism helped integrate these ideas into the liberal-democratic tradition, rendering them more acceptable. Minimalism, appealing to skeptical liberals wary of populist tendencies in democratic movements, elevated elections to the central role in liberal-democratic systems, positioning them as a key democratic element. As a foundational concept in the tools used to measure democracy, the plebiscitarian view shaped how laypeople, politicians, and diplomats assess whether a country is democratic, with elections often seen as the defining marker. From the early days of universal suffrage to the present, the notion of voting as a democratic mechanism to appoint a strong leader remains a powerful influence on the liberal-democratic legacy, continuing to shape our aspirations for democracy.

5. Conclusion

Since the mid-19th century, the notion of democratization, understood as the extension of suffrage, has significantly influenced conceptions of democracy. Plebiscitarian thinkers quickly recognized that voting in mass societies does not function as it did with a highly restricted electorate and promoted the voting-centered view of democracy to advance a new form of electoral monarchy. This conception has endured through several "waves" of democratization and continues to dominate political science. It is not that the dominant view of democracy in political science fully endorses the radical reactionary theories of Weber or Schmitt, but rather that the idea of elections and referenda as central democratic institutions shapes both academic and popular understandings of democracy.

This helps explain why calls for popular votes on all major political issues are increasingly framed as "democratic" solutions to the crisis of representation within contemporary liberal democracies. The notion that in order to bring the power back to the people, it is necessary to take a vote, is a legacy of plebiscitarianism, and it remains central to mainstream definitions of democracy and the practices used to measure it, thereby defining our democratic imagination. Beneath this concept lies the enduring belief that democracy is about voting for a strong, capable leader (or endorsing his decisions)—a vision that has gained traction in many liberal-democratic nations.

Disentangling democracy from voting can help address issues related to the role elections play in the evolution of political regimes, both within and outside what is typically considered the group of established liberal democracies. From this perspective, the widespread use of elections by undemocratic regimes (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009) no longer seems paradoxical but rather emerges as a logical and consistent outcome. Antidemocratic leaders' enthusiasm for polling and voting can be understood as a strategy to bolster their absolute power with the veneer of democratic legitimacy.

This also suggests that the growing disaffection with democracy (Diamond, 2022, 2024) in many countries can be at least partly attributed to the fact that efforts to repair democracy often involve doubling down on the electoral process. Despite significant efforts to promote free and fair elections globally, these initiatives have not led to greater enthusiasm for democracy but rather to widespread disenchantment. It is unlikely that a stronger focus on organizing, conducting, and observing voting will reverse this trend. There may be a link between the promotion of a voting-centered view of democracy—fixated on elections as its baseline and referenda as its extension—and the rise of the relationship between the monarchical leaders and the masses that Manin (1997) encapsulated with the concept of "audience democracy." Recognizing the mechanics of plebiscitary thinking helps explain this correlation.

Reflection on how the plebiscitarian tradition has shaped dominant perceptions of democracy invites a broader reconsideration of the value of elections in a wider sense, distinct from voting. As an increasing body of literature acknowledges, the normative justification of elections is far from self-evident, and the task of reassessing the contributions of both elections and voting to democratic life deserves to be taken afresh (Chapman, 2024; Näsström, 2021, Chapter 4). It has been noted that reducing elections to the aggregation of isolated individual preferences under universal and equal suffrage impoverishes our conception of democratic life, fostering disgruntlement that leads to democracy's rejection: "Democracies are being threatened from within in part because the use of electoral procedures without the awareness of their significance for liberty renders them inane" (Saffon & Urbinati, 2013, p. 445).

However, the analysis presented in this article suggests that to free democratic imagination from the effects of plebiscitarianism, we may need to go beyond merely overcoming electoral reductionism and challenge the centrality of voting itself. This does not deny the role of elections and referenda in democratic life, but rather shifts attention to aspects of the electoral process beyond voting. The "operation of suffrage" has significant disaggregative power, as it "requires a dissolution of social ties and thereby signifies the sovereignty of the people solely through the enumeration of individual choices" (Lefort, 2019, p. 106). This power can easily be weaponized by plebiscitarianism to legitimize monarchical rule. And yet elections and referenda are among the rituals that can suspend the existent symbolic order, creating a liminal space from which society can emerge creatively and collectively reinstituted (Marchart, 2007, p. 106). It is not that elections are inherently incompatible with democracy; rather, democracy is not elections.

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