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Conceptual Space for Illiberal Democracy

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Abstract

For over a decade, populists have been experimenting with a new political regime–illiberal democracy. Vocal proponents, such as Hungary's PM Viktor Orbán, develop "democratic illiberalism" as an ideational model for the illiberal-democratic regime they are building. Exploiting the normative appeal of popular sovereignty as the master legitimating frame for political authority in our age, illiberals in power try to subvert liberal democracies from within. Using their democratic mandate, they erode liberal norms and coopt liberal institutions to serve illiberal purposes. The dangers of illiberal democracy prompted many democracy scholars to deny democratic character to illiberal regimes. The concept "illiberal democracy," they argue, is not useful analytically and is incoherent. Following a critical analysis of the debates surrounding the concept of illiberal democracy, I advance three arguments in support of the conceptual viability of this regime type. The first is a conceptual argument: While there are normatively attractive conceptions of democracy, on which democracy cannot be illiberal, the democratic model currently practiced in "real existing democracies" leaves conceptual space for illiberal forms of democratic regimes. Substantiating my position against scoring definitional victories on illiberal democracy, I advance a second, political argument: Liberals risk losing the long-term political battle for liberal democracy, as they may be portrayed as anti-pluralist anti-democrats, intent on excluding from the democratic arena their illiberal opponents. My third and final point is a normative argument: The central debate concerning illiberal democracy should focus on the normative appeal of its foundational ideas—the core ideational features of the competing political regimes. Political theorists can greatly contribute here by providing a clear understanding of the main ideological competitors—what they are and what makes them attractive to many—and such is precluded by purely conceptual arguments against illiberal democracy.

Keywords

authoritarianism; democratic illiberalism; illiberal democracy; illiberalism; liberal democracy

1. Introduction

Liberal democracy's decline in the last 20 years has alarmed democracy proponents, spurring a flurry of research to account for these developments (Daly, 2019; Diamond, 2015; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Galston, 2017; Krastev, 2007, 2017; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Rupnik & Zielonka, 2012). The crisis-of-democracy and death-of-liberalism genres (Deneen, 2019; Fukuyama, 2022; Keane, 2009; Krastev & Holmes, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) turned into growth industries, attracting academic and lay readers. Many scholars traced the observed democratic decline to multiple failures of political, economic, and cultural liberalism (Krastev, 2007; Krastev & Holmes, 2019; Luce, 2017; Mounk, 2018). The waning support for minority rights, for pluralism and limited government, for unregulated markets and global free trade, together with growing majoritarian, sovereigntist, and traditionalist sentiments, provided fertile ground for the rise of a new type of regime. Attracted to illiberal alternatives to liberal democracy, a score of populists—Hungary's PM Viktor Orbán, India's PM Narendra Modi, US President Donald Trump, to name just a few—started experimenting with illiberal democracy (Ganguly, 2019; Plattner, 2020; Shattuck, 2018). The most committed—such as Viktor Orbán and his ideologues—worked on a core of "illiberal democratic" ideas (Smilova, 2021), around which to develop further the practices of illiberal democracy.

The reaction of many liberal democracy proponents was to deny democratic credentials to illiberal regimes and therefore deny conceptual space for "illiberal democracy" (Halmai, 2019; Kis, 2014, 2018; Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2019b). I engage critically with the arguments advanced by democratic theorists who deny there can be, even in principle, "illiberal democracies." Against this, I defend the position that there is a conceptual space for such type of regime. I further argue that scoring conceptual victories does not serve well liberal democrats. On the contrary, liberals risk falling into a trap set by their illiberal opponents, as such victories would only strengthen the illiberal claim that by excluding their illiberal opponents as non-democrats, liberals reveal themselves as anti-pluralist anti-democrats (Legutko, 2018).

A better way to win a battle involving essentially contested concepts such as democracy, I argue, is to use substantive arguments, demonstrating the normative attractiveness of the preferred conception of democracy. Winning this battle requires understanding illiberal democracy—what it is and what its core ideas are. Such understanding is precluded by denying conceptual space for illiberal democracy. Understanding the core ideas of "democratic illiberalism," which many find normatively attractive, is a precondition for evaluating the comparative advantages of the liberal vis-a-vis the illiberal forms of democracy. Finally, I argue that relying on definitional victories may make it more likely that liberal democrats lose the long-term political battle for liberal democracy.

2. Democratic Decline and the Rise of Illiberal Democracy

Fears of liberal democracy's decline have haunted democracy advocates for some time. It was at the height of the liberal triumph during the third wave of democratization in the 1990s that Fareed Zakaria gave currency to a concept—"illiberal democracy," introduced a few years earlier (Bell et al., 1993), to diagnose what he perceived already then to be a threat: the rise of illiberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997, p. 22). Referring to regimes that rely on popular elections for their legitimacy, yet come short on the other, specifically liberal, features of liberal democracy such as rule of law and civil rights, Zakaria noted that "illiberal democracy is a growth industry" among democratizing countries (Zakaria, 1997, p. 24).

Twenty years on, this illiberal "growth industry" has spread to consolidated democracies in the economically rich West, prompting fears of rapid global democratic deconsolidation and a "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Some have even argued that "the global democratic advances of the last thirty-five years have been wiped out" (Papada et al., 2023). Signs of deconsolidation have been traced in value surveys even in advanced democracies (Foa et al., 2020; Foa & Mounk, 2016). Citizens in developed democracies today arguably express the lowest levels of satisfaction since the polling began, not just with their democratic governments and other representative institutions—political parties and parliaments—but also towards the democratic system as a whole, including towards watchdogs, such as media, supervisory bodies, and NGOs. Support for liberal values—protection of minority and other liberal rights and freedoms in particular—is also arguably declining, even though either the existence of such a trend of backsliding on liberal-democratic values or its universal scope is disputed (Alexander & Welzel, 2017; Inglehart, 2016; Norris, 2017; Voeten, 2017; Welzel et al., 2022; Zilinsky, 2019). Studies have shown that citizens, often generally defined as "democrats," come in a variety of stripes, with "liberal democrats" being only a minority among them (Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). Recent studies have further demonstrated that "populist" citizens, i.e., citizens with predominantly populist attitudes, are disaffected democrats: They may value democracy highly yet find its performance wanting (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020). Such citizens find fault with some institutional features of the liberal model of democracy but not with the democratic principle as such (Zaslove & Meijers, 2021). In short, what we are currently witnessing may be not so much the decline of democracy in general, but of its liberal form. This liberal form of democracy adds liberal protections—individual and minority rights, and limited government—to the democratic principles of popular sovereignty and majority rule. The alternative, illiberal form of democracy seems to currently enjoy the support of large groups of citizens.

3. After Liberalism: Experimenting With "Illiberal Democracy"

Riding the wave of popular disaffection with liberal democracy, populist political entrepreneurs started experimenting with new political regimes. Confirming Zakaria's hypothesis that "Western liberal democracy might not be the final destination on the democratic road, but just one of the many possible exits" (Zakaria, 1997, p. 24), the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán marketed the "non-liberal state" as the model for the regime he is building—which he claims to also be democratic (Orbán, 2014). More recently, he further defined his political project as building a Christian-democratic state (Orbán, 2018).

The type of political regime that Orbán and other aspiring autocrats such as Narendra Modi and Donald Trump are building is broadly defined as "illiberal"—a form of "democratic illiberalism" (Pappas, 2019). Its underlying illiberal ideas and practices are arguably evolving into a new—if only rather thin—ideology (Smilova, 2021), designed specifically for the era of unchallenged dominance of the democratic ideal. Our age saw the growth of critical citizens (Norris, 1999), who are particularly sensitive to "democratic deficits," resulting from the widening "gap between democratic aspirations and satisfaction" (Norris, 2011, p. 5). Widespread perceptions of democratic deficit are fertile ground for the emergence and success of illiberal democratic regimes. Their ideologues offer a new model for the social and political order, while keeping intact the main legitimating frame of our democratic age—people as ultimate source of political authority. Exploiting its normative appeal, contemporary illiberals feed on the democratic ideal yet stretch it to the extreme (Mounk, 2018).

Composed of elements from older anti-liberal ideologies and enriched with recent illiberal practices, this new form of illiberalism came after liberalism's triumph. The temporal sequence, liberalism first, and only then the advent of democratic illiberalism, plays an important explanatory role. This temporal sequence accounts for democratic illiberalism's peculiar features, namely, that this form of illiberalism is a *reaction* to experiences with "real existing" liberalism. Liberalism in its various manifestations—political, economic, cultural—was victorious yet disappointed many. For many, it is "the light that failed," to use the memorable phrase Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes coined to describe the current state of liberalism (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). The discontent with liberalism triggered a "counter-revolution" to this "overall ideology of power" (Zielonka, 2018). A similar temporal sequence leading to the emergence of contemporary forms of illiberalism is central to the most developed account of illiberalism to date. Marlène Laruelle defines contemporary illiberalism as a "new ideological universe," a "backlash against today's liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational—often in the name of democratic principles" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 309).

This story about the emergence of illiberalism has its dissenters. Zsolt Enyedi, for example, objects that "to restrict the concept of illiberalism to societies that have experienced liberalism seems unnecessarily limiting" and he insists on defining illiberalism more widely to cover pre-modern and modern developments both in regions with and without direct experience with liberalism (Enyedi, 2024, p. 3). One may indeed dispute whether *direct* experience with liberalism—and disappointment with it—is necessary for illiberal regimes to emerge. It may be sufficient that liberalism as "the model to be imitated by all" (Krastev & Holmes, 2019) has lost its global appeal. The word of liberalism's imminent demise has spread globally, reaching corners without direct experience of either its successes or failings. There is certainly no shortage of lamentations on liberalism's decline and impending death. As early as 1942, John Hallowell announced its decline as an ideology (Hallowell, 1942, 1946), with conservative think-tanks and academics contributing to this growing industry (Bork, 1996; Deneen, 2019, 2023; Luce, 2017).

Irrespective of whether illiberal regimes indeed existed before the liberal triumph, it is important to stress that it is the new, democratic form of illiberalism which is a serious threat to liberal democracy. Feeding on more or less "authentic"—based on lived experience or triggered by the global spread of anti-liberal propaganda (Vatsov, 2018)—disappointments with some, or all, elements of the "liberal script," this form is particularly dangerous as it grows within a democratic framework. The subversive potential of the illiberal script—affecting consolidated, not just younger and weaker democracies—is realized to the full only there. No matter how its more concrete form is conceptualized—as "disruptive" and "ideological" (Kauth & King, 2020), or specifically as "democratic" (Smilova, 2021)—this regime succeeds only under its attractive democratic mask. Only there may the gradual erosion of liberal values and institutions go unnoticed long enough to achieve illiberalism's ultimate goal: the substitution of liberal rights and freedoms with illiberal values. This substitution usually happens through legalistic means, as contemporary illiberal regimes co-opt liberal institutions meant to safeguard liberal rights and freedoms. Instead of dismantling them, illiberals often start repurposing them to serve illiberal goals (Uitz, 2015, 2021) "through the twisting and turning of the rule of law, which at the same time continues to provide some legitimacy to the regime" (Sajó & Tuovinen, 2019, p. 507). András Sajó has described in detail the strategy of illiberals in overtaking liberal institutions: They act by "pretending to observe a rule in order to depart from it, most often reaping undeserved benefits from the cheated persons or from the 'system' " (Sajó, 2021, p. 281).

Orbán's step-by-step dismantling of the liberal-democratic order through careful constitutional engineering follows a consciously developed ideological script to use the legitimacy and efficiency of liberal institutions

to spread illiberal values and practices. Christian conservative theorists elevated to the heights of legal and political theory the illiberal practices developed by Orbán's regime. When Adrian Vermeule is arguing for "a common-good-constitutionalism" (Vermeule, 2022), for example, he claims that the regime of the non-liberal state will be born from within the frame of the old liberal order—a process he calls "an integration from within" (Vermeule, 2018). During his second term, Donald Trump may be following the same script: Armed with strong popular legitimacy, his team is systematically eroding constitutional norms and institutions and is thereby aiming to turn the US into an illiberal regime.

The illiberal script has its non-Western adepts, too. Under Narendra Modi's rule, India's democracy has been eroded to such an extent that it has warranted its downgrading by the V-Dem project in 2021 to competitive autocracy due to the "radically constrained civil liberties" and the sharp deterioration of the horizontal accountability of the executive (Tudor, 2023). Important laws and political decisions were passed without parliamentary consultation and "the growing lack of executive accountability to parliament is exacerbated by an increasingly quiescent judiciary" (Tudor, 2023).

4. Against the Illiberal Democracy Concept

The apparent dangers of democratic illiberalism prompted what may seem like an apt response—deny the democratic character of illiberalism. Motivated by a concern to resist presenting autocrats as democrats and based on an impressive comparative study of 35 cases of democratic decline, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way coined the term "competitive authoritarianism" to account for regimes in which "formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority. Incumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent, however, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy" (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 52). Some or all the necessary minimal conditions for a functioning democracy are often violated there, creating an "uneven playing field between government and opposition" (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 53). Nevertheless, arenas of democratic contestation (electoral, media, judiciary), even if obstructed, persist and still permit the occasional victory of the opposition.

Many political theorists are tempted to take a similar route. Norberto Bobbio, Giovanni Sartori, Jürgen Habermas, Jan-Werner Müller, Nadia Urbinati, and János Kis are just a few of the prominent democratic theorists defending the position that illiberal political regimes cannot be democracies in any meaningful sense. For them, the "illiberal democracy" concept is neither useful analytically nor is it coherent. It is an oxymoron, pernicious for democracy.

In the most radical take on this issue, Nadia Urbinati argues that the "liberal-democracy…syntagma is a pleonasm" (Urbinati, 2019b, p. 551): "The study of populism in power is an opportunity to clarify some things about liberal-democracy and argue that this syntagma is a pleonasm" (Urbinati, 2019b, p. 551). She further holds that "the 'liberty' credentials of democracy are not imported from liberalism" (Urbinati, 2019b, p. 551). She concludes:

> [Conceptions of populist or illiberal democracy] presume something that in fact cannot exist: democracy without rights to free speech and freedom of association, and democracy with a majority that is overwhelming enough to block its own potential evolutions and mutations (that is, other

> majorities). From the diarchic perspective, liberal democracy is thus a "pleonasm," and illiberal democracy is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. (Urbinati, 2019b, p. 552)

In drawing these conclusions, Urbinati explicitly refers to the work of Habermas (2001), whose thesis on the "'co-originality' of political liberty and individual liberty" she further develops in her own diarchic theory of democracy (Urbinati, 2014, 2019a). She also builds on the work of Norberto Bobbio, who sees "an unavoidable link between freedom as a non-impediment and freedom as autonomy" (Bobbio, 1995, as cited in Campati, 2024, p. 20). Bobbio has emphasized the same point as Urbinati:

> When I speak of liberal-democracy I am talking about what for me is the only possible form of effective democracy, without any other addition, especially if one means "non-liberal democracy" [which] indicates in my opinion a form of apparent democracy. (Bobbio, 1999, as cited in Campati, 2024, p. 21).

Gábor Halmai has developed a Habermasian line of defense against "illiberal democracy," similar to that taken by Nadia Urbinati. He has argued that liberalism, with its central elements of fundamental rights, rule of law, checks and balances, etc., is "not merely a limit on the public power of the majority but also a constitutive precondition for democracy" (Halmai, 2019, p. 302). Hence, he concludes, any contemporary democracy must be a liberal democracy.

Discussing Orbán's claims to build an illiberal democracy, Jan-Werner Müller has also opposed calling his regime a democracy, even if the adjective "illiberal" is added to it (Müller, 2016). Calling such regimes democracies would cede democratic credentials to aspiring or accomplished autocrats, who try to exculpate themselves by calling their own aspirations democratic even if also illiberal. "The expression illiberal democracy must be definitively abandoned when referring to leaders like Orbán because—precisely thanks to a real conceptual split—it allows them to present themselves as democrats even if not liberals" (Müller, 2016, p. 69). The central characteristics of Orbán's populist rule—its anti-pluralist politics, the attacks against the opposition, the dismantling of the rule of law, and generally capturing the liberal institutions by emptying them of their liberal content—undermine the democratic character of the regime rather than merely making it less liberal.

Wojciech Sadurski has also joined the definitional efforts to distinguish developments in Poland under Jarosław Kaczyński from any association with democratic regimes. Suggesting that illiberal democracy is an oxymoron, he refers to the regime, emerging under PiS's rule in Poland as "populist authoritarianism" (Sadurski, 2019) instead.

János Kis has advanced the most elaborate, in my opinion, argument to date against the "illiberal democracy" concept (Kis, 2014, 2018). In order to demonstrate that contemporary democracy must necessarily be liberal, and that there cannot be any other type of contemporary democracy, he compared two competing conceptions of democracy. On the mainstream conception, a democratic regime may be majoritarian and come short on liberal values, if it fails to uphold the rights of individuals or minorities against the majority. On this mainstream conception, democracy can be either liberal or illiberal (or majoritarian). More importantly, in this view, the more democratic a regime is, the less liberal it is, and vice versa. It is precisely this feature of the mainstream conception that aspiring autocrats demagogically abuse. They extoll the

supposed democratic majoritarian virtues of the regime they are building by curbing the supposedly anti-democratic liberal rights and institutions.

Against this mainstream conception, János Kis defends a liberal conception of democracy, which sees democratic and liberal values as inextricably bound together. It explicitly builds on Ronald Dworkin's "partnership conception of democracy," according to which "citizens of a political community govern themselves, in a special but valuable sense of self-government, when political action is appropriately seen as collective action by a partnership in which all citizens participate as free and equal partners" (Dworkin, 1998, p. 453). It views democracy not simply as majority rule limited by liberal rights, but as "a kind of partnership among citizens that presupposes individual rights as well as majoritarian procedures" (Dworkin, 1998, p. 457). To treat each citizen with equal concern and respect, it must both give each equal say in the democratic process and at the same time make sure that the interests of all are reflected in the democratic outcome. Individual rights, which on the mainstream conception protect the interests of minorities against majoritarian abuse, on the "partnership conception" are integrated within the democratic process itself. Decisions taken by a majority that systematically disregard the interests of an individual or a minority are not truly democratic, as they treat those in a minority with less than equal concern and respect. They treat them as ultimately not belonging to the demos—the owner of the state. A core feature of contemporary democracy on this conception is that the minority accepts the legitimacy of the majority decisions. Majority decisions are only acceptable to the minority because they see them to serve the interests of the whole demos, of which the minority is an integral part. Majority decisions should also ensure that the minority remains a legitimate actor in the democratic process that can still win the next time. In short, majority decisions do not curb minority rights and do not disenfranchise the minority. On this conception, democracy cannot be illiberal in principle: An illiberal regime, which systematically marginalizes and disenfranchises the minority, does not qualify as democratic.

This liberal conception of democracy is normatively very attractive—as an ideal of how democracy should work, one could hardly object to it. The problem with it is that it does not reflect the way "real existing democracy" actually works. Regrettably, in current democracies, majorities often disregard the interests of the minority. Precisely for this reason, minorities need liberal rights to protect their interests against abusive majorities. The majority always insists that its decisions take into account the interests of the minority, i.e., majorities claim to act as the *liberal* conception expects. The dissenting minorities dispute this claim, arguing that majorities act knavishly, just as the *mainstream* conception predicts. Herein lies the main problem with the ideal "partnership" conception of democracy. While *analytically* we can easily distinguish it from the mainstream conception, there is no clear-cut empirical criterion that we can apply in a politically neutral way to know whether the political community acts according to the partnership model of democracy, without abusive majorities, or according to the mainstream model with its abusive majorities.

The problem here is structurally similar to a problem in Rousseau's social contract theory. It is impossible empirically to distinguish majority decisions expressing the impartial "general will," always striking the right balance between social interests, from those expressing only the partial "will of all." There is no way to know whether the majority expresses the "general will" or not, as the ideal infallible "general will" of the popular sovereign may greatly diverge from its empirical embodiment in the majority. The majority typically presents its own will as the infallible "general will," while this will in fact is rarely more than the fallible "will of all" (Smilova, 2014, p. 288). Precisely because there is no way to know whether the majority acts *bona fide*, in

which case its will would indeed be "general," the dissenting minority needs protections against a potentially abusive majority.

Similarly, in the absence of an easily applicable, clear-cut criterion to distinguish the two, the minority is better off if we assume the political process runs according to the mainstream model of democracy. Only there can minorities be sure that even in the worst-case scenario—when majorities are abusive—they will be safe because their rights are protected. In the much rarer scenario of majorities acting *bona fide*, minorities will also be protected. As the "partnership" model relies on the *bona fide*, best-case scenario, which rarely occurs, it requires minorities to take risky gambles, without providing compensations for victims of abusive majorities. Because of such risks, democracies generally work better when they guarantee individual and minority rights and freedoms, i.e., when they are liberal. Yet just because liberal democracies generally work better, it does not demonstrate that "illiberal," majoritarian democracies do not or cannot exist. Furthermore, liberal democracies have often failed to deliver. Overreliance on democratically unaccountable experts and on self-regulating markets, to name just two of liberal democracy's recent failings, have prompted frustrated majorities to grant their trust to politicians, who promise them better opportunities in illiberal democracies.

To summarize my *conceptual* argument here: While there are normatively attractive conceptions of democracy, on which democracy cannot be illiberal, the democratic model currently practiced in "real existing democracies" leaves conceptual space for the existence of illiberal forms of democratic regimes.

5. The Conceptual Space for Illiberal Democracy

On the opposite side of the dispute over the illiberal democracy concept are scholars who point out that, both descriptively and analytically, contemporary democracy can be illiberal. For them, illiberal democracy is neither incoherent nor an oxymoron. They take seriously Carl Schmitt's position in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, published in 1923: "A democracy can be militarist or pacifist, absolutist or liberal, centralized or decentralized, progressive or reactionary, and again different at different times without ceasing to be a democracy" (Schmitt, 1985, p. 25). Admitting that there can be many, often diametrically opposed forms of democracy, most of these scholars nevertheless argue that an illiberal democratic political regime is normatively less attractive than the liberal alternative.

For Jeffrey Isaac, for example, illiberal democracy is used by apologists to denote a distinct type of democratic regime—sufficiently different from its liberal counterpart to warrant calling it illiberal, but which also shares with it some common democratic characteristics (Isaac, 2017, 2019). More importantly, this author warns against scoring easy definitional victories:

> To stipulate by semantic fiat that the justifications offered by Orbán et al. are against not just liberal democracy, but democracy itself is to refuse to take seriously the potent, if perhaps toxic, ideological brew that many millions of citizens are apparently eager to imbibe. (Isaac, 2017, p. 8)

For Yascha Mounk, the current crisis of liberal democracy is due to the growing tension between its two constitutive elements—the liberal emphasis on rights and limited government, on the one hand, and the democratic demand to translate popular views into public policies, on the other. In his account, democracy is deconsolidating due to the rise of "undemocratic liberalism," where liberal rights trump and may undermine

democracy (Mounk, 2018). In Mounk's view, "rights without democracy" weaken social bonds and economic security in the name of individual freedom. The backlash leads to the opposite extreme—to "illiberal democracy." A frustrated majority empowers power-hungry demagogues to rule unconstrained by rights and without rule-of-law limits—all in the name of "the real people." Such unconstrained rule, Mounk argues, ultimately leads to authoritarianism.

Scholars of contemporary populism add further insights to the debate on electoral democracy without liberalism.

Cas Mudde defines populism as a form of extreme majoritarianism that is "essentially democratic, but not liberal democratic" (Mudde, 2004, 2013; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Importantly, he warns that denying the democratic character of populism reinforces the plausibility of the populist critique against liberal elites, which portrays them as fundamentally undemocratic because of their apparent insensitivity to popular demands (Mudde, 2013). A more recent statement of Mudde's view brings out this aspect particularly well: Populism is "An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism" (Mudde, 2021). Defining populism precisely as democratic illiberalism has allowed Takis Pappas to set populism apart from neighboring phenomena such as nativism, on the one hand, and anti-democratic regimes, on the other (Pappas, 2019).

For William Galston, populist movements are not necessarily anti-democratic and are not always a threat to democracy:

> Although populist movements sometimes erode or even overturn democratic regimes, they are not necessarily anti-democratic. But populism is always anti-pluralist. In this key respect it represents a challenge to liberal democracy, which stands or falls with the recognition and protection of pluralism. (Galston, 2017, p. 127)

The defenders of the illiberal democracy concept are aware that the political stakes in this debate are high, much exceeding the purely academic quibbles over concepts that rarely go beyond university walls or leave academic journals. They understand that "the struggle [is] for the language of politics" (Kis, 2018, p. 182). Concepts used by political analysts are not politically innocent. Political struggles to large extent are struggles over the language of politics. Those who win the battle for framing a disputed issue have good chances to win the battle over the issue itself.

Yet contrary to those believing it is easier to win against illiberals on conceptual grounds, they think that definitional victory is unlikely to win the substantive battle over the attractiveness of a particular political regime. More importantly, in their view such victory would be politically counterproductive, as it only makes it more likely that the long-term political battle with the illiberals over the better political regime will be lost. They fear, for example, that in refusing to allow conceptual space for illiberal forms of democracy, liberal theorists easily fall into the trap set by their illiberal opponents. It should be stressed here that liberal theorists do not limit their arguments to the pages of academic journals, but in their role as public intellectuals participate in political debates. The involvement of Hungarian and Polish liberal academics in the debates on the illiberal democracy concept is a case in point. The phenomenon is hardly limited to the post-communist region, however. Around the globe, think-tanks along with politicians take on and politically

weaponize arguments developed by political theorists. Thus, when insisting that democracy should necessarily be liberal, and that all democrats are liberals—or else they stop being democrats—the liberal position risks being portrayed as anti-pluralist and anti-democratic and then weaponized against liberal democracy. By using this strategy, furthermore, liberals only confirm a long-harbored accusation against them: Not only do they dismiss popular grievances as illiberal whims, but they also try to exclude from the democratic arena their illiberal opponents.

Cas Mudde has pointed out the political risks of the liberal strategy of denying democratic credentials to illiberal populism: "Given the complex relationship between populism and democracy, it is crucial for opponents of populism to criticize the actual weak points of populism. The argument that populism is antidemocratic is unconvincing and might ultimately reinforce the populist position" (Mudde, 2013, p. 6). Further developing the line advanced by Jeffrey Isaac (Isaac, 2017, 2019), András Sajó also urges us to take illiberals' self-description as democrats seriously. He stresses the central role that electoral support plays for illiberalism as an ideology: "For the illiberal structuring of law, culture, and society, it is essential that the political (legislative) power be confirmed through elections" (Sajó, 2019, p. 396). He adds:

> [The illiberal regime is] legitimate in the eyes of a popular majority exactly for being both elected and illiberal, and for its daring counter-cultural denial of what is felt unauthentic and imposed. The affirmation of illiberal positions…offers an appropriate and socially attractive everyday social theory. (Sajó, 2019, p. 396)

In this section, I have provided *political* arguments to substantiate my position against definitional victories on illiberal democracy. Discussing the positions of political theorists—prominent public intellectuals—I argued that they may prove politically counterproductive. They risk giving arguments to their ideological adversaries and risk losing the long-term political battle for liberal democracy.

6. Debating an Essentially Contested Concept

If the description given by András Sajó is accurate, illiberal democracy may not just be a pet project of illiberal leaders, intent on hiding their authoritarian intentions behind a democratic mask. Rather, it is a fledgling ideology with which majorities (of Hungarians, maybe also a significant number of Poles, Brits, Americans, Indians, among others) may identify and embrace as an attractive conceptual frame "to order social space, social and historical time, to forge collective national identity" (Freeden, 2003, p. 42).

The democratic character of the paradigmatic illiberal regime that claims to also be democratic—that of Orbán's Hungary—was debated in the European Parliament (EP) in 2022. The stakes of the debate could not be higher. The MEPs were well aware of the political implications of continuing to call an increasingly autocratizing political regime a democracy. They did not need to be reminded by prominent democratic theorists that:

> Democracy emerged from World War II as a good word, a word that elicited praise, indeed a word that was praise. Thus, the clash of arms had barely ended when a war over the word was started. It was, and remains, a war for winning over "democracy" on one's own side. (Sartori, 1987, as cited in Campati, 2024, p. 12)

Aware of the political implications, the overwhelming majority of the MEPs in 2022 voted for a resolution that Hungary was no longer a democracy, but a "hybrid regime of electoral autocracy instead" (EP, 2022). The EP, the resolution read, "expresses deep regret that the lack of decisive EU action has contributed to a breakdown in democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary, turning the country into a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy" (EP, 2022).

This EP resolution is a political statement. Yet it is a controversial statement, as it goes against the general political principle that only autocrats—and never democrats—"deny the legitimacy of their opponents" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 23). A favorite among illiberals, the line of attack against the EP majority was open by this decision—they could accuse the mainstream parties in the EP of double-standards-hypocrisy, as they did what according to their own standards only authoritarians do. Liberals denied the legitimacy of their opponents, thereby demonstrating their true nature of authoritarians rather than democrats. This was exactly how "illiberals" reacted. Commenting on the EP resolution, the conservative political theorist Patrick Deneen quipped on the social platform X: "Electoral autocracy is democracy liberals don't like." Deneen was not just expressing his own disagreement with this resolution. He voiced the dissatisfaction many feel when liberals claim the right to authoritatively define essentially contested political concepts such as democracy.

The second problem with such definitional victories is that they are weak strategically, as they may prove counterproductive. The EP resolution, heralded by many as a victory, may backfire in the long run. It may produce a backlash that fuels Euroscepticism and breeds even stronger popular disaffection with liberal democracy. In short, it may further enhance the political positions of illiberals.

The danger of backlash is not hypothetical. Growing satisfaction with democracy in parts of Eastern and Central Europe under illiberal rule has long baffled analysts (Foa et al., 2020, p. 25). As counterintuitive as growing satisfaction with democracy under illiberal rule may sound to a convinced liberal democrat, it should be taken seriously. The reason is that these popular attitudes may cohere well with the newly emerging, specifically illiberal-democratic, ideology, giving a more or less coherent expression to the growing illiberal sentiments in some parts of the world. The illiberal attitudes may themselves be expressions of the rapidly spreading ideology, which many find attractive. In short, the illiberal ideology and the illiberal attitudes may reinforce each other.

The same trend of growing illiberal attitudes has become still more pronounced during "the year of elections": In 2024, illiberals scored global electoral victories—in Europe (in national and EP elections), in the US, and beyond.

Academic scholars discussing democracy have not always recognized that it is an essentially contested concept. Some may have even slipped into the political "war for winning over 'democracy' on one's own side" (Sartori, 1987, p. 479). Others have acknowledged it is an essentially contested concept and have been mindful of the implications. Referring to Claude Lefort's work, for example, Jeffrey Isaac noted that democracy is "an inherently open and an essentially contested idea" (Isaac, 2017, p. 11). And while János Kis states that "the concept of democracy is more or less consensual," he agrees that "its conceptions are contested. Different conceptions offer different and competing interpretations of what democracy really is" (Kis, 2018, p. 184)—i.e., for him, too, democracy is an essentially contested concept.

When debating an essentially contested concept such as democracy, it is important to recognize that it is sufficiently complex and open-textured to sustain multiple reasonable interpretations (Gallie, 1956; Kahan, 1998). It should be stressed that recognizing the essentially contested character of democracy does not relativize this concept, nor does it require conceding that anything goes. Not all interpretations are equally valid, even when the complexity of the concept of democracy allows for multiple reasonable interpretations of the values articulated in it.

The debates in normative democratic theory on the multiple reasonable interpretations of the essentially contested concept of democracy need to be distinguished from the debate on "democracy with adjectives" (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). The latter has been a favorite academic exercise in comparative politics and democratization scholarship during the 1990s. It dealt with the proliferation of subtypes of democracies in a scholarly attempt to better account for the diverse cases of countries undergoing a regime change away from authoritarianism—and possibly towards democracy. Its aim was to differentiate the diverse trajectories and better explain the distinct features of their diverse paths. The challenge back then was to not overstretch the concept of democracy yet at the same time to account for the multiple, often very diverse weaknesses encountered on the road to democracy.

The issues raised by the current debates on what we may call "democracy with illiberal adjectives" are different. They are not of purely scholarly interest but are *political*. Not scholars of comparative politics pile adjectives to make better sense of the democratic regimes they study. Politicians and ideologues, aiming to present their political projects as "democratic," now add the adjectives. In a propaganda feat, they mark them as "democratic" even when these projects grossly depart—as ideas, policies, and institutional, formal, and informal practices—from the ideas and practices of liberal democracies, which earned democracy its good name.

The issues in the debates around democracy are essentially political. Political theorists can, nevertheless, make an important contribution; one may even argue they have a civic duty to serve with their expertise for the survival of our democracies. An important lesson to draw from the discussion here, for example, is that given the essentially contested character of our concept of democracy, definitional victories are unlikely to win the important *political battle over the better political regime*. Such victories are not just fruitless. Serious political risks are involved. By scoring purely definitional victories against "illiberal democracy," the "liberal victors" in fact fall into the trap prepared for them by their illiberal adversaries, who readily accuse the former of being smug anti-democrats. The better strategy, with greater chances of success, I argue, is to engage in substantive debate on ideas, an ideological battle, if you wish, on the normative ideas of the alternative regimes and to show why liberal democracy is the more morally attractive regime.

The debate, in short, should be about the normative attractiveness of the central ideas, of the core "ideational" features of alternative regimes. Zsolt Enyedi welcomes a similar shift of emphasis away from debates on the institutional features of political regimes ("liberal-democratic" versus "illiberal-democratic") and towards ideas, since "the mimicry of the formal institutions of liberal democracies shows that they can be used for multiple purposes" (Enyedi, 2024, p. 3).

7. The Better Strategy: Disputing the Ideational Core of Democratic Illiberalism

Contemporary illiberal ideologues pursue a strategy reminiscent of that of Sir Isaiah Berlin in *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Smilova, 2021, p. 190). Berlin sought to discredit communism by showing that of the two regimes proclaiming liberty as their fundamental value, only liberal democracy is true to it. Similarly, illiberals today try to discredit liberal democracy by showing that democratic illiberalism is truer to democratic values than is its liberal-democratic incarnation.

The better strategy for the defenders of liberal democracy, who want to resist such illiberal tropes, I argue, is to engage substantively with the distinct ideas, with the "ideational core" of democratic illiberalism. It is the attractiveness of these substantive ideas that may render "illiberal democracies" more morally appealing than the liberal-democratic alternative. Without an adequate account of its normative features, the battle against illiberal democracy risks being lost. This is the *normative* argument for leaving conceptual space for this type of regime, which I advance in the last part of this article.

Political theorists' contribution in accounting for the core normative features of illiberalism is indispensable. There are competing accounts of the core ideas of illiberalism. Some authors single out the promotion of (a) unrestrained popular sovereignty, (b) ethno-nationalist "common good" anti-individualism and anti-pluralism, and (c) anti-liberal anti-globalism (d) within electoral regimes (Smilova, 2021). Others define illiberalism through its opposition to pluralism and ideological heterogeneity and to minority accommodation, and its prioritizing "the ties of solidarity, formed around a communitarian view of nationhood and sovereignty" (Guasti & Bustikova, 2023). In the most developed account of contemporary illiberalism to date, Marlène Laruelle defines it as "majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity," with "claims of rootedness in an age of globalization" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 304). In all of these accounts, state support for traditional hierarchies and for preserving cultural homogeneity plays a central role, which seems to exclude the possibility of leftist illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024, p. 4). Yet, as contemporary illiberalism is a "backlash against today's liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational" (Laruelle, 2022, p. 309), the possibility of leftist illiberalism as a backlash specifically against economic liberalism should also be accounted for, even if it is understudied because of fewer recent examples.

In contrast to the rather thick characterization of the core ideas of illiberalism in terms of substantive values, Zsolt Enyedi's approach is minimalist. He first identifies the core characteristics of liberal democracies—limited power, neutral state, and open society, all of which need to be present for a regime to qualify as a liberal democracy—and then identifies their opposites—power concentration, partisan state, and closed society—as the defining features of illiberalism (Enyedi, 2024, p. 6). Avoiding any references to culture, he also keeps the references to values—such as equality or pluralism—rather thin. He does this in order to:

> Allow for legitimate disagreements within liberal democracy on important issues such as gender relations, specific rights of sexual minorities, border openness, or reproductive rights…and the illiberal label is assigned only to those who question the political and moral equality of community members. (Enyedi, 2024, p. 7)

The motivation behind this definitional approach to illiberalism is that "the higher level of abstraction increases its ability to travel through space and time" (Enyedi, 2024, p. 7). The minimalism here has the virtue of being able to account for a wide range of illiberalisms that have existed, exist, and will exist in the future around the globe.

Despite its virtues, however, the minimalist approach has its limits. The illiberal features of power concentration and partisan state (and "closed societies," though maybe to a lesser extent) are not only very thin on substantive content, but can hardly account for the appeal of illiberalism. The substantive content of ideas is what explains the intuitive appeal for many of contemporary illiberal democracies as an attractive alternative to liberal democracies. The general features of illiberalism on this account focus on institutional characteristics—power is concentrated rather than limited, the state is partisan rather than neutral. Unless the substantive values behind these institutional choices are spelled out, the popular preference for a regime with such institutional features would remain under-explained, as the wider public finds attractive the substantive ideas and not the institutional mechanisms that realize them. An account of illiberalism should not leave out the substantive values that make illiberal regimes attractive, as this would diminish its explanatory power. To remedy this limitation, Zsolt Enyedi identifies nine variants of illiberalism. Some of them are more popularly appealing (populist and traditionalist illiberalisms, for example) and have consequently much wider spread as alternatives to liberal democracy than the rest.

The scholarly debate on the core features and other aspects of contemporary illiberalism is rapidly developing (Enyedi, 2024; Laruelle, 2022, 2024; Sajó et al., 2021; Vormann & Weinman, 2020). Yet, this new research field is far from reaching consensus even on the main definitions and explanatory models. I find the thicker substantive accounts of illiberalism more promising as they may better account for what makes illiberalism attractive to many. Further research is needed to form a solid corpus of knowledge on the contemporary forms of illiberalism. Political theorists can greatly contribute here by refining the conceptualization of "democratic" and/or other forms of illiberalism.

A better understanding of what is illiberalism and what makes it attractive would also help in devising better strategies for responding to the challenges of illiberal regimes. It is well established that the ideological scripts of illiberalism draw on different ideological frameworks and historical backgrounds. This makes them flexible enough to serve as political blueprint for the multiple illiberal transformations in the contemporary context of liberal democracy in global crisis. The emerging model of contemporary illiberalism may lack full coherence, yet it exhibits enough consistency to make the illiberal political model determinate enough. The conceptual and policy flexibility makes it adaptable to different contexts and changes in the international and domestic political environment. All of this makes the illiberal model a serious rival to democratic liberalism for global dominance. Key messages of this model are gaining currency among majorities disaffected with liberal democracy. The solutions proposed by illiberal actors to increasingly anxious majorities cannot be discredited merely by labeling them as undemocratic. Recognizing that elements of political, economic, and cultural liberalism have contributed to the pluri-crises hitting political communities is essential. Providing substantive solutions to address liberal shortcomings is what potentially can limit the political space for illiberals. Here, too, political theorists have a lot to offer. Specifying the elements of the liberal scripts that make liberal democracy normatively attractive and distinguishing them from less essential features—including those that may even be detrimental to the survival of this regime—may help build more resilient liberal democracies.

8. Conclusion

The political battle for vigorous liberal democracy, able to win back the hearts and minds of majorities, requires a frank discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of its main current rival—contemporary illiberal democracy. A leading approach in recent democratic theory is to discredit this political regime by denying it conceptual coherence.

In this article, I criticize this approach as misguided and counter-productive. I argued that trying to score definitional victories against the opponents of liberal democracy by declaring the illiberal alternatives non-democratic may seem like an easy win, but in fact only makes it more likely that liberal democrats lose the long-term political battle for liberal democracy.

First, this approach risks confirming the accusations that liberals are anti-pluralist anti-democrats, who are not only deaf to popular grievances, but are also ready to exclude political rivals from the democratic debate.

Next, this approach is misguided as it prevents understanding what illiberal democracy is and what makes its core ideas attractive to many. The lack of adequate understanding prevents engaging in a debate on the substantive ideas of the illiberal model, along with the institutional mechanisms for their implementation. Without engaging in a normative debate, democratic theorists would not be able to demonstrate that liberal democracy is substantively better than its illiberal alternatives.

Lastly, winning the political battle for liberal democracy requires building effective strategies to counteract the most normatively attractive elements of illiberal democracy and offering still better alternatives to them. The success of the alternatives to the challenge of illiberal democracy depends on having adequate knowledge of illiberalism, on understanding its various forms. This knowledge—and recent scholarly studies of illiberalism are rapidly progressing here—is a critically important resource in the political battle for liberal democracy.

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