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EDITORIAL

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Debating Democracy: Concepts, Histories, and Controversies

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Abstract

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

Keywords

contested concepts; controversies; debates; history; liberal democracy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ARTICLE

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Liberal Democracy From Oxymoron to Celebrated Concept: British and French Discourses of 1968–2001

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Abstract

In recent decades, the term "liberal democracy" has become increasingly prevalent in political and academic discourse. However, this widespread usage obscures the historical tension between democracy—understood as the exercise of popular sovereignty—and liberalism's emphasis on constitutional constraints and individual rights. While this contradiction was apparent to earlier political thinkers, the ideological battles of the 20th century led to the fusion of democracy and liberalism into a seemingly self-evident political ideal. To understand this transformation, this article examines the conceptual evolution of "liberal democracy" in Britain and France between 1968 and 2001, focusing on its use in parliamentary debates. It demonstrates how the concept was initially mobilized to counter participatory critiques of democracy in the 1970s, before gaining broader acceptance in the 1980s and culminating in cautious celebration after 1989. By the late 1990s, however, the term became increasingly contested, with both its liberal and democratic components facing scrutiny. Drawing from conceptual history, parliamentary studies, and democratic theory, this article historicizes "liberal democracy" as a constructed and politically charged category rather than a neutral descriptor of political regimes.

Keywords

democracy; France; history; liberalism; parliament; United Kingdom

1. Introduction

The concept of "liberal democracy" is everywhere. From politicians' speeches to pundits' op-eds, the concept has saturated the public sphere. Philanthropists and research agencies fund projects on "the future of liberal democracy" (European Commission, 2021; Walker, 2018). Indicators explicitly created to highlight the

"varieties of democracy" (such as V-Dem) have in recent years recentred their analysis on the measurement of "liberal democracy" and its decline (Wolff, 2023). Numerous voices are leading the charge in this battle for the defence of "liberal democracy" (e.g., Applebaum, 2020; Drache & Froese, 2022; Galston, 2018; Sedgwick, 2019; van Herpen, 2021).

As with most buzzwords, finding a working definition can be challenging. The authors of *The Oxford Handbook of Political Representation in Liberal Democracies* define "liberal democracy" in the following way:

> By liberal democracies we refer to the institutional practices as they have evolved in Western democracies since the early nineteenth century where periodic elections safeguarded by a canon of liberties and rights authorize representatives to make decisions for those residing within nation-states. (Rohrschneider & Thomassen, 2020, p. 1)

In *The Weariness of Democracy*, Obed Frausto, Jason Powell, and Sarah Vitale, while more critical, argue the following:

> Liberal democracy was originally defined as a form of government characterized by representation, the rule of law, and the distribution and balance of power. It became the foundational pillar of modern societies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Frausto et al., 2020, p. 3)

Two key components thus emerge: (a) representation through elections; and (b) the rule of law and constitutionally protected individual rights. But a third historical element is also present in the background of these definitions: Liberal democracy is an old ideal and practice, dating back to at least the 19th century.

While such definitions can have their utility, they are not historically grounded—worse, they are downright anachronistic. Indeed, a hundred years ago, "liberal democracy" would have sounded like an oxymoron, since liberalism and democratic thought were not known for their affinities. Liberals were often quite wary of the "tyrannic" potential of democracy, while others, such as socialists and anarchists, saw democracy as transcending the liberal focus on individual rights.

Thus, the problem becomes not "how can we save liberal democracy," but "how did this notion of liberal democracy become so prevalent?" How did this reconceptualisation of the relationship between liberalism and democracy happen? Who were the actors at the heart of this transformation? Against what model(s) were they using this concept? To answer some of these questions, I focus here on French and British political discourses at the end of the 20th century, especially parliamentary debates, and their uses of "liberal democracy."

Through this case study, I argue that "liberal democracy" is a rather recent category in political discourse: Born in the 1930s, defined during the Cold War, it only became a model applicable to France and the United Kingdom during the 1970s. Before this, "liberal democracy" was mainly seen as something that other countries should aim at achieving. In the 1980s, the revival of East/West antagonisms, rule-of-law issues regarding political violence, and partisan reconfigurations led to a wider application of the notion. By the 1990s, with the collapse of the USSR, the discredit of postcolonial movements, and the rise of human rights discourses, "liberal democracy" became the new banner of those proclaiming the "end of history"—although this was a rather cautious celebration.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a brief discussion of the theoretical and methodological choices that underpin this research. In Section 3, I offer a quantitative view of the uses of "liberal democracy" in parliament and selected newspapers, highlighting the rather late popularity of the concept in these sources. Section 4 provides an examination of the late 1970s and 1980s when "liberal democracy" began to take hold in British and French political discourse as a result of a counter-offensive against participatory critiques and geopolitical shifts. Finally, Section 5 focuses on the 1990s, when the notion became central in French and British political imagination, albeit with some reservations.

2. Methodology

This research sits at the intersection of two strands of literature. First, the last decade has seen several studies in intellectual history of the uses of the word "democracy" in the modern period. While these works often differ in scope and cases, they tend to highlight the negative connotations that this term had in most Western polities until the beginnings of the 20th century (Innes & Philp, 2013, 2018; Kurunmäki et al., 2018). Second, recent scholarship on the history of liberalism has also underlined the importance of avoiding anachronistic uses of "liberal" (D. Bell, 2014; Freeden et al., 2019; Rosenblatt, 2018). These scholars explain how the term is often "retrojected" to political thinkers who never defined themselves in that way (John Locke being the prime example), or onto institutions with few of the characteristics of what we now call "liberalism" or "democracy."

Building on these investigations helps us to critically assess some of the claims regarding the history of "liberal democracy." Several of the above-mentioned works locate its origins in one of the revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries (Boix et al., 2020; Galston, 2018, p. 72; Russo & Cotta, 2020; van Herpen, 2021, p. 198). Such a perspective is both anachronistic and procrustean. Anachronistic because the historical actors of these events rarely use the terms "democracy" or "liberal" to describe what they were living through, let alone "liberal democracy." Procrustean because to see these revolutions as "liberal democratic" implies stretching both the concept and these political situations beyond recognition. The representative governments that came out of such revolutions were neither democratic nor liberal, owing much more to ideas of republicanism and the mixed constitution (Bonin, 2024; Innes & Philp, 2013; Kurunmäki et al., 2018). "Liberal democracy," both as a word and as a concept, was absent from the debates at the time. For much of the 19th century, most self-identified French and British liberals focused on limiting the extent of the state, while those in favour of "popular sovereignty" or "democracy" concentrated on the source of political power (Bourke, 2016; de Dijn, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2018).

In order to understand how "liberal democracy" became such a hegemonic notion while avoiding the above-mentioned pitfalls, I use the framework and methods developed by conceptual history. The starting point of this approach is that human beings create, define, evaluate, use, and reject concepts to construct much of their social reality. Yet the exact meanings of key terms in political, societal, and cultural debates are unavoidably contested. Given this, the researcher's goal is not so much to discover the "true" meaning of contested concepts like "democracy" or "liberty," but rather to reconstruct their different layers of meaning (Koselleck, 2002; Steinmetz et al., 2017).

To restrict the scope of the investigation, this article deals with only two national cases: France and the United Kingdom. While not systematically comparing the conceptual history of "liberal democracy" in the two countries (a process that would raise several issues; see Steinmetz et al., 2017, pp. 17–24), I use the

contrast between the two cases to decentre the analysis and avoid the issues associated with "methodological nationalism." The choice of France and the United Kingdom is justified by two elements. First, they are often hailed (with the United States) as birthplaces of representative government and/or modern democracy, and several works of political science build on this comparison (Bateman, 2018; Manin, 1997). Second, while both countries share an entangled history, their intellectual traditions differ enough to allow one to grasp specificities as well as commonalities. More specifically, the French case allows studying a country where republicanism has been an important ideological framework and where the label "*libéral*" has fared rather poorly. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, has a stronger liberal tradition and is more connected to wider anglophone debates. This last point raises a question: Why not include the United States and complete the above-mentioned trinity? Besides practical reasons, ranging from my lack of expertise in American intellectual history to the limits of what one can do in an article, it is worth pointing out that my goal here is not to be exhaustive, but rather, to recognise "the inescapable diversity of political thought," to aim for "the re-particularizing of its analysis" (Freeden & Vincent, 2013, p. 8).

Furthermore, to increase compatibility and further limit the scope of the investigation, I focus mainly on parliamentary debates. While parliamentary debates have often been used as sources in political history, the history of political thought has often sidelined them in favour of more canonical sources, albeit this is slowly changing (Skjönsberg, 2021). In order to multiply perspectives, I sometimes expand the corpus, mainly towards theoretical treatises, political pamphlets, or newspaper articles. To make a musical metaphor: Parliamentary debates provide the rhythm section of this investigation, while other mediums add their solos here and there.

Since most of these sources are digitally available in a text-searchable format, this article adopts a nominalist approach. While the core ideas behind "liberal democracy" can be expressed through other terms, what seems to be crucial to me is to understand why actors choose to voice them in those precise words. To take one example, while the expression "Western democracy" might share conceptual similarities with "liberal democracy" and might even be used interchangeably by some, this is something to explain rather than to take for granted. It is by being attentive to the precise words used by various historical actors that one can hope to grasp conceptual transformations and their impact on our current situation (Muto, 2022).

Taking advantage of the recent "digital turn" in intellectual history, I adopt digital methods and tools to support this analysis. More precisely, I used the interface People and Parliament, developed at the University of Jyväskylä, which contains the transcripts of the parliamentary debates of more than 10 countries, including France and the United Kingdom (Ihalainen et al., 2024). With this tool, I am able to pinpoint trends and ruptures and focus the analysis on key moments or actors. In this, I follow Jani Marjanen's suggestion that "the value of quantification can seldom be new interpretations, but rather empirical proof" (Marjanen, 2023, p. 50).

3. A View From Above

Adopting a quantitative perspective on "liberal democracy" in French and British parliamentary debates is useful in two regards. First, it makes the comparison easier. As a quick glance at Figure 1 indicates, "liberal democracy" (both in singular and plural) has been much more frequent in Westminster than in the French parliament since the 1990s. Second, it helps to locate peaks and rises in trends. Figure 1 demonstrates that

while the notion was present here and there in debates from the end of the 19th century, it did not become more widespread until the last third of the 20th century. This is particularly clear in the British case: Barely visible before the 1980s, the use of "liberal democracy" has exploded since then. As for the French case, while the progression is less linear, there was a stark increase in the use of the term after 1968.

These dynamics are not unique to parliaments. As demonstrated by Figure 2, in two British newspapers (*The Times* and *The Guardian*), similar trends to Figure 1 can be observed: some uses in the 1930s and a

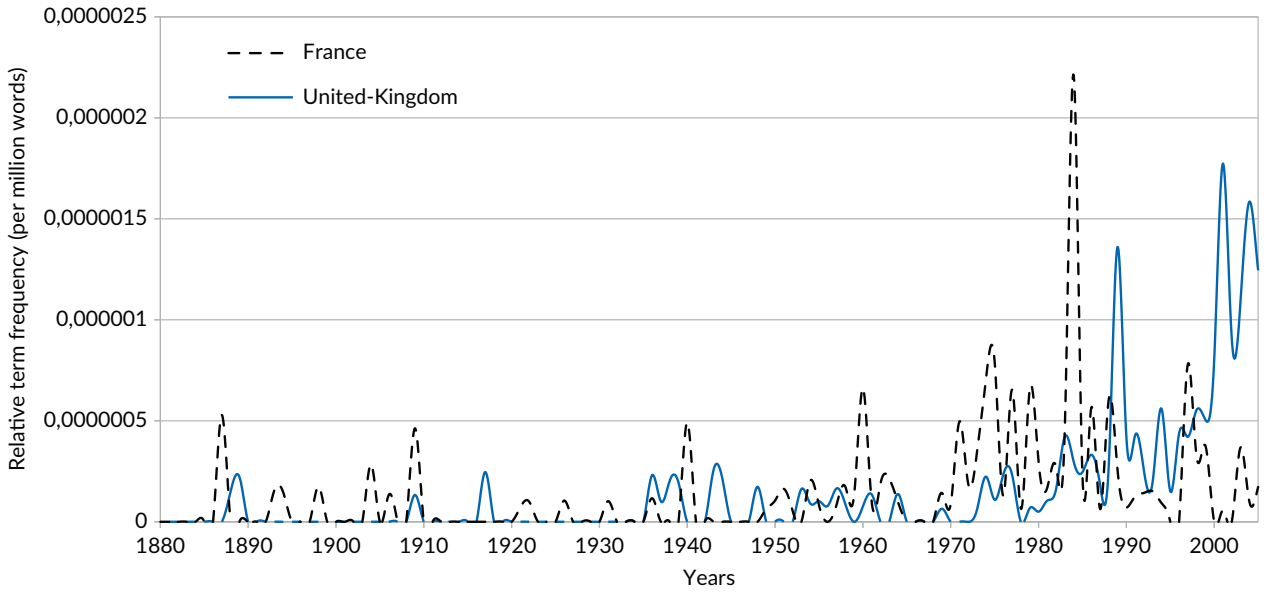

Figure 1. Relative term frequencies of "démocratie(s) libérale(s)" and "liberal democracy(ies)," French and British parliament, both upper and lower chambers, 1880–2005. Note: The low quality of the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) of earlier decades means that the search function might have missed some. Source: Author's own production based on data from Ihalainen et al. (2024).

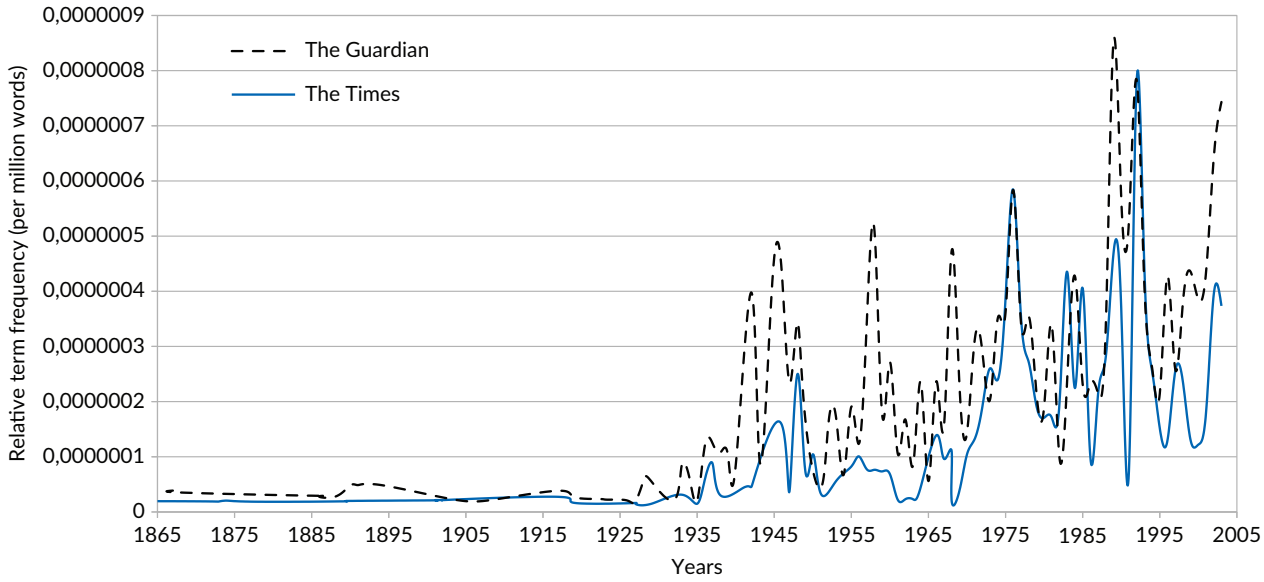

Figure 2. Relative term frequency of "liberal democracy(ies)" in *The Times* and *The Guardian*, 1865–2003. Source: Author's own production based on data from Research Software Lab (2023).

strong rise by the 1980s. In the French newspaper *Le Monde*, there is also a clear upward trend in the use of the notion in the 1970s (see Figure 3).

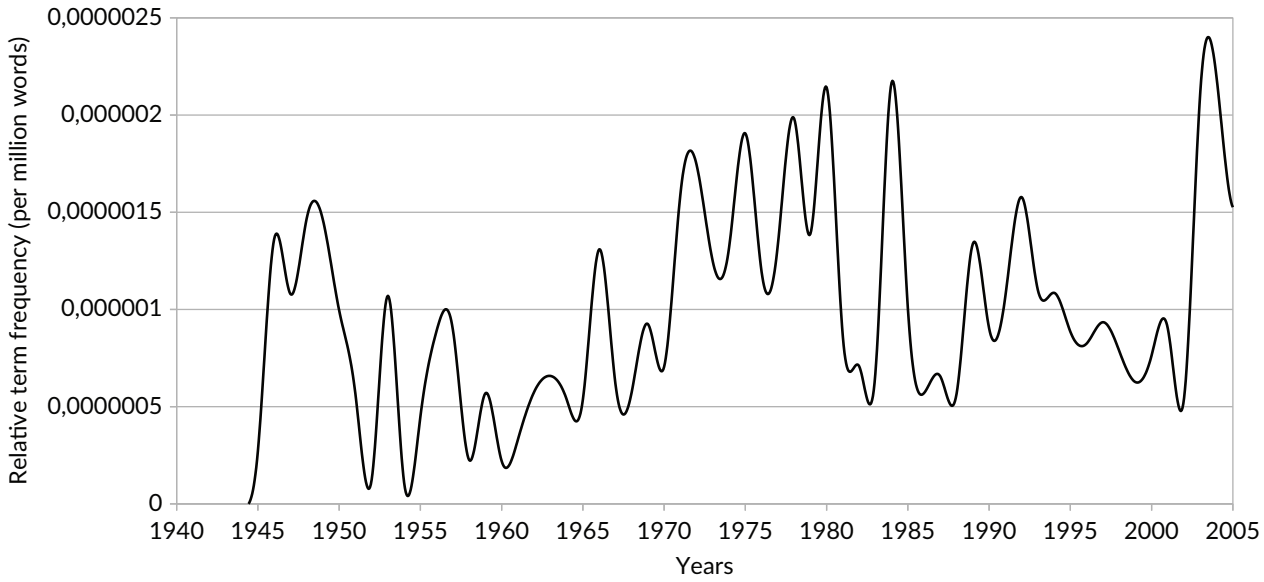

Figure 3. Relative term frequency of "démocratie(s) libérale(s)" in *Le Monde*, 1944–2005. Source: Author's own production based on data from Courson et al. (2023).

"Liberal democracy" was, quantitatively speaking, not a common expression in either British or French parliamentary debates for the first half of the 20th century. While one can find few positive uses in the 1930s, when it was used in juxtaposition with both fascism and communism, and in the 1950s, when it was used in juxtaposition with "totalitarianism," the notion certainly did not play a central role in the debates of the early Cold War. When the concept was used, it was mostly in discussions relating to foreign policy (Bonin, in press). Therefore, despite brief appearances of the term earlier, the current understanding and usage of the term "liberal democracy" should be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s.

4. The Counter-Offensive: 1968–1989

According to Martin Conway and Jan-Werner Müller, Western Europe adopted "stable" and "constrained" democratic regimes following 1945, with limited popular participation as well as strong technocratic and elitist components (Conway, 2020; Müller, 2011). From the 1960s onward, the institutions and the social norms which underpinned these regimes have been increasingly criticized across the West. In both France and the United Kingdom, the newfound popularity of "liberal democracy" appears to have been a response to these attacks, coming mostly from the New Left, in order to defend pluralistic regimes and a market economy. More precisely, while "liberal democracy" was still used often in geopolitical discussions, as something postcolonial states should strive towards, it also gained prominence in domestic debates. This reflects the fact that, as the famous Trilateral Commission report would put it in 1975, "democracy" was increasingly seen as being under pressure, not only from contextual and external threats, but from its own internal trends and intrinsic challenges (Crozier et al., 1975, p. 8).

In the British Parliament, the felt pressure of domestic problems was particularly explicit in the tensions between "parliamentary sovereignty" and "trade union power," or more broadly "out-of-doors" demands.

Without going over the historiography of the 1970s in the United Kingdom (Black et al., 2013), it is clear that various social movements, new and old, increasingly challenged the framework of the postwar "constrained democracy." Various MPs—especially Conservative ones—were keen to defend "liberal democracy" from "the streets." According to Nicholas Scott, a rising Conservative star defending the 1971 Industrial Relations Bill which limited the right to strike, the Labour Party should be cautious in its criticisms of Westminster:

> Some of the things that I hold precious are not so held by the other side, but parliamentary democracy and liberal democracy are, and some of the shouts from the other side of the House the other day about taking this battle on to the streets gives rise to something which I think hon. Gentlemen opposite should consider very seriously.…It behoves every honourable Member in this House to beware of even appearing to threaten the fundamental principles of parliamentary democracy. (House of Commons Debates [HC Deb], 25 January 1971, vol. 810 col. 60)

This type of accusation underlined the (perceived) threat posed to representative institutions by social movements. As Conservative Lord Monson explained a few years later, the Labour Party had turned toward the "authoritarian Left," fuelling a "shift from Parliamentary to trade union power [which] has turned Britain into arguably the least free of the small group of liberal democracies still left in the world" (House of Lords Debates [HL Deb], 28 September 1976, vol. 374 col. 311).

Across the Channel, a similar process of polarisation over the role of representative institutions was at play. In the French context, the events of May 1968 were crucial. This moment sparked the "French liberal revival" of the 1970s, itself situated in a longer crisis of republican thought (Chabal, 2016a; Schulz, 2022). Shocked by the "events of May," but offset by the dirigisme of Charles de Gaulle, several political figures tried to develop a liberal third way. In the intellectual sphere, the rise of Raymon Aron and the "Aroniens" and their associated publications (*Contrepoints* [1970–1976] and *Commentaire* [1979–present]) was a clear indicator of this liberal revival (Châton, 2015). In the political arena, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's presidency (1974–1981) was another proof that French liberalism was on the rise. In his manifesto *Démocratie française* (1976), Giscard d'Estaing defended "a modern democratic society, liberal in the pluralist structure of all its powers, advanced by a high degree of economic performance, social unification and cultural development" (Giscard d'Estaing, 1976, p. 170). This "*société libérale*" could be seen as the foundation for a "*démocratie libérale*" (Chabal, 2016b). In the following years, his goal of a "*démocratie libérale avancée*" was sometimes echoed by MPs (Pierre Jourdan [Union pour la Démocratie Française, UDF], Senate, 10 June 1975, p. 1421; Aymar Achille-Fould [Centre démocratie et progrès, CDP], National Assembly [NA], 18 November 1975, p. 8561; Pierre Bas [Rassemblement pour la République, RPR], NA, 28 July 1979, p. 6480), or criticized and mocked by the Left (Henri Lavielle [Parti socialiste, PS], 16 April 1975, p. 1738; Robert Ballanger [Parti communiste français, PCF], 26 April 1977, p. 2139; Edmond Garcin [PCF], 11 October 1979, p. 8093).

More generally, in the French parliament "*démocratie libérale*" was tied to consultation and dialogue, as then-Prime Minister Jacques Chirac (RPR) expressed in his 1974 *Discours de politique générale*:

> Finally, through a renewed practice of consultation between all the players in economic and social life and, in the political sphere, through different relations between the majority and the opposition, the aim is to make French society an exemplary model of liberal democracy. (NA, 5 June 1974, p. 2491)

This adequation of "liberal democracy" with "consultation" (or sometimes "participation" in Gaullist discourses) clearly positioned the liberal-democratic regimes in contrast to the more radical democratic ideals (such as *autogestion*) of the times. Through its association with freedom, the notion was also raised with regards to judicial questions, and rights and liberties in general (Hector Rolland [RPR], NA, 4 June 1970, p. 2243; André Beauguitte [Républicains Indépendants, RI], NA, 27 October 1971, p. 4955; Jacques Duhamel [CDP], Senate, 3 December 1971, p. 12; Alain Peyrefitte [Union des démocrates pour la République, UDR], NA, 6 December 1977, p. 8708). On this topic, Interior Minister Michel Poniatowski (FNRI, centre-right) could argue that "democracy, in any case liberal democracy, to which the French people confirmed their attachment in May 1974, requires that citizens be granted the widest possible individual and political rights" (Senate, 7 October 1975, p. 2848).

This embrace of "*démocratie libérale*" as the guarantee of political freedom by right-wing political actors went beyond parliamentary debates. Around the same period, Raymond Aron could, in his *Plaidoyer pour l'Europe décadente* (1977), worry about the potential "self-destruction of liberal democracies," since these regimes had at their core a "contradiction…which postulates freedom for the enemies of freedom" (Aron, 1977, p. 356). Taking the French and Italian political situation as examples of countries where a strong communist party might soon take power and destroy the current regime, he pleaded for a reframing of the liberal values of tolerance, diversity, and self-criticism as strengths rather than weaknesses. Aron was not alone in this move towards a stronger embrace and explicit defence of the concept of liberal democracy. Philipe Malaud, an "independent republican" politician who would drift to the far right, could call for a "liberal revolution" to defend liberal democratic institutions against "collectivist ideologies" (Malaud, 1976, p. 4). But it is probably the publication of legal professor Francis-Paul Bénoit's vast *La démocratie libérale* in 1978 by the prestigious Presses Universitaires de France which is the most revealing of the codification of the notion and its increased prevalence. Projecting the notion back onto the English parliamentary system of the 18th century, Bénoit claimed that liberal democracy was a type of society characterised by "the will to freedom and government of the people by themselves" (Bénoit, 1978, p. 5). Seeing no contradictions between liberalism and democracy, Bénoit stressed their complementarity. As vice-president of the Association pour la liberté économique et le progrès social, a (neo)liberal think tank, he was well placed to push forward this renewal of liberal thought (Brookes, 2017). While an examination of the whole (neo)liberal constellation and its relationship with democracy is impossible here, Lars Cornelissen has shown how, for an intellectual network like the Mont-Pelerin Society, the solution to democracy's tendency to intervene in the economy was to impose constitutional limits on the state's expenditure and economic powers (Cornelissen, 2017).

While it may be surprising for a country so commonly associated with neoliberalism, these economic concerns did not dominate the uses of "liberal democracy" in Westminster. Instead, MPs seemed increasingly worried about issues such as the rule of law and freedom of expression in a liberal-democratic state. Patrick Duffy (Labour [Lab]) could thus mention how members of the Armed Forces had to sacrifice "the freedom of expression and political activity and the freedom to engage in public controversy—for this [was] the well-founded basis of the relationship between the Armed Forces and the rest of the community in a liberal democracy" (HC Deb, 5 April 1973, vol. 854 col. 732). Others might underline how, "as citizens of a liberal democracy," the freedom of the press was crucial for both MPs and the public at large (Peter Bottomley (Conservative [Con]; HC Deb, 21 January 1976, vol. 903 col. 1398). The question of individual rights on the international stage often turned to the emerging question of "human rights," which would come to dominate the global agenda in the late 1970s and beyond (Hoffmann, 2016; Moyn, 2010). Thus, Julius Silverman (Lab)

could express his doubts regarding the USSR's capacity to respect the 1975 Helsinki Declaration, considering that "it was not a liberal democracy" (HC Deb, 18 May 1977, vol. 932 col. 503). This association between respect for human rights and the liberal-democratic framework would grow in the following years.

Another topic which would plague parliamentarians was the question of political violence and terrorism. With "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland escalating in the 1970s, several MPs began to weigh options between liberty and security. As Kingston upon Hull Central representative Kevin McNamara (Lab) expressed, this was "the eternal dilemma of any liberal democracy: [When could it be] necessary to exclude people from the country or to intern them without trial and without the evidence being produced?" (HC Deb, 19 May 1975, vol. 892 col. 1126). A few years later, Philip Goodhart (Con) would complain that "interrogators" in Northern Ireland had to "cope with more restrictions on such matters as time available to question suspects [than] in most other liberal democracies" (HC Deb, 16 March 1979, vol. 964 col. 977). Indeed, the question of the relationship between terrorism and "liberal democracy" would only increase in importance during the 1980s—proof that MPs seemed to worry first about the "liberal" part of the notion.

For Nicholas Scott, now under-secretary of state for the Northern Ireland Office, it was clear that in Northern Ireland, "liberal democracy" was "under attack from vicious terrorism," which necessitated the granting of emergency powers (HC Deb, 26 June 1985, vol. 81 col. 1047). This echoes similar concerns over the Channel: In 1986, Jacques Chirac (RPR), newly elected prime minister, presented terrorism as "a challenge to liberal democracies" to be vigorously fought (Senate, 15 April 1986, p. 516). But the threat was not only internal. In Westminster, for Lord Chalfont, former Labour foreign secretary in the 1960s, but getting closer to the conservative side at the time of the following quote, it was clear that "international terrorism is nothing else than a form of low-intensity warfare conducted against the liberal democracies of the West" (HL Deb, 7 November 1984, vol. 457 col. 60). Chalfont had tried to raise awareness about the dangers facing "liberal democracies" for years, both inside and outside of parliament. In a 1976 column in *The Times*, he argued that "for many years the values and principles of liberal democracy have been under attack," both by "international communists" and "Marxists within the Labour movement," but the greatest threat was actually the "growing public expenditure" and "nationalisations"—a position with strong Hayekean undertones (Lord Chalfont, 1976). During the 1980s, Chalfont would go on and on about the defence of liberal democracy, but usually in the context of East/West discussions (HL Deb, 20 July 1981, vol. 423 col. 39; HL Deb, 16 January 1985, vol. 458 col. 1005; HL Deb, 5 February 1986, vol. 470 col. 1180).

If the most frequent user of "liberal democracy" in Westminster was a Labour-turned-Conservative Lord, in France, it was a street-fighting anticommunist-turned-politician: Alain Madelin. By the late 1970s, the growing liberal intellectual counter-offensive described earlier also had its political counterpart, mostly in what has been called "la bande à Léo": rising right-wing heavyweights François Léotard, Gérard Longuet, and Alain Madelin (Perrier, 2015). It is the latter that is of particular interest to us. MP from 1978 to 2007, with brief interruptions as minister of industry (1986–1988) and minister for economic development (1993–1995), Madelin is one of the few French politicians to explicitly claim the mantle of "*libéral*" and was clearly involved in neoliberal networks. While the beginnings of his political activism in the 1960s in the far-right group Occident have been covered by others (Charpier, 2005), it is his work as MP that is relevant here. Indeed, as shown in Figure 1, this decade proved pivotal for the uses of "*démocratie libérale*" in France. In that regard, Madelin clearly stands above other MPs: He is responsible for almost half of the 80 times the expression was uttered in the French parliament during the 1980s.

Tellingly, it is on the issues of freedom of the press and education, two crucial topics in 1984, that Madelin most often used the notion (see all in the NA debates; on the press: 27 April 1982, p. 1377; 16 December 1983, p. 6597; 25 January 1984, pp. 34, 71; 27 January 1984, pp. 190, 194, 248, 430; 4 February 1984, pp. 561, 573; 8 February 1984, pp. 729, 952; 18 June 1984, pp. 3435–3439; 2 July 1984, p. 3961; 4 July 1984, pp. 4029, 4036; on education: 3 June 1983, 3rd sitting, p. 2038; 22 May 1984, p. 2517). That year saw vigorous debates on a bill to encourage transparency and pluralism in media enterprises, as well as on private education. During those discussions, Madelin quite often linked "*démocratie libérale*," freedom of expression, and "freedom of communication businesses," as well as retro-projecting the notion onto the French Revolution:

> Already, under the Convention, Lakanal considered…: "There can be no obstacle to the growth of communication enterprises because their purpose is to spread enlightenment that brings benefits to humanity." This was also the opinion of the founding fathers of our liberal democracy, of those who wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man….Now it is to this dissemination of information, by whatever means—in this case the press—that you are imposing restrictions that we consider to be contrary to the spirit of liberal democracy, contrary to our constitutional texts. (NA, 19 June 1984, p. 3489)

What emerges from these speeches, and Madelin's later publications (Madelin, 1992, 1995), is an understanding of "*démocratie libérale*" which stresses the limitations of popular sovereignty, insisting on constitutionally protected rights for the individual. While not particularly original in itself, these uses of the notion stick out in French parliamentary debates as more developed and articulated than those of his colleagues. Madelin also stands as an idiosyncratic type of politician, since he was not afraid of quoting liberal thinkers in parliament as well as dipping into the intellectual sphere, through his links with the Association pour la liberté économique et le progrès social and the Nouveaux Économistes.

Alongside Madelin, French MPs who used "liberal democracy" in parliamentary debates during the 1970s and 1980s tended to sit in the centre or the right wing of the chambers. While in these two decades, few MPs on the Left might use the notion here and there in a neutral way (Roger Quilliot [PS], NA, 5 November 1977, p. 2584; Hélène Luc [PCF], Senate, 17 February 1988, p. 130), most uses on the Left tended to be critical. For example, communist MP Joseph Legrand described "liberal democracy" as "just an electoral advertising screen" (NA, 8 December 1977, p. 8295), while Senator Franck Sérusclat (PS) could declare that a "*démocratie libérale*" was a "*démocratie tronquée*" (truncated democracy; Senate, 7 November 1979, p. 4671). However, this type of critical use of "liberal democracy" would go on declining. This mirrors broader intellectual tendencies: Whether associated with the first or the second Left (the "*deuxième gauche*" led, amongst others, by Michel Rocard), French intellectual figures tended to steer clear of using the concept of "liberal democracy" (with two minor critical exceptions: Ellul, 1978, p. 83; Huntzinger, 1977, pp. 252, 282). This would change in the following decade.

By the end of the 1980s, a series of events illustrate the newfound popularity of "liberal democracy" in both countries. In the United Kingdom, the most important one is the creation of the "Liberal Democrats" party in 1989. In the early 1980s, a breakaway group of Labour MPs created the Social Democratic Party, which would negotiate an electoral agreement with the Liberal Party and gain a certain momentum as "the Alliance." As both parties lost seats in the 1987 general election, calls for a merger grew. Initially named the "Social and Liberal Democrats" (SLD) in March 1988, the party adopted the name "Liberal Democrats" the following

year (while being briefly named the "Democrats" in between; Cook, 2010, p. 202). According to Matthew Taylor, Liberal MP and chair of the party's communications at the time, this was due to a lack of recognition of the SLD name, as well as the will to preserve "liberal beliefs" as a core identity (Taylor, 2007, p. 26). More broadly, this reflects the dominance of the Liberal Party in the merger: As historian Mike Finn explains, it is clear that "by the mid-1990s the party was emphatically rejecting the language of social democracy as that of a bygone age, and redefining itself exclusively in 'liberal' terms" (Finn, 2020, p. 268). Regarding the concept of "liberal democracy," while the 1990s would see an increase in its popularity in Westminster, the Lib-Dems do not appear to be the main cause: Labour and Conservatives MPs would continue to use the notion as well, meaning it did not acquire a specific partisan connotation.

In France, the larger embrace of "*démocratie libérale*" in the intellectual sphere was seen in the use of the notion in textbooks and other student-oriented publications. While in the 1960s, the recommended handbooks for the *collège* and *lycée* history classes might mention it here and there (Bloch-Morhange, 1963; Crouzet, 1961), the notion became commonplace by the 1980s (Heffer & Launay, 1980). This was not uncontroversial: In 1980, Communist MP Colette Privat could attack "a textbook that contrasts the liberal democracy of Pinochet's Chile with the communist dictatorship of Vietnam" (NA, 24 October 1980, p. 3097). For historian of education Marie-Christine Baquès, the 1980s witnessed several important changes in *lycée* history textbooks, including a "turnaround in interpretation" of the USSR (from positive to negative) and "a positive view of the United States [replacing] the negative view of the 1970s" (Baquès, 2007, p. 147). This was not limited to secondary education: In 1987, Philipe Bénéton's *Introduction à la politique moderne*, a textbook for university students, explicitly framed the main issue of politics as the struggle between liberal democracy and totalitarianism (Bénéton, 1987). In the United Kingdom, the publication of a political science textbook entitled *Understanding Liberal Democracy* (1988) can also be seen as revealing of the changing zeitgeist. From a rather arcane term used in historico-philosophical discussions, "liberal democracy" was now presented to students as a basic category of analysis of contemporary politics. The author, University of Reading Lecturer Barry Holden, defined "democracy" as "a political system in which the whole people…make, and are entitled to make, the basic determining decisions on important matters of public policy" (Holden, 1988, p. 8). From this, he argued that "liberal democracy" had a more controversial meaning but that it could be understood as a "limited democracy," one in which the people "are only entitled to make such decisions in a restricted sphere" (Holden, 1988, p. 17). Once again, the key characteristic of the liberal-democratic regimes was its "liberal" element, that is in its limitations on the state's power.

5. The Cautious Celebration: 1989–2001

While we should be cautious about overstressing ruptures, it does seem that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, a levee had broken regarding "liberal democracy" both in British and French politics. The notion became increasingly frequent in parliamentary debates, gained traction in the public sphere, and was generally used with triumphalist undertones. In the second edition of *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, published in 1993, Holden could now write in the preface that while the book was initially published during the Cold War, the events of the last years "support the view that liberal democracy is now unchallenged" (Holden, 1993, p. ix). This echoes the thesis of one of the most infamous essays in modern politics: Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History" (1989). While a full study of Fukuyama's ideas falls beyond the scope of this article, there is good reason to think that Fukuyama is one of the main innovative ideologues to have influenced the popularity of the concept of liberal democracy in the 1990s.

Although there is a vast literature on the question of the "end of history," the important point from my perspective is that Fukuyama argued that we were witnessing "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of *Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government*" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 4, emphasis added). In his 1992 book, Fukuyama quietly dropped the "Western" part, aiming at a more universalist tone, and recounted how in his essay he "argued that liberal democracy may constitute the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and the 'final form of human government,' and as such constituted the 'end of history'" (Fukuyama, 1992, p. ix). More precisely, Fukuyama presented the Hegelian-inspired thesis of Alexandre Kojève, for whom, following the French Revolution, "the basic *principles* of the liberal democratic state could not be improved upon" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 5, emphasis in the original). Such a state was liberal "insofar as it recognizes and protects through a system of law man's universal right to freedom," and democratic because it existed "only with the consent of the governed" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 11). Juridically-backed individual rights and consent (mostly understood as elections) in the political sphere, and free markets in the economic one—this was Fukuyama's final trinity.

Fukuyama's ideas were widely discussed and criticised in the following years, in France, the United Kingdom, and beyond. His original essay was published in *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989, and it was translated into French (by the Aronien review *Commentaire*) in the fall. As proof of the dissemination of his ideas in France, one can note that by the end of the year, the essay had been quoted by two different MPs in the French parliament. One of them, Emile Koehl (UDF), actually asked Prime Minister Michel Rocard (PS) his views on the article (NA, 25 December 1989, p. 5615). Rocard's answer was that it was not the PM's job to comment on philosophical debates, but that "freedom and democracy remain achievements that it would be dangerous to regard as irrevocable in any event" (NA, 29 January 1990, p. 434). This cautious view echoes the reception of Fukuyama's ideas in the intellectual sphere. Commentators, from Pierre Nora to Jean Baudrillard, generally took a critical stance on the "end of history" thesis, reflecting a deeper resistance to any notion of historical closure and a continued commitment to the unfinished and open-ended nature of political struggle (Marks, 1994). But once again, the debate focused on whether the "end of history" had arrived, not necessarily on what "liberal democracy" entailed.

While Fukuyama was not quoted directly in Westminster, his ideas were also widely discussed in the United Kingdom. In the pages of the *New Left Review*, Fred Halliday and Joseph McCarney highlighted the contradictory nature of "liberal democracy" and the ongoing challenges, from the ecological crisis to the persistence of authoritarian capitalism, it faced (Halliday, 1992; McCarney, 1993). For Halliday, British responses to Fukuyama varied "from the empiricist scepticism of the Right…and a Left divided between those who see him as just a capitalist ideologue…and those who seek to recruit him for a revisionist progressivism" (Halliday, 1992, p. 91). Typical of the former was Ian Crowther's conservative attack on the "liberal universalism" of Fukuyama, which argued that since "liberal democracy alone [was] not enough to guarantee a good society," then a common moral and religious culture needed to be defended (Crowther, 1990, p. 16). But again, most of the attacks on Fukuyama concentrated on whether history had ended, not on whether "liberal democracy" was an apt concept to designate the representative regimes of the West.

In a curious twist, it is thus not the Cold War itself but rather the victory of the West that enshrined "liberal democracy" in the political imagination of France and the United Kingdom. While the Cold War had been thought of through numerous oppositions (West/East, capitalism/communism, free market/planned economy, etc.), the end of the 1980s saw its reframing as a conflict between "liberal democracy" and

communism. As former President of the Republic and now Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (UDF) summarized this period, "from 1948 to 1990, world diplomacy managed the risk of a global confrontation between East and West, between communism and the liberal democracies" (NA, 28 October 1993, p. 5081). With the dissolution of the USSR, a new era was thus beginning.

While this embrace of "*démocratie libérale*" was thus not universal, several indicators suggest that by the 1990s a new chapter had begun. In France, several prominent scholars, from François Furet to Claude Lefort, began explicitly endorsing "liberal democracy." While Furet had steered clear of the concept in his work on the French Revolution, in his critical analysis of the idea of communism as it was perceived in public opinion, entitled *Passing of an Illusion* (1995), he would mainly use "liberal democracy" in opposition to both communist and fascist regimes. In a rather typical fashion for the era, he could write that after 1945, "the only antagonists left were capitalism and socialism, liberal democracy and 'popular' democracy, in their living incarnations as the United States of America and the Soviet Union" (Furet, 1999, p. 413). Lefort's intellectual trajectory exemplifies the liberal-democratic turn in parts of French political thought (Ghins, in press). Initially a Left-wing communist and co-founder of Socialisme ou Barbarie, Lefort later moved closer to liberal thinkers like Furet, Marcel Gauchet, and Pierre Rosanvallon. While his influential theory of democracy emphasized radical indeterminacy, it was not explicitly framed as "liberal democracy" until the late 1980s, when he began focusing on the opposition between populism and democracy, particularly in response to the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National (Selinger, 2023). By the 1990s, Lefort fully embraced the term, stating in a 1994 conference that "what is modern democracy today—the one in the societies in which we live? It has a name: It is liberal democracy" (Lefort, 2007, p. 748). His gradual shift underscores a broader intellectual movement, as other thinkers, both prominent and lesser-known, engaged with the concept, oscillating between critical reflection and triumphalism. Even Rosanvallon's trilogy on universal suffrage, representation, and popular sovereignty (published between 1992 and 2002), while not dealing explicitly with democracy in its liberal form, did present the articulation of democratic and liberal thought as one of the main tensions of the modern era (Rosanvallon, 1992, p. 25). In 1997, nearly 20 years after Bénoit, Serge Berstein edited a massive historical investigation entitled *La démocratie libérale*, again published by the Presses Universitaires de France. While also recognizing in his introduction that democracy and liberalism had been at odds for most of the 19th century, Berstein argued that "*démocratie libérale*" had lived a "golden age" from 1880 to 1918 and endured contestations in the interwar period, before being "renewed" after WWII and finally becoming "triumphant" in the 1990s (Berstein, 1998, pp. 4–5).

Outside of the academic sphere, things were also changing. In 1997, Alain Madelin founded Démocratie libérale (DL), the first French party explicitly embracing the term "liberal democracy," following a broader post-Cold War trend in Europe (Sauger, 2002). Madelin, who had distanced himself from the UDF, sought to promote a vision of democracy rooted in constitutional limits and economic liberalism, opposing majoritarian rule. As he explained in a preface to a volume entitled *Aux sources du modèle libéral français*, "the liberal conception of democracy is based on the presence of constitutional limits delimiting the powers of the legislature and the government" (Madelin, 1997, p. v). Despite his efforts to present DL as modern and dynamic, the party struggled electorally and dissolved into the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP)after Madelin's poor 2002 presidential performance. However, while DL failed as a political force, the concept of "*démocratie libérale*" gained traction in French political discourse, despite the persistent negative connotations of "liberal" in France compared to the United Kingdom.

The 1990s were the decade when "liberal democracy" broke through in Westminster. After the internal debates of the 1970s and 1980s, it was once again mostly used to discuss geopolitical issues, especially about post-Soviet countries and European integration. As in France, while some MPs celebrated the fall of the USSR, not all were that optimistic about the future. Some seemed to have doubts about the prospect of democracy in Russia itself due to its "historical record," as David Howell (Con), chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee put it (HC Deb, 22 February 1990, vol. 167 col. 1115; see also Archie Hamilton [Con], HC Deb, 1 July 1991, vol. 194 col. 43; Lord Chalfont, HL Deb, 12 June 1991, vol. 529 col. 1112). While Dianne Abbot (Lab) was worried that Eastern Europe could not "sustain stable, liberal democracies" due to economic difficulties (HC Deb, 2 July 1990, vol. 175 col. 723). Eventually, some came to have hope in other countries such as Slovenia, which for Baroness Lynda Chalker (Con) was "politically stable [and] has a pluralist liberal democracy" (HL Deb, 29 February 1996, vol. 569 col. 16002).

It is probably Peter Luff (Con) from Worcester who put best the mix of anxiety and hopefulness that MPs were feeling in regard to "liberal democracy":

> Communism was the common enemy by which we measured the health of our society. Its demise has robbed us of that powerful weapon. We are now forced to argue the details of how we run our affairs in Britain and in the rest of Europe without that overwhelming argument, based on the evils of the old, totalitarian alternative. The major failures of western liberal democracies, such as high unemployment, will be much harder for us to explain away when we cannot remind people of the unpalatable consequences of the only real alternative. (HC Deb, 18 March 1994, vol. 239 col. 1262)

In a rather straightforward manner, Luff outlined that the lack of an enemy made "western liberal democracies" more fragile to criticisms. He was echoed a few months later by David George Clark, then Labour shadow secretary of state for defence, who, in commenting on the new democracies of Eastern Europe, warned against reducing "liberal democracy" to the free market solely:

> Those of us in liberal democracies have to meet certain challenges. The market economy, unbridled, is not a liberal democracy. If one is not careful, one creates underclasses, which negate the concept of free democracies. We must avoid that in our country and we must avoid exporting it to newly emerging democracies. (HC Deb, 17 November 1994, vol. 250 col. 219)

Far from a naive celebration, we can see a certain critical understanding amongst certain MPs of the challenges that laid ahead for Western states in the post-communist era.

This echoes the sentiments of French MPs on geopolitical issues during the 1990s. For Bernard Stasi (UDF), the first Gulf War showed that "the almost universal victory of liberal democracy and the market economy" was not a guarantee of stability (NA, 8 November 1990, p. 4974). For Michel Rufin (RPR), it "was too early to talk about and bet on the final victory of liberal democracy in what was once the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" and thus defence budgets had to be maintained at a reasonable level (Senate, 26 November 1991, p. 4339). Thus, while there was a clear celebration from French and British politicians, it was a rather cautious optimism that dominated the scene.

Another area where MPs from both countries converged in their uses of "liberal democracy" was the question of European integration. Of course, parliamentarians had diverging positions on the necessity of European Community enlargement, but generally agreed that a liberal democratic regime and a free-market economy were prerequisites. In Westminster, as early as January 1990, Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal-Democrats, defended a motion regarding Eastern Europe and the European Community. For him, the United Kingdom should welcome "recent progress towards liberal democracy in the countries of eastern and central Europe [and endorse] progress towards the political and economic integration of the European Community" (HC Deb, 31 January 1990, vol. 166 col. 323). There was a clear trans-partisan consensus on the first part. For Francis Maude, minister of state for Europe, the Conservative government also welcomed "recent progress towards liberal democracy in eastern and central Europe" (HC Deb, 31 January 1990, vol. 166 col. 333), while Joyce Quin (Lab), although critical of Ashdown's framing of the motion, was also supportive of this new democratic pluralism (HC Deb, 31 January 1990, vol. 166 col. 353). Although European integration would (famously) continue to divide MPs and British citizens in the years to come, "liberal democracy" was now taken for granted as a common denominator for members of the European Community and a sine qua non condition for integration (Roger Knapman [Con], HC Deb, 11 June 1990, vol. 174 col. 2083; Lord Eatwell [Lab], HL Deb, 10 March 1994, vol. 552 col. 1594–95). In France, during the debates on the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, Xavier de Villepin (UDF) argued that this treaty "aims to establish a liberal democracy and develop a market economy in all the countries concerned" (Senate, 10 June 1992, p. 1529). A few years later, Jacques Genton (Union du Centre, UC) could explain that the former countries of the USSR had to undergo economic reforms (from planned to market economy) and "fundamental political reform—moving from a totalitarian system to pluralist liberal democracy as we know it" in order to join the European Union (Senate, 19 April 1994, p. 1150).

Before moving to the conclusion, it is worth mentioning a last element, which falls outside of the scope of parliamentary debates but is crucial in considering our current conceptual landscape—the emergence, during the 1990s, of the notion of "illiberal democracy." While the term originated in a 1995 book on Southeast Asia (D. A. Bell et al., 1995), it is generally Fareed Zakaria's 1997 "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" article in *Foreign Affairs* which is credited as having introduced the notion to a larger audience. Zakaria's main point was that, while in the West the rise of democracy had been intertwined with liberty and the rule of law, this was not the case in the rest of the world. Worse, democracy and liberalism were growing apart, since while the number of democratic countries was rising, those respecting civil liberties were falling. Or as Zakaria put it: "Democracy is flourishing; constitutional liberalism is not" (Zakaria, 1997, p. 25).

Since the 1990s, "illiberal democracy" has been criticised by a number of scholars as a vague concept or as an oxymoron; some arguing that notions such as "competitive authoritarianism" or "plebiscitarian authoritarianism" are more precise ways of describing countries with elections but few other "democratic" characteristics (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Sadurski, 2019). Nonetheless, with political figures such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán explicitly endorsing "illiberal democracy," the notion has gained ground, both politically and scientifically, especially since the 2010s. Its birth in the 1990s is thus a testament to the sense of cautious celebration characteristic of the era: While "liberal democracy" had become the "final form of human government," deviations from it were still possible. But these "alternatives" were not thought of as standing on their own; they were purely antithetical to the liberal model.

6. Conclusion: The Disillusion?

By the late 1990s, a new chapter in the history of "liberal democracy" seemed to begin. The trope of a "crisis of democracy" was reactivated, but the focus was different. While politicians and academics had worried about a "democratic overload" in the 1970s, at the turn of the millennia it was the twin problems of mistrust and apathy which drew attention. A quarter century after its initial report, the Trilateral Commission issued a new assessment which argued that "public confidence in the performance of representative institutions in Western Europe, North America, and Japan has declined since [1975] and in that sense most of these democracies are troubled" (Pharr & Putnam, 2000, p. 7). While other scholars might have underlined the global support for democratic values, they also outlined how citizens were increasingly critical of political institutions such as parliaments, parties, and the judicial system (Norris, 1999). A growing electoral abstention began to raise concerns in Western Europe (Delwit, 2013). Critical theorists, worried about the hollowing out of representative institutions by global capitalism, began to talk of "post-democracy" (Crouch, 2000) or "the end of liberal democracy" (Brown, 2003).

The shock would come in the form of the 2001 September 11 attacks, which led to a reconsideration of the "triumph of liberal democracy" on the international scene. As French Senator Serge Mathieu (RI) expressed, "the countries of the West have been living for the last ten years in a state of euphoria," which led them to believe (quoting approvingly then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin [RPR]):

> That all the world's problems had been overcome, that we were in agreement on the principles, that everyone had the same references, and that we were going to make rapid progress towards the international community, towards a generalised market economy, towards liberal democracy. (Senate, 29 November 2001, p. 4)

This sense of disillusionment kept growing in the 2000s. But the rest of this story still has yet to be written.

To conclude, highlighting this short history of "liberal democracy" in France and the United Kingdom has three effects. First, by historicizing "liberal democracy," we are politicising it, showing its ideological genealogy which is far from neutral. Second, this short history reveals that "liberal democracy" is not as descriptive a category as it is usually thought to be: Its users are usually much more worried about the "liberal" part than the democratic elements. Finally, from a normative perspective, the history of the term also reminds us of the flexibility of representative institutions. Instead of defending "liberal democracy," it might be necessary to reform or adapt it to the current challenges and thereby avoid reifying the current concept of "liberal democracy."

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ARTICLE

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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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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Ancient Demagoguery and Contemporary Populism: Conceptual Analogies and Differences in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The association between contemporary populism and demagoguery is frequent, both in academic literature and political debate. However, the scholarly attention devoted to the latter is considerably less than that given to the former. This is a peculiar situation considering that demagoguery has been a primary concern for political thinkers since classical Greece. Even when not explicitly discussed, the question of demagoguery was an underlying concern framing discussions on pivotal themes like political leadership, public rhetoric, tensions between oligarchic and popular factions, and the nature of the best regime. This raises the question of how historical conceptions of demagoguery align with contemporary theories of populism and whether relevant differences between them can deepen our understanding of both phenomena. The first part of the article reconstructs the classical conception of demagoguery focusing on its treatment by two of its most influential theorists, Plato and Aristotle. For them, demagoguery was a corrupted political form in which popular power turns into tyranny under unprincipled leaders exacerbating divisions between popular and oligarchic factions. Building on this historical analysis, the second part of the article compares the ancient conception of demagoguery and contemporary theories of populism focusing on the three primary aspects around which the current debate revolves: ideology, political style, and institutions and forms of organization.

Keywords

ancient democracy; demagoguery; history of political thought; modern democracy; populism

1. Introduction

The association between contemporary populism and demagoguery is frequent, both in academic literature and in political debate. It is common, especially from the liberal perspective, to discredit the former by

associating it with the latter. In effect, as an important scholar of populism has stressed, "liberal critics see authoritarian demagogy as the very essence of populist politics and construe it thus as the antithesis of pluralism and liberal democracy" (Stavrakakis et al., 2016, p. 63). On the other hand, those who defend, or at least have a less critical opinion of populism, usually reject this association arguing that populism and demagoguery are two different things, or that demagoguery is not a prerogative of populists in contemporary politics (e.g., Chollet, 2023; Tarragoni, 2024).

What is intriguing, however, is that in both cases the concept of demagoguery (and its related terms) is usually taken for granted, reduced to the ordinary meaning of manipulation of the people for political purposes. Now, similarly to the case of populism, demagoguery is a concept particularly prone to be used in the daily political battle. But compared to the former, it receives considerably less scholarly attention, despite having been discussed for centuries by political thinkers. And even though it is true that the loose meaning with which the term is often used today is not entirely unrelated to what this tradition of political thinking has bequeathed to us, it is also true that the subtleties and complexity of that debate are almost completely lost.

This article compares ancient conceptions of demagoguery and contemporary ones of populism to bring to the fore significant analogies and differences, and better understand the latter while at the same time inviting to make a more sensitive use of the former. I believe that a historical and conceptual comparison like this can be particularly useful for gaining a deeper understanding of populism, especially in its complex relationship with liberal democracy. It highlights what is specific about the relationship between populism and liberal democracy by comparing it with similar but, in many respects, different elements from the past (ancient democracy and ancient demagoguery). Furthermore, while it is true that the connections between populism and liberal democracy have been discussed extensively, seldom has this discussion taken on a historical dimension (e.g., Ballacci & Goodman, 2024; Finchelstein, 2014; Grattan, 2016; Jaffe & Graíño Ferrer, 2023a, 2023b; Patapan, 2019; Rosanvallon, 2020). This is quite surprising, given that the issue of populism is linked to themes—first and foremost, demagoguery—that have a long tradition in the history of ideas.

The structure of the article is as follows: In the next section, I will outline the main characteristics of the ancient conception of demagoguery, focusing on the views of its two principal theorists—Plato and Aristotle. After that, I will draw a comparison between that conception and the most prominent contemporary theories of populism. Finally, I will tease out some conclusions on how this sort of comparison can inform the current debate on populism.

Before proceeding, however, two premises are in order. Plato and Aristotle are two philosophers who (especially the former) expressed strong criticisms of democracy. Referring to them to outline an ancient theory of demagoguery runs the risk of conflating such a theory with a wholesale critique of democracy. However, it is also true that, being the greatest political philosophers of antiquity, their critique is particularly broad and incisive, and in fact, one that would prove particularly influential over the centuries. This connects to the second clarification. The comparison between the ancient theory of demagoguery and contemporary theories of populism will unfold along three axes: ideas, language and style, and institutions and organizational forms—corresponding to the three main approaches to populism available today. These three dimensions are found, roughly speaking, in the Platonic and Aristotelian critique of demagoguery, confirming the breadth of their approach.

2. Demagoguery: The Ancient Conception

As is well-known, despite the negative connotation that has consolidated over the centuries, the term "demagogue" originated with a neutral, descriptive meaning. It emerged in the 5th century B.C. in Athens, a period marked by significant social-political divisions between the aristocracy and the people in the contest of a process of democratization. "Demagogue" derives from the Greek words *dēmagōgós*—where *dēmos* means people and *agō* means "to lead"—and *dēmēgoros*—composed by *dēmos* and *agoreuo*, which means to speak in public assembly (Ober, 1989, p. 106, footnote 7; Zoepffel, 1974, pp. 80–84). However, the term was not commonly used and, when used, it was simply to refer to politicians as "leaders of the people" (e.g., Canfora, 1994, pp. 9–20; Hansen, 1991, p. 268; Lane, 2012; Ober, 1989, pp. 106–107; cf. Rhodes, 2016).

Following Finley, it could also be argued that in democratic Athens all politicians should to an extent be "demagogues" since, without the support of organized political parties, their power inevitably depended on their capacity to win the consent of the *demos* in the public assemblies, mainly through rhetoric (Finley, 1985b, Chapter 2; see also Hansen, 1991, pp. 277–278, 342; Harris, 2024; Ober, 1989, p. 110). Prominent figures like Themistocles, Pericles, and Cleon were all referred to as "demagogues," regardless of the evaluation of their political actions, and authors who were later known as critics of demagoguery, such as Aristophanes, Thucydides, Isocrates, and Aristotle, used the term also in a neutral sense. However, the meaning of the term gradually shifted from neutral to pejorative; and, according to Lane (2012), two philosophers and critics of democracy—Plato and Aristotle—played a pivotal role in such a transformation. Lane has argued that the consolidation of demagogue in its negative sense was due to Plutarch who established "the statesman–demagogue distinction as a staple of both republican and democratic currents of thought" (Lane, 2012, p. 193). But according to her, Plutarch accomplished this mainly by adopting Plato's account of the statesman–demagogue distinction and Aristotle's term for the negative concept of the demagogue.

The role of Plato is particularly relevant, since for Lane, he made a key contribution to crystallizing the negative notion of the "demagogue" by forging it as a "shadow-type" of his ideal of the "statesman" (*politikos*). It is in characterizing the "newly invented concept of the statesman which in Plato furnishes the template for defining its antithesis" (Lane, 2012, pp. 181, 190). Apart from the dispute over the chronology of the consolidation of the negative meaning of the term demagogue (cf. Harris, 2024, p. 33; Saldutti, 2015; Urso, 2019), Lane's focus on Plato and Aristotle is useful from our perspective, as it reconnects the issue of demagoguery to an ancient debate on political regimes, and particularly on democracy, in which these two authors play a crucial role.

As a radical critic of democracy, Plato tends to conflate it with demagoguery. The flaws of demagoguery are clearly connected to those he imputes to democracy, rooted in the very principle of this regime: the idea that people—whom he considered as driven by irrational desires and fundamentally ignorant—are called upon to decide on issues crucial to collective life, without having the sufficient discernment for it. Nonetheless, I believe it is possible to identify the criticisms he made of this regime that specifically relate to what would later be recognized as characteristic of demagoguery.

Plato constructs the opposition between the good and the bad statesman around three pillars: morality, knowledge, and rhetoric. *Gorgias* is one of the key texts to locate such opposition, even though Plato doesn't use the term demagogue in it. His target however is the leaders of the people in democratic Athens,

particularly their main political tool: rhetoric. And if, as Finley argues, demagogues were a structural part of Athenian democracy, and if rhetoric was their main tool, then the relevance of rhetoric for demagoguery becomes immediately clear (cf. Pacheco Bethencourt, 2021).

The opposition between the good and the bad statesman roughly corresponds to that between philosophers and rhetoric, which Plato constructs in *Gorgias* through a *mise en scène* of a debate between the philosopher Socrates and some rhetors. Socrates argues that philosophers love and pursue wisdom and in so doing can improve the virtues of their fellow citizens and thus contribute to making the city more just, which are the most authentic aims of the statesman. On the other hand, he says, there are the rhetors, lovers of the *demos* (Plato, 1979, 481d–481e), and specialists in the capacity to guess the tastes, desires, and opinions of the people and to manipulate and flatter them through rhetoric (Plato, 1979, 449a–449d, 452d–453a, 502e–503a). This sort of politicians can only rely on rhetorical ability and thus are unable to educate the people and lead them toward the good (Plato, 1979, e.g., 462c, 463d, 464c–465d). Theirs is a powerful ability, but devoid of any moral concerns and substantive knowledge. The rhetors, in Socrates' words, "don't speak with an eye on what is best and aim to make the citizens as good as possible by their speeches." They only "concentrate on gratifying the citizens, despising the common interest for the sake of their own private interest," using "flattery and shameful public oratory [*aischra dēmēgoria*]" (Plato, 1979, p. 80, 502e–503a).

Plato in a sense was radicalizing an opinion generally held in democratic Athens. The skillful use of rhetoric by politicians was much appreciated. However, at the same time, it was seen with skepticism and distrust to the extent that it could be used also for immoral purposes. In fact, criticizing a politician for being a flatterer and manipulator of the crowd was rather common. Thus, an exclusive education in this art was viewed with suspicion due to its inherently double-edged nature (Hansen, 1991, pp. 144–145; Ober, 1989, pp. 321–322). And it was generally held that, while eloquence was necessary for political leadership, it should always be accompanied by good judgment, virtue, and *paideia*—a broader kind of education of which rhetoric was only a part (Ober, 1989, pp. 183–188).

It could be argued that in drawing this contrast between philosophers and rhetors, Plato shaped most of the main traits of the discussion on demagoguery for the following centuries. He locates the question of demagoguery at the ethical, epistemic, and political levels. Demagoguery is explained by pointing to the deficient moral character of the demagogue, his willingness to pursue only personal interests, his lack of substantive knowledge that prevents him from developing an idea of what is just and good for the city, and his purely instrumental relation with the people. Such conception is reflected, for instance, in the contrasting portrayals of Pericles and Cleon in Aristophanes' *Knights* and Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* (as well as in Aristotle and Cicero), where Pericles represents the ideal statesman and Cleon the quintessential demagogue. Pericles is an authentic statesman, because he has the capacity to lead the people towards justice and the common good using good arguments and understanding. Cleon is a demagogue because, even though he can manipulate the people, he is ultimately a slave to them (e.g., Aristophanes, 2022, 732–734; Thucydides, 1986, 2.65–68).

Aristotle developed Plato's account of demagoguery in some significant respects, most notably by emphasizing the role of social and political polarization in its emergence and providing key insights into political rhetoric. While preserving a certain semantic ambiguity of the term—oscillating between neutral and negative connotations—Aristotle's *Politics* is among the earliest works where the term is explicitly

employed in a distinctly negative sense. First of all, Aristotle clearly associated it with democracy: Demagogues operate primarily by exploiting the democratic principle of seeking majority consent within the assembly, leveraging it to foster polarization in pursuit of power. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle did not equate democracy with demagoguery. Instead, he associated demagoguery with a specific form of democracy: the worst manifestation of this regime—a radicalized, unruly, and unjust version of democracy. He argued that demagogues flourish in democracies that have degenerated into despotic regimes, where all decisions are submitted to the people and made through decrees rather than established laws (Aristotle, 1998, 1292a). At the same time, Aristotle considered that demagogues can exist also in a constitutional and just form of democracy—what he called a *politeia*, a popular regime in which democratic rule is combined with oligarchic elements—and could lead it in a transformation not only into a demagogic regime, but also into a tyranny. They do so because, in their attempt to please the people at all costs, they excessively hurt the wealthy, causing their reaction against the democratic regime itself (Aristotle, 1998, 1304b–1305a). For Aristotle, thus, demagoguery is always a possibility in a regime founded on liberty and equality as democracy. However, in its radicalized and degenerated form, demagoguery becomes one of the essential elements of this regime, as the people, led by demagogues, become the sole sovereign outside the law.

Significantly, Aristotle also identifies a social dimension in the transformation of a constitutional democracy into a demagogic one: the increasing polarization between the poor and wealthy classes and the reduction of the middle class. A consistent middle class is essential for a just form of democracy, as those who belong to it, being neither too poor nor excessively rich, are more inclined to follow reason, act justly, and avoid dividing citizens into warring factions (Aristotle, 1998, 1295b–1296a). On the other hand, the impoverishment of the lower class calls for more interventionist policies, which in turn pushes the well-off to band together and put democracy at risk (Aristotle, 1998, 1304b). In this sense, demagoguery is also a strategy adopted by a minority within the upper class, which understands that it can take advantage of the social distress in order to acquire power, and sometimes even become tyrants, with the support of the poor.

In Aristotle's account, there is a correspondence between the social situation, the political regime, and the kind of political speech. As Urbinati notes, for Aristotle, in a constitutional democracy, "until the equilibrium among classes persists, the weapon of words seems to be enough strategy," since the laws are still in force (Urbinati, 2014, p. 142). Here, demagogic speech is still "consonant with assembly politics" where "proposals must gain the majority of the votes to become law" (Urbinati, 2014, p. 141). But demagoguery can become a negative force: It can corrupt constitutional democracy to the point of making it tyrannical, as it contributes to breaking the social and political equilibrium, suspending the rule of the law, and undermining the possibility of compromise. In this situation, democracy becomes similar to tyranny in terms of public rhetoric as well: In both cases, language is completely instrumentalized, by flatterers in the case of democracy and sycophants in that of tyranny (Aristotle, 1998, 1313b–1314a5), with the aim of gaining the trust of those in the hands of whom power is concentrated, respectively, the people and the tyrant.

A second major aspect in which Aristotle contributed to the analysis of demagoguery is his analysis of rhetoric. Properly understood, for him rhetoric can be a central element of a well-ordered and just political community. But Aristotle also acknowledges that rhetoric is a primary resource for demagogues. His differentiation between demagogic rhetoric and positive rhetoric, however, is not straightforward. The complexity arises because, although Aristotle believed that rhetoric can be partially systematized, it is also an art that requires the use of practical reason, making it ultimately irreducible to a closed system of rules.

Schematically, we could say that Aristotle's primary way for differentiating a positive version of political rhetoric from a demagogic one is to characterize it as a deliberative form of argumentation and to explain its main features as depending on the proper realm in which it operates: the political domain characterized by contingency and uncertainty about principles (see Garsten, 2006, Chapter 4; Garver, 1994). Aristotle amplified the deliberative dimension of rhetoric by emphasizing the importance of the proofs of persuasion (*pistis*) and centering rhetoric on the *enthymeme*, the rhetorical form of a syllogism that he defines as the "body of persuasion" (Aristotle, 1991, 1355a). Unlike Plato who condemned rhetoric as epistemologically deficient, Aristotle recognized its unique role in navigating the realm of public affairs, characterized by contingency and verisimilitude. He argued that rhetoric is not a specialized art because it is based on *endoxa*, generally accepted opinions, and is addressed to an audience of ordinary citizens (Aristotle, 1991, 1354a, 1357a, 1404a; cf. Aristotle, 1980, 1179b). Nevertheless, for Aristotle, opinion and knowledge, as well as verisimilitude and truth, do not constitute dichotomies. Consequently, the dependence of rhetoric on generally accepted opinions is not as problematic as it is in Plato, as it doesn't imply that its arguments are necessarily far from the truth.

An additional way to differentiate a positive from a negative version of political rhetoric is through Aristotle's understanding of the role of extra-rational means of persuasion, specifically *pathos* and *ethos*, which, along with *logos*, form the three modes of persuasion (e.g., Aristotle, 1991, 1377b, 1391b). Aristotle acknowledges the key role of emotions, of *pathos*, in persuasion, especially in linking general rules to particular cases. However, for him, emotions can only enhance judgment and contribute to the deliberative process when they are relevant to the subject under discussion. Conversely, a demagogic and manipulative use of emotions in rhetoric occurs when they are used instrumentally, without any connection to the subject matter (Aristotle, 1991, 1354b-1356a; cf. Aristotle, 2002, 35.3). The *ethos* as well is fundamental for persuasion, to the point that Aristotle defines it as the most important source of persuasion (Aristotle, 1991, 1378a). The speaker in effect should be able to put the audience into the proper emotional state in order to be persuaded, displaying a benevolent attitude toward them to manifest a concern with their situation.

But the *ethos* is essential for good rhetoric also in another sense: Learning to argue well on public affairs requires also an extensive process of practical experience whereby the tenets of rhetoric become deeply ingrained in the practical reasoning of the speaker, ultimately integrating into his own *ethos*. According to Aristotle, this gradual assimilation of rhetorical principles forms the basis for rhetoric to evolve into a civic virtue. The orator's selection of persuasive methods is intricately tied to his *ethos*, as rhetorical deliberation, manifesting as an expression of *phronesis*, is concerned with the means rather than the ends. This, however, always occurs within the teleological framework of the pursuit of the good life—which is only possible in a just form of regime and thus not in a demagogic one. Indeed, the last and probably main element Aristotle identifies to make rhetoric a civic art, rather than an instrument of demagoguery, is submitting it to the moral philosophy and the science of politics (Aristotle, 1991, 1356a; cf. Aristotle, 1980, 1094b).

While a thorough discussion of ancient demagoguery would naturally require a much more extensive examination, these elements provide a broad picture of how the ancients conceptualized this phenomenon. In the next section, I will outline the main points of contemporary populist theories and compare them with this broad picture.

3. Contemporary Theories of Populism and Ancient Conceptions of Demagoguery: A Comparison

Populism is a phenomenon whose historical roots can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the radical agrarian populist movements of the *narodnichestvo* in Russia and the People's Party in the United States. Over time, populism has taken on very different forms, including the important cases of the national-popular authoritarian regimes of Latin America between the 1930s and 1960s, with emblematic examples such as *Peronismo* in Argentina and *Varguismo* in Brazil. Few scholars, however, attempt to reconstruct the concept of populism by looking at its earliest political experiences (e.g., Canovan, 1981; Finchelstein, 2014; Grattan, 2016; Tarragoni, 2024). Most research focuses on contemporary cases, and when conceptualizing the phenomenon, scholars tend to favor a more abstract approach, one that can encompass a variety of contexts and reflect the flexibility and malleability of populism. The main theoretical approaches that can be identified in the literature indeed confirm this tendency.

3.1. Contemporary Approaches to Populism

In the contemporary debate about populism, it is possible to identify three main theoretical approaches. They are the ideational, the stylistic or also discursive-performative, and the strategic or also institutional-organizational approaches (Ballacci & Goodman, 2023; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). The first approach includes scholars such as Canovan (2002), Mudde (2004, 2017), Müller (2016), Stanley (2008), and others. These scholars are unified by the attempt to define populism through its ideological outlook, particularly the core idea of a Manichean divide between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." The second approach shifts focus from content to form: how populists speak, act, and present themselves. This includes their language, symbols, aesthetics, as well as their performative style. Scholars in this tradition, tracing back to the work of Laclau (2005), argue that populism's political significance lies chiefly in the forms it employs to mobilize the people and construct a populist political subject (e.g., Aslanidis, 2016; Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy et al., 2021; Stavrakakis, 2017). The third approach focuses on the way populist movements and parties structure themselves and on the way they mobilize and represent their constituencies in their pursuit of power. Scholars ascribable to this approach, such as Barr (2009), Urbinati (2019), and Weyland (2017), stress the centrality in populism of the unmediated link between leaders and their followers, through which populist leaders challenge traditional parties to seize and maintain power.

These three approaches and levels of analysis can be juxtaposed with the main elements identified in the reconstruction of the ancient conception of demagoguery, revealing both shared features and differences. Such comparative analysis, however, should be undertaken with an awareness of how deeply interconnected these levels of analysis are—an understanding that is evident in the ancient conception of demagoguery and that has also been recently emphasized in contemporary debates on populism (e.g., Ballacci & Goodman, 2023; Diehl & Bargetz, 2023). Relatedly, it is also important to underscore that, in the same way contemporary approaches to populism can be seen as complementary rather than alternative, the different works on Athenian democracy that I rely on—such as Ober's *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Ober, 1989), which focuses on its ideology and rhetoric, and Hansen's *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Hansen, 1991), which examines its institutions and foundational principles—can be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

3.2. Ideational Level

Starting with the realm of ideas, a notable commonality between the two conceptions is that according in both cases, ancient demagogues and contemporary populists prioritize the principle of popular power over anything else, for instance, over the respect of the laws. In the ancient conception, this is clearly evident in Aristotle, who considers this feature a defining characteristic of demagoguery. In contemporary theories, most of the scholars who focus on the ideational dimension put "people-centrism" at the very core of populism, underlying how this could undermine the respect of the liberal principles of modern democracy. Both ancient demagogues and contemporary populists are seen as politicians who portray themselves as champions of the people and who make the struggle against the elites the core of their politics.

Moreover, in the ancient account, demagogues are criticized for pursuing their own personal or factional interests rather than the common good. This critique is echoed in contemporary analyses of populism, particularly from more critical perspectives. For example, Urbinati argues that, lacking a coherent ideology and normative framework, populism tends to devolve into a "hyperrealistic" and "voluntarist attempt to seize power," promoting a "*pars pro parte*" rather than a "*pars pro toto*" politics (Urbinati, 2019, pp. 33–34; see also Johnson, 2017).

A further important common element, at the ideational level, is the fact that in both the ancient and contemporary conceptions, demagoguery and populism's respective ideologies can be described as "thin," minimally articulated (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Stanley, 2008). In the case of ancient demagoguery, this feature is somewhat implicit. In democratic Athens, critics accused demagogues not only of lacking the knowledge necessary for effective political leadership, but also of uncritically aligning their views with those of the general populace—what Ober (1989) refers to as the "popular ideology" of democratic Athens. Ober also points out that this ideology was largely unarticulated in theoretical terms, even contradictory at times, and more practical, embedded in communicative strategies and symbols used by demagogues in their public speeches. It was after all an ideology that appealed to and was endorsed by the *demos*—one of the reasons why oligarchic and anti-democratic thinkers such as Plato opposed it, as they equated the *demos* with the common people, or the poor, whom they viewed as fundamentally ignorant and lacking in judgment (Ober, 1989, pp. 42, 337; see also Hansen, 1991, p. 334). Likewise, in republican Rome, the ideological outlook of the *populares* has been described by a scholar as "submerged," a "style of political reasoning," rather than a full-fledged ideology (Arena, 2012, pp. 80, 116–117).

On the other hand, at the ideational level, there are also significant differences between ancient and contemporary conceptions. One key distinction is that, while the ancient view focuses on the immorality of demagogues and their alleged inability to pursue the common good, contemporary theories adopt a more systemic, impersonal approach (cf. Ceaser, 2007; Patapan, 2019). For instance, when a scholar like Urbinati criticizes the purely strategic and instrumental behavior of contemporary populists, her critique is not moral, but political and ideological, highlighting how populism distorts democracy. Similarly, Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, or Müller, who share the view of populism as based on a Manichean opposition between elites and the people, criticize it on political rather than moral terms: for the threat it poses to the rule of the law, the mechanisms of checks and balances, or pluralism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016).

The key difference between the ancient and contemporary contexts in this regard concerns what is generally referred to as the "fact of pluralism." Indeed, although the pursuit of consensus and a certain skepticism

toward factions are characteristics found in modern democracy as well (see Rosenblum, 2008), it is evident that the ancient era was characterized by a significantly lower degree of ideological pluralism compared to the modern era. In democratic Athens, ideological pluralism was far less prominent than it is today. *Homonoia* (or likemindedness) was a central feature of its political and cultural landscape, with the expectation that politicians would adhere to the common worldview and avoid deepening ideological polarization (e.g., Canevaro, 2018; Ober, 1989, pp. 168–170). Similarly, republican Rome was characterized by what one scholar termed "ideological monotony," with both popular and aristocratic leaders aligning their public speeches with this shared ideology (Morstein-Marx, 2004, p. 230). This difference at the ideational level is reflected at the institutional level in the absence of a structured system of political parties, which, as Finley (1985b) explained, had significant implications for the role of the demagogue in democratic Athens. As seen before, the demagogue's prominence in this regime also stemmed from the necessity of maintaining a direct, personal relationship with the *demos*, rather than one based on ideological affiliation.

This ideological difference is significant for several reasons. For instance, it suggests that the ideological repertoire available for criticism against the elites was much more constrained in the ancient context than in modern societies. Indeed, contemporary populists have access to a wider range of ideologies and principles to legitimize themselves and attack the elites. These include modern ideologies such as socialism and nationalism, as well as principles like popular sovereignty, the consent of the governed, and freedom of speech. While such principles existed in a looser form in democratic Athens (and to some extent in republican Rome), they were only fully codified and consolidated in modern democracy. As a result, contemporary populists have not only a broader ideational scope, but also more rhetorical tools for contestation than ancient demagogues (cf. Patapan, 2019).

3.3. Stylistic Level

The reference to rhetoric allows us to move to the level of styles, or forms. In the ancient conception of demagoguery, rhetoric and more in general political style were central. As it has been argued, "Greeks of this period, both mass and elite, understood *dēmagōgia* to entail a specific set of characteristics, or a coherent 'political style' " (Simonton, 2024, p. 36). The concern with rhetoric, in particular, reflected the relevance of direct speech to popular assemblies, not only in democratic Athens but also in republican Rome (on the style associated with *populares* in republican Rome, see for instance Goodman, 2024). Critics of demagogues, such as Plato, accused them of not enlightening the *demos* and not serving its interests, but manipulating and exploiting it essentially through the cunning use of flattering and manipulative rhetoric.

In contemporary theories, such a straightforwardly normative critique of populism's forms is less common, partly because the kind of demagogic rhetoric condemned by ancient philosophers is considered an inevitable feature of partisan, democratic politics. But, as we have seen, the importance in populism of specific forms is emphasized by many scholars of populism—especially, though not exclusively, those aligned with the stylistic approach. This has been explained most clearly by Laclau (2005). Rejecting clear-cut normative judgments, Laclau has proposed an essentially instrumental understanding of populism as a form of articulation. For him, populism's most distinctive traits—those related precisely to its forms, such as its vague, simplistic discourse, the appeal to emotions, and a strong, extra-rational identification with a charismatic leader—are essential to its goal of splitting society into two opposing blocs. Other scholars have highlighted additional formal features of contemporary populism. For example, Moffitt (2016, p. 38) notes the use by populists of "bad manners,"

a transgressive style that flouts the traditional norms of public behavior to emphasize their distance from the establishment. Similarly, Ostiguy (2017) foregrounds the tendency of populists to "flaunt the low," that is, to display an attitude of approving familiarity with popular culture in order to demonstrate their closeness to the people and win their trust.

A similar set of rhetorical tactics was frequently highlighted in ancient critiques of demagoguery. Figures like Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, and Cicero associated demagogues with a manipulative and flattering rhetoric that relied heavily on emotional appeals, clouding reason and sound judgment with simplistic but captivating arguments. Their style frequently included deliberately scandalous, aggressive behavior, intended to disrupt traditional norms of decorum (e.g., Morstein-Marx, 2004, pp. 271–272). Thucydides, for example, in his depiction of Cleon, emphasizes his inflammatory rhetoric, which appealed directly to the emotions of the common people and showcased his intimate familiarity with their customs and concerns (Thucydides, 1986, 3.35–40). Moreover, demagogues were often accused of resorting to theatrical, exaggerated tactics that violated the standards of rational discourse.

However, in terms of style, there is also a significant difference, which is related to the point mentioned earlier on the greater level of ideological consensus in ancient Greece (and Rome). One important consequence of this consensus is that, while Laclau points out that populist forms function to divide society, this role was likely more moderate among ancient demagogues. And this means, for instance, the rhetorical disruptiveness used by them could not have been as pronounced as that employed by contemporary populists. Additionally, the rhetorical capacity to challenge ruling elites was less pronounced in ancient demagoguery also due to the fact that political regimes in those times had far less institutional complexity and weight compared to modern democracies. As a result, what we now call "the establishment" was less of a target than it is for contemporary populists. In other words, ancient demagogues had fewer opportunities for rhetorical contestation of elites compared to contemporary populists, who can target more complex institutions and power structures.

Some relevant considerations can also be developed regarding the question of political charisma. Elements of charisma can certainly be identified in ancient accounts of demagoguery, for instance in the portraits of Pericles found both in Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian Wars* (1986, 2.65.68–13) and in Cicero's *The Republic* (1977, 1.25). Weber himself, who canonized the concept in political theory, regarded the Greek *polis* as a form of charismatic rule and drew on the role of the demagogue to develop his theory of plebiscitary democracy (Weber, 2019; cf. Finley, 1985a, pp. 38–75, 177–179; Ober, 1989, pp. 123–125; Roisman, 2021).

Nonetheless, it is evident that charisma did not hold the same centrality in ancient demagoguery as it does in contemporary populism (e.g., Pappas, 2020). This difference stems from the profound transformations that have shaped modern democracy—foremost, the institution of representation, the advent of ideological pluralism, and, related to that, what Lefort (1988) famously described as the "dissolution of the markers of certainty" (p. 19). Indeed, if we consider charisma, as Weber explained, to involve the potential to radically transform and challenge established institutional orders (e.g., Weber, 1946, p. 250), it becomes clear that the ideological rigidity of ancient regimes meant that demagogues in those systems had little incentive to question the legitimacy of the political order and advocate for radical change. This ideological rigidity rendered charisma less significant in ancient contexts. Conversely, those transformations in modern democracy have paved the way for a new form of representation as embodiment. With power becoming, symbolically, an empty space (Lefort, 1988), there emerges a drive to fill it through ideological narratives that

seek to reconstruct social unity and bring to life an image of the people. Charismatic leadership plays a pivotal role in this process by claiming to incarnate this collective image.

But beyond the question of charisma, we can say that certain structural elements of democratic Athens (which we already mentioned) favored a personalistic kind of politics. Among them are the direct nature of democracy and the absence of organized parties, which made the direct relationship between the politician and the mass central to political activity. This relationship was essentially mediated through rhetoric, which also explains the ambivalence Athenians had toward this art—at the same time "both fearful of the power of the orator…and eager to be entertained and instructed by a master" of it (Ober, 1989, p. 178). A central problem in democratic Athens indeed was precisely how to distinguish a true leader from a demagogue, the one who uses rhetoric for the common good and the one who uses it to manipulate. And among the ways to tell the difference was precisely the personal qualities or the *ethos* of the politician, such as his credibility and reputation, which Aristotle regarded as the most powerful of the three modes of persuasion (*logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*; Aristotle, 1991, 1378a).

Political personalism and charisma are also central features in contemporary accounts of populism. This intersection offers fertile ground for the comparative analysis undertaken here. However, I will focus on a particularly intriguing dynamic that emerges in both ancient demagoguery and modern populism: the complex interplay among two opposing tendencies—proximity and distinction—arising from the interaction of personalism and charisma with a democratic and egalitarian ideology. On one hand, the ancient demagogue needed to demonstrate closeness and identification with the people; on the other, he had to establish himself as a *primus inter pares*, showcasing exceptional abilities that enabled him to fulfill his role as a leader. Scholars of contemporary populism, such as Casullo (2020) and Diehl (2019), have identified this same dynamic of horizontal and vertical identification as a defining characteristic of contemporary populist leaders. However, as seen before, a key distinction lies in how the personalistic aspect of leadership is framed: While the ancient account tended to view it essentially through a moralistic lens, contemporary analyses approach it from a predominantly political perspective, focusing for instance on how this combination contributes to making populism a form of plebiscitary, Caesaristic democracy (e.g., Urbinati, 2019).

3.4. Strategic and Institutional/Organizational Levels

The aspects discussed in relation to charismatic leadership and personalism are, of course, also significant from an institutional/organizational and strategic perspective, to which corresponds the third approach to contemporary populism.

As previously mentioned, the strategic or institutional/organizational approach to populism identifies the direct relationship between leader and people aimed at acquiring power as its defining characteristic. In this regard, the parallels with ancient critiques of demagoguery are evident. Ancient critics held that demagogues were culpable for acting as leaders of the people as a means to serve personal or factional interests. However, the differences at the institutional levels are enormous, particularly with regard to the representative systems and free elections that define modern democracies. A number of scholars have emphasized that modern populism cannot be conceived outside this institutional framework (e.g., Müller, 2016, p. 20; Taggart, 2002; Urbinati, 2014, p. 134). Its origins are accordingly traced back to the crucial moment when modern revolutions introduced the principle that government must be republican and

popular, but delegated through elections and representation. This, in the words of Canovan (2005), is what set "the stage for populism in the sense of movements to give government back to the people" (p. 29). The very nature of representative democracy creates the potential for recurring crises of legitimacy, because of the tension—inscribed at its core—between the ideal of popular sovereignty and the fact that the people only exercise power in an indirect, mediated way. Indeed, since its inception, representative democracy has faced different waves of crisis (see Rosanvallon, 2020) and contemporary populism can be seen as one such episode. Many of populism's defining features—such as anti-establishment rhetoric, hostility toward intermediating institutions, or the demand for a more direct link between the people and political leaders—can be understood as reactions to the representative nature of modern democracy.

Just like contemporary populism is inherently tied to modern representative democracy, for Aristotle demagoguery was a corruption of direct democratic rule, not a fundamentally different regime. As previously noted, Aristotle viewed demagoguery as a possibility rather than an inevitability in democracies, given their foundation on freedom of speech. A similar argument can be made for contemporary populism. Both ancient demagoguery and contemporary populism operate within constitutional regimes where conflicts of interests and values unfold primarily at the symbolic, ideological level. In this respect, there is a significant point of convergence: In both cases, the demagogic or populist distortion of democracy (representative in the case of contemporary populism, direct in the case of ancient demagoguery) is understood to depend as well on sociological and economic factors (on the economic causes of contemporary populism, see for instance Margalit, 2019). These include growing social and economic polarization and the shrinking middle class, as Aristotle also observed. Demagogues and populists exploit this polarization, intensifying it and channeling it into a project of political polarization to seize power (cf. Urbinati, 2014, pp. 138–142).

A final key difference, at this level of analysis, has been highlighted by Patapan (2019). While the ancient conception of demagoguery pivots around the distinction between statesman and demagogue, finding in education one key solution, modern thinkers have attempted to address the problem of demagoguery mostly at the level of institutional design. This includes creating mechanisms such as the separation of powers and constitutionalism, which aim to limit and distribute power to curtail and redirect the negative influence of demagogues. The Founding Fathers, for instance, saw demagoguery as a major threat to stability and believed institutional measures were key to curtailing it. The combination of a large republic and representative government, for them, would limit direct leader–mass interaction—where demagogic rhetoric thrives—while fostering a diversity of interests that would prevent any single faction, led by a charismatic demagogue, from dominating, and instead encourage compromise and moderation (e.g., Ceaser, 2007). The institution of the presidency was also designed to limit the rise of a demagogic figure, for instance, by restricting direct presidential appeals to the public and instead directing communication toward Congress to foster a more reasoned form of rhetoric (Tulis, 1987). In a similar vein, contemporary critics of populism often identify as its political risk its alleged threat to the institutions and procedures of liberal democracy, and seek to counter it also by strengthening them (e.g., Crick, 2005; Galston, 2017; Müller, 2021; Urbinati, 2014, 2019).

Even if the focus on institutional solutions represents a significant departure from the ancient conception of demagoguery, this is not to suggest that the ancients completely overlooked institutional measures to counteract demagoguery. Aristotle, for instance, emphasized the importance of a mixed regime and, also, of the rule of law—which indeed was an important element in democratic Athens (see Harris, 2013)—to

prevent the kind of demagogic democracy discussed above. In Athens, furthermore, there were also specific institutional means aimed at curtailing the excessive power of demagogues: among them, the inability of speakers to speak on topics that had not been put on the agenda by the Council; or the *graphe paranomon*, which could be invoked if a proposal made in the assembly was considered to be against the law; or finally, ostracism (e.g., Aristotle, 2002, 45.4; Hansen, 1991, pp. 35, 205–212; Pacheco Bethencourt, 2021, pp. 17–18).

4. Conclusion

Needless to say, the analysis developed here couldn't but be incomplete. For instance, much more could be said about the relationship between economic and social polarization and demagoguery and populism, or about the differences in political style between ancient demagoguery and contemporary populism, particularly those arising from the profound transformations in modern communication—a huge topic that I haven't even touched upon. Nonetheless, I believe this article offers a sufficiently broad overview to see why comparing these two phenomena can deepen our understanding of both.

To conclude, I will briefly explore one of the many questions that this type of historical-theoretical comparison can raise, illustrating how it might open new avenues for research on populism and democracy.

A central point in the ancient critique of demagogues was related to the idea of the common good: Demagogues were accused of not having one and not pursuing it. If we move to the contemporary debate on populism, we'll see that one of the leading theories of populism—that proposed by Laclau—defines populism as a form of articulation, a mobilization strategy, downsizing the relevance of its ideological dimension. However, as it is generally recognized, such an approach has created a normative problem, as it reduces populism to a mere instrument (e.g., Kitus, 2020; Urbinati, 2014). At the same time, we have recently seen a number of theorists advocating for a partisan (but not populist) democracy—against the liberal emphasis on consensus—pointing to the relevance of the common good as a basis of a principled commitment compatible with good faith and civic respect (e.g., Muirhead, 2014; Rosenblum, 2008; White & Ypi, 2016). This however poses us a conundrum.

Populism is often criticized on ideological grounds for the threat it poses to pluralism and other liberal values. At the same time, however, populism is a phenomenon whose ideological core is very thin, while the forms through which it is expressed hold significant political relevance. This implies that a critical approach to populism must necessarily consider its formal, stylistic dimension. But in this regard there is a notable difference with the ancient conception of demagoguery. In that conception, it was implicitly understood that, albeit not without complexity (as we have seen in our discussion of Aristotle), it was possible to make a normative distinction at the rhetorical level as well.

Today, however, the landscape is much more fragmented. Many scholars who adhere to a stylistic approach indeed support what could be broadly defined as a "post-modern," or "post-structuralist" conception of language, with Laclau being the most prominent example. At the risk of being too blunt, we can say that, from this perspective, since everything is discourse, there are no external standards from which to determine whether one type of discourse is, for instance, more manipulative than others. In this case, a normative dimension comes into play as we remind ourselves, first, of the contingent nature of all discursive

formations and thus of their potential for rearticulation, and then, as a consequence, of the possibility of creating ever-expanding conditions for emancipation (e.g., Laclau, 1989; Marchart, 2007; Palonen, 2021).

On the other hand, scholars within a more liberal tradition have offered critical analyses of populism, with part of their critique focusing on its insufficiently deliberative nature. The underlying conception of deliberation in these analyses aligns broadly with that of the paradigm of deliberative democracy. But in the last years, this paradigm has undergone profound transformations, including a significant relaxation, and sometimes even a complete rejection, of its early rationalist assumptions to incorporate forms of communication more akin to real-world politics, including the kind of rhetoric closer to populism. Some of these contributions have also been directly influenced by the classical conception of political rhetoric (cf. Abizadeh, 2007; Garsten, 2011; Goodman & Bagg, 2022; Badano & Nuti, 2023; Walter, 2017). What remains to be understood, however, is whether these two major paradigms can find points of contact to foster a more fruitful dialogue.

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ARTICLE

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Politicisation and Democracy: The Consequences of Contingency

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Abstract

The article develops the relation of politicisation and democracy theoretically, normatively, and conceptually. Politicisation is defined as marking something as collectively relevant and as an object of politics, and hence as debatable or contested. Democracy, and concretely liberal or representative democracy, means organised self-government of the citizens via elected representants. It is marked by a set of institutions and rights based on the rule of law on the one hand, and by political action and (regulated) controversies and processes of collective decision-making on the other. How do the two relate to one another? The article proceeds as follows. First, I conceptualise politicisation and its linkages to the concept of politics. Two ideal-typical conceptions of politics are developed, i.e., (a) a spatial understanding of politics as a system, area, field, or sphere, and (b) an understanding of politics as action. The following reflections are based on an action-oriented understanding of politics and politicisation, arguing that politics consists of political action(s) and politicisation is the act of marking an issue as political. Therefore, both politics and politicisation potentially can take place anywhere and anytime, inside and outside of the classical political system. The third section discusses conceptually and theoretically whether and to what extent politicisation is compatible with liberal representative democracy: if politicisation is action, then it can be both democratic and anti-democratic action, and the ensuing question is how liberal representative democracies react to this challenge. On this basis, the grey zones around populism, polarisation, and democratic backsliding are discussed, in order to further clarify existing and possible current interrelations between politicisation and liberal representative democracy. The article concludes with a typology of four types of interrelations between politicisation and democracy.

Keywords

anti-democratic politicisation; democratic backsliding; democratic institutions; Euroscepticism; polarisation; politicisation; populism; representative democracy

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the concepts of politicisation and democracy—in particular, liberal representative democracy—and on their complex interrelations. Politicisation will thus be defined and discussed as "marking something (an issue) as collectively relevant and as an object of politics, and hence as debatable or contested" (Wiesner, 2024, p. 3). Democracy, and concretely liberal representative democracy, is a form of political organisation of self-government of the citizens via representants that are elected in free, fair, and equal elections. It is marked by a set of institutions and rights that are structured as according to the principle of the rule of law on the one hand, and by political action and (regulated) controversies and processes of collective decision-making on the other.

The relationship between politicisation and liberal representative democracy is one of immediate contemporary relevance. The news reveal examples of political conflict and politicisation on an almost daily basis, and more and more processes and actions of politicisation seem to be directed against liberal representative democracy, as in the following prominent example: On January 6, 2021, a violent and angry crowd stormed the US Capitol. It was raging against the fact that Joseph Biden had been elected president of the US, not Donald Trump. The riot followed a narrative spread on social media and right-wing media channels, among others, by Donald Trump himself, that the presidential elections allegedly had been "stolen" from Trump and that the riot was a legitimate means of self-defence. The January 6 riots, in other words, were fuelled by what can be termed anti-democratic politicisation, i.e., political rhetoric and arguments that not only were based on a lie (since Trump had lost, not won the elections), but also directed—at the grounds of that lie—against the representative democratic institutions of the US.

However, there are other recent and prominent examples of politicisation that are not at all directed against liberal representative democracy and that may, on the contrary, even strengthen it: On August 20, 2018, a Swedish girl named Greta Thunberg sat down before the Swedish Riksdag. She, too, was critical of representative institutions and their policy outputs, because she found elected representatives not to be active enough to combat climate change. Her banner said she was on a "school strike for the climate." Greta Thunberg thus marked climate change as an important political issue. The "Greta effect" this politicising action had is well known. Thunberg's action, i.e., the initial singular action of one Swedish girl, laid the base for what she could not have known previously, a wave of protest that ultimately led to the founding of a political movement. More and more pupils and students, first in Sweden, then in an EU-wide and later worldwide scale, joined "Fridays for Future." They issued strong claims to the established liberal representatives, urging them to fight climate change better and more strongly.

As these examples underline, politicisation can have different effects on liberal representative democracy: It can be anti-democratic, it can enhance political participation and hence have a democratising character, and, as will be discussed in Section 3, it can also fall in between.

In the following, I will develop the relationship between politicisation and liberal representative democracy (a) in conceptual and (b) in normative terms. The reflections continue a train of thoughts that began in earlier works (Wiesner, 2019a, 2021a, 2021b, 2024) and aim to discuss three out of four fields of questions that are decisive for conceptualising politicisation (Wiesner, 2021a):

1. The theories, understandings, and/or definitions of politics and the politics that the conceptualisation of politicisation relates to.

2. The who, where, and what of politicisation, i.e., dimensions, actors, issues, objects, addressees, areas, arenas, and spaces.

3. The relation of politicisation to other concepts such as democracy, populism, and polarisation.

The fourth dimension—the approaches, dimensions, methods, and techniques of the empirical study of politicisation—will not be discussed in this article. This also means that I will leave out two possible levels of conceptualising politicisation, i.e., the meso-level as a first level of operationalization, and the micro-level of concrete empirical study (Wiesner, 2021b, pp. 20–21).

Against this backdrop, the article is presented as follows: In Section 2, I will conceptualise politicisation and how it relates to politics. Two ideal-typical conceptions of politics, i.e., a spatial understanding of politics as a system, area, field, or sphere, and an understanding of politics as action, will be discussed. In the remainder of the section, I will base my reflections on an action-oriented understanding of politics and politicisation, arguing that both potentially can take place anywhere and anytime. In Section 3, I will discuss conceptually and theoretically whether and to what extent politicisation is compatible with liberal representative democracy—if politicisation is action, then it can be both democratic and anti-democratic action. The question, therefore, is how liberal representative democracies react to this challenge. On this basis, I will continue discussing the grey zones around populism, polarisation, and democratic backsliding, to further clarify interrelations between politicisation and liberal representative democracy. I will be concluding with a typology of four types of interrelations between politicisation and liberal representative democracy.

2. Conceptualising Politicisation

Any discussion of politicisation needs to begin by thinking about the concept itself. However, the current academic debate shows that while politicisation has become a key topic in political and social sciences, many contributions to the academic field use the concept without much specification, theoretical reflection, or conceptual discussion (see Wiesner, 2021a). Furthermore, the academic debate is split into subfields and subdisciplines such as European Studies, international relations, (international) political theory, comparative politics, political sociology, and legal theory. These respective epistemic communities are largely disconnected and tend to follow their particular paths of conceptualising and operationalising politicisation.

However, if taken together, the contributions from these different subfields offer a great theoretical and conceptual richness around different understandings and operationalisations of politicisation. Since the fields have rarely been connected so far, this richness is present but has remained largely unexplored. Reading contributions from the different subfields in connection shows that the puzzle of politicisation, even if followed on different paths, leads to complementary answers. As discussed in the concluding thoughts to a comprehensive volume on politicisation that I had the pleasure to edit (Wiesner, 2021c), despite the different theoretical backgrounds and communities, the contributions to the debate on politicisation thus raise similar conceptual points and may be possibly related (Wiesner, 2019b, 2021d).

In most contributions in the current debate (see, e.g., Anders, 2021; de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Gheyle, 2019; Hutter et al., 2016; Kauppi & Trenz, 2021; Selk, 2021; von Staden, 2021) and as discussed previously in Wiesner (2021d, p. 268), "politicisation refers to creating controversy, conflict, contentiousness, or contestation. It means an increase in visibility (in terms of both appearance and salience, quantitatively measured) of an issue, or an actor, and it refers to the notion of the public space and/or issues that are publicly shared." Politicisation also refers to the fact that an actor or an issue is, or becomes, an object of debate, controversy, or contestation. Politicisation is usually understood as being related to politics, as well as to collective action, or collectives.

This summary indicates important pillars for conceptualising politicisation: The first conceptual pillars are visibility and publicity—or the fact to have a public—and collectivity and relevance, which suggest that the issue or actor at stake is deemed relevant by a collective. There is debate, controversy, or contestation—i.e., there is disagreement and deliberation about the issues or actors at stake, or they are contested. All this might refer to both the productive disagreement in a peaceful deliberation and open conflict or even violence. Last but not least, politics is at stake, and in particular that an issue or actor is, or becomes, an "object of politics," i.e., of political debates, processes, institutions, or actions. But what does politics mean in this?

2.1. Politicisation and Politics

The concept of politicisation has a direct normative, theoretical, and conceptual relation to the concept of politics, or the political, as in any case (i.e., irrespective of the concrete definition used) it refers to political processes, actions, or conflicts.

The concept of politics itself has a long and rich history (see Palonen, 2006, 2007, for an encompassing discussion). A number of different understandings are used and current. In this, two ideal-typical accounts of theorising politics can be distinguished (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen, 2021; Wiesner, 2021b): politics can be understood on one hand spatially, i.e., as system, area, sphere, or field, but it can also be understood as action. The decisive conceptual difference between the two approaches is that while in the activity concept any issue, actor, or question can become subject or object of politics, in the spatial concept, only actors and issues present in the area or system are part of politics (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 23). Both understandings have consequences for conceptualising politicisation.

Spatial understandings of politics can differ, ranging from a classical political systems approach (Easton, 1953) with parties and institutions to broader understandings. But in any case, in a spatial understanding, politics is conceptualised as a fixed area with more or less stable borders. This leads to an equivalent understanding of politicisation: if based on a spatial conception of politics, politicisation means either that issues or actors enter or leave the system or area of politics, or the extension of the borders of politics.

Spatial concepts of politics and politicisation often go along with putting the conceptual and analytical focus on the classical political system, i.e., governments, institutions, parties, political elites, and mainstream media—rather than on politicising actions and processes as the ones described in the introduction. If operationalised this way, research focuses mainly on issues that are discussed in parliament or the mainstream news media, but tends to leave out issues and actors that are not (yet) salient in these arenas. They are hence not regarded and analysed as politics.

Such a view, accordingly, tends to lose sight of both the issues and actors that are (in the moment) active outside the political system, and of the actions related to politics and politicisation, i.e., the question of who moves the issue into the system or area of politics or out of it, how, and why. From a systems-based perspective, these actions will become relevant only if they cross a threshold that gives them a decisive impact on the core of the political system, i.e., visibility and salience there. Both the cases described in the beginning, the January 6 riots and Fridays for Future, have had such an impact.

But even if they had not had an impact on the system, they have to be considered politicisation in an action-based understanding. As said above, if politicisation is understood as action, it means to mark an issue or actor as political. This entails, at first, nothing more than to mark the issue as "playable" (Palonen, 2003, p. 171) in political actions. The issue is marked as a potential object of further politicising actions, of debates, votes, or protests—but whether and to what extent this will happen, and if it will have an impact in the core of the political system, is not to be predicted. The outcomes of politicisation, as with all politics, are contingent (Kauppi et al., 2016; Palonen, 2003).

The spatial and action-oriented approaches to politics are to be understood as ideal types, not in a simple either-or opposition (Wiesner, 2021b). There is no dichotomy at stake here. Political action in general and politicisation in particular can take place in the classical system as well as outside of it. In the academic debate, authors use various understandings "of system, sphere, and field notions of politics, in different combinations with, or in opposition to, action or conflict-oriented approaches" (Wiesner, 2021d, p. 268). But the two ideal types hint at theoretical and analytical distinctions which describe a horizon of interpretation:

A first dimension of distinction is whether politics is considered to be spatially bound and as a static kind of space with fixed borders, or as action and process, i.e., without boundaries.

A second, related, dimension of distinction is whether to put theoretical, conceptual, and analytical importance only on what happens in the core of the classical political system or to include what happens at its margins or outside of it, too.

A third dimension is the focus of research: On one hand, we can aim for the fact that an issue or actor is an object of public debate already, on the other hand, it is worthwhile focusing on the action that makes it such.

All these distinctions are decisive for analysing the relation between politicisation and liberal representative democracy.

2.2. Politicisation as Activity

If politics is action, everything can become political. This understanding of politics hence is the broader one, as it includes potentially all political actions at any time (Wiesner, 2021b). It is also an understanding that catches crucial dynamics in current liberal representative democracies, namely the actors and actions originating outside the classical political system (such as in the example of the January 6 riots and the Fridays for Future). The action-based approach, different from the spatial or systems one, allows to grasp conceptually and empirically both politicising actors and activities from scratch.

The following considerations thus rely on a conceptualisation of politics as action or activity (see Kauppi et al., 2016; Wiesner, 2017, 2021b, 2024). Furthermore, they build on Palonen´s (2003, p. 171) distinction of four sub-dimensions of politics (politics, polity, politicisation, and politicking) that is developed further. As per Wiesner (2021b, p. 21):

> In this conceptual classification, politics is the activity, polity is the institutionalised arena or form politics relates to (this can be the political system, but also another institutional form), policy refers to the regulating aspect of politics, politicking means the doing of politics, and politicisation is understood as the act of marking or naming something as political.

In the following, I build on Palonen´s typology but develop it further. Accordingly, the following conceptualisation differs from Palonen´s in certain dimensions. I understand political action as any action that marks an issue as political, drives political processes, builds, changes, or acts within a polity (e.g., the political system and its institutions), or shapes policies (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 21). Once more, politics as action can happen "at any time, any place, and in any situation, and anything can be marked as political" (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 21)—politics then has no boundaries. It concerns the actors' actions and not the system or area in which they act.

Based on these considerations, I will use the following definition: "politicisation means to mark something (an issue) as collectively relevant and as an object of politics, and hence as debatable or contested" (Wiesner, 2024, p. 3).

Importantly, all politics is contingent, and so are the consequences of politicisation. Once an issue is marked as political, there is no predetermined outcome of what will happen next. In each moment of political controversies and processes, it is always possible to act otherwise (Kauppi et al., 2016). Moreover, it is never a priori clear how the other players will take the respective political actions and how they will react.

3. Politicisation, Politics, and Liberal Representative Democracy

How does politicisation relate to liberal representative democracy? To further clarify this, I will, first, discuss the importance of the institutional and legal frameworks of politics, and second, the consequences of the fact that all politics are contingent.

3.1. The Framework of Liberal Representative Democracy

Importantly, and linked to the reflections in Section 2 above, I regard liberal representative democracy as a form of political organisation (or a polity) of self-government of the citizens via elected representants. It depends on both institutions *and* democratic activity. This means that liberal representative democracy does not simply consist in institutions and rights, as in narrow models of democracy (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 25). These institutions and rights also need to be filled with democratic practice. Without democratic practice, liberal representative democracy only is an empty institutional framework (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 25, 2024, p. 5, 23). In this understanding, liberal representative democracy is a structured and regulated form for defining, debating, and deciding upon collectively relevant questions via representative institutions and processes. It also is an arena for democratic practice.

Institutions and democratic practice have a specific relation in liberal representative democracy. Rules and democratic institutions build the legal framework for political action and structure its form in that they offer formalised arenas and pathways (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 26). Institutions, accordingly, fix the rules of the democratic game, and democratic activity fills them with life. This also means that institutions and laws both create and limit spaces for democratic activity—they structure, enable, limit, or hinder, politicisation and democratic practice. A crucial question is whether politicisation abides by these rules and institutions or is in opposition to them.

The above means that there is a latent tension between democratic practice and institutions. Concretely, rules such as election laws structure access to the institutionalised arenas of liberal representative democracy, such as parliaments. Election laws in liberal representative democracies give preference to some political actors over others—namely political parties as big, organised interest-representing organisations, rather than individual voices, activists, or protest movements. This entails that in formalised political arenas such as parliaments, parties are dominant, as are the interests that they represent. Both these tendencies taken together tend to establish institutionally relevant issues represented by big parties, and these issues might not be the ones judged relevant by population groups or citizens that are less represented in the institutions, or that have limited access to them. This means that democratic institutions in liberal representative democracies tend to channel and limit not only the chances for politicising actions, but also to influence which issues can obtain public relevance in the institutionalised arenas of the political system.

Importantly, a liberal representative democratic system must not close down but be open to political activity by the demos. This also means that it is decisive that there are ways to impact the core of the system from the margins, e.g., by politicisation from citizens or NGOs that take place in bottom-up ways. Liberal representative democracy therefore always includes the possibility for dissent; i.e., the possibility of openly debating, criticising, and contesting a governmental policy, a parliamentary majority, a law, or a political opponent. Such criticism is a legitimate part of liberal representative democracy. Concretely, to criticise a policy of the state a person lives in, to criticise institutions, and to be critical of the EU as a polity is by no means anti-democratic. On the contrary, it is democratic practice as well.

Accordingly, liberal representative democracies usually open institutionalised pathways and arenas for dissent in that they lay down rights and spaces for dissenting voices in the form of codified rights for protests and demonstrations, as well as demarcated powers for opposition groups in parliaments. There are also rights to free speech and minority rights and further channels for entering the institutionalised arenas, such as petitions or hearings. These rights and channels not only protect dissenters and minorities but enable them to express their standpoints. They also open possibilities for politicising actors and actions that originate outside the core of the system to enter it. These mechanisms nowadays are acquired liberal democratic standards (see Merkel, 2004).

When it comes to discussing how politicisation relates to liberal representative democracy, both the institutional thresholds and the spaces and rights for political actions from outside the core of the system are crucial. The key question is then how political actors make use of their rights and the rooms for action they offer (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 26).

3.2. Politicisation and Contingency

So far, I have argued that politicisation, as political action, is part of the activities that fill liberal representative democratic institutions with democratic practice. The institutional framework of liberal representative democracy fixes the rules for all political action and also for politicisation—but it also creates spaces and offers rights to politicise, as was just explained.

But despite this framework, as said earlier, politics and politicisation are contingent. This means we do not know what the outcomes and consequences of politicisation will be. As politics is contingent, the impact of politicisation on democracy cannot be determined in advance of a politicising action.

Following the definition introduced in Section 2 by Wiesner (2024, p. 3), "politicisation means to mark something (an issue) as collectively relevant and as an object of politics, and hence as debatable or contested." It is important to note that this does not speak of "democratic politics": Politicisation is not necessarily democratic politicisation, and neither is politics always democratic. The two examples introduced in the beginning illustrate this. Both examples represent cases of politicisation, both have a visible bottom-up component, but their relation to and effect on liberal representative democracy is opposed.

On one hand, the Greta Thunberg example, as said in the previous sections, illustrates a path in which politicisation can be beneficial for liberal representative democracy in that it leads to political activity, participation, and people being engaged. A simple politicising action led to young people across the world uniting, organising, going to the streets, and campaigning for a goal that is for the common good, i.e., combating climate change and saving humanity. All of this took place within the rules of the democratic game. The Fridays for Future activities benefited from the rules and possibilities liberal representative democracies offer, such as the right to demonstrate and to free speech. Young people who previously had not been politically active suddenly were, and their claims were taken up by mainstream political parties, i.e., they made their way into the very core of the political system. In sum, the early years of Fridays for Future are an example of what can be termed bottom-up politicisation as democratisation (see type 1 in the conclusion section).

On the other hand, the contrary is the case of the January 6 riots: a group of people that mobilised via social media and specific channels violated the very core of the political system and liberal representative institutions—the building of the two parliamentary chambers. Their aggression became not only material but also threatened the lives and health of politicians and policemen. The January 6 rioters actively aggressed liberal representatives of both the political system and the state. On top, the riot was driven by the person who had been president of the state in question until the day before, i.e., by the person who had only just left the position as the highest representative of the democratic system. In sum, the January 6 riots mark an example of bottom-up anti-democratic politicisation (see Type 3 in the conclusion section).

3.3. Limiting Anti-Democratic Politicisation

The above underlines that politicisation has no predetermined effect on democracy. Both politicisation and politics can be non-, or even anti-democratic. But what exactly is to be considered anti-democratic politicisation?

On one hand, politicisation can aim at enhancing societal polarisation (McCoy et al., 2018; Schedler, 2023) and this can endanger liberal representative democracy, because conflicts are no longer carried out peacefully by deliberation, but can also become violent, as on January 6, 2021. On the other hand, it is possible that politicisation attacks both the liberal representative democratic institutions and arenas, and the freedoms and protection rights (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 27).

As said in the introduction, all over the world there are political actors and movements that enhance political polarisation, criticise or abolish minority rights, and challenge political institutions and representative-democratic rules. In these cases, actors use their own constitutional rights and political freedoms to push forward an anti-system agenda and hence to attack these rights and freedoms. This is notably the case for several nationalist and/or right-wing populist movements and parties. In such cases, to reference a dictum attributed to Saint Just, "the enemies of freedom use their freedom—opponents of representative democracy use the very freedoms granted by representative democracies to fight against them" (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 27). The crucial question is how the actors, and the framework, of liberal representative democracies deal with such anti-democratic politicisation. Are there limits to anti-democratic politicisation? And how can they be set?

The answer is that, first, there is an awkward but necessary tension: liberal democratic freedom needs to be a principle that is valid for all. "If it is just conditional for persons that behave well in the eyes of a government, it is not freedom anymore" (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 28). As famously put by Rosa Luxemburg (1972, p. 69), democratic freedom has to be the freedom of dissenters:

> Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party—however numerous they may be—is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of "justice" but because all that is instructive, wholesome, and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when "freedom" becomes a special privilege.

Accordingly, as discussed in Wiesner (2021b), "representative democracies must guarantee freedoms and protection rights also for deviating opinions" (p. 28). This also means that "anti-democratic politicisation needs to be taken into account if democratic politicisation shall be enabled—up to a certain extent. To cut down democratic freedoms and arenas for political actions preventively to limit anti-democratic politicisation is a contradiction in itself" (p. 29). Importantly, "democratic freedoms, protection rights, and institutionalised arenas do not create anti-democratic politicisation, they just enable it" (p. 29).

Second, if politicisation is directed against the principles of liberal representative democracy itself, and hence against the rules of the democratic game, two ways of reaction are possible. On one hand, liberal representative democracy is a matter of the people, the citizens, and their political actions, and so defenders of democratic freedoms can, or must, act politically against enemies of democracy if they want to defend it—in a battle of opinions, in demonstrations and the public spaces.

On the other hand, the above claim—that freedom must be a principle valid for everyone—does not mean that there are no limits. Liberal representative democracies do not have to accept open breaches of their rules. From a certain point onwards, there are limits to anti-democratic politicisation via mechanisms of democratic self-defence (see Malkopoulou & Norman, 2018, for a critical discussion).

Germany is a case in point for relatively strong rules of democratic self-defence. First, Germany, in international comparison, has relatively strict limitations on freedom of speech. In reaction to National Socialism, based on the wish to defend German democracy against its enemies in the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany, and especially in recognition of the Shoa, several symbols (such as swastikas) and phrases (such as statements relativising the Holocaust) are judged as unlawful in Germany.

Second, the German constitution enables the interdiction of political parties by the Constitutional Court if their aim is to overthrow the liberal democratic system. This rule is an example of a possible institutional reaction against anti-democratic actors. Following Wiesner (2021b, p. 28):

> The logic behind this is to claim that only actors playing by the rules of the representative democratic system and accepting to support it are entitled to use the benefits of the system. If an actor, a party, or a movement, aims at destroying it, they thus can be taken out of the democratic game.

3.4. The Grey Zones

It is, however, difficult to determine when politicisation creates too much polarisation or endangers the system. It is important but difficult to clearly distinguish whether we deal with controversy or contests, with protest or conflict, and it is decisive whether these take on a peaceful character or become violent. It is also decisive whether and to what extent politicising actions do support democratic institutions and processes, whether they take place within their framework, or whether and when they aim at tearing them down.

What about cases of politicisation that are not outrightly anti-democratic? Representative democracies today are marked by various types of politicising actions that fit in between outright support and outright rejection of their principles. Especially populist actors today are frequently discussed as proponents of polarisation or anti-democratic politicisation (see Müller, 2016; Urbinati, 2019). But there are by no means simple equations at stake in this. The grey zones are decisive. Several authors have underlined that populists cannot simply be classified as enemies of democracy (see Jörke, 2021; Katsambekis, 2022). Furthermore, crises are drivers of populist reactions (Stavrakakis et al., 2018; see also the contributions of Ostiguy et al., 2020).

To further dwell into these grey zones, the following examples will show that populist actors may be agents of politicisation that tend to act in a polarising manner, and it can happen that they argue in anti-system ways. But this does not mean that they also act in anti-democratic ways. Focusing on empirical findings on two EU referenda (the French 2005 EU referendum and the 2026 Brexit referendum) it will thus be discussed whether and when politicisation turned—or not—into being polarising, anti-system oriented, or anti-democratic.

3.4.1. Populist Arguments, Populist Politicisation?

The two EU referenda and the related discourses each had a national history behind them. Jacques Chirac, then French president, called a referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty in order to obtain a higher legitimacy for the Treaty, and David Cameron, then British Prime Minister, had given in to a lingering EU criticism in his own party when he promised to hold a Brexit referendum. Both referendum discourses thus were major instances of EU-related politicisation from the beginning. They were marked by populist and polarising arguments—and they had a major impact on EU politics, and hence in the core of the political system.

On May 29, 2005, France held a referendum on the EU Constitutional Treaty. 54.67% of those participating voted "No," only 45.33% voted "Yes" ("29 mai 2005 : Le non gagne," 2005; Conseil Constitutionnel, 2005). The question asked was "Do you approve of the law that authorises ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe" ("Approuvez-vous le projet de loi qui autorise la ratification du traité établissant une constitution pour l'Europe?"; Conseil Constitutionnel, n.d.). In the end, the result for "No" even exceeded the forecast of the last opinion polls (Boy & Chiche, 2005, p. 94). On June 23, 2016, the UK held a referendum regarding its EU membership. The question asked was "Should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?" While 51.9% of those participating in the polls voted for "Leave," only 48.1% voted "Remain." Turnout had been 72% ("EU referendum: The result in maps and charts," 2021). While the French "No" vote led to the EU Constitutional Treaty never being ratified, the "Leave" vote ultimately led to the UK leaving the EU in January 2020.

When comparing the Brexit referendum discourse and results and the French 2005 referendum discourse and results, it becomes obvious that both discourses were marked by a critical politicisation of the EU—but the British discourse was "driven from the right when the French discourse was driven from the left" (Wiesner, 2024, p. 289). In both discourses populist arguments were decisive. There were also anti-system arguments (mainly arguments directed against the EU as a system) and polarising rhetoric—but only a few of the arguments had an anti-democratic character.

The Brexit discourse and vote represent a success of right-wing populism (Koller et al., 2019, p. 3). As discussed in Wiesner (2024, p. 288), the Brexit discourse was driven mainly by the United Kingdom Independence Party and its "Leave" campaign. The main "Leave" motives emphasised fear of immigration and claimed to protect the National Health Service by a Brexit. The EU was altogether depicted as an "other." While right-wing EU criticism thus drove the referendum discourse, left-wing EU criticism was less important (Cap, 2019; Demata, 2019; Koller et al., 2019; Smith, 2021; Zappettini, 2021). As opposed to this, in France in 2005, the discourse was driven and won by the left. Left opponents based their victory largely on an anti-liberal motif (Wiesner, 2014, pp. 264–268, 2024, pp. 170–172, p. 177, pp. 287–292) that depicted the EU as neoliberal. The left EU critics with this motif mobilised on the social situation which had been decisive in almost all previous election campaigns of recent years. The left Treaty opponents succeeded in linking classic left-wing arguments, social protests, and resistance to the Constitutional Treaty. This enabled to vote "No" out of opposition to neoliberalism, to the EU in its current form, or to make the referendum a protest vote against the government.

However, as discussed at some length previously in Wiesner (2024, pp. 287–292), despite this clear difference in the ideological camps and motifs driving the discourses, they show striking similarities. The decisive motifs relied on populist rhetoric, polarising arguments, and anti-system critique:

1. Protest and contestation against "the system" and "those above": Both proponents of the French "No" camp and the British "Leave"´ camp constructed an opposition against the system and governing elites. The UK "Leave" campaign built on the British tradition of contesting the European Union (p. 290), while the French "No" proponents built on the French tradition of protesting against elites in power (p. 289).
2. Black-and-white distinctions: With the anti-migration stance, the UK "Leavers" relied on a key topic of right-wing contestation (p. 290). In France, the anti-liberalism motif that depicted the EU as neoliberal combined traditional left-wing criticism, social protests, and opposition to the Constitutional Treaty (p. 170, 289).

3. Construction of oppositions: The UK "Leavers" successfully established arguments that constructed the EU as anti-National Health Service and pro-immigration. These lines of argumentation allowed for various reasons to advocate the "Leave" vote. Similarly, in France, opponents of the Constitutional Treaty successfully established a chain of argumentation that allowed for various reasons to advocate the "No" vote.
4. Linking EU criticism with protest traditions: The dynamics of the discourse created in this way worked in favour of the "Leave" campaign in the UK, and in favour of the opponents of the Constitutional Treaty in France. "Every current social issue and every criticism of the government was now linked to the referendum" (p. 177).
5. Weak opponents: Added to this was the weakness of the "Remain" and the "Yes" camps, which in both cases consisted of mainstream parties and politicians but were divided.
6. Weak pro arguments: On top of all this, both "remainers" and advocates of a "Yes" took up the topics of the opposite camp. While the "Leave" and the "No" messages were clear and simple, the "Remain" and the "Yes" camp had many different messages, all ambivalent. Both used few substantive arguments of their own and often only reacted to criticism. "Contentless meta-arguments tended to reinforce the impression of [elite] arrogance" (p. 177).
7. Exaggerations: The central goal of both the "Leave" and the "No" camps was not to present political alternatives, but to oppose the EU or the Constitutional Treaty. "Arguments on policy substance and political alternatives were less decisive than clear exaggerations (…) it was about clear and simple opposition, not about complicated alternatives" (p. 177).

In sum, the British discourse was strongly oriented around right-wing arguments, parties, and actors. These rather appealed to older voters. The French discourse was driven by left-wing EU criticism which tended to appeal to younger voters (Wiesner, 2024, pp. 287–292). Accordingly, the sociodemographic voter profiles of the two referenda showed striking similarities, as discussed previously (Wiesner, 2014, pp. 438–439, 2024, pp. 287–288). Both votes were very clearly aligned as according to regional and income structures. While 59.9% of those voting in London opted for "Remain," the economically less developed British regions in the majority voted "Leave" ("EU referendum: The result in maps and charts," 2021). The sociodemographic patterns of the French 2005 referendum were similar. In France, in 2005, the poorer and less developed regions also voted "No" in the majority (Fourquet et al., 2005, pp. 110–112). But when it comes to the age groups, the British outcome differs. In Britain, 73% of those aged between 18 and 24 voted "Remain" and 60% of those aged above 65 voted "Leave" ("EU referendum: The result in maps and charts," 2021). In contrast, 56% of French pensioners voted "Yes" as well as 54% of the students (IPSOS, 2005; Wiesner, 2014, pp. 439).

All this indicates that both EU referendum discourses were not only successful instances of politicisation of EU criticism but also clear successes of the populist, polarising, and anti-system motifs sketched above. In both cases, key motifs in the discourse distinguished "us" and "them" in society and were directed against the EU as a system. But does anything in the dynamics describe an anti-democratic tendency? The answer is no.

Two decisive distinctions need to be made here. First, importantly and again, any liberal representative democracy must be based on the possibility of openly debating, criticising, and contesting policies and political institutions. Such criticism is simply a legitimate part of democratic political culture, even if it is polarising, even if it can at times be mingled with populist arguments, and even if it can at times classify as Eurosceptic. Second, EU criticism is by no means to be confused with criticism of liberal representative

democracy as such or with populism—even if there may be arguments where the three, or two of them, go together. This discussion allows for a critical perspective on the concept of Euroscepticism that cannot be elaborated on here (see Wiesner, 2024, pp. 292–295).

All in all, both the French and the British EU discourse were not only major processes of EU politicisation, but they also were major instances of broad and open public deliberation about the EU. This means that both discourses also had a major democratising effect in terms of raising public discourse and exchange. Both can be classified as bottom-up and top-down driven examples of politicisation (scenarios 1 and 2 in the conclusion section).

As per Wiesner (2024, p. 299), "the point, then, is that politicisation and its democratising effects, the enhancement of public debate, and the preparation of democratic decisions, do not necessarily lead to the outcomes that EU scholars, politicians, or other persons would deem to be the best," i.e., support of draft Treaties or remaining in the EU. Nothing of this, however, is anti-democratic, it is not even dangerous for political systems—except maybe for the EU. All this indicates that the threshold for politicisation to be classified as anti-democratic is rather high.

3.4.2. Damaging Democracy From Within the Institutions

Having discussed these various examples and grey zones, we are left with politicisation becoming anti-democratic when it enhances polarisation and violence, or when it is directed against the principles and institutions of liberal representative democracy. This may, as in the January 6 example, happen from the outside and in bottom-up movements.

Another case in point is right-wing populists in government that drive anti-democratic politicisation, such as Victor Orbán. Orbán is a right-wing populist politician that can be termed a proponent of anti-democratic politicisation. The example of Orbán and his Fidesz shows the rhetorical element, i.e., anti-democratic politicisation in terms of rhetoric that enhances polarisation—and how these are linked to concrete steps from within the institutional framework after election successes that make anti-democrats take over government.

For one, in his rhetoric, Orbán fuels polarisation and criticises liberal representative democracy. For example, on July 22, 2022, in a speech he gave in Romania to Hungarian ethnic groups, he criticised the democratic West as being in decline (Oysmüller, 2022). But Orbán does not limit himself to words. Orbán´s party Fidesz has been in government for more than a decade. He won the last Hungarian parliamentary election again with a two-thirds majority (Tagesschau.de, 2022). Fidesz uses its political majority to cut down standards of liberal representative democracy such as minority protection and opposition rights, i.e., the possibilities for politicisation and democratic activity (Wiesner, 2021b, p. 28). The EU´s values from Article 2 TFEU are being increasingly restricted in Hungary (Freedom House, n.d.).

In cases like this one, both modes of democratic defence have been outplayed—political activity as well as institutional protection mechanisms. The actors of anti-democratic politicisation then have been successful not only in entering into the institutions but also in taking over government. The mechanism at stake is then democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016), i.e., the cutting down of democratic standards and institutions from a

government position. Democratic backsliding can be based on, and backed by anti-democratic politicisation. The EU has tried to counteract democratic backsliding in Hungary with several rule-of-law measures and complaints. This means that the EU has partly taken over the role of the institutionalised agent of democratic self-defence in this case.

4. Conclusion: Four Scenarios of the Relation Between Politicisation and Democracy

In sum, the relationship between politicisation and liberal representative democracy is complex. As discussed in the previous sections, liberal representative democracies need to enable politicisation as political action, even when it is critical of liberal representative democracies themselves. But politicisation, as politics, is contingent: the outcome of politicisation is never to be predicted beforehand. Politicisation can enhance debate and democratisation, but it can also be anti-democratic and enhance polarisation or violence. Liberal representative democracies have two possibilities to act against anti-democratic politicisation: via the political actions of the demos members, and via legal means of democratic self-defence. All in all, to delineate when politicisation enhances polarisation and endangers democratic institutions requires inquiring into grey zones.

The discussion and the examples mentioned therefore suggest conceptualising the interrelations between politicisation and liberal representative democracy in different pathways. Thus, I present below a taxonomy of four different scenarios (adapted from Wiesner, 2023, 2024, pp. 299–300):

1. A bottom-up democratisation scenario (politicisation as enhancing democratic activity): Politicisation brings democratic activity. Citizens participate, engage, debate, and politicise issues. There is an increase in democratic practice and participation which, in this case, strengthens social cohesion (instead of polarisation). The relationship between citizens and elites is dynamic, democratic institutions are filled with democratic practice. Most emancipatory social movements would be examples of this kind of politicisation, such as Fridays for Future in their beginnings. The French referendum debate also is an example of bottom-up democratisation.
2. A top-down democratisation scenario (politicisation as enhancing political debate): this scenario is mainly based on party-political activity that enhances political debate which in this case also strengthens social cohesion (instead of polarisation). There will be less interaction between elites, citizens, and activists than in the bottom-up democratisation model. But still, political parties and media may trigger public debate and politicisation. Democratic institutions are also filled with democratic practice. The referendum debates conform to this type.
3. An anti-democratic bottom-up scenario (politicisation as enhancing anti-democratic mobilisation in the sense of polarisation and anti-system actions): The processes are similar to the bottom-up democratisation scenario. Citizens and activists politicise issues, but either engage in order to polarise societies, or in a system-critical or even anti-democratic way, or both. Bottom-up activities and politicisation then may be directed against liberal representative democracy as such which may ultimately lead to violence. The US events of January 6, 2021 are an example of such an anti-democratic bottom-up politicisation.
4. An anti-democratic top-down scenario (politicisation as enhancing polarisation, anti-system votes, and anti-system actions): this scenario is mainly based on party-political activity, this time of anti-democratic parties. There will be less interaction between elites, citizens, and activists than in the

bottom-up obstacle scenario. Political parties and media that communicate and politicise liberal representative democracy critically may push polarisation and a decline of citizen support for democracy, and in consequence, also gather votes in elections. These dynamics run similarly to the ones in the top-down democratisation scenario but trigger criticism of liberal representative democracy instead of its support. Ultimately, it may lead to anti-democrats acceding into government. The Hungarian Fidesz is a case in point of this type.

To conclude, from a normative perspective, politicisation is a basic practice of democracy, which means that—for instance in the case of the EU, which is not very politicised, i.e., not very much marked by public political debates and actions—politicisation means democratisation. The final question thus is not how much politicisation is beneficial, but which kind of politicisation is beneficial, i.e., whether politicisation enhances democratic debate and practice, or whether it triggers polarisation or is linked to attempts to destroy democratic institutions from the inside.

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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Alternatives to Liberal Democracy and the Role of AI: The Case of Elections

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Abstract

Liberal democracy has been increasingly challenged not only by illiberal democracy but also by the Dark Enlightenment (also named neoreactionarism, abbreviated to NRx and characterised as neo-fascist), which has been supported by the top segment of global high-tech corporations based in the US. These concepts of governing have not been directly compared, either in general or in their treatment of elections in particular. This article compares these concepts with more detailed insight into a conceptualisation of free and fair elections, which form the critical difference between liberal democracy and autocracy, and are an institution vulnerable to the misuse of AI. Based on the conceptualisation of free and fair elections and a review of the sources (academic literature and reports related to AI and elections), this article offers: (a) an overview of the (mis)use of AI to affect three stages in the election processes (before, on, and after polling day); (b) a taxonomy of segments in the election process with their particular vulnerabilities for AI (mis)use; and (c) a preliminary overview of the estimated impact of AI (mis)use on elections. The article argues that so far, AI has been only to a limited extent instrumentalised in support of liberal democracy. Rather, it has been predominantly misused in favour of illiberal democracy and Dark Enlightenment alternatives to liberal democracy.

Keywords

AI; liberal democracy; illiberal democracy; Dark Enlightenment; elections

1. Introduction

Historically, crises of liberal democracy have been cyclically addressed by political thinkers and social scientists—especially during the critical years of 1918, 1933, 1947, 1961, 1974, 1989, and 2008 (see, e.g.,

Keane, 2009; Runciman, 2013). Nevertheless, variations in particular democracies at particular times and places have also been exposed (Runciman, 2019, p. xiv). Currently, several alternative conceptualisations of governing are competing in the Western world: liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, and the Dark Enlightenment (also named neoreactionarism, abbreviated to NRx and characterised as neo-fascist). In the article, we focus on them since they not only appear in political theory but also have a practical impact on politics in the context of major social, economic, and technological changes.

Liberal democracy has a long tradition in political thought and various practices. While illiberal democracy, as a practice and political thought, has been developing since the 1990s in various parts of the world (Zakaria, 1997), the Hungarian version of illiberalism has been gaining substantial impact not only in Europe but also in the US (Shapiro & Végh, 2024). Also, it has achieved an academic level of recognition, including the publication of handbooks on illiberalism (Laruelle, 2024; Sajó et al., 2021). Although the Dark Enlightenment has some historical ideational roots, the current Dark Enlightenment alternative to democracy evolved in the 2000s based on originally disputed British political thought by Nick Land and by contributions of the US right extremist blogger Curtis Gay Yarvin (using the blogger name Mencius Moldbug). While academic philosophers have ignored the Dark Enlightenment for some time, academic literature on the Dark Enlightenment has been evolving (Burrows, 2018; Tait, 2019; Žižek, 2023). Nevertheless, the current Dark Enlightenment is not only a concept in political theory but also has practical political manifestations. It has been significantly empowered by the world's richest individuals (CEOs of AI tech corporations, particularly Elon Musk) who have adopted Dark Enlightenment ideas (E. Simon, 2025).

In academia, even the concept of liberal democracy, which is much older, has been debated to this day. More recent, illiberal democracy and the Dark Enlightenment alternatives to liberal democracy have been contested even more. Nevertheless, the latter two have been increasingly used in contemporary philosophical and social science scholarship. At the same time, they have been substantially linked to the more recent spread of practices which critically damage liberal democracy. This is obvious in their treatment of elections. This is why, in this article, we are focusing on elections.

For the purpose of the article, we argue that there are democratic (meaning free and fair) elections that are the main distinction between liberal democracy and autocracy. Elections are democratic (free and fair) and, by that, are also at the core of democracy only in truly liberal democratic systems. Elections are also held in illiberal democracies, but illiberal elites damage their free and fair characteristics in favour of maintaining their positions of power (Bíró-Nagy, 2017). The Dark Enlightenment aims to dismantle liberal democracy. In practice, its followers damage free and fair elections accordingly (Global Coalition for Tech Justice, 2024; Rankin, 2025). Elections are also critical events that can either reinforce or counteract an autocratisation or democratisation trend (Nord, Medzihorsky, & Lindberg, 2024).

Researchers have investigated the processes of democratisation, de-democratisation/autocratisation, and U-turns in transitions from democracy to autocracy. As these turns are products of human agency, it is important to learn more about the instruments used in these processes. Since information and information networks play critical roles and are especially vulnerable in the context of accelerated AI, we further narrowed our research focus to the instrumentalisation of AI in elections. Although human/information networks already existed in other historical circumstances, with the development of AI technology, they have changed in scope and quality to an unprecedented degree (Harari, 2024).

The main theses of this article are, firstly, that today, liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, and the Dark Enlightenment are competing conceptualisations of governing, which critically differ in their treatment of elections. Liberal democracy favours democratic—that is, free and fair—elections for representative institutions. Illiberal democracy damages democratic elections by damaging the freedom and fairness of elections for representative institutions. The Dark Enlightenment damages free and fair elections with an aim not only to damage free and fair elections but to eventually destroy the whole representative liberal democratic order. Secondly, AI technology has so far been predominantly (mis)used for damaging democratic (that is, free and fair) elections, both led by illiberalism and by the Dark Enlightenment.

With this article, we contribute to filling the gap in the political science literature related to AI and democracy. In fact, there are several specific gaps. First, there is a gap between political-philosophical contributions and contributions focusing on macro-political phenomena. Second, there is a gap between (a) highly theoretical, abstract contributions on AI and democracy, including some particular examples of (mis)use of AI; and (b) highly empirical insights into the (mis)use of AI in election processes in various reports. This article contributes to filling this gap by providing a link between the two levels of analysis. We offer: (a) a detailed comparison between currently competitive alternative conceptualisations of governing (particularly the treatment of elections within them); (b) the operationalisation of variables critical for analysing the impact of AI on two main qualities of election processes—their freeness and fairness; and (c) a taxonomy of AI (mis)uses in elections based on literature and reports on (mis)using of AI in elections (described in more detail in the methodology section).

We do this by taking into account the following major contextual factors in the current spread of the (mis)use of AI in elections. First, liberal democracy is in crisis (Önis, 2017; Wike & Fetterolf, 2018), illiberal democracy has been spreading (Vormann & Weinman, 2021), and more recently, the Dark Enlightenment alternative has been gaining space (Jones, 2019; Michael, 2016, 2022). Contrary to liberal democracy, the other two concepts of governing intentionally deconstruct liberal democratic institutions (including free and fair elections) both in normative and practical ways. A conscious impact on democratic elections is a crucial common ground for anti-liberal democracy trends.

Second, the form of capitalism has changed significantly. Political management of societies and technological advances have opened the way for a new form of capital based on the privatisation of the internet by big technological companies and the development of digital trading platforms, which do not function as markets. The payments for access to the internet (cloud) produce cloud rents to cloud owners (cloud capitalists) based on the payments for access to the internet (cloud). This is why the new form of capitalism has been nicknamed techno-feudalism (Varoufakis, 2024).

Third, international corporations—technological giants (Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, and X, previously Twitter) are currently very powerful in relation to the state (particularly in the US, where they can literally buy the political elite) and may and do control social networks (what people see and hear) beyond national borders where the state does not prevent access to them (Runciman, 2019, pp. 120–143). At the same time, such corporations may be and are instrumental in democratic states' temptations to use technology, with negative effects on democracy as well as the intervention of other countries into particular state politics (Runciman, 2019, pp. 153–157).

Fourth, recent times have seen the emergence of extreme social inequalities (Ahmed et al., 2022; Datta et al., 2023). Inequalities have radically increased not only between countries but also within countries, including those of the most developed nations (Quereshi, 2023). Potentially, the rise of AI could exacerbate both within- and between-country inequalities (Schellekens & Skilling, 2024).

Fifth, while the crisis of liberal democracy had been cyclically debated and already empirically revealed (see, e.g., Ercan & Gagnon, 2014; Hobson, 2021; Runciman, 2019), it is important to note that researchers have been revealing that, currently, a global wave of autocratisation has been in full swing (Rensmann, 2024), elections are becoming less democratic (Angiolillo et al., 2024) and the integrity of elections is now increasingly threatened both in democracies and autocracies. The quality of elections is increasingly worsening in democracies, with the level of electoral violence and the freedom and fairness of elections deteriorating the most (Hobson, 2021; Nord, Medzihorsky, & Lindberg, 2024).

Sixth, although technological innovations have affected elections in the past, the recent accelerated technological revolutions in the rapid evolution of AI and the unprecedented power concentrated in individual owners/leaders of international technological corporations based in one state (US) have been unprecedented in terms of scope, time, and influence beyond national borders. With the construction of Trump's second administration, Elon Musk's private and public (state-related) roles have converged and enabled the richest tech billionaire to act as a non-elected state representative in the domestic (US) and international arena. However, it is not only about the richest person in the world. The combination of highly concentrated but globalised technological and economic power in the hands of a few allows them to affect the information supply beyond national borders with unseen ease and speed. Privately owned platforms, such as Google, X, and Facebook, allow AI-empowered information, disinformation, and misinformation to be spread by individuals, corporations, various groups, and states, which has affected various social fields, including elections.

Seventh, recent times have also seen the rise of new reactionary philosophical and ideological/political platforms. The interference of tech billionaires in politics is not ideologically free. The ideas and practices of several of the richest American billionaires not only support illiberal practices but have also openly adopted the Dark Enlightenment alternative to liberal democracy. These ideas not only inspire extreme right-wing movements, well developed via AI-accelerated social media information impacts, but recently even entered the Trump second administration with the unprecedented direct and indirect inclusion of an extremely wealthy individual—Elon Musk—into government. Musk has been leading the rapid deconstruction of US federal institutions, which is in line with the Dark Enlightenment's ideas of disruptively destroying the democratic order with the aim of establishing a new elitist order.

Eighth, the interplay among all the above-described phenomena comes with the extraordinary power of several global AI-related technological enterprises situated in the US, led by several billionaires (owners of these companies) who increasingly support an autocratic alternative to the liberal democratic concept of governing. Tech billionaires may directly affect election processes by (a) manipulating platforms (algorithms, etc.); (b) enhancing particular (mis)information; and (c) personally interfering in particular elections (e.g., Musk's interference in the US, UK, and German elections), as well as personal support of particular, extreme right-wing politicians and parties in other countries (Robertson, 2025).

Ninth, the severe deficiencies of AI technology and its availability for misuse by various domestic and international actors in elections are factors on their own. Slattery et al. (2024, pp. 8–9) reported the findings from analysed expert articles, which show that most of the AI risks (51%) were caused by AI systems rather than humans. Most risks (65%) also emerged after the AI model had been trained and deployed. Furthermore, 35% of risks were intentional, and 37% were unintentional.

Tenth, many countries in the world are lagging behind in the regulation of AI, while some have adopted permissive rules regarding the use of AI in elections. At the same time, big tech companies made an accord on respecting some norms regarding elections in 2024 (*Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections*), but this seems to have been abandoned (Munich Security Conference, n.d.-a, n.d.-b) as big tech companies have removed fact-checking and allowed AI content to circulate without guardrails (Duffy, 2025; Verma et al., 2024). Recent increases in the regulation of AI and reductions in previously adopted AI regulation in various parts of the world have contributed to the mixed trend in states' influence on the behaviour of big tech companies.

With a large and increasing share of the world's population active on social media (an estimated 56.8% of the world's population, with an estimated four billion eligible voters, according to Krimmer et al. [2022]), the impact of AI on electoral processes gained importance in 2024, which has been considered a test of the health of democracy (United Nations, 2024). The year 2024 witnessed a historically unprecedented number of elections around the world, involving nearly half of the world's population. It was also a period when the rapid developments and use of AI technologies—particularly the increased use of generative AI (GenAI; Taylor, 2024), such as ChatGPT (Open AI) and Copilot (Microsoft)—were believed to have the potential to significantly impact on elections and democracy (Brand, 2024).

In the article, we are interested in the decay of liberal democratic systems, where liberal democracy has been losing its qualities, in the evolution of illiberal systems, and in the implementation of a new, plutocratic-based system inspired by the Dark Enlightenment, with a specific focus on elections. We are not, however, dealing with the (mis)use of AI in authoritarian regimes and the export of authoritarian playbooks by countries like China or Russia (Jang & Yoo, 2024). More precisely, we are seeking answers to these research questions:

> RQ1: Which AI technologies are used to affect election processes?
>
> RQ2: How and why are these impacts related to alternative concepts of governing (liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, and the Dark Enlightenment)?

In the following sections, we first present the key differences among the competing conceptualisations of governing and the critical differences among them in their treatment of elections. In the methodological section, two dimensions (free and fair elections) and the elements of three election stages are conceptualised (before, on the, and after polling day). Based on literature and election reports, we present an overview and a taxonomy of segments in the election process, including their particular vulnerabilities for AI (mis)use in the different election stages as well as in relation to alternative conceptualisations of governing. We conclude with estimations of AI's impact on elections, a summary of findings, and suggestions for further research.

2. Alternative Conceptualisations of Governing: A Comparative Analysis

Three conceptualisations of governing embedded in the political thought of the Western world (liberal, illiberal, and the Dark Enlightenment) have been both increasingly gaining status in academic research and competing on a global scale (see Table 1 in the Supplementary Material). They all share a core of political ideas, attitudes towards democracy, and international dimensions, including at least some aspects of colonisation and postcolonial reordering (Luger, 2020).

In practice, the concept of liberal democracy has been losing the trust of citizens in the ability of elites within these systems to genuinely represent citizens' interests. Illiberalism may be (and in some countries has been) gradually growing within a liberal democratic order and has a tendency to be replaced by an authoritarian regime. Recently, the Dark Enlightenment has been practically promoted within the already illiberally damaged democratic order (a case in point being the US, which has been evaluated as a flawed democracy since 2016; Lotz, 2025; Valgarðsson et al., 2025). How do these three conceptualisations of governing actually differ among themselves?

Liberal democracy is a political, social, and moral philosophy with a variety of real-life liberalisms, in principle based on the consent of the governed, constitutionalism, division of powers, private property, free enterprise, secularism, individual rights, civil liberties, equality before the law, free and fair elections, and freedom of the public sphere. Because a vast, well-known literature has long been available (to mention just Dahl, 1971; Held, 2006), for the purpose of this article, we mostly keep the comparisons with the other two competing conceptualisations in Table 1 (in the Supplementary Material).

Illiberal democracy (e.g., Laruelle, 2024; Zakaria, 1997) rests on a fundamental rejection of liberalism, notably the liberal concepts of equal political freedom and civil liberties for their alleged hypertrophic individualism. Nevertheless, it does not entirely reject democracy. Rather, it accepts formal democracy based on elections. Contrary to liberal democracy, it does not respect tolerance, multiculturalism, or the protection of minorities and their "decadent" way of life. Rather, it favours traditional social hierarchies, cultural homogeneity, and nation-centrism. It undermines the prerequisites for liberal democracy, such as constitutional order in general and liberal democratic institutions in particular (including free and fair elections and division of powers), and erodes participation, representation, and the public sphere.

Since the Dark Enlightenment is the least known conceptualisation of governing among the three conceptualisations considered in the article, we present it in more detail. Establishers of the Dark Enlightenment (particularly Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin) have developed and spread a philosophical basis for Trumpism (Johnson & Stokols, 2017) to a great extent via the internet through blogs, web-based media, and interlinked neoreactionary online communities (Tait, 2019). Despite some peculiarities, a significant portion of the tech elites in Silicon Valley share strong links to the Dark Enlightenment (Goldhill, 2017). Republican strategist Steve Bannon also supports the Dark Enlightenment (Johnson & Stokols, 2017). Recent empirical developments in the US have also shown how the richest man in the world took over *de facto* US leadership without electoral legitimacy, dismantling national state institutions and affecting national and international US policies (McGreal, 2025). Elon Musk, a non-elected, extremely rich individual, and at the same time the leading person in several tech companies, was named by President Trump as the head of the Department of

Government Efficiency and took over government operations with his private company, as well as taking advantage of unprecedented access to government data (Stanger, 2025).

The current Dark Enlightenment thinking (especially Nick Land, Curtis Yarvin, Peter Thiel, and Patri Friedman) favours "architectures of exit," including a micro-fracturing of nation-states into private governments—"gov-corps" (H. Smith & Burrows, 2021). The ideal is a realm: A sovereign corporation that draws its executives from the same talent pool large companies now draw from. A patchwork of such realms (Moldbug, n.d.) is seen as a modified version of a monarchy. To establish such an order, the old order needs to be destroyed. The disintegration of liberal democratic institutions within a nation-state has been taking place in real-time by an extremely rich minority supporting extreme right candidates and parties who can be instrumentalised in the process of political transformation. For that purpose, a Gramscian approach has also been used. In the US, this can be seen in the insertion of the richest tech CEOs into the state apparatus (as seen in the case of Trump's second administration).

The Dark Enlightenment view on liberal democracy is that it is a form of government that is dangerous and degenerative, leading to tyranny and chaos (Tait, 2019). The alternative is based on libertarians opting for a minimal state and a new form of authoritarianism, which is based on a privatised state (corporate–monarchy regime). Its formation is not seen as a gradual reformist change but as "a hard reset."

In Table 1 (see Supplementary Material), we compare liberalism, illiberalism, and the Dark Enlightenment based on the sources cited below the table.

Current AI developments have also enhanced the ability of external actors to interfere in national elections. Private ownership of some leading digital infrastructures (particularly platforms used by governmental and nongovernmental users) additionally challenges democracy. For example, Elon Musk has been using his resources as the richest man and tech CEO in the world to: (a) use social media ownership to promote far-right parties in elections in other countries (Collinson, 2025); (b) selectively deny and allow access to his platform X to governmental and nongovernmental users, algorithmically manipulate their use of the platform X, algorithmically manipulate his own tweets and tweets related to Musk and Trump; and (c) affect the power of one particular side in the war in Ukraine. One example is the Starlink satellites owned by Musk's SpaceX company, which are being used by Ukraine's military forces for communications because Russia disabled Ukraine's internet services as part of its invasion in early 2022. The second example is Elon Musk's refusal to let Ukraine use his satellite network to guide its drones to attack Russia's Black Sea fleet in 2023 (Kim et al., 2023). With US-based companies emboldened by their gilded status in Trump's second administration, their impacts on the international order have also gained a new dimension (Wilkinson, 2025).

As with the concept of liberal democracy in the past, illiberalism has also been internationalised (Cottiero et al., 2024). The territorial interests of particular illiberal states have also come to the fore. Such examples are even present within the EU, such as Orbán's interests in the Western Balkans (Domenech, 2024). The Dark Enlightenment ideas and politics look for territorial expansion on Earth and even include the thesis that the territoriality of governing needs to be amended by hybrids of territoriality, cyberspace, and extraterritoriality (Luger, 2020; Thiel, 2009).

3. Methodological Framework

We focus on the (mis)use of AI in three election process phases (before, on, and after polling day) while also taking into account the conceptualisation of free and fair elections. Also, we discuss the findings in relation to the three alternative conceptualisations of governing.

3.1. AI

Since AI developments are very dynamic, the definition of AI is also important. To be sufficiently precise, in our research, we expose specific sets of AI, which we have identified in a "bottom-up" way based on the sources cited in the article. Because determining these AI sets was part of the research and was not pre-determined, we only present a basic overview: advanced machine-learning, large language models (LLMs), automated or semi-automated social media accounts controlled by algorithms (social bots), LLM-based chatbots, AI models, and GenAI tools (i.e., AI tools for generating text, image, video and audio content, including bots and deepfakes—products of machine-learning algorithms, which generate images and sounds that appear to be authentic).

Other than these AI tools, it is worth mentioning that impactful algorithms are still used in social media (e.g., Facebook, Facebook Messenger service, TikTok, X, and YouTube). These algorithms are sets of instructions to be followed in calculations or other operations, such as classifications and recommendation systems. Their impact has been greatly enhanced by their combination with AI tools.

3.2. Free and Fair Elections

We draw on the detailed conceptualisation of free and fair elections developed by Elklit and Svensson (1997), which is rooted in the idea that coercion is uncommon in a democratic system (Dahl, 1989, p. 221). They link freedom with voters' opportunity to participate in the elections without coercion or restrictions of any kind except for possible economic limitations (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 35). We also take into account Dahl's thesis that external interventions in elections are not feasible with free and fair elections.

Fairness is related to impartiality and the equal treatment of equals—the unbiased application of rules and reasonableness in terms of the distribution of relevant resources among competitors (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 35). It is also important to distinguish between events before, during, and after the actual polling (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 36). The checklist for election assessment (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 37) distinguishes between three periods: before polling day, on polling day, and after polling day.

At the core of Elklit and Svensson's understanding of freedom is that it primarily deals with the "rules of the game" (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 35). In their view (Elklit & Svensson, 1997, p. 37), elections are free if: (a) in the period before the polling day, multiple preconditions are fulfilled (freedom of movement; freedom of speech for candidates, the media, voters and others; freedom of assembly and of association; freedom from fear in connection with the election and electoral campaign; absence of impediments to standing for elections for political parties and independent candidates; equal and universal suffrage); (b) on the polling day, there is an opportunity to participate in the elections; and (c) after the polling day, there are legal opportunities for complaint.

According to Elklit and Svensson (1997, p. 37), elections are fair if, (a) in the period before the polling day, there is: a transparent electoral process, an election act, and an electoral system that grants no special privileges to any political party or social group; an absence of impediments to inclusion in the electoral register; the establishment of an independent and impartial election commission; an impartial treatment of candidates by the police, the army, and the courts of law; equal opportunities for political parties and independent candidates to stand for election; impartial voter-education programmes; an orderly election campaign observance of a code of conduct; equal access to publicly controlled media; impartial allotment of public funds to political parties—if relevant; and there is no misuse of government facilities for campaign purposes. Elections are fair if (b) on the polling day, there is: access to all polling stations for representatives of the political parties, accredited local and international election observers, and the media; secrecy of the ballot; absence of voter intimidation; effective design of ballot papers; proper ballot boxes; impartial assistance to voters—if necessary; proper counting procedures; proper treatment of void ballot papers; proper precautionary measures when transporting election materials; and impartial protection of polling stations. And lastly, elections are fair if (c), after the polling day, there are: official and expeditious announcements of election results, impartial treatment of any election complaints, impartial reports on the election results by the media, and acceptance of the election results. As identified in Table 2 (in the Supplementary Material), many of the prerequisites for free and fair elections are vulnerable to AI manipulation.

3.3. Sources of Findings

The generalised findings are based on experiences with AI affecting elections as revealed in academic research, reports by intergovernmental organisations, national governmental reports, and nongovernmental reports. The review of empirical examples of particular types of AI used in elections so far was based on sources published by the end of February 2025. The sources are cited in the text and under tables in the Supplementary File.

4. The Impact of AI on Requirements for Free and Fair Elections

In line with the methodological framework, we focus on the (mis)use of AI in three election process phases (before polling day, on polling day, and after polling day) while also taking into account the conceptualisation of free and fair elections. The findings are summarised in relation to alternative conceptualisations of governing.

4.1. Free Elections

Before polling day, politicians, election administration, citizens, and other actors are involved in this stage. They may be creators, disseminators, and recipients (or targets) of AI (mis)use.

Citizens need to be informed about ways to exercise their right to vote (e.g., in person on a polling day or before the polling day, via mail). Practical information and organisational preparations for the implementation of the voting rights of various minorities and citizens living abroad also need to be ensured. All these elements for the preparations before polling day can be (and in some countries have been) taken care of by AI and/or mitigated by the (mis)use of AI tools (see, e.g., "How Donald Trump's Election," 2024; International IDEA, 2024; Richardson, 2024).

Citizens' right to participate in elections is based not only on legal norms but also on the maintenance of actual voter records, including purging voter records, voter registration, and identification. Among the most problematic examples of using AI models and AI tools in the pre-polling stage are problems with voter registration and identification due to biased AI-based biometric tools, identity fraud during voter registration, intimidation and disenfranchising of marginalised voters, overload of the voter registration system, deletion of or tampering with voter data, AI-empowered re-drawing of election district lines (gerrymandering), and damaging of the potential for the clear expression of the voters' will. Optimising resource allocation to particular voting stations throughout a country and to support voters abroad, as well as individually targeted campaigns to discourage voters from voting even before polling day, can also involve problematic use of AI (Bender, 2022; "How Donald Trump's Election," 2024; International IDEA, 2024; Panditharatne, 2024). Discouraging voters from voting may be a form of persuasion, as in the case of deepfakes persuading voters from a particular party in Pakistan to boycott elections (de Abreu, 2024) or deepfakes of Biden discouraging voters from going to vote in the US (Han, 2024). However, threats have also been used to discourage particular groups of voters from coming to vote—examples include threats to Black voters in particular US territories using AI-supported mass communication (robocalls "on steroids" from candidates or other influential figures; Johns Hopkins University, 2024). It is also difficult to make a positive estimate of all the encouragements to particular voters to vote in favour of a particular party as favourable to democracy or not, such as the positive promotion of voting by a widely shared AI-generated video of Donald Trump and Elon Musk dancing to the Bee Gees song "Stayin' Alive" (Daily Mail, 2024; Elliott, 2024), attracting youth with avatars (Lamb et al., 2024), and the AI-empowered targeting of previously ignored voters (Rao, 2023).

AI-supported information campaigns for/against a particular politician may focus on issues of candidates' fitness or even eligibility for a political office (e.g., political procedural arguments against Kamala Harris's presidential candidacy and arguments against Trump's presidential candidacy due to his being convicted of a felony). Campaigns may also focus on candidates' personal characteristics such as age, gender, mental capacity, and "perceived strength" (e.g., Musk about the need for the US leader to appear terrifying to others in the world), which can mislead the public about candidates' policy positions and their expected political moves in case of electoral victory (Noti, 2024). Sponsors of particular candidates may also become targets of negative campaigning. Recent examples include the widely shared AI-generated sexually explicit deepfakes of Taylor Swift, who endorsed Kamala Harris (Maslej et al., 2024, p. 18), and false information about public persons endorsing a political candidate can also be disseminated (e.g., Trump's announcement that Taylor Swift endorsed him).

Technology can also be misused by authorities (they may be democratic or autocratic) and by private actors to suppress voters' political participation. Currently, owners of AI companies mostly privately regulate the social media milieu, which provides the platform for AI information campaigning. Their owners may even actively campaign in person for/against a particular political leader (e.g., Elon Musk's decisions about Trump's X account and joining Trump's campaign in 2024 in person). Public regulation of this aspect has been evolving slowly, unevenly, and with backlashes.

In regard to the polling day, this day is about the actual implementation of the right to vote. Individually targeted voters may be politically encouraged or discouraged to vote (Clarke, 2023). The use of a voter identification signature-matching AI tool could lead to the disenfranchisement of eligible voters due to the limitations of such tools (International IDEA, 2024). For example, AI-based tools for facial recognition

technology disproportionately misidentify non-white faces (Perkowitz, 2021). This may raise concerns about electoral integrity and potential electoral fraud.

Spreading disinformation could also persuade voters to stay home on election day. There have been examples of disinformation scaring voters and turning them away from voting on polling day. This can include disinformation on the locations and openings of polling places, the eligibility of particular voters, false reports about non-functioning voting machines, long waiting lines, and false alarms about emergency situations, such as a fire or an attack (Cotter et al., 2021; International IDEA, 2024).

At the same time, video monitoring of elections could raise concerns related to surveillance (e.g., damaged security, privacy, and human rights) and discourage people from participating in elections. Misuse of AI could be focused on damaging the administration of elections by threats and harassment of the nonpartisan election workers who try to ensure a smooth and fair democratic process (Edlin & Norden, 2023). Finally, the AI-supported spread of unjustified doubt about election results and mobilisation for rebelling against potentially unfavourable election results may also take place on polling day.

The stage after polling day presents new opportunities for bad actors to undermine the administration of elections and spread unjustified doubt about the results. AI may be used to fabricate audio of a candidate claiming they rigged the results or to generate other misinformation that could persuade the supporters of a failed campaign to disrupt vote counting and certification procedures, which are already increasingly politicised and provided the basis for the effort to sabotage the 2020 US presidential election (Devine et al., 2024). Mobilisation to rebel against election results, including coordination of particular actions, has already taken place with the help of AI technologies. These actions may be particularly efficient when an election-denial movement has already been nurtured during the previous election stages and additionally fuelled by an AI-supported participatory disinformation campaign (e.g., the 6 January 2021 attack on the US Capitol).

4.2. Fair Elections

The "fair" dimension of elections is also important in all three stages: before polling day, on polling day, and after polling day.

Before polling day, election fairness relates to many characteristics, including transparency, no privileges, an absence of impediments for inclusion, equal opportunities for political parties and independent candidates to stand for elections, impartial voter-education programmes, and orderly election campaigning. So far, many misuses of AI have been observed.

First is the damage to human rights, particularly privacy, caused by the use of data on the internet for AI-based targeting of particular individuals. This damage has even risen with the (mis)use of GenAI. For example, AI has been found to allow the targeting of particular social groups in particular languages using increasingly high-quality deepfake images, audio, and video (Johns Hopkins University, 2024).

Second, AI technologies themselves are insufficiently reliable. For example, chatbots have spread misinformation about EU elections and the EU vote in France, Germany, Italy, and Spain (F. Simon et al.,

2024). US government officials have also warned citizens that AI chatbots are not reliable sources of voting information (Field & Kolodny, 2024).

Third, another example is the misuse of AI technology to affect election administration and suppress voters' participation in elections (e.g., manipulation of voters' records, gerrymandering, and attacking applications and websites dedicated to voters' registration or requests for particular modes of voting; Bender, 2022; Eisen et al., 2023).

Fourth, AI has been misused to damage equal opportunities for candidates and parties through, for example, cyberattacks that steal classified or sensitive data to undermine a candidate or party. Deepfakes can also be misused, such as the audio clips of a politician from India's Hindu party attacking his own party and praising his opponent (Maslej et al., 2024, p. 211).

Fifth, some politicians take advantage of declaring something they said or did to be fake when, in fact, it is true (the "layers' dividend"; Joffe-Block, 2024). Public claims that reality is a deepfake may also have a different logic: For example, Donald Trump alleged that images showing large crowds of people turning out to rallies for Vice President Kamala Harris were AI-generated.

Sixth, misuse of AI can privilege particular individuals and private economic entities in the election process. For example, technological companies can offer or deny the use of social platforms based on the owners' decisions, as well as the direct involvement of leaders of such companies in elections (Elon Musk's platform X in the 2024 US elections).

Seventh, AI technology can be used to damage the fairness of elections by targeting particular individuals and groups to encourage or discourage their participation in elections. This includes targeting particular actors involved in elections through, for example, public and private bullying or harassment, as well as the surveillance of activists, candidates, journalists, or other public figures via social media.

Eighth, AI has been misused to mobilise individuals and groups in anticipation that elections will not be fair. For example, participatory disinformation spread doubt about the fairness of US elections (Starbird et al., 2023) as part of the election denial movement in the US.

Ninth, external actors can promote disinformation and fake news, thus seeding doubts about the legitimacy of elections. For example, the dissemination of deepfakes by Russian actors showing an immigrant saying he plans to vote multiple times for Kamala Harris (The Associated Press, 2024).

Regarding the polling day, as already presented in the previous section, various misuses of AI have already been revealed, which may affect voter turnout and observation of the elections, thus tempering election administration and directly subverting the perception of election legitimacy.

After the polling day, the critical preconditions for fairness include the official and expeditious announcement of election results, impartial treatment of any election complaints, impartial reports on the election results by the media, and acceptance of the election results. Perception of election legitimacy may be challenged in various ways when using and misusing AI. Krimmer et al. (2022) have listed examples

related to: (dis)information about rigging elections; issues with voting technology (e.g., software bugs that alter election results, overloading the systems used for counting or aggregating results, tampering with the supply chain involved in the movement or transfer of data); breaching voter privacy; election results; and reports on election results and election complaints. AI can be used and misused in the presentation of election results, election complaints, and reports on election results, as well as by spreading (non)acceptance of the results and organising violent actions as reactions to the non-acceptance of the results (Krimmer et al., 2022; Starbird et al., 2023).

4.3. External Interference in the Three Election Stages

The use of AI via digital networks has simplified cross-border political interference. Information warfare has gained new dimensions of hostile social manipulation (Mazarr et al., 2019). Before the 2024 election, it had been estimated that the (mis)use of AI technology had high potential both as an ongoing threat and to target a particular election process (Prochaska et al., 2023). We highlight some particular cases in Section 5 (see also Table 3 in the Supplementary Material).

5. Summary and Overview of Findings

In the context of free elections, when looking at the prerequisites for this, the role of AI is not one-dimensional. Freedom of speech in relation to AI is actually freedom of speech on the internet. On the one hand, AI appears to democratise (particularly taking into account the accessibility of AI tools, including GenAI), while on the other hand, it can be and has been misused to damage freedom based on fear in connection with elections and electoral campaigns. It can be used and misused in election campaigns to reveal impediments to standing for elections for particular parties and candidates. AI tools can be misused for purposes that undermine equal and universal suffrage, damage electoral administrative infrastructure, demobilise voters on polling day, or prevent them from coming to vote.

As for fair elections, the (mis)use of AI helps to damage the transparency of the electoral process from the stage of administrative preparations (electoral administration). Even when the election does not grant special privileges to any political party or social group, AI can be misused to affect this prerequisite for free elections (e.g., AI misused in gerrymandering, impediments to inclusion in the electoral register). AI distorts equal opportunities for political parties and candidates to stand for elections and distorts the impartiality of voter-education programmes. It is difficult to talk about the observance of a code of conduct in election campaigns because not many countries have such codes adapted to the reality of increasing (mis)use of AI in elections. Tech companies have stopped following the rules agreed upon among themselves. Issues of election (public/private) funding via AI-composed and AI-targeted communication are appearing. On polling day, issues of AI (mis)use appear to be related to ballot secrecy, voter intimidation, and impartial assistance to voters, as well as impartial protection of polling stations. The (mis)use of AI after polling day has also gained new dimensions, particularly in swift campaigns spreading (mis)information on the impartiality of reports on the election results and mobilising against/in favour of the acceptance of the election results.

In regards to external interference, the spread of misinformation and other external information activities with the intention to affect elections in other countries is not new (Whyte et al., 2021). However, the (mis)use of AI tools has made it much less costly. The spread of (mis)information has become much quicker in combination

with (mis)using social media and their algorithms (Pomerantsev, 2020). Nevertheless, virtual societal warfare can involve a combination of a broad range of techniques—old and new (Mazarr et al., 2019).

Based on examples found in the reviewed literature and sources, we created the following taxonomy of segments in the election process with their particular vulnerabilities for AI (mis)use (see Table 3, in the Supplementary Materials). This taxonomy exposes the vulnerability of many segments of the election process, starting with electoral administration and then including civic education, multiplication of specific campaigns and related segments, including external involvement and cyber-crimes. It also shows the vast variability in the (mis)uses of machine-learning, AI models, bots, and GenAI products, which have clearly entered the election processes.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that various actors had used diverse ways to affect election processes even before the development and spread of AI tools. Party organisations had been adapting to ever more complex politics through bureaucratisation and professionalisation (Panebianco, 1988), increasingly collaborating with the newly emerged profession of political campaigning (Butler & Ranney, 1992), and had adopted strategies based on emerging new technologies (printed political press, radio, TV including CCTV, internet; Runciman, 2019, pp. 159–161). Not only had political parties tended to evolve into elitist organisations (Michels, 1911; Ostrogorski, 1902) and corrupt entities—even in the form of political machines (Gosnell, 1933)—but they also had not shied away from manipulating elections through corruption and electoral fraud (Anderson, 2000; Bryce, 1906; Campbell, 2005; Lehoucq, 2003). Technologies before AI had also been found to be addictive (e.g., TV), including for the use of political news and campaigning (Ivanova, 2024). Elections are still vulnerable in democracies today (Hill et al., 2017), and other factors of democracy may either prevail in preserving liberal democracy or fail in preventing the effective degradation towards illiberal democracy and the even more radical shift towards governing based on the Dark Enlightenment ideas.

Concerning alternative conceptualisations of governing, AI per se used in election processes does not automatically function in support of implementing a particular conceptualisation of governing. However, the presented findings expose AI misuse within the framework of liberal democratic systems (e.g., UK, Germany) and within the framework of already damaged democratic systems—e.g., in the US, which has been recently characterised as a flawed democracy (J. Smith, 2025). Such an environment, together with the concentration of the richest and most powerful CEOs of AI tech corporations in the US, has also opened opportunities for national and global implementation of Dark Enlightenment ideas.

6. Estimations of AI's Impact on Elections and Alternative Conceptualisations of Governing

Estimations of the extent to which AI has affected elections vary. There have been reports stating that the (mis)use of AI affected the US 2016 presidential elections (leading to Trump's first electoral victory) and the support for the Brexit referendum (leading to the first EU member state ever leaving the EU). Preliminary estimations of AI's impact on elections by high-tech companies did not confirm such a thesis. It should not be forgotten, however, that their view is not unbiased—Microsoft and Google provided training to several campaigns on how to use their GenAI products during elections (Kelly, 2024). Despite a fast-growing misuse of GenAI, such as deepfakes (McIsaac, 2024), various governmental and nongovernmental reports have stressed that AI's impact has had little or no effect on elections (Elliott, 2024) and that the impact of social media

misinformation on elections still prevails over that of AI (Tuquero, 2024). However, AI fakes appear on social media platforms without a label or fact-checking (Verma et al., 2024).

While these estimations relate to election outcomes, they may be very different when estimating other impacts on politics. In the US, it has been found that the (mis)use of AI has deepened the partisan divide (Verma et al., 2024). It may negatively affect trust in democratic institutions, including trust in electoral integrity in particular and democracy in general (Regis et al., 2025). This impact is actually quite significant, especially taking into account the competition among the three conceptualisations of governing presented in the theoretical framework. Some authors have also argued that the aggregate effects of AI might fundamentally alter political dynamics in ways we cannot yet predict (Hubbard, 2024).

There have already been examples of the unanticipated role of AI related to elections. For example, in Denmark in 2022, a new political party, the Synthetic Party, was formed by the artist collective Computer Lars and represented by an AI representative, the AI chatbot, Leader Larss. The chatbot was programmed on the policies of Danish fringe parties since 1970 and was meant to represent the values of the 20% of Danes who did not vote in these elections (Werner, 2022; Xiang, 2022). Despite not competing in elections, this artistic social intervention expressed political and social criticism, as well as pointing towards the poor representative function of the existing political system.

In 2024, Victor Miller, a candidate in a mayoral campaign in Wyoming, created a ChatGPT-based bot VIC (Virtual Integrated Citizen) and promised to govern entirely by AI (Elliott, 2024). While this has not produced any particular impact, the results were somewhat different in the case of Belarus. In 2024, Belarusian dissidents in exile used an AI candidate (Gaspadar) to symbolically counter President Alexander Lukashenko, whose regime actually harassed dissidents, their relatives, and journalists (Elliott, 2024; Stein, 2024). The recent Romanian example also shows a struggle of liberal democratic institutions in dealing with externally rigged elections. Romania's Foreign Intelligence Service reported in December 2024 that Russia had targeted the country in an attempt to influence its presidential elections. Russia used far-right, pro-Russian propaganda and AI-generated content that was disseminated through a large network of social media channels and AI-generated accounts. With the help of AI (which can help develop malware that evades cybersecurity defences), Russia is also believed to have organised some 85,000 attacks against the Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority to gain access to its databases (Regis et al., 2025).

Estimations on the future (mis)uses of AI in elections are not unified. GenAI allows for campaigning based on real-time digital conversations with voters, which may change the scale of election campaigns (Foos, 2024). Nevertheless, there is also recognition of the (potential) uses of AI to strengthen democratic elections (Brkan, 2019). It needs to be acknowledged that past estimations of the impact of technological innovations on elections have not been simply direct and one-dimensional—be it the proliferation of the political press, television, the professionalisation of campaigning (including e-campaigning), the internet (see e.g., Althaus & Trautman, 2008; Davis, 2024), or AI-supported change in the scope, scale and precision of election manipulation (Henle & Bradshaw, 2022). Today, this is especially difficult because political campaigns have combined various strategies and media to reach out to voters (i.e., hybrid campaigning; Haßler, 2022).

Also, it is not possible to predict how (mis)uses of AI in elections will relate to future trends in the actual implementation of liberal democracy, illiberal democracy, or the Dark Enlightenment neo-reactionary forms of

governing. At the current stage the findings support the following theses: (a) characteristics of AI (including its unreliability and hallucinations) limit AI's full use in support of liberal democracy; (b) public regulation is lagging behind the spread of AI use; (c) misuses of AI in elections may be feasible for both those seeking to enforce illiberal democracy and the Dark Enlightenment; and (d) individual owners of a few private tech companies, who control the worldwide digital platforms have enormous power to enforce concepts of governing according to their preferences.

7. Conclusions

While taking into account the broader social and technological context presented in the introduction, in this article, we sought to answer these research questions: What forms of AI are used to affect election processes? How and why are these effects related to alternative conceptualisations of governing (i.e., liberal democratic, illiberal, and the Dark Enlightenment)?

Based on the criteria of free and fair elections, the three main stages of elections, and a review of the literature and governmental and nongovernmental reports, we presented an overview of various types of (mis)use of AI in elections. This review has shown that the use of AI is unequally distributed among the three election stages (before the polling day, on the polling day, and after the polling day). The period before the polling day tends to be exposed to longer and more diversified (mis)uses of AI, notably AI-boosted algorithms and GenAI products. In contrast, AI-supported external interference appears to take place in all stages. Misuses of AI commonly involve the support of misinformation and disinformation campaigning, and also the strengthening of political polarisation—all of which damage the democratic prerequisites for free and fair elections. The potential benefits or damage of newly emerging uses of AI (e.g., for developing AI-supported performance of party organisations) are not yet fully known. Based on the findings from the empirical cases of various kinds of AI (mis)use in elections, we have offered a taxonomy of segments in the election process and their particular vulnerabilities for AI (mis)use.

We have shown that the three competing conceptualisations of governing currently differ critically in how they treat elections. Elections are institutions and processes in which various actors can promote liberal democracy, internally damage it to gradually achieve illiberal governing, or misuse illiberally damaged governing to pursue Dark Enlightenment governing. AI can be and has been used both to strengthen the liberal democratic characteristics of governing in the election process and, more often, to damage them. As a rule, damage is done through disinformation, misinformation, and deepfakes without labels clarifying their fake nature. These inflict damage through their impact on the prerequisites for free and fair elections, as well as their effects in favour of a particular alternative to liberal democracy. So far, the (mis)use of AI has been biased in favour of illiberal and Dark Enlightenment alternatives to liberal democracy. This finding resonates with warnings that democracies may die at the hands of elected leaders (presidents or prime ministers) who subvert the process by which they came to power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 3).

While processes damaging to liberal democracy have already taken place in previous historical waves, the (mis)use of AI has allowed these trends to develop as if "on steroids." At the same time, research findings point to some of the problematic characteristics of AI technologies as well as the overlapping of political and economic interests and activities, which seek to damage democratic elections, coming either from the illiberal or Dark Enlightenment agendas. On the one hand, it is important to reveal how, exactly, the contextual changes

(particularly the radically increasing social inequalities related to the AI technological revolution, as well as the disproportionate growth in the power of big technological companies) and alternative conceptualisations of governing translate into real-life changes in governing. On the other hand, it is of critical importance to reveal potentials and scenarios for alternatives to ongoing autocratic scenarios as well.

These findings not only call for more research into human agency in contextual and technological changes but also for contextually updated research into the core political science issues (especially power, conceptualisations of governing, relations between the private sector and the state, political–ideological streams, actors, and processes) in the context of the interlinkages between (a) accelerated technological development and (b) the autocratic tendency, supported by tech corporations, on the global scale.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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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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ARTICLE

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The Conspiracist Theory of Power

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Abstract

In recent years, conspiracy theories have surged in democratic politics, enabling illiberal parties, movements, and politicians to win the votes of constituents who are disillusioned with mainstream democratic politics. Yet scholars of democratic backsliding have not fully grappled with the implications of conspiracism as the basis for a governing ideology. In this article, we argue that challenges to liberal democracy can be better understood by analyzing conspiracism as a theory of power in its own right. Conspiracy theories are formulated to identify the ultimate source of power in society. They attribute the occurrence of major historical and political events to malevolent actors and their secret activities, and their ideas can be fleshed out into a political program. We offer a conceptualization of conspiracism as a theory of power and analyze it alongside liberal and populist theories of power. We examine four facets of political theory—who should govern, who threatens power, what governing entails, and the constraints on power—to identify divergences and unexpected affinities across these bodies of thought. We argue that conspiracism is not merely a critique of power, but an intellectual foundation for a political regime embodied in autocracy, oligarchy, or an alternate technocracy. This analysis informs our understanding of a serious yet under-theorized threat to liberal democracy.

Keywords

autocracy; conspiracy theories; democratic theory; oligarchy; populism; technocracy

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories are theories about power—who has it, how actors wield it, and how they benefit from it. In democratic countries, for most of the postwar period, conspiracy theories have primarily been promoted by those excluded from power. In recent years, however, politicians touting conspiracy theories have

themselves moved closer to the centers of power in democracies around the world. The rhetoric of conspiracy is increasingly part of the standard toolkit of rightwing politicians, parties, and movements and it has been successfully wielded to mobilize coalitions and attract the votes of constituents disillusioned with mainstream politics and conventional democratic governance.

Yet despite the endorsement of conspiracy theories by elites who seek and sometimes gain elected office, conspiracism has not been treated as a set of ideas that can be realized by those in power as part of a political program. This failure to take conspiracism seriously may occur because it is usually viewed as incoherent pablum or, at most, a critique of status quo politics (Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2013) rather than offering a "positive" program. We believe this view is mistaken, as leaders who promote conspiracy theories may believe what they say or feel public pressure to put their ideas into practice. In this sense, conspiracism is similar to populism, often labeled a "thin ideology," or a set of beliefs that "lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent program for solving crucial political questions" (Stanley, 2008, p. 95). Yet this has not prevented analysis of "populist rule" or "populist politics" as meaningful categories that inform our understanding of governance and politics.

In this article, owing to the increased prominence and rapid proliferation of conspiracism in politics, we accord it similar analytic deference. We propose the first conceptualization of a conspiracist theory of power and analyze it alongside existing ideologies that have been more fully examined by scholars. Our analysis presents a conceptual comparison of three ideal types (Weber, 1949): liberalism, populism, and conspiracism. We analyze them as theories of power, which answer four normative questions: who should govern, who threatens power, what governing entails, and the constraints on power. Although there are many ways to approach questions on power (see e.g., Christensen, 2023), for the sake of tractability, we limit the domain of our inquiry to issues of politics and governance. Our conceptualization relies on a broad scholarly literature—from cultural studies to political science, history, and psychology—that has long examined conspiracy theories. We also draw on the work of conspiracy theorists, who may include writers, public intellectuals, journalists, or politicians. Their arguments may be reflected in, and they may draw from, ideas promoted by non-elites that circulate from person to person or are disseminated online (Allport & Postman, 1947). Naturally, the nuances of these arguments vary widely. In this analysis, we emphasize the universality of conspiracist thought, whereby actors, plots, and secrets may change, yet the underlying power dynamics and answers to our core questions remain constant.

From this point, this essay is divided into six sections. First, we justify the importance of studying conspiracism in light of contemporary political developments. We then introduce a typology that lays out how liberalism, populism, and conspiracism consider fundamental questions about the acquisition, exercise, and limits of power. We discuss our conceptualization of conspiracism and identify its distinct characteristics. After establishing points of comparison and difference among the three schools of thought, we lay out three paths of political rule that flow from conspiracist principles: autocracy, oligarchy, and technocracy. We conclude by discussing what our analysis reveals about conspiracism and the challenges it poses to liberal democracy.

2. Why Conspiracism?

We identify two reasons conspiracism has been neglected as a theory of power. First, due to its historical marginality, at least within consolidated democracies, it has largely been viewed as a discourse of the disempowered with some exceptions (e.g., Bayar, 2023; Butter, 2020; Radnitz, 2021; Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). Conspiracy theories have been considered a form of critique of democracy, reflecting a loss of trust in institutions (Knight, 2013). A surge of belief in conspiracy theories followed in the wake of national scandals in the US, such as Watergate and failures in the Vietnam War (Olmsted, 2019). Psychologists and political scientists have likewise found that conspiracy theorists and believers are typically outsiders, expressing social alienation, cynicism, distrust, paranoia, and generalized powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Douglas et al., 2019).

A second reason conspiracism has been neglected as a serious theory of power is that it is often subsumed under the category of populism, which frames political competition in Manichean terms, of the people pitted against the elite (Bergmann, 2018; Butter et al., 2024; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Fenster, 1999; Pirro & Taggart, 2023). But while there is certainly much overlap between the two, the differences have not been carefully drawn out. This conflation of the terms can lead to category errors when drawing conceptual boundaries between populism, conspiracism, and other ideologies. Empirically, lack of clarification may lead to flawed analyses when trying to make sense of the rhetoric, appeal, and consequences of conspiracy-touting politicians.

Political reality reveals that conspiracy theories are not only for the marginalized or disempowered. In recent years, conspiracist politicians have succeeded in winning free and fair elections around the world, pointing to the resonance of their ideas. Most observers would agree that the most prominent conspiracist in power in a democracy—or perhaps anywhere—is Donald Trump, who emerged as a political candidate by accusing then-President Obama of lying about his birthplace. Trump maintained an onslaught of conspiracy claims, large and small, throughout his first term, on topics as varied as immigration, the "deep state," the FBI, Ukraine, windmills, and of course, the 2020 election (Moniz, 2024; Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019; Tollefson, 2021). He then won the popular vote in 2024.

Other heads of state have habitually espoused conspiracy theories in power in less established democracies. In Turkey, President Erdogan endorsed conspiratorial ideas about the West, the military, and his political opponents (Bayar, 2023). Prime Minister Orban of Hungary has campaigned touting conspiracies about (Jewish) financier George Soros as the mastermind behind the immigration of non-Christians into Europe (Plenta, 2020). More generally, the far right propagates and adapts conspiracy theories across borders to advance common political projects, many of which are directed against liberal successes including constraints on executive power and the advancement of minority rights (Ekman, 2022; Laruelle, 2024). Conspiracism exists on the left as well. Famously, Presidents Chávez and Maduro of Venezuela utilized anti-US conspiracy theories to account for the nation's problems (Andrade, 2020). Yet, right-wing forces have been the main exponents of conspiracy theories as they have surged to power in recent years, posing an urgent threat to liberal democracy in the process (Abrahamsen et al., 2024).

The use of campaign rhetoric is never a perfect guide to how politicians behave in office. Conspiracy theories have many uses and do not necessarily indicate a leader's political platform. They can be used to

create confusion or distract from poor performance in office (Müller, 2022; Pirro & Taggart, 2023). In contexts where such rhetoric is disapproved of, they can signal transgression to win over voters disillusioned with mainstream politics (Hahl et al., 2018). In some cases, the speaker might simply believe his claims are true and aim to convince the public of those beliefs. Yet, whether conspiratorial rhetoric is sincere or cynically deployed as campaign rhetoric, voters may believe the politician's promises and expect them to be realized as a political program. Insofar as acceding to those expectations boosts a leader's popularity or enhances his power, he may find it expedient to transform rhetoric into reality.

3. Theories of Power

In order to illuminate what conspiracism as a theory of power reveals, we identify its foundational principles and interrogate it alongside competing theories of power. For our purposes, a theory of power must do three things: (a) describe the workings of power, (b) diagnose the system's pathologies, and (c) prescribe remedies for those problems. That is, a theory of power is necessarily descriptive, positing how power operates and identifying flaws in the status quo, as well as prescriptive, in imagining how power should ideally be allocated and wielded.

We build on the scholarly literature on conspiracy theories, as well as on the works of several well-known conspiracy theorists, to first explain how a conspiracist theory of power answers descriptive questions about who holds power and how. At the ideational level, conspiracist thinking revolves around the problem of powerful global conspirators engaging in secret plots, whose machinations must be stopped by any means. Based on this diagnosis, we can then assess the concrete remedies conspiracism implies to counter these malevolent actors: regimes that embrace autocracy, oligarchy, or alternative technocracy. The conspiracist diagnosis and prescription of power thus go beyond mere critique; rather, they provide both descriptive and normative answers to fundamental political questions. This makes it possible, and analytically fruitful, to conceptualize conspiracism as a theory of power in its own right.

To identify what distinguishes conspiracism, we analyze it alongside three ideal types of theories of power: classical democratic theory, liberal (elitist) theory, and populist theory. We select classical democracy because it embodies the foundational ideal of popular sovereignty; liberalism because it has dominated twentieth-century debates on how to institutionalize and constrain power; and populism because it stands as the principal contemporary challenger to that liberal consensus and is often conceptually intertwined with conspiracism. We ask how each theory of power diagnoses and purports to solve fundamental social and political problems. Our purpose is not to portray these ideologies monolithically, but rather to compare and contrast them as ideal types, holding them accountable to their fundamental premises. This comparative exercise reveals stark divergences—especially between populism's mass-centered empowerment and conspiracism's epistemic elitism—and unexpected affinities, such as the shared skepticism of popular sovereignty in both liberalism and conspiracism. Table 1 summarizes the answers each theory provides to central questions of power. We explain how these points are derived, and the differences among them, throughout the analysis that follows.

Table 1. Approaches to power.

Theory	Who should govern?	Who threatens power?	What does governing entail?	What should constrain power?
Classical/majoritarian democracy	The majority of the people	Oligarchy, tyranny	Acting for the common good	No constraints on the will of the people
Liberal/elitist democracy	Political entrepreneurs	Misguided masses, arrogation of power	Exercising skill and intellect with attention to public opinion	Institutionalized checks and balances
Populism	Leader who embodies the people	Corrupt elites, unelected bureaucrats, gatekeeping institutions	Acting as the voice of the people	Changes in popular will, in principle
Conspiracism	Enlightened outsiders turned epistemological insiders	Global malevolent forces	Acting in pursuit of the truth	None

3.1. Democratic Theories of Power

Two ideal types stand out in democratic theories of power: classical and liberal. The classical view, drawing on thinkers such as Rousseau, Bentham, James Mill, and J. S. Mill, holds that power belongs to the people. In this view, citizens are the sole sovereigns, exercising direct democracy in pursuit of the common good, without rule-based restrictions on their sovereignty (Pateman, 1970, p. 18; Rousseau, 1968; Schumpeter, 1942).

The liberal-modern (or minimalist/elitist) view challenges these premises. Famously, Schumpeter defines democracy as a competitive struggle for votes that selects leaders rather than a direct expression of a common good or a unified will (Schumpeter, 1942, p. 269). Here, governance entails institutional procedures—such as checks and balances, electoral competition, and elite accountability—to ensure responsiveness in a complex society (Birch, 1964; Caramani, 2017; Urbinati, 2006).

3.2. Populist Theories of Power

Populism has been extensively theorized, though debates persist about how to define and conceptualize it (Stanley, 2008). Populism is premised on a division of society into "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), and contends that political competition should be democratic—but not liberal. The legitimate means to obtain power is majoritarianism—the manifestation of the popular will as expressed by the majority of citizens (Caramani, 2017). This mechanism aligns with the democratic theory of majority consent, except that populists valorize the majority not only as numerically dominant but also as morally superior to their opponents (Urbinati, 2019). Populists meaningfully diverge from liberals in how power should be exercised. Whereas liberal theory emphasizes institutions that mediate between the public and political officials and constraints on the executive to protect individual rights, populism views these fetters as serving elite interests and unjustly limiting the leader's freedom to act (Lacey, 2019; Moffitt, 2016; Urbinati, 2014).

Populism, with its disdain for constraining institutions and its valorization of the leader, tends to weaken democracy and, in extreme cases, lead to the construction of authoritarianism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2015). Because populists derive their legitimacy from the people, they do not recognize the authority of other officials or constraining institutions to challenge them (Bugaric & Kuhelj, 2018; Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Houle & Kenny, 2018). The exercise of power, therefore, tends toward the tools of executive aggrandizement in the form of pardons and rule by fiat. Thus, in his first term, Trump famously claimed that the Constitution gave him "the right to do whatever I want as president" (Brice-Saddler, 2019).

4. Defining and Conceptualizing Conspiracism

In essence, conspiracism portrays politics as a battlefield where malevolent actors and groups secretly plot against society's interests. In this view, power is not distributed through visible or democratic processes but is instead controlled by hidden forces behind the scenes, pulling the strings in what appears to be nothing more than a puppet show. This spectacle, according to conspiracism, is designed to keep the masses, often disparagingly labeled as "sheep," passive and easy to manipulate.

We consider conspiracism to be a thin ideology that answers both descriptive and normative questions about power in specific ways. Since it does not offer a coherent—let alone comprehensive—set of solutions or preferred policies, like most conceptions of populism, it cannot be considered a "thick" ideology. Yet unlike populism, which typically views society in binary terms—"the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite"—conspiracism distinguishes between a differentiated set of groups. In conspiracist ideation, society is seen as divided into at least three segments, including malevolent forces, victimized masses, and an enlightened few. The malevolent forces are characterized as a secretive cadre that orchestrates events from behind the scenes and wields power for its own ends. In contrast, the victimized masses are portrayed as the unwitting, oppressed majority. Intermingled with these two, the enlightened few claim to have pierced the veil of deception and possess the monopoly on truth; they argue that only those who see the reality behind the manipulation are fit to govern.

There are three plausible trajectories for a regime based on a conspiracist theory of power: autocracy, oligarchy, or alternate technocracy. In an autocracy, power would be concentrated in a single ruler who claims to have unveiled the hidden truths behind the plots of malevolent forces; in an oligarchy, a select cadre of the "enlightened few" would dominate political, economic, and social decision-making; and in an alternate technocracy, authority would be vested in alternative experts whose specialized knowledge of conspiracy theories grants them the exclusive right to determine what is true or right and to act accordingly.

5. The Conspiracist Theory of Power

Conspiracism divides society into three major groups, each of which includes sub-groups within them. First, the malevolent forces include the puppet masters—those who hold real power behind the scenes—as well as their collaborators, the "fifth column," who serve as the domestic foot soldiers of these global actors (e.g., Jews as the masterminds and Freemasons as the fifth column [Barkun, 2013; Pipes, 1999], or Great Powers and minorities [Şahin, 2025]). Second, the victimized masses consist of those who are ignorant of secret plots (i.e., the "sheep" or "sheeple") and are depicted as victims of the plots by malevolent forces. Thus, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., before he entered the US government, wrote about how the government supposedly induces

compliance: "It is not a matter of persuading or convincing people to accept the new 'reality.' It's more like how you drive a herd of cattle. You scare them enough to get them moving, then you steer them wherever you want them to go. The cattle do not know or understand where they are going. (Kennedy 2023, pp. 809–810).

Although conspiracists may acknowledge that within the public there may be individuals or groups who are suspicious of such plots or even believe in certain segments of the truth (conspiracy theories), conspiracist ideation constructs the public as uniformly ill-informed and unprepared to grasp the scope and power of malevolent forces. In contrast, the enlightened few are the intelligentsia of conspiracist ideation: those who write, speak out, and disseminate the "Truth" in an effort to enlighten the masses and prevent the malevolent forces from succeeding. In this societal division, the villains are the malevolent forces, and the heroes are the enlightened few, creating a moral dichotomy of good versus evil (Bayar, 2023). Along these lines, Robert Welch, founder of the anti-communist and conspiracist John Birch Society, declared in his 1958 manifesto, "This is a world-wide battle, the first in history, between light and darkness; between freedom and slavery; between the spirit of Christianity and the spirit of anti-Christ for the souls and bodies of men" (Welch, 1992, p. 28).

In envisioning a moral dichotomy, conspiracism has an elective affinity with populism (Weber, 2002), as both portray the ingroup as victims of the outgroup (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2020). Some scholars in fact posit that conspiracism is simply a form of populism (Fenster, 1999). But there is an important difference of emphasis. Populist ideation is centered on the people, who are depicted as inherently righteous. Their exploitation at the hands of a corrupt elite is what spurs the need for virtuous leaders who can truly represent their interests. Conspiracists, on the other hand, place their emphasis on the perpetrators, whom conspiracists labor to identify and expose. The victims of these plots—the people—are incidental to this work of revelation. Along these lines, British conspiracy theorist and former footballer David Icke wrote: "Look at the structures of government known laughingly as 'democracy'…These structures were designed to give the appearance of freedom while allowing almost limitless control by the few behind the scenes" (Icke, 1999, p. 130).

Conspiracists see the public as a unitary collective, in ways superficially similar to classical democratic theory. Like liberal democratic theorists, conspiracists believe that the public is uninformed and ill-equipped to manage their affairs without good leadership (Fenster, 1999, p. 109). They similarly see themselves as best positioned to provide guidance to the masses. But, whereas democratic elitists consider elites to be trustees responsive to the public's ever-changing majorities (Dahl, 1982; Rokkan, 1970) and responsible for advancing coherent policies on their behalf (Pitkin, 1967, p. 172), conspiracists not only *do not* work as trustees of the people, but they also regard them with disdain. Eschewing democratic governance, they do not claim to represent the public in any formal sense. In fact, their contempt runs deeper: They deny people agency, viewing them as "sheep" who merely follow the herd, unable to discern the big picture or act courageously. This contemptuous orientation toward the masses also distinguishes them from populists, who see "the people" as a fount of wisdom and virtue.

When it comes to the qualities leaders should embody, conspiracists emphasize discernment and the ability to penetrate the veil of power thanks to their access to information and uncanny intellect (Barkun, 2013, p. 33). This confidence in their own acumen makes conspiracy theorists quintessential elitists. Although democratic elitists also emphasize the role of "political entrepreneurs" in shaping public policy (Dahl, 1971), such entrepreneurs are expected to do so with regard for the plural interests of the public (Dahl, 1961), through coalition-building, adherence to procedures and institutions, and under the constraints of the rule of

law (Dahl, 1971; Rosenblum, 2008; Schattschneider, 2003). Conspiracism brooks no such give-and-take. If taken to its logical conclusion, conspiracism idealizes a regime led by a postmodern philosopher-king or an enlightened clique who rule not for the good of the people, but to pursue the Truth.

As for how such a rule would be realized, we can accept the logic of conspiracism on its own terms and consider three types of political regimes that may result: autocracy, oligarchy, and alternate technocracy. Autocracy involves embodying the regime in a single figurehead, which is fitting for a philosopher-king who seeks to manifest power from exclusive knowledge. Yet, the reality of governing may require power-sharing, based on the notion that discerning conspiracies, let alone countering them, must be a collective enterprise. A more ambitious, and far-reaching, project would be to remake the state itself in a conspiracist's image. A conspiracist technocracy involves appropriating and hollowing out the state, before repopulating it with like-minded believers trained to advance the reigning conspiracist ideology. Conspiracist technocracy would come about only after the consolidation of autocratic or oligarchic rule, as the institutionalizing of conspiracism would require extensive commitment but represent a durable solution to the problems conspiracists believe they face. Yet, insofar as the supremacy of a subversive conspiracist worldview over conventional liberal-rationalist epistemology may be the true ultimate goal of conspiracists, the prize—harnessing the power of the modern state to produce and disseminate conspiracist knowledge—may be worth the struggle.

6. Three Conspiracist Models of Rule: Autocracy, Oligarchy, and Technocracy

Unlike populists, who aim to return power to the people (Urbinati, 2019), and democratic elitists who institutionalize power through representative bodies and the separation of powers, conspiracists offer no clear action plan or ideal form of government. They often describe malevolent forces as omnipresent and impossible to truly vanquish as they will always find a way to retain power or will be replaced by other, more sinister forces. Unable to triumph materially, their work therefore involves exposing and publicizing what they know so that the public may overcome its ignorance and see the conspiracies around them. The Sisyphean nature of the project implies that a conspiracist's claim to rule has no clear endpoint. Their unending struggle grants rulers the justification to remain in power in perpetuity, thus making a conspiracist regime inherently anti-democratic.

Conspiracists, like populists, dismiss institutional barriers and political rivals that prevent them from acting on their knowledge and intuitions. But while populists disdain aspects of democracy, conspiracists dismiss the whole enterprise as a sham. Party politics and the elections are performances for the masses to feel empowered, while the real power lies behind the scenes, in the hands of unelected, untouchable forces, wealthy families, and secret groups who control political institutions and determine the fate of the globe. Such groups are seen to control all viable candidates, so that they never lose elections. This political imagination is evident in the rhetoric of far-right figures who rail against conventional (and especially leftist) politicians, whom they depict as puppets manipulated by powerful, hidden entities such as George Soros. Hungarian Prime Minister Orban aggressively promoted this narrative, saying, for example, "Let's not beat about the bush: in order to implement the 'Soros Plan,' across the whole of Europe they want to sweep away governments which represent national interests—including ours" (Hungarian Government, 2017, para. 18). These nefarious masterminds supposedly aim to weaken Western/Christian civilization via schemes such as the "Great Replacement" of democratic majorities by immigrants from the Global South (Ekman, 2022;

Plenta, 2020). French author Renaud Camus coined the term, warning of an impending "genocide by substitution" (Bullens, 2021).

A conspiracist's knowledge of insidious plots would lead them to distrust established institutions and parties, as they would invariably be infiltrated by malevolent forces–a "deep state." Recapturing political institutions might necessitate revolutionary purges before repopulating them with loyalists who pledge to act in service of the "truth-tellers" and for the benefit of humanity. This restoration of the state would lead to these institutions' ultimate obedience to a chosen leader. Consequently, a conspiracist regime would evolve into an autocratic or oligarchic system, with a select few controlling the state apparatus and demanding absolute loyalty. Such an atavistic model of governance may seem ill-suited for the (post-)modern technological age, yet some conspiracists argue that an autocrat is required to solve the otherwise intractable problems of the times (Wilson, 2024). A vivid, and prominent, statement of this vision can be seen in a Trump speech at a 2024 campaign rally:

> That's true, we are a failing nation, we are a nation in decline and now these radical left lunatics want to interfere with our elections by using law enforcement. It's totally corrupt, and we won't let it happen. 2024 is our final battle with you at my side. We will demolish the Deep State, we will expel the warmongers from our government, we will drive out the globalists we will cast out the Communist Marxist fascists, we will throw off the sick political class that hates our country and we will route the fake news media. We will defeat crooked Joe Biden and we will drain the swamp once and for all. (Roll Call, 2024)

How might a conspiracist leader be selected? Unlike populists, who view legitimate power as the manifestation of the popular will expressed by the majority of citizens (Caramani, 2017), conspiracists believe the people are not capable of choosing their leaders. Nor would rulers inherit power through dynasty, since conspiracist legitimacy has little to do with legacy or inheritance. Instead, the credentials to lead come from exceptionally penetrating intelligence and the courage to speak the truth. The path to the conspiracist pantheon is sui generis. Once the protagonist clearly sees reality (in internet-era parlance, he is "red-pilled"), they join a rarified club of those who have undergone a similar process of self-discovery and acquire the self-image of being among the elect. The conspiracist self-narration is inward-looking rather than public-facing. It involves a progression from ignorance to disillusionment to unexpected discovery to revelation and enlightenment (Barkun, 2013; Tripodi, 2022). This process of personal development resembles a religious conversion, like Paul on the road to Damascus or the Buddhist path of discovery (James et al., 2003). Narratives such as these are common to adherents of the Qanon movement, in which the notion of a "Great Awakening" is central (Greer & Beene, 2024).

It is important to note that this self-selection need not be perceived as broadly legitimate, as the public's assent is irrelevant. If a leader must justify their claim to power, it is based on their self-assessment that they have revealed the Truth and the recognition of this fact by the select few who are equally in the know, or "epistemological insiders." Insofar as the revelation of conspiracies is a collective activity of information exchange, theory building, and moral reinforcement (Starbird et al., 2023), there may be a pool of insiders deemed worthy of leadership. When applied to government, the mutual recognition of conspiracist talent may result not in autocracy, but oligarchy.

What does governing entail? For conspiracists, it means the relentless pursuit of Truth: exposing covert threats, dismantling the hidden forces that obscure reality, and embedding that Truth into the very capillaries of the state apparatus. Such an undertaking demands both epistemic and political consolidation. The leader—or a tight-knit circle of enlightened oligarchs—must concentrate power as both a means and an end, which would likely involve violence, a move beyond what most populists see as necessary to achieve their aims. Trump, accordingly, used violent metaphors when discussing how to thwart his enemies, once saying, "In 2016, I declared I am your voice. Today, I add: I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed: *I am your retribution*" (Hutzler, 2023, para. 5). The primary objective of a latter-day inquisition would be to eliminate malevolent forces with epistemological insiders positioned as ultimate arbiters of truth unencumbered by due process or the rule of law. Repression and purges can be legitimized by labeling elements of resistance a "fifth column" colluding with "the enemy." To pursue their enemies, they cultivate a culture of surveillance and suspicion. Loyalty to this regime and unwavering belief in its righteousness become essential markers of belonging to the political community, reinforcing the elite's power.

Another facet of conspiracist rule involves the institutionalization of alternative forms of knowledge. Expert authority has come under attack in democracies in recent years, as a result of factors such as rising globalization, rising inequality, and the fragmentation of the mass media (Eyal, 2019). The populist critique of epistemic authority takes on a sharper edge when articulated in the language of conspiracism. Credentialed experts are seen as collaborators of malevolent forces who forge or conceal evidence to aid their secret plots (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Scientists bury evidence of the (obvious) flatness of the earth or work with pharmaceutical companies to manufacture viruses and profit off new vaccines–which themselves are harmful (Merkley & Loewen, 2021). A conspiracist regime running a bureaucracy may be content with exposing these plots and ridding the government of those involved. Yet they may go further and build a new set of institutions that embody their conspiracist ideation: a conspiracist technocracy.

A technocracy is defined as a form of representation that emphasizes the importance of expertise in identifying and implementing objective solutions to societal problems (Caramani, 2017, p. 55). Power in a technocracy, therefore, derives from abandoning neutrality in favor of a merit-based, expert-led initiative (Caramani, 2017, p. 60). A conspiracist technocracy involves summoning a class of *alternative* experts in public health, history, international relations, politics, elections, journalism, and economics. In recent years, we have seen online networks of conspiracy theorists and conspiracy enthusiasts sharing and propagating alternative accounts of what "actually" happened in the US 2020 election or the Covid-19 pandemic (Moran et al., 2024; Starbird et al., 2023). Proponents of these heterodox views lack relevant educational training and are not credentialed by professional associations, yet they claim to be the "real" experts on these issues and persuade followers that their version of reality is the correct one.

Conspiracist governance through technocracy provides a system in which conspiracy theorists become the new experts. At the top is an oligarchic structure within an authoritarian regime where enlightened thinkers preside over conspiracist ministries. Within the state, conspiracist civil servants receive training in parallel educational institutions to learn the methodologies and procedures of conspiracist research. They speak for the Conspiracist State, and their analyses, reports, diagnoses, and policies become officially sanctioned by the reigning authorities. Unlike knowledge produced by the scientific method, which relies on ethical codes, disinterested inquiry, transparency, and replication to acquire public trust, conspiracist epistemologies may

rely on premises such as experiential knowledge, emotions, and personal convictions that do not leave their claims open to critique or refutation (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Conspiracist technocracy in this sense resembles a religious priesthood more than a scientific bureaucracy.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In this essay, we have conducted a systematic analysis of three theories of power: one conventional (liberal), one nascent and contested (populism), and one that is not usually considered a theory of power at all (conspiracism). The analysis yielded insights about how, according to conspiracism, power is wielded and by whom, and forward-looking propositions about how a state should be governed. We argued that a polity ruled in ways consistent with conspiracist ideas could be autocratic, oligarchic, or technocratic.

Our analysis revealed unexpected areas of convergence and divergence of conspiracism with its rival political theories. For example, even though conspiracism is often considered an offshoot of populism, or even synonymous with it (Castanho Silva et al., 2017), we suggest that they harbor a foundational difference: whereas populism lauds "the people" as a fount of virtue and wisdom whose interests must be secured, conspiracists view the same body as ignorant masses who are blind to the conspiracies around them and ill-equipped to discern what their own interests are. In a more awkward convergence, conspiracists agree with elitist theories of democracy that the public is incapable of forming coherent preferences and, therefore, requires wise leadership. But then, of course, a divergence is revealed: Democratic representatives are compelled to be responsive to the public and govern on its behalf. To a conspiracist, on the other hand, revealing the Truth is paramount, and there is no imperative to govern and advance the interests of the populace.

Political philosophers, social scientists, and conspiracy theorists have long asked, "Who governs?" Theorists such as Dahl and Schumpeter examine the role of structures and agency in interpreting complex social phenomena, including procedures, elite contestation, and institutions, and reach nuanced conclusions subject to ongoing scrutiny by other social theorists. In contrast, conspiracy theorists selectively pick evidence that fits their narratives, finding secret plots by malevolent actors as an overarching explanation for all important world events. Their approach leaves no room for acknowledging the limitations of their analyses, mechanisms for refutation, or venues to challenge their claims.

A conspiracist theory of power, when put into practice, has features that may superficially resemble democracy and populism but are substantially different. The regime's purpose is not to represent the people but to pursue the Truth. Dissenting voices are not merely distractions but, by casting doubt on a conspiracist's pursuit, are considered inherently subversive. Conspiracism, therefore, cannot tolerate pluralism and has an elective affinity with autocracy. It envisions an enlightened few, led by a postmodern philosopher-king, as the rightful rulers. Their most prized commodity is ownership of the "Truth"—the ultimate means of production—which they aim to disseminate as their *raison d'etre*. They are not anarchists who seek to dismantle the state but are rather like Leninists who want to infiltrate oppressive institutions or build new ones to advance their agendas. A state that produces and certifies conspiracist experts to produce knowledge of how the world "really" works—a conspiracist technocracy—is perhaps the variant of autocracy best suited to the complex and rapidly changing age we live in.

Our analysis, though conceptual, sheds light on phenomena we have already witnessed in recent years. Although conspiracy theories are usually viewed as a cynical rhetorical tactic associated with autocratic rule (Giry & Gürpinar, 2020), new developments indicate that politicians who deploy conspiracy theories can win significant vote shares in freely contested elections (Bayar, 2023; Pirro & Taggart, 2023). The electoral allure of conspiracy theories in an age of disenchantment and distrust of elites is intuitive and has been theorized alongside populist discourses. But it is important to recognize that when conspiracy theories are used as rhetoric to win votes, even opportunistically, they may give rise to *conspiracism* as a foundation for the exercise of power.

There are indications that parties and leaders who strategically invoke conspiracy theories in the electoral arena may, if victorious, take measures to implement conspiracism in office. Due to events like mass immigration from the Global South, the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of a politically involved billionaire class, and the ever-increasing number of people who get information from social media, we have seen greater demand for conspiracy theories to account for social disruptions and they have correspondingly moved into the mainstream of public discourse. Other parties competing for the votes of the disillusioned masses are waiting in the wings. Whoever gains power, wary of losing votes to even more conspiratorial and illiberal rivals, may take a more literal interpretation of their mandate and follow through on the implications of their electoral promises. Already, since we began drafting this article, the Trump administration has placed conspiracy theorists in critical positions to administer the American state, including Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as head of the health bureaucracy and Kash Patel as director of the FBI. In doing so, he has followed through with a larger project of the far-right to purge the "administrative state" of expertise and make alternative, conspiracist knowledge hegemonic. History books must be rewritten to conform to the new official narrative (Mervosh, 2025). In Europe, once-fringe parties, including neo-fascist ones, have already been included in coalition governments, signaling a violation of European taboos against forming coalitions with the far-right (Henley, 2022). The ascendant Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany spreads conspiracy theories about the postwar order, revives banned Nazi slogans, and has threatened to deport people not born in Germany (Pfeifer, 2024). These examples, and the broader illiberal forces they represent, suggest how conspiracism might work when translated into a political program, and we should not dismiss it as empty rhetoric.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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After Post-Truth: Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey Debate

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Abstract

The debate on post-truth has sought to restore what it held to be the proper relationship between knowledge, truth, and political judgment. This made for an intuitively plausible response to the experience of democracy itself being increasingly contested. However, with the re-election of Donald Trump as US president and a broad array of instances of democratic backsliding in Europe and beyond, such a restorative framing may have exhausted itself. Therefore, we suggest revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate as a starting point for an alternative way of theorizing the contemporary crisis of democracy and knowledge production. The article outlines the potential of revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate to this end in three steps. First, we read the Lippmann–Dewey debate as a classical instance of the contestation of the concept of (liberal) democracy. Second, we discuss the relevance of two fundamentally different perspectives on the politics of knowledge: expertise and education. Third, we introduce two empirical sites to further illustrate such reflexive contestedness: the contestation of economic knowledge during European austerity politics and the role of Scientists for Future in environmental protests. A brief conclusion reflects on how one could think of the paradigmatic positions of Dewey and Lippmann not as mutually exclusive but complementary ways to problematize democracy in crisis.

Keywords

climate change; crisis of democracy; education; expertise; euro crisis; John Dewey; post-truth; social movements; Walter Lippmann

1. Introduction

The end of history has ended. Fukuyama's (1989) flamboyant claim that liberal democracy after the end of the Cold War was without alternatives has always been theoretically contested. It circulated so widely and gained idiomatic notoriety beyond academia, however, because it did capture a sense of liberal-democratic

triumphalism which seemed intuitively plausible at the time. This is no more. Democracy, liberal and otherwise, is now widely considered to face rollbacks, backsliding, and, more generally, a type of contestation which no longer allows us to take it for granted. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 marked a moment of discontinuity; from then on democracy, and with it the complex relationship between knowledge, truth, and political judgment, were visibly contested even in places where it had been considered to be most firmly established. The influential debate on post-truth can be read as a reaction to this particular constellation. Indeed, as the recent literature on post-truth argues, liberal democracies are under increasing pressure exactly because the distinction between truth and falsity has broken down in public life; and it seems plausible to suggest that the remedy of reinstating this distinction can only be achieved by fact-checking and the propagation of scientific knowledge (Ball, 2017; D'Ancona, 2017; E. Davis, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Michiko, 2018). Hence, the critical impetus of these debates was restorative and, by and large, underwritten by a reading of Brexit, Trump, and democratic backsliding as a disruption of an orderly arrangement of knowledge, truth, and political judgment.

The re-election of Donald Trump as US president in 2024 and a concurrent wave of democratic backsliding throughout Europe (and elsewhere), however, signal not a temporary disruption but rather a shift at the levels of political practice and semantics which the post-truth framing seems increasingly ill-equipped to capture. Specifically, we argue that the post-truth framing centres contemporary interrogations of the crisis of democracy around three presuppositions. First, it locates the problem firmly and unilaterally on the side of an ill-informed citizenry. Second, it contrasts the ill-informed citizenry with an idealized vision of science as disinterested, morally pure, and therefore uniquely qualified to restore the quality of public communication. Third, it presents post-truth politics as a disruption from an idealized past where a "proper" public could be assumed to always already be there, as if it were a pre-existing and objectively given entity rather than a communicative process. While these presuppositions are of course not universally shared in the literature on post-truth politics (see, e.g., Schindler, 2024, on the social-theoretical preconditions of the crisis), they are nevertheless pervasive enough to invite a conversation on possible ways of reframing the contemporary crisis of democracy.

In order to move beyond the post-truth framing, we suggest revisiting a classic entry into the lexicon of democratic thought: the Lippmann–Dewey debate. Walter Lippmann and John Dewey famously clashed in the 1920s over the very possibility of a democratic public (Dewey, 1946; Lippmann, 1922, 1925). Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate, we argue, can help to conceptualize the relationship between rulers and ruled as a communicative situation where the production and circulation of knowledge are at stake. This makes for a productive alternative to the post-truth debate as it moves beyond static and idealizing notions of knowledge, truth, politics, and democracy. Specifically, it allows for a focus on how the relationship between rulers and ruled is communicatively mediated and negotiated. The article thus seeks to develop such an analytics and to illustrate how it could generate new and interesting questions—in making sense of the role of expertise and education, or as a source of inspiration for the empirical study of how the production and circulation of knowledge plays out in social movements, political struggles, and the ensuing politics of crisis, which tellingly often comes in the form of a politics of crisis management.

More specifically, we suggest that revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate is particularly productive if we engage with it as a debate. From *Dewey* we can learn that democracy is more than a particular arrangement of political institutions where citizen participation amounts to little more than casting a ballot every few years,

but also more than a constant struggle for hegemony between principally antagonistic social groups. Both the narrow institutional view of democracy as a system of government, and a broader perspective on civil society and cultural hegemony typically rest on fixed and stable political imaginaries where the component parts are always already known in advance. Voters must have preexisting preferences (even if sociologists have their doubts, see Bourdieu, 1979) and social groups must be readily constituted before they can enter the zone of antagonism (see, e.g., the concept of multipolarity in Mouffe, 2009, which presupposes ready-made poles and thus presents a significantly more substantialist account of political identity than Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Dewey, in particular, invites us to dissolve all of these assumed fixities into their processes of production, transformation, and circulation, and in doing so he pushes the debate firmly beyond the confines of American democracy viewed as a particular system of government with its particular checks and balances. Hence, while the Lippmann–Dewey debate is triggered by a perceived crisis of American democracy, it is not tied to the particularities of the political system of the US. Indeed, revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate re-centres our attention from political systems to the societal conditions of possibility of democratic practice. Democracy, Dewey thus radically suggests, is a way of life and as such must be considered not only in terms of the political system but also in any other domain of social life. This includes, for example, education and economic production, which we will consider below (Dewey, 2018; Talisse, 2019).

From *Lippmann* we can learn that in order to make sense of the relationship between rulers and ruled as a communicative situation, we must study the actual communicative situation rather than hold on to a vision of what we hope this relationship could be. This is the core of Bruno Latour's reading of Lippmann as a Machiavelli of our time (dos Reis, 2019; Latour, 2024; Marres, 2005; Schölzel, 2021). In Latour's (2024, p. 45) words:

> If you despair of politics, it is because you've asked for more than it can give. You've imprudently burdened it with moral, religious, legal, and/or artistic tasks that it is powerless to fulfill. Ask for the impossible, and you'll harvest something atrocious or grotesque. If you want people to regain confidence in democracy, you first have to relieve it of the illusions that have transformed the dream of harmonious public life into a nightmare.

To read the Lippmann–Dewey debate as a debate (on the question of whether the Lippmann–Dewey debate actually was a debate at the time, see Fuller, 2024; Jansen, 2009; O'Gorman, 2024; Ralston, 2010; Schudson, 2008; Shechtman & Durham Peters, 2024), we suggest, is to hold together these two lessons in order to explore the preconditions of a democratic revival in the face of the state of actually existing democracy. Revisiting a century-old debate strikes as productive here because it helpfully precedes the division of labour, now firmly institutionalized, between (normative) political theory on the hand and (empirical) social research on the other.

In order to demonstrate how revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate may make for a productive alternative to a post-truth framing, the article proceeds in three steps. In a first step, we will discuss the what, the why care, and the what follows of the Lippmann–Dewey debate. In a second step, we demonstrate how the Lippmann–Dewey debate invites us to think beyond the institutional confines of political systems by discussing two fields of practice where the practical negotiation of the relation between knowledge, democracy, and judgment is at stake: expertise and education. In a third step, we briefly illustrate how the analytical perspective distilled from the Lippmann–Dewey debate can be put to work by zooming in on two recent examples of how the communicative relationship between rulers and ruled has become the subject of

public controversy: European austerity policies and Scientists for Future. In conclusion, we reflect on how one could think the paradigmatic positions of Dewey and Lippmann not as mutually exclusive but complementary ways to rethink the crisis of democracy.

2. The What, Why Care, and What Follows of the Lippmann–Dewey Debate?

The Lippmann–Dewey debate (sometimes also Dewey–Lippmann debate) stands as a significant discourse in the field of political theory and democratic theory. Arising from the intellectual contexts following World War I, the debate mainly unfolded in three books: Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* from 1922, which received much acclaim, and *The Phantom Public* from 1925, which proved too pessimistic in its view of the world for the American Progressives (O'Gorman, 2024; Ralston, 2010). John Dewey would take up some of these themes in *The Public and its Problems* from 1927. On the surface, the stakes of the debate concern the foundations of modern democracy: an informed citizenry that is capable of rational participation in their own government. To Lippmann, the average citizen does not possess the capacity for rational self-government, and so he advocates for a turn towards science to help inform and organise public opinion. In contrast, Dewey argued that such an intellectual aristocracy would only further eclipse the public; what was needed instead was to revive the power of the public to make it possible for it to be articulated, heard, and followed (Bybee, 1999).

If the Lippmann–Dewey debate remains relevant, it is exactly because it problematizes what is taken for granted today. Hence, it contrasts sharply with the recent debate on post-truth politics which suggests that public opinion has been poisoned by populist politicians, deceiving media, and ignorant masses by means of lies and manipulation (e.g., Ball, 2017; McIntyre, 2018). In this view, public opinion becomes its own self-contained entity rather than an amalgamation of diverging forces. This results in the problematic belief that the cure for the malady of post-truth politics is the formation of a "correct" and scientifically informed public opinion, which is capable of reconstituting truth in democratic politics. The basis for this belief is, therefore, that modern science possesses some kind of tacit moral structure affording it a privileged position in curating a healthy public (Pennock, 2019). In sum, the post-truth framing rests on a fixed and idealized image of the relationship between a (singular) public, science, and politics based on which one can do little more than lament the current situation as an undesirable deviation from the orderly status quo.

Against this, revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate allows for a different and more productive problematization centred on three key themes. First, it constitutes the *epistemic challenge for democracy* as a communicative situation between ruler and ruled (Estlund, 2012; Goodin & Spiekermann, 2018; Talisse, 2019). Second, it conceptualizes the public not as a given condition for democracy, but rather as either a *fabrication* (Lippmann), or an *emergent property* in confrontation with a problem (Dewey, see also Herborth & Kessler, 2010). Third, it highlights both the promise, but also the problematic *status of science* in relation to democracy. Taking these three themes together, it becomes clear that public opinion cannot simply be equated with democratic knowledge. Instead, it advances an analytic where public opinion, or simply the public, is an amalgamation of forces that constitutes the particular communicative relationship between ruler and ruled, and what we refer to as democracy depends on the nature of this communicative relationship. Science may inform and contribute to the process of democratic knowledge production, but it does not occupy a superior position in it. Hence, it raises the question of the politics of how knowledge is produced and how it circulates.

2.1. The Epistemic Challenge for Democracy

Lippmann is concerned with the public's ability to govern. Hence, he starts *Public Opinion* by exploring the epistemological problem of the gap between real events and our experiences of them, which is mediated by mental pictures: "The real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 16). Rather, "what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 25). Lippmann terms this inner world of mental pictures a "pseudo-environment." It is comprised of manufactured myths and fictions that provide us with maps that are necessary to navigate social existence. Our actions, Lippmann contends, are wholly dependent upon our pseudo-environment. Because of this gap between events and experience, our mental pictures are, by definition, always misleading, they are never finished, but they can also always be clearer or more nuanced. Hence, as Lippmann (1922, p. 30) explains:

> [We are limited by] the artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meager time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world, and finally the fear of facing those facts which would seem to threaten the established routine of men's lives.

Dewey departs from a similar distinction when he differentiates between "facts" and the "meaning of facts," i.e., between facts and their interpretation. To Dewey (1946, p. 6), "no one is ever forced by just the collection of facts to accept a particular theory of their meaning." Thus, while we might come to some kind of agreement on the factual phenomena of political behaviour, we cannot arrive at a stable interpretation of the meaning of such phenomena.

For Dewey, the usual remedy of relying on facts, which are "verifiably ascertained," is not a plausible way forward, for the simple reason that "political facts are not outside human desire and judgment" (Dewey, 1946, p. 6). There is no way of isolating the *de facto* from the *de jure*, and despite the prestige of the natural sciences, the alternatives before us of a "factually limited science" and "uncontrolled speculation" are false ones, "[t]he more sincerely we appeal to facts," Dewey (1946, p. 7) informs us, "the greater is the importance of the distinction between facts which condition human activity and facts which are conditioned by human activity." The former are facts of association and political action, while the latter are the interpretations of these and, thereby, dependent facts. The epistemic challenge arises from the condition that facts do not provide their own interpretation, and it is exacerbated precisely because these two kinds of facts are conflated while the belief that facts offer their own interpretation proliferates.

2.2. The Public as Fabrication or Emergent Property

To Lippmann, the public is entirely a fabrication. Public opinion, Lippmann (1922, p. 29) asserts, can be rightfully said to only consist of those misleading pictures that groups of people and societies act upon. The public does not *express* its opinion, but rather *aligns* itself for or against an already articulated position on a given topic. There is no common or national will, no group mind or social purpose. Lippmann thus rejects traditional liberal political theory (to which the notion of *vox populi*, of the natural endowment where rational citizens come together to form a common will, was so central) as it fails to deal with this complexity

because it assumes that the rational individual is capable of perfectively knowing the outside world. In practice, public opinion can only ever appear, Lippmann argues, by skilfully playing on the irrationality of man and the ambiguity of symbols—that is, as every political leader knows, public opinion has to be manufactured by the technical use of symbols to produce an illusory yet effective common will. Lippmann (1922, p. 208) terms this the "manufacture of consent" and asserts:

> The creation of consent is not a new art. It is a very old one which was supposed to have died out with the appearance of democracy. But it has not died out. It has, in fact, improved enormously in technic, because it is now based on analysis rather than rule of thumb. And so, as a result of psychological research, coupled with the modern means of communication, the practice of democracy has turned a corner.

Public opinion is the mobilization of force (Lippmann, 1922, pp. 248–249). Thus, when leaders claim to represent *the* public opinion, the "public" as such does not exist: Public opinion is wholly manufactured by special interest groups with advanced techniques to serve their interests.

It is not only because the press is organized as a business where advertisement is necessary since consumers are unwilling to pay the real costs of gathering quality information, but also because of an epistemological distance between news and truth that modern mass communication media (whether in the form of print, radio, or television) fail to produce a genuine public opinion which can guide communal action. As Lippmann (1922, p. 358) points out:

> News and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act.

In contrast to the scientist, the journalist does not have special access to truth. Yet, Lippmann observes, the press has slowly become the leading actor in the public sphere; it has, in the absence of well-functioning institutions, falsely become the vital organ of direct democracy: "The Court of Public Opinion, open day and night, is to lay down the law for everything all the time" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 363). The press, Lippmann (1922, p. 362) explains, "is too frail to carry the whole burden of popular sovereignty, to supply spontaneously the truth." The problem, Lippmann (1922, p. 365) argues, lies deeper than the functioning of the press: It lies in "the failure of self-governing people to transcend their casual experience and their prejudice, by inventing, creating, and organizing a machinery of knowledge." In *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann makes this problem of the fundamental unit of the public the crux of the problem. The common citizen "lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand, and is unable to direct" and it is therefore impossible to "move him…with a good straight talk about service and civic duty, nor by waving a flag in his face, nor by sending a boy scout after him to make him vote" (Lippmann, 1925, pp. 4–5). The private citizen "gives but a little of his time to public affairs, has but a casual interest in facts and but a poor appetite for theory" (Lippmann, 1925, pp. 14–15).

Dewey puts forward a different view. The issue is not that the public is a complete fabrication. Rather, it is with the facts of association that we discover the state and the public: "There is no mystery about the facts of association, of an interconnected action which affects the activity of singular elements. There is no sense in asking how individuals come to be associated. They exist and operate in association" (Dewey, 1946, p. 23).

The state is the totality of association, which is not a given, but which has to be found and clarified through the interaction of the citizenry:

> The lasting, extensive and serious consequences of associated activity bring into existence a public. In itself it is unorganized and formless. By means of the officials and their special power it becomes a state. A public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public. (Dewey, 1946, p. 67)

Thus, the public only comes into being because human communities are faced with particular problems. In response, they form publics to discuss and evaluate these problems and their solutions. As Dewey (1946, pp. 15–16) points out: "The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for."

2.3. The Status of Science

Having rejected traditional theories of public opinion, Lippmann turns towards (social) science to safeguard democracy from the challenges emanating from the complexities of the world. He envisions in *Public Opinion* a "machinery of knowledge"—made up of social scientists working for the various agencies of government—that may ameliorate the "failures of self-governing people to transcend their casual experience and their prejudice" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 396). Hence, in this book, Lippmann's version of a realistic democracy rests on the ability of the new scientific aristocracy to be "neutral to their prejudice, and capable of overcoming subjectivism" to discern the truth about the world (Lippmann, 1922, p. 396). For Lippmann, the point of democracy is not that everyone engages in self-government (how could they ever achieve this in the modern world), but to realize the "good life." He therefore does not see this elitism as an enemy of democracy, but rather a necessary measure to save it. Yet, when Lippmann rejected Newtonian and Darwinian science in *The Phantom Public* (because it is based on a metaphysics of certainty that makes knowledge of universal and unalterable truth possible), and started to explore the epistemological space of uncertainty that opened up because of advancements in quantum physics, he stood in awe: Science, he now believed, could no more than the mass communication media produce a public opinion that could face up to the world, and he thus restrained himself to only talking about the "neutralization of arbitrary force" by "workable adjustment" as the only way to deal with the challenges to the social body (Lippmann, 1925, p. 57).

The sciences thus occupy a central role for both: Where Lippmann initially formulated an elitist solution that in *Public Opinion* would rely on scientific government, he would later, in *Phantom Public*, display great disbelief in science to provide the necessary guidance to govern society. Dewey, in contrast, insisted on a democratic solution, where the public would only exist in so far as it was willing to engage with a particular common problem. Science could play a part in doing so, but its inclusion would also impose limitations as well as new problems. The main problem being that science as a human activity cannot be disinterested. As Dewey points out, historically, science itself has cherished the "pure" over the "applied," with the consequence that whenever science was applied it was done so with contempt and disregard for human concerns and in favour of the commercial interests of the few. That is, science was applied *to* human concerns rather than *in* them—where "application *in* life would signify that science was absorbed and distributed; that it was the instrumentality of that common understanding and thorough communication which is the precondition of the existence of a

genuine and effective public" (Dewey, 1946, p. 174, emphasis in the original). Thus, to Dewey, there is nothing preventing sciences from being embedded in human concerns, just as there is nothing preventing the ordinary citizen from being educated enough to appreciate the indirect consequences that scientists and experts are grappling with. It is in this relation that we find Dewey's famous shoe analogy, in which he states: "The man that wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied" (Dewey, 1946, p. 207; see also McAfee, 2004). This is what makes democracy a superior institutional arrangement and ties it to a way of life. By providing the space for debate, discussion, and persuasion between democratic masses and experts, it is able to engage in a practice of reflexive self-intervention (Honneth, 1998).

2.4. Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey Debate

We have seen that Lippmann and Dewey offer fundamentally different views on key themes of democratic politics, generating questions which are still relevant today. What is the status of facts in relation to political judgment, and what follows from the fact that facts are mediated in public? What, then, is a public—a fabrication ultimately reflecting special interests, or an emergent property of an open-ended process of communication? And can we plausibly expect science and scientific expertise to (better) mediate knowledge and democracy? With respect to this last question, however, we also see an interesting convergence. Both Lippmann and Dewey forcefully reject a simple, technocratic fix to the problem of knowledge and democracy. Lippmann's second thoughts on the issue are informed by advances in the hard sciences where quantum physics had shattered the metaphysical belief that Capital-S-Science could provide a singular and stable ground for knowledge production. Dewey (1929) strikes a similar chord in *The Quest for Certainty* and develops a reflexive vision of science as an open-ended communicative process. Epistemologically, this amounts to a rejection of both the distinction between theory and praxis and the Cartesian dualism of *Knowing and the Known* (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Politically, it suggests that any attempt to know better than the ordinary citizen rests on a knowledge claim which is quite fundamentally out of touch with early 20th-century developments in science. Last but not least, it builds on a processual and relational understanding of politics outlined in Arthur F. Bentley's earlier *The Process of Government* (Bentley, 1908), but it also moves significantly beyond Bentley by redirecting our focus from a given political system to the broader question of the societal conditions of possibility of a democratic organization of social life.

This is to say that the Lippmann–Dewey debate leaves us with an interesting set of unanswered questions. The relationship between knowledge, democracy, and political judgment is always problematic, and it is always subject to practical negotiations. It is practically mediated in and through acts of public communication which always involve both the potential of critical self-transformation and the possibility of misinformation and distortion, for instance in online anti-publics (M. Davis, 2021; for a critique of teleological conceptions of the public see also Herborth, 2023). Reading the Lippmann–Dewey debate as a debate strikes us as productive because it allows us to zoom in on precisely those communicative situations where such practical negotiation takes place. In doing so, it allows us to pose questions which are both open-ended and precise. It allows us to pose open-ended questions because it does not frontload our discussion with substantive a priori knowledge as to how the contentious relationship between knowledge, democracy, and political judgment will play out. And it is precisely because the public has the potential to be both fabrication and emergent property that a focus on communicative negotiation and mediation gives us a specific set of questions. It allows us, for instance, to interrogate social fields such as expertise and

education with a view to how the social relation between rulers and ruled is constituted, enacted, and potentially redescribed. It also allows us to study empirically how the status of scientific and academic knowledge becomes the subject of public contestation when social movements challenge the political status quo. What follows is an attempt to illustrate how questions of this kind can be put to work.

3. Negotiating Democracy and Knowledge: Expertise and Education

In the previous section, we have seen that the Lippmann–Dewey debate not only forms a standard entry into the lexicon of democratic thought, but also continues to inform debates ranging from media and communication studies to political science and political philosophy (e.g., Bjørkdahl, 2024; Bohman, 2010; Carey, 1989). What stands out for the purpose of this contribution is the potential use of the Lippmann–Dewey debate in order to shed light on how the contemporary reading of a crisis of democracy is only insufficiently understood through the lens of post-truth politics. Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate comes for us hence not merely with an archival purpose; it also contributes to a better understanding of our current predicament. As we have seen above, the discourse on post-truth is organized around a set of normative expectations regarding the role science and facts (often simply collapsed into one) ought to play in the public and its politics. These normative expectations are empirically frustrated, and the basic grammar of the post-truth debate seems to simply express exasperation in the light of this empirical frustration. Building on the Lippmann–Dewey debate, we can focus instead on understanding the fundamental political relation between rulers and ruled as a communicative situation. This allows us to raise the question of how this relation is mediated, how it is negotiated, and how the results of such mediation and negotiation have informed the practice and potential of democracy as a mode of social organization (Herborth, 2020). It also allows us to raise this question with regard to any social domain where knowledge hierarchies are at stake, thus extending our discussion of democracy, knowledge, and political judgment beyond the confines of the formally institutionalized political system.

Hence, in this section, we will briefly zoom in on two fields of practice and their associated academic debates as sites where the relationship between rulers and ruled is communicatively produced, mediated, and negotiated. First, we will explore the field of *expertise*. Expertise has been variously hailed as the most promising remedy to the lack of an adequately informed public (debate) or denounced as a form of technocratic usurpation (rule of experts) of the democratic process. It thus expresses the ambiguous relationship between democracy and knowledge in interesting ways. The second part of this section discusses *education* as a field of mediating the relationship between the centre of political power and authority and its subjects. A classical liberal view posits education in general, and political education in particular, as a necessary social precondition of democracy. On this view, education can crucially empower people to meaningfully partake in the democratic process. Sponsoring educational policies from the political centre, however, both imposes qualifications on democratic participation and assumes that the learning outcomes of the process can be set in advance. This contrasts sharply with a democratic view of education as a radically open-ended process from the bottom up, which not only informs the public but plays a crucial role in constituting the public in the first place. In each of these fields, both the relationship between knowledge and democracy and the relationship between rulers and ruled remain contentious. This is to say, however, that it also remains subject to an open-ended process of mediation and negotiation which is itself crucial to democratic practice.

3.1. Expertise

As we have seen above, painting Lippmann as an anti-democratic proponent of the rule of experts does not stand up to scrutiny. He does suggest, however, that for "representative government" to operate effectively in "what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry," it would have to rely on "an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 31). Lippmann (1922, p. 32) thus views experts as curators of public opinion:

> My conclusion is that public opinions must be organized for the press if they are to be sound, not by the press as is the case today. This organization I conceive to be in the first instance the task of a political science that has won its proper place as formulator, in advance of real decision, instead of apologist, critic, or reporter after the decision has been made.

More broadly, in the social and political climate which gave rise to the Lippmann–Dewey debate, there was an intuitive and commonsensical appeal to the notion that expertise had become increasingly important for democratic practice. Alfred Zimmern, known today as an "interwar idealist" in international relations and the first to hold a chair in that newly founded discipline, is an interesting case in point. In a 1930 essay on *Democracy and the Expert*, Zimmern suggests:

> The establishment of a right relationship between Knowledge and Power is the central problem of modern democracy. Upon it, more than upon any other single factor, depends the survival, or, to speak more truly, the realisation of democracy as an effective method for the conduct of public affairs. (Zimmern, 1930, p. 7)

The struggle for democracy, Zimmern (1930, p. 9) argues, had to face the "old 'police state' of the privileged classes" primarily occupied with "the maintenance of order and the protection of property: it required little more than a routine administration." New democratic regimes, however, are confronted with a much wider range of political demands for example in the fields of social security and welfare. Responding to such demands, however, requires expertise: "Thus democracy is faced, at the moment of apparent triumph, with a new danger—that of being displaced by the ruler-class which it has had to call into its councils in order to meet its own special requirements" (Zimmern, 1930, p. 9). For Zimmern and many contemporaries, this could be achieved in particular on the international level and here through the newly established international organizations and, first and foremost, the League of Nations (see, for example, Fosdick, 1924).

Zimmern's remark that the new politics of expertise could flourish more easily in the international realm because it was institutionally less developed remains prescient. It is expressive of a wider trend to articulate what Steffek (2021) has aptly described as "technocratic utopia." The notion of progressive rationalization beyond the nation-state, Steffek suggests, has been expressed predominantly in the mode of a "technocratic internationalism" bent on fulfilling Karl Mannheim's dictum that "the fundamental tendency of all bureaucratic thought is to turn all problems of politics into problems of administration" (Mannheim, 1954, as cited in Steffek, 2021, p. 15). Knowledge resources for the formulation of policy are then supplied by "epistemic communities" wielding expertise over specific issue areas (Haas, 1992). This notion of progressive rationalization also builds the background for dystopian diagnoses of the present, where democratic processes are replaced by public administration and forms of managerialism conducted by experts (Kennedy,

2016; Knafo et al., 2019). Paired with imaginaries of global hierarchy and imbued with hyperbolic forms of modernization theory, this shift towards expert administration can amount to what anthropologist James Ferguson has referred to as an "anti-politics machine" (Ferguson, 1990).

It should not come as a surprise, then, that the contested role of experts has become a crystallization point for the contemporary crisis of democracy. These range from the obvious example of the Covid-19 pandemic to the politics of austerity, or the environmental crisis (more on the latter two below). The ensuing politicization of expertise (and, more broadly, scientific knowledge) is well-documented (Maasen & Weingart, 2006; Nowotny et al., 2001; Sending, 2015; Weingart, 1999; Weingart & Guenther, 2016). What stands out here is how the role of scientific knowledge and expertise can be articulated in radically different ways. Ferguson's anti-politics machine co-exists with anti-science bubbles, and depending on the issue at hand, democracy can only be saved with the help of more, less, or simply different types of expertise. Systematically, for the purpose of our argument, the politics of expertise thus raises the question of how the production and circulation of knowledge is mediated and negotiated at the hierarchical centre of political power.

3.2. Education

Dewey shares Lippmann's basic diagnosis. The practice of democracy and the production and circulation of knowledge are out of joint. However, Dewey takes a decidedly more sceptical stance toward experts, opting instead for a forward-looking exploration of the possibility of popularizing knowledge. Dewey has written extensively and explicitly on education (Dewey, 2019, 1916), but for the purpose of our discussion it is particularly interesting to consider the role of education in his effort to sketch an alternative to the bleak consequences which Lippmann had inferred. The fundamental conceptual problem, Dewey (1946, p. 155) suggests in *The Public and its Problems*, is the tendency to approach social and political concepts from the point of view of an "absolutistic logic." Education is no exception. Notably, education is discussed here not merely or even primarily as a matter of "schooling" but "with respect to all the ways in which communities attempt to shape the disposition and beliefs of their members" (Dewey, 1946, p. 200). Doing so on the basis of the presumption of always already knowing in advance what the outcome ought to be, Dewey (1946, p. 200) contends, is as antithetical to democracy as it is to the logic of inquiry:

> Even when the processes of education do not aim at the unchanged perpetuation of existing institutions, it is assumed that there must be a mental picture of some desired end, personal and social, which is to be attained, and that this conception of a fixed determinate end ought to control educative processes. Reformers share this conviction with conservatives. The disciples of Lenin and Mussolini vie with the captains of capitalistic society in endeavoring to bring about a formation of disposition and ideas which will conduce to a preconceived goal.

Dewey's vision of education as a radically open-ended process of self-transformation thus contrasts sharply with a classical liberal view (see Thompson, 2017), which centres the need to "elevate" the public to a higher level in such a way that the hierarchy of levels must always already be known in advance. Education is so central to classical liberalism that Ryan (2011), in a broadly sympathetic discussion, claims that "to write about [John Stuart] Mill is to write about education." This is indeed so notoriously the case that, as Ryan reports, "Disraeli sneered 'here comes the finishing governess' when Mill entered Parliament in 1866" (Ryan, 2011, p. 653). Liberal hope stands in constant tension, however, with illiberal methods which hypostasize the given

order into a predetermined learning outcome. It is precisely on account of this tension that Mill could advocate "weighted suffrage and elite education" (Jahn, 2005, p. 200) while justifying the political exclusion of lower classes and colonial subjects with reference to their apparent lack of education (see also Hindess, 2007).

This illustrates how, both nationally and internationally, the relationship between democracy and education remains paradoxical. Dewey's emphasis on education as a praxis of reflexive self-transformation remains incisive today precisely because it addresses this paradox. Democracy presupposes particular and demanding forms of knowledge. At the same time, democracy itself can be read as a mode of knowledge production. A democratic organization of social processes will yield epistemic outcomes that otherwise could not have been attained (Estlund, 2012; Goodin & Spiekermann, 2018; Misak, 2008). Against this background, the organization of political education seems both necessary and borderline impossible. It is necessary on account of the diagnosis shared by Lippmann and Dewey: A public without education will fail to be politically effective. And it is borderline impossible because the centralized organization of political education shuts down democracy and education as soon as it imposes learning outcomes on a public which is described as sovereign but treated as an object of intervention (as one can also see in discourses on "social impact," Venzke, 2024; but see also Nøhr & Jensen, 2024). This is not a paradox to be solved here. It can serve, however, as another crystallization point for the contentious relationship between knowledge and democracy. For the purpose of our discussion, this is to say that the politics of (democratic) education raises the question of how the capacity to partake in the production and circulation of knowledge is mediated and negotiated between the centre of political power and the democratic populace.

4. Knowledge and Democracy in Times of Crisis: Anti-Austerity Protests and Scientists for Future

In this section, we briefly discuss two empirical sites where the relationship between knowledge and democracy has emerged as an issue of contention: anti-austerity protests during the eurozone crisis and particularly the European sovereign debt crisis, and the emergence of groups such as Scientists for Future within discussions on climate change and the Anthropocene. Within the scope of this article, we cannot offer a substantive empirical analysis, but we can map controversies (Whatmore, 2009) where the relationship between knowledge and democracy has played out in interestingly different ways, e.g., by countering (anti-austerity) or mobilising (environment) semantics of crisis in an effort to suspend routinized temporalities of democratic decision-making. Both anti-austerity protests and Scientists for Future thus serve as examples of public negotiation and contestation of how knowledge is produced, how it circulates, and how the production and circulation of knowledge become politically relevant.

4.1. Anti-Austerity Protests: Democracy Against Austerity?

The eurozone crisis (also known as the European debt or euro crisis) emerged in late 2009, two years after the global financial crisis. While observers initially assumed that the financial crisis would mainly affect the US and its subprime mortgage market, the crisis eventually spread to the EU. For the three affected non-euro members (Hungary, Latvia, and Romania), the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) created financial support packages already in late 2008 and early 2009. Such measures were not taken for similarly affected countries on the periphery of the eurozone (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain). In the following years, particularly the Southern European eurozone members experienced a profound

economic—but also political and societal—crisis in the context of extensive austerity policies imposed politically from the centre of the eurozone and justified in terms of economic knowledge. Starting in the mid-2010s, these countries began to recover as austerity measures were gradually eased. Importantly, the crisis led to substantial transformations in the relationship between rulers and ruled, affecting, inter alia, the institutional arrangements of and around the EU, the mobilisation of (economic) expertise, and the role of social movements.

The eurozone crisis shifted decision-making processes within the EU. Interestingly, it did not lead to a shift towards more decisions being made at the supranational level—the European Commission, European Parliament, or European Court of Justice—nor did it bounce back to the national level of member states. Instead, as part of an emerging "new intergovernmentalism" (Bickerton et al., 2015), some of the already existing decision-making bodies were strengthened: The European Council, composed of the heads of state and government, began to meet more frequently; the Eurogroup, an informal forum of euro-area finance ministers, gained centrality; and so did also the European Central Bank (ECB). Additionally, new institutions were established such as the *troika*, which was composed of the European Commission, the ECB, and the IMF. Overall, the crisis saw thus a shift in governance towards an *intergovernmental executive*, also marked by seemingly endless nights of negotiations behind closed doors between austerity-supporting countries like Germany and the Netherlands on one side and Southern European members of the eurozone on the other. During these negotiations, there was a constant feeling that the entire eurozone—or at least the membership of Southern European countries (particularly Greece)—was at stake. It created a sense that urgent action was needed and that there was little room for longer processes of democratic deliberation. The temporality of the financial market was contrasted with that of democracy. Democratic decision-making was considered too slow to cope with ever-accelerating financial markets. In times of crisis, there is just no time for democracy. Moreover, if there are "scientific" laws of the market, there is just no need for democracy. Hence, economic expertise came to play a decisive role.

As is the case with expertise in general, a central dimension of the politics of expertise during the eurozone crisis was to decide who becomes recognized as an expert and what is valued as expertise. Experts and their field of expertise are not pre-determined or "natural" fits. When it comes to the "economy," a variety of groups could be seen as experts. However, during the eurozone crisis, this was narrowed down and boxed predominantly as economic expertise—understood as the expertise of economists (at universities, in think tanks, and in advisory functions at economic organisations). Yet, even there, it became relatively quickly clear that economists do not speak with one voice. Maesse (2018) identifies, for instance, three "camps" within the European austerity discourse: "law-and-order economists," "pragmatists," and "heterodox rebels." The first camp, "law-and-order economists," centred around ideas of neoclassic economics, ordoliberalism, and monetarism. It identified unequal levels of competitiveness as the main cause of the crisis and shared a preference for austerity measures to overcome this. As one of its leading representatives, Sinn (2014, p. 1) stated that the "unresolved problem underlying the financial crisis is the lack of competitiveness of the southern European countries and France." The second, more "pragmatic" camp, favoured a more expansive monetary policy and, at the same time, a consolidation of budgets. This position was common among many IMF and ECB economists, including Mario Draghi. Finally, the "heterodox rebels," represented, for instance, by Yannis Varoufakis, opposed austerity measures and highlighted instead the need to foster GDP growth and focus on employment (Maesse, 2018).

This latter position also informed many anti-austerity protests across (Southern) Europe. A central part of these protests was to shift the discussion from the "necessities" of the market to the consequences of austerity measures "on the ground." This included attempts to reframe anti-austerity protests as "pro-democracy protests" (Flesher Fominaya, 2017). We can therefore read the struggle for and against austerity as an interesting example of how the status of authoritative knowledge claims stands at the centre of political contention.

4.2. Scientists for Future: Knowledge Against Climate Change

Scientists for Future (also known as Scientists4Future or S4F) was initiated by Gregor Hagedorn as a "decentralized, self-organizing grassroot movement" (Scientists for Future, 2019) at the beginning of 2019 through various statements—an initial statement was signed by more than 26,000 scientists (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019)—and letters published in academic journals (Hagedorn, Kalmus, et al., 2019). Moreover, after the summer of the same year, the group adopted a Charter (Scientists for Future, 2019). Scientists for Future's first regional focus was in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, and the idea was to support the "young protestors" (Hagedorn, Kalmus, et al., 2019) of Fridays for Future.

One of the problems for Fridays for Future and similar groups was that they relied on scientific knowledge about climate change while lacking scientific authority to make these claims and related demands. As a protest group, it was essential to eliminate any doubt about the underlying foundations of their demands and thereby counter any form of "green ambivalence" (Rödder & Pavenstädt, 2023; Svensson & Wahlström, 2023), in particular when it comes to the anthropogenetic nature of climate change. This aligned with an imaginary of science as producing irrefutable facts. Scientists for Future seeks to meet the demand to deliver such facts and labels itself as "people who are familiar with scientific work and deeply concerned about the current developments" (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, p. 81). In this regard, Scientists for Future sees itself as standing above institutions, parties, and disciplines: as a "non-institutional, non-partisan, interdisciplinary association of scientists committed to a sustainable future" (Scientists for Future, 2019).

But what is, according to Scientists for Future, precisely the relationship between knowledge and democracy? What is the role of scientists here? Scientists for Future mobilises in this regard semantics of crisis alerting to the urgency to act: "Time is of the essence," we can read, or, "action must be taken now" (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, pp. 79–80). While the group acknowledges that it is "important to take time to understand the consequences of political decisions" (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, p. 84), the urgency of the climate crisis demands immediate action. The following metaphor is illustrative in this regard:

> Experts consulted about a transportation issue may conclude that it would be best to build a bridge of a specified quality at a certain place. The political process may come to a wide variety of conclusions: build no bridge at all, build it elsewhere, or build a cheaper bridge with higher maintenance costs and shorter lifespan. Such decisions justify a critical expert publication, but little more. However, when it is decided to build a bridge that is liable to break in unpredictable ways…a different role for scientists and scholars is called for. (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, p. 84)

Scientists for Future sees its role mainly in educating the public about the consequences of climate change, something which is also shared by Fridays for Future (Rödder & Pavenstädt, 2023): "Scientists and scholars play

a critical role in knowledge production and application and are called upon to actively feed their knowledge into the public sphere of opinion forming" (Hagedorn, Loew, et al., 2019, p. 84). Still, science and the public are attributed to different spheres. Science informs the public, and the public pressures then politics. In all these operations, communication is perceived as going in one direction: from sender to receiver.

Notably, the way in which democracy becomes problematic operates quite differently here, when compared to the austerity context, as social movements mobilize science—represented by Scientists for Future—in order to counter what they take to be the problematic inertia of democratic politics. It is precisely these differences in how the politics of knowledge plays out that we believe warrant further attention, and it is precisely because the Lippmann–Dewey debate allows us to ask open-ended questions as to what happens with academic knowledge once it enters the fray of public controversy that it makes for a productive analytical lens. Hence, while a post-truth framing would tend to frontload our discussion with preconceptions as to how the politics of knowledge ought to play out, our re-reading of the Lippmann–Dewey debate does not invite pre-constituted answers but helps us to identify different dynamics in how the relationships between rulers and ruled, knowledge and democracy, or politics and truth are articulated.

5. Conclusion

In this article we have argued that the post-truth framing, while intuitively plausible in the face of blatant public misinformation, is ill-equipped to understand the contemporary crisis of democracy. It is ill-equipped to understand the contemporary crisis of democracy because it rests on static and idealizing notions of science, knowledge, and the public. These idealizing notions may serve as a striking contrast to the state of actually existing democracy. By virtue of this contrast, however, they set themselves up for little more than empirical frustration. On this view, the public is not what it used to be, science does not receive the respect it is owed, and the ever-accelerating spread of misinformation cannot but make it worse. As a political intervention, the post-truth framing made sense at a time when the crisis of democracy seemed new and surprising, disrupting liberal-democratic common sense but also read, with liberal hope, as a momentary disruption.

Today, it has become increasingly implausible to read it as a momentary disruption. This invites us to ask difficult questions about the relationship between knowledge and democracy, the production and circulation of knowledge, and how they shape public communication. Revisiting the Lippmann–Dewey debate, we have suggested, provides us with a productive alternative to the post-truth framing because it allows us to zoom in on how knowledge, truth, and politics are practically negotiated. On this view, we need not claim in advance that science does have or ought to have a particular status in relation to politics, or that the common citizenry is or is not epistemically up to speed with the requirements of modern democracy. We can simply ask how the relationship between rulers and ruled is constituted in communicative situations. This is to say that the Lippmann–Dewey debate, with the benefit of a century's hindsight, does not provide us with prefabricated answers to the contemporary crisis of democracy. It does, however, provide us with an interesting set of questions. It does so, in particular, if we read it as a debate and not as a stylized confrontation where the winner is always already known in advance. The point is not to celebrate Dewey as a champion of democracy at the expense of Lippmann's allegedly cynical and technocratic tendencies. Nor is it to dismiss Dewey's emphasis on the possibility of public self-transformation in the light of Lippmann's sober realism. On the contrary, it is precisely because the Lippmann–Dewey debate as debate predates the now firmly institutionalized hard and

fast line between normative and empirical approaches to the study of democracy that it provides us with the tools to interrogate just how the production and circulation of knowledge shapes the public.

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ARTICLE

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Undermining Liberal Democracy? Cross-Level Opposition in Madrid Regional President's Speeches During the Pandemic Crisis

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Abstract

This article offers a theoretical contribution to the study of political opposition during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. In liberal democracies, the crisis often amplified executive dominance, thereby weakening the institutional opposition's key role in providing scrutiny on government policies. While governmental emergency powers during the pandemic have been previously critically assessed, the strategic deployment of contestation by opposition actors has received less attention. Given the foundational role of "opposition" in liberal democratic theory, this oversight is notable. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the importance of opposition as a pillar of democratic resilience. In the context of global democratic backsliding, the fundamentals of liberal democracy are at stake. This article examines a case from Spain, where Madrid's regional government positioned itself in direct opposition to the central government. Our conceptual analysis shows that parliamentary questions in the Madrid parliament were used by the incumbent, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, as a platform for what we call "cross-level opposition." The research question is: How did this regional leader discursively construct political opposition by challenging the central government during the pandemic, and what does that mean for liberal democracy? Our findings reveal two key dynamics: the use of conceptual nodal points in Ayuso's rhetoric and the irregular nature of her parliamentary questions, without the prime minister facing her in the same parliamentary space. We argue that such forms of cross-level opposition, while seemingly consistent with democratic contestation, can ultimately erode the norms and institutional integrity that underpin liberal democracy.

Keywords

crisis; liberal democracy; multi-level polity; opposition; parliamentary questions; Spain

1. Introduction

Recent and most noteworthy academic publications on liberal democracy have focused on the role of opposition (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Przeworski, 2019). Competing political forces scrutinising the executive and presenting alternatives to the government agenda are, in fact, integral to the proper functioning of liberal democracies (Dahl, 1965). The Covid-19 pandemic crisis showed that the parliamentary opposition's key function of providing a counterbalance to the executive can be severely undermined due to emergency measures (e.g., Merkel, 2020). We aim to demonstrate that crises may produce irregular practices from the political opposition, and thus, potentially contribute to undermining democratic institution's liberal functions.

This article's main argument is that liberal democracy itself is at stake when it involves irregular political opposition, because the opponent's role is to propose alternatives while respecting the "rules of the game" in its language and practices. We aim to justify this claim by illustrating that "opposition" should be, normatively speaking, understood as a dynamic, political concept. We further develop Friedrich's (1966) "alternative model of dynamic opposition" in federal and quasi-federal democracies, defining opposition as inherently political, with both personal and operational dimensions simultaneously at play. In this sense, the political character of opposition is to be found in the opportunities of contestation created and/or used by political actors in changing circumstances, which should be considered when it comes to institutionalised opposition.

Our case example comes from the multi-level system of Spain, a Western liberal democracy that in recent decades has experienced various consecutive and interconnected political crises, which have shaped the country's political institutions and deepened bipartisan ideological divisions. The pandemic was not the first crisis in modern Spanish democratic politics. Arguably, the eurozone crisis, which caused a financial meltdown in 2011, and the Catalan independence referendum, which led to political upheaval in 2017, were more decisive ruptures. They introduced radical parties both on the left and the right, first in local and regional parliaments and then at the national political level, impacting mainstream parties' political agenda and increasing polarisation (Garmendia Madariaga & Riera, 2023). The pandemic presented an opportune moment for opposition actors in the multi-level system to politicise public discourse (Haapala, 2024). Additionally, Spanish post-pandemic politics saw the already existing polarisation and ideological partisan divisions grow, making it extremely difficult to form essential political alliances and policy commitments in the multi-level polity.

In this context, we focus our examination on the Madrid regional parliament, which saw the electoral victory of its incumbent regional president in May 2021. After our initial analysis of national press reports and relevant statistical data on pandemic politics in Spain, we observed that it was especially the president of the Autonomous Community (AC) of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso from the centre right-wing People's Party (PP), who was able to galvanise discontent against the central government in the capital. Participation in the regional elections was exceptional, with a 22-point increase on the previous elections in 2019, and Ayuso was able to secure a comfortable parliamentary majority with the support of the radical right-wing Vox party.

As our analysis will illustrate, Ayuso successfully used an opportunity to advance her political agenda on the national stage by adopting "cross-level opposition" in the Madrid regional parliament against the national government. We demonstrate that her replies to parliamentary questions were essentially directed at

challenging the central government in ideological terms, although she is not the leader of her party at national level. In practice, she "made opposition" (Friedrich, 1966) as incumbent regional leader against the national-level leader, thus breaking with the established parliamentary procedure of facing one's opponent in the same space. Additionally, rather than engaging in the typical regional-versus-central government conflict over jurisdictional or cultural claims, this politician shaped the national debate on broader policy issues by tying them to core concepts of liberal democracy, thus engaging in the ideological debate already present in the polarised pandemic context. Given her media prominence, as we will also illustrate, we find it relevant to focus on this actor as a case study of government–opposition dynamics transcending the classical framework.

We examine this case of "cross-level opposition" using a mixed-method approach to analyse parliamentary speeches, with the aim of revealing the conceptual contestation taking place between the two parliamentary levels. We ask: How did this regional political leader discursively construct political opposition by challenging the central government during the pandemic crisis, and what does that mean for liberal democracy? The starting point of our investigation is to identify the conceptual connections between the regional debates in Madrid and the national parliamentary debates over the handling of the pandemic. By adopting a conceptual approach, we identify key terms in political debates—such as "democracy" and "freedom"—and treat them as analytical nodal points (Wiesner et al., 2017) to guide our textual interpretation of the political discourse. This study also offers a comparative reflection on other parliamentary democracies with similar multi-level political structures, thereby contributing to the scholarship on political governance.

The structure of the article is the following: First, we discuss the theoretical framework of studying liberal democracy and political opposition in a crisis context; then, we introduce the Spanish case study, explaining both institutional and political features relevant to the case selection and providing a contextual background for our analysis. Next, we discuss the research design as well as the mixed methods applied to analyse parliamentary sources. The following section presents our analysis of the Madrid regional leader's parliamentary speeches. Finally, we discuss the findings of the analysis and conclude with our theoretical contribution to studying the role of opposition in liberal democracies.

2. Theoretical Framework: Liberal Democracy, "Dynamic" Opposition, and Irregular Practices During the Crisis

In political science, governments have traditionally been the focus of research on liberal democracy, while opposition has been understood as an implicit part of democratic politics, and thus, largely undertheorised in the literature (Helms, 2008). Opposition is implicitly a core element of liberal democracy, but it is notoriously difficult to define (Dahl, 1966, p. xviii). Perhaps due to this definitional ambiguity, "opposition" is often rather narrowly employed in political debates, both institutionally and conceptually. Institutionally, it commonly refers to a political group that challenges the government's agenda and seeks to win the support of constituents to become the new incumbent. Thus, it is a group that competes for the same seats in a particular political arena. Conceptually, "government" and "opposition" are inherently dichotomous. The notion of political opposition has been described as "parasitic" on concepts of government, rule, and authority, insofar as opposition cannot exist independently—it must address a governing body and articulate a viable alternative to it (Blondel, 1997). However, in practice, the distinction between being "in opposition" and "in government" is not always clear-cut. Rather, it can be context-dependent, with actors assuming opposition roles in practice, even while formally

belonging to the government side. In fact, this reflects the political nature of opposition. Rather than being constantly the same, it is reshaped through political practice.

The liberal argument about the justification for democratic rule emphasises the relationship between the government and opposition, as well as their institutional bases guaranteed by the separation of powers, with checks and balances. The increase of the functions of modern parliaments, from early liberal legislatures to modern representative chambers, is largely due to the growth of executive power and its oversight and control. In today's parliamentary democracies, it is not the parliament, but rather the opposition, that oversees the government (Duverger, 1955; Von Beyme, 1985). More recent contributions in comparative political science have offered new research agendas for understanding democratic opposition in times of crisis. They have, for example, examined the opportunities for parliamentary oppositions to propose alternatives to government policies and control governments (Garritzmann, 2017) or to express their contrasting opinions in relation to government policy during the pandemic crisis (Laflamme et al., 2023; Louwerse et al., 2021).

What remains yet to be studied are the irregularities of political opposition in liberal democracies during exceptional times. Although "political opposition" as a concept seems very intuitive, commonly assigned to the party that poses a serious alternative to the government, it is not, however, accurate enough for our analysis. Using the multi-level case study of Spain, we aim to show from a conceptual perspective that the traditional, narrow understanding of opposition can be insufficient to capture the complexities of government–opposition dynamics in a complicated political context such as a global pandemic.

It is crucial to emphasise that our case example involves the contestation of one incumbent leader by another one in their respective governing positions, not a confrontation between party-political leaders, which is a typical aspect of liberal democratic politics. "Oppositionness" may vary for non-incumbent political groups depending on their policy–votes–seats strategy balance (Müller & Strøm, 1999). For instance, Hix and Noury (2016) have shown that in the (very common) context of minority governments, in particular, votes in parliament are more conditioned by parties' ideological closeness than by their institutional positions, i.e., "government" versus "opposition." This leads us to believe that being "in-government" and "in-opposition" are shifting concepts, rather than dichotomous entities (cf. Blondel & Cotta, 1996).

In a democratic context, the thing we generally call "opposition" has the responsibility of contesting, controlling, and proposing an alternative to government. Consequently, many scholars argue that one of the paramount roles of parliaments in such systems is to form, sustain, and dissolve governments (e.g., Bergman et al., 2021; Laver & Schofield, 1992). Laver (2006, p. 122) emphasises that these functions are among the most significant responsibilities of parliaments. Hence, the focus tends to remain on the "winning" or "losing" of institutional power. The spotlight, therefore, is on the parties and their national leaders that propose alternatives to the government. However, especially in the context of federal democracies, Friedrich (1966) argues that the dynamic conceptualisation of "making opposition" should be applied, instead of the more stagnant version of "being in opposition." In other words, it is not enough to study institutionalised opposition from the perspective of party-political divisions and based on electoral results, but to also include the active articulations of individual politicians to "making opposition."

According to this alternative model, "opposition" is defined as "a group of persons" organised in an institutionalised political setting "opposing the activities and policies of the government in power and the

complex of activities in which such persons might engage (including their thoughts and ideology)," *and* as having "both a personal and an operational dimension" (Friedrich, 1966, p. 286). In our analysis, we employ this theoretical assumption, as we expect that the political character of opposition is to be found in the opportunities of contestation created and/or used by political actors. In other words, in our view, the contingency of politics should be also considered in the case of institutionalised opposition, of which the Westminster parliamentary style of "loyal" opposition is commonly considered the ideal example.

Positioning oneself as an alternative to the government is not confined to parliamentary leaders formally opposing the government within legislative settings, nor are the resources they draw upon limited to those provided by the parliamentary institutional framework. The multi-level structure of party organisation allows national leaders to manage regional sub-units within a principal–agent framework, where the national party branch acts as the principal and the regional branch serves as the agent (Van Houten, 2009). When actors in this top-down relationship hold institutional power while formally being in opposition, they may have strong incentives to present their own governments as viable alternatives to the central government. In other words, regional governments can serve as tools for opposition parties in the national arena. This reflects the increasing development of multi-level government structures contributing to the blurring of the classical Westphalian state model (Alcantara et al., 2016), which underpinned the architecture of early liberal democracy. Given that multi-level governance is ubiquitous, there is room for "multi-level opposition" in most contemporary European political systems.

More relevant for our case study, however, is when regional leaders in government "go national" by challenging policy in areas where responsibilities are shared between national and regional authorities. This type of crisis setting can produce tensions that in the framework of principal–agent theory can be called "loss of control" in a context where the agent probably has more resources given its institutional position. In this regard, scholars already have highlighted the difficulties some parties have in maintaining internal cohesion and discipline in their regional branches (Detterbeck & Hepburn, 2010). Hence, regional government leaders questioning the central government in their speeches, and vice versa, places the regional government in a privileged position in the government–opposition confrontation not only in its own territorial delimitation but also statewide.

Thus, this article puts forward a more "dynamic," or politically aware, concept of opposition, by arguing that future studies in political science on multi-level governance should not become "trapped" in the framework of confrontation between political groups pursuing the same seat in the same political arena. As we seek to show, "opposition" itself is a controversial concept in actual political practice. In our case study analysis below, we illustrate an irregular practice of government–opposition relations relating to two incumbent government leaders, in which only one actor is the "active party" producing the dichotomy for their own political purposes. This "cross-level opposition" challenges the liberal understanding of a government–opposition setting of two party leaders facing each other in the same parliamentary space.

3. Spain as a Case Study

Spain is a case study that, for institutional and political reasons, is useful for analysing multi-level political dynamics. Institutionally, the Spanish political system provides a high degree of regional autonomy. Although it can be said that decentralisation has historically been more an exception than a tradition (Aja, 1999, 2014), the continuity from the late 1970s to date allows us to speak of a consolidated AC structure. Although not

federal states *stricto sensu*, ACs have greater responsibilities than many regions in formal federal systems (Colino, 2020). Indeed, Spain shows a high level of political decentralisation according to several indices, such as the EU's Decentralisation Index of the European Committee of the Regions and the OECD's Index on Regional Government Finance and Investment. This makes many non-Spanish authors perceive Spain to be a federal state (Villadangos, 2013). Therefore, it can be stated that this case's political relevance is quite remarkable and even outstanding at a comparative level. Furthermore, our case exemplifies a common characteristic of contemporary democracies: "Even when legislatures are important, the legislative agenda in most parliamentary democracies is very much in the hands of the government" (Laver & Shepsle, 1996, p. 4; see also Rasch & Tsebelis, 2011). This is reinforced by positional and partisan advantages of governing parties and institutional powers granted to the cabinet, including agenda-setting and veto powers (Ajenjo & Molina, 2013). Spanish governments have consistently leveraged these advantages to maintain effective governance, even in minority contexts (Field, 2016). In general terms, the "type of federal system that has evolved in Spain has shown a relatively strong capacity for multilevel decision-making but has also suffered from its own problems such as a lack of coordination and joint decision capacity" (Colino, 2020, p. 78). All the regions are parliamentary regimes that mirror, to some extent, the central polity. Thus, both the national and regional governments dominate the agenda-setting process in their own territorial domains, shaping the party-political congruence—or incongruence—in the intergovernmental processes (Aja & Colino, 2014, p. 3).

The country's government–opposition dynamics have undergone significant changes in the past decade, marked by a decline in bipartisan political compromises and increasing ideological polarisation among major parties, from both the left and the right, and their voters. Before the 2008 financial crisis, government–opposition dynamics leaned toward consensus on key policy issues (cf. Mújica & Sánchez-Cuenca, 2006). However, the crisis heightened the divide between the two major statewide parties (Palau et al., 2017), the right-wing PP and the left-wing Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). This trend was exacerbated by the rise of anti-establishment parties in 2015 (the radical left-wing Podemos) and 2019 (the radical right-wing Vox), which have further intensified political polarisation and shaped public debates and the national political agenda. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, this polarisation had already deepened with the rise to power of Pedro Sánchez, the leader of PSOE, in 2018. As prime minister of a coalition minority government, Sánchez relied on non-statewide parties to pass legislation, exchanging support for "pay-offs" related to regional issues. While this practice is not new (Field, 2016), tensions grew due to the government's collaboration with parties originating from the Catalan secessionist movement and the electoral gains of the Basque pro-independence left, historically linked to ETA terrorism. These factors led right-wing parties to impose vetoes on significant parliamentary actors, fostering territorial polarisation, and influencing public opinion among their voters (Rodón, 2022). The entry of Vox drove right-wing discourse toward centrifugal competition, further radicalising the political landscape (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020).

In general, multi-level politics in Spain in recent decades have evolved towards competition and radicalisation rather than cooperation. Whenever shared competencies in important matters, such as taxation, are debated, they provide a space for regional actors to fully enter into national policy debates. In such cases, regional governments provide a viable avenue for political opposition. Both at the national and regional level, governments hold the primary institutional mechanisms for setting agendas, giving them a prominent role. Specifically, during the Covid-19 pandemic, governments wielded: (a) extensive emergency powers that, given the urgent circumstances, were initially difficult to criticise; and (b) access to the most

recent and reliable information creating advantage over the opposition to obtaining data. Consequently, at the peak of the pandemic, it was difficult to express dissent in ways other than through anti-official or conspiratorial narratives.

To manage the pandemic, the central government's strategy was to call a "state of alarm" based on the Royal Decree 463/2020, leading to legal and political controversy. Firstly, the legality of the Decree was questioned based on interpretations that saw lockdown measures violating fundamental rights of citizens not permitted by Spanish law in the case of a state of alarm. However, other voices, including the Spanish Ombudsman, argued that rights were merely being limited (Cebada Romero & Domínguez Redondo, 2021). Secondly, the "single command" of the Decree was controversial in the government–opposition setting, as it centralised the pandemic response, directly affecting the use of regional governments' powers. Even though an attempt was made to establish a system of shared government, the management of the pandemic in Spain largely obeyed the logic of decentralisation. This gave rise to public conflicts in the media between regional governments—as well as between some autonomous regions—and central government. The highly partisan and polarised environment induced new forms of politicising strategies employed in Spanish opposition politics (see Haapala, 2024).

Despite strong opposition at the national level, the pandemic also created an opportunity for consensus and "responsible opposition" in addressing urgent healthcare challenges. This precisely reflects what Coller (2024) highlights about government–opposition dynamics in Spain. Namely, while national political debates are often dominated by the exaggerated portrayal of stark differences between parties, these same parties often reach agreements and engage in joint actions at the parliamentary level that receive far less public attention. The Spanish case shows that, while opposition at the same political level (e.g., the national level) is constrained by the material need to support the government in the management of the health crisis, another opposition can "break through." This corresponds to Friedrich's (1966) "alternative model" of "dynamic" opposition in federal and quasi-federal democracies. It defines dynamic opposition as inherently political having both personal and operational dimensions at play to accommodate both diversity and unity in the polity (Friedrich, 1966, p. 286). Since the federal system is prone to this dynamic practice of opposition, situations may arise when "temporary" opposition is carried out by individual politicians who self-represent "an integral part of the general constituency and therefore expect to become the government" by converting "their minority following into a majority" (Friedrich, 1966, p. 289). This kind of opposition also propounds "values, interests and beliefs" (Friedrich, 1966, p. 289) that have a good chance of being embraced by the majority of the population. This is precisely the political point of its "dynamic" character: "In opposing it strives to change the political situation so as to enable it to govern rather than oppose" (Friedrich, 1966, p. 289).

In Spain, regional governments operating under the principle of "shared responsibility" during the pandemic had both the capacity and opportunity to assert their own management strategies, allowing regional leaders to assert significant influence in national debates, i.e., to "break through" as opposition, in moments of heightened political and social tensions. These strategies were subject to overarching mandates set by the central government, which were often flexible and, in some cases, even indefinite, affording regional governments to propose alternatives that exposed perceived flaws in the central government's response. In Madrid's regional government, this idea of "shared responsibility," however, soon evolved into conceptual contestation. This was due to the regional leader's framing of the contestation in terms of liberal democratic

principles explicitly directed against those of the prime minister. The prominence of this debate between levels of government was evident in the fact that, in 2021, Ayuso was the second most visible political figure on national television—trailing only the prime minister, Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), and surpassing the national opposition leader (of her own party), Pablo Casado (PP), in media presence (see Figure 1).

This is but one indicator of the striking way in which Ayuso jumped to the forefront of national public debate. Additionally, her popularity was reflected in a significant increase in votes in the 2021 regional elections, in which, notably, the Covid-19 pandemic had no significant impact on voting preferences (Coulbois, 2023). The Madrid case is unusual, as it was only one of two ACs (with Andalusia) in which incumbents were able to improve their electoral results. Further, Madrid was the only region where a considerable increase in electoral participation was observed during the pandemic.

Nationally, the central government's media presence overshadowed that of the parliamentary opposition, prompting opposition parties to advance their agendas through alternative avenues, particularly regional and municipal governments. The main parliamentary opposition party in the national parliament, PP, began to act as an opposition force in the regional and local governments that it controlled, effectively assuming the role of opposition while utilising government tools. It should be noted that these new avenues of political opposition were not fully controlled by the parties' central offices, particularly in the case of PP. Echoes of this lack of party control were evident in 2022, when President Ayuso had a public confrontation with the national leader of her own party (see Jones, 2022), Pablo Casado, forcing his resignation.

At the discursive level, the opposition—both national and regional—accused Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) of undermining "freedom," with some claiming that Spain was drifting towards a dictatorship. Right-wing parties portrayed Sánchez as a leader aligned with far-left communists, separatists, and former terrorists, willing to restrict civil liberties. As such, there is nothing new in efforts to criticise the central

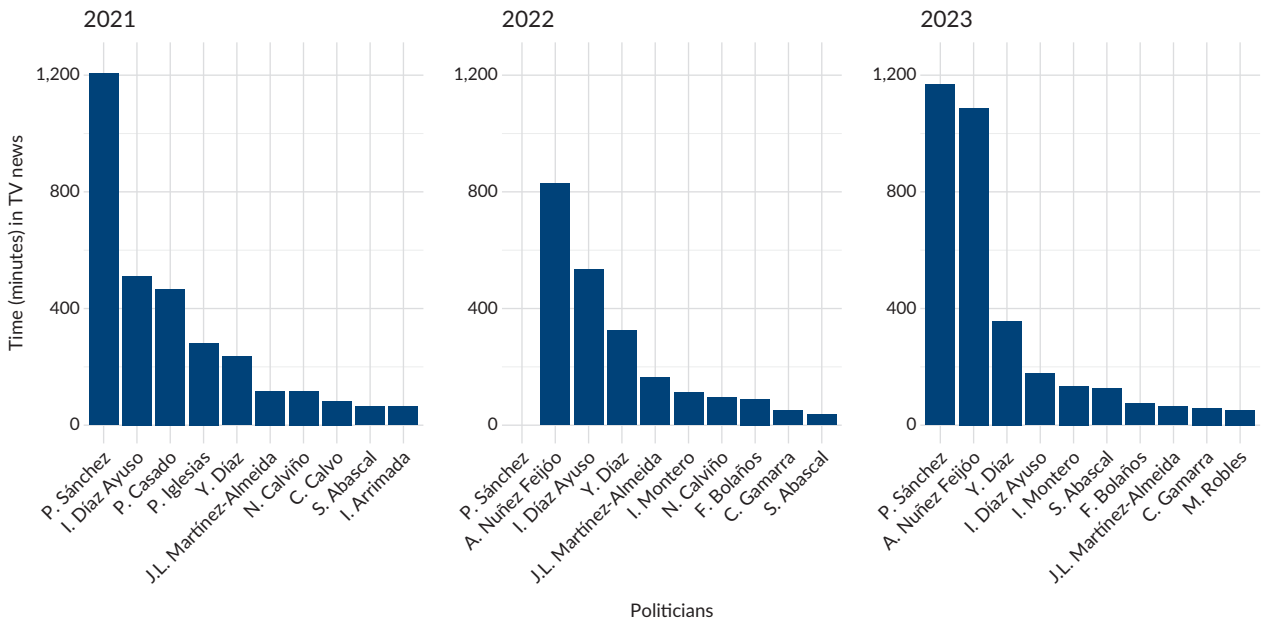

Figure 1. Total minutes of appearance of Spanish politicians on television news. Source: Gabinete de Estudios de la Comunicación Audiovisual (2021, 2022, 2023).

government by the main statewide opposition party leaders. However, the political strategy of the regional president in Madrid is distinctive for two reasons. First, it does not rely on an oppositional approach based on a national or cultural conflict, as seen in Catalonia, the Basque Country, or even in Scotland. Second, criticism of the government was not framed as a conflict over the division of policy competencies between regional and national authorities, as often occurs in multi-level systems with shared policy fields. Instead, Ayuso's discourse and media presence were firmly rooted in *ideological* national political debates, framing the policy differences with the central government as issues related to stark differences in values and beliefs over liberal democracy: "socialism or freedom," "communism or freedom." The central government's pandemic management gave this incumbent leader the opportunity to use the situation for her own political benefit. As our analysis below shows, Ayuso used parliamentary question times in the Madrid regional parliament to challenge the prime minister. Against one of the hallmark features of liberal parliamentarism, Ayuso did not face her political opponent *in the same parliamentary space*, which can be described as an irregular opposition practice.

In sum, the national government's management of the pandemic was followed by a rise in diverse responses from regional governments. The most striking transformation at the discursive level was put forward by Ayuso, who used the opportunity to elevate herself to the national political arena as an opponent of the prime minister. For that, she used rhetorical tools related to key concepts of liberal democracy and offered an alternative understanding of democracy, as opposed to the "restrictions" and "top-down decision-making" of the central government. We contend that, in times of crisis, regional governments may amplify the prominence of regional leaders within national political debates and when the parliamentary opposition is overshadowed at its own political level, what we refer to as "cross-level opposition" emerges as a strategic opportunity.

4. Research Design, Method, and Sources

We now turn to the analysis of key concepts used by President Ayuso to challenge Prime Minister Sánchez through irregular parliamentary opposition and aim to shed light on the discursive strategy of "cross-level opposition" in the pandemic crisis context. We employ a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative textual analysis, combining in-depth contextual examination of conceptual contestation with large-scale text analysis. The former examines the relationships between conceptual nodes, while the latter aims to confirm that these relationships consistently emerge when a specific group of nodes appears in parliamentary debates. The quantitative textual analysis is applied, first, in the preliminary interpretative stage to verify our hypothesis on the salience of Ayuso in national media, and later, to identify nodes and to analyse their relationships through conceptual network analysis. The qualitative textual analysis is based on the interpretation of political activity as contestations over meanings and concepts (Wiesner et al., 2017). Concepts, such as democracy or freedom, are matters of struggle in political debates, i.e., the "nodal points" of political debates, but their use should be carefully interpreted. It is only through the qualitative interpretation of sources in their proper context that an informed analysis of these concepts is possible. We follow the idea of parliamentary-style debate being the ideal-typical form of political debate as it considers all topics raised on the parliamentary agenda as explicitly controversial (Wiesner et al., 2017, p. 29).

In both cases of textual analysis, we use parliamentary speeches as primary sources. Our full research corpus includes 205 plenary debates both from the Spanish parliament's lower chamber, the Congress (*Congreso de*

los diputados), and the Madrid regional parliament (*Asamblea de Madrid*). The dataset includes a total of 4,449 parliamentary speeches from those debates, covering the period from March 2020 to September 2024. As said, this article focuses solely on the parliamentary speeches of one single political actor: Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP). In our preliminary stage of analysis (see Section 3), we were able to verify Ayuso's rise to prominence in national media during the pandemic (Figure 1). Given her prominent role within PP, the statewide political party, and her emergence during the pandemic as a leader beyond the borders of the territory she governed, we prioritise our analytical focus on her 1,151 speeches across 118 plenary debates in the Madrid regional parliament, limited to the leader's replies to parliamentary questions, as we are interested in *how* the shaping of the discourse from "shared responsibility" to "cross-level opposition" was done during the pandemic, corresponding to "dynamic" opposition. Our main research question is: How did this regional leader discursively construct political opposition by challenging the central government leader during the pandemic crisis, and what does that mean for liberal democracy? Our qualitative analysis further relies on the following sub-questions: To what extent and in what ways is (liberal) democracy explicitly used and addressed as a contested concept in the debates? How is it raised? In what context? What are the strategic ideas behind it?

The analytical process involves three steps. First, we begin by identifying the core conceptual "nodes" of the cross-level oppositional discursive strategy from the entire research corpus of 205 plenary debates. Based on the contextual analysis presented in Section 3, highlighting the ideological framing of Ayuso's use of liberal democratic principles in her discursive strategy against the central government, we selected and quantitatively analysed the frequency of seven key concepts (i.e., communism, democracy, dictatorship, freedom, Madrid, Sánchez, Spain). This initial count aims to highlight the sustained relevance of key concepts over time with a particular focus on the Covid-19 period.

Second, we conduct a qualitative textual analysis with examples in which the discursive elements, as outlined in our theoretical framework and identified during the initial extensive reading of the speeches, are illustrated. This approach allows us to explore how the key nodal points are articulated and endowed with meaning, providing a qualitative understanding of their significance. Our qualitative textual analysis draws on 118 plenary debates in the regional parliament of Madrid, further narrowed down from the full research corpus and selected based on two criteria: (a) parliamentary questions addressed to Madrid's regional president and (b) references to multi-level politics. We chose to examine the parliamentary questions that explicitly mention the Spanish government, reflecting thematic and institutional conflicts between the two levels. The selection is justified by, first, thematic and conflictual connections between the two assemblies (bearing in mind that the national government used its constitutional authority to declare a state of emergency and the ACs have the competence to decide on health policy and budget), and second, the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic involved both the national and regional governments in Spain. Furthermore, parliamentary questions serve as key indicators of political activity, revealing both the issues introduced into the political agenda and the positions adopted by questioners and respondents (Martin, 2012). Prior research has viewed them as tools for political competition (Borghetto & Russo, 2018; Budge & Farlie, 1983), information-seeking, and/or to pressure someone to take a position on a particular issue. Although they provide very interesting information, institutional and conventional constraints (e.g., time-use, length, appropriateness, or formality) mean that they are incapable of explaining the political debate as a whole. The following quantitative analysis does, however, allow us to obtain a snapshot of the relevant issues during specific time periods, and thus complements our qualitative analysis.

Third, we create a comprehensive overview of the selected nodal points through a conceptual network analysis, drawing again from the full corpus. We segment all (national and Madrid regional) parliamentary speeches into paragraphs, resulting in a dataset of 3,453 text fragments, with an average length of 135.52 words per fragment. To make this step, we first translated the words using the "Translator" module from googletrans, a widely used Python library for automated translation. We then removed common stop-words—a standard practice in text analysis—to focus on meaningful terms. Next, we vectorised the texts to construct a document–term matrix, where each row corresponds to an individual parliamentary speech fragment and each column represents a unique word from the vocabulary. Each cell in the matrix contains the count of a specific word within a given speech fragment. By transposing this matrix, each column becomes a vector representing the distribution of a word across all speeches. We then compute cosine similarity between word vectors using scikit-learn's built-in function (Pedregosa et al., 2011), a widely used method for measuring word-relatedness. Rooted in the work of Salton and McGill (1983), vector space models have proven effective in optimising information retrieval tasks (De Vos et al., 2022). Cosine similarity quantifies the angle between two vectors in a multidimensional space, yielding a value between 0 and 1, where higher scores indicate a stronger semantic relationship between words. These scores allow us to identify words that frequently appear in similar contexts, helping to uncover underlying themes and connections in parliamentary discourse. Based on the similarity scores, we identify the words most closely associated with specific nodal points. These associated words are selected by sorting and filtering vocabulary according to their similarity values, retaining only those that exceed a predefined threshold or belong to the top-ranked results. To refine this selection, we first established a set of predefined keywords that served as conceptual anchors identifying semantically related words in the corpus. These anchors are the main nodes that we identify in Ayuso's cross-level opposition strategy (as described in Section 5, they are: Madrid, freedom, Sánchez, and democracy). Second, we draw up a network of related words which, in turn, constitutes a network of signification of these concepts. This final step helps us to quantitatively verify the results of the previous qualitative step of our analysis.

5. Analysis of "Cross-Level Opposition" in Madrid Parliamentary Debates

Freedom, one of the key concepts of liberal democracy, was prominently used in Ayuso's speeches. The novel aspect of it was that she placed the concept within specific geographical coordinates: Madrid. She thus linked "Madrid" with elements related to "freedom." She also argued that, under the leading centre left-wing party (PSOE) government, Spain was on its way to becoming an authoritarian state, and claimed that Madrid was the political, social, and cultural centre of freedom. During the most striking moments of this strategy, which invoked broader concepts of general policy—transcending the geographical boundaries of its governmental political scope—explicit references to Spain, along with principles such as "democracy" and "freedom," as well as terms like "dictatorship," "communism," and "Sánchez," became significantly more prominent (see Figure 2).

To conduct the search of terms, we used the root of the words shown in Figure 2, capturing their derivatives (e.g., "Spain" also included "Spaniard") and synonyms. Among all these nouns, the most frequently mentioned is Madrid, which is expected, as it is natural for a regional president to speak about their own region. "Spain" and "Sánchez" also appear frequently, highlighting Ayuso's recurrent references to the national government. We observe a notable increase in the use of the three concepts leading up to 2021 that coincides with Ayuso's heightened prominence in public discourse (see Figure 1). This period also aligns with the implementation of the central government's co-governance, the so-called "shared responsibility," that delegated significant

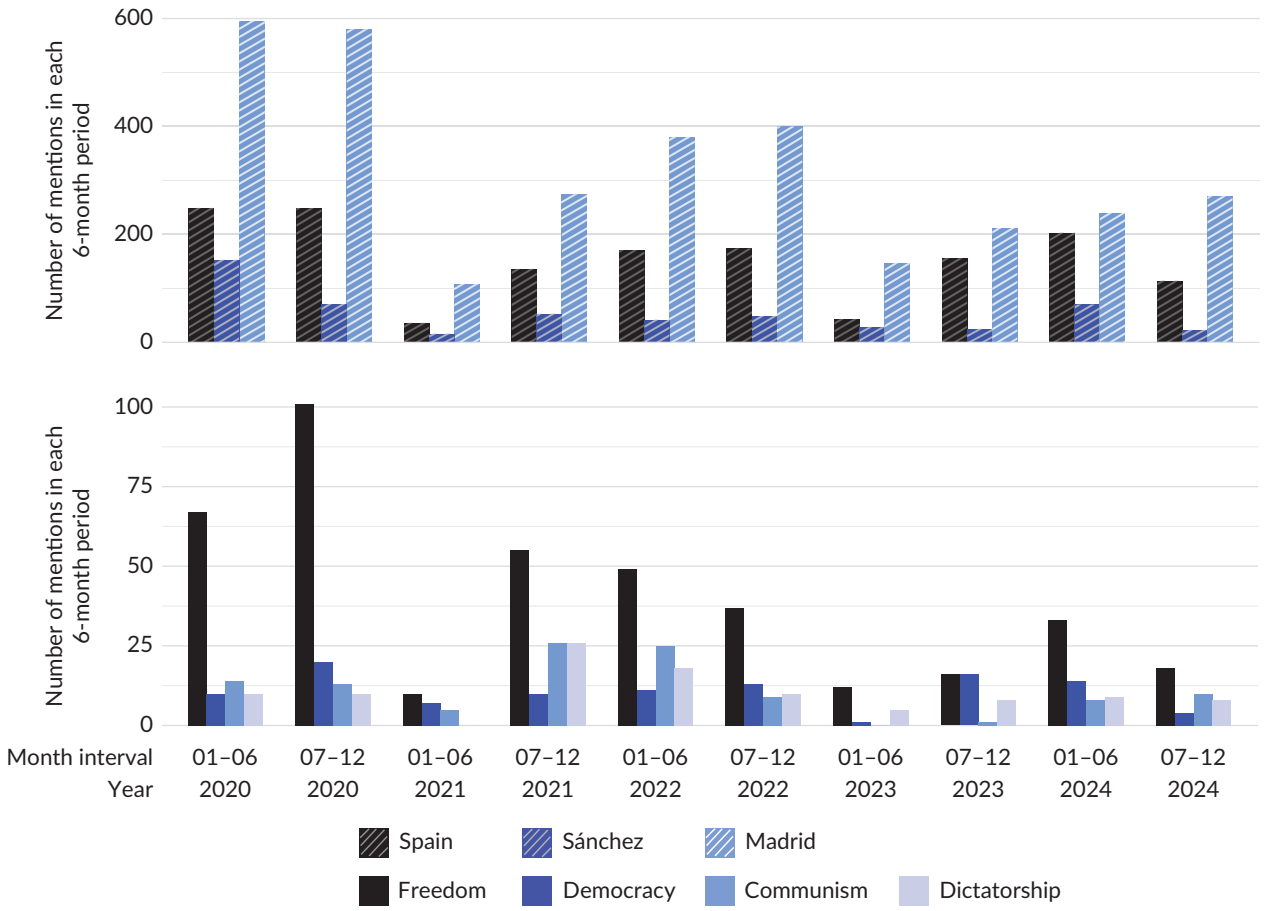

Figure 2. Total mentions of key terms in President Ayuso's speeches by six months. Note: 01–06 note the period between January and June and 07–12 note the period between September and December.

decision-making powers over pandemic management to the ACs. However, it also established unprecedented boundaries by imposing restrictions on individual rights, such as freedom of movement and assembly, which regional governments had to consider when making their decisions.

The use of the words "freedom" and "democracy," and their counterparts, "authoritarianism" and "communism," is notable in the regional president's speeches. These nodal points in her discourse stand out as the cornerstone of her communication strategy within regional parliamentary debates. On the one hand, she links concepts such as "arbitrariness," "dictatorship," "totalitarianism," "persecution," and "absence of freedom" to the central government, and, on the other, to Prime Minister Sánchez. This is clearly shown in her replies to parliamentary questions in the regional parliament: "First of all, we must remember that Pedro Sánchez is the most deceitful politician in this country, not to mention the most authoritarian ruler we have known since the beginning of democracy" (Ayuso, 2022c, p. 19489). Figure 2 illustrates that the use of tangible concepts appealing to national politics, on the one hand, and intangible ones employed by the Madrid leader to conduct cross-level opposition, on the other, is reasonably well established.

Prime Minister Sánchez is portrayed as "corrupt" and "authoritarian," and, in connection, the Spanish government is described, in paradoxical terms, as "the most authoritarian democratic government":

> Well, look, "the president of the weakest"—but the most authoritarian democratic government—is using the Spanish people's money to exchange favours, and to pass sectarian laws with parliamentary minorities, in order to have enough seats with which to keep himself in power. (Ayuso, 2022b, p. 18820)

The accusations here are presented without any sanctions or reply from the prime minister himself who is not present in the regional parliament.

In contrast, the nodal connections put forward by the regional president associate "Madrid" with concepts such as "freedom," "prosperity," and "liberalism." From the speeches, a narrative depicting Spain as a country in the throes of de-democratisation emerges, while its capital stands out as an "oasis," representing freedom and prosperity. This second major association of concepts can be observed, for example, from a speech delivered in October 2021, after the landslide electoral victory of PP in Madrid:

> Every decision taken by the Government goes against all of us! When they pretend to be this polycentric, polyhedral Spain, nation of nations, the only thing they do is attack again and again the essence of the unity of the country, which is its capital….Look, we, as opposed to the sectarianism of Sánchez, are going to promote freedom, prosperity and impartiality in the Government through the budgets. (Ayuso, 2021b, p. 3480)

This nodal connection between "democracy" and "Madrid," a key element of the regional president's discourse, also serves as the basis for the recurring claim that the central government, represented by values antagonistic to liberal democracy, attacks and opposes Madrid. However, this attack on Madrid is framed in broader terms than the health emergency and, instead, portrayed as an assault on the liberal principles associated with it. Consequently, the attacks on Madrid are depicted as attacks on liberal values that are "in danger" across the country:

> From the political perspective, we are besieged by a government that spares no means to attack our policies of freedom and prosperity; public benefits and services that today are enjoyed in Madrid and that before were authentic conquests. We will defend Spain! We believe in the individual, in the family, in business, in property, in the free market, in public–private partnership supported by a strong Administration subject to the law, which accompanies a framework of legal certainty, in public services without ideological interference. (Ayuso, 2022a, p. 16998)

This portrayal of "Madrid" is tightly connected with "Spain" and contrasted sharply with those associated with the central government and its "ideological interference." In other words, it is less about defending a certain political management style characteristic of a governing body, and more about presenting an alternative democratic vision rooted in ideological principles—a stance more typical of an opposition group. On the one hand, Ayuso has at her disposal the political resources and media spotlight typically available to a regional government to achieve this. On the other, although "Madrid" as a concept is constructed around intangible ideas, it is also a tangible region that benefits from the media and cultural prominence of being a capital city.

Moreover, during the pandemic, the significant leeway that the central government granted to regions regarding restrictions on mobility and assembly rights allowed Ayuso to underscore tangible differences in

governance. Even before that, she highlights the opposition between the central government and the Madrid regional government:

> In view of these difficulties, what we are going to have to do is to continue fighting against all odds, because we are a target to beat for the Spanish Government….We are a very uncomfortable Government for the Government of the nation because we can contrast, compare the policies and the results of some with others'. (Ayuso, 2020a, p. 6968)

Here she positions herself as a "leader of the opposition to the central government," who is also a "leader of the government to which the central government is opposed."

On another occasion, she mentions the prime minister as being opposed to her, which she describes as "abuse":

> That is to say, it is the [Spanish] Government…that is lashing out against us. Just yesterday, in the control session, the President [i.e., the prime minister] himself was opposing me, and not the other way around. Look at the way in which a higher Administration abuses a lower one! Instead of helping the autonomous communities, I insist that they have once again left us alone at the worst moment. (Ayuso, 2020b, p. 20012)

It is worth highlighting that, in this way, Ayuso is suggesting that the prime minister's reply is in opposition to her, and thus unacceptable.

Additionally, the regional president puts her government forward as a model example of liberal government:

> While the left is still determined to describe Madrid as a homophobic, racist, drunken place, what we are doing is showing for Madrid: in investments, in projects, in employment, for students, in the attraction of its events; in fact, we are the government that Spain is missing until there is an alternative in *La Moncloa* [i.e., the central government]. (Ayuso, 2021a, pp. 2358–2360)

Arguing that "real" Spanish government is at function only in the Madrid region, Ayuso seems to suggest that her government leadership is the only viable one for the country during the crisis.

The qualitative analysis of the parliamentary speeches reveals that they are criticisms of the central government and proposals for an alternative, which is the Madrid regional government. In this sense, this represents a case of opposition between two heads of government belonging to different political levels, i.e., cross-level opposition. While it does not operate within the conventional framework of liberal democracy's constitutional architecture—namely, opposition confronting the government policies and providing alternatives at the same parliamentary level—it proves highly effective in the media and within the arena of public discourse.

6. Results and Discussion

In the last stage of our analysis, we further constructed a conceptual network based on selected nodal points—democracy, Sánchez, freedom, and Madrid. Rather than analysing all words, which would be

computationally expensive and less interpretable, we focus on these words with the highest similarity to the key terms, as shown in Figure 2. These four terms were selected for both theoretical and technical reasons. Theoretically, discourse analysis requires distilling complexity into signifiers that encapsulate broader ideas. We chose two tangible signifiers (i.e., Madrid and Sánchez), as they are central to the discursive strategy and have clear meanings, unlike more context-dependent terms, such as Spain. The two intangible signifiers (i.e., freedom and democracy) are the most frequently mentioned in Ayuso's speeches (see Figure 2). "Democracy" was included due to its recurrent negative framing in critiques of the central government. Terms like authoritarianism, dictatorship, and communism are commonly used to attack left-wing parties in the region. Thus, democracy is the most unequivocal alternative for our purpose. Technically, limiting the number of nodes ensures the clarity of our visualisation, allowing us to quantitatively map how these key concepts are articulated. From this refined selection, we constructed a semantic network where words are represented as nodes. Pairs of words with similar scores surpassing the threshold are connected by edges, and these edges are assigned weights corresponding to their cosine similarity. This weighted network visualises the relationships between terms highlighting clusters of semantically related words and revealing patterns within the textual data. In sum, the selection of the above-mentioned four words followed, first, the theoretical reasoning of representing the backbone of cross-level opposition discourse as revealed by our speech content qualitative analysis (see Section 5), and, second, the technical limitation to these words to ensure clarity in visualising the clusters of nodes associated with the core concepts under study, which would become obscured if additional terms were included.

Furthermore, it is anticipated that, as these four concepts encapsulate the semantic weight of many related terms, the latter will appear within the node clouds. The vectorisation and cosine similarity values from scikit-learn (Pedregosa et al., 2011) allowed us to formulate the findings with the Python library NetworkX (Hagberg et al., 2008). This produced a figure that reveals the words most closely associated with the selected key concepts and highlights potential direct associations between these words as well (see Figure 3).

Although different conceptual communities appear relatively independent from one another, a clear and direct association emerges between "Madrid" and "freedom" on the one hand, and "democracy" and "Sánchez" on the other. The terms most closely linked to the first pair generally carry positive connotations and relate to public policies, such as "liberal," "employment," "economy," "citizen," "life," "service," and "investment." From this cluster of concepts, we can infer two key points: first, "Madrid" and "freedom" are strongly interconnected in Ayuso's speeches, and second, this association is expressed through generally positive terms. In her rhetoric, "Madrid" emerges as a space of "freedom," safeguarded by fiscal and labour policies that empower citizens to thrive in their life pursuits. On the opposite side of the map, we find an association between "democracy" and "Sánchez," mediated by predominantly negative concepts. The number of terms directly linked to these two words is smaller, possibly due to the regional focus of the parliamentary questions shaping the contents of the speeches analysed. Nevertheless, the rather surprising finding is that the main connotation of the association between "Sánchez" and "democracy" is mediated by terms such as "frightened," "break," "repudiate," and "defeat." Particularly striking is the prominence of the "dictatorship" node within the conceptual network, which is clearly connected through numerous links to this cluster of terms. Similarly, "institution" operates in a manner akin to "democracy" within this nodal group.

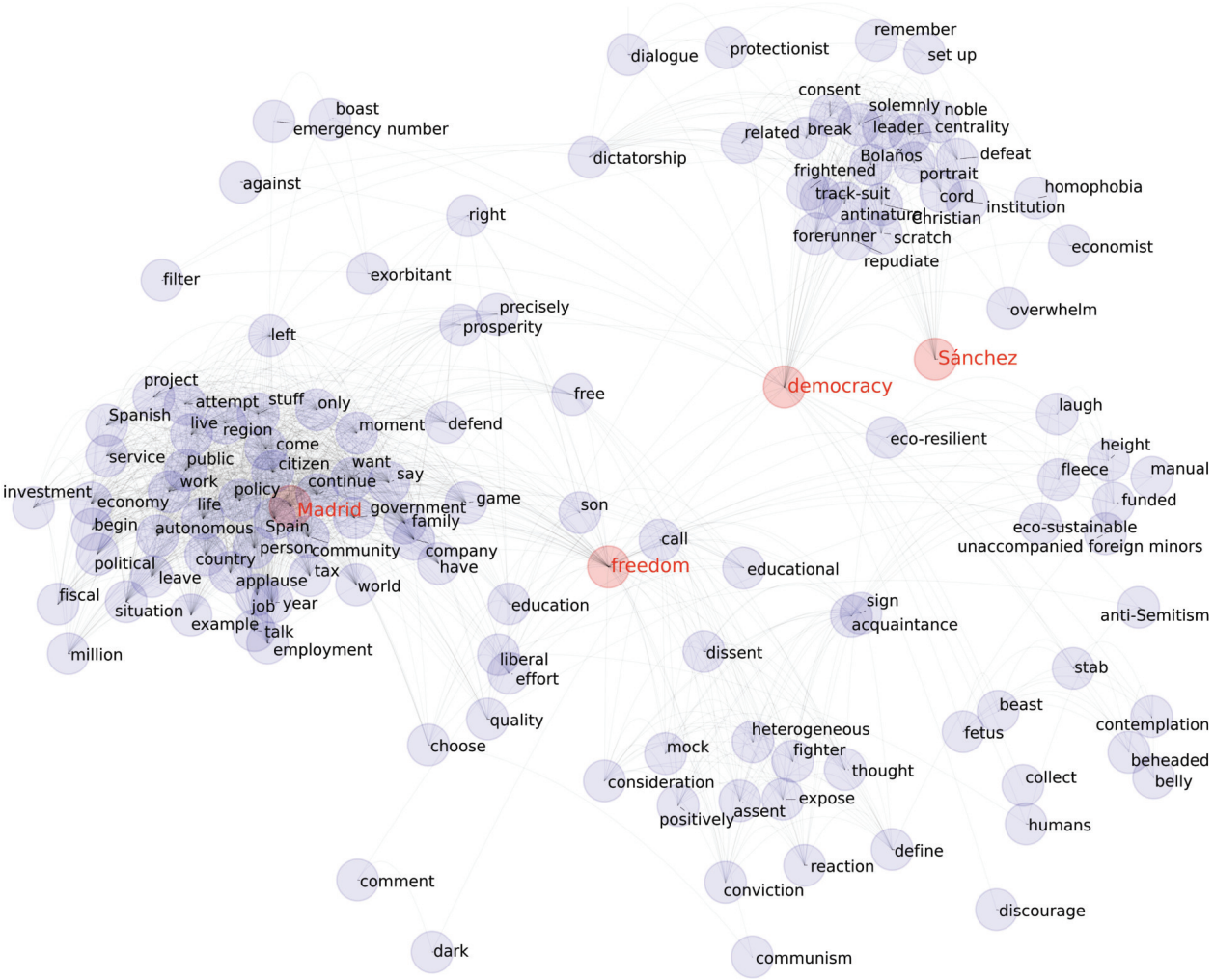

Figure 3. Network of words strongly associated with "freedom," "Madrid," "democracy," and "Sánchez."

Finally, to further visualise the different groups of strongly semantically related words, we can show potential groupings using a heatmap (Figure 4). This figure was produced with the seaborn library (Waskom, 2021) using cosine similarity as the measure of association between words in the network. It groups words into semantically coherent clusters, as shown below. The red cells highlight high cosine similarity between certain words, indicating strong semantic connections, whereas the blue areas represent low or no semantic similarity. The clusters identified in the heatmap align with the network graph (Figure 3) confirming that nodes grouped in the graph represent semantically related words, as described above. The observed polarisation indicates distinct semantic domains within the analysed corpus, suggesting thematic separation between groups. This differentiation between semantic domains reflects the dual nature of Ayuso's discourse: criticism directed at the central government and the proposal of an alternative model rooted in the concept of Madrid.

In sum, the interpretative expectations raised in the qualitative analysis are fulfilled in an outstanding way in this final stage of quantitative analysis based on large sets of texts. The cross-level opposition strategy that allowed Ayuso to be the most prominent opposition politician in the national media during the pandemic crisis is based on a contrast of models that is not based on hypotheses but on an actual counterfactual (i.e., Madrid) that seeks to oppose an assumed anti-democratic central management model.

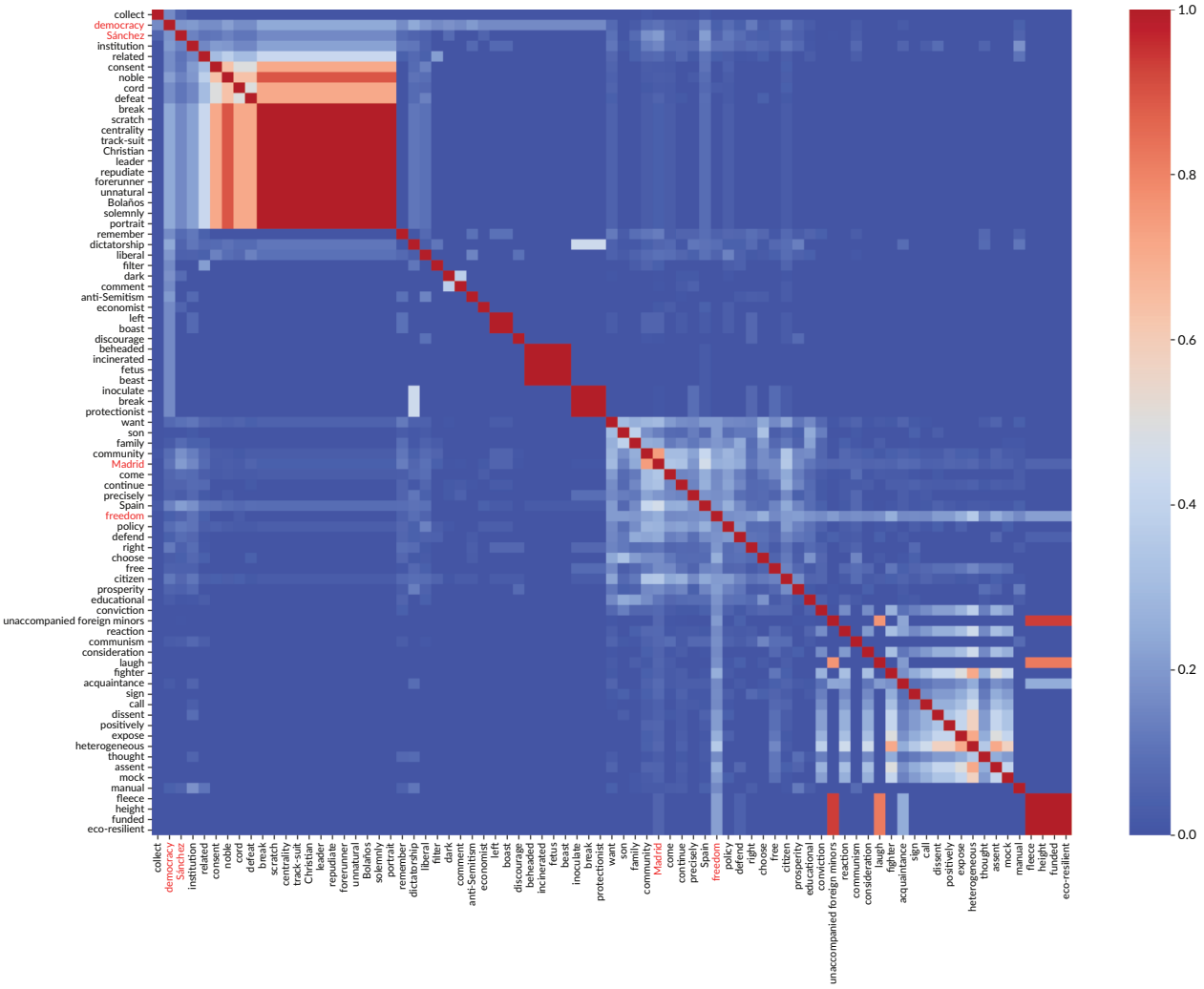

Figure 4. Heatmaps of cosine similarity between term pairs from the Figure 3 network.

7. Conclusion

The key role of opposition in liberal democracies underscores the importance of evaluating their performance and effectiveness, especially in relation to scrutinising the executive, and in presenting credible alternatives to the governmental agenda (Garritzmann, 2017; Helms, 2008). In the context of global democratic backsliding, the fundamentals of liberal democracy are at stake: to propose policy alternatives to the government, while respecting the "rules of the game." The pandemic crisis provides a strong case for examining the role of political opposition, and not only in Spain. In liberal democracies overall, the pandemic tended to increase the executive dominance of national governments as well as populist protests against governmental measures, fostering increasing distrust and anti-establishment rhetoric. Even before the global health emergency began, Western liberal democracies were experiencing the onslaught of growing distrust in democratic institutions and politicians (e.g., see Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The democratic erosion in established liberal democracies is often interpreted as a result of the opposition's limited capacity to achieve electoral success (Marquez, 2016; Przeworski, 2019) or a lack of adherence to the rules of the game that enable the opposition to fulfil its essential functions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). We show, however, that opposition is a dynamic concept (cf. Friedrich, 1966), and in the pandemic crisis context, it was effectively

used as a discursive strategy for political benefit. Given the well-documented ability of governments to set the agenda and dominate public discourse, opposition efforts can extend beyond traditional parliamentary channels. In multi-level political systems, such as that of Spain, regional governments can serve as sites of opposition by leveraging: (a) institutional advantages that allow them to influence the agenda and (b) institutional power to present credible alternatives.

As shown, the president of the AC of Madrid received extraordinary media attention during the pandemic. This level of national media attention—exceeding even that of the national opposition leader from the same party—is more characteristic of an opposition leader than a regional political figure. This "cross-level opposition" challenges the liberal understanding of opposition between two leaders in a government–opposition setting. To analyse this, we studied the parliamentary speeches of President Ayuso during parliamentary question times, searching for discursive patterns typical of opposition to the central government. Our study yielded three main findings. First, the speeches include confrontation towards the national government beyond the centre–region dynamics, containing extensive ideological criticism of the central government, moving beyond conflicts over jurisdictional authority. Notably, the central government was frequently linked to negative concepts such as "frightened," "dictatorship," or "institutional backsliding." Second, the speeches recurrently emphasised the proposal of a general political alternative rather than the defense of specific implemented policies. The proven connection of "Madrid" to overarching concepts like "freedom," "prosperity," and "life" exemplifies this approach. Third, there are explicit mentions of a conflict between these two governments, central and regional, framed as a clash of distinct political models. We also find conceptual contradictions, such as "the most authoritarian government of democracy."

This analysis highlights the Madrid regional president's strategic positioning as a cross-level opposition figure, leveraging her regional platform to participate in broader national debates and prompting us to consider what it means for liberal democracy. In light of the findings, the opposition of one incumbent leader to the other at a different level of the same polity emerges as an activity that, at least in terms of discourse and public deliberation, can transcend traditional political boundaries and operate across different levels, without engaging in open public debate. Consequently, "cross-level opposition" provides the opportunity to accuse without the possibility of a reply from the opponent, which undermines the liberal democratic idea of public deliberation. For the evaluation of opposition performance in liberal democracies, future research should expand to encompass a broader set of parameters to understand the impact of cross-level opposition for liberal democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

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The European Parliament: On the Politics of Naming

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss the early history of the expression of the European Parliament and analyse the political points of its different rhetorical nuances and connotations. I shall use as the background a wider discussion on the politics of naming, indebted to the rhetorical work of Quentin Skinner as well as to the historical repertoire of alternative titles for parliamentary assemblies. The expression "European Parliament" had already been in use in the post-war years, first among the pro-federalist wing of the European movement. In the initial sitting of the ECSC Common Assembly on 13 September 1952, Théodore Lefevre spoke of the Assembly as "la première à mériter le nom de 'Parlement européen' " in the sense of both describing and legitimising the political novelty of that Assembly. In the Ad Hoc Assembly's debates on the constitutional draft for the European Political Community in 1952/1953, which proposed a supranational parliamentary government, the expression—first in French and then in English—became a colloquial title for the two chambers of the Parliament of the European Political Community. The European Parliamentary Assembly of the EEC changed its name to the European Parliament on 30 March 1962. The title European Parliament has been used both for an existing assembly with a low "parliamentarity" and for a future assembly with full parliamentary powers.

Keywords

Ad Hoc Assembly; European Parliament; politics and rhetoric of naming; supranational parliamentarism

1. Introduction

Every parliament is an assembly, but not every assembly is a parliament. This seemingly neutral statement refers to a conceptual and rhetorical asymmetry of obvious political significance. The asymmetry is normative, but also historical: many anti-parliamentarians have accepted assemblies but rejected parliaments. For others, certain criteria must be met for an assembly to merit the title of parliament. In other

words, the politics of naming does matter. Regarding the name "parliament," we should ask who uses it, when they use it, and how they use it.

Naming is a paradigmatic example of the contingency of politics: anything could always be named differently. The naming marks a claim of legitimising why this name would be better than any other among the usually limited range of alternatives. This means that naming it as a contingent act is not arbitrary but, as a rhetorical move, depends on the acceptability of the audience.

Quentin Skinner discusses strategies of rhetorical redescription in his *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. He describes this as "enabling us to redescribe actions or states of affairs in such a way as to lend additional force to whatever interpretation we may wish to put upon them" (Skinner, 1996, p. 139). Skinner regards the scheme of paradiastole as a "technique of elevating" or "depreciating" actions (Skinner, 1996, p. 141) and refers to examples from the Roman rhetoric scholar Quintilian: "Prodigality must be more leniently redescribed as a case of liberality, avarice as a case of carefulness and negligence as a case of simplicity of the mind' (Skinner, 1996, p. 142). Skinner, finally, sets such renaming in relation to alternative paradiastolic strategies of altering the concept's range of reference, its weight, or replacement by an alternative concept (Skinner, 1996, Chapter 4; see also Skinner, 1979).

The politics of naming contains a wide if not endless range of topics dealt with in many disciplines, such as onomastic linguists and geographers, but rather seldom by political scientists. A favourite topic has been street names, which are still a regular topic of controversy (see Rose-Redwood et al., 2018). A long time ago I discussed party names in rhetorical terms (Palonen, 1995), yet it has remained astonishingly unthematised.

2. "European Parliament" as a Topic of the Politics of Naming

The same holds, strangely enough, for parliament names. The few existing studies (e.g., Pekonen, 2021) refer that concerning the political rhetoric of naming assemblies, we have to consider a historical range of alternative nominations. Parliament comes from speaking (*parlare* in Italian) and has been used since the 12th century; diet comes from the Latin *dies* (day) and is still used, for example, for the Swedish (Riksdag) and German (Bundestag) parliaments; assembly, like congress, refers to meeting, to coming together; the old Scandinavian *ting* also referred to meeting, not only to local courts (the Icelandic Althingi was summoned in the 10th century); legislature refers to law-making, while the representative character of the assembly is still used in the Italian Camera di Deputati or the Finnish Eduskunta (see Ihalainen et al., 2016, pp. 10–11). Roughly speaking, the political controversy between types of political assembly concerns legislatures, representative assemblies, and debating parliaments (Palonen, 2018, 2019).

The following case deals merely with the relationship between parliament and assembly as an excellent example of how the speech act of naming can have a political point. Naming an assembly a "parliament" can always be disputed and regarded as illegitimate, contested on the same or different grounds that were used to justify the naming. In other words, the political rhetoric around the use of the term "parliament" is always controversial concerning the criteria by which the concept is defined, although the criteria are seldom made explicit—it remains to the scholar to interpret the moves of the actors in order to understand the point of the naming or the dispute.

Today, everyone seems to know what is meant by the expression "European Parliament." The common story told by EU scholars is that the European Parliamentary Assembly was founded by the Rome Treaty of the European Communities in 1957. It started its sittings in 1960 and changed its name to the European Parliament on 30 March 1962 (see Piodi, 2007). However, the European Community officially accepted the title only after the first direct elections to the Parliament in 1979. Formal recognition of the name European Parliament appeared as late as the Preamble of the European Council's Solemn Declaration of Stuttgart on 19 June 1983 (European Council, 1983).

The expression "European Parliament" was, however, already used in the post-war history of Europe's integration of its existing and projected institutions. I shall discuss this early history of the "European Parliament" from the perspective of the politics of naming.

I shall look at when, how, and by whom the institution began to be called the European Parliament. What kinds of rhetorical moves are contained in each use of the term, and to what contexts do they refer? What was the purpose of using "Parliament" and "European" and how did these connect? What justifies using the term "European" and what are the minimum criteria for calling an assembly or a meeting a "parliament"? At the time these terms were adopted, we can ask what conventions were available then that legitimised their use or, conversely, which kind of provocative move the naming may have represented in the face of the prevailing conventions.

3. Parliament Beyond the Nation-States

For many British writers who considered the English parliament at Westminster as the "mother of parliaments," a topos coined by John Bright in 1865 (see also Graham, 1911/2024) it has been an oxymoron to speak of a "European parliament." Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher spoke on 5 December 1985 of the "European Assembly" as "different from our Parliament" (cited in Rittberger, 2005, p. 160).

In a classical sense, parliament has been linked with the nation-state, for example, in Edmund Burke's famous Bristol speech, in 1774, to his electorate in which he contrasted "a deliberative assembly of one nation" to a mere "congress of ambassadors" (Canavan, 1999) dependent on the opinions in their constituencies. The formula is mainly remembered for rejecting the imperative mandate for MPs, but it also binds the concept of parliament with the nation-state as the assumed polity level.

After the French Revolution, it was also commonplace to call continental parliaments "national assemblies" and even to regard parliament as one of the nation-building institutions (see Rizzoni, 2023). For British politicians, independently of their party, speaking of a parliament of a supranational European polity has been a real provocation and the same was the case for nation-centred parties, such as the Gaullists in France.

The converse view could be justified by reference to the practice of defining parliament as any assembly that follows certain rules of procedure and meeting practices. This was especially the case when parliament enjoyed at least some degree of power to control the executive, independently of the polity level. For example, in German it has been customary to speak not only of *Landesparlament* but also of *Kommunalparlament* or even *Studentenparlament*, and even in Britain, with the devolution, Scotland has got its parliament, Wales its national assembly, and Northern Ireland its assembly.

The idea here was rather to understand that "parliament proper" referred to a procedural and rhetorical paradigm for doing politics, and such procedures were then followed to a greater degree in different kinds of assemblies, associations, organisations, and meetings (see Alapuro & Stenius, 2010, for examples in Scandinavia; see Haapala, 2016, for the example of the Oxford and Cambridge Union Societies). If the term applies to a subnational polity level, why not apply it to a supranational polity as well?

A further reason that has made it difficult to speak of supranational parliaments is the government's traditional monopoly on foreign policy, in the sense of *arcana imperii*, the "secrets of the realm," to be kept beyond the access of parliamentarians. This tendency has to some extent declined since the late 19th century, for example, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, founded in 1889, was originally a debating club of parliamentarians in matters of peace (Kissling, 2006). Participation in the Hague peace conferences of 1899 and 1907 included not only ministers and diplomats but also scholars and parliamentarians (Roshchin, 2017).

Around that time, it became more acceptable to demand parliamentary control of foreign policy (see Ihalainen & Matikainen, 2016, for Britain). After the First World War, parliamentarians were part of many member-state delegations to the League of Nations and other international institutions and this practice has continued in the UN. To sum up, these shifts relativised the divide between foreign and domestic politics and paved the way for applying the parliamentary style of politics to European and world politics.

However, recent studies have emphasised that the concept of "supranationalism" was, at first, frequently regarded as inimical to parliamentarism. Especially in France, since the 19th century, supranationalism has been linked to corporatist or syndicalist views, as opposed to individual suffrage and parliamentary government. Supranationalism has also been connected to legal or economic universalism, as opposed to the alleged arbitrariness of politics and parliamentary debate (Canihac, 2020).

Parliaments were, of course, treated with contempt in older authoritarian political thinking. Thomas Carlyle (1850, p. 85), for instance, condemned "the national parliament as an enormous national palaver." The case was similar for leftists who favoured direct action. The poet Georg Herwegh (1848) depreciated the mere "politics by speaking" of the Frankfurt parliament: "In Parla-parla-parliament. Das Reden nimmt kein End!" In the 20th century, both the Soviet model of direct workplace democracy and the neo-corporatist thinking on the extreme right shared a militant anti-parliamentarism. In the Western democratic countries of the 1920s and 1930s, parliaments were, as it is well known, weakened in favour of executive power, as supported by proto-corporatist expert bodies as well as by presidentialist and plebiscitarian tendencies.

Even in the contemporary forms of direct-democratic thinking, an assembly might be a legitimate title for a meeting of citizens, factory employees, universities, and so on, but a parliament is viewed as something suspicious. Representation and debating *pro et contra* might appear illegitimate if the given opinions or mere presence of the "people" in the process are seen as authoritative (Butler, 2015).

In other words, in the broader historical context, the application of the concept of parliamentarism or parliamentary government to a supranational level has had mighty conceptual and historical hurdles to overcome before it could be taken seriously. To legitimise it would require a rhetorical competence of what Quentin Skinner (1974) has called an "innovative ideologist," who legitimises the change by referring to cases in which the proposed new concept or expression has been already accepted.

4. Parliament in the Post-War Political Constellation

The situation looks different when we consider the European institutions of the immediate post-war period, especially the Council of Europe, created in 1948, and the ECSC, founded in 1951. As we shall see, the expression "European parliament" was used in their context, but not in a very ambitious sense. The Council of Europe remained, despite its vocal federalistic minority, a traditional inter-governmental organisation, especially in the form insisted upon by the UK Labour government (see Haapala, 2022, for an analysis of the British debates). In the ECSC, the supranational element (the High Authority) was based on a kind of expertise, while the parliamentary Common Assembly, elected by member-state parliaments, was originally formed in order to hold supranationalism in check (Palonen, 2024).

An alternative to both was the attempt to put European integration on a parliamentary basis. This took place in the context of planning the European Political Community (EPC) in 1952/1953. The resulting Draft Treaty of the so-called Ad Hoc Assembly (see Palonen, 2024, for the debates in the Ad Hoc Assembly) was ultimately rejected by the French National Assembly in August 1954.

Before turning to the primary sources, I shall offer some general points regarding the rhetoric of naming.

The move to speak of an existing assembly by using the term "European parliament" may be justified on two opposing grounds, both intelligible with the rhetorical scheme of paradiastole, of depreciating vices and extenuating virtues, as reactivated by Skinner (1996).

As mentioned, many parliaments are officially named "assemblies," whereas in other cases "assembly" has a more modest connotation. The French Assemblée nationale is the title used for the French parliament since the French Revolution. The General Assembly of the UN and the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, for their part, are not parliaments by strict criteria, although they do follow parliamentary rules in some important respects.

In post-war Western Europe, the revaluation of parliamentarism gained surprisingly strong support, at least outside the Communist parties and the French Gaullists with their presidential-plebiscitary ideals. Parliamentarism came to be viewed as an inherent part of democracy, especially among those speaking in favour of European unification; parliament remained a highly respected concept. As such, it may be regarded as a misuse of terms to call any kind of assembly a parliament.

In the context of the post-war years, to speak of a European parliament was, of course, never meant as a description of an existing or established institution. Referring to an institution as "the European Parliament" was a highly pretentious claim for empowering that institution, as were, indeed, attempts to use it as a name for certain proposed or projected institutions that did not yet exist.

If "parliament" was in post-war Europe both a descriptive and a normative concept (in the sense of Skinner, 1973), then speaking of parliament was always a move of revaluation, deeming an assembly worthy of the title "parliament" (in the sense of Skinner, 1996). The title could be disputed by denying the assembly's "parliamentarity," regarding it as a pseudo-, facade-, quasi-, or proto-parliament. In the early 1950s, the latter analytic termini were not used, and the question could thus be simplified to whether it was legitimate to call an assembly a "European parliament."

Indeed, "European" in this context was not used in a strict exclusive sense—nobody tried to restrict "Europe" to only those countries included at a given time in the European Parliament. The question was more about "the parliament in Europe," rather than "the Parliament of Europe."

In the sources, we can find discussions of two typical but contrasting cases. A speaker may value a given assembly highly as a "parliament" by lowering the criteria used for distinguishing a parliament from other assemblies. In contrast, a speaker may value a given assembly highly but keep high criteria for speaking of a parliament. These contrasting speech acts may have opposite points in an actual political context: in the former, desiring that an assembly would in the future act even more like a real parliament; in the latter, giving recognition to an assembly if, for example, its procedures and practices already correspond to those of a parliament.

In the context of speaking of a "European Parliament," the initiative frequently came from those who used the expression for an existing assembly by lowering the criteria for a parliament. The alternative—speaking of the parliamentary quality of an existing assembly or a system of government—was seen as requiring increased powers for the assembly vis-à-vis the executive.

By Skinner's criteria, only the first case was a move through the rhetoric of naming in a strict sense. In the second case, the move was a demand to alter the institution itself to correspond to the criteria of a full-fledged parliament (Skinner, 1996, Chapter 4). The Ad Hoc Assembly, for its part, proposed the introduction of a supranational parliamentary government, which was an unprecedented form of political regime.

5. The Hague Congress, Council of Europe, and ECSC

For the Hague Congress on Europe, activists from the federalist wing of the European movement (Comité International de Coordination pour l'Unité Européenne) prepared a "Political report," which contained a rather ambitious vision for the permanent unification of Europe. The final point in Article 26 called boldly for "the conclusion of a complete Federation with an elected European Parliament" (Mouvement européen, 1948, p. 86). However, in the further proceedings of the Hague Congress, nothing remained of this proposal; the unionist wing of the European movement around Winston Churchill prevented all federalist plans.

Nonetheless, the formula is interesting in its uncompromising claim. Although seen merely as a long-term target, the "Political report" uses "parliament" as a well-known concept and does not water down the criteria for it. The epithet "elected" referred to the aim of forming a single "European parliament," and the federalists of the Comité did not have any reservations about applying the concept of parliament to a future supranational polity. In the next stage of the Congress, in the "Political resolution," the federalist ideas and talk of a "European parliament" had disappeared because there was no support for such a maximal programme.

In the Council of Europe, hopes of transcending intergovernmentalism were frustrated from the beginning, and the Council's parliamentary aspect was degraded already by its title, "Consultative Assembly," leaving the decision-making to the Committee of Ministers. A federalist minority was, nonetheless, still active with the French socialist André Philip speaking in the Assembly on 8 August 1950 about the possibility of instituting parliamentary control on the European level. His strategy, following the "method Monnet" in the ECSC, was to "set up [of] various Ministries, which will be responsible towards what will become a European Parliament"

(Philip, 1950, as cited in Lipgens & Loth, 1991, pp. 119–121). Philip still hoped that the Council of Europe would be the main institution of European integration and similar hopes were also held by other federalists in the Council (see Kivistö & Haapala, 2023).

To speak of "European parliament" would have also been somewhat pretentious when the Council of Europe's membership originally consisted of only 10 countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the UK) while Turkey and Greece joined three months later. "Europe" was an inclusive concept, allowing other countries to join later, as was the case with the 13 states founding the US in 1776.

The number of European countries was, of course, still more modest in the ECSC, consisting of only six countries. It was originally based on France's and West Germany's joint forces in coal and steel policy but allowed other states to join later, as Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands did at the occasion of the Paris Treaty of 1951. The inclusive European "we" did not prevent speaking of "European" in the context of the ECSC.

The political constellation in the ECSC was different from that in the Council of Europe. It was built around the High Authority, a supranational institution consisting of officials rather than politicians. Contrary to the original plans, the Council of Ministers and the Common Assembly of parliamentarians from the member states were created in order to hold the powers of the High Authority in check. Jean Monnet, the president of the High Authority, soon realised that the Common Assembly could be opposed to the Council of Ministers and serve on the side of the High Authority in the internal struggles of the ECSC.

In his address at the opening meeting of the Common Assembly, Monnet spoke of it as the first European assembly invested with decision-making powers: "C'est devant vous seuls que la Haute Autorité est responsible….C'est la première Assemblée européenne qui soit investie d'un pouvoir de decision" (Communauté Européenne du Charbon et de l'Acier, 1953; 11 September 1952). Both arguments were directed against the merely Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe. Nonetheless, the Common Assembly's "responsibility" as well as its power to make decisions were, according to the Paris ECSC Treaty of 1951, highly restricted. In the context of the annual report of the High Authority, the Common Assembly could, with a two-thirds majority, express a "vote of censure" by which it could force the Authority to resign.

If we consider that the vote of censure—or vote of no confidence—serves in 20th-century political theory and constitutional law as the main criterion for parliamentary government, we can understand that Monnet had well understood how an assembly could become more like a parliament. When speaking of the European Assembly, he also realised that in practice the Common Assembly's hurdles preventing it from being a proper parliament were far too high, perhaps above all the fact that its vote of censure was limited to debates on the annual report.

We can note, in the Communauté Européenne du Charbon et de l'Acier (1953; 11 September 1952), that when the chair of the ECSC foreign ministers, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, went one step further in recognising the parliamentary quality of the Common Assembly, he was the first to explicitly use the terms "supranational" and "parliament" together: "Vous êtes en Europe le premier Parlement souverain établi sur une base supranationale." Adenauer thus first affirmed the possibility of supranational parliaments, again by

the criterion of vote of censure: "par votre décision, vous pouvez provoquer la démission de la Haute Autorité." Simultaneously, Adenauer recognised that due to the limited range of competence of the ECSC, the Common Assembly was a "parliament in Europe," not a European parliament.

Adenauer's speech also marks the origins of a bicameral understanding of parliamentary powers in the ECSC: "La position du Conseil et de l'Assemblée est peut-être à certains égards comparable aux rapports entre deux Chambres dans la vie constitutionnelle d'un État" (Communauté Européenne du Charbon et de l'Acier, 1953; 11 September 1952). Although admitting that his interpretation might be merely partial, Adenauer regarded the nine-member Council as a rudimentary upper house of the ECSC. For the present purposes, the point was that the "parliament in Europe" for Adenauer did not refer solely to the Common Assembly but to a second chamber—the Council of Ministers with its free mandate. This is a highly ambiguous view, due to the legislative and executive hybrid form of the Council of Ministers, which persists in the EU still today.

In the debate on setting up the Ad Hoc Assembly, the Belgian Christian Social Party member Théodore Lefevre spoke explicitly of the Common Assembly as a European parliament, "notre Assemblée qui est la première à mériter le nom de 'Parlement européen'" (Communauté Européenne du Charbon et de l'Acier, 1953; 13 September 1952). Lefevre seems to compare different assemblies to see whether they fulfil the criteria for both parliamentary quality and Europeanness, concluding that the Common Assembly comes closest to a European parliament. He notes the inclusive, open-ended membership criteria of the Common Assembly, consisting of MPs appointed by member state parliaments, and therefore regards it as deserving to be called a parliament.

Indeed, Lefevre seems to have been the first person to characterise an existing institution, the Common Assembly, as a European parliament. His comparative judgement was that the Assembly was on its way to becoming a European parliament, if not the European Parliament. Not only did Monnet and Adenauer in a sense encourage the Common Assembly to act as a parliament, but the Assembly's members themselves from early on were discontent with the modest competence given to it by the Treaty of Paris. Already in September 1952, the Assembly's founding of committees and its adoption of parliamentary procedure served as instruments by which Assembly members strove to make the Assembly resemble as closely as possible a proper parliament (Wigny, 1958).

6. Debates in the Ad Hoc Assembly

The ECSC foreign ministers proposed to the Common Assembly in September 1952 the setting up of a so-called Ad Hoc Assembly to draft a constitution for the EPC.

The six-member countries agreed to the proposal as political support for the ECSC and the planned European Defence Community. The Ad Hoc Assembly consisted of the Common Assembly members, supplemented with a few additional MPs from the bigger member states (France, Italy, and West Germany) as well "observers" from the Council of Europe countries. The Ad Hoc Assembly provided a Draft Treaty on 10 March 1953, including a plan for a European parliamentary government (Palonen, 2024). As is well known, the plan was rejected by the French Parliament in August 1954.

I focus now on the debates over the politics of naming the European Parliament in the plenary and committee sessions of the Ad Hoc Assembly. The Ad Hoc Assembly followed in its internal deliberations the ordinary parliamentary procedure, which was familiar to its members.

In the Ad Hoc Assembly, no party affiliations were mentioned, and it seems that there were no cross-national faction meetings either. In the ECSC, partisan names were used for these political factions as of the summer of 1953 as a guide to identifying the Ad Hoc Assembly members politically. I use the ECSC affiliations of socialists (Soc), Christian democrats (CD), and liberals (Lib) when first mentioning a member. Among these, the "liberals" was the vaguest denomination, reaching from the far right (e.g., Deutsche Partei) to the centre-left (Radicaux de gauche in France).

The chair of the Ad Hoc Assembly was Paul-Henri Spaak (Soc), who chaired the plenary sittings. Its main organ was the Constitutional Committee, led by Heinrich von Brentano (CD), with a working party functioning as a kind of executive committee completed with subcommittees. The Subcommittee for Political Institutions, chaired by Pierre-Henri Teitgen (CD) with Fernand Dehousse (Soc) as rapporteur, was the most important for the politics of naming.

Whereas the Common Assembly could call itself a "European parliament," the Ad Hoc Assembly was merely a proto-parliament that applied parliamentary procedures and practices. The title "European Parliament" was reserved for the future Parliament of the European Political Community. "European Parliament" was a *Vorgriff* in the sense of Reinhart Koselleck (1972), referring to an institution that did not exist, but that the Ad Hoc Assembly expected would be realised in the future EPC.

The guidelines of the ECSC foreign ministers spoke vaguely of a federal or confederal constitution based on a bicameral system, without presupposing a parliamentary system or that the chambers together would be called "parliament." In the Ad Hoc Assembly, one notorious adversary of supranationalism was Michel Debré, a Gaullist and later de Gaulle's first prime minister in the Fifth Republic. In the Constitutional Committee, Debré contended that a European parliament could not be anything more than "l'émanation des parlements nationaux" (Assemblée Ad Hoc, 1952–1953a; 24 October 1952), thus opposing not only supranational powers but also parliamentary direct elections, which the majority of the Ad Hoc Assembly had already indicated to support.

There were also other members who, like Marinus van der Goes van Naters (Soc), initially saw that speaking of a European parliament would go beyond the mandate given to the Ad Hoc Assembly (1952–1953a; Constitutional Committee, 25 October 1952). Van der Goes van Naters polemised against those whom he thought wanted to create "un vrai 'Parlement' de six.' " His main point was to oppose the direct elections. Regarding the Council of Europe as the umbrella organisation of European integration, he was suspicious of the powers planned for the EPC (Assemblée Ad Hoc, 1952–1953b; Subcommittee for Political Institutions, 16 November 1952).

On 25 October 1952 (Assemblée Ad Hoc, 1952–1953a), the debate on the European Parliament was indirectly opened by Antonio Azara (CD), who in the Constitutional Committee proposed the creation of "une assemblée politique européenne" which should be elected directly as soon as possible by the citizens of the member states. He did not initially call that assembly a parliament but, in response to van der Goes van

Naters, Azara argued that there were already several "Parlements européens," and what was now being proposed was "un nouveau Parlement." In this usage, Azara did not hesitate to regard the different existing assemblies as parliaments but maintained that the new parliament would be a proper parliament. Herman Kopf (CD) supported Azara with the argument that the thought of "un Parlement Européen démocratique élu" might lead the peoples of Europe to assimilate better into the EPC. For Kopf and Azara, only a directly elected chamber would deserve to be called a parliament.

Already on 20 November 1952 (Assemblée Ad Hoc, 1952–1953b), several members of the Subcommittee for Political Institutions used the French expression *le parlement européen* as a rather unproblematic concept. Eugène Schaus (Lib) asked whether the president of the ECSC High Authority, as a European Executive Council ex officio member could be dismissed by the "European parliament," "est renversée par le Parlement européen." Chair Teitgen answered affirmatively: "il puit être reverse par le Parlement européen," thus emphasising that the parliamentary responsibility of the ministers of the European Executive Council also applies to the ECSC president as an ex officio member of the Council. In this context, the term "European parliament" was therefore already connected to the acceptance of parliamentarianism in terms of the relationship between the government (European Executive Council) and the Parliament of the EPC. This was also affirmed in the same sitting by rapporteur Dehousse, who regarded the Executive as "responsible devant le Parlement europeen."

On December 1952, at the initiative of Chair Teitgen, who admitted that *parlement* was a maximalist expression, the subcommittee agreed on to adopt "le parlement de la Communauté" as the official title of the future EPC Parliament (Assemblée Ad Hoc, 1952–1953b; 3 December 1952). This concept was different from the views of Azara and Kopf in that it included not only a directly elected chamber (later agreed to be named the Peoples' Chamber) but also a Senate elected by the member state parliaments. The title was thenceforth used in all the documents of the Ad Hoc Assembly. The subcommittee's decision on 6 December 1952 contains also the explicit English title, "European Parliament."

In the debates, however, it was common to speak of "the European Parliament" in a rather unproblematic way when referring to the two chambers. Dehousse in his report to the Constitutional Committee (15 December 1952) as well as Lodovico Benvenuti (CD), Guy Mollet (Soc), and Max Becker (Lib) in the Committee (17 December 1952) all used the expression "the European Parliament." The definite article referred to the Parliament of the Community, which thus tacitly raised the claim to encompass all "Europe," perhaps with the hope that one day other European countries would be included.

This colloquial use of the European Parliament in the Ad Hoc Assembly formed a representative affirmation of the principle of parliamentary government at the supranational European polity level. It marked a disjunction from the mere "assemblies" of the Council of Europe and of the ECSC as well as a typological use of the scholarly term as a substitute for the official term "Parliament of the Community." Parliamentary language was also practised when referring (although with some reservations) to the European Executive Council as "a European government" and to its members as "European ministers."

The decisive test regarding the parliamentary quality of the EPC's system of government was the election of the president of the Executive Council. Brentano took up the topic of the future EPC's parliamentary powers, particularly the power to choose the president of the European Executive Council. For Brentano,

granting such powers would deny the European idea if "de ne pas donner le Parlement européen le pouvoir de designer le Président de l'Executif" (Assemblée Ad Hoc, 1952–1953b; Political Institutions subcommittee, 20 November 1952). Dehousse's proposal that the directly elected Chamber—later named the Peoples' Chamber—should elect the president of the Executive Council was passed by the subcommittee on 3 December 1952.

On the following day, however, Chair Teitgen persuaded the subcommittee members to let, in the name of a stable European government, the Council of National Ministers elect the Council president, and this was also included in the Resolution of the Constitutional Committee on 20 December 1952. This did not necessarily mean a break with parliamentary government, but a rather minimalist interpretation of the concept.

In the plenum of the Ad Hoc Assembly, however, several members turned against the proposal, including Dehousse, who as the rapporteur, presented the "compromise" proposal of the committee while at the same time stating his own doubts on the compromise solution (Assemblée Ad Hoc, 1952–1953c; 7 January 1953). The plenum rejected the Committee's proposal, supporting Piet Vermeylen's (Soc) motion instead, which was that the EPC Senate should elect the Executive Council president (9 January 1953). In subsequent meetings this was further detailed: The Executive Council at its inauguration would be subject to votes of confidence from both parliamentary chambers; the election of the Senate in member state parliaments to a fixed term of 5 years instead of altering the composition after every election in member states; and a slightly different qualified majority in the two chambers would be required to dismiss the Executive Council (for details see Palonen, 2024). Such measures were supporting the stability of the Executive Council as well as the supranational standing of the senators.

To sum up, although the Ad Hoc Assembly was initially cautious about speaking of the Parliament of the Community as a European Parliament, it soon adopted this language, which included a directly elected People's Chamber and the responsibility of the European Executive Council to the Parliament of the Community (with the parliament having the power to name the Council's ministers). The rather detailed system of nominating, confirming, and dissolving the Council in the bi-cameral parliament was the final move to secure a full-fledged system of supranational parliamentary government for the EPC.

7. A Future or the Existing "European Parliament"?

In a typological sense, the Ad Hoc Assembly understood well that, since the EPC was to have a parliamentary system of government, its parliament was to become the European Parliament and its executive the European government. A certain caution, however, was shown in using these titles officially, perhaps due to the limited powers of the Community or, alternatively, to facilitate the acceptance of the supranational parliamentary government in the member states.

When writing the history of the European Parliament, we should remember the debates of the Ad Hoc Assembly. It had a vision of a bicameral European Parliament, which at first had the limited range of competence of the EPC, but which followed, in its rules of procedure and political practices, the model of a parliamentary government. The European Parliament was planned to be a core institution of supranational parliamentary Europe. In that sense, the planned Parliament of the Community was much more "parliamentary" than what the subsequent "European parliaments" have been.

Creating a supranational parliament was an unprecedented task the Ad Hoc Assembly faced. The name of this new institution was by no means self-evident. Those who took the position to call it the European Parliament acted as "innovating ideologists" (see Skinner, 1974). Both parts of the name contained a modified range of references. "European" referred to a polity of merely six countries, but it was open to extension in the weak—inclusive sense of "European" as meaning "in Europe." In contrast, the prestigious term "parliament" was boldly applied, without watering down the principles of parliamentary government to justify the extension of the range of the parliamentary style of politics to a supranational polity.

The Ad Hoc Assembly itself would perhaps deserve the distinction of being the first "European parliament." Although most of its members were not elected for the purpose of drafting the Constitution for the EPC, in its procedure, rhetorical practices, and the politics of time, the Ad Hoc Assembly was an extraordinary example of a "European parliament" in which neither the national delegations nor the party affiliations played a decisive role. In this regard, it was different from not only intergovernmental organisations but also from the strongly partisan and government-bound practices in the member countries of that time.

The character of the Ad Hoc Assembly does not yet say anything about whether the Parliament of the EPC would have transcended ambassadorial relations between states and parties in favour of a proper deliberative assembly, in which questions on the agenda would rise above both the inter-partisan negotiations and inter-governmental forms of diplomacy. The deliberative alternative would have been one in which differences in polity and policy (as interpreted in Palonen, 2003) matter, in which debates on the strengths and weaknesses of the items on the agenda, would have gained a greater independence over the partisan and national divisions between persons.

8. Remarks on the Later History

The shift from the European Parliamentary Assembly to the European Parliament served as a rhetorical move that strengthened its political reputation but did little to increase its powers within the European Communities of the 1960s. After the direct elections, the legitimacy of speaking of a European Parliament was stronger than before (although major parliamentary powers, such as the right to initiative, are still lacking). Margaret Thatcher, however, refused to use the expression, in line with the old British view of disputing the very possibility of supranational parliaments.

The work of the Ad Hoc Assembly might have legitimised both a "small" view of Europe and a parliament with restricted competence. Despite this, its point was not to lower the criteria for attaining the title of a parliament: its project proposed a supranational parliamentary government for the EPC, and the Assembly itself acted in several respects as if it were a European parliament.

In the post-war West European context, when women's suffrage had finally been introduced in France, Italy, and Belgium, the member states' parliaments were commonly regarded as democratic, and the regimes were commonly called parliamentary democracies. Extending the principle of parliamentary government to the supranational level, with a government (European Executive Council) elected by the Senate of the European Parliament and responsible to both houses can also be seen as a major move in the democratisation of the European political order. The Draft Treaty of the Ad Hoc Assembly also gave the planned European Political Community the power to exercise supranational control against threats to democracy and human rights in the member states.

It is still common to hear not only among the Eurosceptics that the European Parliament is not a proper parliament, for example, due to its low representativity, as expressed in the electoral turnout. The European Parliament of today is a parliament even by the most ambitious procedural criteria and its sitting time is longer than that of many member state parliaments.

However, the EU itself is still no parliamentary democracy, as its parliament has only limited powers to elect and dismiss the government (the European Commission), unlike what was proposed by the Ad Hoc Assembly in 1953. The Ad Hoc Assembly did not accept that either the EPC or the Council of the European Union, consisting of ministers of member states, would act as a quasi-second Chamber, as well as the EP's lacking right of parliamentary initiative of individual members.

Nonetheless, I would not dispute the current EP the title of European Parliament. In terms of the political rhetoric applied in this article, I would, however, not see the "parliament" so much as the description of existing affairs but as a *Vorgriff* to change, a prospect for the parliamentary government in the EU. Or, in terms of my typology of the four aspects of politics (Palonen, 2003), the claim to name the European Parliamentary Assembly "European Parliament" was a move both in politicking and politicising it, the prospect for parliamentarisation of the EU is a major claim of politicisation.

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At the Conceptual Crossroads of Politics and Technology: An Exploration Into EU Digital Policy

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Abstract

As the EU pursues digital sovereignty and defines its role in the global digital era, this article examines the conceptual politics that shape EU technology policy. By conceptual politics, we refer to how the meanings and applications of core political concepts are actively contested, shaped, and renegotiated within policy discourse and practice. While existing scholarship has examined discursive strategies and technocratic tendencies in EU digital policy in isolation, this article distinctively analyses their paradoxical interplay. We do so by employing a conceptual politics framework that emphasises temporality, drawing insights from conceptual history. We focus on how foundational concepts, including rights, governance, and agency, are being renegotiated at the intersection of EU politics and rapid technological change. Specifically, we examine the conceptual shifts related to two cases—fundamental democratic concepts (digital rights) and those prompted by specific technologies (blockchain)—to illuminate how the discursive framing of digital technologies performs political work. Through our analysis of policy documents, we identify a central tension: as the EU utilises expansive future-oriented discourse to frame its digital policy, this simultaneously tends to narrow the horizon of expectations and make politics more technocratic. This dynamic risks obscuring the contested nature of politics by framing technological development as inevitable.

Keywords

citizenship; concepts; democracy; European Union; governance; policy; technology; temporality

1. Introduction

Recently, the EU has strengthened its stance on the regulation and adoption of technology. Under Ursula von der Leyen's first Commission, between 2019–2024, the EU developed and passed a substantial amount of legislation addressing the development and deployment of digital technologies. This so-called regulatory wave introduced distinct political expressions and conceptualisations, ranging from trustworthiness to ethics-by-design. Simultaneously, the academic and political debates in Europe and beyond have become more nuanced in their analyses of how digital technologies, especially big data, blockchain, and AI, affect democratic societies (see e.g., Coeckelbergh, 2020; Smuha, 2021; Ulnicane & Erkkilä, 2023). In response, a risk-based approach to the regulation of such technologies has been consolidated through legislation such as the AI Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, 2024). This approach, in turn, introduces novel concepts and topics, including the digital divide, discriminatory biases, risks of disinformation to the public sphere, as well as the concentration of power to a few technology giants.

The political investment into digital technologies from all aspects, such as their development, deployment, and social and political impacts, has been codified into a programmatic approach known as the EU digital policy. This article explores how the EU digital policy is conceptualised and developed by analysing its conceptual politics. Using policy documents as our main sources, our approach is grounded on the research traditions in conceptual history and the history of ideas (see e.g., Koselleck, 2002; Skinner, 1999; Steinmetz et al., 2017) and their contemporary applications. Our research questions are rooted in an exploration of temporality, by which we refer to time as a key dimension in structuring and experiencing social, political, and historical phenomena. A central focus is how time can be constitutive of politics through concepts, rhetoric, and language. This approach is inspired by previous literature on time and politics (Palonen, 2003, 2006, 2008) and the temporalisation of concepts (Koselleck, 2000, 2004; Jordheim, 2012, 2017; Jordheim & Wigen 2018). By conceptual politics, we mean an approach which focuses on studying "the political and rhetorical moves, strategies, debates and their actors, that coin, shape or reflect political concepts in institutional and social reality and its perception, as well as over time" (Wiesner, 2023, p. 2). Central to this framework is understanding concepts as nodal points for key controversies in social, material, and political reality (Wiesner, 2023, pp. 3–4). We recognise that concepts are not static; rather, their meanings and political functions are constantly renegotiated, meaning they are actively contested and redefined through formal utterances, in this case through policy documents. A key to understanding concepts here is to accept temporality and historicity as their key characteristics, especially evident in technological progress.

Yet, applications of conceptual politics have remained underdeveloped in the context of contemporary EU digital policy, where different historical concepts and potentially conflicting values are frequently invoked, ranging from democracy to competitiveness. While scholars have examined technical aspects of regulation, institutional processes, and discursive strategies individually, less attention has been paid to their intersecting temporal dynamics. Examining these temporalities can reveal how core political concepts are reshaped through policy discourse and, in turn, how these reshaped concepts influence political practice.

To address this research gap, we ask how foundational political concepts are being renegotiated within recent EU digital policy discourse, and how this process of conceptual renegotiation, with its inherent temporal shifts, affects the nature of politics and governance in this domain. To answer these research

questions, we conduct an analysis grounded in conceptual politics, with a specific focus on the temporalisation of key concepts in selected policy documents. This involves treating time not merely as a backdrop but as a central resource and tool for political action embedded within conceptual language. We examine key EU policy documents related to digital rights and blockchain strategy, thereby covering both technology-neutral and technology-specific policies. This allows us to analyse the temporalities of technology governance that shape political concepts and their use, thereby influencing our social and material realities. Our contribution is twofold: First, we demonstrate the utility of the conceptual politics approach, with an emphasis on temporality as an integral component, for analysing how digital technologies forge political action within and through EU discourse. Secondly, we identify a paradoxical tension between the EU's future-oriented rhetoric on digital technologies and the simultaneous potential for this discourse to narrow political debate and reinforce technocratic governance patterns.

In the next section, we sketch out the contextual background for our argument, both in terms of the development of the EU digital policy and the key concepts we focus on in our analysis. The third section introduces our methodological approach to analysing technology governance through the lens of conceptual politics and its temporal dimensions. In the fourth section, we utilise these tools to examine the conceptual shifts in European digital policy by analysing both digital rights and blockchain as paradigmatic cases. Finally, we reflect both on the substantive findings of our analysis and how our conceptual approach can serve future research in understanding the conceptual and temporal shifts related to digital technology and politics.

2. The Contextual Backdrop: Dynamics of the EU Digital Policy

The EU's intensifying political engagement with digital technologies and their governance provides a well-documented context for studying the evolution of key concepts in politics. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this recent focus builds upon several decades of prior EU engagement with digitalisation, including foundational work on concepts such as e-democracy and e-participation, which inform the current landscape. Concepts central to European polity, such as sovereignty, rights, and governance, are inherently at stake and are being actively redefined within the specific context of European integration in general (Wiesner, 2023), but also in EU technology politics. With a perspective of political concepts and language, we analyse the rich selection of debates, reports, legislative documents, press releases, and working documents from differing, albeit complementary, angles: by focusing on classical key concepts in politics like democracy or citizenship; or by centring on a specific technology (AI or blockchain), or a technologically driven issue (standards, open-source, etc.). Therefore, the question of how key concepts are changing when they are used as objects and tools of politics is only one side of the coin, since technology, by its nature, alters our concepts. This is evident in how the meaning of privacy has shifted to focus primarily on the digital sphere with technological progress.

Authors across the fields of philosophy, sociology, political thought, and history have analysed the transformative role of technological development. From a temporal perspective, these analyses have typically focused on progress or acceleration as central categories. A well-known reference point is *Sattelzeit* (see Angster, 2024; Koselleck, 1967), i.e., a period of democratisation and modernisation between 1750 and 1850, and its impact on the experiences and concepts of that time, including progress and acceleration. Furthermore, Rosa, in analysing the interlinkages between social and technological acceleration, argues that the development of digital technologies has increased the dominance of time over space in our social

realities (Rosa, 2003, pp. 6–7). In Rosa's words, technological acceleration is an example of "acceleration *within* society" (2003, p. 7; emphasis in the original). A related strand of literature focuses on the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries (e.g., Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Konrad et al., 2016), which has focused on analysing visions underpinning technology policy. From the current EU perspective, the development of digital technologies can arguably be understood as a form of temporalisation, in which disruption and apparent risks challenge progress and acceleration as key categories for describing social and political experiences, though not necessarily the development of technology itself. In other words, the impact of digital technologies on individuals' everyday lives—through, for example, changes in the information environment or the negative effects of social media—has raised criticism of the determinism of progress and social acceleration. At the same time, progress and acceleration still seem to be influential categories broadly across contexts in the sense that the belief in technology still prevails.

The EU has increasingly framed its digital policy through ambitious future-oriented narratives in the context of technologies, such as big data, blockchain, and AI. Central to this is the concept of digital sovereignty, a term deployed rhetorically to signify the EU's aspiration for greater autonomy, control over critical infrastructure, and normative influence in the global digital landscape (Falkner et al., 2024). This narrative aims to position the EU as a distinct actor capable of shaping technological development according to its values and interests, impacting diverse areas from security integration (Bellanova et al., 2022) to the governance of emergent sectors like digital finance (Donnelly et al., 2024). The articulation of digital sovereignty thus functions not only as a political goal but also as a tool used to construct a particular vision of Europe's digital future. This also aligns with the EU's efforts to leverage the "Brussels effect"—its ability to shape global standards by making compliance with EU regulations attractive for foreign companies, even beyond its borders—as a way to position itself as a regulatory superpower in technology (Bradford, 2020). Relatedly, the EU has also spearheaded initiatives for international coordination on responsible and ethical technology, evident in UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention (2024), for instance.

However, there may be inherent tensions between the expansive rhetoric of sovereignty and the practical realities of its implementation (Falkner et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant now that the EU is implementing and enforcing enacted legislation such as the Digital Services Act, the Digital Markets Act, and the AI Act (European Commission, 2022a; Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 September 2022, 2022; Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024, 2024). While the debates on sovereignty often emphasise democratic values, the agreed policy measures to implement these values and political choices tend to gravitate towards technocratic modes of governance (O'Donovan, 2024), narrowing the range of perceived technological futures. This dynamic highlights a recurring challenge within the politics of "the digital" (Kaufmann & Jeandesboz, 2017), where technically complex issues are at risk of becoming depoliticised as inevitable trajectories, despite their significant societal implications. Similarly, debates over strategic technologies like AI expose competing visions of sovereignty, raising crucial questions about who this autonomy serves, which goals it advances, and who ultimately benefits, with the EU digital policy increasingly embracing the global technology race narrative (Mügge, 2024). This places digital sovereignty and its underlying economic and security motivations in potential friction with fundamental rights like data protection. Indeed, the ambiguous nature of digital sovereignty contributes to its political efficacy at the discursive level by masking underlying disagreements between EU actors.

These temporalities and the contested future expectations are particularly prominent with distributed ledger technology (DLT) and blockchain. Since its inception in the 1990s, blockchain has been subject to significant hype cycles, framed as a disruptive technology that allows one to reshape economic and political institutions to overcome issues such as distrust and corruption. Blockchain has been viewed as a crypto-anarchist, even neoliberal innovation, due to its connection to Bitcoin and other cryptographic currencies (Herian, 2018). Proponents of the technology present visions about revolutionary Web3 and 4 paradigms and radical political restructuring like the "network state," driven by speculative investments and techno-optimism. The EU has explored harnessing these technologies for a "public good" framed in a more institutionally grounded future (Hassan et al., 2020), generating significant ideological friction. Thus, the EU's digital policy grapples with leveraging blockchain technologies that are, by design, hostile to its centralised authority (De Filippi & Hassan, 2016). Therefore, the prevailing EU stance seems to assign future agency primarily to industries, research actors, and existing public institutions, in an attempt to steer the technology towards established policy horizons, despite the hyper-individualistic values underlying it. In contrast, only downstream concepts like digital rights focus on the constitution and practices of individual citizenship and the democratic basis of the EU as a polity, as discussed in Section 4.1.

The temporal nature of technology is also reflected as an inherent tension in developing regulation, especially in terms of the conflict between anticipatory regulation and the pace of technological development. According to the commonly referenced Collingridge dilemma, the effects of emerging technologies are hard to predict and govern early in their development, but once those societal impacts become clear, the technologies are often too entrenched to be regulated effectively (see Genus & Stirling, 2018). This temporal dynamic renders several conceptual and political openings, which revolve around balancing between technological innovations and risk mitigation. Namely, the EU has embraced the concept of future-proof regulation, referring to legislation that is flexible enough to stand the test of time without becoming obsolete or distorted (Colomo, 2022). One of the main instruments to achieve this is the principle of technology neutrality, which stands for regulating the effects of technologies broadly rather than favouring or discriminating against any particular technology itself. In practice, "what holds offline should also hold online" in terms of regulation, regardless of the technology underneath (Koops, 2006). In EU policy, technology neutrality is expected to lead to future-proof regulation by allowing the legislation to adapt to technological changes over time, rather than being tied to already obsolete technologies. This highlights how expectations of technological progress shape and influence regulatory and policy discourse and vice versa.

3. Temporality and Concepts as Heuristic Tools

In our analysis of the EU digital policy as conceptual politics, we emphasise its inherently temporal nature. This is to consider the different ways time can be perceived or articulated through concepts and their use, and how such temporal expressions shape politics. As an analytical frame to this article, we follow Palonen's (2003, 2006, 2008) and Wiesner's (2023) distinction between "politics as sphere" and "politics as activity" as an established way of understanding politics. The temporality of both dimensions can be explicated when we consider them through the concept of politics, broken down into four constitutive perspectives of policy, polity, politicking, and politicisation (Palonen, 2003). Within this group, policy and polity signify politics as a sphere, while politicking and politicisation constitute corresponding figures for politics as an activity. When analysing key concepts in EU policy documents on digital technologies, we are interested in both ways to understand politics from a temporal perspective. This choice allows us to study the context of a polity

(the EU), where a significant political push has occurred recently to generate a remarkable number of laws and regulation forming a policy (the EU digital policy), and understand what kind of possibilities for politicisation and politicking (political agency) this entails for different actors. In other words, we are interested in a temporal reading of digital technologies as conceptualised through the EU digital policy (politics as sphere) and agency in relation to it (politics as activity).

A central question in this approach is how digital technologies open up new possibilities for playing with time and temporality in politics, and how this conditions and enables agency, concerning both politics as a sphere and politics as an activity. Much of the politicisation of technology as a controversial issue for the EU has been successfully turned from a policy to a set of established regulations, while the implementation phase now opens up a horizon for politicking within the policy and for the politicisation of new issues in relation to that policy. The momentum of "digitalisation" and "digital technology" as politicised issues also allows for several sub-momenta and agendas to be pushed. In general, this temporal reading of politics, grounded in the analytical tools of conceptual politics, enables the identification of alternative, and often co-existing, temporal categories. By recognising concepts as inherently historical and temporal nodal points, conceptual politics offers a framework for a more detailed analysis of the temporal politics of digital technology in the EU. This concerns both the politics as sphere and politics as activity dimensions from two perspectives: First, in the sense of polity–policy, the EU is centred around key political concepts such as democracy, citizenship, sovereignty, or rights, codified into a legal order, and organised through a partly shared infrastructure including calendars and administrative systems. Second, in the sense of politicisation–politicking, agency within this context is thereby constituted through these key concepts, where the three classical dimensions of past, present, and future act as key elements for doing politics.

The EU as an evolving, contingent polity (Wiesner, 2023, p. 19) is not just a political, legal, and economic order, but also a temporal order. As Jordheim and Wigen (2018) argue in their analysis of the international order and its temporality, one way to produce a temporal synchronisation is through technological innovations such as clocks or infrastructure, while another way is to use concepts to order events and objects politically. Understood as a polity, the EU marks "a metaphorical space that demarcates the 'political sphere' from other spheres" (Palonen, 2003), which then also signifies a paradigm and horizon for politicking. The EU digital policy directs political action within an "extended present"—such as an electoral cycle or another defined timeframe—based on an assumption of temporal linearity. It emphasises a future-oriented perspective that prioritises the future over the present and, as such, carries implicit normative commitments. In Palonen's (2003) temporal reading, a policy also includes a dichotomy of realisability and a fixed moral desirability, which are inherently in opposition to one another. As the recently enacted EU digital regulations are now being implemented, this interplay between realisability and desirability remains a relevant point of political action in the coming years.

For our analysis, the use of the past, present, and future concerning political agency is especially relevant, as is the tension between experience and expectation. Koselleck (2004) famously builds his conceptual analysis on the categories of experience and expectation, which he describes as a couple "redoubled upon itself" (Koselleck, 2004, p. 257). Koselleck goes on to analyse the temporal relationship between these two categories, emphasising their interconnection while also insisting on their distinctiveness in relation to each other. In temporal terms, he argues that an expectation cannot be entirely deduced from experience, which according to him "once made is as complete as its occasions are past; that which is to be done in the future, which is anticipated in terms of expectation, is scattered among an infinity of temporal extensions" (p. 260).

The outcome of Koselleck's analysis is the two spatio-temporal analytical categories, namely the space of experience (*Erfahrungsraum*) and the horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*).

The categories of experience and expectation remain relevant in the context of the politics of the EU digital policy, especially in the way they can be used to consider the interplay between the past, present, and future, and the balance between these categories in policy documents. If one believes that technology politics is rendering politics more future-oriented, Friberg's (2021) development of the horizon of expectations towards the direction of utopias offers another option for linking the hype and future-heaviness of technology discourses from an alternative perspective. Focusing especially on Ernst Bloch's work, she argues that the concept of the utopian has not been sufficiently developed, and seeks to link politics with long-term visions, utopias, and political imaginaries, ending up with a proposal on the reading of concrete utopias.

Our analysis deals with an ongoing political momentum involving key political concepts, rapidly advancing technological development and a recently constructed political-legal apparatus with yet unrealised political consequences. To support an understanding of the temporality generated through key concepts in context, we refer back to the directionality of the conceptual, political, social, and cultural movements (for an elaboration, see Wiesner et al., 2018, p. 6; see also Wiesner, 2023). Building on literature from the history of ideas and conceptual history, it is possible to differentiate between four main ways in which concepts and our historical, political, and social realities are interlinked. These include situations in which (a) no change is happening and both concepts and the political, social, and institutional realities are developing jointly; (b) the realities are changing before the concepts, generating discrepancies between the lived experiences and languages; (c) the concepts precede changes in these realities when pushed and developed by influential actors; and (d) the concept and lived realities are moving in opposite directions, where there are not yet aptly developed concepts to match or some new concepts are not reflected by the realities. Since this division allows for a discussion of the interlinkages between institutional, social, and conceptual change in reference to both politics as sphere and politics as activity dimensions of politics, it supports the analysis of politics in all four senses (policy, polity, politicking, and politicisation) in our context.

4. Analysing the Conceptual Politics of the EU Digital Policy

In this section, we examine how technology shapes political concepts temporally through two distinct yet interconnected cases: digital rights and blockchain. We employ these cases as entry points to the potential controversies and struggles over digital technology as a political issue in the EU: how is it politicised, which kind of framings end up as policy-level utterances, how are key political concepts used in these framings, and how can we understand political agency in this context? Drawing on the conceptual politics approach, we therefore focus on complementary cases that, first, operate with one of the basic legal, political, and conceptual categories in democracy (digital rights); and second, open a window to a specific technology (blockchain). Comparing the discourse in policy documents surrounding digital rights, rooted in citizenship and participation, with blockchain, framed through technology governance, economics, and infrastructure, allows us to illuminate these crucial dynamics. This contrast is analytically valuable because it highlights: (a) how established concepts adapt versus how new ones are forged; (b) the interplay of different temporal logics (appeals to past versus future expectations); and (c) the inherent tensions between granting agency to citizens versus institutions within the EU's overall digital policy. Methodologically, our analysis adopts a conceptual politics approach, drawing inspiration from frameworks like Wiesner's (2023), which focuses on

concepts as sites of political struggle and examines the actors, concepts, and controversies (implicitly via policy documents) involved in shaping policy narratives.

To unpack these temporally-attuned conceptual politics, we analyse how key political concepts (e.g., democracy, governance, rights, and agency) are framed and deployed differently across the digital rights and blockchain as policy domains. Our analysis concentrates on publicly available EU policy documents, including strategies, communications, legislative proposals, press releases, and related materials. Following Palonen's (2003) temporal reading of policy and Wijermars and Makhortykh (2022), we treat these documents not merely as descriptive outputs but as performative interventions that attempt to articulate specific political visions, codify past struggles, and shape future possibilities. By examining the language, framing, and underlying assumptions within these texts through the contrasting lenses of digital rights and blockchain, we aim to understand the "how" behind particular conceptual choices and rhetorical strategies (Wiesner, 2023, p. 8), thereby exposing the political activity involved in constructing Europe's digital future. The paradoxical application of blockchain—a technology with individualistic decentralised roots—within the EU's technocratic and institutional framework provides a particularly compelling illustration of these conceptual tensions when contrasted with the rights discourse.

4.1. Digital Rights as a Technology-Neutral Concept

In 2022, the Commission, the European Council, and the European Parliament signed a Joint Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade (European Commission, 2022c). The driver for this was the von der Leyen Commission's choice to develop a distinctively European approach to digital policy with European values as a key frame. We base our examples here on the Declaration, the Commission communications, the staff working document on public consultation, and the monitoring report from 2024. This provides a temporally condensed entry point into the extended present of the EU digital policy through the concept of digital rights. Since the Declaration, the Commission has also adopted an EU Citizenship Package, which has been introduced as a tool for strengthening European citizenship rights. The effects of the Declaration and the potential introduction of further regulations have been evaluated in the Evaluation Reports (European Commission, 2024a), which were established as a monitoring tool in connection with the Declaration. These evaluations provide an entry point to politicise new issues, repoliticise something that has been sidelined, or depoliticise a previously controversial topic.

The Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles is explicitly building on the Treaty of the European Union and European values. The opening statement from the Communication by President von der Leyen (European Commission, 2022c, p. 1) highlights "human-centred digital transition," which "is about who we want to be, as Europeans." The Declaration introduces a set of principles: (a) Putting people and their rights at the centre of the digital transformation; (b) supporting solidarity and inclusion; (c) ensuring freedom of choice online; (d) fostering participation in the digital public space; (e) increasing safety, security, and empowerment of individuals (especially young people); and (f) promoting the sustainability of the digital future (European Commission, 2023). These principles are not legislative initiatives, which suggest politicking with the interplay between digital technologies and European citizenship, and add meaning to how rights can be articulated and practised in the EU.

Emphasising the EU Treaty and European values also suggests a reference to a shared past, which the Commission redefines as a response to a contemporary political challenge. This implies that the political and social developments around digital technologies challenge and politicise the basic elements of the EU polity—its values and key categories of democracy, rights and citizenship—and that they therefore are now an integral part of the political struggle and controversy within and beyond the EU. Indeed, the Commission communication frames the digital principles as "essential concepts, based on common European values, and serving as guidance for a human-centred, secure, inclusive, and open digital environment, where no one is left behind" (European Commission, 2022c, p. 1). Emphasising the future beyond the extended present of the policy, it refers to the 2030 Digital Compass and to "a digitally transformed Europe of 2030 in line with European values" with "empowered citizens and innovative businesses," which reinforces "our digital leadership" and makes "the digital transformation the engine of sustainable economic growth, and social well-being in Europe" (European Commission, 2022c, pp. 1–2).

The documents also demonstrate the EU's political agency within the international order, referring again to a historical condition where the EU "has always been at the forefront of the promotion of fundamental rights on the global stage, including at the United Nations" (European Commission, 2022c, p. 8). Generating a temporal horizon towards the future with a moral codification, the Declaration argues that the EU is "in a position to retain this role as responsible global leader of a human-centred and value-based approach model in the digital age" (European Commission, 2022c, p. 8). As part of the future horizon of expectation, technology is expected to offer "significant opportunities for a better quality of life, economic growth and sustainability," even if digital transformation also challenges democratic societies (European Commission, 2023). The Declaration includes explicit expressions for temporality, namely "acceleration" and "the time has come" to argue for political action by linking the established (past) agreements (values and fundamental rights) with the ongoing controversy (politics) to ensure a normatively desired future (a digitally transformed Europe):

> With the acceleration of the digital transformation, the time has come for the EU to spell out how its values and fundamental rights applicable offline should be applied in the digital environment. The digital transformation should not entail the regression of rights. What is illegal offline, is illegal online. This Declaration is without prejudice to 'offline policies,' such as having access to key public services offline. (European Commission, 2023)

The quote stresses the continuity in securing fundamental rights also in the context of digital technologies, which implies an interpretation of technology neutrality (see Koops, 2006). In this reading, future technologies should not affect how the rights protect European citizens, even if the future of that development is open-ended. Therefore, the possibility of a contingent reading of fundamental rights is closed, and their meaning is fixed to the present and the past. Instead of describing the future through any specific technological innovation, the Declaration articulates the horizon of expectation for the future as "a dynamic, resource-efficient, and fair economy and society in the EU" (European Commission, 2023). Moreover, this future should be taken to mean "digital sovereignty in an open manner, respect for fundamental rights, rule of law and democracy, inclusion, accessibility, equality, sustainability, resilience, security, improving quality of life, the availability of services, and respect of everyone's rights and aspirations" (European Commission, 2023). This aspirational language tends to gloss over the tensions and trade-offs inherent to the governance of digital technologies. It presents technological development as seamlessly aligned and conceptually interwoven with rights and citizenship while downplaying the potential

for economic and political conflicts and exclusions that may arise in practice.

The public consultation process between the Commission Communications and the final Declaration was an official opportunity to challenge and introduce new elements to the principles. The Staff Working Document (European Commission, 2022b) summarises the consultation process for a range of stakeholders, with the note that, while the overall recommendations received support across the groups, additional suggestions were also put forth. The conceptual choices and their use were not entirely clear, since "the concepts of 'rights' and 'principles' were used in an interchangeable manner in some of the responses" (European Commission, 2022b, p. 11), which shows potential controversy in how the Declaration was interpreted concerning rights. The role and purpose of the Declaration were also contested with requests for additional clarity on this, especially on its relation to the existing rights and principles in legal or other frameworks (European Commission, 2022b, p. 11). Thus, there was a lack of clarity both about the definition of the basic concept of "rights" in this context and how this reinterpretation of rights would change the already established polity of citizens' rights in the context of digital policy. This can be read as a case where a conceptual innovation (digital rights) is being pushed forward without the everyday experiences of citizens fully aligning with its meaning or use. This reading becomes more prominent when combined with the concerns raised in the Staff Working Document's analysis of the results, which concludes that there is a need to inform EU citizens better about their rights in the online environment (European Commission, 2022b, p. 22), as the consultation process revealed a lack of understanding of those rights on the part of citizens.

The claims for adding the right to opt out, the right to disconnect, and the right to articulate digital technology as a means rather than an end indicate arguments for an active and informed practice of citizenship and rights (European Commission, 2022b, pp. 19–22). According to the Staff Working Document, the right to opt out was proposed by several respondents who "elaborated on the need to have principles that would set out the possibility of alternatives (or choice) in a digital society" (European Commission, 2022b, p. 19). This principle also represents playing with the temporality of opportunity and occasion, where the individual can choose how to act on a case-by-case basis. It also allows one to contest the power of the technology giants, in which such an option would already be included in a codification of future policies as a temporally singular act (opting out). Arguments in support of this right were also linked to the horizon of possibilities through a need to "specify that persons should not be overly dependent on certain digital technologies (from large corporations) to determine their future or actions" (European Commission, 2022b, p. 21) in a way that citizens would have the right to end their contract with a digital platform whenever they so choose.

The digital rights outlined above display a certain resistance to a future, while simultaneously taking the continuous interlinking of individual agencies with digital technology for granted. The ambitious and aspirational language embedded in the Declaration is rather aligned with the EU's push for digital sovereignty and respect for the technology-neutral realisation of fundamental rights as a democratic backbone. Yet, as the rather uncritical nature of the Declaration and the Staff Working Document analysis showcase, there remains a threat of technocratic governance, which can limit the horizon of expectations at the cost of citizens. These tensions between temporality and technocracy are arguably even more apparent in the context of blockchain technologies.

4.2. Blockchain as a Technology-Specific Concept

The strategy and regulation of blockchain are technology-specific issues in the broader context of the EU digital policy, representing a more reactive approach to technology policy. As noted, the economic and technological momentum and opportunism heavily informed the introduction of DLTs and blockchain by the Commission. The Commission's Blockchain Strategy forms a background for regulatory packages such as Markets in Crypto-Assets regulation (Regulation (EU) 2023/1114 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 31 May 2023, 2023) and the launch of the European Blockchain Regulatory Sandbox as part of the European Blockchain Services Infrastructure. Mostly driven by the first von der Leyen Commission, the Blockchain Strategy (European Commission, 2024b) itself is a rather brief output of outspoken ambitions and entries on its website, which describe a set of activities and actors involved. Here, we base our analysis on a selection of relevant policy documents, news, declarations, and other publicly available documents of the Commission's Blockchain Strategy. The EU's blockchain policy and politics reach into various dimensions—from international relations and the EU's global position in emerging technologies to the efficiency of public administration, the free mobility of EU citizens, and the development of digital markets. In a conceptual and political sense, this constructs a nexus between (public) governance as a historically formatted complexity of processes, practices, and institutions in Europe, and DLTs as a part of the "digital revolution."

In this case, blockchain technology comes with a degree of associated meanings to it, generated by both its technological roots and the translation of these into different contexts. The narrative and technological development of blockchain derives from the development of a cryptographically secured chain of blocks (see e.g., Haber & Stornetta, 1991) into increasingly applied technology that can be used to contest centralised power. The technology has since opened up new dimensions in business development and, more recently, in economic policy (for original proposals in practical application, see Haber & Stornetta, 1991, pp. 452–453). The ethos of increasing trustworthiness and transparency is also central in the EU Blockchain Strategy discourse, while still carrying some of the ideological roots of disruption and transformativeness along. Many of the intended uses of the technology are linked to questions surrounding economic activity, such as the development of the digital euro, the creation of crypto wallets, and, more generally, the promotion of the European single market. As such, the Blockchain Strategy projects a future heavily reliant on advancements within the economic and infrastructural spheres, contingent upon sufficient technological development, and its widespread adoption. In contrast to digital rights, individuals here appear primarily as consumers benefiting from more efficient DLT services, rather than as citizens engaging in democratic processes. This framing inevitably lends itself to a more techno-solutionist future vision.

Out of the key political concepts, governance and economy are both central to the policy surrounding blockchain. The concept of governance has two main meanings here, as a conceptual and technical distinction can be made between the governance of DLTs and governance with DLTs. The first alternative refers to how the design, development, and deployment of blockchain could and should take place. In turn, the second option opens up a horizon of alternatives for considering how this technology can be utilised in the public sector, for example, to provide services. A key concept concerning the Blockchain Strategy and its extensions is the concept of "ecosystem," which the documents utilise to depict a network of key actors, such as EU institutions, technology developers, economic institutions, private companies, and researchers. Reflecting this, the future contexts for deploying blockchain technology include public services, data

transfer, economic transactions, and cross-border services for verifying information, where blockchain is used to improve, create, enable, or protect transactions (European Commission, 2024b). As such, the future potential of blockchain includes an increase in trust and transparency, but also an increase in control over agreements (European Commission, 2024b). To make this envisioned future possible, the present technological innovations, and the technocratic and economic power they carry, are codified into the policy's extended present. At the same time, they reach beyond their formal timeline, since the resulting technological and economic infrastructure requires ongoing maintenance, adaptation, and revision. Politicisations in such a polity, and politicking within such a policy, then assumes a degree of technical understanding of governance in both senses.

The embedded future-orientedness in the strategy includes both expectations for reinforced values, such as trust, transparency, security, and integrity, as well as a strong emphasis on economic activities. The horizon of expectations for blockchain also covers sustainability, where it is envisioned to be "a powerful tool that can significantly improve the transparency, accountability, and traceability of greenhouse gas emissions" (European Commission, 2024b). As such, the technically decentralised basis of blockchain is envisioned to strengthen the integrated market and innovation and to build an ecosystem for generating a shared horizon of expectation where blockchain is an integral part of the European digital transformation. These expectations are largely speculative and still distant from the ongoing present. The hype over the possibilities of Web 3 and 4 technologies, the visions for a state governed through blockchain, or the other idealisations of the Silicon Valley ideology, remain far away from the everyday experience of citizens in a broad sense.

In this sense, the far-reaching visions put forward by the Commission are partly an example of, again, innovation-driven politics and articulation driven from the top down with a temporal distance to the social reality of citizens. At the same time, in principle, blockchain continues to provide an opportunity for challenging the mainstream power structures when applied to, e.g., local economic activity or commons used for political activism and contestation of the established political regimes (Hassan et al., 2020). The potential for disrupting, even at a small scale, the linear future-orientedness of the fixed technological and temporal order, remains a horizon of politicisation even when the EU claims a programmatic approach to its development and utilisation. In this sense, it looks as if the Commission's conceptual push for Blockchain and the technological, political, and social reality of at least some groups of individuals might be going in opposite directions, with one highlighting the role of public governance and the other fundamental contestation to it. Indeed, one could argue that blockchain is by design hostile to the centralised authority of the EU (see De Filippi & Hassan, 2016), representing a struggle over policy horizons.

Contrary to blockchain as a particular technology, which is decentralised and focused on the (hyper)individual agent, the Blockchain Strategy displays a rather technocratic future and limits the role of democratic debate by highlighting the role of experts over citizens. In the strategy, agency is constituted through a strong role for the public sector and established economic institutions, which are positioned both as beneficiaries and drivers of the utilisation and development of blockchain, with a particular emphasis on leadership. According to the examples, "the European public sector is playing a trailblazing role in blockchain by building its own blockchain infrastructure" (European Commission, 2024b), where such initiatives as the introduction of regulatory sandboxes, for example, should bring together "regulators, companies, and tech experts" (European Commission, 2024b). The Commission also wants to engage "strategic partners,

including UN agencies and international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development" (European Commission, 2024b) in the horizon of activities. In a technocratic fashion, individuals are reduced to consumers who are primarily users of services and economic systems based on this technology.

5. Conclusions

Our analysis of the EU digital policy as temporally-attuned conceptual politics and renegotiation yields several key conclusions. In reference to politics as a sphere, the examined policy documents showcase the dynamics of digital technology as an object of politics and policymaking as well as a tool for politicking, loading in certain future expectations, and codifying the space of experience, to an extent. As part of the extended present of EU digital policy, the example of digital rights displays references to the shared EU past through rights, values, and citizenship, while generating a vision for the future where digital technologies are leveraged without violating fundamental rights. Politics as activity is, by extension, constituted through the agency of the EU, its members, and political institutions, in reference to sovereignty and democratic values, as part of the international order. Yet even here, EU policies express technocratic tendencies, potentially curtailing the agency of individual citizens whose participatory avenues are increasingly tied to the logics and rules of existing digital platforms. These dynamics are even more apparent with blockchain technology, where the EU's more reactive embrace of technology has shifted the agency to the public sector and economic institutions at the expense of individual citizens, despite the individualistic notions behind the technology. Indeed, both cases demonstrate the EU's efforts to actively shape and articulate forward-looking policies on digital technology, which simultaneously threatens to narrow the horizon of expectations towards seemingly "inevitable" technological directions in a technocratic fashion.

In reference to Koselleck (2004), the interplay between experience and expectation highlights the complex temporal negotiation between them in the context of digital technologies, especially now that technologies like generative AI have come to dominate much of the debate. These mutually enforcing categories remind us about the balance between basing regulation on our existing concepts and experiences while anticipating future risks. In practice, this means relying on and choosing between our existing experiences, since it is impossible to anticipate all potential scenarios and impacts of technological development. While policymaking as a form of political action is always future-oriented, the rapid pace of technological development puts distinct pressure on such efforts, as reflected in the concept of future-proof regulation. An interesting question is whether the rapid development of digital technologies and their increasing deployment across society are drawing us toward conceptualising our horizon of expectations in terms of concrete utopias (cf. Friberg, 2021). Expanding these horizons could help resist technological determinism by creating more space for politicisation and meaningful political action.

In the case of digital rights and citizenship, the policy documents suggest that digitalisation shapes the temporality of these basic concepts by actualising the past experiences and established meanings in a new temporal horizon, towards a new conceptual order, as demonstrated by the shift from offline to online contexts. The case of blockchain and its technological roots provides another angle to this, as it can be seen as a digital solution to a problem created by digitalisation itself. As such, it shows how digitalisation shifts past experiences and offline practices, and how the need to replicate the same ideals and values online (in a very pragmatic sense), can drive technological innovation—even if misconstrued. As the emergence of

concepts like algorithmic discrimination shows, the digital environment is intertwined with our political, social, and historical experiences, but a specific technology can reshape these dynamics in complex ways. When we employ our classical conceptual tools and vocabulary to understand new phenomena influenced or brought about by digitalisation, this challenges our agency in a conceptual sense: we are essentially relying on a space of experience that proves insufficient to fully articulate the new expectations created by digital technologies. Yet, simultaneously, issues such as algorithmic discrimination underscore that historical biases and political conditions readily translate through technological systems to produce tangible, real-world consequences in the present.

In terms of the four dynamics between concepts and our political, social, and cultural reality (see Wiesner, 2023; Wiesner et al., 2018), it could be said that the EU is indeed leading from the top by generating a conceptual and legal apparatus for technology to steer the political and social reality forward. While technological change precedes concepts to some degree, the EU is arguably not merely responding to these political and social realities but also actively shaping and conceptualising them. This is especially evident from a global perspective, where the EU tries to position itself as a "third way" between the technological laissez-faire approach of the US and China's state-led model. This regulatory statecraft relies heavily on a specific conceptual framework centred around terms like trustworthiness, human-centricity, and digital sovereignty and exporting these conceptual benchmarks globally through the Brussels effect (Bradford, 2020). However, the above is also a question of degree, since concepts like digital rights are not EU inventions but have been used previously by a variety of actors, especially representatives of civil society. Given the fast pace of technological development and the political choice of the EU to act as a frontrunner in regulation, it is also possible that the concepts and reality are, in some instances, moving in opposite directions. The conceptual tools used in shaping policy in the context of governance, such as technology neutrality and regulatory sandboxes, can potentially mitigate such situations by attempting to "future-proof" the regulation of technology over time, or at least render legislation more flexible and amendable to such conceptual conflicts. Still, as the use and deployment of any technology provides yet another chance for unprecedented consequences, the possibility of opposite directions remains.

Technology politics, as reflected in EU digital policy and its documentation, combines the key concepts spanning the spectrum from technology development to democracy and the economy. By focusing on temporality and its analysis by using concepts as objects of research, it is possible to understand how digital technologies distinctly change politics and its language. Digital technologies are highly scalable, unpredictable in their use, tend to generate technocratic exclusion, and are being developed at a rapid pace. Meanwhile, the EU's regulation of digital technology often implicitly and explicitly prioritises a forward-looking narrative centred on progress and development. This emphasis, however, affects the complex temporalities of key concepts, such as "agency," by potentially disrupting how their meanings synchronise or desynchronise with lived experiences over time. One should note that our aim here has been to research a specific conceptual nexus generated by the intersection of digital technologies and politics in the EU context. This choice leaves room for more focused analyses, but also for developing the choice of analytical categories further, namely the conceptual lens. This limitation of the article opens up the possibility of future research applications to other contexts: focusing the analysis on a single concept or a policy process, including the debates, would enable further analytical nuances into how foundational political concepts are being renegotiated.

In conclusion, we have presented a possible way in which a conceptual analysis, with an emphasis on temporal readings of concepts and politics, can open up avenues for exploring the implications of digital technologies on our political language and for politics as an activity interwoven with time. In reference to previous authors on the interlinks between temporality, concepts, and politics, we have summarised this approach as conceptual politics with specific emphasis on temporality. Through two contemporary cases of the EU's digital policies, digital rights and blockchain, we have identified a central tension between the EU's future-oriented digital policy and the simultaneous narrowing of the horizon of future expectations and agency. These technocratic tendencies around technological development risk obscuring the contested nature of politics. Future research should further develop this approach to enable a more temporal reading of the EU's technology governance and politics.

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Conflict of Interests

Johannes Mikkonen is a former, and Johannes Anttila is a current, policy advisor on digital issues in the European Parliament. The research and conceptual analysis in this article predate their respective roles. The other authors declare no competing interests.

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Liberal and Deliberative Democracy in the Global South: Models, Functions, Practices

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Abstract

Deliberative democracy is a consolidated strand of political theory, its current expansion sustained by ongoing experiments in political practice. Initially, model-based theories framed deliberation as a corrective to shortcomings in liberal democracy. More recent approaches shift the focus away from theoretical models and towards the political problems that deliberation can solve. Yet these approaches, too, suffer from a "Global North bias," centering theories and cases predominantly from wealthy Western countries. This article turns the gaze towards the Global South to counter this bias. I bring Mark Warren's problem-based approach into dialogue with evidence from Demo.Reset, a project that documented deliberative practices by 105 practitioners across 22 countries in the Global South, to provide a situated and differential account of the functions of deliberation across global contexts: foster pluralism, develop coalitions, and enable collective action. This category-building effort aims to inform democratic theory with global, plural reflections.

Keywords

collective action; deliberation; deliberative democracy; liberal democracy; Global South; pluralism

1. Introduction

Deliberative theory first emerged as a challenger to shortcomings in liberal conceptions of democracy. Liberal models, as enacted in electoral-representative democracies, restrict political participation to the act of voting in elections and disregard more meaningful engagement in the decisions that affect citizens' lives (e.g., Dryzek, 2002, p. 50; Saward, 2003, p. 41). But elections are insufficient to authentically represent the diversity of positions across the population (e.g., Fishkin, 2009), given that the mere "counting of votes…prevents citizens from being able to demonstrate the intensity of the preferences that they hold"

(Elstub, 2018, p. 189). Lower political mobilization, especially among structurally disadvantaged groups who see little chance to improve their conditions via aggregative methods, endows already better-positioned groups—those who "speak louder"—with greater influence (Cohen, 2009, p. 248). Moreover, although citizens elect their representatives, vast political decision-making power remains "safely left in the hands of non-majoritarian and counter-majoritarian institutions…independent from the electoral cycle," who still hold the power to "set the terms of public debates," "to shape the political agenda of legislatures, and to establish multiple veto points" (Palumbo, 2023, pp. 65–66).

Deliberative democrats embarked on a theoretical project to surmount those limitations, placing public participation and reasoned exchange at the core of democratic norms. Developing upon participatory conceptions of democracy, deliberative democrats underscored citizen engagement, equality, and considered judgment. They maintain that the giving and receiving of arguments should be at the center of "public reasoning" (Cohen, 2009, p. 250). Inclusive, argument-based dialogue allows citizens to reflect on their own views, learn from others, potentially transform their preferences, and thus produce more legitimate (Dryzek, 2002), robust (Cohen, 2009), epistemically diverse (Landemore, 2012), and just (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) political decisions.

Over decades and "generations" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 4; Elstub et al., 2016, p. 142), from foundational conceptualization efforts to sophisticated empirical experiments, deliberative democracy has evolved into one of the fastest-growing, most vibrant fields in political studies. In recent years, however, efforts have increasingly focused on better understanding the precise democratizing function of deliberation. While democratic theories typically contrasted "deliberative" to "aggregative" models (Warren, 2017, p. 40), recent inquiry has attempted to move beyond norm-centered models towards plural accounts of democratic norms and practices (e.g., Asenbaum, 2025; Gagnon et al., 2021; Lancelle-Webster & Warren, 2023).

Despite the growing "global reach" of deliberative democracy (Curato et al., 2020, p. 60), theory and empirical research have not reflected truly global developments. Foundational studies in the field were informed by political practice in the Global South, such as Kerala's *gram sabhas* (Heller et al., 2007) and Brazil's Participatory Budgeting (Avritzer, 2006). But, over the past two decades, studies of deliberation have increasingly focused on deliberative practices hailing from the Global North. The current popularity of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) illustrates this point. These deliberative forums operationalize the mandates of inclusive and reasoned dialogue through careful design, participation by "civic lottery" or sortition, curated expert information, and facilitated discussions, to craft policy recommendations that reflect citizen preferences after considered judgment. DMPs have earned international attention due to highly publicized cases like Ireland's Constitutional Assemblies (2012–2023) and France's Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (2019–2020). Some maintain that a "deliberative wave" (OECD, 2023) has taken over liberal democracies and beckons deliberation as a "cure" to the democratic malaise (c.f. Elstub, 2018, p. 187). Yet DMPs have taken place almost exclusively in the Global North; only 2% of cases in the OECD (2023) and 8% in the CRC1265 (2021) databases occurred in the Global South.

This "Global North bias" in contemporary deliberative democratic scholarship and practice has not gone unnoticed. The field's hyperfocus on deliberative practices that are dominant in the Global North renders current scholarship inaccurate and incomplete in its representation of how deliberation effectively takes place, on the ground, across the world. This has elicited recent calls to decenter (Scudder, 2021; Williams,

2020), decolonize (Banerjee, 2021; Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025), and ground (Curato et al., 2025) deliberative theory in truly global experiences. Such calls further invite scholars to consider the underpinnings of democratic theory under a critical light, broadening the sources and approaches behind theory and category-building (c.f. Asenbaum, 2022). This article is situated among these calls, and asks: How does deliberation supplement liberal democracy's shortcomings in the Global South? What are the democratic functions of deliberation?

To answer these questions, I first briefly review the deliberative critique of liberal democracy, the advantages envisaged for deliberation, and recent efforts to move beyond model-based theories to better account for the role of deliberation. Where model-based approaches center normative claims around certain practices and institutions, problem-based approaches instead identify *functions* that *practices* must fulfil to enact democratic norms (Scudder, 2021; Warren, 2017). However, these efforts to rethink democratic theorizing (Asenbaum, 2022; Asenbaum et al., 2023) are constrained by their Global North bias. I flag the current under-exploration, under-documentation, and under-representation of global deliberative practices in the field, which frame this article's contribution to ongoing reflection in the field.

In response to those limitations, I propose that, to understand the democratic functions of deliberation, we must turn the gaze to the Global South. Section 3 outlines the ethos and approach of the grounded normative theory and democratic theorizing, which guide this article. I bring Mark Warren's problem-based approach (2017) into dialogue with evidence from Demo.Reset, a project documenting deliberative practices by 105 organizations across 22 Global South countries (Extituto, 2023, 2024). The term "Global South" is not used here uncritically; rather, it signals geopolitical and epistemic hierarchies and preexisting inequalities that condition how those doing deliberation situate themselves, how they conduct deliberation, and what goals they pursue with it.

I find that Warren's (2017) functions more accurately explain how Global South practitioners deploy deliberation than liberal and deliberative model-based theories. These findings are discussed in Section 4. I show that practitioners across the Global South use deliberation as part of wider participatory repertoires for both strategic and substantive ends that resonate with Warren's three categories: empowering inclusions, forming collective agendas, and reaching collective decisions. I present practitioner accounts to illustrate what forms of deliberation take place in the Global South, and what their functions are: as a way of promoting pluralism, as a channel for coalition building, and an enabler of collective action. This analysis contributes to a more accurate, differential, and situated account of deliberative practices in the Global South. I conclude with a reflection on three implications deriving from this category-building exercise: open lines for further inquiry on the explanatory capacity of situated categories, the need to account for the strategic use of deliberative practices within wider participatory repertoires, and the relevance of documenting and studying Global South practices without romanticizing or essentializing them.

2. Conceptualizing the Democratic Function of Deliberation

This section briefly reviews the development of deliberative theory as a rebuttal to shortcomings in liberal conceptions of democracy, followed by critiques of model-based democratic theory, and the current shift towards understanding the democratic functions of political practice. Within the latter strand, this study is inscribed alongside emerging calls for pluralizing democratic theory beyond Global North visions and practices.

2.1. Liberal and Deliberative Models

Deliberative democracy first emerged as a response to limitations of concepts and practices of liberal democracy with regard to its goal of enabling "the rule of the people" (Cohen, 2009, p. 248; Fishkin, 2009, pp. 48–49; Held, 2006, p. 232ff; Warren, 2017, p. 70). For the purposes of this article, liberal democracy is understood as the "Anglo-American template" (Palumbo, 2023, p. 4) that entails (a) periodic general elections, (b) party competition, and (c) constitutional guarantees, including the rule of law, separation of powers, and civil liberties. This definition echoes Dahl's (1979/2020) classic formulation of "acceptable hybrids" of polyarchy, where necessary components of the liberal democratic mandate are fair, periodic, and competitive general elections among organized political forces. Similarly, in David Held's classic account, liberal democracy entails "elected 'officials' who 'represent' the interests or views of citizens within the framework of the 'rule of law'" (2006, p. 62). These three elements—elections, representation, and the rule of law—"provide citizens with a satisfactory means to choose, approve, and control political decisions" (Held, 2006, p. 70).

Deliberative theorists maintained that electoral-representative democracies, the modern political enactment of liberal models, failed to deliver on their democratic promise. Aggregative procedures like elections in mass democracies are exclusionary because they fail to meaningfully capture and represent the diversity of views, positions, and identities in a political community. In a pivotal book on the tension between liberal and deliberative democracy, John Dryzek critiqued the design of liberal democratic institutions around individual entitlements, which disregards the "social embeddedness" of individuals (2002, p. 8). He proposed deliberative democracy as a "critical" alternative that is "well equipped to respond to challenges presented by deep plurality and difference in the political composition of society" (Dryzek, 2002, p. 30). Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson likewise contended that liberal democracies take individual preferences "as a given" and prioritize translating them as "fixed positions," neglecting how those preferences come to be (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 13–14). Deliberative democracy, instead, is grounded in the assumption "that deliberators are amenable to changing their judgements, preferences, and views during the course of their interactions, which involve persuasion rather than coercion, manipulation, or deception" (Dryzek, 2002, p. 1).

How does deliberation supplement those shortcomings? What is the specific democratic function of deliberation? Early theorizations emphasized different normative models and explanations. For Gutmann and Thompson, deliberative democracy "affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives" to one another (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3). In their view, deliberation foregrounds the pluralistic nature of societies, where disagreement necessarily arises, and promotes resolving those disagreements by encouraging individuals to "find justifications that minimize their differences with their opponents" and, in so doing, "come to accept the legitimacy of a collective decision" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 3–10). Similarly, Dryzek saw the critical potential of deliberation in *bridging* across difference and conflict, "encouraging reflection upon preferences without coercion" and openness to "preference transformation within political interaction" (Dryzek, 2002, pp. 8, 10). Cohen defined deliberative democracy as "a political arrangement that ties the exercise of collective power to *reason-giving* among those subject to collective decisions" (Cohen, 2009, p. 248, emphasis added).

Over time, "conceptual innovations" (Palumbo, 2023, p. 157), practical exercises of deliberation, and empirical research have contributed to expanding visions of how deliberation can supplement or improve the *legitimacy*

of political decisions. Carefully designed deliberative practices have sought to translate the "ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2). In this vision of deliberation, collective reasoning and procedural guarantees are expected to supplement the acceptance of outcomes. Others, like Iris Marion Young, argued that deliberation should instead emphasize the *inclusion* of historically marginalized groups and voices, making it a tool to address political inequality (Young, 1996, p. 125). Others, yet, maintain that deliberation improves the *epistemic* quality of decisions: diversity should lead to better decisions, resulting in "not just fairer but overall smarter collective decisions" (Landemore, 2012, p. 2).

2.2. Models to Problems to Functions

Both liberal and deliberative democrats situate political participation within norm-centered models. Model-based theorizing is helpful because it "clarifies normative presuppositions, enabling critical debate about better and worse forms of democracy" (Warren, 2017, p. 40)—it provides an "a priori theory of what democracy is and, therefore, both where it should be going and how it gets there" (Gagnon et al., 2021, p. 3). Theoretical models identify the "changing meanings" of democracy over time, pinning down "key positions and arguments," revealing "its underlying structure of relations" (Held, 2006, p. 6). As such, they are both descriptive and prescriptive—they tie together "ideas of democracy" and the "social and historic conditions" of their occurrence (Held, 2006, p. 8). For instance, while there is consensus that deliberation entails more than plain dialogue, there is variation in how its conceptual elements are defined. What exactly deliberation requires, what end it can and should pursue, are thus described differently across models, which outline diverse combinations of ideal (e.g., Cohen, 2009) and practical (e.g., Neblo, 2015) conditions for it to take place.

But model-based democratic theories have been increasingly challenged. They have been criticized for constructing a narrow focus on select concepts and relations, preventing theorists from engaging with other factors at play beyond their model's theoretical core (Warren, 2017, p. 39). While models help "identifying and justifying specific norms and practices," they have also overly "emphasized one kind of practice or norm" (Lancelle-Webster & Warren, 2023, p. 98). This can result in proponents "defending their preferred democratic practice against competitors," which can make model-based theorizing "unproductive" (Scudder, 2021, p. 244), potentially "preventing innovation in democratic theory" (Asenbaum, 2025, p. 3) by centering single norms and practices and disregarding elements and interactions external to the model.

These critiques have inspired alternative approaches to democratic theorizing. For instance, Michael Saward maintained that "We do not need more 'models of democracy'" but rather a *proceduralist* and *reflexive* approach "focused on the shaping of binding collective decision-making" that "accepts that in principle outcomes can be regarded as legitimate if they have been produced by a certain procedure" (Saward, 2003, p. 161). He describes deliberation as just one "device" (Saward, 2003, p. 167) that can lead to legitimate public decisions, alongside electoral, direct, and other democratic practices. In Fung's (2006) design-oriented theorizing, frameworks and categories are developed close to empirical cases. In his view, citizen participation—including deliberation—can pursue a range of goals, including legitimacy, effectiveness, and justice. Asenbaum (2025), in turn, shows the benefits of approaching participatory processes from a range of theoretical traditions that can inform and improve design and practice.

This article dialogues with these recent efforts to decenter prescriptive models and instead center approaches to theorizing that are informed by real-world practice and complexity. To that end, I follow Warren's (2017) problem-based approach. He proposes to shift the gaze away from norms at the center of models, and toward the democratic *problems* that political practices tackle. He asks: "What should we expect deliberation to accomplish within a democratic political system?" (Warren, 2017, p. 40) and identifies three responses to this question: (a) empower inclusions of those affected by collective decisions, (b) form preferences and interests into collective agendas and wills, and (c) transform those agendas and wills into collective decisions (Warren, 2017, pp. 44–45). These are the *functions* of participation that are conducive to the "rule of the people." *Practices* are the organized forms of engagement that can fulfill those functions—"ideal-typical social actions" and "socially intended behaviors" (Warren, 2017, p. 43), among which deliberation is but one of many.

2.3. The Global North Bias

Deliberation is increasingly celebrated as a solution to the serial crises of liberal democracies (c.f. Curato et al., 2020). However, much of that current attention is directed to a few forms of deliberation, mostly practiced in the Global North. Participedia (n.d.), the largest global database on citizen participation, provides a good example. Despite its initial goal of creating "a very rich and encompassing data set of democratic innovations all over the world" (Fung & Warren, 2011, p. 347), to date, only 126 out of 907 documented cases that use deliberative and dialogic methods are based in the Global South. The popularity of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), such as citizens' assemblies and citizen panels, further illustrates the problem: the stricter the definition of deliberation, the greater the space granted to Global North practices in knowledge production. Take the OECD's "deliberative wave:" the claim that such a "wave" is taking place derives from a database documenting 733 DMPs, of which only 15 have taken place outside the Global North (OECD, 2023). Similarly, the CRC 1265 global database lists 2169 DMPs, of which only 179 are located in the Global South (CRC1265, 2021). Looking exclusively at climate assemblies, KNOCA only lists four beyond the Global North, two in Brazil and two in the Maldives (KNOCA, n.d.); drawing on Participedia and LATINNO, a recent study arrives at a total of nine: three in the Maldives, two in Brazil, and four across Latin America (Curato et al., 2024, p. 86).

This Global North bias is not limited to empirical evidence but also manifests in the conceptual histories that deliberative democrats draw on. Historically, democratic theory has been "deeply rooted in Western thought" (Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025, p. 2), its "philosophical canons deeply rooted in the Western Enlightenment and modernization ideals of reasoning, equality, and publicity" (Min, 2014, p. 1). The field "traces their intellectual heritage through the western canon, beginning with Aristotle and passing through a chain of luminaries, including Mill, Rousseau, Kant, Dewey and others," but such "spurious self-descriptions" fail to treat "non-western political thought as a source of insight when fashioning deliberative ideals, practices and institutions" (Curato et al., 2020, p. 60). The consequence is that "some democracies are better known, and more widely practiced, or entertained as possible future practices" (Gagnon et al., 2021, p. 5). The problematic consequences of Western-centric knowledge production have been tackled in depth by postcolonial and decolonial theorists (e.g., Connell, 2014, p. 211), most recently also in relation to the field of deliberation (Banerjee, 2021, p. 287; Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025, pp. 6–8).

Limited engagement with visions and practices from the Global South poses at least three challenges to democratic theory. First, if the Global North approaches and practices of deliberation are assumed to be the norm, alternative forms of deliberation in the Global South may be considered exceptional and therefore of limited theoretical value: they are viewed as case studies whose learnings are limited to their contexts and regions. They are of particular, not general, interest. Such under-exploration prolongs exclusionary academic practices and, even if involuntarily, reproduces the Global North's purported epistemic supremacy (see Connell, 2014, p. 219).

Second, the under-documentation of global practices results in an incomplete and therefore inaccurate body of evidence and reflection about deliberation. Instead, our knowledge about the Global South is limited to (a) well-documented or flagship practices, which limits accounts to few cases, (b) self-reported and self-documented practices, which may not be the most typical or relevant in the given context, or (c) studies of singled-out traditions, concepts, and practices, which do not provide a systematic overview and place the burden of documentation on individuals with the interest or capacity to report on them.

Third, the under-representation of global practices in existing knowledge production limits not only the way deliberation is theorized, but also how it is assessed. Dominant conceptions of deliberation determine what deliberative processes count, and how they are assessed. But deliberation across the world may not be best understood and measured by approaches and tools that—explicitly or implicitly—derive from highly privileged contexts such as the Global North. This can create unfair conditions for internationally competitive fundraising and unequal chances in comparative evaluations.

These empirical and theoretical gaps do not reflect a lack of deliberative theorizing and practice elsewhere, but rather a lack of attention to the global diversity of deliberation in the current dominant scholarship. Ten years ago, Jensen Sass and John Dryzek challenged the field to diversify its accounts, pointing out that "a fuller understanding of political deliberation requires comparative and historical studies of diverse contexts," studies that could provide "new insight into the forms deliberative practice can take and the conditions under which it can flourish" (Sass & Dryzek, 2014, p. 4). This article responds to this call, seeking to reduce the epistemological gap in existing deliberative scholarship and contributing to tackling the three challenges outlined above. It does so by centering theory development around deliberative practices in the Global South, informing categories with empirical reflection. In "theorizing from the bottom up" (Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025, p. 12), this effort aligns with ongoing calls to counter the Global North bias by decentering (Scudder, 2021; Williams, 2020), decolonizing (Banerjee, 2021; Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025), and grounding (Curato et al., 2025) deliberative theory.

3. Mapping Deliberative Practice

What is the democratic function of deliberation? To explore this question, I bring existing theorizing about the functions of deliberation with evidence from those directly engaged in deliberative practice across the Global South. I follow the principles of grounded normative theory (see Ackerly et al., 2024) and democratic theorizing (Asenbaum, 2022). Both approaches "blend empirical study with normative theorizing" (Johnson, 2022, p. 53) with the aim of generating *situated* theoretical accounts that foreground engagement with experiences historically sidelined in theory-making, so that the resulting analysis remains "rooted in the lived experiences of radical democratic practice" (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 3). I examine original data from

Demo.Reset, a project led by Colombian non-partisan organization Extituto de Política Abierta and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy. Since "most deliberative action takes place in civil society" (Beauvais, 2018, p. 148), the main actors leading deliberative practices are best placed to report on what form of deliberation is deployed and what it aims to achieve.

The term "Global South" is not used uncritically in this article, but rather due to its ability to foreground geopolitical and epistemic hierarchies while acknowledging diversity. It is meant to identify places peripheral to dominant political and economic powers, underscoring "the historical legacies of colonialism and its consequences for creating unequal global conditions in terms of standards of living" and "access to resources" (Curato et al., 2024, p. 7). Yet the term remains contested. Critics point out the radical variation across political systems, economic development, societal, and cultural features in places and cases grouped under this single label. Generic categorizations that bundle such different contexts together may further imply "negative connotations" (Alam, 2008, p. 89).

Despite criticism, the term remains widely used in global politics, including international organizations like the United Nations Trade and Development Agency; by scholars (e.g., Curato et al., 2024; Raventós, 2008); and by practitioners and activists themselves (e.g., Democracy R&D, n.d.). Most importantly, I use this term because Demo.Reset respondents identify with it. A Latin American practitioner explained they use the concept as "an emancipatory political category" for communities "where systems of inequality have historically been installed," indicating global territories "that share historic dispossession consequences, but also solutions to simultaneous crises" (Extituto, 2024, p. 118). In Demo.Reset, the Global South encompasses places affected by "deep inequality gaps to access and diversify the participation of communities traditionally underrepresented in decision-making scenarios; among others," challenges that "hinder the effective implementation of healthy practices for deliberative democracy" (Extituto, 2024, pp. 22–23).

3.1. Demo.Reset

Demo.Reset sought to "describe and characterize the set of differential practices for participation and deliberation…in the expanded Global South" (Extituto, 2024, pp. 23–25). It centered perspectives from those *doing* democratic labor, on the ground, in the majority world. The project comprised an online survey in 2021, five in-person workshops in June 2021, and 12 online focus groups in April and May 2022. The survey mapped deliberative practices, barriers, and adaptations using Participedia's data model, a wide-ranging questionnaire documenting 42 variables on context, design, and impact of participatory initiatives (Gastil et al., 2017; Participedia, 2019). A supplementary section with multiple-choice and open text fields invited respondents to identify barriers and adaptations in their work across seven areas: political, participatory, cultural, social capital, organizational, contextual, and informational. In addition, two published volumes document narrative accounts of their practices (Extituto, 2023, 2024).

Respondents were global practitioners—organizations or individuals—of participatory and deliberative democracy from four regional hubs: Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and India, and Eastern Europe. They were identified through volunteer sampling via open calls and snowball sampling via the project's Advisory Committee, composed of five international democracy organizations (Democracia en Red, Participedia, People Powered, Democratic Society, and i4policy) that facilitated access to practitioner networks and ensured diversity in regional coverage. Given the absence of a sampling frame or known

population of Global South deliberative practitioners, Demo.Reset did not aspire to identify a representative sample. Instead, it sought to advance an initial mapping of global practitioners and practices of deliberation, attending to regional diversity. Figure 1 illustrates the origin and distribution of the 108 respondents who participated in the survey, with 40% coming from Latin America, 48.2% from Sub-Saharan Africa, 10% from India and Southeast Asia, and 2.8% from Eastern Europe.

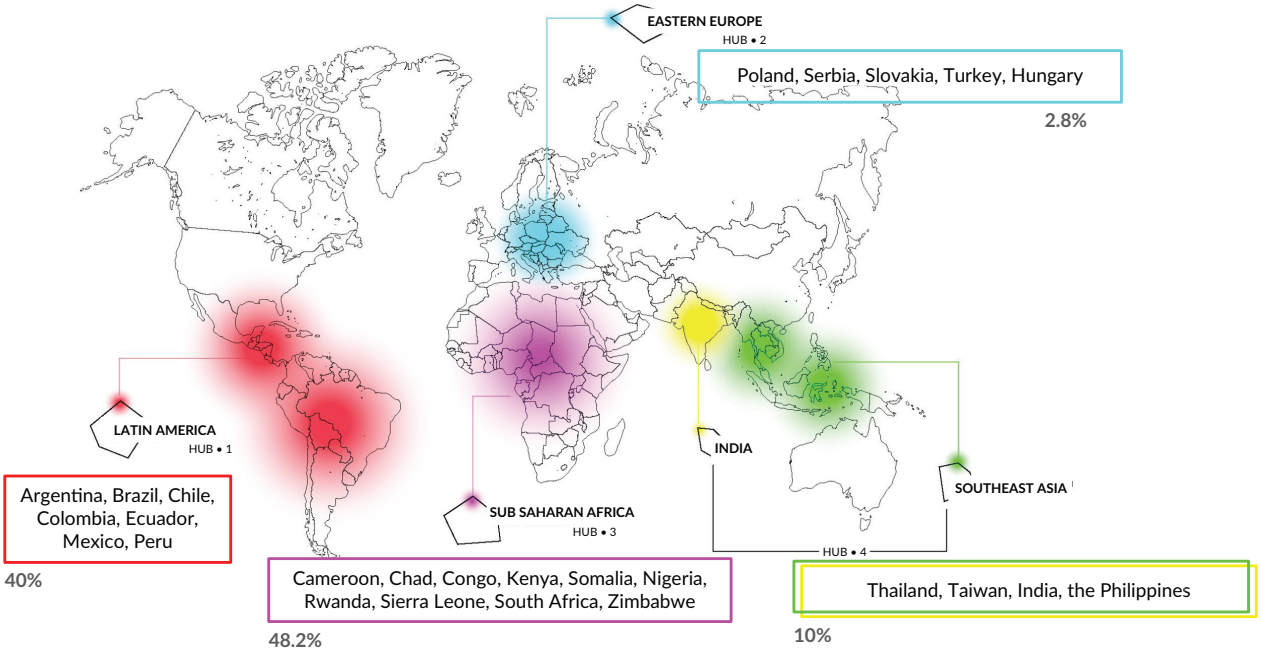

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of Demo.Reset respondents by regional hub. Note: *N* = 108 respondents. Source: Demo.Reset (2022).

This article engages narrative accounts (Extituto, 2023, 2024) and survey responses by 105 organizations active in 22 countries in the first three hubs. Three respondents active in five Eastern European countries are excluded from the analysis: these countries are not part of the Global South, and represent a minimal segment of responses that does not substantially affect the analysis.

3.2. Category-Building

To bring practitioner narratives in dialogue with democratic theory, I follow the ethos of democratic theorizing and the principles of grounded normative theory. In line with *epistemological inclusion*, this study focuses on deliberation not as a normative concept but as a practice, developing explanations that "center on marginalized lived experiences" (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 3) and foreground the experiences of those who are "on the frontline of struggles" (Johnson, 2022, p. 62). Acknowledging that "activists produce normative theory in their own political debates and through their prefigurative politics" (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 5), the analysis below is presented in dialogue with the accounts of respondents and project leads. The principle of *comprehensiveness* demands systematic data gathering to map out the variety of interests, claims, and stakeholders involved in the issue (Ackerly et al., 2024, pp. 4–5). To achieve this, I reviewed open text survey responses (Demo.Reset, 2022) and compared them with narrative accounts from respondents (see Extituto, 2023, 2024).

In line with the principle of *recursivity* (Ackerly et al., 2024, p. 5), I engaged iteratively with the evidence, identifying recurring argument patterns and categories to refine my own analytical claims. The categories that structure findings result from the reconstruction of argumentation patterns and overarching themes. Two strategies were deployed: deductive thematic analysis organized narratives following variables from the data model, identifying types and purposes of deliberation, and locating relevant excerpts for analysis (Bingham, 2023, pp. 2–4); and inductive analysis was used to typify descriptions of respondents' practices, barriers, and adaptations, to ensure alignment between my theoretical reconstruction and respondents' own accounts (Saldaña, 2021, pp. 61–62). Direct citations of respondents' narratives illustrate the development of categories and explanations. I prioritized published narratives (Extituto, 2023, 2024) over unpublished responses (Demo.Reset, 2022) to allow for a plausible and accountable reconstruction of this article's account and arguments. Translations from Spanish are my own.

Finally, *epistemic accountability* mandates recognizing power structures in knowledge production and avoiding the misrepresentation of respondents' perspectives. Following the commendation to share findings "with those engaged" and "dialogue with them on possible differences of interpretation" (Ackerly et al., 2024, p. 12), iterations of analytical claims were discussed in two dedicated sessions, allowing for feedback and further reflection: first in November 2023 in Bogotá, Colombia, with project leads, local practitioners, and participants; then in June 2024, online, with global respondents and the general public. In June 2025, former and current Demo.Reset leads reviewed and endorsed this article for publication.

4. Situating Deliberation: Visions and Practices from the Field

What is the democratic function of deliberation in the Global South? Practitioner narratives of deliberation, its forms, goals, and uses are brought into dialogue with the three democratic functions in Warren's problem-based approach—empowered inclusions, collective agenda formation, and decision-making. While the literature review in Section 2 presented models and functions "content down," I now approach the question "context up," reconstructing respondents' narratives to locate "normatively relevant claims" (Ackerly et al., 2024, p. 21) and "broaden the empirical basis" that informs definitions of the functions of deliberation. Each subsection (a) discusses democratic functions in liberal, deliberative, and problem-based approaches, (b) reconstructs respondent accounts of deliberative practice in the Global South, drawing on quotes and examples, and (c) collates those narratives into broader categories that explain the functions of deliberation in context.

I find that Warren's functions (2017) more accurately explain how Global South practitioners deploy deliberation than liberal and deliberative model-based theories. Yet I also find differential, situated accounts of those functions. Despite variation in context and practices, practitioners generally combine deliberation with other forms of participation and deploy it strategically to pursue goals that go beyond the moment of reasoned dialogue: *fostering pluralism*, *building coalitions*, and *enabling collective action*. This demonstrates that, beyond Warren's original assessment that deliberation is best suited to pursue collective will or agenda-formation (Warren, 2017, p. 39), all three functions can be associated with deliberative practice, as shown in the three subsections below.

4.1. Empower Inclusions: Fostering Pluralism

In liberal and deliberative models, equality is both the departure and arrival point for political participation. Liberal democracy requires the acknowledgement of "free and equal individuals" (Held, 2006, p. 59) who reconcile their different interests "in the ballot box" (Held, 2006, p. 72). Public deliberation in liberal models is merely intermediary, so that "public views can be refined and enlarged when passed through the medium of a chosen body of citizens" (Held, 2006, p. 73). In deliberative theory, equality requires more than individual one-off acts of participation; it demands equal access to the public sphere and equal conditions for meaningful engagement (e.g., Beauvais & Bächtiger, 2016, p. 1). Here, deliberation entails a double mandate: first, to ensure the "inclusion of all those affected by decisions;" second, to ensure the "inclusion of all relevant positions on the issue at hand" (Elstub, 2018, p. 191).

Such equality in political participation faces barriers everywhere, but those barriers are exacerbated in less privileged contexts. In the Global South, "the political equality necessary for effective inclusion cannot be considered as a given, since different forms of social, economic, cultural, educational or ethnic inequalities translate into politics" (Raventós, 2008, p. 14). Under constrained opportunities for meaningful political engagement, different subaltern groups have historically had to "take a step back" and develop their own "different forms of popular participation" (Raventós, 2008, p. 14).

Narratives from Demo.Reset echoes the difficulties in creating equality in access to political participation. Respondents therefore report designing deliberation not for the general population of "free and equal" individuals, but targeting specific groups: those that have historically suffered social, cultural, and economic deprivation and been excluded from political participation. They can be structurally marginalized groups (such as identity-based or interest groups), but also other stakeholders that have been sidelined in institutional politics in their respective contexts (such as organized civil society). Which groups are targeted varies across regions. Latin American practitioners prioritize gender-based agendas, especially in relation to women's political participation and mobilization around their demands for rights. In Eastern Asia, deliberative practices center on civil rights, including religious rights, and strengthening civic and political engagement. Sub-Saharan African practitioners instead prioritize low-income groups, youth, women, and rural residents.

Deployed in this way, deliberation brings members of structurally disadvantaged groups together to talk to and among each other, find common ground, and develop strategies to improve their own political engagement. In Taiwan, for instance, participatory budgeting assemblies were complemented with thematic project-based deliberations, such as "entertainment activities for migrant workers, or disability welfare services" (Extituto, 2024, p. 85). Without these targeted projects, those groups would be unlikely to participate. Another illustrative example is feminist student assemblies in Colombia. In the aftermath of #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo, female students began organizing open assemblies to tackle growing harassment, abuse, and discrimination at universities. These assemblies were "an exclusive space for women and non-binary persons," not allowing "any male participation, or even attendance, in order to provide a safe space for women to talk about their experiences" (Extituto, 2023, p. 198). Participants could exchange individual or anonymized stories that helped identify offenders, abusive practices, and institutional gaps. Some of these assemblies produced lists of demands aimed at University leadership, while others remained an "alternative space for participation for groups that are underrepresented in other political spaces or traditionally monopolized by men, like student committees and university institutional bodies" (Extituto, 2023, p. 200).

Normative theoretical models can neglect the inclusive function of these deliberative practices. In liberal models, power is understood as "non-hierarchically and competitively arranged…part of an 'endless process of bargaining' between numerous groups representing different interests" (Held, 2006, p. 160). Liberal democracies emphasize institutional guarantees so that different groups can organize and compete for political representation (Held, 2006, pp. 77–78); across the Global South, the guarantees that enable the bargaining among groups are often not given. Some groups face extraordinary constraints to participate due to their income, education, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or cultural norms (Extituto, 2023, pp. 113–115).

In turn, deliberative models emphasize equality of access—deliberative practices should enable the inclusion "of all those affected by decisions" and "of all relevant positions on the issue at hand" (Elstub, 2018, p. 191). To ensure that double inclusion, Global North deliberations often seek to bring historically marginalized groups into forums with the majoritarian population, for instance by over-sampling them during recruitment, supporting their accessibility needs, providing diverse learning materials, and protecting their time and space through facilitated deliberation (Dell'Aquila et al., 2024, pp. 19–31). But Global South deliberations do not necessarily seek integration into public discourse, nor do they foreground the interaction between historically marginalized groups and the broader public or institutional spaces. Instead, they aim to support certain—not all—groups by creating safe spaces in often hostile contexts. In this sense, respondents' narratives align with the aims of enclave deliberation (Himmelroos et al., 2017) rather than public forums, open or invited.

In Warren's problem-based approach, deliberation is not expected to empower inclusions: "deliberation is not, in itself, a mode of empowerment, nor is it a mechanism for distributing empowerments" (2017, p. 48), except as a means of recognition that can "endow *others* with the status of discursive participants" (Warren, 2017, p. 48, emphasis added). Narratives from Global South practice challenge this account: student assemblies in Colombia supported both inclusion and empowerment of female students, improving their standing within their institutional settings; similarly, Taiwan's thematic budgeting deliberations successfully engaged migrant workers and people with disabilities, groups that would otherwise not have been reached. In these narratives, organizers and participants claim and perform that recognition for themselves.

Deliberation in the Global South thus enacts inclusion by fostering pluralism, "empowering marginalized groups to practise narrative agency—to give an account of oneself using one's own voice, on one's own terms" (Curato et al., 2019, p. 65). Deliberative spaces encourage equal and reasoned dialogue *for* and *among* historically excluded groups, strengthening their social and political standing in contexts where other channels for political participation are insufficient or where institutional arrangements systematically exclude those groups. It is used to mitigate exclusions in the public and political sphere, focusing on "representation, redistribution and recognition of the needs of those who make up a diverse community" (Extituto, 2023, p. 193).

4.2. Agenda Formation: Building Coalitions

In liberal democracies, collective agendas are determined by "free and fair elections in which every citizen's vote has an equal weight;" the aggregation of individual wills through suffrage is meant to ensure "accountable and feasible government" (Held, 2006, p. 94) that reflects the public agenda. Yet, over time, party governments have been increasingly considered "rubber-stampers," susceptible to powerful sectoral

interests that informally set agendas and vetoes (c.f. Palumbo, 2023, p. 4). Deliberative models instead underscore collective agenda-setting via public reasoning. Where liberal democracies are structured around the aggregation of individual will-expression, deliberation is talk-centric and requires the "considered reflection" of ideas (Chambers, 2009, p. 335). All other things equal, the exchange of arguments distinguishes deliberation from other forms of political participation in democratic theory because participants engage with each other in reflective debate with mutual respect. Deliberation "is not about speaking up but also about hearing the other side," "listening across difference" to understand the positions of "differently situated others" (Young, 1996, p. 128). For Jane Mansbridge, it must entail "weighing and reflecting…with care and thoughtful consideration"; participants must consider each other "as equals engaged in the mutual exchange of reasons oriented as if to reaching a shared practical judgment" (Mansbridge, 2015, pp. 28–29).

In the Global South, however, structural, political, and institutional challenges systematically prevent individuals and groups from meaningfully influencing public agendas. Elections may be rigged or representatives unresponsive to their constituencies; public arenas may be inaccessible to certain groups; governments may offer one-sided opportunities, such as public meetings where participants are not allowed to speak, or inconsequential forms of engagement, where citizen input is later ignored. Additional barriers include contextual (e.g., climate catastrophes), material (e.g., lack of infrastructure), and systemic issues (e.g., elite capture or bureaucratization; Extituto, 2024, pp. 32–35).

In this context, Demo.Reset respondents see deliberation as a vehicle for coalition-building: it creates spaces for interested groups to come together, build common understandings, and forge alliances around proposals. Different groups need to work together to gather support for political transformations—as a respondent explained, "deliberation is the only way to understand better the problems and solutions that affect us all, even if they are often differentiated" (Extituto, 2024, p. 119). This is seen as a necessary precondition to influence the public agenda, especially when access to political and institutional arenas is limited or barred. Figure 2 below shows reported purposes of deliberative practices: forums are convened with the main goal of understanding problems in 14% to 20% of mapped practices across hubs, and developing capacities in 30% to 35% across hubs. For example, in some African countries, democratic institutions operate under limited statehood. Elections may be called off or their results may lack transparency, legitimacy, or integrity (Extituto, 2024, pp. 72–73). When the institutional interlocutors for policy demands are missing, communities turn to other strategies to advance their goals. Latin American practitioners, for instance,

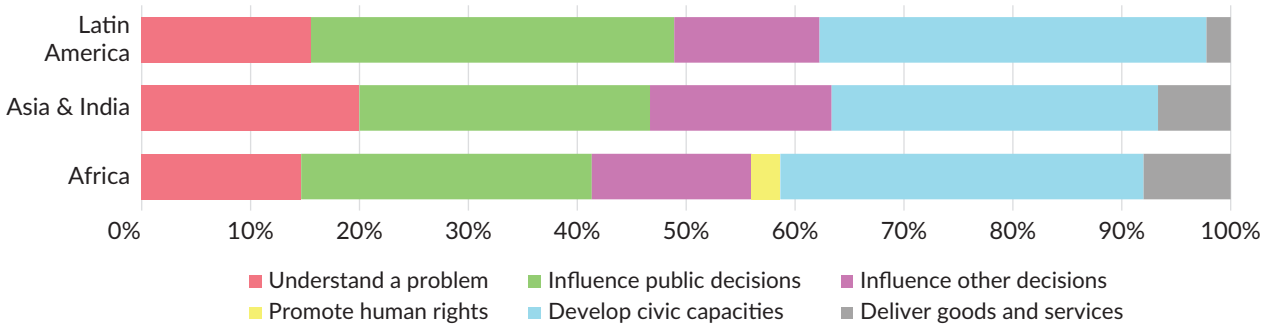

Figure 2. Purposes of deliberative practices by regional hub. Note: *n* = 127 practices. Source: Demo.Reset (2022).

collaborate with other democracy organizations to carry out a citizens' assembly to advance a "community of practice" beyond the single exercise of the assembly (Extituto, 2024, pp. 113, 141). Initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa, in turn, often pair different stakeholders to work together on community development initiatives to improve their chances of success (Extituto, 2024, p. 47).

The most frequent deliberative formats are therefore invited spaces, such as thematic forums and community-based dialogue. The goal of invited forums is to mitigate these groups' political and social capital asymmetries and ensure more equitable opportunities for participation. As one respondent explained, the focus lies on "generating community strengthening" and "developing tools and languages that increase people's abilities to participate in public power" (Extituto, 2024, p. 150).

To support those groups and channel social and political coalitions, deliberative spaces often adopt capacity-building approaches, like human rights education and awareness campaigns, but also civic education. An illustrative example is Ashanti's Political Training School for Afro-Peruvian Youth. The project brings together young black people to deliberative forums where they access information and training materials on political participation and Afro-Peruvian history (Extituto, 2023, p. 217). However, the main goal of the space is not unidirectional information, but rather creating "dialogue and conversation, a space for fellowship where participants share their experiences and knowledge about Afro-descendant identity" (Extituto, 2023, p. 218). As a historically oppressed and underrepresented population, the School allows them to "collectively participate more actively" and "communicate their demands" in both public and institutional settings (Extituto, 2023, p. 219).

In Mark Warren's approach, supporting collective agenda- and will-formation is deliberation's key strength. Through reasoned dialogue, "epistemic goods" and "common and overlapping preferences can emerge" (2017, 48). Deliberation allows "individual preferences…to be related communicatively to collective judgements," ensuring that all participants have an equal chance at voice, curtailing groupthink and domination by certain individuals, and grounding rhetoric on careful consideration of facts and arguments (Warren, 2017, p. 44). This description reflects narratives emerging from Demo.Reset, yet it misses part of the goal they pursue beyond mere agenda-setting. Ultimately, deliberation is employed to empower groups—especially those structurally disadvantaged or historically marginalized—to identify shared goals and develop coalitions that can potentially exert influence on the public arena.

4.3. Influence Decision-Making: Enabling Collective Action

To what extent the public can weigh in on political decisions matters greatly for a regime's democratic value. In liberal models, that power is "essentially dispersed throughout society, and since there is a plurality of pressure points, a variety of competing policy-formulating and decision-making centres arises," so that "political outcomes are the result of government…trying to mediate and adjudicate between the competing demands of groups" (Held, 2006, p. 161). Deliberative democrats point out that both political apathy and unequal capacity to reach institutions hinder plural decision-making, making electoral-representative mechanisms elitist and exclusionary (Palumbo, 2023, p. 5). They instead underscore the reasoned exchange of arguments as a way to generate both more inclusive and effective decisions, because it allows participants to "communicatively form personal preferences into *collective opinions* and wills, and to implement those collective wills as democratic *collective decisions*" (Beauvais, 2018, p. 146, emphasis added).

Yet across the Global South, even when opportunities to influence decision-making arise, citizens and organizations may face higher barriers than other actors to exert that influence. With little variation, respondents report that existing institutional channels for consultation and policy influence in their countries often fall short of meaningful engagement or perpetuate the exclusion of certain groups and voices. For example, Sub-Saharan African organizations described how mothers with small children often cannot join public forums owing to their care duties, while adult men show interest in participating when they expect these forums to bring potential job offers (Extituto, 2024, p. 33). Others in the region report ethnic and religious discrimination as a cultural barrier for affected groups' willingness to participate in public consultations (Extituto, 2024, p. 57). Additional material barriers to participation include a lack of infrastructure, resources, and other external conditions, such as limitations to the right to meet in public or communities' physical or political isolation. In Southeast Asia, for instance, human rights violations and violent conflict often bar communities from engaging in political activities (Extituto, 2024, p. 81). Latin American organizations, in turn, report financial constraints in high poverty contexts as the most significant material barrier, along with difficulties for public messaging to reach potentially affected groups (Extituto, 2024, pp. 97–98).

Due to these limitations, deliberative practitioners in the Global South must strategize when they seek political impact. Conditions for influence over decision-making are not given, so they must first be created. Deliberation offers a means for participants and practitioners to collectively assess opportunities, map political fields, and mobilize for their interests. Rather than opening direct channels to policy and politics, deliberation enables *collective action*. An example is Estamos Listas, a Colombian political movement of "Black, Indigenous, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and cisgender women" (Extituto, 2023, p. 202) formed through word-of-mouth and direct invitation, explicitly aiming to ensure diversity and center women's voices in politics. The movement leveraged a Feminist Café system, comprising "regional circles where topics affecting the national movement were defined," shaping their political demands and defining core issues for their public and political campaigns, including what independent candidacies to back in local elections (Extituto, 2023, p. 204).

In contexts where authorities may not be supportive or even open to citizens "deciding on the policies that will affect their lives" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2), social mobilization remains a necessary form of engagement. In the Global North, deliberative processes are often geared towards producing outputs, influencing decision-making by way of policy recommendations (c.f. Curato et al., 2017). In the Global South, limited state capacity and even open hostility towards participation lead respondents to use deliberation to mobilize public influence instead. For instance, in Africa, ActHub incorporates deliberative and dialogic moments within other processes, such as citizen budgeting, fiscal data, or advocacy campaigns, to create space for strategizing. Deliberation strengthens capacity for action insofar as it fosters "people's capacity to hold the government accountable in environmental [issues], governance, spending" (Extituto, 2024, p. 49). In Central Asia, the Sardovaya movement used village assemblies in rural settings to mobilize landless workers and "untouchables" and successfully articulate their claims for land (Extituto, 2024, p. 88). Respondents thus see the need to first support communities in creating connections and alliances that can enable them to strategically intervene in the public sphere. Or, as one respondent put it, in order to effect change, deliberation must channel:

> An imminent need for creating new democratic and communal spaces where various actors can safely cooperate and work on educating and supporting their communities, empowering each other to

> create change and fight for democracy, and experiment with new forms of democracy-building. (Extituto, 2024, p. 130)

In Warren's account, deliberation is not necessarily expected to directly affect institutional decision-making, defined as "the capacity to make and impose binding decisions upon themselves," but rather as a "mode of influence" (Warren, 2017, pp. 44, 48) where participants attempt to persuade each other and, later, collectively attempt to persuade political decision-makers of their reasoned conclusions. Deliberative influence is temporally serial, while (political) decisions often happen in fast timelines. This resonates with respondents' stories; however, the sequentiality of deliberative influence over public agendas and political decision-making is precisely the reason why practitioners choose deliberation. It reflects a pragmatic acknowledgement that influencing political decisions requires both a deep understanding of issues and broad-based support. To create these conditions, rather than relying solely on deliberative forums, respondents often employ a mix of informal engagement strategies and other collaborative approaches, bringing stakeholders to work together through deliberation, community organizing, protesting, and informal participation through, e.g., community action. Combining multiple engagement and mobilization methods helps respondents overcome barriers to participation and enhances their capacity to influence policies and politics by enacting participation across multiple fronts.

5. Conclusion

This article has advanced a situated account of a diverse range of deliberative practices in the Global South and their democratic functions from the perspective of those *doing* deliberation as documented by Demo.Reset. Demo.Reset asked 108 deliberative practitioners active in 26 countries to map their practices, discuss barriers and constraints, and identify trends and shared strategies. I examined 105 of those responses and narrative accounts, which give privileged insight into how deliberation takes place across global regions and what aims it pursues in contexts where political participation is difficult or entirely barred. Following the principles of grounded normative theory (Ackerly et al., 2024) and democratic theorizing (Asenbaum, 2022; Asenbaum et al., 2023), I brought their insights into dialogue with liberal and deliberative models, and with Mark Warren's problem-based approach. Delving into practitioner narratives uncovered a nuanced picture of how deliberation is conceptualized, implemented, and integrated in their political practice. Acknowledging there is variation across contexts and locations, their accounts portray a distinct landscape of deliberation within and across Global South regions. The iterative reading of theoretical categories from the perspective of Global South deliberative practices allows rethinking and contextualizing what deliberation can do: it empowers inclusions by fostering pluralism; enables collective agenda setting through coalition building; and influences decision-making via collective action. This reading seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to pluralize democratic theory and to "the study of deliberative democracy…as a normative project informed by empirical findings" (Sass & Dryzek, 2014, p. 20). There are at least three relevant implications from these findings.

First, the developed categories are meant to expand the range of critical inputs for theory development, "informing normative arguments through original empirical research or analysis" (Ackerly et al., 2024, p. 8). Theoretical models of liberal and deliberative democracy have limited capacity to explain the democratic function of deliberation in the Global South. While model-based theories are valuable tools for reflection and empirical research, they evidence a Global North bias that has largely neglected Global South histories,

visions, and practices. In turn, although Warren's functions better explain how and why deliberation is deployed by Global South practitioners, respondents' narratives also challenge some theoretical assumptions and help contextualize and reformulate analytical categories to explain the democratic function of deliberation.

Bringing existing theory in dialogue with Global South practice does not seek to generate a new set of "universal" explanations about deliberative democracy, but situated accounts of what deliberation can look like, why it is deployed, and what it seeks to achieve. Where established scholarship on models and functions of deliberation has drawn mainly on theory produced in the Global North, this article invites us to bring established understandings of deliberative democracy into dialogue with the experience of those doing deliberation, on the ground, across different contexts. The resulting categories and explanations may be explored and refined in future studies, and invite timely reflections: What democratic norms underlie deliberative practices that seek to foster pluralism, build coalitions, and foster collective action? What inclusions and exclusions do those norms justify in those contexts, and to what extent can they "travel"? What are the implications for process design if deliberative forums shift from, e.g., emphasizing collective agenda-setting (as DMPs do) to centering coalition-building?

Second, engagement with practitioner narratives and documented deliberative practices from the Global South has shown that deliberation is used strategically and not constrained to predefined institutional or process designs. It is not a standalone practice, nor necessarily the predilect one, but rather one tool among many in much wider participatory repertoires. Respondents are clear on this. Across hubs, they report that commonly used dialogue-based methodologies, such as community meetings, workshops, or public hearings, rarely lead to immediate political outcomes. Neither do more sophisticated methodologies, such as sortition-based citizens' assemblies, which are also financially and functionally costly. Respondents do not align with fixed approaches to institutional design, adopting and adapting solutions to need and context.

Global South practitioners instead adopt a *hybridization* approach towards deliberation, tweaking and sequencing deliberative methods to adapt to emergent needs and available resources. They recognize that single institutions or processes alone cannot address their communities' structural political issues through political engagement, especially under conditions of stark socio-economic inequalities, colonial legacies, insecurity, or violence. Such fundamental barriers prevent not only meaningful political participation but also access to basic rights. Deliberation, alone, does not open a road to political transformation, although it often does align with respondents' transformative political projects.

Third, variation across contexts and practices demands caution in describing and presenting deliberative practices in the Global South—these are not necessarily equivalent nor automatically of higher normative value. Deliberative forums may still be deployed in undemocratic ways or for undemocratic ends. For example, in Kenya, public hearings where the local chief would inform citizens about government policy have been historically mandatory to attend. Such practice "would hardly be called deliberation, as it was a monologue directed to the citizens in which they were told about what the government wanted and how quickly it wanted it" (Extituto, 2024, p. 65). Research by Baogang He and Hendrik Wagenaar has shown how deliberation in authoritarian regimes, as in China, is "used by the party in power to manage social conflict and promote regime stability" (as cited in Curato et al., 2024, p. 59). Brazil, in turn, "may be among the most deliberative of democracies, but this provided little resistance to the state's lurch towards authoritarianism"

during the Bolsonaro government (Curato et al., 2020, p. 62); instead, deliberation could be found in other innovative formats challenging state institutions, such as collective mandates (Pogrebinschi & Ross, 2019, p. 391). Researchers and practitioners must be systematic in accounting for context, practice, and outcomes—not all deliberation may align with the normative principles and political project of deliberative democracy. Moreover, Demo.Reset surveyed only practitioner-led processes; responses are illustrative and do not aim to represent the entirety of Global South deliberation. Further research is needed for a more systematic and comprehensive documentation of Global South processes, accounts, and categories.

Centering visions and practices of deliberation in the Global South remains crucial. It allows us to identify innovative and context-specific approaches, expanding our knowledge of what deliberation can be and inviting reflection as to what it should be. It challenges the dominance of Global North perspectives in the field, promoting a more accurate understanding of deliberative democracy as it effectively takes place on the ground. It inspires new theoretical and practical developments, fostering a more dynamic and responsive community of inquiry and practice. As Demo.Reset project leads concluded, "recognizing the processes of the Global South is not simply a matter of allowing us to listen to their voices and give them visibility," it is also "an invitation to expand the limits of what we know as deliberative democracy" (Extituto, 2024, p. 148).

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LLMs Disclosure

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