Hanno Scholtz
Rethinking Democracy

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The New Model of Democracy
for the New Democratic Era

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1 The Need to Rethink Democracy

We need to talk about democracy—in order not to lose it.

Democracy is not just in crisis. It is on the brink. Across established democracies, dissatisfaction is exploding, polarization is hardening into hate, trust in institutions is collapsing, and authoritarian impulses are gaining open applause. Just before the inauguration of a second populist U.S. presidency in early 2025, 88 percent of Americans described their political system as "broken", with 59 percent believing it had been broken for decades.[1] Austria, where Adolf Hitler was born, stopped just short of electing a chancellor who does not see it as necessary to distance himself from Hitler. In the U.S., a prominent figure of the new administration received standing ovations in right-wing social media for making the Hitler salute on prime-time TV. These are not outliers. They are symptoms of a system coming undone.

These are not at all problems of just the moment. The collapse is decades in the making. In the United States, satisfaction with democracy has steadily eroded for three decades. From the late 1990s to the 2020s, one in two Americans turned from "rather satisfied" to "rather not satisfied" with democracy,[2] and the percentage of those who reported satisfaction with the system of government dropped from around 70 to around 30 percent. Roberto Foa and Yasha Mounk found younger generations raised under democracy to be radically less committed to it: by the early 2010s, only 30 percent of U.S. millennials rated living in a democracy as "essential," compared with 72 percent of those born before World War II. Support for military rule among wealthy young Americans rose from 6 percent in 1995 to 35 percent in 2011. And this is not a U.S. anomaly; it is a pattern among Western societies. In countries like Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Australia, the same generational divide shows up: among the young, belief in the essentialness of democracy drops into the minority. And none of these is a question of age but all of birth year, destroying any illusions of angry young people who might calm down over time.[3]

Trust in institutions like courts, parliaments, and political parties has been bleeding out for decades.[4] And even the appearance of support for democracy is no longer reliable. Even if they still profess support for democracy in the abs-

1 Peters and Igielnik 2025.

2 Ejaz and Thornton 2024.

3 Foa and Mounk 2016.

4 Hetherington and Rudolph 2008; Torcal 2017; Dalton 2017b.

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tract, individuals today are increasingly willing to condone norm violations and anti-democratic acts.[5] The danger is not hidden. It is normalized.

Another part of the long-term crisis is increasing political polarization. It is especially prevalent in the United States, where it has led to problems from decreased political compromise resulting in ineffective governance over diminishing trust in institutions and a loss in the ability to identify with the whole country[6] to individuals having difficulty communicating with others with opposing views.[7] Polarization has created a more divided and hostile society, with negative impacts on the ability of the country to function effectively and address important issues, and it endangers democracy.[8] And in the wider perspective of reviewing the contemporary state of Western democracies, the U.S. is just an extreme case of a general trend.

These developments have long led to warnings that a new form of authoritarianism is emerging, not via coups but through the slow erosion of democratic norms.[9] During the first current populist presidency in the United States, the worries about democracy led to a number of widely received books that aimed to issue dire warnings, including "How Democracies Die", "The People vs. Democracy", worrying outright "On Tyranny", and reminding with "Fascism: a warning".[10] These and other books aimed to paint a dark picture to exert a wake-up call, sometimes even explicitly included in the title.[11] These attempts are as understandable as they were unsuccessful: the negative developments ultimately stem from people who act in many regard against their rational interest, so the idea to wake them up is reasonable. But they act under circumstances that prevent them from exerting long-term rationality, like an exhausted sleeper both unwilling and unable to hear the alarm in the morning.

Already in 2012, one book[12] gave a summary of the strategies known to political science to combat political extremism in democracies. It can still be seen as describing the state of the art—of, as can be frankly said, what has not worked, either because it has been tried but did not work or because it did not work to seriously try it. Policy transparency, trust-building, or democratic education have been tried but have been of limited effectiveness. Strengthening democratic

5 Isermann et al. 2024; Frederiksen and Skaaning 2023; Foa and Mounk 2025.
6 Jones 2001; Citrin and Stoker 2018; Lee 2022; Iyengar et al. 2012; Tappin and McKay 2019.
7 Easton and Holbein 2021.
8 Kaufman and Haggard 2018; Graham and Svolik 2020.
9 Keane 2020; Krastev and Holmes 2019.
10 Levitsky 2018; Mounk 2018; Snyder 2017; Albright and Woodward 2018.
11 Pepper 2021.
12 Downs 2012.

actors sounds nice, but who exactly should do that? Turning from exclusion to a regulated inclusion of populist norm-breakers is rightly contested on the ground that this normalizes norms-destroying behavior.[13] And so on.[14]

A more analytical study of the current democracy crisis, rightly set in comparison with that of the 1920s and 1930s, has been presented by long-term democracy scholar Adam Przeworski.[15] He conceptualizes the current crisis of democracy as arising from the erosion of the traditional mechanisms that sustain democratic governance, highlighting especially the destabilization of party systems. Przeworski observes that traditional political parties, once central to the organization of democratic conflicts, have been rapidly losing support. This erosion undermines the ability of democratic systems to process societal conflicts peacefully and effectively. Emphasizing that democracy operates as a conflict-management mechanism, absorbing and channeling antagonisms into institutionalized frameworks like elections and courts, Przeworski warns that when the stakes of political competition become too high, leaders may exploit polarization and undermine institutional checks to consolidate power.

To counter the threats facing democracy, Przeworski does something that is regrettably absent from the studies discussed so far: He advocates for institutional reform. He envisions reforms aiming to balance the stakes of political competition. We will see below that this is indeed one part of solving the current crisis. But it is a small one, and recent developments show that it would be illusory to hope for the consensus to start with such reforms.

We must think much broader and do much more. Przeworski rightly names as symptoms of this crisis declining electoral participation, rising xenophobia, and the weakening of traditional democratic norms. He could also have named the long-term decline in trust and democratic satisfaction, revolutions in how we get our information, the constant diversification of societies, the financialization of capitalism and rising economic inequality, and the growth in population and education in non-Western societies to which democratic institutions failed to expand. These are all developments that have been underway for much longer than the current populist power grabs, and they have made them possible. In 2024, the

13 Wodak 2021; Krzyzanowski et al. 2023; Lamour 2024.

14 Other non-working recipes include electoral engineering towards center-seeking rather than center-fleeing incentives that, although generally seen as highly successful in the case of Germany's 5 percent threshold established in 1949, is rare for the high demand of consensus it demands, and has been of limited success in the one recent case of Italy's 2017 reform (Labitzke 2022). And the imperative to address root causes is easier said than done, especially for questions demanding supra-national regulation.

15 Przeworski 2019.

American electorate chose with its popular majority a notorious liar determined to destroy the long-term prevalent American institutions. It would be in vain to aim for their restoration with just some small changes. We need to understand why ever larger and larger parts of Western publics have an appetite for politicians with an expressed disdain for democratic norms.

In this situation, following Przeworski in seeing democracy just as systems "in which incumbents lose elections and leave when they lose"[16] is not helpful. Not only the election of the second populist U.S. presidency, but much more so seeing the long-term wave it rides makes clear that we need to expand our perspective and employ more institutional creativity than Przeworski does. It is high time not only "to think about the circumstances under which consolidated democracies could fail, and to be on the lookout for the signs which indicate that a major systemic transformation might be under way",[17] but to rethink democracy in order to make this major systemic transformation ourselves for the better. How did we come to this dire place? And what do we need to do to change it?

While doing so, we need to keep in mind that rethinking democracy is not only about bringing established democracies back to a more stable and less agitated state. Democracy is not only the system that granted Western societies social peace, stability, and prosperity for several decades. It is also the general promise that adequate institutions allow the pacification of societies and solve social problems in societies complex enough to require the inclusion of individuals. And that also applies to societies that are already under autocratic reign; it applies to societies that have never experienced living under democratic institutions; and it applies to world society as a whole. In the current "polycrisis" we face, the crisis of existing democracies is only one of several arenas, and it is necessary to keep this larger picture in mind.[18]

The model of democracy as we know had it in three waves of democratization after 1919, after 1949, and after 1989[19] been expected to soon cover the whole globe, but it never made it. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis[20] was ridiculed for the huge deviation of its prediction from factual evidence. But the philosophical base on which it was generated, the observation that everywhere people want to be heard and want to control their situation, remains true.

16 Przeworski 2019, p. 5.
17 Foa and Mounk 2017, p. 8.
18 Scholtz 2024a.
19 Huntington 1991.
20 Fukuyama 1989, 1992.

And this has repercussions for the current democracy crisis. In the early 2020s, more than 800,000 young Pakistanis each year left their country for its numerous problems, after decades of democracy problems, and regardless how much thrift, focus, and work discipline they bring, they provide populists in their destination countries with prime ammunition for scapegoat campaigns. Rethinking democracy might allow for ideas on what had been overlooked at home, in Pakistan as in so many other societies that have struggled to build resilient democratic institutions and have faced democratic backsliding in recent years, pushing ambitious young people to leave their home by the millions.

Finally, despite the clear line between national and international institutions most scholars draw, the general promise that adequate institutions allow the solving of social problems among interdependent individuals once held beyond the national level. It held even on the global scale, but does no longer—while humanity currently faces the greatest challenge of all. Even before populists started to attack them, the prevalent institutions of transnational climate governance have not been able to deliver the cessation of growing emissions. In this likewise dire situation, rethinking democracy offers transformative potential for addressing the challenges of transnational climate governance. Instead of market-based solutions with their amplification of power imbalances,[21] new democratic frameworks can enhance the legitimacy, equity, and efficacy of climate policy.[22] They offer a pathway to more effective and equitable responses to the global climate crisis.[23,24]

Rethinking democracy is hence urgently necessary while at the same time offering great potential for improvement in social situations around the world.

Are you, as a reader, willing to join that intellectual enterprise?

And if so: how do we do it?

21 McCarthy 2006; Swyngedouw 2015.

22 Bäckstrand and Kuyper 2017.

23 Stevenson and Dryzek 2014.

24 There is another reason for rethinking democracy that has not been included in this chapter because in previous discussions I learned that it was more offputting for first-time readers and convincing only for those who already had some knowledge about the approach. It is hence only discussed in Chapter 13 at the end of the book.

2 How to Start Rethinking Democracy?

If we accept that democracy is in crisis and needs rethinking: how do we do that?

How do we approach "rethinking"? What does the term essentially mean? What aspects are included in aiming for it? What is its relationship with creativity? What happens in our brain when we aim for it, how can we enter such a process, and how do we make it more fruitful?

And how do we turn the general approach to rethinking into a specific strategy? How do we change the approach to the crisis in order to come to better results? How do we prioritize ideas? What theoretical frameworks are suited to rethinking democracy? And within them, how do we find a good starting point?

Finally, what can you as a reader expect in this book? In which structure will it develop its arguments? For which audience or audiences is the book written?

2.1 How to Rethink Democracy?

For the start of the endeavor of rethinking democracy, it is helpful to first recapitulate what that the verb "rethinking" means.

Rethinking, like redoing or revisiting, begins with the prefix *re-* that means coming back to a place where one has already been or to an object one has already dealt with. It suggests a process of revisiting the familiar, not to repeat it, but to reexamine it in a new light, with a deeper or broader understanding.

To rethink often starts with re-evaluating, assessing the value of something anew, questioning initial conclusions, and considering alternative perspectives. It involves re-analyzing, delving into the components of an issue to uncover overlooked details, and reexamining, critically reviewing evidence or assumptions that might have seemed settled.

A rethinking process also demands redefining, shifting boundaries or altering the meaning of concepts that once appeared fixed. Similarly, reconsidering invites us to entertain different angles, reflecting on what we may have missed. This naturally leads to reappraising, weighing an idea or approach again, often in light of changed circumstances.

Sometimes, rethinking entails reconceiving, a profound reworking of an idea, reconstructing it from the ground up. In other instances, it requires re-exploring, venturing back into a familiar terrain to uncover hidden pathways, and readdressing, tackling unresolved issues or concerns with renewed clarity and intent.

Beyond critical review, rethinking involves reenvisioning, projecting a refreshed vision of possibilities, and reimagining, liberating the mind to explore

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new ways of framing or addressing a challenge. Redesigning follows suit, translating these conceptual shifts into actionable plans or structural adjustments, in order to allow for redoing.

All these aspects of rethinking take place in a tension between the old and the new. Developing alternative perspectives, uncovering overlooked details, shifting boundaries, altering the meaning of concepts, projecting new visions, exploring new ways, developing new ideas; these are all aspects of creating something new, in a situation where the old still exists and attracts the mind back to ways that didn't work as demanded. It is hence helpful to have a quick view on what supports creative processes.

Before being put into reality, new ideas are just that—ideas: that is, structures in the brain of the conceiving individual or individuals that relate to specific external phenomena. In the case of rethinking democracy, such phenomena might include the aim of solving social problems, citizen participation, or political actors. These ideas form brain structures different from those previously associated with the same external phenomena: solving social problems, participating citizens, or political actors may look different afterwards than before.

Have you ever been part of a brainstorming session? If so, then you know that every attempt to find new ways has two parts. Creativity theory calls them "divergent thinking" and "convergent thinking".[1]

Divergent thinking is the wild part. It is the moment of generating new ideas, when participants write down dozens of thoughts coming to their minds which may or may not be helpful. In the best case, every idea sparks another, and thoughts get more and more wild and creative. It's that moment when ideas flow freely, when you're coming up with multiple solutions rather than focusing on finding the one "right" answer.

Divergent thinking requires making flexible connections[2] between different concepts stored in our brain's knowledge networks. Think of your brain as having a web of interconnected ideas. The more flexible and densely connected this web is, the better you are at linking concepts that don't obviously go together. The richer these mental networks, the more innovative your solutions can be. And the more unrelated the concepts you connect, the more creative your new idea will be.[3]

For rethinking democracy, it is not innovative enough to, for example, consider just alternative voting methods that address current shortcomings. Address-

1 Guilford 1967; Nusbaum and Silvia 2011.

2 Mednick 1962.

3 West 2002; Kenett et al. 2014.

ing these is necessary, and we will come back to them. But remember that the crisis of democracy spans not only over a long period but also over many nations with different institutions. Proportional representation has not spared the Netherlands or Israel their share of the crisis.

The divergent part of creativity also benefits from reflecting on one's own thought patterns, limitations, and implicit taboos. Creativity researchers call that "metacognitive awareness".[4] Outdated assumptions in democratic theory may be a good example of cognitive routines that can constrain our imagination if left unexamined. Acknowledging the mental models we bring into rethinking democracy, including the concepts we unconsciously avoid, is a first step to genuine innovation.

On the other hand, convergent thinking is the second phase of the brainstorming session when it's time to get practical. This is where the group narrows down all those wild ideas into something useful. After having generated many exciting options, now you're evaluating, organizing, and selecting the best ones.[5] It's about finding the most effective solution to the problem at hand.

Think of convergent thinking as the focused counterpart to divergent thinking. While divergent thinking casts a wide net, convergent thinking reels it in. You might ask: "Which ideas are actually doable? Which ones solve our problem best? What resources would we need?" This analytical process helps transform creative concepts into practical action plans.

The magic happens when these two thinking styles work together. The freedom of divergent thinking generates novel possibilities, while the structure of convergent thinking refines them into workable solutions. Most successful innovation processes deliberately separate these phases—first allowing ideas to flow without judgment, then critically examining them later.[6] This process also demands the deliberate suspension of judgment. Many potentially transformative ideas fail to surface or mature because they are deemed "impossible" too quickly. A key element in effective divergent thinking is resisting this impulse, cultivating tolerance for ambiguity, and allowing ideas—even strange or radical ones—to develop before assessing their feasibility.

Divergent thinking, especially when exploring unconventional directions, often evokes psychological tension: challenging established ideas can create inner conflict and uncertainty that must be endured rather than prematurely resolved. The most creative breakthroughs often emerge from processes that have

4 Lebuda and Benedek 2024.

5 Cropley 2006.

6 Baer 1993; West 2002.

been depicted as "Janusian"[7] in reference to the Roman god with two faces, to describe the need to hold seemingly contradictory or paradoxical ideas together without rushing to eliminate the tension between them.

I invite you, in reading this book, to set it aside after this paragraph, and to join a common exercise (or, if you use this book in a course or group, even do the exercise with your students, colleagues, or friends): let's do a brainstorming session for *best ideas to change the scientific approach towards tackling this crisis of democracy*. What could political science do differently to allow us to end this crisis? Even if you are not a political scientist and can only guess what political science could do, I invite you to invest some minutes in this task. (You can enhance the exercise by asking a generative AI tool, just make sure to thoroughly review its answers and pick only those that are convincing for you.)

Pause reading here and return after the exercise.

It would be too much to present my own brainstorming blackboard here. It is possible to quickly generate from 10 to 50 or even more ideas, depending partly on what you or your group knows with regard to existing scientific approaches towards tackling this crisis of democracy, and partly just on the willingness to let ideas run wild. You will find some lists under https://civil-democracy.org/rethinking-democracy-brainstorming-canvas/, and the opportunity to submit your own. But with space limitations in the book (and, probably, your attention), we directly proceed to the next step and mention the multitude of ideas only in relation to what happens with them.

2.2 Finding a Strategy

What are the criteria that determine what is a helpful idea and which ones will be left aside? Very much like the initial divergent idea generation stage, the subsequent convergent process of setting priorities depends on individual predispositions. Criteria that single out which road to take always carry a certain degree of subjectivity. But some objective arguments exist.

Two criteria used here can be derived from the very process of rethinking. One is to keep the focus on democracy while seeing the larger picture. The other is to accept the challenge of innovation.

7 Rothenberg 1971, 1996.

Keeping the focus on democracy means to acknowledge that we are dealing here with democratic institutions. They need to be a fit with and in a good relation to their social environment, but they have to take on their own role in this relation. Even more, they are the central tool through which influence can be exerted. The economic system may be among the root causes of the current crisis, but demanding a different one requires political implementation, and so we are back at square one. Keeping the focus on democracy also puts recent social and technological developments in perspective. The problems of democracy did not begin just last year. Rethinking democracy is necessary precisely because we deal with a larger process going back at least 20, if not 30, years. That does not mean that ideas dealing with recent developments may not be helpful. But they cannot be the ones to begin with. So, if your list (like mine) contains hints around social media or AI, set them aside for later, in order to narrow the focus for now.

Accepting the challenge of innovation means joining the almost 90 percent of Americans who see that there is some problem deep inside the structure of political institutions. It implies that, in order to fix the problem, we first need to understand it. With that, it implies a priority for theory work.

Again, this may be seen as a value-laden decision. Many political scientists hope to find the solution to the problems of democracy in some empirical material.[8] This may be valuable work, but starting with it is not the road we take here. Regardless of how valuable they may ever be, accepting the challenge of innovation deprioritizes all innovations in empirical methodologies, and even experiences with previous democracy innovations or foreign or historical democracy traditions that could be studied in more depth.

We can take this argument even further. If there is some problem deep inside the structure of political institutions, it will not be fixed with superficial strategies. That means prioritizing among theoretical arguments those on a higher level of abstraction, that is, theoretical frameworks over directly entering institutional design or strategies for public engagement, communication, or collective action.

Keeping the focus on democracy and accepting the challenge of innovation both hint to turning to institutionalist theory, a research area that studies the internal dynamics and external performance of institutions. By using the term "institutions", we refer to agreements on how to conduct interaction, providing "rules of the game" for social interactions. These are embedded in broader contexts[9] and follow what institutionalists call "path dependencies": their past sets conventions that can easily shape their future, and may prevent them from adapt-

8 For example, Rhodes-Purdy 2017; Parker 2017.

9 Powell and DiMaggio 1991.

ing to changing societal needs, rendering them sources of dysfunction.[10] Institutionalism has recently begun to include behavioral insights,[11] and this is surely a helpful idea to keep in mind.

However, while institutionalism surely is a helpful framework, it does not yet determine where exactly to start. For finding a good starting point for our endeavor of rethinking democracy, I see three arguments.

The first argument is to broaden the disciplinary perspective. On the one hand, since de Tocqueville political science has been to a large extent a democracy science, and hence the fact that democracy is in crisis does not leave the discipline untouched. On the other hand, democratic institutions are embedded in a social environment and need to fit with and be in a good relation with it, as said above. But that means that associated social sciences like sociology, psychology, or communication may be as necessary to understand what's going on as political science.

The second argument is to broaden the perspective in time—on the one hand, to seek inspiration from classical scientific studies of the past; and on the other to keep in mind impact orientation for the future. Rethinking democracy is not meant to be purely academic exercise. It is meant to contribute to social change. What we may find out in rethinking democracy must be able to spark a social movement, otherwise it is not worth the effort. Interestingly, both arguments lead to the same starting point.

With regard to classical studies, I turn to famous texts of Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Michel Foucault; more specifically to Weber's Protestantism study, Durkheim's study of suicide, and Foucault's analysis of *The Birth of the Clinic* in the 19th century.[12] Weber asked why modern capitalism emerged in Protestant areas of Europe and found that Protestant theology stimulated thrift, focus, and work discipline. Durkheim asked why suicide rates differed starkly among French departments and found the importance of social integration and cohesion. Foucault asked why 19th century doctors came to objectify their patients' bodies as separate from their personal identity and found the rise of systematic knowledge by establishing causal links between observations.

Despite vast differences between them, these three studies have one thing in common: they all established an analytical centerpoint that links causes and effects through human interaction, and for which each author established a distinct term. Weber summarized the importance of thrift and work discipline in his con-

10 North 1990; Thelen 1999.

11 Thaler 1985; Thaler and Sunstein 2009.

12 Weber [1904/1920] 2011; Durkheim 1897; Foucault 1963.

cept of the "Protestant work ethic". Durkheim used the word "anomy" for the loss of connection, integration, and meaning. Foucault coined the term "episteme" for how we agree to see the world, and "the clinical gaze" for the specific resulting way of interaction in medicine.

These analytical centerpoints always link the phenomena studied to human agency. Weber's Protestant work ethic established motivations and mutual expectations that guided the early capitalists. Durkheim's anomy summarizes the loss of clear expectations and social resources that led young French people to take their own lives. Foucault's medical gaze described how doctors and patients gathered in a joint setting of hope for newly established diagnostical and therapeutical techniques, even at the price of missing out on the agency and narratives of patients.

Fortunately, following these examples in search of an analytical centerpoint is consistent with impact orientation. What we may find out in rethinking democracy should be able to spark a social movement, and therefore a focus on human agency is helpful, since social movements are processes in which actors become aware of a social problem and coalesce to solve it. Speaking of actors here is correct because all social movements reach greater impact if organizations join them. But even organizations comprise individuals—movements usually start with individuals, and such beginnings genuinely matter. Starting a social movement always begins with understanding the situation of individuals, for which an analytical centerpoint is dearly needed.

But what exactly is it that we should search for with regard to individual situations? Here, a third argument can be borrowed from creativity research, specified with another famous classical theory example, this time from psychology.

Creativity research advises changing perspectives.[13] Peeking into other disciplines is one way of perspective-shifting. Another can be learned from psychology, from the discipline-shifting effect of psychologist Abraham Maslow. During World War II, his "pyramid of needs" not only provided the first comprehensive theory of human motivation but also started a completely new perspective in psychology. Up to that point, psychology had only studied aberrations from established norms of behavior. Against this focus on negative phenomena, Maslow asked for the conditions of successful life, initiating what became known as "positive psychology". It was not a cheerful inception: deeply aware of the atrocities of Holocaust and war, Maslow realized that conventional psychology had too easily taken mental health for granted.[14] It was time to ask what enabled it.

13 Mednick 1962.

14 Hoffman 1988.

A lifetime later, this is an important insight. After the huge relief of the late 1940s, enabled through the success of war-winning and postwar democracies and expressed in Churchill's quip of democracy "as the worst form of government, except all others that have been tried",[15] we may have too easily taken "democratic health", that is, stability and good governance in democracies, for granted. Today, it is time to ask what enabled it.

What made democracies work? More specifically, what made Western democracies work in the 1950s through 1980s? So far, seeing democracy and stability as identical in modern societies has been an unquestioned premise, and everything else an aberration. Our fear of social instability may have driven an implicit self-suggestion that democracy should normally work well—very much as, prior to Maslow, his contemporaries' fears of mental instability drove the implicit self-suggestion of taking mental health for granted.

Together, these three arguments—interdisciplinarity, the search for an analytical centerpoint linked to human agency, and the question of what made democracies work—provide a clear strategy for this book. We set out to understand the successful recipe that made democracy work for individual citizens in Western societies in the 1950s to 1980s, and look for the reasons why this recipe no longer works.

The concept of the analytical centerpoint, as derived from Weber, Durkheim, and Foucault, breaks down this question into two: "What is the central outcome that good democratic institutions need to deliver for their citizens?" and "How has this outcome been delivered in Western industrial societies?" This framework allows us to ask "What has changed to prevent its delivery?" to derive an own understanding of the current problems. On this foundation, we can build and answer the question, "What needs to change to deliver it again?"

2.3 How Has Democracy Been Rethought Before?

Of course, this is not the first attempt to rethink democracy. Experience of creativity research has resulted in us not starting with previous attempts, but that does not imply ignoring them. In some attempts, "rethinking" meant a thorough critique of the status quo,[16] valuable in times of justified complacency but not

15 Churchill 1947, p. 207.

16 For example, Sartori 1991; Hermann and Kegley 1995; Streb 2008; Isaac 2014; Rensmann 2019; Hintzen 2022.

enough to overcome the crisis we are in today. But there have been other approaches of rethinking democracy that are more constructive.

As democracy as currently implemented is mostly representative democracy, attempts to rethink democracy have often begun with the democratic function of representation. The traditional view saw representation as a simple handoff of power: we vote, they govern on our behalf.[17] But this approach has left too many people feeling unheard and excluded.

In response, thinkers expanded the understanding of representation beyond just elections. For them, "rethinking representation" meant to show how identity matters,[18] how symbols shape our political imagination,[19] how representation is as much about performance as policy.[20] Some rethink representation to shift it from a delegation to being a community act, growing from shared belonging and mutual recognition.[21]

This broader view aligns with theories that see representation as an ongoing series of claims and performances rather than just an election-day transaction.[22] An important way to rethink representation is to acknowledge that these patterns play out differently across cultures,[23] and now face new challenges in the digital world, where technology risks amplifying existing inequalities unless carefully managed[24]—both important insights to which we will return later, but not a stronger starting point than the one laid out above. For all its innovative thinking, this work on representation largely remained stuck in theory rather than practice, and far from inspiring impactful institutional reform and broad social movements towards it. We've gained insights and broader perspectives but no ideas to translate these into real-world reforms that could actually transform political structures or restore people's faith in democracy.

When representation started showing cracks in the late 20th century, deliberative democracy emerged with a compelling promise: if citizens could engage in reasoned, inclusive discussion about public matters, better decisions would follow. Thinkers like Jürgen Habermas believed that through thoughtful conversation

17 Pitkin 1967.
18 Mansbridge 2011; Piscopo 2011.
19 Carrillo 2013; Loncar 2024.
20 Xydias 2024.
21 Costa et al. 2018.
22 Urbinati 2006; Saward 2010; Disch 2015.
23 Guasti and Geissel 2019.
24 Deseriis 2021.

we could find common ground despite our differences. They saw rational discourse as more legitimate than mere vote-counting.[25]

"Rethinking" in this context meant, for example, pushing this vision further, for example insisting on actively including marginalized voices and embracing different ways of communicating beyond formal argument[26] or extending deliberation across national boundaries in a global democratic thinking.[27]

But over time, cracks appeared in the deliberative model too. The ideal of finding "the best argument" may mask deep power imbalances.[28] Our emotional lives—so central to how we actually make decisions—may be pushed aside in favor of cold reasoning.[29] Real democratic contexts involve uncertainty, complexity, and networks that don't fit neatly into idealized discussion forums.[30] Even well-designed deliberative experiments underperformed when faced with crisis or conflict.[31]

When put to the test, deliberative reforms often failed to deliver on their promises. We need to measure democracy's success by its authenticity and depth, not just formal procedures.[32] Even well-designed innovations struggled to overcome polarization and exclusion.[33] In settings beyond the nation-state, deliberation proved especially difficult,[34] and ironically, more transparency and public discussion sometimes created new forms of exclusion rather than inclusion.[35]

It is, however, helpful to have a closer look at one rather successful implementation of deliberative democracy: the Irish Citizens' Assembly, widely celebrated as a success in democratic innovation, particularly for its influence on constitutional referendums such as marriage equality (2015) and abortion legalization (2018). A constitutional requirement for referendums on such reforms created a unique context where deliberative assemblies could link directly to binding democratic decisions, providing output legitimacy—citizens' recommendations were not merely symbolic but fed into actual referendums.[36] But this success story was temporally limited. It was designed from the outset as a temporary, ad-hoc

25 Habermas 1996, 1998; Gutmann et al. 1996; Elster 1998; Dryzek 2000.
26 Fraser 1990; Young 2000.
27 Bohman 1996.
28 Pellizzoni 2001.
29 Máiz 2010.
30 Pellizzoni 2003; Booher 2008.
31 Davis 2024; Machin 2023.
32 Fishman 2016.
33 Mansbridge 2003; Streb 2008.
34 Apaydin 2016.
35 Friedland et al. 2006; Stasavage 2007.
36 Field 2018; Farrell et al. 2019; Courant 2021.

body with a specific mandate and fixed timeline, not meant to be a permanent institution. It remained a time-limited add-on to traditional representation initiated by the government strategically to delegate contentious issues like abortion, avoiding direct responsibility—a form of "blame avoidance". Although subsequent assemblies were launched, each remained likewise temporary and topic-specific, reinforcing the pattern of Ireland's "contrasted institutionalization" of deliberative democracy: innovative, impactful, but not normalized as part of everyday governance. These assemblies may have relieved the democratic crisis for Ireland a little. But they do not constitute a new success model to be exported.[37] All in all, for all its appeal, deliberative democracy ultimately proved too reformist. It couldn't fully address the emotional and knowledge-related dimensions of democratic breakdown, nor scale effectively to handle complex institutional, technological, and social challenges.

As these traditional models faltered, a different pattern emerged—one where democracy increasingly exists as spectacle rather than substance. In this context, "rethinking democracy" became "rethinking spectacle", as Guy Debord's analysis in *The Society of the Spectacle*[38] emerged as helpful for understanding this shift: democratic representation becoming a staged substitute for genuine participation, a show we watch rather than a power we exercise. Political meaning dissolves in a flood of images and symbols disconnected from reality.[39] Simulation logic is present in today's digital democracy wherever visibility masks a lack of real agency.[40]

But most analysis remains critical rather than constructive. Technical fixes and "social" innovations may just disguise deeper exclusions.[41] Well-meaning criteria derived from complexity or systems theories remain without any bridge to practical institutions.[42] What we need, a more substantial democratic renewal, for example along the antique concepts of citizen equality in relation to institutions and political self-expression (*isonomia* and *isegoria*),[43] remains frustratingly out of reach.

With reformist deliberation stalling and democracy declining into meaningless spectacle, a more radical current gained strength—one focused on conflict, disruption, and performance. Drawing on thinkers like Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto

37 Courant 2021, 2022.
38 Debord [1967] 1994.
39 Smith 2003.
40 Penner 2019.
41 Busch 1999; Schmidt 2016.
42 Shkliarevsky 2016.
43 Griffith 2020.

Laclau, and Jacques Rancière,[44] this tradition rejects consensus as democracy's goal. Instead, it sees democracy in the contentious processes through which new identities, demands, and meanings emerge through struggle.

Radical democratic theory offers a fundamental critique of liberalism's tendency to reduce politics to administration.[45] Democratic leadership, in this view, isn't about maintaining order but disrupting hierarchies.[46] Rights themselves become tools for defiant self-creation rather than just protections.[47]

These abstract ideas take concrete form in protest movements. A refugee march becomes not just a plea for help but a democratic practice in itself.[48] Radical action and performativity emerging from society's margins are emphasized over political system approaches.[49] Digital activism also connects to this tradition, though visibility alone—without challenging power—has limits.[50] In all these approaches, democracy isn't a stable system but an emotionally charged performance that makes the excluded visible, heard, and politically present.

Yet even these radical approaches proved more about coping with or even further contributing to democracy's crisis than overcoming it. And so we arrive at our current moment—one where liberal democracies face a profound breakdown of legitimacy amid deepening inequality, polarization, and shifting identities. Populism isn't just an external threat to democracy but a symptom of its exhaustion—a sign that our democratic forms have failed to represent, include, or adapt. Some of the citizens who increasingly participated only as spectators of elites rotating through technical positions of decision-making[51] have turned to populist actors dramatizing this exclusion by appealing to "the people" against "the system".[52]

The populist surge responds to democracy's increasingly empty performance: we maintain the spectacle of sovereignty without its substance. We cling to democratic forms even as they've been emptied of influence—a kind of "democratic fetishism". These problems were visible years ago in how global institutions failed to create genuine inclusion.[53] At the core of our crisis lie deep epistemic and moral

44 Mouffe 2000, 2018; Laclau 2005; Rancière 1999.
45 Tambakaki 2019.
46 Barthold et al. 2022.
47 Eristavi 2021.
48 Schwiertz 2022.
49 Stavrakakis 2011; Palonen 2021.
50 Penner 2019.
51 Crouch 2004.
52 Mudde 2007.
53 Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019; Kapustin 2020; Bonanno 2000.

challenges. Deliberative models often exclude dissenting moral frameworks under the guise of reason. We lack good ways to measure democracy's depth and authenticity—precisely what populists claim to restore. We might find a better path in reimagining partisanship as ethical engagement rather than tribalism.[54]

Some pragmatic alternatives focus on rebuilding moral and civic trust. Others rethink fundamental categories like "the people" through demographic and symbolic struggle, echoing Laclau's view of populism as a logic of political articulation.[55] The common thread in these analyses is that populism emerges not from too little democracy but from its distorted excess—a system increasingly unable to make citizens feel seen, heard, or represented. As Peter Mair observed in his prophetic analysis, we now face democracies without demos, where political contestation lacks substance and legitimacy crises multiply without institutional repair.[56]

So far, neither pragmatic nor self-declared radical approaches have been able to turn the tide towards ending the crisis of democracy. None of them provides an institutional blueprint for making things better. None of them addresses the need to implement such an institutional blueprint with a motivated social movement. Some of their insights are very helpful to inform single steps on the way to go. But none is competition for the strategy laid out above.

2.4 What You Can Expect

Hence, without much structuring input from earlier attempts to rethink democracy, the considerations laid out in Section 2.2 structure the book. "What is the central outcome that good democratic institutions need to deliver?" is asked and answered in Chapter 3; "How has this outcome been delivered in Western industrial societies?" in Chapter 4. "What has changed to prevent its delivery?" is the subject of Chapter 5, together forming Part I, "The Past", of this book. The question "What needs to change to deliver it again?" fills Part II, "The Future", and "In which specific phenomena is this theory exemplified?" to convince movement actors in- and outside of academia to engage in testing the theory is the subject of Part III, "The Present". Part IV, "Redoing Democracy", aims for what its title says, applying the insights gained in previous sections to derive strategies for the better.

54 Pellizzoni 2001; Fishman 2016; White and Ypi 2010.
55 Petersen et al. 2022; Palonen 2021; Laclau 2005.
56 Mair 2006.

This structure allows the inclusion of many aspects of rethinking as discussed above: we will reanalyze and even redefine democracy in Chapter 3; reevaluate previous success models in Chapter 4; reconceive and reconstruct democracy in Part II; reconsider the current crisis in Chapter 5 and Part III; reexplore and readdress non-Western modernization and global governance in Part IV; and reenvision and reimagine strategies for a new dynamic of finally redoing and better doing democracy in Part V.

One additional hint to you as the reader: rethinking democracy is an aim that targets different groups, and it is worthwhile having a closer look at some examples, for raising awareness of the others for whom this book needs to be written, too. I have given them hypothetical names: Catia, Thomas, Clarence, and others.

First, this is a book for Catia. Catia is a professor of political science. Bringing forth new insights in political theory, this book is written for her. However, with limited time and hundreds of books in political theory being published each year, she has to filter for focus. Unfortunately, after decades in which active institutional design has had no prominent role in political science, even today the promise of needed change is not high on her list of criteria. For her research, Catia reads books that engage with existing theory debates or present new empirical results. Even if she sympathizes with new approaches to democracy, she does not see it as her role to bring it forward. As one rejecting review put it a decade ago, "This might be an interesting idea for a social movement, but this movement needs to exist so that it can be researched".

Such a social movement would be mainly built by concerned citizens. Let's name one of them Thomas. Thomas worries about the democratic backlash; he worries about populism and the reduction in rights, the more violent social climate and the short-sighted and oftentimes simply bad policies it brings. Thomas is very often not happy with politics as made in the current system either, but it is clear for him that any real improvement would not come from a regression to autocratic leadership. And next to Thomas, there are Maxim and Azada, who both left their home countries because of the pressure, lack of rights, and bad policies of authoritarian regimes. They worry about developments in their new environment, but even more so, they would be happy to see new democratic movements in their home countries. However, none of the three is a political scientist. To consider putting effort into a new democracy movement, they need to be assured by someone who knows more about political institutions.

Very unfortunately, both Catia and the three concerned citizens wait for the other to move first. Thomas, Azada, and Maxim need Catia to assure them that rethinking democracy and redoing it accordingly is worth the effort, while Catia waits either for them to start a social movement without her or for colleagues

to rethink democracy within established debates that, with their lack of imagination, have contributed to the current crisis.

Luckily, in between them there is a third group. Let's name one of its representatives Clarence. Clarence is a B.A. student in political science or another social science. He chose his subject precisely because he could see that something is going wrong, with the explicit aim of change. While he sees how in higher grades and even around him, friends and colleagues begin to be more focused on employability, he has not forgotten this aim. Luckily, Catia knows about him, and as she is not only a researcher but also a teacher, she is sometimes on the lookout for texts that might be interesting for students like Clarence.

This is the way rethinking democracy and redoing it can be expected to develop: from Catia seeing the argument and thinking, "Clarence might like that as assigned reading", and Clarence understanding the argument, and convincing Thomas. Seeing Clarence and Thomas together, even Catia might consider bringing the topic of rethinking democracy to the next conference she organizes.

We will see that all three would largely benefit from a fourth person—let's call her Vivianne. Vivianne is a member of a foundation board that worries deeply about the ongoing crisis of democracy. She would like to support efforts to turn the tide and even be happy to make a great impact. She is aware that innovation needs the courage to bet on the right vision, but she is a little bit anxious to waste her founders' money on unproven approaches. So, all she has done so far is to fund conferences or neat, small tools for democracy education. Vivianne would definitely feel more comfortable with Clarence, Thomas, and most of all Catia at her side. And with the four of them working together, rethinking democracy will soon turn into redoing democracy, as we will study more closely in Chapters 12 and 13.

Regardless of which of these groups you would place yourself in, in reading the book it may be sometimes helpful to remember that the others exist, too. If you are most like Thomas, you probably like clear, concise language, while if you are more like Catia, you may feel uncomfortable with suggestions of clarity when you know about thousands of related questions that still might need further research. In my writing, I hope to mediate between you. I mostly try to accommodate Thomas. But if this book does not make it on to Catia's course reading list, it will be written in vain. So, if you are like Catia and feel uncomfortable with summaries of contested topics others would devote separate books to, think of Thomas. And if you are like Thomas and feel that the complication of some argument would not have been necessary to convince you, consider that this argument might have been needed to let Catia place the topic on Clarence's reading list. Only together, can you turn the ongoing crisis into a new democratic dynamic.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that rethinking is more than reflection. It is a structured creative process. It involves questioning established assumptions, exploring new frameworks, and fostering cognitive flexibility to break out of old patterns. Creativity research can enhance this process, showing that rethinking benefits from generating bold new ideas while also refining them into actionable strategies.

From this perspective, we have established key criteria for a successful strategy. We have prioritized broad institutional thinking over minor adjustments and emphasized the role of institutions in shaping the analytical centerpoint we seek. The three arguments of broadening the perspective in terms of knowledge, time, and a turn from negative to positive thinking led to the book's central structure.

This structure has been checked against a survey of past rethinking efforts which have yielded many helpful facets but no alternative strategy competing with the approach chosen.

Finally, we have spelled out this structure: understanding democracy's key deliverable, its historically successful emergence and recent end, presenting the necessary institutional innovation, tracking theory and potential in different fields, and developing the implementation strategy, which turned into considering the diverse intended audience—among which you will have hopefully found yourself.

Part I **Understanding the Past**

3 Democratic Efficacy

After reviewing the deep crisis in democratic institutions, with its long-term increases in dissatisfaction, trust erosion, and polarization, the first step of rethinking democracy is to identify the analytical centerpoint of understanding democratic institutions with their successes and failures.

To do so, we start very generally, and on the individual level: Why do we want what we want? Why do humans pursue the goals they pursue? How do the ways we see the world and the ways we act in it relate? What role do our body and our brain play? Are there common mechanisms that link different motivations as we know them from psychological studies? How have these common mechanisms been described so far?

In a second set of questions, we shift to the collective level: What happens when we come together, meet others, and form a society? How do our general motivations play out when we join others? How do different layers of motivations play out in interaction? What do we need to keep up our ability to engage in helpful interaction? How are motivations transformed into collective action? Again, what do we know about that from science so far?

Collective action and democracy are not necessarily the same. This leads to a closer examination of the relationship between motivations and democratic institutions. Which role does the closeness of our connections play? Which role do the power relationships in our interactions play, and which our institutional frameworks? What makes our demands fulfilled not only in the moment but in the long run?

With thus finally having our analytical centerpoint defined, we can use it to review the term "democracy". What is it, really? Which aspects are important for societies to be good societies in the long run? And how does this new view of rethinking the very concept of democracy relate to the many conceptions of democracy that have been developed over the history of the concept?

3.1 A Kantian Theory of Motivation

Why do we want what we want? Why do humans pursue the goals they pursue?

Most of us see these questions as the same. Wanting something seems identical to having it as a goal. But there's a subtle difference. Wanting is about motivation—the drive that pushes us forward. A goal is a mental picture we create and try to make real in the world around us.

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And this small distinction in the question can actually be turned into a powerful answer: We don't just set things as goals in our minds because we want them. We want things because the very act of creating these mental pictures and working to see them in reality is deeply satisfying to us.

I call this a "Kantian theory" because it was the great 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant who first described how our minds organize what we experience. Kant argued that we use cognitive frameworks (he called them "schemata") to make sense of everything we see, hear, and feel. These mental frameworks help us organize incoming information, allowing us to recognize and categorize our experiences before we fully understand them. They bridge the gap between raw sensations and abstract thinking. This ensures our knowledge isn't just random impressions but a meaningful interpretation of reality.

Kant used the example of a plate and a circle to illustrate this. The circular shape we associate with a plate connects directly to our abstract understanding of circles in geometry.[1] These mental frameworks let us apply abstract math principles to everyday objects.

From the time we're babies, we don't just experience random sensations. Instead, we interpret everything according to patterns we've already learned. These patterns develop through repeated experiences and get stronger each time reality confirms them. When we encounter something new, we try to fit it into these existing patterns. Think about how a child might initially call all four-legged animals "doggy" until they learn to distinguish between dogs, cats, and horses. The child is using an existing pattern and gradually refining it as new information comes in.

This happens in all areas of thinking. When children learn language, they don't learn words in isolation—they develop grammar structures that guide how they understand and create sentences. Similarly, when we discuss politics, we don't evaluate each argument independently—we fit it into our existing belief systems. For instance, someone who values individual liberty might automatically view government regulations with suspicion, while someone who prioritizes community welfare might see the same regulations as necessary protections.

What Kant didn't realize is that human motivation largely comes from our desire to see these patterns confirmed.[2] Evolution has shaped us to crave pattern confirmation in two ways: passively confirming aspects of reality that are familiar and safe, and actively pursuing external goals which we have thus far only imagined. Consider how we feel comfort when returning home after a long trip—that's passive pattern confirmation. But when we embark on a trip for the excitement of

1 Kant [1787] 2000, p. 197.

2 Scholtz 2002, ch. 2.

steering towards places long envisioned, that's active pattern confirmation at work.

Evolution has given us specific brain chemicals that create these motivations. When we experience familiar patterns, serotonin helps us feel content with stability and predictability.[3] When these patterns are disrupted, stress hormones like cortisol make us uncomfortable. For social relationships specifically, oxytocin rewards us for seeking familiar connections.[4] When we feel at ease with long-time friends, our brains release chemicals that reward us for maintaining these familiar social patterns.

But we can't always stick with what's familiar. Every animal must face uncertainty to find food, and evolution rewards us for seeking genetic diversity when finding partners.[5] That's why we pursue goals and feel pleasure through dopamine when we successfully predict outcomes or confirm patterns.[6] Think about the satisfaction you feel when completing a crossword puzzle or figuring out the plot twist in a mystery novel—that's dopamine rewarding you for successfully confirming a pattern. For active pattern confirmation, we use the word "efficacy". Don't confuse it with efficiency or effectiveness. All three are about action achieving results. But the focus is different: effectiveness focuses on achieving the best results while efficiency focuses on minimizing resources used. Efficacy is about the experience that one leads to the other.

Examples of the different forms of passive and active pattern confirmation are provided in the famous hierarchy of needs of Abraham Maslow.[7] On the base level of Maslow's physiological needs, passive pattern confirmation ensures our basic bodily functions are met: when you feel hungry and then eat a meal, you're confirming the pattern that food relieves hunger. Safety needs rely primarily on passive confirmation, as well, when secure environments and stable living conditions reinforce predictability. If these patterns break, we're motivated to restore stability, feeling uneasy during power outages or when our daily routines are significantly disrupted.

Social relationships provide ongoing pattern confirmation, on the level of love and belonging through familiar interactions and group recognition, and on the higher level of esteem through seeking challenges and recognition to verify our

3 Cools et al. 2011.

4 Feldman 2012.

5 Mays and Hill 2004.

6 Schultz 2015.

7 For the pyramid, see Maslow 1943. For the relation to pattern confirmation, see Scholtz 2002, ch. 2.

capabilities and social standing. The comfort we feel in maintaining long-term relationships, getting a promotion at work, or receiving praise for a creative project confirms patterns from interaction to confirm the value of our skills.

Finally, self-actualization, the highest form of active pattern confirmation, lets us pursue unique, complex projects to strive for creative, intellectual, or altruistic achievements. Writing a novel, building an organization, or mastering a musical instrument are all activities that challenge us to form new, complex patterns and see the finished book, the group at work, or the melody played answering them.

Maslow's pyramid does not fully deliver on its promise of completeness,[8] but motivations overlooked in it can be easily integrated in the perspective of pattern confirmation. For example, performing rituals has been shown to significantly enhance individuals' sense of efficacy and control, as has always been an important base of religion but only recently confirmed with empirical evidence across a range of contexts, from stress-coping and decision-making to athletic performance.[9]

Maslow's base level shows that restricting Kant's argumentation to cognitive frameworks is incomplete. We may feel grumpy when we are hungry even if we have not yet cognitively realized how long ago our last meal was. Schemata may not only relate to cognition but also to perception. In fact, the distinction between perceptual and cognitive patterns is rather artificial.[10] Our brain has different regions, but they are interconnected and without clear borders. If we draw a rough midline from the brainstem at the upper end of the spine to the forehead, the regions where the respective patterns are stored and processed line up roughly as in Maslow's pyramid[11] from the bottom to the top: breathing, heart rate, and reflexes at the brainstem; the regulation of attention and arousal at the midbrain; fear at the amygdala; and, further, social bonding below the thalamus, and perspective-taking and understanding intentions above and behind the ear; to assessing rewards and punishments directly behind the eyes and self-reflection and long-term planning behind the upper forehead.

8 Compton 2024.

9 Boyer and Linard 2007; Sosis and Handwerker 2011; Xygalatas et al. 2021; Niczyporuk 2022; Lang et al. 2022; Yun et al. 2024; Pujalte et al. 2024.

10 Barsalou 1999.

11 With some more recent corrections, Kenrick et al. 2010.

3.2 Efficacy's Social Relevance

Maslow's pyramid metaphor has the implication of a clear dependency of higher steps from lower steps. This implication has drawn a lot of criticism, even though Maslow himself did not want to be rigid in that regard.[12] One can pursue self-actualization projects even under conditions of loneliness or hunger. But it is harder to do so, as it requires the necessary goal patterns to be present, and the probability of striving for pattern confirmation on higher levels decreases when patterns on lower levels have not been met.

Over time, psychological theories of motivation have described the importance of active pattern confirmation with increasing clarity, though often using different terminology. In the psychology of work, Frederick Herzberg was among the first to highlight the importance of goal-directed behavior. His research challenged the conventional wisdom of his time by showing that money and benefits alone don't create lasting motivation.[13]

For many business leaders in the 1950s, and even some CEOs today, Herzberg's findings about the importance of achievement, recognition, and meaningful work came as a surprise. But from the perspective of active pattern confirmation, the explanation is straightforward. External rewards like bonuses direct employees' thoughts away from work itself: they start forming and pursuing projects on which to spend their extra money. In contrast, meaningful projects and the expectation of social recognition for accomplishments keep their focus within the work context, confirming patterns related to their professional identity and skills.

The theories that come closest to very generally explaining motivation as a search for pattern confirmation are those of Albert Bandura and of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan.[14] Bandura showed that people are driven by their expectation that their actions will lead to predictable and desired outcomes, reinforcing an impression of competence through being able to produce results fitting with inner patterns. Think about learning to play a musical instrument—each time you successfully play a piece, your belief in your ability to master new music grows, motivating you to take on more challenging compositions.

Similarly, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory identifies three basic psychological needs that fuel our internal motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy represents our ability to set and confirm our own mental patterns. Competence aligns with reinforcing our skills and mastery of

12 Compton 2024.

13 Herzberg et al. 1959.

14 Bandura 1977, 1986, 1994; Deci and Ryan 1985, 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000.

tasks. Relatedness ensures we confirm social patterns through our connections with others. Both theories emphasize that lasting motivation comes from goals we set for ourselves rather than rewards imposed from outside.

From the perspective of pattern confirmation theory, self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation ensure that we don't just passively maintain existing mental structures but actively expand them through exploration, creativity, and personal growth. However, both theories focus too heavily on the active side of pattern confirmation. We will see in more detail below how democracy crises demonstrate that the passive maintenance of familiar mental structures must also be taken into account. Before we can describe what good democratic institutions need to deliver, we need to better understand the conditions that determine whether passive or active pattern confirmation takes priority in our lives.

Now: what happens when humans, driven by our need for pattern confirmation, come together, meet others, and form a society? Our experience of efficacy—that sense of being able to make things happen—doesn't disappear when we join others. It plays out in interaction.

When we meet others, we can do so as friends or foes. We can compete for scarce resources, or we can cooperate to meet our goals together. As discussed above, our interaction is a source on its own of experiencing pattern confirmation and rewarding-hormone release. All that can take place within the same relationships—everyone who has siblings or more than one child will confirm that.

In our brain, however, patterns for scarcity and fear are more deeply engrained than those for social bonding and perspective-taking, not to speak of self-reflection and long-term planning. If we feel threatened or that we're losing control over our lives, first our interest in and empathy for others will fall, and later our ability to engage in rational cooperation, even if this would be in our own best interest. Certain levels of efficacy are necessary to keep up our ability to engage in helpful interaction. I will use the term "efficacy-based dialogical capacity" for this ability.

When shared institutions exist, interacting with others can, however, soon lead to coordinated collective action. And that allows for a new source of experiencing efficacy: the political efficacy of envisioning phenomena that can only be reached through coordinated action.

Political efficacy is at the heart of how democracies work. It shapes whether we vote, join political movements, or simply tune out of politics altogether, and has been intensely studied in political science. The concept first emerged from Campbell et al.'s *The Voter Decides* to capture individuals' beliefs about their ca-

pacity to influence politics and the system's responsiveness to their input.[15] Based on their research, when we talk about political efficacy, we're actually discussing two related ideas. The first is "internal efficacy", your confidence in your own ability to understand and participate in politics.[16] The second is "external efficacy", your belief that the government will actually listen and respond to citizens like you.[17] These two beliefs work together to determine how you engage with politics. Both components are likewise important for participation in politics, and both are subject to broader social inequalities, turning efficacy from a psychological to a sociological and political concern.[18]

Your sense of *internal political efficacy* starts forming early and continues to evolve throughout your life. It's shaped by your education, your economic situation, and even your cognitive abilities.[19] People with higher education levels typically have stronger internal efficacy, as they feel more capable of understanding complex political issues.[20] If you have more autonomy in the workplace, that helps.[21] If you regularly engage in discussions among family, friends, and classmates, that helps, too.[22] People who engage in elections and electoral campaigns —or even take the time for practical administrative processes like public hearings or citizen advisory boards, or do respective training— experience, learn a lot, and feel their internal efficacy increase.[23]

But internal efficacy is not just about resources. Emotions play a surprising role in internal political efficacy, too. For instance, anger can actually boost political participation by motivating people to take action.[24] This might explain why some protest movements gain momentum during times of widespread public frustration.

The news you consume also shapes your sense of political efficacy. Regular exposure to political news tends to strengthen internal efficacy over time: the more you learn about politics, the more confident you become in your understanding.[25] The media environment plays a crucial role, too: media trust and ex-

15 Campbell et al. 1954.
16 Niemi et al. 1991.
17 Craig et al. 1990.
18 Verba and Nie 1972.
19 Borgonovi and Pokropek 2017.
20 Wu 2003; Rasmussen and Norgaard 2018.
21 Geurkink et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2023.
22 Kudrnac and Lyons 2018; Chung et al. 2022.
23 Finkel 1985, 1987; Oh and Lim 2017; Valentino et al. 2009.
24 Valentino et al. 2009.
25 Semetko and Valkenburg 1998.

posure shape political engagement across democracies,[26] and the way media presents political issues has an effect on the relationship between efficacy and activism, for example on issues like climate change.[27] Social media can likewise boost internal efficacy and political engagement.[28]

Politics has its influence on internal efficacy, too. Social welfare programs or trustworthy pension systems can increase people's sense of political agency by providing economic security.[29]

3.3 Efficacy in Interaction with Institutions

When it comes to the second part, *external political efficacy*—the belief that the system will respond—is very much about institutions and their performance. There are things that may moderate or amplify it: social media, for example, despite its positive effects on internal efficacy, discussed above, can exacerbate the impression of powerlessness.[30] On the level of whole communities, there are good arguments for higher external efficacy if the community is smaller.[31]

Individual resources again play a role: higher education and income can significantly boost political efficacy,[32] and the same seems to be true for knowledge about ongoing political stories,[33] while depression reduces it.[34] Getting involved in civic associations again has a positive effect. People who join political organizations and develop relationships with community leaders experience increased external efficacy, they gain connections and see more clearly how they might influence the system,[35] an effect that has become even stronger over time.[36] And workplace autonomy or participation in administrative processes, as discussed above, enhance not only internal but even more so external efficacy.[37]

But at its core, external political efficacy is influenced mostly by how well the government actually performs and whether you see yourself represented in the

26 Norris 2015.
27 Feldman et al. 2017.
28 Velasquez and LaRose 2015.
29 Kumlin 2004; Shore 2020.
30 Boulianne et al. 2023.
31 Denters et al. 2014; Huang and Deng 2017.
32 Wu 2003.
33 Haenschen et al. 2024a.
34 Bernardi et al. 2023.
35 Henderson and Han 2021.
36 Hooghe et al. 2024.
37 Oh and Lim 2017; Geurkink et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2023.

political system. As a concept, external political efficacy links how one acts to make one's voice heard to the results achieved. In research, this link is not always present. For example, even though citizens' factual influence on Covid politics was very limited, their perceptions of government competence during the crisis strongly impacted their sense of external efficacy.[38] When governments appear competent and responsive during challenging times, citizens are more likely to believe the political system works.

Various measures of government output have been studied in their relationship with external efficacy but without being very specific about the means of influence, and results go in different directions. While being unsatisfied with how one experiences government in everyday life may have a mobilizing positive effect on external efficacy,[39] the same dissatisfaction with regard to higher-level phenomena like income inequality, polarization, or extremism makes people feel more powerless.[40] Today, political efficacy therefore faces serious challenges. Growing polarization makes it harder for citizens to believe the system can respond to everyone's needs. Rising economic inequality leaves many feeling powerless. And as governance becomes more global, citizens may find it harder to see how they can meaningfully participate.

At its core, however, external political efficacy is all about how institutions translate what citizens do into government responsiveness. Fair institutional procedures matter greatly: when citizens perceive political processes as fair and transparent, their sense of efficacy increases.[41] People who worry more about the role of money in the political process have a lower impression of external efficacy.[42] When people have greater opportunities for political voice and when their concerns are reflected in the policy process, their experience of external efficacy grows.[43]

Therefore, a large number of democratic theorists believe the solution lies in more deliberative forms of democracy: creating more opportunities for citizens to directly participate in political decision-making.[44] Face-to-face deliberation among citizens enhances internal efficacy by building political competence.[45] Various forms of direct democracy like ballot initiatives and participatory budgeting

38 McBrayer et al. 2022.
39 Gidengil 2020.
40 Norris 2015; Rhodes-Purdy et al. 2023.
41 Thibaut and Walker 1975; Cicatiello et al. 2018.
42 Haenschen et al. 2024b.
43 Wolak 2018.
44 Pateman 1970; Barber 1984.
45 Morrell 2005.

have shown mixed results for increasing efficacy,[46] but participatory governance mechanisms can improve efficacy when they're well designed.[47]

However, some caution may be needed, as a comparison of two Latin American cases shows. Chile is the economic envy of every country in Latin America, yet its citizens' support for their government has been surprisingly anemic. By contrast, Venezuela managed to maintain extremely high levels of government support during the tenure of Hugo Chávez despite severe failures of governance. This apparent paradox can be resolved by studying the extensive opportunities for direct participation in the political process Chávez created, which engendered in citizens a sense of control over the course of politics, that is, high external political efficacy.[48]

But at that time, Chile was maintaining in all democracy indices a ranking as an imperfect but stable "flawed democracy", while Venezuela tumbled into being ranked as outright authoritarian, with more than 20 percent of the population leaving the country not only because of the poor economic situation but also because of the perceived low quality of political institutions. As important as political efficacy is, we have to take a closer look at its relationship with democracy.

How we experience political efficacy depends on several factors: how densely connected our social lives are, the power relationships that structure our interactions, and the institutional frameworks that define how we engage with each other.

In societies where people live far apart with few connections between them, individuals can largely live independently. They pursue their life goals with minimal interference from others. In these settings, people meet their need for pattern confirmation through personal safety and private projects, with little need for political structures beyond basic coordination. Think of early frontier settlements or isolated rural communities where neighbors might help each other occasionally but mostly handle their own affairs.[49]

However, as population density and interconnections increase, individual experiences become more interdependent. People's safety and life projects are increasingly shaped by social interactions. In facing upcoming problems, individuals form ideas about how to improve their collective reality. When these ideas successfully lead to collective action, individuals experience political efficacy. As societies become more interconnected, the structure of power relationships and the

46 Dyck and Lascher 2009; Kim 2015.
47 Geissel and Hess 2018.
48 Rhodes-Purdy 2017.
49 Woodburn 1982.

nature of institutions determine whether this political efficacy can be meaningfully realized. Societies that build political efficacy into their institutions allow for sustained civic engagement, leading to both social stability and adaptability to changing circumstances.[50] In contrast, societies that don't create avenues for participation often generate frustration, leading to either political disengagement or unrest.[51]

In highly interconnected societies, individual actions have broad social effects, making collective problem-solving necessary rather than optional. As societies evolve and become more complex, their challenges become more intricate. This requires mechanisms that allow citizens to contribute to decision-making processes. Political efficacy emerges when individuals recognize shared problems, form collective goals, and see their influence reflected in tangible social outcomes.

3.4 What Democracy Needs to Deliver

However, the mere existence of a complex society doesn't guarantee political efficacy. The transition from individual complaints to collective action depends on whether institutions enable or suppress political participation.

Even for authoritarian regimes it is helpful to create some form of political efficacy to maintain legitimacy despite centralized control. Following orders gives predictability, creatively taking part in an artificially devised social project may even give the impression of influence.[52] One way for authoritarian regimes to engineer political efficacy is by framing governance as an exercise in solving apparent social problems. Through state-driven initiatives such as large-scale infrastructure projects, military campaigns, or ideological movements, governments provide citizens with a way to feel effective, even if their engagement is ultimately controlled.[53] Another strategy is the invention of artificial political goals. Populist leaders and autocratic rulers frequently manufacture crises or external threats to mobilize public energy. By presenting themselves as the solution to these challenges, they generate temporary political efficacy, directing collective efforts towards state-encouraged objectives.[54] Consider how regimes often create "enemies of the state" or exaggerate external threats to unite citizens behind leadership.

50 Verba et al. 1995.
51 Norris 2011.
52 Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956.
53 Slater 2010.
54 Arendt 1951.

While these tactics can create short-term political engagement, they are inherently unstable. Bashing fabricated threats does not lead to real improvements, and any truly productive insights of good-willing citizens quickly fade when the institutional framework automatically turns others with other ideas into stability threats.

It is worthwhile remembering here two core criteria of good institutions. On the one hand is stability, the oldest demand made on good political institutions. Politics is about making decisions, and these decisions need to be accepted; a lack of legitimacy and even the belief that political decisions might not be accepted anymore harms all sources of efficacy in private lives.

On the other hand, decisions made in politics need also to be in some sense "good" decisions. This criterion of what is today called "epistemic quality"[55] has (despite specification problems) an equally long tradition back to Plato's demand for philosopher-kings justified on these grounds.

In modern, complex societies, sustaining these two criteria requires predictable and repeatable institutions of political efficacy. Good decisions need information, and providing and judging this information needs the intrinsic motivation of being part of steering responsibility. And while societies with low complexity may be led for a long time based on means of coercion alone, complex societies need the cooperation of their citizens that is only motivated by such responsibility.

For political efficacy to sustainably contribute to stability and good decisions, it must be institutionalized in a way that provides citizens with predictable and repeatable avenues for participation. Only democratic institutions offer this kind of framework.[56] When political influence is tied to formal rights rather than arbitrary or elite-controlled mechanisms, individuals trust that their engagement has real consequences. This leads to the reinforcement of political agency. When citizens see that their votes consistently lead to peaceful transfers of power, or that their advocacy can result in policy changes, they develop confidence in the democratic process.[57] We will term such a kind of political efficacy institutionalized through predictable and repeatable ways of participation "democratic efficacy". Complex societies require democratic efficacy for several reasons. As societies become more intricate, governance mechanisms must adapt to a greater diversity of perspectives and needs. Democratic institutions facilitate adaptive problem-

55 Cooke 2000.
56 Verba and Nie 1972.
57 Easton 1975; Norris 2014.

solving, allowing for inclusive decision-making that accommodates evolving social conditions.[58]

The human consequences of experiencing efficacy allow us to understand how different parts of democracy definitions go together. Such definitions traditionally equate democracy with the presence of political rights and civil liberties, political rights meaning competitive and fair elections with broad suffrage to elect governments with an effective power to govern, and civil liberties comprising at their core the freedoms of speech, assembly, and association.[59] Beyond such a core, democracy would also mean additional criteria like the inviolability of body, home, or dignity, property rights, or minority rights. We will see in the next two chapters how such definitions have overlooked an important point. But we can acknowledge what such definitions aimed for: to describe the conditions for democratic efficacy, even if they were not sufficiently aware of the social preconditions they were implicitly assuming, and for efficacy in the private realm, to be called "private efficacy".

In a world in which governing politicians made the decisions shaping the political world, the only way to experience one's own contribution to this political world was to elect the politicians who did so, and to argue, communicate, and organize in the process. And on the basis of democratic efficacy and the experience of thus being in control of the outer conditions of their lives, humans could pursue their private projects and see others, even members of minorities, as human equals who deserved the same rights as they did.

For democratic efficacy's structural necessity in complex societies, modern societies have developed norms to see democracy as morally desirable. Unfortunately, we will see how democratic efficacy may decline despite such rights and institutions and lead to their erosion. Like autocracies, democracies may fail to offer political efficacy and hence risk stagnation or collapse, as individuals disengage or seek alternative means of experiencing influence on their environment.

Democratic efficacy is about being engaged in a way that makes the individual aware of their power, and of the responsibility that comes with it. Efficacy is the precondition for responsibility: we cannot reasonably expect people to take responsibility for collective outcomes if the institutions they inhabit render their input irrelevant. But when institutions predictably and comprehensibly translate people's individual actions into political results, each avoidable contribution to a less-than-optimal result will leave a constant motivation to think ahead better the next time.

58 Dahl 1989.

59 Collier and Levitsky 1997; Storm 2008.

As the only long-term base for stability, good decisions, responsibility, and the dialogical capacity of acknowledging the other even across divides, democratic efficacy is the analytical centerpoint political institutions in modern societies need to deliver.

Conclusion

This chapter has laid the theoretical foundation for the entire project of rethinking democracy. By tracing the human need for efficacy from individual motivation through social interaction to institutionalized politics, it has identified democratic efficacy as the key concept for understanding both the historical power and the current crisis of democracy.

We started with the insight that motivation can be generally understood through efficacy based on the confirmation of internal mental patterns. Both passive and active pattern confirmation generate feelings of agency, satisfaction, and purpose. And this logic extends to social and political life. When individuals engage with others within institutional frameworks, their experience of efficacy becomes dialogical and collective, turning into political efficacy: the belief that one can understand and influence political processes and that institutions will respond to one's input. Termed "internal" and "external efficacy", both components of political efficacy are shaped by individual resources, emotions, social context, and institutional performance. Political efficacy can exist even under authoritarianism, but only sustainably within democratic institutions. As societies become more interconnected, inclusive institutions become essential for enabling continuous meaningful participation and avoiding disengagement or unrest.

Only democratic efficacy can sustainably connect inner motivations with outer institutions. This concept explains why democracy can be powerful, and also why it can fail—when citizens lose the sense that their participation has an effect. This has implications not only for participation but also for representation and responsiveness, the institutional capacities that enable the translation of individual engagement into collective outcomes.

As the analytical centerpiece of the book, this chapter also provides the evaluative standard for what follows—how democratic efficacy was successfully achieved in previous eras, how it has been lost, and how we can regain it.

4 Two Success Stories

Having argued for democratic efficacy as the central outcome that democratic institutions must deliver, it is now time to turn to the two great historical stories in which democratic efficacy has indeed been delivered, with spectacular success. It is time to ask: what made that possible?

First, what allowed the first-ever case of democratic efficacy—Athenian democracy—to emerge and to function? Why did it appear in its specific time? Why in Greece? What institutional mechanisms enabled free citizens to experience their influence over public decisions?

Second, why did such a model not spread further? Why did direct democracy never again become a dominant model? Why, despite the evident power of direct participation in some cases, has large-scale democracy so rarely relied on it?

Third, how have democracies emerged in recent history? How was modern democracy born? Do we find the same mechanisms played out when young Senegalese got rid of John Rawlings in 1992 as when the citizens of Paris toppled King Charles X of France in 1830? What actors have been important in pressing for democracy? How did they get their power? How did they exert it?

Fourth, and most importantly, what allowed the postwar Western model of representative democracy to succeed? What combination of institutions, social structure, and historical cultural norms enabled citizens to experience democratic efficacy in a new form?

These questions frame our exploration of the two great historical success models of democratic efficacy: ancient Athens and the postwar West. Neither was perfect. But both worked—for a time.

4.1 Direct Democratic Efficacy in Ancient Athens

About three thousand years ago, starting to use iron in a fragmented, hilly country opened a centuries-long window for democratic efficacy in ancient Greece.

To understand how, we need to look at what came before. The previous Bronze Age societies were built around the control of copper and the rare metal of tin that required extensive trade networks. This scarcity concentrated power in the hands of warrior-kings who controlled access to metal production and, by extension, military strength. All large Bronze Age societies were organized around such monopolies, with kings maintaining their rule through exclusive access to superior weapons, large-scale distribution of resources, and the loyalty of dependent warrior classes who relied on them for bronze equipment.

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For Greece, iron changed everything. Unlike bronze, iron was far more abundant and could be extracted and worked using local techniques. This reduced dependence on long-distance trade and centralized resource access. In Greece, this shift facilitated a more decentralized form of society. Local elites—free landowning citizens—could now arm themselves independently without needing a king's resources, and could hence engage in self-governance without hierarchical oversight. It was a democratization of military power: when more people can afford weapons, fewer people can claim exclusive right to rule.

The widespread availability of iron weapons and tools led to the breakdown of the old palace-based power structures. This allowed for new political models to emerge where decision-making was shared among a broader group of free men. In the Greek polis (city-state), civic participation and collective decision-making became central organizing principles. Unlike the hierarchical Bronze Age societies with kings wielding exclusive military power, Iron Age Greece saw the rise of communities that governed themselves.[1]

However, it's important to note that while iron-working technology spread throughout the ancient world and led to shifts in military and economic power, only Greece developed a lasting tradition of democratic self-rule. This unique political path wasn't due to iron alone. The geographical and agricultural conditions of Greece played crucial roles, setting it apart from other regions where iron also replaced bronze.

Greece was a land of fragmented, mountainous terrain broken up by small fertile plains. This geography naturally limited the ability of any single ruler to establish a centralized kingdom. Unlike China and Persia, which developed sophisticated administrative systems and standing armies, Greece's rugged landscapes made communication and administration across large territories extremely difficult. Instead, Greek communities remained politically independent, developing separate city-states, each with its own government and military.[2]

The way Greeks farmed further reinforced this decentralized political structure. The land wasn't suited to large-scale, state-controlled farming such as in Egypt or the Near East, where vast irrigation networks required coordinated labor under centralized rule. Instead, Greek agriculture centered on small, family-owned farms. Independent landowners cultivated grain, olives, and vines on relatively self-sufficient estates.[3] From this agricultural base the hoplite system emerged, where citizen-soldiers defended their city-state with iron weapons.

1 Hjärthner-Holdar and Risberg 2009.

2 Hansen 2006.

3 Hanson 1999.

This further strengthened the connection between owning land, serving in the military, and having political rights.

The shift from bronze to iron, together with Greece's unique geography, allowed for a unique combination of self-defending citizens with their own small-scale production that gave birth to the first case in recorded history where political decisions were made and implemented resting on a large populace. Individual citizens were able to invest their resources both in production and in means of power (i. e., iron weaponry) to create a power equilibrium among themselves.[4] Still, being part of this equilibrium was limited to a small class of free arms-bearing male citizens, so Athens doesn't match democracy by modern standards. Women, slaves, and non-citizens had no political rights. Nevertheless, Greece's political experiment created the term *demokratia*—decision-making by the people—and the first occurrence of democratic efficacy in history.

As a result, in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE Athens emerged as the cultural center of the Western world in a way that has impressed observers and commentators over the centuries,[5] being rightly celebrated for freedom and its contributions to the development of democratic principles. Athenian democracy also achieved remarkable power and performance: its military prowess protected the city-state and furthered its interests. Economically, the classical period fully exploited Athens' strategic location as a port city for trade and commerce, while the city's own production of goods expanded.[6]

And this period of abundance allowed for cultural flourishing and intellectual achievement which echoes until today. Athens became a hub of artistic, philosophical, and literary activity. Democracy created the Parthenon and other iconic architectural achievements. Its emphasis on freedom of speech and debate allowed for a philosophical discourse that laid the foundations of Western philosophy. Plato and Aristotle, the two best-known contemporary commentators on Athenian democracy, took a rather critical stance, but both their ability to write their great works and the fact these were circulated and discussed broadly enough to survive, would not have been possible without the performance Athenian democracy developed.

An impressive success story. Once achieved, how was it sustained?

Living through this period of abundance, Herodotus described the power unleashed through democracy as follows:

4 Scholtz 2001.

5 Piovan and Giorgini 2021.

6 Davies 2007, p. 359.

> [W]hile they were under tyrannical rulers, the Athenians were no better in war than any of their neighbors, yet once they got rid of their tyrants, they were by far the best of all. This, then, shows that while they were oppressed, they were, as men working for a master, cowardly, but when they were freed, each one was eager to achieve for himself.[7]

The success recipe was democratic efficacy. Athenian democracy was built on the active participation of its free male citizens in the popular assembly (*ekklesia*), where they could propose, debate, and vote on laws and policies. Unique in the ancient world, this form of direct democracy was instrumental in fostering democratic efficacy, as Athenian citizens directly influenced governance. For day-to-day business which did not need everyone's participation, there was the so-called Boule, a council of 400 and later of 500 chosen by lot—about 1 in 80 full citizens, ensuring that in the case someone saw his personal life projects affected, direct contact was easily available.

Being deeply aware of their very particular situation in the world of their time, Athenian citizens felt the need and were able to safeguard their institutions with strong democratic norms. On the one hand, everyone who might think of striving for a king-like dominance was threatened with a year in exile. On the other, political engagement was not just a privilege but seen as a civic duty. Citizens gained confidence in the democratic process as they saw their votes determine policies and their advocacy influence legal reforms. Institutionalized direct participation strengthened democratic norms and encouraged continued engagement.

Athenian democracy created not only democratic efficacy but with it also good decisions through aggregating knowledge. The structure of the Boule, for instance, ensured that expertise and localized knowledge from different districts were incorporated into decision-making. The judicial system, where large juries were selected by lot, functioned as a safeguard against corruption and elite domination. These mechanisms both provided opportunities for participation and allowed collective intelligence to shape governance.[8]

Public deliberation in Athens extended beyond the *ekklesia* into the courts and civic festivals, reinforcing shared knowledge and political cohesion. The ability to argue in the Assembly, the legal requirement to justify policies in front of large audiences, and the practice of inscribing decisions on stone created a highly transparent governance system.

With these institutions, full citizens of Athens were able to form patterns and derive satisfaction from seeing them matched as a result of their action, experi-

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7 Herodotus, *Histories*, Book V, section 78. http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001.perseus-eng1:5.78.1.

8 Ober 2008.

encing satisfaction while engaging for their society. Democratic efficacy based on direct participation is what made Athens' democracy so powerful.

4.2 Direct Democratic Efficacy and Its Limits Today

Jump forward 2,500 years from ancient Athens, and many of the positive effects of direct democracy still shine through today.

When talking of the positive effects of direct democracy, we will often turn to Switzerland, with its tradition of direct democracy. With wealth, stability, and well-functioning institutions, Switzerland has good cause to be described as a success story, and some efforts have been made to transfer this model to other countries.[9] But despite the many benefits direct efficacy offers, popular assemblies and direct democracy with initiatives and referendums have not become the main form of democracy, not when its modern revival began in the 19th century, and not in recent decades when such attempts have been made. Why not?

One reason is what political scientists call "path dependency": the conventions of the past shaped how people imagined the future.[10] Even when implementing democracy through revolution, people were so accustomed to centralized decision-making and distinct classes of politicians that they mostly aimed just to replace hereditary kings with elected presidents and appointed officials with elected representatives. They didn't take the more radical step of replacing politics as decisions made by leaders with politics as decisions made by themselves.

A second reason specifies the first reason in the moment of transitioning to democracy: the process of establishing institutions shaped their form. Athens' democracy was created by individuals, and so was the democracy that emerged in the inner cantons of Switzerland. Both gave power to individuals through direct participation. We will see in the next section that in the last century democracy was less created by individuals than by groups. Hence, democratic institutions became more based on groups.

But there is a third reason, a non-transitory real problem of direct participation that was central to the need for another model of democracy that was finally established after World War II.

Democracy in its purest form—where citizens vote directly on laws and policies—sounds ideal. After all, what could be more democratic than people making decisions for themselves? But here's the reality: most of us simply don't have

9 Qvortrup 2013.

10 North 1990; Mahoney 2000.

enough time, information, attention, or mental energy to make frequent, informed decisions on complex policy issues. This is what we might call "temporal-cognitive scarcity", and it presents a genuine challenge to direct democracy.

Even in Switzerland, which comes closest to putting direct democracy into practice on a large scale, researchers are seeing signs of strain. Looking at democracies around the world, we can see this scarcity showing up in three main ways: voters get tired of constant voting, information isn't equally available to everyone, and participation tends to favor certain social groups over others.

The idea that ordinary citizens face limits in political participation isn't new. Back in 1957, Anthony Downs introduced the concept of "rational ignorance", the perfectly sensible choice most people make not to invest huge amounts of time learning about politics when the personal payoff is too small.[11] This was later formalized by studies showing how political participation involves weighing costs like time and mental effort against potential benefits.[12] These frameworks help explain why meaningful mass participation becomes difficult when voting happens frequently and involves complex issues.

One of the clearest signs of temporal-cognitive scarcity is voter fatigue. When ballots become too long, too complex, or too frequent, participation drops, especially for items further down the ballot.[13] This isn't because people don't care—it's because they get overloaded. There's only so much information a person can process. The problem gets worse when ballot language becomes technical or obscure, causing more voters to skip questions entirely.[14] Even repeated exposure to ballot initiatives doesn't solve the problem. Between 1978 and 2004, states that frequently used ballot initiatives didn't see any consistent increase in political engagement or sophistication among their citizens.[15]

Another major challenge is the uneven distribution of political knowledge. Being aware of a ballot measure doesn't mean understanding it.[16] Many voters recognize the names or slogans of initiatives but don't grasp what these measures would actually do. Instead, they rely on shortcuts like party endorsements or media headlines. While many citizens do look for information about ballot measures, the quality and reliability of what they find vary widely.[17] During Canada's 1992 referendum on the Charlottetown Accord, only the already-engaged segments

11 Downs 1957.
12 For example, Riker and Ordeshook 1968.
13 Bowler et al. 1992.
14 Reilly and Richey 2011.
15 Schlozman and Yohai 2008.
16 Barth et al. 2020.
17 Burnett 2019.

of the public gained significant knowledge during the campaign.[18] The referendum did little to help less informed citizens catch up.

Ballot initiatives, despite their symbolic power, sometimes don't generate sustained political learning or deeper engagement. Participation tends to remain superficial and follows existing patterns of educational and informational advantage.[19] Even with hot-button social issues that get lots of attention, the learning effects are concentrated among people who were already paying attention. Most voters remain only marginally informed, constrained by limited time and interest.[20]

There's also the question of who participates in the first place. Socioeconomic status remains the strongest predictor of political participation.[21] People with more education and income are more likely to have the skills, confidence, and time needed to participate in demanding democratic processes like voting on initiatives. A recent study of German municipalities shows that social stratification strongly skews referendum turnout, especially when overall participation is low. Only when turnout exceeds 50 percent does this stratification begin to decline.[22] Otherwise, policy decisions remain biased towards resource-rich groups. Barriers related to time, education, and cognitive capacity remain in place and may even be growing. Even when opportunities to participate exist, most citizens simply don't have the practical means to take advantage of them.[23]

Switzerland offers the most comprehensive example of direct democracy in action. There, referendums and initiatives are central to the political system, happen frequently, and are broadly accepted as legitimate. But even in this favorable setting, signs of temporal-cognitive scarcity have emerged. The increased use of initiatives by populist parties like the SVP has contributed to polarization and decision fatigue, challenging the consensus-driven function that referendums once served.[24]

Some researchers argue that most literature still underestimates the challenges on the input side of direct democracy. They call for a new theory that accounts for cognitive limits, information asymmetries, and the uneven capacity of citizens to participate meaningfully in complex policy decisions.[25]

18 Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000.
19 Dyck and Lascher 2019.
20 Biggers 2012.
21 Verba and Nie 1972.
22 Velimsky et al. 2024.
23 Bernhard 2024.
24 Vatter 2016.
25 Vatter et al. 2019.

The evidence points to a fundamental dilemma: citizens' time, knowledge, and cognitive resources are limited. These limitations lead to ballot fatigue and participation gaps that undermine direct democracy's promise to engage and empower all citizens equally.

Switzerland, with its exceptional implementation of direct democracy, shows that no institutional design can fully escape the problem of temporal-cognitive scarcity. Unless these constraints are explicitly addressed, direct democracy remains an imperfect vehicle for democratic participation. The scarcity problem isn't just an incidental bug in the system, it's a fundamental limitation of direct democracy in our complex, modern societies. Representation remains essential to balance decision quality with citizens' need to focus on their own lives.

Good collective decisions matter, but democracy should function smoothly so we can focus on building our own lives. Democracy needs to operate efficiently so citizens aren't burdened by constant political involvement. In contrast, radical grassroots democracy overloads people's lives with too many demands. Athenian citizens lived in what was then a major city but tiny by today's standards. They reduced their decision load by appointing officials through random selection, which worked because specialized knowledge wasn't yet necessary. They also had women and slaves doing most of the labor. Copying their model today is impossible.

Nevertheless, digital technologies have recently renewed hopes for grassroots democracy.[26] Technology expands the possibilities for direct participation. But it doesn't eliminate its fundamental limitations. While deliberation improves decision quality, it still comes with time and effort costs, and we must balance participation with efficiency.[27] For democracy to work, the scarcity problem must be solved.

4.3 Indirect Democratic Efficacy in the Western Model

We have seen above how groups allowed for the emergence of democracy. But how were they able to? And, more importantly with regard to the general argument of our book: what was their role in creating democratic efficacy?

To grasp the argument clearly, we need to introduce one new term and remember one central feature of industrial society. The new term we need is "partitioning representation".

26 Friedland 1996.

27 Kurrild-Klitgaard and Brandt 2021.

"Partitioning" is a mathematical term that describes dividing a set into subsets that have no overlap, no intersections. Partitioning is dividing a group into subgroups and forcing everyone to decide to belong to one of these subgroups. Partitioning representation means to represent through such forcibly non-overlapping subgroups. This is what most elections do. And this is what territorial representation does.[28]

Partitioning representation was able to create democratic efficacy in Western industrial societies because of the relational formation of these societies, a central feature we have so successfully overcome that we currently have difficulty remembering it.

The central feature of Western industrial societies we need to remember has multiple names. Social control. Conformity pressures. Norm enforcement. Massification.

In its time, it was not at all overlooked but very present and made famous authors and texts who were able to see and confront it: "The individual ceases to be himself; he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns; and he therefore becomes exactly as all others are and as they expect him to be. [...] The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him."[29]

Though written in the context of fascism's rise, Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (from which the preceding citation is taken) deeply influenced postwar thought, seen as a valid description of the social norm pressures that became institutionalized in workplaces, family, and community life. In it, even character and conscience were turned around not to support individually responsible decision-making but to internalize external social demands.

David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* used the term "other-directed individuals" for the same orientation to expectations and preferences of social peers, and described postwar Western societies as dominated by these other-directed individuals who adapted to moods and norms of their peers to gain acceptance. This created powerful pressures towards behavioral uniformity in schools, workplaces, and middle-class suburbia.[30] William Whyte's *Organization Man* focused on corporate workplaces where ambition, initiative, and independence gave way to loyalty, team spirit, and the capacity to blend into bureaucratic life. He identified a

28 Dual citizenship is a small deviation from the principle of partitioning representation in supranational policymaking which begins to attract some attention but has been irrelevant for most of the history of Western democracies.

29 Fromm 1941, p. 159.

30 Riesman 1956.

preference for group cohesion over individual creativity and described workplace structures as engines of conformity.[31]

Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse criticized the ideological function of everyday cultural practices in family and mass media that reproduced domination, and portrayed postwar individuals as alienated from their own desires.[32] Betty Friedan countered their male-centered view with detailed descriptions of how the same conformity pressures played out in the widespread unhappiness of middle-class women forced into marriage, motherhood, and domesticity.[33] And Michel Foucault used the example and metaphor of the prison for describing modern institutions as agents of surveillance and normalization[34] at a time when the whole system of manufacturing conformity was already showing its first cracks.

Parallel to these broad empirical descriptions and theoretical conceptualizations, psychological research studied normative social influence as underlying mechanism enabling this group convergence. Individuals conform to shared expectations not only to avoid sanctions but also to affirm identity and belonging[35] in cohesive groups, as were postwar workplaces, neighborhoods, unions, and churches.

Most of the normative assessments of social conformity were negative, and for good reasons. But they ignored how much partitioning representation in Western postwar democracy needed social conformity to function. With social conformity, partitioning representation was able to create democratic efficacy. Social conformity made citizens arrive at the ballot with demands that were the same among their social group because conformity pressures made them themselves the same among their social group. The political system's output reflected their inputs not because of democratic idealism, but because of normative alignment at the point of input. Politicians received clear signals on what policies they should pursue, because their voters were pressured into a uniformity that created specific and unambiguous demands—in stark contrast to the fragmentation of interests and identities that would come to characterize democratic life from the 1970s onward, as we will discuss in the next chapter. As German constitutional judge Gerhard Leibholz took it, "The more specific and unambiguous the plebiscitary political decisions of the active citizens grouped together in parties are, the

31 Whyte 1956.
32 Adorno 1964; Marcuse 1964.
33 Friedan 1963.
34 Foucault 1975.
35 Asch 1956; Festinger 1950.

better a democratic party state will function".[36] People felt represented through their formal democratic inclusion with one vote on the ballot in elections, because group homogeneity pressures made them similar to each other, creating clear, consistent, noncontradictory demands with regard to their everyday-life problems which could easily be taken up by the parties and politicians they elected. Part of the group-based identities that bundled political interests and opinions were based on geography. The more important part was, however, based on class. Together they shaped the base for long-term party affiliations.

Representative democracy created satisfaction and legitimacy in three temporal horizons, as can be described both with regards to the relation between voters and politicians (actor-oriented) and with regards to the policies that were pursued, as summarized in Table 4.1. In the short term, representation created input legitimacy through procedural quality, since it integrated voters and politicians procedurally[37] and made politics and policies meaningful through solving real-life problems. In the medium term, its epistemic quality played out through the fact that political actors were both motivated and received the necessary information to address problems. In the long term, these two aspects added to systemic stability and sustainability through creating in both voters and political actors a sense of responsibility and making them prone to accepting compromise, since they saw the frames they had formed mirrored in the political process.

Table 4.1: Six former advantages and current problems.

Time horizon	Source of legitimacy	Actor-oriented	Policy-oriented
Short term	Input legitimacy through procedural quality	(1) Procedural integration vs. alienation, anger, and rage	(2) Meaningful politics vs. artificial identity creation
Medium term	Output legitimacy through epistemic quality	(3) Information efficiency vs. lack of information	(4) Issue relevance vs. issue neglect
Long term	Systemic stability and sustainability	(5) Responsibility taken vs. responsibility neglected	(6) Acceptance of compromise vs. conflict escalation

With class-based party affiliations, socially conforming citizens of Western industrial societies were able to form patterns and derive satisfaction from seeing them

36 Leibholz 1960, p. 232, own translation.

37 Luhmann 2000.

matched as a result of their action, experiencing constant hormone release while engaging for their society. Indirect democratic efficacy based on partitioning representation is what made the Western democracy model so powerful.

4.4 The Short and Very Long History of the Western Model

The successful combination of social conformity and partitioning representation made its enormous career partly based on special effects of the postwar decades.

On the one hand, these decades brought educational expansion which created differentiated careers, especially in the middle class. In the U.S., high school graduation had become the norm by the 1950s, while Europe followed with rapid growth after World War II.[38] This educational expansion supported unionized wage-bargaining and productivity-oriented workplace roles.

On the other hand, experiencing the necessity of clinging to one's group as a matter of life and death for the generation of World War II soldiers seems to have played a role, too: military service in World War II fostered a group-oriented mindset among soldiers which, offsetting service trauma, contributed to postwar societal success, especially among disadvantaged men,[39] but led many of them into acting as tyrants at home, pressing for conformity and in tension with the next generation that erupted from Berkeley to Paris and Berlin in 1968.

But the culture of partitioning representation is much older than industrial society. To understand why this relational formation was especially a "Western" model, it is useful to switch from political sociology to history and religion, and to go back much farther in time, back to the Constantinean reforms of the 4th century CE.

Constantine's acceptance of Christianity solved a problem that the Emperor Diocletian, before him, had tried to tackle without success. Rome had been able to conquer much of Europe with its armies and built roads that connected the continent. But through them, knowledge disseminated, allowing for more power resources to grow in the peripheries. In stark contrast with the Chinese and Islamic empires, where central military control was possible throughout most of their history, long-term central military domination in Europe became impossible. To arrive at sustainable order, it was necessary to have local kingdoms. But they would be so close to each other that they needed common institutions, as well. Diocletian had attempted to solve this problem by introducing a 'Tetrarchy' of

38 Goldin 1998; Flora et al. 1983.

39 Elder 1986; Sampson and Laub 1996.

four independent kingdoms. But these kingdoms lacked a stable overarching institutional structure and did not last.

Christianity provided that missing structure. It offered central values that threatened exclusion to anyone who refused to accept the common framework. While allowing local kingdoms to maintain their own military power, they still had to recognize shared institutions that made peaceful interaction across borders possible. From the 4th century CE, Christianity allowed for a culture of partitioning representation in Europe. Christian dogma created strong social mechanisms which successfully established partitioning representation in the form of local kingdoms next to each other and accepting overarching institutions like canonical family or property law, conflict mediation, authority legitimation, and a unifying culture.

One of these mechanisms enforced a separation of spheres—such as the church and the monarchy. Others were constant threats of social exclusion for those who deviated from social norms. This discouraged kings from ignoring the church's role in setting norms. But it also led to both strong group homogeneity norms and the acceptance of overarching institutions.[40]

And this framework did not only bind rulers but trickled down to individuals. We see that in medieval towns and cities: despite the fact that the socioeconomic structure of Europe's urban areas did not significantly deviate from that elsewhere, only European towns had councils with members representing partitioning groups within urban societies which, in spite of often still oligarchic recruitment processes, were nevertheless able to derive legitimacy from shared within-group sameness that created political efficacy. Councils and local officers often represented specific groups such as guilds, neighborhood associations, and fraternities, which were key players in urban life and functioned as organized collectives that channeled the political interests of their members, ensuring their voices were heard in broader urban decision-making processes. "Everyday orderings", such as neighborhood networks or guild activities, created a sense of shared belonging and collective action. The alignment of political power with shared group identities and communal objectives reinforced the legitimacy of councils and their role in maintaining urban order and resolving conflicts.[41] Political efficacy through homogenous groups in some power equilibrium was the base on which these town councils eked out autonomy and self-administration, in contrast to towns in all other cultures.[42]

40 Scholtz 2018a.

41 Johnson and de Larivière 2024.

42 Blockmans and 't Hart 2013.

And the guilds show that the idea of organizing individuals in non-overlapping groups played out not only politically. By providing incentives for peaceful competition, the culture of partitioning representation was the basis for Europe's ascent from a per-capita income on par with the rest of the world in the year 1000 to a sixfold advantage in the year 2000.[43] All the important reasons for this ascent that have been discussed in the literature, as family structures,[44] rationality,[45] the evolution of property rights[46] and of corporations and entrepreneurial spirit,[47] and finally the world system position and exploitation of others thus made possible,[48] became possible only through this combination of homogeneity norms in balanced groups accepting overarching institutions.

Partly secularized through the 18th through mid-20th centuries but still grateful for legitimizing support of the newly emerging Christian Democrats after World War II, the culture of partitioning representation formed the cultural base on which the success model of Western postwar democracy was built: indirect democratic efficacy through the partitioning representation of conformity-demanding social groups, working well without any clear separation of politics and religion.[49]

Conclusion

This chapter has explored two institutional success models that—despite their vast differences in time, scale, and structure—both delivered democratic efficacy: ancient Athens through direct participation and postwar Western democracies through partitioning representation. Each was a context-bound yet powerful arrangement that allowed citizens to experience their influence on collective decisions, fulfilling democracy's core promise of self-rule.

Athenian democracy achieved this by radically empowering its (limited) citizen body through institutions of direct participation—popular assemblies, random selection, and public deliberation. What enabled it was not only the availability of iron and the geography of Greece but also the social organization of independent landholders who were both economically self-sufficient and militarily relevant. The result was not only civic engagement but also cultural and polit-

43 Maddison 2010, and own calculations.
44 Henrich 2020.
45 Weber [1904/1920] 2011.
46 North and Thomas 1973.
47 Mokyr 2017.
48 Wallerstein 1974.
49 Stepan 2000.

ical flourishing. Yet, the model remained exceptional and ultimately unsustainable under the cognitive, social, and demographic constraints of large-scale societies. The scarcity of time, information, and mental energy of ordinary citizens to engage in frequent, complex decision-making is a fundamental problem that even modern referendum systems, like Switzerland's, have not been able to fully overcome.

The Western postwar model succeeded by entirely different means. It harnessed democratic efficacy not through participation in decisions but through the representation of cohesive groups. Social conformity, class structure, and electoral systems based on partitioning representation created a functional match between what citizens demanded and what political systems delivered. While this model obscured the individual face of participation, it allowed for stability, responsiveness, and a shared sense of democratic inclusion—so long as social cohesion and group clarity remained intact.

Both models demonstrate that democratic efficacy is not an abstract ideal but an institutional achievement, contingent on enabling conditions. Understanding these conditions—material, social, cultural—is essential for building democracy in new times and places. But both models also had limits. Their conditions no longer hold. The task ahead is to identify the causes of this breakdown.

5 Waning Democratic Efficacy

The Western model of traditional democracy solved the scarcity problem of direct democratic efficacy with a unique combination of what we have called "partitioning representation"—here the one vote on the ballot—with the class conformity of the 1950s and 1960s that created democratic efficacy and gave people the experience of exerting control over the determinants of their social lives. What happened to this model, and to the experience of control it created?

But before diving into what actually happened in Western societies, it is helpful to first understand what happens generally when people get the feeling that they lose control. What psychological responses emerge when individuals lose their sense of control? How do emotional and cognitive reactions to powerlessness manifest in social behavior? In what ways can these reactions become collective political phenomena?

Second, what has been the general direction of social change in Western societies over the last half century? How did increasing prosperity, education, and informational transparency change the structure of social relationships? What structural transformations did individualization bring to networks and political expectations? Why did the transition from group-based to network-based societies erode the efficacy of partitioning representation?

Third, how did that affect democratic efficacy? How did the decline of class-based alignment change the representative function of parties? What role did globalization play in dissolving the coherence of national interests? How did mediatization reshape citizens' expectations of politics and the identities of politicians? Why can't politicians today fulfill the expectations of efficacy that were feasible in the 1960s?

And finally, what specific emotional and behavioral outcomes follow from the collapse of representative efficacy? How do feelings of betrayal and exclusion translate into passivity, conspiracy beliefs, or aggression? In what ways have populist actors capitalized on conspiracy beliefs to mobilize political support? How does the collapse of rational compromise relate to the rise of emotional polarization?

5.1 When People Feel They Lose Control

The last chapter described how the Western model built democratic efficacy to give people the experience of control over their lives, based on the evidence summarized in Chapter 3 regarding how much this experience of agency, control, and

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111827902-006

efficacy is necessary and beneficial. Before we study the interactions of technical and social developments with political institutions that have destroyed this experience for many citizens, let's first have a look at what we generally know about people losing control. This is general psychological research, mostly either clinical or experimental, which has been accumulated over decades without connection to this specific historical situation.

We have described how humans want to shape reality in ways they have formed in their minds. If they can see how their ideas and actions lead to aspects of reality conforming to their views, they feel in control. If that is not the case, their reactions can differ in location and direction. In both dimensions, we can differentiate between "in" and "out". The reaction can be internally or externally located, and inwardly or outwardly directed. Note that for the location dimension there are other ways to see it; it is likewise possible to describe it as a differentiation of emotional vs. cognitive processes, or of immediate vs. longer-term reactions. Table 5.1 contains the two dimensions and the four reactions they entail.

Table 5.1: 2 × 2 reactions to loss of control.

		Location	
		Internal	**External**
	Process	Emotional	Cognitive
	Timing	Immediate	Long term
Direction	Inward	Depressive passivity	Cognitive defenses
	Outward	Negative emotions	External action

When we lose our sense of control, our first emotional response is often to shut down. We pull back into depressive passivity, and feel sadness wash over us. For some, this feeling passes quickly. For others, it lingers.

This retreat into passivity happens because our brains conserve energy when we believe nothing we do matters.[1] Like a student who studies hard but keeps failing regardless of effort, we eventually stop trying. Studies show this happens to both humans and animals. When repeatedly faced with situations where actions don't improve outcomes, both become passive in ways that resemble depression.[2]

1 Abramson et al. 1978.

2 Miller and Seligman 1975.

Our thoughts determine how long this passivity lasts. Negative patterns like "I'll never succeed" make it harder to bounce back.[3] We begin to see ourselves as ineffective, deepening our tendency to withdraw. Research suggests people experiencing depression might actually be more realistic about their lack of control. However, this "realistic" view comes with a cost—less likelihood of taking action; action that helps others maintain a protective optimism.[4] The longer we stay passive, the worse we feel. When we withdraw, we miss opportunities for positive experiences that could lift our mood.[5] This creates a cycle: feeling powerless leads to withdrawal, which leads to fewer good experiences, which reinforces feelings of powerlessness.

After such an initial shutdown of depression, many people experience a sudden shift towards more energetic negative emotions as their minds begin fighting to regain control.[6]

When we feel our control slipping away, a common reaction is anger. This powerful emotion typically surfaces when we perceive situations as unfair, as blocking our goals, or personally threatening. Rather than being a simple knee-jerk reaction, anger serves positive functions by involving complex thinking processes about who's responsible and why things happened.[7] We become angry when we believe someone is deliberately or carelessly standing in our way.

Our emotions stem from how we interpret events relative to our goals and expectations.[8] When a situation feels unfair or forced upon us, we experience frustration and a strong desire to regain control. This connects to the idea that blocked goals naturally increase anger. How intensely we feel this anger depends on our thinking patterns: those who believe others are intentionally causing their setbacks tend to experience stronger rage.[9]

Anger can actually be useful, motivating us to address injustices and reassert control.[10] However, when feelings of powerlessness continue, unresolved anger may transform into lasting resentment or explosive outbursts. In this way, anger represents our psychological attempt to reclaim control, whether through confrontation or defiance.[11]

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3 Beck 1967.
4 Moore and Fresco 2012.
5 Lewinsohn et al. 1981.
6 Abramson et al. 1978.
7 Lazarus 1985, 1991; Weiner 1985.
8 Frijda 1986.
9 Berkowitz 1993; Weiner 1985.
10 Lazarus 1991.
11 Frijda 1986.

However, instead of turning outward, we can use cognitive defenses in an attempt to regain control. People who feel powerless and lacking control often restore a sense of order and meaning by seeking refuge in conspiracy theories and delusional thinking. Studies reveal that in unpredictable or overwhelming situations, people engage in compensatory mental processes to create structured explanations for uncertain events.[12]

This response centers around illusory pattern perception—seeing connections between random events that don't actually exist. Feeling powerless makes people more likely to detect patterns and hidden forces behind societal events, fueling belief in conspiracies and grand narratives. Conspiracy thinking appeals because it offers simple explanations for complex, threatening situations, reinforcing a sense of cognitive control.[13]

Research confirms that perceived lack of control correlates with increased conspiracy belief. When facing unpredictability or existential threats, people gravitate towards structured, often conspiratorial interpretations.[14] This effect intensifies in those with high need for cognitive closure—people who struggle with ambiguity and crave definitive answers.[15]

In extreme cases, conspiracy beliefs can evolve into delusional thinking and clinical paranoia, where individuals believe they're personally targeted. Severe paranoia can stem from feelings of powerlessness, creating a cycle of mistrust and distorted reality perception.[16] Ultimately, conspiracy beliefs serve as psychological defense against helplessness, offering an illusion of regained control.

Lastly, the experience of powerlessness can result in externalization through action. That offers the chance to change the situation. But that demands having a theory and a vision that address the true causes of the loss of control—which may not always be present. And the last point has already shown that people with a feeling of powerlessness may prefer a simple understanding of the world to a true one. Under such circumstances, the desire for externalization can turn into aggression. When people feel powerless and lack control, they often cope by directing their frustration towards scapegoats—easy targets to blame. This displaced aggression serves as a psychological strategy when life feels overwhelming. Psychological studies show that uncertainty and unpredictability create a strong need to restore control, pushing people to seek simple, external explanations

12 Whitson and Galinsky 2008; Landau et al. 2015.
13 Whitson and Galinsky 2008; Douglas et al. 2017.
14 Van Prooijen and Acker 2015; Marchlewska et al. 2017.
15 Marchlewska et al. 2017.
16 Freeman et al. 2022.

for their troubles.[17] Finding someone else to blame provides immediate emotional relief.

We all know that from school or workplace bullies: people whose sense of self feels threatened lash out at others with even less power;[18] frustrated children or employees, unable to confront parents or bosses, redirect their anger towards companions.[19] Even powerless individuals sometimes support unfair social systems by blaming outside groups for their problems.[20] Scapegoating creates an illusion of order and control, giving people a false sense of power over their situation while avoiding confrontation with those truly in charge. This aggressive defense mechanism offers temporary comfort when feeling helpless. Rather than addressing the real causes of powerlessness, scapegoating typically fuels ongoing cycles of prejudice and hostility.

All these results stem from experimental and clinical studies, always with control groups that neither had loss of control experiences nor their negative results. Nevertheless, doesn't this short review of psychological studies sound like a description of today's societies? Spoiler alert: we will find these four phenomena, summarized in Table 5.1, when studying how the end of the partitioning social structure ended the success story of the Western model in Part III of the book. Before doing so, let us first review the mechanisms behind this (so far) unhappy end.

5.2 Five Decades of Social Change

In the last chapter, we recalled the factual situation of individuals in the 1950s and 1960s. The functioning of the Western model rested on the unhappiness of being forced under the strict pressures of social control, norm enforcement, and massification, where individuals ceased to be themselves and societies were dominated by other-directed individuals who gave up ambition, initiative, and independence, with women widely trapped in unhappy marriages. There was much reason for rebellion in 1968, and for liberation in the subsequent decades. And the basis of the current crisis is this liberation, which can with good reason be described as a success story, as well.

Some have seen the decline of rigid class conformity since the late 1960s as a crisis of cohesion. Individually, it was a success of social emancipation. In the industrial period, class operated as a powerful normative force. It not only shaped

17 Whitson and Galinsky 2008.
18 Twenge et al. 2001; Baumeister et al. 1996.
19 Fox and Spector 1999; Hershcovis et al. 2007.
20 Jost et al. 2003.

access to resources but also dictated tastes, manners, expectations, and aspirations.[21] Social mobility was rare; even those who climbed the class ladder often felt the pressure of symbolic boundaries and misrecognition,[22] and those who aimed to rebel against these boundaries often merely reinforced them.[23]

But from the 1970s onward, the relational formation of our social relationships changed, and social science played an important role in framing and supporting these developments.[24]

Forty years ago, Ulrich Beck suggested that what he called "reflexive modernization", the "application of the principles of modernity on modernity itself", "dissolves the traditional parameters of industrial society".[25] Behind these philosophical ideas, the process is largely based on modern growth and the rising incomes in Western societies since the end of World War II. In longer-term perspective, Western annual per-capita incomes rose from 6,300 US$ in 1950 to 11,350$ in 1968, 18,600$ in 1989 to 25,700$ in 2008, after having been around 4,000$ in both 1913 and 1933 and below 1,200$ in 1820. Compared with the level of both 1913 and 1933, it was 50 percent higher in 1950, 180 percent higher in 1968, 370 percent higher in 1989, and 540 percent higher in 2008.[26]

Based on this vastly increased availability of resources, it is now the individual and no longer the class, the family, or any other group that serves as "reproduction unit of the social in the lifeworld".[27] Social inequalities do not end. But they become "unmoored from class relations".[28] They become individualized.

Individualization has to a large extent been studied with regard to specific "individualistic" attitudes and traits.[29] But to understand how individualization ended the viability of the Western democracy model, it is useful to concentrate on the structural side of the phenomenon. The content of individualistic attitudes is just another example of differences that the political process should be able to settle into decision-making and problem-solving to allow societies to shape their fate and move forward. But the individualistic structure of these attitudes and traits, and its misfit with existing institutions, is what currently hampers this process.

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21 Bourdieu 1979; Skeggs 1997.
22 Sayer 2005.
23 Willis 1977.
24 The following paragraphs largely build on Scholtz 2024b.
25 Beck [1986] 1992, p. 87.
26 All in constant 1990 Geary–Khamis dollars, based on Maddison 2010, and own calculations.
27 Beck [1986] 1992, p. 90.
28 Curran 2018, p. 32.
29 Halman 1996; Inglehart 1997.

The 1950s and 1960s saw individuals' social positions as imposed and unchangeable. In the late 1970s and early 1980s social convention began to change towards seeing the social connections one holds, and one's position within the wider network of others' connections, as contributing to one's life chances. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was the first to compare social relations with other aspects of reality which can be built up over time by individuals for subsequent usage, understood as different types of capital, varying from cattle herds to machinery to education. Bourdieu hence coined the term "social capital" for social relations in this perspective. But he defined social capital as group affiliations, being thus still attached to the old Western understanding of non-overlapping groups.[30]

However, at that time the news that cultivating social relationships across groups was individually beneficial had already been spreading for more than a decade. Mark Granovetter had already in the late 1960s studied how his colleagues got their jobs after graduation, and developed the "strength of weak ties" hypothesis, according to which "weak ties"—acquaintanceships that are not reinforced by intense contact or many mutual friendships—are especially important sources of information.[31] Subsequent research underlined how beneficial it is to have connections heading into areas socially farther away,[32] and individuals and organizations were quick to understand such benefits and to strive for them.

The dramatic postwar rise in incomes and living standards enabled them to do so, expanding individuals' freedom to cultivate social ties based on personal preference and strategic benefit, rather than group-imposed obligations. Urbanization, closely linked with affluence, and at that time being viewed as leading to social isolation, did not in fact erode social networks but transformed them into more diverse and elective forms.[33] With rising educational attainment, individuals began forming networks more reflective of personal circumstances and choices rather than inherited roles.[34]

At the same time, rising standards of living did not only permit individualized networking. They increasingly made it necessary. As labor markets became more fluid and competitive, success began to hinge less on group membership and more on individual ability to access diverse and novel information through networks. Access to social resources increasingly depended on weak ties reaching across so-

30 Bourdieu 1986.
31 Granovetter 1973, 1974.
32 Burt 1992.
33 Fischer 1982; Marsden 1987.
34 Marsden 1987; Moore 1990.

cial boundaries, ties that individuals had to cultivate and manage on their own.[35] Job mobility increasingly relied on weak, instrumental ties rather than group-based channels.[36] As a result, the group-based societies of the 1950s and of much of Europe's past quickly morphed into network societies.[37]

Vast literature has described individualization mostly as a change in individual values. Much more important for the fate of Western democracies was, however, the structural individualization that resulted from these new relationship structures. Social relationships reflect the views we hold,[38] but the opposite is also true: they actively shape what we believe. When people receive positive reactions to their opinions from others in their network, they tend to reinforce those opinions, leading over time to shared convictions.[39] Today, we see this tendency especially in online networks, where it can contribute to social polarization.[40] As people adjust their views to align with others they are connected to, common norms emerge, not because someone enforces them from above but because individuals gradually learn from one another what is acceptable and expected.[41]

Since the 1970s and 1980s, this structural individualization has caused values and opinions to no longer be shaped by stable group identities but increasingly by the structure and diversity of our social ties.[42] By drawing people into new patterns of alignment shaped more by connection than by category, social relations and their emerging new network structure had the power to dissolve the old group-based divisions on which the old Western model of democratic efficacy through partitioning representation had rested.

In previous research, Beck's individualization thesis has been studied and largely confirmed, with the immediate restriction to class voting Beck had pointed out most explicitly.[43] But the general thesis is wider: any correlation of individual characteristics can serve as a base for cognitively structuring the world. The U.S. political landscape today is shaped by individual characteristics in questions of religion and gun ownership rights that are almost completely absent from Western European discourse. Not every division in individual characteristics is useful for solving real-world problems. But any division in individual characteristics can

35 Lin et al. 1981; Lin 2008.
36 Wegener 1991.
37 Castells 1996.
38 McPherson et al. 2001.
39 Banisch and Olbrich 2019.
40 Kozitsin 2023.
41 Friedkin 2001.
42 Marsden and Friedkin 1993.
43 Johnston and Pattie 1992; Dogan 1995; Schnell and Kohler 1995; Müller and Klein 2011.

be loaded with political meaning to organize representation and offer indirect political efficacy. Any correlation between divisions hence eases partitioning representation, while diminishing correlations complicate it.

The widest possible picture of the wider landscape of structural individualization in Western societies can be drawn from the World Values Surveys. Since 1981, and with the so far latest round in 2022, researchers have looked at hundreds of different questions across 28 countries and regions. In studying their data, one finds that we predict someone's views in one aspect—for example, on the environment or on economic regulation—when knowing about another aspect, for example class or religious view, with much greater difficulty and less precision. On average, our ability to predict one aspect based on knowing the other has dropped by about a third over these four decades. When comparing people across the spectrum of different income levels, predictability dropped by more than half.[44] We have indeed become much more individualized.

And beginning at around the same time, but acquiring force mostly in the 1990s, two other widely discussed developments amplified this structural dissolution of the rigid preconditions of the Western model.

On the one hand, globalization added to this dissolution in three ways. Its first effect, within Western societies already going back to the labor force demands of industrial societies and starting soon outside the West, was the reappearance of large-scale migration, which created individualized life courses.[45] Its second effect was to undermine partitioning representation in the supranational realm that at the same time increased enormously in relevance, as national governments no longer had to represent a rather coherent national interest but citizens with vastly different interests at the same time.[46] Its third effect was to support growth in countries outside the Western core and hence to bring societies that did not share the cultural predisposition for partitioning representation (as discussed above in Section 4.4) to the complexity levels requiring democratic institutions.

On the other hand, mediatization transformed politics into a public spectacle, bringing political conflicts into voters' daily lives and making citizens more aware of decision-making aspects that had previously been far away from them. Mediatization has fundamentally altered the relationship between politics and the public by reorienting political communication around the logic of media visibility, dramatization, and simplification.[47] Conflict, emotion, and personalization create

44 Scholtz et al. 2010.
45 Vertovec 2014.
46 Held et al. 1999.
47 Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck and Esser 2014.

narratives that pull citizens into ongoing political storylines and controversies.[48] This reformatting widened the gap between the representative identity citizens require for indirect democratic efficacy and the identity politicians are able to credibly project.

At the same time that individualization—and to a lesser extent globalization—diversified interests in practical matters, citizens increasingly demanded to see these interests answered in their own specific, personalized way. Politicians faced this dilemma under structural constraints: mediatization imposes external adaptation pressures on the political system without giving it greater autonomy in return.[49] Even the most principled actors, operating within the partitioning framework of Western democracies, would have been unable to fulfill the expectations of efficacy that had been feasible under the more homogeneous conditions of the 1960s.

5.3 The Decline of Democratic Efficacy

As many positive effects as the developments of individualization, mediatization, and globalization had, what was their effect on democratic efficacy? We have defined democratic efficacy as experiencing the social results of one's own ideas, built on predictable rights and institutions. In the Western model of partitioning representative democracy, that meant exerting the core institutional predictable right of voting for politicians who later made decisions aligned with one's conceptions. But this latter expected result—that politicians shaped policies aligned with one's ideas—was consistently possible only with clear signals aligned over the electorate.

With individualization, mediatization, and globalization, that was no longer the case. The disaggregation of formerly cohesive group identities eroded the foundational demand structure of representative democracy and the alignment of individuals with parties. As a result, representation as a relational and institutional mechanism ceased to function, particularly through the experience of betrayal, the rise of strategic ambiguity, and the showmanship of mediatized politics. The decline of democratic efficacy led to a displacement of energies away from institutional channels and towards sources of private efficacy. Together, these three developments paint a picture of institutional misfit that is structural, perceptual,

48 Altheide and Snow 1979.

49 Marcinkowski and Steiner 2014.

and emotional—and explain why the system no longer delivers the perceived experience of democratic efficacy.

To demonstrate this, Figure 5.1 employs a graphical presentation. There are two dimensions of attitudes, opinions, or policy evaluations: a to b and a' to b'. Each individual has his or her own position on both dimensions measured independently, and each individual is expressed by a point inserted at the place corresponding to the two measures of his or her optimal conceptions.

Figure 5.1 compares two possible situations. The diagram on the left shows a situation in which the attitudes to the two questions a–b and a'–b' are structured by group affiliations. The two groups A and B each have their own processes of forming opinions, and individuals have certain degrees of autonomy from these processes. But it is clear that each individual will see themselves quite well represented by their group.

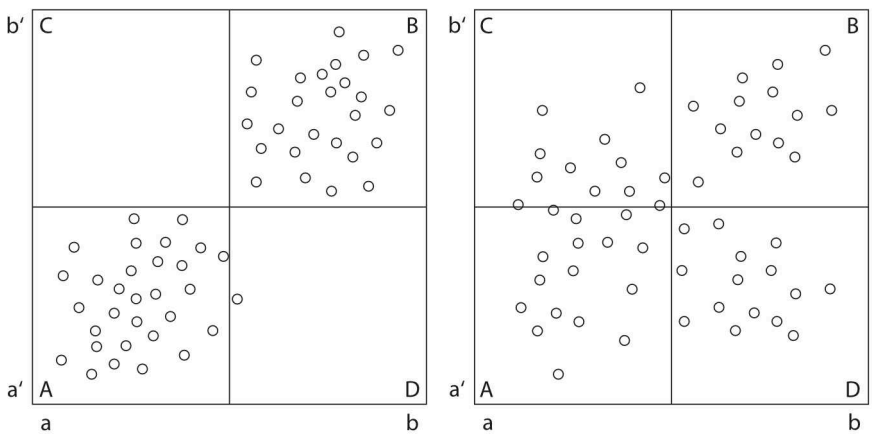

Figure 5.1: The dissolution of groups in a two-issue space (from Scholtz 2024b).

The development in Western societies since 1968 can be described in this understanding as in the right pane of Figure 5.1. Voters and citizens of the world have become structurally individualized. Group centers have become practically meaningless. In a two-dimensional arrangement, this can still be expressed as groups: large groups C and D have emerged outside the old group-based map of society. In this situation, one could still see half of the population being aligned to one of the party corners A and B. But if there are more than two relevant questions, it quickly becomes clear that the share of voters that are not frustrated or alienated in at least one question gets smaller and smaller. A society shaped by the indirect

democratic efficacy of clear party alignments gets replaced by one of frustrated, alienated, and isolated voters.

Previous literature has discussed these developments in the relationship between voters and parties since the 1980s. In Britain, for example, between 1964 and 1992 the share of strong party identifiers went down from 45 to 20 percent,[50] and comparable developments of party dealignment are documented for all major industrial societies.[51] The idea of party identification as a stable, psychological attachment that expressed democratic efficacy and influenced voter behavior had been introduced in 1960,[52] and only 20 years later was already being challenged by the thesis that voters make decisions based on evaluations of past government performance rather than on long-standing party loyalties or social class affiliations.[53] This is the basis of realizing that politicians may have failed to deliver what has been expected, simply because they decided to serve another part of an electorate becoming more heterogenous.

For some time, researchers tended to overlook the structural challenge posed by individualizing electorates because they attributed dealignment simply to the growing demands of more educated people.[54] This so-called "cognitive mobilization" hypothesis has dominated research for a long time.[55] Recent results show, however, that in fact well-informed voters switch less radically,[56] and the profile of party identifiers shifts towards the educated, leading to higher declines among the less sophisticated. This suggests that dealignment may not be driven by education, but more where it is lacking.[57] The real driver is instead frustration and alienation stemming from disillusionment with the party system.[58] Thus, traditional class cleavages have eroded substantially across Western democracies.[59] While some new socio-economic divisions, particularly around education, have emerged,[60] they only partially compensate for the loss of older class-based structures. A significant part of the former working-class electorate has shifted its alle-

50 Clarke and Stewart 1998.
51 Thomassen 2005; Arzheimer 2006; Walczak et al. 2012; Van Biezen et al. 2012; Marquis et al. 2022.
52 Campbell et al. 1960.
53 Fiorina 1981.
54 Dalton 1984.
55 Dalton 2007; Albright 2009; Dalton 2012.
56 Dassonneville and Dejaeghere 2014.
57 Dassonneville et al. 2012.
58 Zelle 1995; van der Meer et al. 2015; Dassonneville and Hooghe 2018; Marthaler 2020.
59 Franklin 1992; Kriesi et al. 2006; Kriesi 2008; Best 2011.
60 Oesch 2008; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Bornschier 2010a; Evans and Tilley 2011, 2012.

giances, including towards populist radical right parties.[61] This cleavage transformation remains a key driver of the ongoing crisis of democratic efficacy.[62]

Adding to the effect of these developments towards declining democratic efficacy is the fact that they have taken place in an environment that has become at the same time increasingly globalized. As voters lost the sense of belonging to stable group identities, and thus the capacity to articulate predictable and aggregated demands through national institutions, globalization introduced additional forces that undermined the alignment between voter preferences and political outcomes that had been the base for democratic efficacy in the decades of industrial society.

On the one hand, globalization had its own influence on the correlation of issues by adding new cleavages. The economic dimension of globalization fueled dislocation, with trade liberalizations intensifying the impact of technological change in producing new winners and losers, for example in Britain where areas exposed to import shocks experienced sharp increases in support for nationalist parties.[63] A new opposition between "integration" and "demarcation", or cosmopolitans versus traditionalists, started to replace the traditional left–right axis.[64]

On the other hand, globalization transformed the institutional context in which democratic decisions were expected to unfold. National sovereignty declined. With globalization, many key policy decisions were increasingly shaped by international agreements, transnational markets, or supranational organizations, which under conditions of partitioning representation created a trilemma where democratic governance, national sovereignty, and economic globalization could not be simultaneously pursued.[65] Global integration institutionalized agreements and governance structures that did not include mechanisms for meaningful democratic input and frequently overrode domestic preferences, fueling discontent and alienation,[66] and constrained governments' ability to respond to domestic preferences, being increasingly forced to act as competitors against each other instead of supporting their citizens against market forces.[67]

In this situation, migration has become both a material reality and a symbolic focal point for fears about the erosion of national control. Experiences of econom-

61 Arzheimer 2012.
62 Ford and Jennings 2020.
63 Colantone and Stanig 2018a.
64 Kriesi 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2009, 2018.
65 Rodrik 1997.
66 Scharpf 1991; Walter 2021.
67 Strange 1996; Cerny 1997.

ic precarity and symbolic displacement fuel anti-globalist positions among lower- and middle-status groups.[68]

The emotional core of these developments lies in insecurity. Many voters interpret globalization, and especially immigration, as a direct threat to the areas in which they feel to be in control: national identity and cultural cohesion. Migration thus becomes a central grievance, politically salient precisely because it embodies the loss of collective control.[69] Instead of the old industrial world where politicians were identified with the groups they represented, we have entered a world where political elites who largely favor openness are sharply divided from mass publics that demand closure.[70]

The result is a deepening perception of distance between voters and political elites[71] that adds to the frustration and alienation emerging from the loss of identification with parties: the end of democratic efficacy and a growing feeling of a loss of control.

5.4 The Rise of Emotional Politics

As a result, large groups of voters emerge that no longer feel represented because they see their positions 'betrayed' by the parties they used to affiliate to, and develop feelings of frustration and anger over their inability to influence politics.[72]

This creates incentives to select issues for political treatment not on the basis of their relevance but on that of their fit to existing positions, and hence to neglect relevant problem-solving issues in favor of addressing identity issues. Clear mandates are only derived with respect to such identity questions, rather than to solving practical problems, so politicians lack information to make good policies (which should be their main task[73]) and citizens lack information to behave in a socially responsible manner. Since issues are selected on the basis of serving identities, addressing and solving real problems is neglected.[74] The above-mentioned processes play out especially in the long term, with a growing number of politicians feeling responsible only to their artificially created identity questions

68 Gidron and Hall 2017; Margalit 2011.
69 Norris and Inglehart 2019.
70 Hooghe and Marks 2009.
71 Walter 2021.
72 Webster 2020; Rico et al. 2020.
73 Baumgartner and Jones 2015.
74 Binder 2015; Lewallen 2020.

but not to long-run stability and sustainability.[75] Finally, politicians can no longer compromise on identity questions,[76] and voters no longer feel at all obliged to accept compromise, because through feeling unrepresented they do not see themselves as part of the process any more.

And the consequences of lacking control, described in the first section of this chapter, have started to shape our societies. We start to review this with the inward-directed results discussed above, including depressive passivity and cognitive defenses, such as belief in conspiracy theories.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, citizens were starting to be described as becoming more critical of democratic institutions—not turning away entirely, but losing trust in how well the system worked for them.[77] Everyday habits that used to connect people to public life were found to be eroding with declining community life.[78] As discussed above, declines in loyalty to political parties were initially interpreted more as a sign of rising sophistication than of disaffection.[79]

Soon, however, the tone changed. Colin Hay was the first to state that disaffection was deepening into resentment, driven by a growing sense that politics no longer gave people meaningful choices.[80] Others came to similar conclusions. Declining democratic efficacy was expressed as a political system having become too remote, too technocratic, too focused on managing outcomes rather than offering real debate. As a result, people's belief that participation made a difference began to decline.[81]

This trend showed up especially strongly among young people and marginalized groups. Many were politically active in other ways—through protests, causes, and online campaigns—but felt that traditional politics excluded them.[82] They didn't trust parties or politicians and often saw voting as ineffective.[83] For some, especially in working-class communities, this turned into anger and disillusionment.[84] In Scandinavia and Australia, too, younger citizens showed growing alienation from the system, even while their interest in political issues remained high.[85]

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75 Finnegan 2022.
76 Anderson et al. 2020.
77 Norris 1999.
78 Putnam 2000.
79 Dalton 2007.
80 Hay 2007.
81 Stoker 2006.
82 O'Toole et al. 2003; Marsh et al. 2007.
83 Van Wessel 2010.
84 Manning and Holmes 2013.
85 Valgardsson 2019; Chowdhury 2021.

Over time, what had started as disappointment began to look more like deep-seated distrust. People no longer saw politics as a flawed system in need of fixing —but as something self-serving and detached. Many started to view politicians as part of the problem rather than the solution. Some expressed their disengagement by simply going quiet—not voting, not engaging—not because they didn't care, but because they no longer believed it could matter. Others still participated, but often out of a sense of duty rather than hope.[86]

Evidence of detachment trickled in from different sources. Survey data confirmed how many people did not feel their voices were being heard, while ethnography showed how an everyday sense of frustration, resignation, or quiet rejection had become common across different walks of life.[87]

In sum, political disaffection and cynicism have grown gradually but steadily. The belief in relevance and responsiveness that once connected people to politics has frayed. While many still care about issues, fewer believe that democratic institutions can or will address them. This is not just a story of declining turnout or party membership. It's about how people feel when they look at democracy—and whether they still see a place for themselves in it.

As a next step, politics is on a path towards regressing from a rational discourse aimed at finding solutions towards an emotionally agitated state in which individuals with deeply ingrained feelings of being threatened clash with all their emotions, ready to sacrifice rational deliberation for the cognitive defense of simplified worldviews that merely exacerbate their feeling of loss of control.

However, scientific evidence can sometimes cool down impressions of alarm. Journalists are close to social reality, but they can also become subject to "moral panics", dynamics vastly exaggerating what happens on the ground.[88] One study on the long-term evolution of conspiracy beliefs found ample evidence for journalists proclaiming ages of conspiracy again and again.

> In 2013, New York Times editor Andrew Rosenthal saw a poll on U.S. conspiratorial beliefs and summed it up in five words: "No Comment Necessary: Conspiracy Nation." Two years prior, the New York Daily News breathlessly declared: "It's official: America is becoming a conspiratocracy." In 2010, The Times columnist David Aaronovitch was confident the West was "currently going through a period of fashionable conspiracism.[89]

86 Flinders 2012; Gray 2015; Manning 2018.
87 Jennings et al. 2016; Boswell et al. 2019.
88 Cohen 1972.
89 Uscinski and Parent 2014, p. 109.

These citations are from the 2010s, but the text adds similar quotations from different newspapers dating back to 1964, to give a more impressive contrast to empirical evidence that conspiracy theories were merely not increasing. In a century-long data set of letters to the *New York Times* (1890–2010), conspiracy talk in the U.S. was actually found to be in gradual decline over time, contradicting claims that we live in an age of rising conspiracism.[90]

Nevertheless, the interest in conspiracy theory in political science clearly shows a different tendency. From the 1960s to the 2000s, only 1 in 2,000 political science articles dealt with conspiracy theories. Since the year 2008, we see an almost exponential growth: fourfold up to the year 2020 and over twentyfold over the whole period 2008–2025. Why? It may be that political scientists are a bit prone to moral panic like the journalists cited above. And for sure, much of the increase since 2020 may be due to the specific spread of conspiracy theories in the exceptional situation of Covid-19.

Another important candidate for explaining the vast increase in academic interest in conspiracy theories is, however, one thing that seems to have clearly changed: the degree to which conspiracy beliefs are taken up by populist political actors, and the degree to which these populists are rewarded for playing on conspiracy beliefs in elections.

Many studies show a clear link between populist attitudes and belief in conspiracy theories. People who strongly distrust elites or think that "the people" should have full control over politics are more likely to believe in conspiracy stories—especially ones that blame corrupt or powerful groups.[91] These beliefs often go hand in hand with voting for far right parties.[92] People who hold strong populist views also tend to believe other questionable claims, even when those have nothing to do with politics.[93]

Populist politicians have found a powerful tool in conspiracy theories—and they're using it more than ever. Across Europe and the U.S., populists have woven conspiracy stories into their political playbooks. They blame hidden elites, dark global forces, or supposed traitors within the country to stir up fear, anger, and loyalty.[94] And these messages work. In the 2016 U.S. election, for example, conspiracy theories about Hillary Clinton helped push key voter groups away from her.[95] Experiments show that conspiracy-laced slogans fire up populist attitudes

90 Uscinski and Parent 2014, pp. 110–113.
91 Christner 2022; Silva et al. 2017; Loziak and Havrillová 2024.
92 Christner 2022; Loziak and Havrillová 2024; Vaclavikova and Vitekova 2024.
93 van Prooijen et al. 2015, 2022.
94 Bergmann 2018; Pirro and Taggart 2023.
95 Sawyer 2022.

more than regular campaign messages do.[96] During the Covid pandemic, populist actors tapped into virus-related conspiracies to attack scientists and politicians, fueling distrust and turning crisis into opportunity.[97] People with strong populist attitudes are more likely to believe these tales—and this "populist gullibility" helps conspiracies stick and win votes.[98]

By turning reaction to feelings of loss of control into voting behavior, this is however already an outward-directed reaction. We will turn to the outward-directed emotions of frustration and anger below when discussing polarization, and outward-directed action when discussing populism.

Conclusion

The Western model of traditional democracy once succeeded in giving citizens the sense of control they needed to remain politically engaged and socially integrated. It did so by combining a minimalist institutional mechanism—partitioning representation, most visibly in the form of one vote on the ballot—with the structural coherence of a class-based society. In the postwar decades, this constellation enabled the experience of democratic efficacy: individuals saw their social fate reflected in the political process and felt their voice mattered.

But the social foundations that had made this model viable eroded with the rise of prosperity, education, individualization, and mediatization. Prosperity expanded people's expectations and diversified their interests; individualization reshaped social relations away from class and community towards self-curated networks; and mediatization brought politics into everyday life with a visibility and emotional immediacy that shifted attention from institutional decision-making to symbolic performance.

The result is not simply a weakening of traditional parties or a growing mistrust in institutions, but a fundamental mismatch between political mechanisms and the experience of political control. Citizens today are not necessarily more passive or apathetic; they are often more informed and expressive than ever. But their expectations of responsiveness, formed in individualized and emotionally charged environments, collide with institutional structures that cannot deliver the kind of recognition and efficacy once generated by collective group alignment. As this mismatch grows, individuals respond with disillusionment, retreat, or rad-

96 Hameleers 2021.

97 Eberl et al. 2021.

98 van Prooijen et al. 2022; Loziak and Piterova 2023.

icalization. What emerges is not apathy, but a new form of political affect—hyper-attentive, yet often disempowered.

Understanding the current end of democratic efficacy requires recognizing this structural disjuncture between individualized expectations and partitioned institutions. It also requires us to ask: what kinds of democratic forms could be built on individualized, networked societies? This question lies beyond the scope of the present chapter—but it is the challenge that follows.

More than five decades after 1968, we have long accepted the fact that individuals defy partitioning group allocations. We need to see that the times of indirect democratic efficacy built on partitioning representation are over. To end the current problems of democracy, it is necessary to rebuild our institutions according to this insight.

Part II **Creating the Future**

6 Individualizing Participation

The times of indirect democratic efficacy built on partitioning representation are over. The combination of the lived reality of individualized societies and the institutional disempowerment that now defines representative politics boosts our endeavor to rethink democracy and leads to the next two questions: What comes next? And how do we get to it?

For the second question, it is helpful to return to the advice of creativity research: breakthrough innovation rarely starts from nothing. Instead, it emerges by recombining existing ideas in ways that shift perspective and reveal new possibilities. Most often, progress does not come from inventing entirely new building blocks, but from reconfiguring familiar ones into new structures.[1] This insight applies equally to institutional design. If democracy is to be rebuilt on new foundations, this rebuilding must begin with a rethinking of what has already been tried.

Sensing the end of partitioning representation's indirect democratic efficacy, over the last decades much of the innovative capacity of political science has been directed towards two main areas that both aim for the direct democratic efficacy we saw in the Athenian popular assembly: direct democracy and deliberative democracy. From the classic Greek model, direct democracy adopts the aspect that everyone is involved in decisions, while deliberative democracy adopts the form of assembly interaction. Both have been limited in their ability to prevent the ongoing crisis, but we need to learn from them, and will do so both with regard to their theoretical and empirical insights, plus mentioning other forms of democratic innovation.

As with all creative advances, the limitations are part of the lesson. We start by reexamining what we have learned from direct and deliberative democracy to extract from each of the two some structural insight that can guide a new model. In a first step, we will look at their empirical record, and afterwards examine their theoretical principles: What happens when direct or deliberative innovations are implemented in practice? Where have they succeeded, and where have they failed? What theoretical building blocks for achieving democratic efficacy can we discover? Starting from examining these two perspectives provides a necessary foundation for understanding a more general approach to democratic design.

1 Koestler 1964; Weisberg 1993; Boden 2004. The insight also connects to the views of Mednick 1962 and Rothenberg 1996.

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6.1 Successes and Shortcomings

How have democratic innovations fared when implemented in practice? What questions does empirical literature pose, and what answers does it present?

Our first question is directed from the viewpoint of representative democracy as a model providing democratic efficacy, good decisions, and ultimately stability. Can people be entrusted with making decisions on a large scale? Does it lead to irresponsible and outright dangerous decisions? Many people worry about exactly this.

The Brexit referendum has become a perfect example of why many political leaders worry about direct democracy. Despite its appeal in theory, letting citizens vote directly on complex issues can sometimes lead to choices that shake the foundations of a country. Brexit was presented as a high-stakes, emotional choice, and the public debate focused more on fears and campaign messaging than on thoughtful discussion of consequences.[2] For years, scholars studying constitutions had warned that referendums lack the protective guardrails that exist in representative systems, making them vulnerable to populist distortion and poorly informed decisions.[3] Brexit brought these warnings to life, showing how direct votes can bypass traditional lawmaking and lead to institutional gridlock.[4] The effects rippled beyond the UK's borders—political parties across Europe became more cautious about referendums, and even citizens eager for more empowerment reconsidered their support for direct democracy after seeing Brexit's aftermath.[5]

What emerged was a story told by political elites: that referendums, rather than fixing democracy's problems, might actually destabilize our political systems. And Brexit is not the only recent case direct democracy fans have to worry about: the first two decades of this century saw other high-stakes referendums that many now believe caused more harm than good. When France and the Netherlands rejected a European Constitution in 2005, and when Colombians voted against a peace deal with FARC guerrillas in 2016, both votes derailed carefully negotiated processes aimed at peaceful integration. In Egypt (2013) and Turkey (2017), referendums were used to justify authoritarian shifts away from democracy. David Altman's comprehensive study contains a "nightmare" list with 39 referendums

2 Atikcan et al. 2020.
3 Bellamy 2023.
4 Gordon 2020; Blick and Salter 2021.
5 Steiner and Landwehr 2023; Rojon and Rijken 2021; Oppermann 2023.

with highest approval ratings mostly from non-democratic regimes.[6] Is that the proof that people can't be entrusted with important decisions?

However, all these problematic cases were one-time votes, not part of an ongoing democratic practice.

When, by contrast, direct democracy becomes part of citizens' everyday life, people develop the ability to consider long-term consequences in their decisions. This is especially clear when we look at how fiscally responsible voters tend to be in direct democracies. Across many different settings, letting citizens vote directly on budgets and spending leads to more fiscally conservative government. Direct democracy reduces the overall size of government and keeps public spending in check.[7] The consistent pattern across the areas of spending, debt, taxation, and redistribution is one of restraint shaped by public oversight. Voters behave as fiscal conservatives, and systems that give them a direct say tend to build long-term budgetary discipline into governance.

Whether direct democracy empowers citizens or threatens stability depends not on the tool itself, but on how it's designed and how it links to democratic culture at large. Studies comparing different systems show that outcomes—from fiscal restraint to polarization—are shaped by how referendums are initiated, structured, and integrated into broader governance.[8] For example, referendums initiated by citizens and legally binding tend to create more accountability and legitimacy than those called by politicians or those that are merely advisory.[9] Differences in signature requirements, which topics can be voted on, and approval rules directly affect how often and how responsibly citizens engage with ballot decisions.[10] In short, the fears and hopes we associate with direct democracy reflect not the democratic tool itself but the specific design choices made around it.

If citizens are to act responsibly in direct democratic decisions, they must experience participation not as a rare event but as a regular democratic practice. Frequency matters, not because each single decision would be unimportant, but because regular engagement builds the habits, expectations, and mental readiness

6 Altman 2011, Table 4.1 pp. 93–94. Looking further back in history gives us even more troubling examples, like the consolidation of Nazi rule in Germany between 1933 and 1936 (Jung 1995) and the end of Athenian democracy in 406 BCE (Fine 1983) which would need more room for treatment than available here, but see Scholtz 2023.

7 Matsusaka 1995; Kiewiet and Szakaty 1996; Feld and Kirchgässner 2001; Feld et al. 2001; Feld and Matsusaka 2003; Blume et al. 2011; Morger and Schaltegger 2018; Geschwind and Roesel 2022.

8 Suksi 1993; Setälä 2006; Altman 2011.

9 Cheneval and El-Wakil 2018.

10 Eder et al. 2009; Blume et al. 2011.

that responsible participation requires. Political participation is shaped less by abstract principles than by learned behavior and opportunities to participate.[11] Citizens who regularly vote on concrete issues, especially on matters involving money, develop a long-term perspective and greater awareness of tradeoffs. Studies show that places with established direct democracy not only practice fiscal prudence but also foster higher levels of political confidence and trust in government.[12] It is *regular* participation that equips citizens with better judgment, even on complex issues, while reducing their vulnerability to emotional appeals or populist messaging,[13] and builds lasting democratic capacity and institutional strength.[14] Experience also increases support for direct democracy: citizens don't shy away from frequent participation but adapt to it.[15] The lesson is clear: designing for frequency isn't a burden but an investment in democratic co-responsibility.

Direct democracy can hence nurture a mindset of long-term responsibility—especially when it becomes part of regular political practice. This is an insight whose importance cannot be overstated. "Government By the People"[16] is possible. Every human is endowed with the dignity of being able to make decisions from the position of their prefrontal cortex, and that allows us to base collective action on these decisions.

With that knowledge in mind, let us have a look at the empirical knowledge about deliberative democracy. Its promises are compelling: if citizens can deliberate rather than just vote, if they can bring arguments rather than slogans, democracy can function more intelligently, creating both better decisions and more democratic efficacy. To some extent, these promises have been confirmed. Participating in deliberative mini-publics is indeed good for the political efficacy of participants.[17] There is even some evidence that it has some measurable effect on the political efficacy of non-participants too.[18]

But across 30 years of research, deliberative mini-publics have not been able to seriously turn the tide of the growing democracy crisis. Their vision has simply become entangled in tensions of practice. The core dilemma is well known and not

11 Verba et al. 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993.
12 Matsusaka 2005; Tolbert and Smith 2005.
13 Altman 2011; El-Wakil 2023.
14 Negretto and Sánchez-Talanquer 2025.
15 Gherghina and Geissel 2020.
16 Lincoln [1863] 1995.
17 Gastil et al. 2008a; Grönlund et al. 2010; Knobloch and Gastil 2015; Strandberg et al. 2021.
18 Min 2007; Gastil et al. 2008b; Knobloch et al. 2020; Már and Gastil 2023.

new: the deeper the deliberation, the smaller the group must be. Mini-publics, citizen juries, deliberative polls—all are designed for tens or hundreds, not millions. As a result, while these formats offer important insights and useful democratic rituals, they remain marginal to reestablishing democratic efficacy at the large scale. Worse, they can inadvertently create a simulative rather than substantial role for citizens,[19] eroding democratic efficacy instead of building it.

Traditional deliberation fails to scale for barriers of three kinds: input, throughput, and output. On the input side, deliberative forums rely on either random selection (which increases representation but limits who can join) or open participation (which risks bias and overrepresentation of the resource-rich). The broader public is not integrated in either case.[20]

Second; throughput. The quality of deliberation depends on the time and attention participants can invest. But that time is scarce—and even in well-resourced mini-publics, facilitation quality, argument diversity, and emotional safety are not guaranteed.[21] The larger the process becomes, the more difficult it is to ensure those deliberative conditions.

Third; output. The recommendations or designs emerging from mini-publics often lack a mandate. Unless adopted by governments or embedded in institutional procedures, they remain advisory, not binding.[22] And even when they are taken up, the process of translation often dilutes or distorts their deliberative quality.

One way to solve this would be by strengthening the linkage between mini-publics and representative institutions. That may improve uptake, but it does not address democratic efficacy: the citizenry at large still lacks a channel for participation that would be deliberative while giving everyone the chance to be heard.

A central problem of participation-based democratic innovation has nowhere been seen more clearly than in the study of participatory budgeting (PB). Brian Wampler, author of a central text[23] on PB, co-authored after 15 years of subsequent experience a sober follow-up describing an "arc" with rise, spread, and decline.[24] After early successes in places like Porto Alegre, creating tangible improvements in well-being, its long-term sustainability faced mounting difficulties.

19 Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019, 2020, see also pp. 16–17 above.
20 Dendler 2022; Michels and De Graaf 2010; Frelih-Larsen et al. 2023.
21 Hoppe 2011; Rask 2013; Dendler 2022; Jacquet and van der Does 2021.
22 Boker 2017; Drake 2021; Lewis 2021; Junius 2023; Vrydagh 2023; Rountree et al. 2022.
23 Wampler 2007.
24 Wampler and Goldfrank 2022.

One thing was that the initial novelty of PB wore off and disappointed some hopes for radical transformation.[25] Another is the fact that supporting elites either lost voter support or adopted different priorities. A third that the funds to be redistributed using PB became questioned and reduced.[26] But one core issue was an overextension of participatory demands. PB programs require sustained civic engagement, informed deliberation, and time-intensive meetings. Asking people facing precarious labor markets and fragmented personal schedules to repeatedly participate in lengthy budgeting processes became increasingly unrealistic.[27]

Amid these sobering results, we recognize a familiar problem: the scarcity problem that led to the invention of representative democracy in the first place. And we see this problem not only with regard to participatory budgeting.

The imperative for frequency in the use of direct democracy stated above came with a similar qualification: frequency isn't only a virtue. It can also become a burden. The constraints in terms of time, information, attention, or mental energy we have discussed above under the notion of scarcity have not disappeared. Rational ignorance and the danger of voter fatigue still exist, and the frequency needed to nurture the mindset of being responsible does at the same time usually drop turnout below the 50 percent needed to overcome the social selectivity of participation,[28] which lets resource-rich groups keep their larger influence.

The same problem has become visible in the inability of traditional forms of deliberation to scale to the size of whole populations. This inability has given rise to a certain disillusionment regarding the further potential of deliberative democracy.[29]

We face a tension: democracy cannot thrive without meaningful citizen input but asking too much may undercut its own legitimacy.

6.2 Understanding Participation

In order to rethink participation to overcome this tension, we need to understand it. What do we learn in terms of building blocks to achieve democratic efficacy from the democratic innovations of the past? Again, we start with direct democracy.

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25 Montambeault 2019; Wampler and Goldfrank 2022.
26 Wampler and Goldfrank 2022; Jung and Kim 2024.
27 Wampler and Goldfrank 2022, pp. 94–101; Nebot and Goldfrank 2022.
28 Velimsky et al. 2024.
29 Vrydagh 2023; Macq and Jacquet 2023.

Direct democracy's promise lies in giving citizens the direct power to make binding *decisions*, thereby bypassing the layers of representation that may obscure or distort their preferences. Direct democracy is institutionalized through mechanisms such as referendums, initiatives, and recall votes that allow people to influence legislation and policy without needing intermediaries. This institutional architecture rests on a core belief: that citizens are best positioned to determine their own collective future when granted the formal authority to decide. The directness of this engagement provides a tangible and immediate sense of efficacy.[30]

In contrast to traditional representative institutions where citizens act mainly as selectors of elites, direct democracy enables citizens to act as co-legislators. This builds democratic efficacy by strengthening both internal efficacy (the belief in one's competence to act politically) and external efficacy (the belief that the system responds to one's actions). Outcomes receive legitimacy from resting on direct citizen input: those affected by decisions should have the say in them.

Direct democracy thus changes the theoretical understanding of politics and democracy. Against conceptions that focus on elites,[31] it brings to the center the understanding of politics as the area of making collectively binding decisions,[32] close to the sociological view of seeing it as the area of collective action.[33] But that still brings us to the same conclusion: action is meaningful behavior, behavior is always a choice between options, and so therefore is politics. By placing the final choice between options in the hands of citizens, direct democracy puts this view of politics center stage.

We learn even more about how one can aim to achieve democratic efficacy in the study of deliberative democracy, the attempt to make politics in open deliberation in assemblies. It adds to the decision focus of direct democracy in likewise starting from demanding a clearly framed decision: in Jürgen Habermas' words, communicative action depends on orientation towards a common practical question.[34] Deliberation without a shared understanding of what is at stake devolves into confusion. In one particularly successful example of public deliberation, the Irish Citizens' Assembly on abortion reform (2016–2017), 99 randomly selected citizens deliberated whether and how to amend the Irish Constitution's Eighth Amendment which since 1983 had treated the life of an unborn from the moment of procreation as equal to that of the mother. The framing was clear from the out-

30 Altman 2011.
31 For example, Schumpeter 1943; Dahl 1971.
32 Easton 1965.
33 Skocpol 1979.
34 Habermas 1996, pp. 18–22, 303–307.

set: should the Eighth Amendment be retained, repealed, or replaced—and if so, with what constitutional provision?[35]

With this shared focus on decisions, both democratic innovations demand a set of discernible *options*. However, deliberative democracy is wider in this regard. While the set of options is generally small in direct democratic decisions, mostly constrained to two alternatives, or occasionally three, deliberation generally implies a greater choice and a general openness for possible new options. In the Irish case, the assembly was asked to consider multiple alternatives beyond a simple repeal: whether to repeal and not replace, or repeal and replace with specific provisions regulating abortion by law. The citizens deliberated over gestational limits, grounds for legal abortion, and access conditions—generating, refining, and ranking over 13 detailed recommendations.[36] This capacity to add and structure options reflects that, in John Dryzek's words, deliberation must organize arguments around distinct, actionable courses.[37]

Between options, making a decision mostly means selecting one. But that is not necessarily so: decision orientation still includes deciding on executive positions to assign day-to-day work, and Switzerland has good experiences selecting all members of multi-member executive boards in one process.[38] And in PB, a special case related to both direct and deliberative democracy in which ordinary people decide how to allocate some public budget,[39] not even the number of options to be selected is fixed from the outset.

Regardless of the number of options to be finally selected, making a decision implies a collective ranking of the options. And a democratic decision always implies that this collective ranking is based on the individual preferences of the citizens. The Irish Assembly accomplished this through iterative voting rounds following deliberation, where members expressed graded judgments, enabling not just selection but prioritization of proposals.[40] These processes made it possible to build consensus without masking disagreement. Deliberation is not about talking, but about talking that leads to decisions.[41]

It is, however, important to analytically distinguish two different aspects that come together in this step: on the one hand, the *individual rankings* of the available options, and, on the other, a *decision rule* that aggregates the individual rank-

35 Field 2018; Farrell et al. 2019; Courant 2021.
36 Farrell et al. 2019, pp. 6–8; Courant 2021, p. 4.
37 Dryzek 2000, p. 76.
38 Eichenberger and Schafer 2022.
39 Wampler 2007; Wampler and Goldfrank 2022.
40 Field 2018, p. 2; Farrell et al. 2019, pp. 8–9.
41 Goodin 2008.

ings into the collective ranking that finally shapes collective political action. In order to make the latter possible, the former must be known. To make a collective decision, we need to know how individuals rank the available options. Expressing those preferences and indicating which options to support and which to leave aside is the basic act of formal political participation. It's through this act that people are included and empowered in a democracy.

Finally, deliberation requires *arguments*—the reasons participants give for preferring one option over another. During the Irish process, these arguments came from multiple sources: legal and medical experts, civil society advocates, and fellow citizens. Diverse inputs—emotional and empirical—were presented in carefully curated sessions, followed by group discussions in mixed tables, moderated to ensure inclusion.[42] This reflects what has been described as the normative heart of deliberation: reason-giving as a foundation of legitimacy.[43]

Decisions, options, individual preferences to be entered into the decision-making system, decision rules, and arguments are five building blocks defining what democratic deliberation must contain in any setting. The practice of deliberative democracy has provided the best base to delineate them, but they are the same in direct democracy and PB—with the one exception that arguments for and against particular rankings between options, central and inseparable from the other aspects in the deliberative understanding, are treated more externally in direct democracy.[44] The mini-publics of established deliberative democracy treat all these components organically, with participants shaping and reshaping decisions and preferences in real time, while direct democracy has established formalized procedures for the first four elements that strongly reduce citizens' options to shape the process beyond a fixed final decision, and mainly delegate the exchange of arguments to the public sphere outside the formal process.

Between the two forms of democratic innovation, we can diagnose a second tension, this time of quality vs. quantity: deliberation allows for many more options, including turning back to the framing of decisions and making them the subject of meta-decisions. I will term them "collective meta-decisions", as we will deal with meta-decisions at the individual level in the next section. But this categorization allows us to focus on options and individual preferences. The success recipe of deliberation is that it allows anyone to bring options forward, and that rankings between all such possible options can be obtained. Is that impossible beyond the scale of mini-publics?

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42 Courant 2021, p. 4; Farrell et al. 2019, pp. 5–6.

43 Habermas 1996; Mansbridge et al. 2010.

44 Schröter 2019; Müller and Campell 2023; Fischer and Gilardi 2023; Mueller 2023.

6.3 Meta-decision Freedom

Creatively rethinking participation for democratic efficacy has to successfully balance the benefits and costs of participation. The experience with direct democracy shows that participation is possible, and it is a necessary way to achieve direct democratic efficacy that should not be missed. But the shortcomings of all three democratic innovations studied show that the option of having representation is still needed, too. Increased levels of education and resources and digital technologies may have shifted the boundaries of participation. But they have not eliminated them.

Creativity, however, often means recombining known facts in a novel way: here, to confront the building blocks of participation with the reconfirmed relevance of scarcity. Where exactly within the blocks, decisions, options, individual preferences to be entered into the decision-making system, decision rules, and arguments does the scarcity problem play out?

This confrontation makes clear that we face an *institutional measurement problem*. Decisions and decision rules exist on the system level, and options and arguments mostly do so as well, but entering individual preferences requires citizen input and may collide with other uses for time and mental energy. We need a way to retrieve from every citizen their individual ranking of available options, but if that means joining a lengthy meeting or having to go to the voting booth on a sunny Sunday, scarcity of time poses a problem.

And this measurement process is not only between the citizen and the system that aims to turn their actions into collective rankings. It is also about the citizen turning what is in his mind into measurable action. Here, the scarcity of knowledge and cognition poses the problem. In individualized societies, there will for every decision question always be citizens who, despite all temporal and cognitive cost, will be eager to jump into participation to obtain direct democratic efficacy. But at the same time, there will always be other citizens who, "rationally ignorant" in Downs' understanding want to avoid this cost.

These rationally ignorant citizens, however, do not want to simply be ignored. For them, the very idea of representation was invented. Why shouldn't they be able to use it? But, on the other hand, why shouldn't those participate who want to participate? Whether to participate or to be represented in a particular decision is an individual decision on its own, a "meta-decision" in comparison to the decisions in substantive matter to which it relates.

Why shouldn't we open the freedom to have everyone make this meta-decision as they see fit for their situation?

Making either representation or (in the relatively few instances where it was given) direct democratic participation compulsory is the one big cognitive barrier

of the traditional concept of democracy. In individualized societies, we need to combine representative and direct democracy, offering citizens the freedom of the individual meta-decision of whether to vote or to be represented.

In the concept of making decisions based on individual rankings of decision options, the role of representation is clear: it allows the creation of indirect rankings which serve as best proxies for those citizens who opt for non-participation. It is the function of political actors to be able to judge decision options against each other and to disclose how they rank them. If we preserve the information regarding which political actors a citizen supports, we can use it in the case the voter prefers to stay represented, but also use direct rankings from those voters who opted for participation.[45]

With traditional paper-and-pencil methods, the aim is to keep the individual voting decision secret, allowing the use of this information only on the level of voting districts, and we will study in Section 8.3 below how this information could be used.

But with digital technologies, it is possible to undo a provision that has been implemented as a central tenet of traditional representative democracy but is not helpful when it comes to more precisely measuring preferences.

For this tenet, we use the term "vote detachment". Thus far, voters go to the ballot box, insert their ballot, let it go into the box, and draw back their hand, therewith effectively and deliberately destroying the connection between their vote and their identity. With digital technologies and securely storing and retrieving *individual trust storage*, it is, however, possible to undo this vote detachment and keep the connection between voter and vote, making it possible to mix representative and direct democracy.

Individual trust storage offers individual voters a "meta-decision" of whether to do all the work of forming and entering opinions themselves, or leave it (or part of it) to political actors they trust to represent them.

Even for those citizens who want to participate directly, such indirect rankings offer valuable cues which allow us to break away from the traditional direct democratic constraint of offering to citizens only two, or in the best case three, options.[46]

Voting methods requiring voters to submit full individual rankings are more common today than often assumed. The most widespread example is Ranked-

45 We use the plural here although traditional democracy most often restricts representation to one political actor for any voter—a second thought blockade that is going to be discussed and lifted in the next chapter.

46 In Switzerland, the government has the opportunity to make a counter-proposal to popular initiatives, and in this case three options are on the ballot (Kriesi 2005; Vatter 2016).

Choice Voting (RCV, also known as Instant Runoff Voting), which has been used for over a century in Australia for House of Representatives elections and is increasingly being adopted in parts of the United States (e.g., Maine statewide elections, New York City municipal elections).[47] Borda Count-type methods, where voters rank candidates and points are assigned based on position, are widely employed in professional associations, academic societies, and award voting. Condorcet methods, which require complete rankings to determine the candidate who would win every head-to-head matchup, are also practically implemented in many contexts, especially in non-governmental organizations. And both methods have histories going back far beyond their eponymous inventors.[48] Asking voters to provide full rankings is not a completely unrealistic burden.

But a decision that demands of citizens they rank options from scratch may be too complicated for some, and recent literature has indeed raised questions about the social selectivity of RCV and pointed to the fact that areas with more racial minorities, lower-income households, and lower levels of educational attainment have lower shares of valid votes.[49]

Individual trust storage allows us to give voters the indirect ranking based on their trusted actors' evaluations as a decision proposal. As trust in political actors is based on the estimation that they will rank decision options in about the same way as the voter, this indirect ranking will already be relatively close to the voters' own, simplifying the need to rank all options from scratch to merely modifying a pre-screened indirect ranking in a few places.

If the voter opts for rational ignorance and makes the meta-decision to abstain from any participation, this indirect ranking is used as their individual ranking to calculate the collective decision. This is *meta-decision freedom*, combining the direct efficacy of direct and the stability of representative democracy: any voter abstaining in a specific decision and not entering a direct ranking of the available options is represented by an indirect ranking created by representative actors they have chosen.

What meta-decision freedom may look like in practice can be studied in a currently implemented demonstration platform at https://civil-democracy.org.[50]

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47 Farrell and McAllister 2006; Gutiérrez et al. 2022.

48 Brams and Fishburn 2002; McLean 1990. The field of voting systems applications is hard to monitor, but the Wikipedia pages for Borda Count, Condorcet method, and Schulze method (a special case of the Condorcet method, Schulze 2011) contain impressive lists of applications.

49 Burnett and Kogan 2015; Atkeson et al. 2024; Cormack 2024; Pettigrew and Radley 2025.

50 See https://civil-democracy.org/cd-handbook for a short introduction.

6.4 Arguments

Individualizing participation involves citizen participation in schedule determination, including defining decisions to be made. It allows individuals to enter decision options, and its center is the information about individual rankings of those options, be they directly from individual participation or indirectly through representation. What remains from the five-criteria structure of deliberation are the two sides of arguments: providing them and acknowledging them.

Why are arguments important? We can understand the deliberative promise that individuals enter a deliberation with conflicting opinions about what is good for the polity, but after voicing and hearing the reasons for different options, converge on one option as the best,[51] from the theory of motivation discussed above. When people's basic needs are secured and they are able to act from a feeling of sovereignty, they are able to choose their goals. Arguments provide frames that may alter one's goals by offering new projects to pursue in order to perceive self-efficacy.

Both history and world literature are full of examples of how powerful reframing arguments can be. In fiction, a classical example is Nathan's argument in his parable of the three rings that truth lies in conduct, not in creed, in Lessing's Nathan the Wise (1779), while younger and not-that-young readers may rather remember the arguments Rafiki (and later Mufasa's spirit) used to inspire Simba to return in Lion King (1994) or T'Challa's confrontation of the ancestors and the reframing of Wakanda's position from isolationism to responsibility in Black Panther (2018).

Classical historical examples include the power of Frederick Douglass' argument that the Civil War was not just a secession but "undertaken and brazenly carried on for the perpetual enslavement of colored men"[52] that drove Lincoln to make abolition the central war aim,[53] and the arguments to redirect popular and individual projects from power politics towards peaceful prosperity that directed the European continent towards postwar stability and prosperity that finally overcame the first modernization crisis of instability, war, and Holocaust in 1914–1945. When Winston Churchill, in his 1946 Zurich speech, urged the creation of a "United States of Europe", demanding partnership between "a spiritually great France and a spiritually great Germany",[54] he massively contributed to shift-

51 Habermas 1996; Mansbridge et al. 2010.

52 "Men of Color, to Arms!", March 2, 1863, https://www.loc.gov/resource/ mss11879.22005.

53 Oakes 2007.

54 "Let Europe Arise", September 19, 1946, University of Zurich, https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/united-states-of-europe/.

ing national objectives from the amygdala-driven zero-sum interwar rivalry to a vision of peaceful prosperity and cooperation sitting right behind the prefrontal cortex. With excerpts from the speech soon quoted in the press across Europe and the UK, this was the power of reframing arguments in large-scale deliberation at its finest.

The deliberative promise rests on the transformative potential of offering new mental schemas in Kant's understanding through which recipients may interpret information. This is what allows new perspectives to emerge, and participants to shift their preferences on the basis of changing understandings.

Arguments are pieces of communication, mainly but not exclusively texts, that support or reject certain rankings of options. They follow common patterns of reasoning, such as evaluating advantages and disadvantages, anticipating potential consequences, or drawing comparisons with similar cases.[55] Beyond pure logic, arguments may employ emotionally resonant frames such as fear or enthusiasm, appeals[56] or metaphors,[57] to enhance their potential—as Churchill did with coining the term "iron curtain" a half year before his Zurich speech. Reframing happens when these schemas are applied in unexpected ways. For example, an argument from consequences can be reframed by highlighting a previously unconsidered long-term cost or a moral implication. Generally, being exposed to different arguments implies the availability of different frames through which to see reality, and hence enhances recipients' internal efficacy: when arguments are offered from divergent frames, and when participants feel empowered to reinterpret them, the space for deliberative reasoning expands.[58]

Despite these benefits, acknowledging arguments demands time and cognitive resources, as does evaluating decision options. Both the enhanced internal efficacy they allow for and the promise to come to better decisions provide incentives to be open to receiving and processing arguments, but no incentive can be large enough to weigh a million arguments.

In order to enter scalable deliberation, it is useful to treat arguments in a parallel way to decision options: it is necessary that everyone can provide an argument, but it is necessary to rank arguments, just as options need to be ranked. In contrast to decisions selecting options, where the number of options that can be selected is given on the collective level, the ranking of arguments just serves to adapt to the respective receptivity of the individual. It may even be useful to offer features such as clustering similar arguments to reduce their complexity

55 Walton et al. 2008.
56 Brader 2005.
57 Musolff 2016.
58 Jerit 2008.

in order to help voters. But the logic of creating a collective ranking of options based on the collective member's individual ranking and the logic of presenting arguments based on individual assessments of their value are structurally the same.

With this addition of offering the ability to enter, store, and present pieces of communication that support or reject certain rankings of options, individualizing participation allows large-scale deliberative processes to be entered. As described above, individualizing participation enables everyone to be part of setting agendas; it empowers everyone to enter decision options; it asks everyone to enter their individual rankings of available options, be it directly from individual participation or indirectly through representation. And now we have added the systemic aspects of giving everyone the opportunity to provide arguments, and of presenting these in sequence and structure based on individuals' assessments, and it is possible and useful to employ likewise both direct and indirect evaluations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have rethought participation for the demands of today's societies. As a base, we have examined the empirical record and the theoretical concepts of recent democratic innovations.

Empirically, direct democracy shows both stunning failures as prime examples of how not to do it, weighed against the positive effect of day-to-day continuous direct democratic practice in swaying citizens towards developing the habit of responsibility for the long-term consequences in their decisions. Government "By the People" is possible, and for it, continuity and frequency are key. Deliberative democracy shows likewise that average citizens selected by lot are able to engage in meaningful deliberation, but their established mini-public form does not include the broader public, faces resource constraints, and often lacks a mandate. The scarcity argument at the core of traditional representative democracy has not vanished.

Theoretically, direct democracy has shifted our understanding of politics away from choosing leaders towards an orientation on making decisions between options. Deliberative democracy underlined that orientation shift and added the importance of openness to adding options, of individual option rankings, of exchanging arguments, and of decision rules on how to aggregate these individual rankings into final collective decisions. In mini-publics, allowing anyone to bring options forward and to obtain rankings between all possible options is possible, but the scarcity argument makes it seem impossible at a larger scale.

The creative impulse of rethinking participation led to the idea of combining it with representation in the concept of "meta-decision freedom". Practical evidence shows that voters can be asked to provide full rankings but many of them would be grateful for help in doing so. Meta-decision freedom means that trusted political actors create indirect option rankings and voters are free in their individual meta-decision of whether to participate in adapting these to their specific views and interests or stay represented through them.

Finally, we extended the architecture to arguments. Just as options are ranked, arguments must be structured and prioritized to match individual receptivity. This enables scalable deliberation that acknowledges cognitive constraints.

Individualizing participation thus allows for a flexible, responsive, and cognitively realistic model of democratic engagement—retaining the democratic ideal of shared decision-making while adapting to the realities of individualized societies. It opens the door to the next step: individualizing representation.

7 Individualizing Representation

If democracy is to be rethought for individualized societies, what becomes of representation?

This chapter begins by returning to political parties, the backbone of the old way of representation. What functions did they fulfill that remain essential today and beyond? And if they are now less able to provide democratic efficacy through these functions, what does that imply for the future of representative institutions?

We then turn to more fundamental questions: What exactly does representation mean in individualized societies? Who can represent whom—and how? If citizens are no longer grouped into large partisan blocks, how must the logic of representation change? Can a more flexible, distributed form of representation be imagined, and how would it work?

Having introduced a new principle—actor openness—we next explore how such a model can be implemented in practice. How can citizens mandate those they would entrust to represent them? How does trust in political actors convert into individual indirect option rankings? What kinds of interfaces are needed to bring individualized representation from abstract concept into lived experience?

Finally, we ask whether actors that would become more relevant within individualized representation are ready to take on new representative responsibilities. What capacities do they have? Are they, perhaps, more prepared than they realize?

7.1 A Last Defense of Political Parties

Representation has always been indispensable for democracy.

Even Athenians had their lot-based Boule,[1] and the smallest Swiss canton, Appenzell Innerrhoden, has a Kantonsrat for those everyday life decisions that need to be made even in such small communities although not justifying everyone's attention.

Instead of making it dispensable, the case for individualizing representation made in the last chapter has added a new role for political representation. When meta-decision freedom allows citizens to choose between participating directly and delegating their decisions, the basic dilemma remains: citizens cannot participate in everything. Time, attention, and energy are scarce, making representation a structural necessity. Representative actors free citizens from the bur-

1 See p. 42 above.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111827902-008

den of having to study, process, and decide every decision themselves. Even citizens who want to make decisions themselves are mostly happy to learn about arguments political actors bring to the fore, and if under meta-decision freedom and decision easing their decision finally leads to agreeing to the position of their trusted political actors, the line between participation and representation becomes thin.

Without representation, democratic life is—and remains—impossible. However, traditional forms of representation have been faltering now for decades. We have already discussed in Chapter 5 how political parties, once the primary vehicles for translating citizen interests into political outcomes, have lost much of the trust they once commanded.

What made parties work in the mid-20th century was a shared social reality: societies were divided into coherent groups, and parties represented these group-based identities. But as societies individualized, the fit between parties and citizens frayed. Individuals can no longer be neatly assigned to partitioning group identities. Representation by group no longer resonates with the electorate. As a result, individuals don't see themselves naturally "grouped" with old party identities anymore, and increasingly feel alienated from the political choices offered to them, diminishing their confidence in democratic representation.[2]

The erosion of trust in traditional parties creates a profound problem. Citizens still need support in political decision-making; they need trusted actors to reduce the cognitive burden of engagement and to organize the immense complexity of modern governance. Modern democracy would be cognitively unworkable without political parties. Most citizens lack coherent ideological belief systems, requiring cognitive shortcuts to navigate politics.[3] Party identification acts as a "perceptual screen", structuring how voters interpret events and information.[4] Partisan cues further shape how citizens form opinions, allowing them to simplify complex choices in uncertain environments.[5] Even retrospective judgments about government performance typically rely on party labels rather than independent evaluations.[6] Without the cognitive structures parties provide, political engagement would require far greater effort and information-processing than most citizens can realistically muster.

2 Dalton 2000; Dassonneville et al. 2012; Ferland 2021; Carroll et al. 2024.
3 Berelson et al. 1963; Converse 1964.
4 Campbell et al. 1960; Zaller 1992; Snyder and Ting 2002.
5 Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Bartels 2002; Lenz 2012; Druckman et al. 2013.
6 Fiorina 1981.

Parties have been described as remaining indispensable to democracy for precisely this reason. Aggregating preferences, their central function[7] in the decades of industrial society, is no longer performed to their voters' satisfaction, not through the parties' fault but as a result of citizens becoming more individualistic and hence too diverse. But parties have always done more than merely aggregate preferences:

- Parties *structure political cognition* by offering shortcuts and interpretive frameworks for citizens who use party identification and partisan cues to navigate complex information, form opinions, and assess governance without requiring unattainable levels of independent expertise. Mirroring this on the macro level, parties *organize public deliberation* by framing political choices, aligning arguments into coherent narratives, and providing conduits for political reasoning.[8]
- Parties *foster civic identity and engagement* by offering citizens a responsible political home. Partisanship grounds agency in a pluralistic structure, enabling and motivating citizens to act meaningfully within democracy and to contribute to preparing and enacting good decisions.[9]
- Parties *structure political life* by channeling dissent, turning contestation into peaceful competition and rotation in office.[10] They give form to political disagreement and provide continuity in democratic governance, preventing disintegration into isolated individualism or chaotic conflict.

Democratic partisanship, rooted in norms of justification, respect for opponents, and commitment to the public good, remains a critical resource for democracy. The literature on defending parties acknowledges that reform and innovation must occur,[11] but sees the basic need for trusted organizational actors to mediate between citizens and the state as vital for democratic resilience.

But is that the case? With parties expected to have an answer to every question and the result necessarily disappointing voters in individualized electorates, is modern democracy really "unthinkable save in terms of parties"?[12] Eric Schattschneider wrote this often-cited phrase in 1942, at the very time when American men learned to conform to group norms as a matter of life and death, allowing the traditional democracy model grounded in group-based parties

7 Sartori 1976; Muirhead 2006.
8 White and Ypi 2011; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020.
9 White and Ypi 2011, 2016; Bonotti 2017; Herman 2023.
10 Müller 2000; Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020.
11 Farrell 2025.
12 Schattschneider 1942, p. 1, also cited in Lipset 2000, p. 48; Muirhead 2006, p. 714.

which were then only starting to overcome the challenge of one-party fascism. Is that still true?

7.2 Rethinking Representation

To get a better understanding of the functions that continue to be needed in individualized societies, let us examine the three functions ascribed to parties in the light of the new democratic setting described in Chapter 6. Now, the central matter decided upon by the citizens is the actual policy rather than merely who's holding the office. They just need representation whenever their time, attention, and energy are too scarce to engage in participation themselves. What kind of subjects are precisely needed to fulfill the three functions in such a setting?

First, structuring individual political cognition and organizing public deliberation remain a core necessity. But do we need parties to do that? Does it even need organizations for that function?

The answer to this question is a doubled "no". The kind of subject needed to structure political cognition is simply the political actor. Every political actor who has gained some visibility and profile could do that. Individual politicians are likewise engaged in framing issues, reducing the complexity of information, and aiming to form opinions and gain influence on decisions made. They influence voter perceptions through emotional and cognitive framing mechanisms,[13] and as actual holders of office have vastly enlarged (although in a functioning democracy not unchallenged) power to do so.[14] As a result, the pertinent literature has political elites as the recurring subject to which framing is ascribed.[15]

Another classical example is media actors. Journalists and their organizations shape political understanding through frames that define problems, assign responsibility, and suggest remedies, shaping both what to think about and how to think about it.[16] Partly, these frames emerge from news production routines: format requirements, deadlines, and editorial norms lead journalists to standardize interpretations, and even without much intention marginalize dissenting views and structure cognition systematically across audiences.[17] Both intentionally and unintentionally, media actors are part of structuring political cognition.

13 Falkowski and Jablonska 2020.
14 Entman 2003.
15 Druckman 2001; Chong and Druckman 2007.
16 Entman 1993; Iyengar 1991.
17 Tuchman 1978; Gitlin 1980; Scheufele 1999.

Likewise, experts frame cognitions when bringing trusted knowledge into specific decisions without claiming broad political authority. Their focused engagement supports legitimacy by adding specialized insight.

A newer group of political actors engaging in framing issues to influence opinions and finally policies are lobby groups and civil society actors. Civil society actors use framing processes as systematic tools of cognitive influence.[18] Anti-corruption organizations similarly frame complex issues like bribery through moral and political lenses to enhance public resonance,[19] human rights and disarmament campaigns reshape public norms through risk-focused and motivational framing,[20] and NGOs and advocacy networks generally promote alternative interpretations strategically,[21] thus structuring political cognition by framing issues in ways that define problems, assign responsibility, and suggest solutions in the way their stakeholders see them.

Finally, the role of structuring political cognition does not need to be taken up by actors addressing mass audiences. Personal networks have always played an important role in that regard. Friends, colleagues, and neighbors can be "micro-framers" of political reality and thus become "political actors" on the smallest scale. For a long time largely unnoticed, the role of individual network partners in framing political information through selections of what is salient, interpreting events, and shaping what is morally or politically important has become the subject of a newer literature with the development of the internet and especially of social media, that shows how important personal networks are in structuring political cognition by framing political events and issues within familiar social contexts.[22]

Second, parties motivate citizens to engage in politics both as activists, members, and aligned supporters, on a scale from just feeling grounded in one's vote up to investing substantial amounts of time and energy into people, framing decisions, developing policies, and communicating arguments for and against them. Many of them do this without financial incentives.

This is possible because parties function as social settings that provide members with opportunities for meaningful contribution. Humans are generally more likely to persist and perform when they experience both intrinsic and prosocial motivation: that is, when they are driven by both internal satisfaction and the de-

18 Caiani 2023.
19 Gutterman 2017.
20 Torelli and Drago 2023; Harijanto 2025.
21 Sell and Prakash 2004; Dobusch and Quack 2013.
22 Huckfeldt et al. 2004; Sinclair 2012.

sire to make a positive difference for others.[23] This motivational synergy is especially effective in structured group environments where shared goals provide purpose and visibility. In work life, a sense of purpose, contribution, and social impact is strongly associated with commitment, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors.[24] Such insights are equally relevant to political parties.

But these insights are not just valid for parties but for all political organizations. They likewise offer shared projects, peer acknowledgment, and roles aligned with values. Meaningfulness arises from environments that support relational ties, value congruence, and the ability to contribute to something larger than oneself,[25] all of which can be offered by a political party, but by any other civil organization, as well. Parties would not be able to fulfill their representative role without being at the same time homes for purposeful civic engagement, but the motivational base on which they do that is present in other civil organizations, as well.[26]

Placing individual politicians, media actors, civil society actors, and individual network partners next to parties as actors for structuring political cognition, with civil society groups with similar motivational resources, allows the question to be turned around: If parties are not the only actors to structure political cognition, might they nevertheless be better than others? And if so, why?

This question leads to questions of responsibility and accountability, and to parties' third achievement.

The final responsibility for all political decisions is with the citizens (and their offspring) who have to live with their results and effects. Democracy lives because of citizens' ability to evaluate political actors and reward or punish them for their performance. The qualities of parties praised in the literature result from their participation in political competition. Their inner interactions do not always reflect an awareness of that fact, and their voters may be rather forgiving for some time. But sooner or later, if they pursue politics that stand in conflict with reality and are not able to serve their constituents, they will be punished at the voting booth. In comparison, for media actors, civil society actors, and individual network partners, it may take a long time before they receive information about and suffer consequences from such negative evaluation.

This electoral orientation is the base for the fact that parties have been able to structure political life by directing dissent into rule-based contestation and peaceful competition that have pacified democratic societies for so long. As long as ci-

23 Grant 2007.

24 Allan et al. 2019.

25 Lysova et al. 2019.

26 Jasko et al. 2019; Vestergren et al. 2017; Landmann and Rohmann 2020.

tizens found themselves represented by parties, dissatisfaction with any social problem could be channeled into proposing decision options, bringing these into political competition, and seeing results of this political action become implemented in social reality. This experience of democratic efficacy made both party activists and aligned citizens prone to accepting democratic rules and their negotiation results. These observations allow for specific conclusions. The fact that structuring political cognition and motivating participation are not exclusive to parties allows us to rethink the representative role itself as a second way out of the current democratic dilemma, after the first one of meta-decision-making as introduced above.

7.3 Actor Openness

Representation is possible wherever citizens include trusted actors in their decision-making processes. In individualized societies, the challenge that parties cannot aggregate diverse preferences into coherent platforms without disappointing their electorates can be healed by widening the options citizens have regarding who may contribute to shaping their indirect rankings.

In traditional democracy, the act of allowing actors to shape their indirect rankings is the clumsy act of voting by making one mark on the ballot. It gives actors a mandate. Voting is the traditional institutionalized measurement process for representation, which can only at best give rise to indirect democratic efficacy based on the expectation that the representative actor will make their decisions according to what the voter expects from them—the general definition of trust, regardless of what different theorists[27] assume as the background motivation for honoring it. We will therefore use the terms "mandating" or "entering trust" to describe the act of a voter formally indicating which political actors they want to represent them.

The problem of parties is that they have to have an answer to every question, and within individualized electorates this leads them necessarily to disappoint voters. One solution to this problem would be to allow them to abstain from decisions. Another solution that would give voters more agency would be to allow them to designate specific actors as representatives for specific decisions or sets of decisions. As both of these solutions increase the chance of indirect political efficacy, they should both be parts of the new concept of representation to be developed.

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27 For example, Hardin 2006; Fukuyama 1995.

This breaks the partitioning character of today's model of representation. Voters need to be able to distribute their trust across different political actors, to build portfolios of representative actors which in their combination are as close as possible to the voter's opinion, in order to allow indirect democratic efficacy to gain traction again. Such portfolios can be durable but also highly adaptable, with voters free to change them whenever they deem fit.

All political actors included in these portfolios will be drawn into electoral orientation, and hence into responsibility and accountability, just like parties and politicians in the traditional model of democracy. To get portfolios as close as possible to voters' opinions for indirect democratic efficacy, it is advisable to allow all potential political actors to join in the role of representation and decision preparation. I call this principle of individualized representation *actor openness*, and use it to refer to all of the different actor categories discussed—parties, individual politicians, civil society actors, individual network partners like neighbors and friends—because of their requirement to disclose their option rankings, in contrast to individual voters whose rankings of decision options are private by default.

This produces a system in which any actor can take on representative functions, provided they are willing to disclose their option rankings. "Any" includes politicians, civil society organizations (CSOs), even individuals visible only to their network partners, and of course the old political parties. This extension of the representative role responds directly to the increased fracturing of political trust and the need to accommodate multiple sources of alignment. Building on existing democratic functions, it expands the scope of who may fulfill them, marking a decisive shift from fixed partisan affiliation to dynamic, pluralistic representation grounded in trust and transparency. With actor openness, individualized representation becomes possible, allowing for indirect democratic efficacy in the 21st century.

It is helpful to have a basic idea of the computation process.[28] Instead of casting a single vote for one party, each citizen distributes their trust across several political actors. Depending on how much they rely on each actor's judgment, they can even assign different levels of trust. This produces a list of numbers, one for each trusted actor, indicating how much weight a citizen wants to give each of them. Separately, each open actor who chooses to participate ranks the available decision options for a particular policy question.

The system then combines rankings from citizens and actors: it multiplies the weight given to each actor by their submitted ranking and adds these together. The

28 Scholtz 2002, 2018b.

resulting indirect ranking for that citizen is a weighted average of their trusted actors' rankings. If the voter "meta-decides" to participate, it serves as the decision proposal that can be adapted accordingly as described above. If the voter opts for doing nothing and being represented, it determines how their voice is counted in the collective outcome. The system makes sure that the abstention of trusted actors on a decision does not affect the influence of voters who mandate them, either by using counting procedures that are only based on relative values or by redistributing their weights among non-abstaining actors, so that every citizen continues to count equally.

This process seamlessly generates representation in an individualized, non-partitioning way. A working prototype for demonstration has been implemented at https://civil-democracy.org.[29]

Voters are encouraged to include not only those actors they regularly agree with, but (probably with lower trust levels) also those whose perspectives they respect—even if they often disagree. Trust need not be synonymous with full alignment. This encourages diversity within the trust portfolio and reduces the risk of cognitive echo chambers. The goal is not to emulate the partisan package deal, but to enable layered, overlapping forms of representation that better reflect the complexity of individualized electorates.

As actors may abstain from certain questions, and voters exchange the requirement to rely on a single representative for a broad portfolio mirroring their very individual perspectives and opinions, this system dissolves the rigid boundaries of partitioning representation. It allows for flexible, topic-specific trust that aligns with how real-world opinion and expertise are distributed. As trust portfolios can be revisited and revised at any time, the system supports dynamic adjustment. Representation thus becomes not a periodic act of delegation, but a continuous relation of evaluative inclusion.

This implementation is not without challenges. The balance between openness and overload must be carefully maintained. But as a proof of concept, the prototype demonstrates that the principles of individualized representation can be operationalized. The technical foundation exists, and with it the potential to move beyond the inherited limits of one-mark ballots and fixed group affiliations. Individualized representation is no longer a theoretical aspiration. It is being built.

29 See instruction manual at https://civil-democracy.org/cd-handbook for further information.

7.4 Is Civil Society Ready?

If political representation is to be individualized, and if meta-decision freedom allows citizens to participate directly or stay represented, then representation must be possible wherever citizens include trusted actors in their decision-making processes. As shown in the previous sections, this widens the scope beyond traditional parties and elected politicians to encompass CSOs, media actors, individual politicians, and even personal network partners.

Among these actor types, CSOs stand out for their mission orientation and organizational character—mission orientation gives them clear profiles (unlike most media actors), and their organizational form ensures continuity and the capacity to motivate meaningful engagement (unlike most individuals). They also possess epistemic depth, sustained policy relationships, and a track record of participatory inclusion, all of which strengthen their ability to take responsibility in individualized representation. But are civil society organizations ready to step into this new role as open actors within a framework of individualized representation?

At first glance, the answer may seem uncertain. CSOs have never been asked to take part in structured, systematized representation. Their legitimacy is not derived from elections but from mission alignment, issue expertise, and moral authority.[30] They are not accustomed to making clear, rankable decisions on complex policy choices in a way that can be tracked and evaluated. They are also operating under tight resource constraints, which could make the demand to take on new representational responsibilities appear unrealistic. But these concerns obscure a deeper reality: CSOs may not think of themselves in these terms, but they already act in ways that align with the functions expected of open actors. In short: yes, they are ready—even if they don't know yet.

1. *CSOs Already Participate in Policy Formation*

In many contexts, CSOs already go beyond lobbying. They participate in shaping laws, norms, and institutional practices. Whether in the EU's civil dialogue framework, UN consultative processes, local participatory governance schemes, or expert consultations in national legislatures, CSOs act as de-facto decision-preparers.[31] They frame problems, develop proposals, and negotiate feasible options.

The novelty in this new democracy model is not in what CSOs would do, but in the structure that would surround them. What was previously fragmented, opa-

30 Keck and Sikkink 1998; Scholte 2004; Bernstein 2011.

31 Mahoney 2004; Gornitzka and Sverdrup 2008; Tallberg et al. 2013; Chu et al. 2016; Halpin and Fraussen 2017; Tallberg et al. 2018; Kuyper et al. 2018; Binderkrantz and Pedersen 2019; Hale 2020; Rahman and Simonson 2020; Rasmussen and Reher 2023.

que, and contingent becomes visible, structured, and traceable. Citizens can see who prepared which options, how they ranked alternatives, and with what arguments. CSOs, in turn, can be recognized not just as advocates or advisors, but as part of the representational structure itself.

2. *Open-Actor Status Serves CSOs' Strategic Interests*
Actor openness is not just a normative opportunity; it is a strategic one. CSOs increasingly face limitations in their advocacy model. Media attention is fragmented, institutional lobbying channels are crowded, policy impact is often slow and uncertain, and organizations face repressive legislation.[32] Making them part of individualized representation is a new pathway to relevance: not by persuading gatekeepers, but by becoming part of the citizens' own deliberative structure.

If citizens begin to see CSOs as experts and decision-preparers and include them in their trust portfolios, organizations gain visibility, legitimacy, and responsibility—all of which translate into lasting influence. The incentive to become an open actor will not only be moral, but also practical.

3. *Trust as the Basis for Democratic Efficacy*
Trust remains the enabling condition for representation. It is the belief that another actor will do what is expected of them. In traditional democracy, that trust is often bundled into the party vote. In individualized representation, trust can be distributed across actors, and it can be issue-specific. CSOs are often among the most trusted institutions in democratic societies, especially by those who share their values, align with their causes, or appreciate their expertise.[33]

This value congruence-based trust is a powerful basis for democratic efficacy. It allows citizens to offload cognitive burdens onto actors they believe will represent their normative positions. By becoming open actors, CSOs can convert that diffuse trust into actionable representation, allowing their supporters to experience indirect efficacy rather than just passive alignment.

4. *The Capacity to Take Responsibility*
To take on the role of an open actor is to step into responsibility. That means more than expressing advocacy positions; it means being willing to engage in decision-preparatory processes whose outcomes affect the public and doing so in a way that allows retrospective evaluation. Responsibility is demanding, because it re-

32 Anheier et al. 2019; Smidt et al. 2021; Lian and Murdie 2023.
33 Chapman et al. 2021.

quires not only position-taking but also anticipation of consequences and ownership of outcomes.

Yet this demand is not foreign to CSOs. In issue areas such as environmental regulation, anti-corruption, human rights, and social policy, many CSOs already engage in formal consultations, prepare draft legislation, or participate in multi-stakeholder processes.[34] They already offer evidence, frame alternatives, and engage with competing claims. CSOs are already serious, but they also deserve visibility within the framework of representation. This new democracy model provides the systemic structure to make this responsibility traceable and integrated into citizens' indirect influence.

(An additional benefit which will be discussed later is that CSOs will also be able to use this framework for their own internal decisions, and to resolve internal disputes.)

5. *Individualized Representation Does Not Require Becoming a Party*
One plausible fear is that stepping into representation might force CSOs to become something they are not: broad-based, compromise-seeking, generalist organizations like traditional parties. This would be neither feasible nor desirable. But individualized representation, as introduced in this book, does not require that.

Open actors in this new democracy model are not asked to speak on every issue. They can abstain from topics where they lack expertise or legitimacy. Their role is defined by their scope of activity, their thematic focus, and the trust they command. In fact, the strength of individualized representation lies precisely in allowing citizens to build portfolios of diverse actors—each trusted in their own field—rather than forcing all-in-one representational packages. CSOs can keep their specialized profiles while stepping into decision-preparatory responsibility.

6. *Cultural Change Is Demanding but Not New*
Some may argue that the shift from "lobbyists" to open actors requires a cultural revolution within civil society. There is truth in that: stepping into representation means embracing responsibility, transparency, and the logic of democratic feedback. It means opening oneself to citizen evaluation and accepting that trust is conditional.

But CSOs are not strangers to cultural change. Many began as protest movements and became institutional actors. Others moved from humanitarian aid to policy influence, or from street-level advocacy to judicial litigation. Civil society

34 Bäckstrand 2006; Hale and Roger 2014; Ishkanian 2022; Villanueva 2023.

is a highly adaptive sector. The cultural shift needed for actor openness is significant, but it is a continuation of existing trajectories. And, as the examples listed under the fourth argument show, the capacity to adjust to systemic imperatives is already present.

7. *Flexibility under Constraints: The Social Media Precedent*
The role envisioned for CSOs in this new democracy model—disclosing ranked preferences on policy options, contributing to decision preparation, and being transparently accountable to citizens who trust them—is new. But CSOs have already demonstrated their capacity to adapt to major systemic shifts under tight constraints. Nowhere is this clearer than in their uptake of social media. Despite having limited resources, many organizations have become agile communicators, framers of complex issues, and mobilizers of distributed publics.[35] They have learned to use Twitter threads, Instagram reels, and issue-based hashtags to shape opinion and reframe debates, often outperforming traditional institutions in agility and resonance.

This shows that when a new communicative space opens and participation conditions shift, CSOs do adapt. If this new democracy model offers a new political structure, with low-threshold mechanisms for making their positions rankable and traceable, there is every reason to believe that many CSOs will step in—not necessarily because they were waiting for it, but because it aligns with their broader mission of influence and impact.

In sum, civil society organizations are not yet thinking of themselves as part of a representational system based on individualized trust and option rankings. They still inhabit the categories of advocacy, service delivery, or watchdog. But functionally, they already fulfill many of the requirements of open actors: they structure political cognition, frame choices, prepare decisions, and enjoy the trust of substantial parts of the citizenry.

The shift to individualized representation does not require CSOs to become something entirely new. It requires them to recognize what they already are—and to step forward, visibly, into that role. Civil society is ready. They hopefully will explore it soon.

35 Theocharis et al. 2015; Hoffmann et al. 2024; Li et al. 2024.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how political representation must evolve in individualized societies. We began by revisiting the role of parties to understand the essential functions they once fulfilled: structuring political cognition, motivating civic engagement, and channeling contestation through stable institutions. These functions remain vital, but they no longer need to be monopolized by parties. Who, then, can be a representative?

The core of individualizing representation is the principle of "actor openness": opening representation for all actors that are trusted and willing to disclose how they rank options in collective decisions. This principle allows representation to be plural rather than partitioned. Instead of being confined to endorsing a single party or politician, citizens can build individualized portfolios of trusted actors. Each actor—be it a party, politician, civil society organization, media figure, network partner—need not speak to every issue, but only to those within their scope. By enabling abstention and issue-specific participation, this model resolves the dilemma of traditional parties that they are expected to offer an answer to every question and thereby necessarily disappoint increasingly diverse electorates. It thus lays the foundation for a new kind of democratic efficacy based on meaningful alignment across a spectrum of public actors whose roles are defined by transparency, not monopoly.

Actor openness opens the door to a new infrastructure for representation: one in which trust portfolios replace party ballots, option rankings replace binary votes, and dynamic accountability replaces periodic elections, with a new individualized, pluralistic, and adaptive logic of representation.

The central new actor to step into this expanded representative role is civil society organizations, which are more prepared for this new role than they are probably aware. Without democratic mandate so far, they often already prepare decisions, enjoy trust from their supporters, and have proven flexible in adapting to new public arenas. While stepping into representation entails a cultural shift, the groundwork is already laid.

Individualized representation is about allowing representation to emerge wherever citizens place their trust—and about building the institutional infrastructure to make that trust count. Representation, reimagined this way, becomes not weaker but stronger—grounded in transparency, pluralism, and the everyday agency of citizens.

8 Making Decisions Together

With individualizing participation and individualizing representation as two related recipes to regain democratic efficacy, it is time to connect them and study what can be built on them.

What kind of democracy do we speak of when relating to them? How does this kind of democracy relate to other recent concepts of democratic innovation? How might that change political culture? And what risks might it entail? Would empowering ordinary citizens risk a tyranny of the majority? What built-in safeguards and strategies are possible to cope with such risks? How is the information necessary for individualizing participation and representation obtained? How is it converted into decision-making? And how can that be used to make a difference?

8.1 Civil Democracy

"Individualizing participation" and "individualizing representation" are good terms for the respective aspects of what is needed to reinstall democratic efficacy. But a new concept needs one name, not two.

With its aspect of individualizing participation, the new concept of democracy presented here fulfills the definition of being a decision-making scheme characterized by a "systemic and flexible mix of direct and representative democracy and based on the principles of voluntary delegation and proxy voting,"[1] so what we propose can be termed a specific form of "Liquid Democracy".[2]

But the current understanding of Liquid Democracy neither implements actor openness nor meta-decision freedom, and lacks an integration of organizational actors of civil society and a reconnection with the public sphere.[3] Additionally, the semantic quality of the term is a transitional one, understandable only from British-Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's juxtaposition of "heavy" and "liquid" modernity[4] that is part of the current social transformation. No one would today term representative democracy as "revolutionary", even in a country in which it was installed via a revolution. New systems need terms that can last.

In that regard, political systems are named according to the actors to whom they assign power and responsibility: monarchy gave power and responsibility to

1 Valsangiacomo 2022.
2 Blum and Zuber 2016; Harding 2022; Valsangiacomo 2022.
3 Ochman 2021.
4 Bauman 2000.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111827902-009

monarchs; representative democracy gave it to representatives. As we devise power and responsibility of civil society actors through the actor openness principle and through the principle of meta-decision freedom to voting citizens, a word stemming from the Latin "cives", it is appropriate to term this a "Civil Democracy." An additional but more anecdotal argument is the fact that the lack of political efficacy has contributed to a tendency towards incivility in many societies,[5] and Civil Democracy as a way to return to democratic efficacy will also have the effect of returning to a more civil form of democracy.

Civil Democracy enters a market of ideas which has grown through the crisis of democratic efficacy under partitioning representation and been flooded with a plethora of models over the last decades. A probably still incomplete list, sorted in three categories and internally according to the product of search hits on Google and the Web of Science (in May 2025) for the respective terms, contains eighteen entries, as shown in Table 8.1.

They can be roughly grouped into those defined by means and ends, those defined by ends only, and those defined by means only. The latter group consists of the overlapping purely technical concepts of E-Democracy, Digital, and Blockchain Democracy and the concept of Networked Democracy, which all, due to their lack of specified shared goals and despite their pragmatic orientation, are unable to provide any coherent strategy for implementing change.

The most practically interesting group are those seven models that provide both concise goal conception ("ends") and practical strategy ("means"). The bottom three of them have fewer search hits because their means are unable to scale—in the case of Sociocracy and Empowered Democracy in terms of the proposed institutions; in the case of Global Assembly projects in terms of the social movements necessary for their implementation. The top four, Deliberative Democracy, Participatory Democracy, Participatory Budgeting, and Liquid Democracy, have all found adequate resonance in practice and academic discussion but suffer from shortcomings that have been extensively discussed above.

The largest group defined by concise goal conceptions but lacking strategies for their implementation all address aspects of the crisis of partitioning representation.

Radical Democracy, Agonistic Democracy, and Aversive Democracy[6] all arose from the void of post-democratic detachment, with Radical Democracy focusing

5 Mason 2018; Rossini 2022.

6 Tønder and Thomassen 2005; Norval 2007.

Table 8.1: 18 recent democracy concepts.

Nr	Democracy model	Google	Web of Science	Focus
1	Deliberative Democracy	1,200,000	2124	Means and ends
2	Participatory Democracy	1,500,000	981	Means and ends
3	Participatory Budgeting	2,300,000	523	Means and ends
4	Liquid Democracy	850,000	76	Means and ends
5	Sociocratic Democracy	9000	10	Means and ends
6	Global Assembly Democracy	2500	25	Means and ends
7	Empowered Democracy	5700	1	Means and ends
8	E-Democracy	1,100,000	1276	Means only
9	Digital Democracy	900,000	395	Means only
10	Blockchain Democracy	15,000	13	Means only
11	Networked Democracy	4200	3	Means only
12	Radical Democracy	95,000	544	Ends only
13	Agonistic Democracy	45,000	95	Ends only
14	Epistemic Democracy	35,000	121	Ends only
15	Cosmopolitan Democracy	50,000	76	Ends only
16	Ecological Democracy	22,000	51	Ends only
17	Aversive Democracy	8500	8	Ends only
18	More-than-Human Governance	1100	0	Ends only

mostly on the loss of individual and collective democratic efficacy,[7] and the latter two on that of political contestation. Apart from differences in their respective theoretical foundations, Agonistic Democracy has a stronger orientation towards the process, especially the relation between different social groups and actors,[8] while Aversive Democracy focuses more on democratic institutions and results, and the continuous imperfection and revisability of both.

Epistemic Democracy focuses on the problem of deteriorating decision quality. Ecological Democracy and More-than-Human Governance[9] address the inability to solve the large ecological questions of our time, and Cosmopolitan Democracy aims for the democratically legitimate supranational governance necessary to overcome this and other global problems.

Part III of the book will address in closer detail how Civil Democracy tackles these problems: even if the test of the viability of its strategy has yet to be provid-

7 Like Strong Democracy, an older concept that did not make it on the list just for its age. (Barber 1984).

8 Mouffe 2013.

9 Abram 1996; Chwalisz and Reid 2024.

ed, the breadth of its approach and the clarity of its strategy allow it to enter the market of ideas with its chances of success intact.

8.2 An Invitation to Responsibility

Individualizing participation and representation changes politics. How might that change political culture? And what risks might it entail?

Democratic efficacy fosters responsibility. Decisions reflect the care or carelessness with which people act, and responsibility grows where individuals experience how their actions contribute to shaping reality. And this entails an answer to a classical fear: would a system with real decision power in the hands of ordinary citizens risk becoming a tyranny of the majority? We respond to that concern, on one hand by exploring the relationships between democratic efficacy, responsibility, and majority power exertion, and on the other by hinting at the tools we obtain to mitigate it more effectively than traditional systems of representation ever could, with the chance to direct the question of responsibility to majorities and minorities alike.

Responsibility can be understood in two fundamentally different ways. The first is "causal responsibility", a backward-looking assignment of cause: someone is responsible for an outcome because it can be attributed to their actions. It is related through experience with the second, deeper and politically more significant form of "motivational responsibility". This forward-looking sense is about who chooses to care about consequences and to act accordingly. It rests on the ability and willingness to engage in decisions whose outcomes matter, especially in the long run.

Motivational responsibility emerges when people recognize that their actions influence outcomes, that is, they are aware of their causal responsibility. This is not a theoretical abstraction: every parent observes how their child's ability to take responsibility grows with the reach of their actions. We act to shape the world so that it fits the structures we hold in mind, and we have seen above how dopamine rewards us for such congruence. Having and accepting the experience of causal responsibility therefore nudges us motivationally to think ahead for the next time.

That also plays out in politics. Institutions with high democratic efficacy create ground on which motivational responsibility can grow. Knowing that one's actions influence outcomes is a precondition to take ownership, reflect on past decisions, and invest time and care in better future ones. That's why industrial societies were able to make important and long-run-oriented decisions in the de-

cades when the Western model worked, and where voters' fiscal responsibility in direct democracies, discussed above, stems from.

Developing such a consciousness for consequences of one's actions has been both empirically described in sociology and normatively demanded in ethics, especially when it comes to ecological and societal sustainability.[10] Yet ethics directed at the social level requires institutional translation. Long-term-relevant decisions demand an institutional design of rules and procedures that encourage all actors, including majorities, to act with foresight.[11]

By restoring democratic efficacy, Civil Democracy is a training in motivational responsibility. Experiencing that their positions matter regardless of whether they express them directly (through voting) or indirectly (through trust in actors with clear profiles) enables citizens to act out their agency in a meaningful and forward-looking way, and in doing so, it transforms responsibility from an external demand into a living, self-sustaining motivation.

This development towards motivational responsibility is of special importance with regard to fears of a "tyranny of the majority", one of the most enduring critiques of direct democratic causal responsibility. When democracy emerged in the 19th century, two of its most influential thinkers, Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, warned that despotism could arise not only from monarchs but also from the people themselves.[12] What if democratic mechanisms, once established, simply enabled the strongest group to impose its will on all others?

Both intellectuals argued from the political side of fearing direct majoritarian control and the cultural side of fearing a group conformity weakening individual judgment and deliberation,[13] but despite their concerns, both remained proponents of the democratic idea. Their point was gladly used by anti-liberal thinkers[14] and has often been used as a rationale for limiting direct democracy, reinforcing representative structures in the hope that they will offer insulation against short-term emotional majorities. But neither de Tocqueville nor Mill ever turned it into a rejection of democracy outright. Tocqueville in particular admired the American project, just asking whether democracies could sustain long-term quality in both their institutions and their civic culture.[15] Their point was never a call to abandon democracy but a challenge to design it wisely.

10 Weber [1922] 1947; Jonas [1979] 1985.
11 McClennen 2004.
12 Tocqueville [1835/40] 1951; Mill [1859] 2003.
13 Jacobs 1993; Maletz 2002.
14 Berest 2019.
15 Riemer 2001.

Indeed, democracy has not always been designed wisely. Citizen initiatives in the United States sometimes function as symbolic performances in which majorities reaffirm dominance through abandoning policies meant to correct structural inequalities, or receive broad support for exclusionary aims: uninformed or emotionally charged majority rule can create rather than solve problems.[16]

Yet these findings are not indictments of democracy itself. They are critiques of simplistic tools deployed under short-term, identity-bound incentives and without safeguards for long-run deliberation. They do not undermine the democratic ideal but reveal its urgency: democracy requires responsibility from those who decide. As all populist regimes show, if a majority wants to wage war against a minority, institutions are only a short-term help. Good institutions help majorities to stay in the rational discourse that allows them to keep in mind that wars are always hurtful to everyone, and that minorities are not "the other" but relatable individuals.[17]

And that's what Civil Democracy is made for. It answers the challenge by embedding long-term prudence into the practice of participation itself. Through iterative processes of voting, ranking, and revisiting prior outcomes, it invites citizens to reflect on consequences over time. Rather than being insulated from power, majority members are trained to use it responsibly—to consider not just what can be done now, but what ought to be sustained later.

Of course, there are situations that start from divisions too deep to allow for immediately bringing all voters together: just think of the diverse intractable conflicts around the world.[18] For such situations, so-called "consociational" solutions of defining group quotas have long been proposed.[19] In the long run, however, they only freeze old conflict lines[20] and have generally not been able to sustainably pacify these conflicts.[21] Instead, knowledge about citizens' option rankings as available in Civil Democracy offers two specific structural mechanisms that respond directly to the classical concern about tyranny of the majority.

The first mechanism is distinguishing between option acceptance and option selection. In each decision, doing nothing and keeping the status quo is always an option. Obtaining full option rankings over arbitrary numbers of options in Civil Democracy allows every voter to express which options are seen as deterioration

16 Davis and Ernst 2011; Farley 2021.
17 For similar arguments see McClennen 2004; Moeckli 2018.
18 Lustick 1979; Kaufmann 1996; Bar-Tal 2000.
19 Lijphart 1969, 1977; McCulloch 2014.
20 Stojanovic 2020.
21 Coakley 2011; Stojanovic 2020; Dixon 2023; Bochsler 2023.

compared with the status quo. And it is possible to define a minority threshold that must be met for acceptance of an option as viable. In that case, the final selection would still be made based on majority vote, but only among those options that are seen as an improvement compared with the status quo by minorities too. That sets incentives for negotiations to create compromise options which are attractive for the majority and acceptable for the minority.

The second mechanism is win/loss tracking. Voters who have been on the losing side of several past decisions gain additional weighting in subsequent ones. This does not reverse outcomes but signals the system's attentiveness to persistent exclusion—giving those repeatedly overridden a stronger voice in shaping future agendas. The literature on voting procedures has discussed that under the term "minority voting", accrediting it with beneficial attributes in theory[22] that could more easily be implemented (and tested) in practice using Civil Democracy.

Both mechanisms share a demand for responsibility to overcome deeply entrenched conflict. They are not immune to strategical behavior. But Civil Democracy disincentivizes it. Strategical behavior is a form of lying, and lying is costly both cognitively and with regard to normative self-conceptions.[23] Few voters will do it because it is so complicated, and open actors that rank options as unacceptable or vote for a presumably losing side merely for strategic reasons do so visibly and can be singled out for their dishonest behavior. Part of the current democracy crisis is that disenfranchised voters lose their feeling for the importance of political honesty and support obvious liars.[24] Reinstating democratic efficacy will reverse that.

The responsibility, understood as motivational engagement in shaping long-term outcomes, that in the long run only stems from democratic efficacy, is a structural necessity for sustainable democracy. The current crisis of democracy, especially in the continuing rise of illiberal democracies, shows how without it democracies risk devolving into majoritarian tyranny despite representation.[25] Civil Democracy counters this risk by reconnecting action and consequence, participation and outcome, thus cultivating dialogical capacity and especially what has been described as "pluralist solidarity".[26] This form of solidarity does not seek to dissolve distinctions but to make them co-present in a system of mutual respect and shared responsibility. It combines procedural recognition of identity

22 Gersbach 2009, 2024; Fahrenberger and Gersbach 2010, 2012.
23 Gneezy 2005; Mazar et al. 2008.
24 Hahl et al. 2018; Arceneaux and Truex 2023.
25 Abrams 2022.
26 LeVan 2024.

with a collective orientation towards problem-solving—training citizens to engage in deliberation not as combatants, but as co-creators of a future they must share.

8.3 Technologies for Making Decisions

The two principles of Civil Democracy allow us to generate for each voter an individual ranking of decision options and base collective choices upon them. The process from individual inputs to collective decisions has an input side that asks through which interfaces the necessary information is retrieved, and an output side that relates to counting methods which translate individual option rankings into decisions. Both are described in this section.

Retrieving option rankings, be it by direct participation or via individualized representation, demands an interface through which voters' actions are obtained. In traditional democracy, this interface is the paper ballot that is counted once voting has been closed.

Such ballots circumvent individualizing participation and representation through an institutionalized separation between voter and election. One may call it "vote detachment": upon placing the ballot paper into the box, one withdraws one's hand, thereby breaking the connection between oneself and one's decision. The ballot delivers the voter's decision contribution, but as the voter no longer has access to it, refinements and alterations are not possible. As refinements are not possible, only political actors with a high salience have the chance to be entered, hence restricting actor openness. As alterations are not possible, replacing the parliamentary "indirect evaluation" through a direct democratic decision on an individual basis is not possible, either. The ballot box, designed to uphold integrity and secrecy, also negates any possibility of learning from stored preferences or trust affiliations. In traditional democracy, the ballot acts as a one-time trust commitment stored collectively in politicians for a full term. The input is minimal and offers little room for individual reflection, adaptation, or real-time learning.

To achieve the full potential of meta-decision freedom and actor openness, Civil Democracy requires a digital interface. Voters need to be able to assign trust and express rankings continuously, adapting them as they gain new knowledge or see emerging needs. These individualized inputs demand an "individualized trust storage" that enables representation to evolve without requiring a new vote each time and individualization of participation to retrieve representation, be it as decision proposal or as a final representatively generated ranking.

The transition from analog to digital interfaces raises legitimate concerns. Many citizens value the traditional secrecy of the ballot box and fear surveillance

or misuse of digital records. This tension is real and should not be dismissed. Full meta-decision freedom and actor openness come at the price of new institutional responsibilities: to build trust, ensure transparency, and safeguard data. Not all communities are ready to adopt these tools immediately. Civil Democracy respects that, while making the case that even high-stakes decisions can be managed securely through modern technologies—when implemented with care.

Civil Democracy does not demand an all-or-nothing leap into digitalization. Many of its principles, especially meta-decision freedom, can be partially realized even with traditional paper ballots. Its adaptation closest to traditional models would just replace the validity thresholds[27] usually applied in direct democratic referenda. In such a model, the result of the referendum would be counted for those who actually turned out, and the result of the parliamentary vote for those who did not, usefully discounted with the turnout in the parliamentary elections. Between this most traditional model and a fully digital one, possibly supplemented by offline interfaces for the digitally illiterate, many mixtures are possible. Such hybrid models lower barriers to entry and offer learning opportunities. In this multitude of possibilities, every political community has the right to decide for itself what balance it wishes to strike between traditional secrecy and digital responsiveness. Civil Democracy supports pluralism in institutional design. Communities can choose the tools and tradeoffs they are most comfortable with.

Notwithstanding these concerns, digital voting systems have become viable—even in sensitive domains. Four developments support their adoption:

- *Advances in encryption:* Cryptographic tools such as homomorphic encryption and zero-knowledge proofs now allow secure storage and transmission of data without revealing its content. Votes and trust delegations can be verified without endangering privacy.
- *Sensitive-sector precedents:* Banking, healthcare, and legal services already rely on digital identity and confidential data exchange. Trust in digital systems is not a novelty; it is a lived reality in most citizens' daily lives.
- *Data separation possibilities:* Identity data (e.g., voter authentication) can be stored separately from ranking data. Anonymized identifiers and distributed storage allow robust protection, making breaches traceable and repairable.
- *Healability through transparency:* Unlike vote detachment, Civil Democracy allows for retrospective verification. If manipulation is suspected, data can be checked and corrected without discarding the whole result. Intrusions can be identified and healed without needing to re-run elections, increasing long-term trust.

27 Qvortrup 2013.

These arguments do not eliminate all risks. But the first three have already allowed Estonia to be a digital voting success story, despite being under the threat of a powerful neighbor with a record of cyberattacks—Estonia has run secure and trusted online elections since 2005, with over half the electorate now voting digitally. Participation has steadily increased, especially among citizens abroad and in remote areas, and no major incident has ever cast doubt on the legitimacy of outcomes. Despite warnings of theoretical vulnerabilities a decade ago, no external actor has managed to exploit them. The system continues to evolve with improvements in encryption, distributed storage, and auditability, demonstrating that digital voting can function reliably even under geopolitical pressure.

These arguments shift the burden of proof: instead of defending digital voting, we should ask what good reason there is for analog-only democracy today. There is a strong case for using the largely digital version of Civil Democracy as a good foundation to build policies.

Once the individual rankings are known, turning them into collective decisions requires a counting rule. Despite considerable debate, that is mostly rather straightforward. However, the few cases in which it is not justify taking a look into the debate.

The question of how collective decisions can be built on information about individual preferences has puzzled researchers especially since Kenneth Arrow's "impossibility theorem".[28] Arrow proved that no rank-order voting system would be able to convert individual preferences into a collective decision that simultaneously satisfies four conditions that on first sight seem reasonable. However, if we take a closer look at these conditions, we find that only three should reasonably be demanded,[29] while Arrow's condition of "unrestricted domain" mixes together two different sorts of decision situations. One sort consists of all decision situations in which one option is able to beat all others in direct one-to-one comparison, making it a "Condorcet winner".

Arrow's impossibility theorem mainly relates to situations in which no Condorcet winner exists. Its simplest version relates to three voters where each option

28 Arrow 1951.

29 "Non-dictatorship" demands that no one person gets to decide for everyone, no matter what others think; "Pareto efficiency" demands that if everyone agrees they like A more than B, then the group must also prefer A over B; and "Independence of irrelevant alternatives" demands that the group's choice between A and B should depend only on how people rank A and B, not on whether C is also an option.

is ranked first by one voter, second by one voter, and third by one voter.[30] If such a situation occurs, it is not clear which option should win.[31]

But how frequent are such situations? This question has not found an exact answer, but the literature contains enough results for a pragmatic assessment. In 1958, one study calculated that if all preference profiles are equally likely, the probability of a Condorcet cycle is 9 percent in situations with three options and many voters and increases with more options.[32] But how realistic is this assumption that all preference profiles are equally likely? The probability of Condorcet cycles increases with the number of options and the degree of polarization. But it decreases with the number of voters and with what researchers call the "structure of the issue space", that is, the tendency for individual preferences to follow a common pattern such as a left–right dimension or a general agreement about what counts as "extreme" or "moderate". When preferences align along such a shared scale, majority choices are more likely to be consistent, and cycles become less likely.

A classic analysis of this problem[33] specifies practical probabilities of between 1 percent and 12 percent; an analysis by Michael Regenwetter, Bernard Grofman, and colleagues with extensive computer simulations regards the specification of such figures as unscientific but argues for probabilities at the lower end of this range or even below it.[34] There are catalogs of real-world examples,[35] including important ones like the question of how America should react to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.[36] But these are lists of carefully searched single decisions in a world in which parliaments in each country make hundreds of decisions annually, based on thousands of committee decisions. Relating a count of such examples to these overall numbers supports the result of Regenwetter, Grofman, and colleagues: Condorcet cycles exist, so it is necessary to have a strategy for that case arising, either repeating or even postponing the decision or using a counting method that can even then calculate a result. The literature does not

30 One can call the voters A, B, and C, with preferences over the three options X, Y, and Z such that A ranks X>Y>Z (">" stands for "better than"), B ranks Z>X>Y, and C ranks Y>Z>X.

31 For real world examples see fn. 35.

32 Black 1958 [2011].

33 Gehrlein 1983.

34 Regenwetter et al. 2006.

35 Gehrlein 2006; Van Deemen 2014.

36 Gaubatz 1995.

allow for a general proposition, so every collective that applies Civil Democracy needs to determine that strategy for themselves.[37] But it is a rare case.

In the vast majority of cases in which a Condorcet winner exists, it is clear which option should win. And the probability that it wins is actually very high. A related large literature has followed on the result that the Condorcet rule could be strategically manipulated.[38] But that mostly applies in cases of Condorcet cycles. If a Condorcet winner exists, the only way strategic behavior can prevent it from winning is by coordinated misrepresentation of preferences that creates an artificial cycle, an effort that is both risky and hard to execute,[39] and which requires lying—which is possible, but costly, as discussed above.[40]

Despite the huge literature that has followed Arrow's impossibility theorem, it is therefore in practical life rather straightforward to decide winners on the basis of complete individual option rankings. For simplicity and ease, many voting procedures produce only incomplete rankings that can obtain artificial Condorcet cycles,[41] and that fact has been one strong driver of the interest in alternatives to the Condorcet rule. In contrast, given voters' adequate choices of trusted open actors, individualized participation and individualized representation produce complete individual option rankings that end this problem.

8.4 Building Policy

The combination of individualized participation and individualized representation as described above allows for making decisions together as elements from which much larger structures can be built.[42] They allow policies to be shaped even at scale, enabling societies to design their collective futures in participatory and inclusive ways.

Policy design is commonly associated with professionalized, institutionally managed environments, as ministries, party elites, or expert panels. But there have been pockets of bottom-up processes on which democratic policy formation can build. Party conferences and conventions, such as U.S. national conventions or

37 The demonstration project at https://civil-democracy.org chooses the Condorcet winner if one exists. Otherwise, the options with the least support are eliminated until a set of options is reached in which a Condorcet winner exists.

38 Gibbard 1973; Satterthwaite 1975.

39 Taylor 2005.

40 See p. 111.

41 Emerson 2013, likewise in Regenwetter et al. 2006.

42 This section builds heavily on Scholtz 2025.

national party meetings in Europe, have functioned as partial arenas of participatory policy formulation, involving hundreds or even thousands of delegates. Individualized participation and individualized representation allow us to build upon this tradition without repeating its limits, and to redesign such processes for scalability, inclusivity, and digital facilitation.

This allows us to rethink policy development in a participatory manner. Traditional frameworks, whether drawn from Lasswell's stages of agenda-setting, formulation, adoption, and evaluation,[43] or from incrementalist models,[44] focus on institutional decision-making within state bureaucracies. Participatory processes are largely absent from this literature. Yet these frameworks reveal an essential insight: policy development is, at its heart, a sequence of interrelated decisions. By reengineering these decision sequences to be open, distributed, and mediated by digital trust delegation, participatory policy design becomes scalable.

The core innovation is thus conceptual: rather than modeling policy design as a linear process centrally managed by institutions, we frame it as a distributed structure of decisions where individuals and organizations can engage selectively—at multiple points, at varying levels of intensity, and with different roles. Some may contribute to goal-setting, others to drafting, and many others may delegate their trust to actors they regard as capable. Participation changes from binary to layered and fluid. The individualization of participation and representation retains and indeed enhances the sequencing of agenda-setting, drafting, revision, and finalization, while reorganizing these into a flexible scaffold that allows both scale and agency.

In the absence of academic descriptions of self-governed participatory policy design at party conferences,[45] the procedures described draw on own participant observation in the German Social Democratic Party during the 1990s. Processes have been changed and reduced since, but the observed procedures still offer a structural model of how medium-scale policymaking processes can work in practice.[46]

These processes began with a base text drafted by an assigned team or an open group. Delegates could then submit amendments. Each amendment was debated and voted on individually. In the end, the final text was voted on, including the possibility that disagreements over accepted changes could cause the rejection of the whole policy text. The process was usually continuous, with a strong collec-

43 Lasswell 1956; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993.

44 Lindblom 1959.

45 The policy design part of these settings is very under-researched; Braunthal 1977 and Faucher-King 2005 come closest but mention it only in passing.

46 Grabow 2001; Michels and Borucki 2021.

tive atmosphere and a shared responsibility for the text outcomes. While demanding, this method achieved democratic development of shared positions in a way that scales beyond mini-publics but still involves direct citizen engagement.

From this practice, and theoretical reflection on democratic scalability, we can reconstruct a participatory structure consisting of *ten steps*, organizing policy design into a coherent, scalable, participatory sequence:

(1) *Goals:* The process starts by defining the goals to be achieved. This aligns participant expectations, enhances transparency, and supports downstream steps like evaluating proposals and deciding among alternatives, thus improving transparency, clarity of purpose, and evaluation criteria.
(2) *Information:* Participants agree on a common information base. This can include a jointly decided reading list or other knowledge resources to prevent informational fragmentation and echo chambers.
(3) *Ideas:* Before drafting begins, participants are invited to contribute ideas. This allows creative and symbolic inclusion at an early stage, motivating engagement and capturing diverse perspectives.[47]
(4) *Drafts:* Draft texts are created based on the shared goals and information. These can be produced by assigned individuals or teams, or emerge from public calls or proposals voted into the drafting phase.
(5) *Changes:* Proposals for changes are collected, discussed, and voted upon. This phase replicates the amendment logic of party conferences but enables broader digital participation.
(6) *Final texts:* After amendment-processing, the revised text is voted on in its entirety. This vote can be emotionally powerful, reflecting both consensus and dissent.
(7) *Decision schedules:* In a practical first step, participants determine the agenda—the sequence in which the above steps will be carried out across different policy areas. This meta-decision helps coordinate participation.
(8) *Network extension:* At key points, participants may ask who else should be invited into the process—be it subject experts, civil society actors, or broader publics. This reflexive extension helps reduce echo chambers and enhances inclusivity.
(9) *Executives:* Operational tasks—such as drafting coordination, facilitation, or reporting—are assigned to designated individuals or teams. These executive roles are limited and transparent but essential for effective process management.

47 On the symbolic and mobilizing function of shared ideas, see Bradford 2016.

(10) *Iterations:* Decisions may need reevaluation—very generally, but especially in growing movements. Decisions made by hundreds cannot be assumed to bind thousands or millions. Iterative revision maintains legitimacy over time.

This ten-step sequence is designed to be modular, repeatable, and scalable, enabling participatory policymaking that can grow with a movement and remain inclusive and accountable. The model integrates both moments of open participation and the possibility for users to delegate via trust-based representation.

Such a model does not exclude administrations. Their role just changes. In traditional participatory policymaking, state institutions dominate: ministries run consultations, define agendas, and organize forums. But in the architecture of Civil Democracy, governments are facilitators, not controllers. First, *decision-making power is decentralized.* Citizens, civil society groups, and trusted open actors have equal standing. The state may support or engage, but it cannot monopolize the agenda. Second, *accountability flows through digital trust storage*, not through centralized command. Participants choose whom they trust, and only those who disclose rankings and justifications are able to attract that trust. This creates a more transparent and dynamic form of political accountability. And third, the *government acts as a facilitator*—ensuring procedural fairness, providing technical or infrastructural support, but never determining the outcome. State legitimacy in this context is not derived from its control over participation but from its openness to following participatory mandates.

This redesign—empowering participants, allowing delegation without loss of agency, and structuring policymaking into ten accessible steps—opens a realistic path to democratic policy development at scale.

Finally, a deeper point must be stressed: building policy is not just about content, but also about capacity. In traditional systems, individuals participate through political parties. In Civil Democracy, participation occurs both directly and through dynamic trust relationships. This model, enabled by digital tools, allows participants to engage as their cognitive and temporal resources permit. Delegation becomes a function of meta-decision freedom—not a relinquishing of agency, but an intelligent allocation of attention. The right not to decide is honored, but the right to be represented as one wishes is preserved.

In sum, building policy in the age of Civil Democracy means more than writing laws or negotiating interests. It means constructing participatory sequences at scale that are meaningful, modular, and open to growth. Each of the ten steps, from goals to iteration, reflects both the aspiration and the challenge of democratic design today: to be inclusive without being vague, structured without being

rigid, scalable without losing meaning. This is not utopian. It is architecture. And it is already under construction.

Conclusion

This chapter started with giving the child a name: rethinking democracy has bred the concept of *Civil Democracy* as the synthesis of individualized participation and individualized representation. It enters the market of ideas on how to end the current crisis equipped with clear concepts of both its means and its ends, connecting to the contributions of earlier competitors and linking them in a novel way.

Its promises build on its influence on behavior. By reconnecting action and consequence, Civil Democracy fosters motivational responsibility and transforms democratic participation into a forward-looking practice. It counters the risk of majority tyranny through this responsibility and through institutional mechanisms that encourage pluralist solidarity even in deeply divided societies.

Continuous, individualized input is enabled by replacing the limits of paper ballots with digital interfaces, ending the traditional "vote detachment" and reconnecting voters to their choices through trust storage. While design options remain pluralistic, concerns about digital privacy and transparency can be addressed. Building on the individual rankings thus received, the Condorcet rule allows us to make decisions in most real-world cases, because complete rankings from individualized participation prevent artificial cycles and make aggregation straightforward and manipulation difficult and risky.

Such decisions are the building blocks for policy, using structured debates, actor evaluations, and agenda-setting iterations, making Civil Democracy a dynamic infrastructure for democratic governance in the 21st century.

Part II **Coping With the Present**

9 Ending the Current Crisis

With the toolkit of both a theory of the current crisis and Civil Democracy as a method for ending it, we can now return to its specifics. How has literature on the crisis described it so far, and how does our approach fit these descriptions?

First, in order to structure this endeavor: What exactly are crises? What happens in crises, generally? How does the discussion on the current democracy crisis relate to the general aspects of crises, and to the systemic functions of democracy? How has the loss of political agency been discussed so far? Who has been blamed for it? What remedies have been devised? Do they really help?

Second, polarization: Is it only a U.S. problem? How convincing are the explanations found for it so far? What is the effect of the partitioning misfit on party members, party organizations, on media, and on voters, and how do they react?

Third, populism: Which political actors appeal to voters suffering from the partitioning misfit? With which strategies are they successful in such an electorate? What do these recipes yield in terms of actual policy, once these actors are successful? How will their voters likely react to their performance?

Finally, do all these mechanisms affect all citizens alike? Or is there social stratification? How does the partitioning misfit affect old cleavages? And, in each of these four issues: what difference can Civil Democracy make?

9.1 Regaining Agency

Political science has analyzed the democracy crisis that has been mounting over the last decades under three terms: post-democracy, polarization, and populism. It turns out that each of these three terms relates to a different common hallmark of crises.

Crises, whether in politics, society, or in personal life, are moments of disruption. But at the same time, they are complex processes that unfold in recognizable patterns. Crises are times when shared understandings and expectations that previously held a relationship or social system together lose their former effectiveness. In such situations, individuals and groups are forced to search for new ways of relating to one another. This search, however, is rarely smooth. It typically involves three recurring elements: *individual detachment* that can reach the level of anomy, the state of disorientation Émile Durkheim described in the social crisis of the 1890s; *tensions between people* whose shared assumptions no longer hold; and the temptation to turn to *"false friends"*—solutions that seem easy or comforting in the short term, but ultimately fail to address the deeper problems. Among

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the many works of art that have described individual crises exhibiting these patterns, we use as examples the love stories of Elizabeth and Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1812) and of Rick and Ilsa in the movie *Casablanca* (1942).[1]

First, when a crisis strikes, individuals often lose their grip on what once gave meaning or coherence to their lives, giving rise to individual crisis and detachment that can lead to feelings of anomy. Elizabeth Bennet's confident judgments about others are shattered when she discovers that Mr. Darcy, whom she had dismissed as arrogant, acted honorably, while the charming Mr. Wickham misled her. This forces her into a painful process of rethinking her values and perceptions. In *Casablanca*, Rick Blaine begins the story emotionally shut down, retreating into a life of self-imposed detachment after Ilsa, the woman he loved, left him without explanation. He masks his pain with cynicism, refusing both emotional intimacy and moral engagement. In both cases, the protagonists experience a form of dislocation: the world as they understood it no longer makes sense.

Second, this internal disruption is mirrored by tensions between people. Crises destabilize shared scripts of behavior, making mutual understanding harder. Elizabeth and Darcy continually misread and misjudge one another, each acting from assumptions the other doesn't share. Likewise, Rick and Ilsa are caught between past love, current responsibilities, and unspoken pain. Their scenes are fraught with misaligned expectations and unspoken emotional debts.

Third, in both stories, characters are drawn to what can be called "false friends"—paths that seem to restore balance but only deepen the crisis. Elizabeth clings for a time to Wickham's flattering lies; Rick chooses emotional withdrawal and political neutrality in a time that demands a moral compass. These options offer comfort and simplicity but ultimately prove inadequate. True resolution comes only when they face the deeper truths: Elizabeth reassesses her pride and prejudice; Rick sacrifices personal happiness to do what is right. In each case, a more stable and meaningful relationship is possible only after moving through the disorientation, tension, and temptation of the crisis phase.

This analytical theory of crises provides us with a description of the three phenomena under which the ongoing democracy crisis has been described in political science. The current democracy crisis reveals that the former shared understanding that partitioning representation would deliver democratic efficacy has lost its effectiveness. We search for new ways of relating to one another, and so far, this search shows all the bumps that are parts of crises. The discussion of

1 Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark in *The Hunger Games* or Toru's relations in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987) are among the many other examples fitting these patterns that the reader may be more familiar with than me.

post-democracy revolves around the perceived detachment from meaningful politics. Polarization describes the social tensions that have evolved. And populists are the Mr. Wickhams that offer seemingly straightforward solutions that however lead only deeper into crisis.

This triplet links two taxonomies we have derived before. On the level of individual reactions, we have discussed already the cognitive defense of reverting to conspiracy theories, so that from the 2 × 2 matrix of reactions to loss of control in Table 5.1 on page 55 there remain three reactions which largely fit the three phenomena: the post-democratic detachment that appeared around the turn of the century relates to what psychologists have described as depressive passivity; polarization stems from negative emotions; and voting for populist politicians is an external action. On the level of political institutions, Section 3.4 (p. 36) discussed three criteria democratic institutions have to deliver, and we can describe post-democratic detachment as the immediate reaction to the loss of democratic efficacy, and polarization and populism as its more long-term results destroying good decisions ("epistemic quality") and, finally, stability. On closer inspection, social reality is always a bit more complex, but these relationships are a good starting point in understanding how the current crisis has developed, and how it will end. Table 9.1 summarizes how the three most discussed phenomena of the current democracy crisis relate to the analytical theory of crises linking individual reactions to loss of control and losses of systemic functions.

Table 9.1: Phenomena of democracy crisis in three theoretical perspectives.

Crisis phenomenon	Individual reactions to loss of control	Crisis aspect in analytical theory	Loss of systemic function
Post-democracy	Depressive passivity	Disorientation	Democratic efficacy
Polarization	Negative emotions	Tensions	Epistemic quality
Populism	External action	False friends	Stability

Let us discuss this in more detail with regard to the first of the three phenomena discussed, the earliest to develop and probably least discussed outside specific debates. The loss of political agency through the end of group-based representative identity has been deliberated from the late 1990s onwards, with early signs of this unraveling captured in sociology, political science, and philosophy.

Sociologist Ulrich Beck built on his view of society transforming into an individualized, reflexive modernity, in which class-based identities and predictable political alignments have been eroded. Traditional mechanisms of representation, Beck argued, could no longer anchor a society of networked individuals navigat-

ing global risks.[2] From the perspective of political science and international relations theory, Gerry Stoker highlighted the shift from hierarchical government to a networked governance that might offer flexibility and adaptability but also risked depoliticizing democratic engagement and weakening accountability.[3] Against these already concerned but academically restrained analyses, philosopher Slavoj Žižek gave a more radical account: in his view, liberal democracy had evacuated its own political core, leaving an "absent center" where the subject can no longer anchor meaning or act effectively—a loss of democratic efficacy, even though Žižek does not use that term.[4]

In 2004, British sociologist and political scientist Colin Crouch coined the term "post-democracy" for this condition where democratic institutions persist but lose their substance. Elections are held, parties compete, and rights are formally protected, yet the locus of power shifts away from the people towards elite governance, managerialism, and technocracy.[5] As a result, public participation withers, and political imagination shrinks. In the post-democratic condition, citizens are spectators rather than actors, consumers rather than participants.[6] Apathy and civic disengagement are not anomalies in such a regime but structural features.

Within this discussion, the tension of emancipation described above has already been noted: collective agency has been undermined by modernization processes that expanded individual freedoms.[7] "Liquid modernity",[8] "singularized society"[9], and "cultures of performative self-expression"[10] have been studied as dissolving solidarities that once underpinned democratic mobilization. As long as traditional democracy in the form of partitioning representation remained without a better alternative, the ideal of the sovereign citizen became increasingly replaced by the fragmented, anxious, anomy-experiencing individual navigating complexity and risk without collective anchoring.

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2 Beck 1999.

3 Stoker 1998.

4 Žižek 1999.

5 Crouch 2004.

6 Bauman 2007.

7 Blühdorn 2020.

8 "Liquid modernity" is Zygmunt Bauman's concept of societies having become "fluid", with shorter and quicker changing relationships (Bauman 2007).

9 "Singularized society" describes Andreas Reckwitz' observation that individuals no longer strive for normality or conformity, but for uniqueness and distinction—social status is increasingly tied to being different, not fitting in (Reckwitz 2017).

10 "Cultures of performative self-expression" is Richard Sennett's term for a world in which individuals are expected to publicly perform their identity, especially in work and politics, shifting focus from stable roles to expressive visibility (Sennett 2006).

This erosion of meaningful agency contributes to a widespread legitimation crisis.[11] Democratic systems continue to operate, but public trust collapses. Citizens disengage not because they are uninterested, but because they perceive the system as unresponsive, not out of political ignorance but as the result of insight that has been described as "post-political".[12] Civic passivity becomes rational adaptation to a kind of politics stripped of transformative potential.

There has been a lot of blame of political elites both for this development and for capitalizing on this disintegration. The growing sense of democratic hollowness is not only the result of external pressures but partly of deliberate choices to depoliticize key areas of governance, as for example analyses of British governments have shown: they show an active depoliticization through shifting decisions away from publicly accountable institutions and into the hands of unelected experts, rules, or market mechanisms.[13] Such processes were built on good reasons in times of the early beginnings of the crisis of partitioning representation, as they aimed to end the use of political power for short-term electoral gain. But they mask political discretion behind a veneer of neutrality in insulating elites from public contestation while maintaining the fiction of democratic control. They have been described as a "new technocracy", where governance is recast as data-driven, efficient, and expert-led,[14] yet disempowering the public and dissolving spaces for collective agency.[15] The blurring of democratic mandates resulting from the mismatch between partitioning representation and individualized societies has opened up new discretionary power for elected elites. They then delegate it to experts, rules, or market mechanisms. That has the appeal of appropriateness and pertinence, but leads into an elite bubble detached from citizens' democratic efficacy.

Very high on the list of causes discussed is the institutional and ideological dominance of neoliberalism. Reaching far beyond any purely economic agenda, neoliberalism has constituted a project of political transformation, discussed as a class project that restored elite power under the guise of market rationality, thus reshaping democratic institutions into facilitators of capital accumulation and displacing collective decision-making by depoliticized rule through markets and expert bodies.[16] Regardless of where core causes are located, increased glob-

11 Blühdorn 2020.

12 Žižek 1999; Rancière 2006; Swyngedouw 2010; Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014; Blühdorn and Deflorian 2021.

13 Burnham 2001; Burnham 2014.

14 Esmark 2020.

15 Dean 2009.

16 Harvey 2005.

alized connectivity in the absence of any democratically efficacious global regulatory institutions has reconfigured national statehood from allowing for democratic efficacy into a mere competition state.[17] Political authority becomes tasked with securing global competitiveness rather than democratic legitimacy.

Building on these analyses, remedies have been devised. We have already discussed above how political science has been engaged in researching and supporting participatory forms of joint decision-making, but we have seen how even the successful case of the Irish Citizens' Assembly was merely a result of politicians aiming to avoid the blame for engaging in contentious issues.

In a more critical view, modern democracies have been described as "simulative democracy", defined by the dual dynamic of a performance of democratic norms (participation, autonomy, deliberation) together with a systemic insulation of decision-making from popular will. Citizens are increasingly activated as participants, but this activation is managed, choreographed, and ultimately non-empowering.[18] The concept has especially been used in the context of environmental politics, where societies articulate ecological commitments while maintaining unsustainable lifestyles.[19] Managed participation, behavioral governance, and post-ecologist governmentality replace genuine contestation with technocratic steering and norm management.[20] Ultimately, simulative democracy legitimizes the status quo by channeling demands for change into symbolic performances. Thus only feigning but not delivering democratic efficacy, it constitutes an adaptive rearticulation to stabilize unsustainable orders under democratic signifiers and has hence become a part of the crisis of democracy instead of being a way out of it.

In contrast, when implemented in a way that indeed establishes popular sovereignty over all collective meta-decisions, Civil Democracy reinstates democratic efficacy to effectively anchor networked individuals and networked governance, filling Žižek's "absent center" again with effective action and meaning. It brings public participation back to a pragmatic equilibrium, opens new spaces of political imagination, and reinstates the sovereign citizen as actor rather than spectator and participant rather than consumer. By allowing for repoliticization of all areas of governance up to democratically efficacious regulatory institutions on the global scale, it can be expected to reestablish the transformative potential of politics and finally democratic legitimacy and trust.

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17 Jessop 2002.

18 Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019, 2020. See also p. 17 above.

19 Blühdorn 2011, 2013, 2018.

20 Strassheim 2020; Butzlaff 2020.

9.2 Reentering Dialogue

The second phenomenon of the democracy crisis—polarization—mirrors the crisis aspect of a breakdown of shared expectations and the rise of social tensions. But polarization is not merely emotional; it is structurally generated. It arises from the mismatch between individualized societies and institutions still shaped by the logic of partitioning representation. This mismatch generates tensions through three mechanisms: citizens feel misrepresented, party members radicalize, and elites respond to skewed incentives. Together, these mechanisms entrench polarization and undermine democratic problem-solving—unless their institutional roots are addressed. Let's have a look at these mechanisms.[21]

In the United States, political polarization has resulted in a number of social problems over a long spectrum from political to social, from foreign policy,[22] to decreased political compromise resulting in ineffective governance,[23] diminishing trust in institutions,[24] a polarized public sphere more susceptible to misinformation,[25] declining identification with the country as a whole,[26] and finally strained personal relationships through individuals having difficulty communicating with others with opposing views.[27] Polarization creates a more divided and hostile society, with negative impacts on the ability of the country to function effectively and address important issues. Polarization is a danger to democracy, discussed as such already before January 6, 2021 and January 20, 2025.[28] And in the wider perspective of reviewing the contemporary state of Western democracies, a comparative data set[29] shows that over 20 years, all countries on average have moved about one-third of the range between the minimal and maximal values in the data set towards more polarization. The U.S. is just an extreme case of a wider trend.[30]

21 The following section draws heavily on Scholtz 2024b.

22 Jeong and Quirk 2017.

23 Jones 2001.

24 Citrin and Stoker 2018; Lee 2022.

25 Jenke 2023.

26 Iyengar et al. 2012; Tappin and McKay 2019.

27 Easton and Holbein 2021.

28 Kaufman and Haggard 2018; Graham and Svolik 2020. The dates refer to the attack on the U.S. Capitol 2021 and the U.S. presidential inauguration in 2025.

29 Dalton 2008, 2011, 2017a.

30 Schulze et al. 2020; Dalton 2021. For single societies, newer literature states polarization for Germany (Ares et al. 2021), Hungary (Vegetti 2019), the Netherlands (Trilling et al. 2017; Silva 2018), the United Kingdom (Perrett 2021; Hobolt et al. 2020; Skytte 2021), Spain (Ares et al. 2021), and Sweden (Reiljan and Ryan 2021; Ares et al. 2021).

Existing approaches to explain this rise refer to gerrymandering,[31] effects of polarizing social and polarized mass media,[32] of diminishing national sovereignty in times of neoliberal globalization,[33] or of information-processing in environments becoming ever more complex.[34] However, for many observers U.S. polarization starts with Gingrich's 1994 "Contract with America", and this timing cannot be successfully explained by gerrymandering and neoliberalism (older) or media changes (newer); gerrymandering is a problem of majoritarian democracies that does not help to explain the generality of the problem (see the next section); and all have had very limited success in deriving ideas on how to break the long-term trend.

The key mechanism through which contemporary societies become polarized operates inside political parties themselves. These *intraparty dynamics* have led to the decline of group-based identities and the rise of individualization, as well as shifting internal compositions and strategic directions of these political organizations that have effective monopolies over organizing political decision-making.. The reason is that political parties are not only ideological vehicles. They are at the same time social communities, providing their members with social benefits inside and outside the party.

In the group-based world of industrial society, joining a party usually meant entering a familiar environment of shared background, values, and lived experience. Workers found their place in labor parties, business owners in conservative parties, and religious affiliations often mapped onto political preferences. Party membership thus provided not only ideological satisfaction but also social integration and identity.[35] In today's societies, being structurally individualized as described above, individuals no longer belong naturally to large, cohesive political groups. As a result, the social rewards of party membership—feeling part of a meaningful collective—have declined. Members who once stayed for friendship, local networks, or shared rituals now leave when these aspects fade.

Likewise, in the group-based industrial era, being active in a political party meant becoming part of a respected democratic infrastructure. Party members contributed visibly to collective decision-making and were often met with gratitude and social recognition. Their engagement provided democratic efficacy and a feeling of control over the direction of society. In today's individualized and

31 Carson et al. 2007.

32 Prior 2007; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Stroud 2010.

33 Crouch 2011; Dardot and Laval 2009.

34 Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006; Van Baar and Feldman-Hall 2022.

35 Granik 2005; Klein 2006; von Alemann and Spier 2008; Hoffmann and Springer 2019; Spier 2019.

post-democratic world, however, this has reversed. Parties are no longer broadly trusted institutions, and their activists are often viewed with suspicion or even contempt. Rather than being seen as contributors to democracy, party members are now frequently regarded as self-interested, manipulative, or out of touch, further discouraging moderate and socially motivated individuals from participating.

Both negative developments affect all party members and may make them question their memberships. Some will leave; others will stay. And if we compare more moderate and more ideological members, the engagement of the moderates depends to a larger extent on this broader sense of belonging, while the ideologues are to a larger extent able to retain satisfaction from achieving political wins. The moderates are hence more easily frustrated, while those whose motivation is primarily ideological remain.

Here, a feedback loop emerges. Members with more radical positions—understood simply as positions farther from the political center—tend to derive more satisfaction from small ideological gains. For them, the feeling of political efficacy achieved from seeing the world move in the direction they envisioned and contributed to through their activism plays a large role. For radical members, even a small rhetorical shift or symbolic policy win can produce this rewarding sense of efficacy. Moderates, by contrast, experience less of this, and are more likely to leave or disengage.

As moderates exit, radicals gain disproportionate influence over party strategy and agenda-setting.[36] Parties, in turn, begin to prioritize issues that energize this narrower base, even if these issues fail to address broader societal needs.[37] This shift alienates moderate voters and political opponents alike, making compromise harder and feeding into a polarized political discourse.[38]

In summary, individualization transforms party membership from a socially integrated activity to an ideologically driven one. In this new environment, radical voices are more likely to persist, organize, and shape the political agenda. As a result, political parties shift away from the center, not because society as a whole becomes more radical, but because the structures of participation now systematically amplify those who are. This mechanism is a powerful engine of polarization—one that cannot be addressed without rethinking both how political representation operates and how important it should be in individualized societies.

A second force driving political division comes from the pressures facing politicians and media in our individualized society. As traditional group loyalties

36 Saeki 2019; Rawlings 2022.

37 Hopkins et al. 2022.

38 Zingher and Flynn 2018.

weaken, political parties can no longer count on stable voter blocks with clear shared interests. Instead, they face voters split across many different issues, making it hard to identify what people really want. This fragmentation pushes politicians towards simple, emotionally powerful messages that connect with voter identity and anger rather than detailed policies or practical solutions.[39]

Parties don't need to offer complete policy platforms anymore; they can simply signal that they understand specific voter frustrations.[40] As political leaders discover that emotional appeals work better than logical arguments, they adjust their strategies accordingly, often making divisions worse.[41]

The media has changed in similar ways. Since the 1990s, media systems have shifted from offering diverse viewpoints within each outlet to having different outlets for different viewpoints, with each catering to emotionally distinct audience groups.[42] Media companies, driven by economic pressure for engagement and viral content, increasingly feature angry, moralized, and divisive stories.[43] This intensifies emotional division between groups and makes compromise seem like weakness or betrayal.

A third mechanism interacting with the first two in leading from the institutional incongruence to polarization is *voter anger.* Long before being amplified by politicians and media, it begins with the mismatch between individualized societies and political institutions still based on partitioning representation. As the old world is gone in which voters belonged to well-defined social categories, and when class-based parties could reliably translate group interests into political programs,[44] so is the democratic efficacy voting it generated. After the post-democratic detachment described above, many people move from passive disappointment to active anger. They feel alienated[45]—not just disappointed, but as if politics has lost its meaning. Voters feel not only unheard but also betrayed by institutions that claim to represent them while offering no route for their concerns.

Political parties, seeing limited response from voters, avoid important but divisive issues. Instead, they focus on vague topics that stir emotions—which only frustrates voters more. Disillusioned citizens either drop out of politics or turn to emotionally charged, polarizing stories that offer simple enemies and clear

39 Klingelhöfer et al. 2025.
40 Widmann 2021.
41 Rico et al. 2020.
42 Ladd 2010; Prior 2013; Hopkins and Ladd 2014; Hoewe et al. 2020.
43 Altheide and Snow 1979.
44 Clarke and Stewart 1998.
45 Citrin and Stoker 2018; Hay 2007.

moral choices.[46] The result? Angry voters everywhere. This anger isn't just about personality or media influence. It comes from a system that fails to provide meaningful ways for people to be heard. While "political dialogue can only emerge when anger is heard with empathy, rather than domesticated or silenced",[47] overwhelming anger makes real conversation impossible—their dialogical capacity evaporates.

Voter rage isn't random or simply caused by bad manners or media. Research shows these emotions are systematic responses to the erosion of democratic efficacy and the feeling of losing control over political outcomes. Anger is a structured emotional reaction to institutions failing to deliver on their democratic promise.

This view comes from Affective Intelligence Theory, which explains that anger happens when people perceive intentional violations of expected norms, especially those related to fairness and agency.[48] Citizens become angry not just when problems occur, but when they feel their ability to address those problems through democratic means has been blocked. This process involves both emotions and thinking, explaining why declining trust in government often comes with rising anger.[49]

Recent work shows that voters lacking a sense of internal political efficacy are much more prone to anger.[50] Far from being disengaged, these voters are emotionally activated—but not in support of the existing democratic system. Instead, they're motivated by resentment towards institutions they see as unresponsive, distant, or corrupt. When usual ways of political orientation break down, emotions like anger become navigational tools.[51]

Anger's relationship to control appears in crisis situations, too. Studies of reactions to terrorist events show that anger increases not just from fear or trauma, but also from experiencing institutional failure to provide protection or justice.[52] When the system seems to fail, citizens turn to alternative political stories that promise to restore control—even at the cost of democratic norms.

This emotional path isn't limited to extraordinary events. Exposure to ongoing threats, especially in fragmented media environments, leads citizens to selectively consume anger-inducing content.[53] This content confirms the sense that politics is

46 Webster 2020.
47 Lyman 2004.
48 Marcus et al. 2000; Marcus et al. 2019.
49 Webster 2018.
50 Rico et al. 2020.
51 Marcus et al. 2000.
52 Vasilopoulos et al. 2019; Vasilopoulos and Brouard 2020.
53 Huddy et al. 2021.

rigged, deepens alienation, and reinforces the emotional cycle of grievance. Institutional decline produces emotional consequences that go beyond disapproval—they become part of identity, transforming political estrangement into personal offense.[54]

What emerges is a population increasingly motivated by what's called "ressentiment"—a form of political emotion rooted in long-term humiliation, exclusion, and perceived powerlessness.[55] Psychological evidence complements this view, showing that a lack of perceived control over one's political environment correlates with punitive, authoritarian preferences, as individuals seek to restore order by any means available.[56]

Anger is thus the third mediator between partitioning misfit and polarization. It contributes to social polarization by causing people to cut off ties with opposing partisans.[57] It is the emotional consequence of broken political feedback loops—of systems that promise agency but fail to deliver it.

To overcome this anger, we need to proceed to a system that returns to providing democratic efficacy. Muzafer Sherif's *Robbers Cave* study provides a wonderful example of how that is possible. In this field experiment, two groups of 12-year-old boys—initially strangers—were brought to a summer camp in Robbers Cave State Park, Oklahoma. For the first week, they developed strong internal group identities, complete with names, flags, and group norms. In the second phase, they were pitted against each other in competitive games. Predictably, hostility escalated quickly. The boys developed derogatory stereotypes of the other group, refused to cooperate, and engaged in acts of sabotage and aggression. By the end of the competitive phase, their enmity had solidified into group-based animosity.

But the final phase of the experiment was transformative. The researchers introduced superordinate goals—shared challenges that could, and could only, be solved through cooperation. They staged a breakdown in the camp's water supply. Later, they arranged for a food truck to "stall" on the road. In each case, both groups had to work together to restore basic camp functions. Through these acts of experiencing efficacy in collaborative problem-solving, the boys began to see one another not as rivals, but as teammates. Stereotypes softened, friendships formed across group lines, and by the end of the week, the two groups voluntarily chose to ride the same bus home.[58]

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54 Webster 2020.
55 Papaioannou 2025.
56 Duckitt et al. 2010.
57 Webster et al. 2022.
58 Sherif 1961.

This is an important lesson in human nature.[59] Polarization thrives in environments of identity threat and zero-sum logic. But when institutions create structures that allow for shared agency, even bitter divisions can be healed. The boys did not need to be taught tolerance in the abstract; they needed to see the world change because they changed it together.

As explained, the current polarization is a paradoxical result of individualization—in an individualist world, we have very probably shared interests and understandings with many of those we're currently not talking to because they are on the other side of the divide; a divide that has resulted from a political system that could only work by making salient those topics on which we disagree, and because our feelings of losing control have led us into stress mode. Using individualized participation and individualized representation, we can return to being able to respectfully disagree because we will again be able to see where we agree, because we regain agency, and because we again will be able to see how much the other is a help and not a hindrance in doing the right thing.

9.3 Redoing the Right Thing

Currently, however, for a growing number of citizens in liberal democracies the feeling of losing control translates into democracy experienced not as empowerment, but as exclusion.

As we have seen above, psychological theories suggest that under such conditions, individuals become especially vulnerable to appeals that promise to restore agency. The more they feel disempowered and without control, the stronger their vulnerability. Eventually, the urge to restore control overrides longer-term motivations, both in terms of rational consideration and of accepting established norms. Appeals promising to restore agency become powerful, even if they are not backed by a consistent understanding of what would be necessary to factually improve the situation. The political movements that aim to exploit this vulnerability have been called "populism".

Populism first appeared in the United States in the 1890s, and has cropped up somewhere in the world in every decade since the 1920s, leading to it being treated as a "perennial possibility".[60] But the theory presented above explains why it was largely absent in Western societies in the decades when the model of group conformity and partitioning representation worked. When institutions fit societies

59 Mason 2018.

60 Canovan 1999; Laclau 2005; Müller 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017.

in a way that establishes democratic efficacy, people feel in control and are aware of their democratic responsibilities.

While most often subverting and sometimes openly questioning democracy, populism has never questioned partitioning representation. For immanent reasons, most of its proponents are not to be expected to do so. They rely on it, and stressing an asserted unity of "the people" is at the very heart of their rhetoric.

In attacking the elite bubble that has arisen due to the end of clear mandates for partitioning representatives in individualized times, populism channels diffuse frustration into concrete political identity and action. This response is emotionally satisfying for populist voters. As without specific democratic mandates the elite bubble shares the shortcomings of all dynamics of encapsulated groups, attacking it can sometimes result in bringing forward questions that rightly deserve to be asked. But stressing the unity assertion instead of the necessary diversity of an individualized populace, and nationalist conceptions in times when productivity rests on international divisions of labor, populism is even more caught in the logic of partitioning representation than the political system it opposes. Apart from incidental findings, populism is therefore structurally unable to address the causes of disempowerment. It merely offers a symbolic reaffirmation of agency.[61]

Empirical studies show that both cultural and economic grievances fuel populist support. Perceived cultural threat—from immigration, gender norms, or globalization—combines with economic risk to create an affective demand for protection and clarity.[62] These threats are often more about identity than material deprivation, but the emotional intensity is no less real. This perception of crisis is reinforced by political rhetoric. Populists reinterpret diverse policy issues as signs of elite failure and national decay. Through the performative invocation of crisis, they create the need for urgent intervention and offer themselves as its agent.[63]

Populism also fills a vacuum created by the erosion of traditional political intermediaries. As mainstream parties converge on centrist positions and abandon their mass-organizational roots, populists reintroduce political passion and mobilization. They speak to those who feel ignored or excluded, especially among lower-education and low-trust segments of the population.[64]

61 Müller 2016; Moffitt 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017.
62 Gidron and Hall 2020; Colantone and Stanig 2018b.
63 Laclau 2005; Moffitt and Tormey 2014.
64 Kriesi 2008; Lubbers et al. 2002.

Media structures amplify this appeal. Social media platforms allow populist actors to bypass traditional gatekeepers, personalize communication, and create echo chambers.[65] Broadcast logic prioritizes emotional conflict over nuance, turning populist style into a competitive advantage.[66]

In this way, populism becomes both an emotional release and a political shortcut—a way to turn vague discontent into moral certainty and political identification. It offers the people not real power, but the feeling of power.

In addressing voters who have grown unaccustomed to real power, the responsibility it brings, and the acceptance of ambivalence that comes with responsibility, populism wins through narrative simplification.

At its core is a binary frame: the people versus the corrupt elite. This moralized dichotomy simplifies complex social realities and makes political conflict legible to large audiences.[67] As its fundamental cleavage is the loss-of-control feeling, the normative core of populism is necessarily small and in need of borrowing from fuller ideologies to specify policy.[68] This flexibility allows populism to be adopted by both left- and right-wing actors. Left-wing populism targets economic elites and emphasizes inclusion, while right-wing populism focuses on cultural outsiders and national sovereignty.[69]

The anti-elitism of populism is discursively versatile. Elites may be political, financial, media, or academic—and populist leaders adapt their targets to resonate with local grievances.[70] In any case, populists portray themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of a unified and virtuous people.[71] For them, symbolism is key. Populist rhetoric simplifies governance challenges, replacing deliberation and compromise with slogans and spectacles. They prioritize visibility over substance: building walls, rejecting treaties, staging referendums.[72] These gestures reaffirm the leader's closeness to the people and disdain for elite negotiation. In doing so, populists displace the deliberative function of democracy with a performative one: politics becomes about reaffirming identity, not solving problems.

This, however, is both their strength and their limit.

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65 Engesser et al. 2017; Jagers and Walgrave 2007.
66 Hameleers et al. 2017.
67 Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008.
68 Mudde 2000; Canovan 1981.
69 March 2011; Rooduijn et al. 2024.
70 Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Hawkins 2009.
71 Müller 2016.
72 Taggart 2000.

When populists enter government, their limitations quickly surface. The simplifications that won them power hinder effective policymaking. Institutional checks are recast as obstacles. Expertise is reframed as elitism. Opposition is denounced as treason.[73]

Populist governments frequently undermine liberal institutions. Judicial independence is eroded, oversight bodies politicized, and constitutions manipulated.[74] By notionally identifying "the people" with themselves, the stated goal of empowering citizens quickly devolves into centralizing power and weakening mechanisms of cooperation that in functioning democracies channel information from different parts of the population.

Across policy areas, populist rule exhibits a disdain for the epistemic quality of good governance that ranges from the absence of long-term planning to overt dysfunction. In foreign policy, populists weaken their countries' standing through favoring symbolic confrontation over diplomacy, rejecting multilateralism, isolating themselves from alliances, and prioritizing performative sovereignty over strategic interests.[75] Environmental governance suffers from populist positions dismissing climate science as elite alarmism and rolling back regulations crucial for long-term sustainability.[76] And so on. Long-term responsibility is discarded in judicial governance by filling courts with loyalists and compromising legal independence; in educational policies through politicizing schools and installing ideological curricula; in relation to media by attacking independent journalism, normalizing disinformation, and silencing critical voices; in welfare by favoring clientelist redistribution over systemic reform; and in migration policy by exclusionary measures misaligned with economic and demographic realities. Most embarrassing given the role of economic policy in populist rhetoric, short-term, voter-pleasing, and simply intransigent measures that ignore expert warnings result in unsustainable spending, debt accumulation, and lower economic performance.[77]

These failures stem from the very logic that brought populists to power: the prioritization of symbolism over substance, immediacy over foresight, and emotional validation over institutional deliberation. They create powerful incentives to weaken democratic institutions rapidly, before the consequences of failure become fully visible. If efforts to consolidate authoritarian control falter, populist

73 Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018.

74 Bermeo 2016; Weyland 2001.

75 Chryssogelos 2020.

76 Forchtner 2019; for differences between right-wing and left-wing populism in that regard see Huber et al. 2021.

77 Eichengreen 2018; Funke et al. 2023.

leaders or movements may collapse. Yet, as long as the root cause of lost democratic efficacy remains unresolved, populism is likely to return.

Perceived lack of control provokes motivated reasoning, in which emotionally congruent beliefs are preserved while contradictory information is dismissed or forgotten. Citizens often engage in automatic, affect-driven processing when confronted with political information, leading them to selectively accept data that aligns with their existing emotional commitments; corrective information frequently fails to overturn misperceptions, especially when it threatens emotionally satisfying beliefs.[78] This dynamic is intensified under conditions of strain, such as political alienation that weakens their epistemic vigilance.[79] In sum, in individuals who feel disempowered, the cognitive capacity to retain historical memories that contradict emotionally satisfying beliefs is often among the first to erode. Populists' chances to hide bad politics behind appealing rhetoric, and even to blame their opponents for their own errors, remain intact so long as democratic efficacy is not addressed.

Since populism is a response to disempowerment, but cannot itself restore meaningful control, the challenge is not only to resist it. It must be rendered obsolete.

That is why the restoration of democratic efficacy with Civil Democracy is necessary. Rather than channeling frustration into simplistic moral binaries, Civil Democracy offers structured, inclusive, and scalable deliberation. It gives citizens real voice, not just symbolic affirmation. It urges them to join civil society organizations to contribute to finding real solutions for the problems at hand in a democratic, open setting. It links participation to responsibility. It creates spaces where grievances can be heard and addressed through shared judgment.

Where populism personalizes power, Civil Democracy distributes it. Where populism exploits crisis, Civil Democracy builds resilience. Where populism destroys cooperation, Civil Democracy rebuilds it. In doing so, it promises not only to outlive populism, but also to cure the conditions that gave rise to it.

9.4 Rejoining Heads and Hands

The first three sections of this chapter treated the crisis of established democracies as if all citizens were equally exposed to the same systemic pathologies. Yet such a perspective overlooks a divide in political engagement capacities that

78 Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013; Nyhan and Reifler 2010.
79 Stanley 2018.

has grown steadily over past decades. Returning to the motivation theory discussed in Chapter 3, this section integrates stratification and realignment into our understanding, and identifies how democratic efficacy has become unequally distributed.

A foundational premise of our model is that political engagement depends on more than interest; it hinges on an individual's resources and situational capacity to invest time, cognitive attention, and emotional energy into political projects. In contemporary democracies, the divide between those who can integrate politics into their life projects and those who cannot marks a key fault line. This divide does not map neatly onto traditional social classes. On one side, we find sociocultural professionals and the cognitively autonomous, often highly educated strata who have the ability and disposition to make political issues their own. On the other, we encounter not only manual workers and the socioeconomically disadvantaged, but also the time-poor—such as full-time caregivers and even entrepreneurs and billionaires preoccupied with private ventures. Despite disparate resources and views, they share a detachment from the interpretive labor that political engagement requires.

This observation resonates with a major transformation in electoral alignment. In 19th century Europe, class positions were based on origin, and it was in workers' best interest to be both change-oriented and altruistic. Today, class positions are much more based on resources: on the one hand, on the scarcity of these resources, on the other on the ability to make political projects one's own projects. Since the 1960s, left-wing positions have hence been adopted more by the well educated, while workers and others who do not have resources to spend on making political projects their own have moved to the right.[80]

As a result, the traditional left–right class cleavage has reassembled into a new structure defined by cultural values and identity. Support for the "new left" now stems disproportionately from highly educated, urban professionals whose work requires interpersonal and interpretive skills. By contrast, the manual working class—once the bedrock of leftist mobilization—is now consistently overrepresented in the electorates of the populist right.[81]

This is not merely an economic transformation, but a cultural and identity-based one. The emergence of a universalism–particularism divide, which has come to structure the political space in most Western democracies, bundles both cultural and economic issues into antagonistic collective identities. The supporters of the new left identify with cosmopolitanism, cultural openness, and ur-

80 Noury and Roland 2020; Guth and Nelsen 2021; Schäfer 2025.

81 Sciarini and Nicolet 2010; Bornschier 2015; Noury and Roland 2020; Bornschier et al. 2021.

banity, while those of the populist right are bound by identities tied to nationhood, tradition, and local rootedness. These group boundaries are not analytically imposed; they are perceived by voters themselves and deeply politicized by parties and media.[82]

Education plays a central role in this realignment. Educational groups increasingly exhibit antagonistic political identities, suggesting that education has become a fully fledged cleavage. Highly educated citizens tend to hold cosmopolitan values; they feel politically efficacious and connected to the universalism advanced by new left parties. The less educated, meanwhile, often experience politics as alien, reinforcing their susceptibility to communitarian appeals and populist narratives.

The transition from class-based politics to value-based alignments also implies that political disengagement is no longer confined to the economically marginalized. Rather, it is a function of temporal-cognitive scarcity: the mismatch between individuals' life situations and the demands of complex political engagement. This helps explain why citizens with vastly different resources—such as single mothers and wealthy entrepreneurs—may both feel politically detached. As explored above, political efficacy has two dimensions: the internal belief in one's capacity to engage, and the external belief that the system responds to such engagement. Both dimensions are unequally distributed and shaped by life experience, educational background, and perceived relevance of politics to one's identity.

The case of Switzerland, despite its stability derived from the continuous practice of direct democracy, offers compelling evidence. Its Social Democrats have lost significant working-class support, despite absorbing much of the universalist political momentum initially driven by green and left-libertarian actors. The populist right, in turn, has mobilized the cultural backlash by appealing to a cohesive identity of "the national homeland"—one that resonates with both manual workers and the less educated in rural areas. And this Swiss case is part of a broader pattern across Western Europe. The openness of party systems plays a key role in shaping whether populist right actors can successfully mobilize these realigned groups.[83] Even when the cultural cleavage is pronounced, institutional gatekeeping and the strategic behavior of mainstream parties can make a significant difference in shaping outcomes.

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82 Bornschier 2010b, 2015, 2024; Strijbis et al. 2020; Noury and Roland 2020; Bornschier et al. 2021; Schäfer 2025.

83 Bornschier 2012, 2013, 2015; Bornschier et al. 2021.

Thus, while left–right economic divides persist, they are increasingly overshadowed by this identity-driven conflict. The universalism–particularism cleavage now reflects a political space where the ability to engage—and to find one's values represented—varies significantly across the population. Political detachment is not merely a symptom of apathy or ignorance; it is often a structural consequence of unequal resources and stratified efficacy.

At the same time, the stratification of efficacy and the crisis of democracy do not only affect resources. The crisis of democracy is not less gendered. Across Western democracies, men are significantly more likely than women to support populist and radical right parties, even when controlling for education, income, or attitudes towards immigration.[84] This disparity is a stable, cross-national pattern that remains insufficiently explained. Why is it that men, far more than women, are drawn to political movements that emphasize control, dominance, and exclusion?

A powerful explanation lies in combining our perspective on lost democratic efficacy with the psychological and sociological literature on gendered agency. Agentic traits as independence, assertiveness, and self-assertion are of relatively greater importance for men. Women like to be agents, as well, but when there are tradeoffs with relational traits such as care, community, and social harmony, they are relatively more likely to choose community, while men tend to choose agency.[85] These differences are, on the one hand, results of stereotypical gender roles and different socialization.[86] But they can at the same time be traced in early temperament and neurohormonal development and have plausible evolutionary explanations. And regardless of where they stem from, they exist and cannot be expected to disappear any time soon.

This difference makes men subjectively suffer more when political efficacy vanishes. Thus, when trust in institutions collapses and democratic responsiveness erodes, individuals high in agentic orientation may be more susceptible to political offerings that promise restored control and dominance, central tenets of populist narratives. Masculine-coded agency, especially in the form of risk-taking, resistance to pluralism, and emotional detachment from procedural norms, may thus incline men more strongly towards populist movements.

Recent research on political behavior supports this interpretation: masculine personality traits such as dominance and independence even after control for respondents' factual sex are positively associated with support for radical right par-

84 Fontana et al. 2006; Coffé 2019; Hansen 2019; Finnsdottir 2022; Donovan 2023.

85 Bakan 1966; Spence 1984; Helgeson 1994; Helgeson 2000; Abele and Wojciszke 2007; Diekman et al. 2010; Croft et al. 2015.

86 Eagly and Wood 1992; Eagly and Karau 2002; Koenig et al. 2011.

ties.[87] System-directed anger, which is more readily translated into political action by those with agentic dispositions, can fuel populist voting.[88] And, yes, women in general hold more egalitarian, pro-social, and democratic values,[89] making them less receptive to authoritarian or exclusionary appeals.

Ironically, at the same time, combining our perspective with the available literature on representation yields that women very probably suffer more objectively when political efficacy vanishes. Traditional representative politics systematically favors male preferences. Political parties and policymakers are more responsive to men than to women,[90] so the larger degrees of freedom for politicians resulting from the blurred mandates after individualization will most probably benefit men more than women. It has to be said, however, that this is among the many questions raised by the theory of partitioning representation and its lost democratic efficacy that have not yet found a satisfying empirical answer.

The crisis of democracy is stratified—an uneven loss of meaning and agency, experienced differently across the social spectrum. The fact that populism so often leads to bad decisions has been taken as another argument for moving away from elections towards lot-based representative deliberative mini-publics,[91] in the hope that the deliberative process would draw individuals from the populist areas of society into acknowledging the complexity of the problems at hand, and that this inclusion of obviously "non-elite" individuals into the decision-making process would lead the populist-prone strata to accept what these mini-publics have decided.

But this strategy is limited in its prospects of success, to say the least. To imagine its implementation is not easy, but it is easier to imagine that if such a mini-public arrived at some demanding conclusions, as regarding taxes, it would be easy for populist-prone media actors to construct some evidence for alleged corruption among the mini-public members that would quickly de-legitimize the assembly results and free the adverse parts of the population from the need to accept its decisions. For good reason, the Irish Citizens' Assembly discussed above did not make binding decisions but only proposals to be adopted by direct democratic referendums. Only democratic efficacy can legitimately arrive at demanding conclusions.

The only way to keep those parts of the public who through their resource situation and life trajectories are less prone to making political projects their own

87 Coffé 2019.

88 Erzeel et al. 2024.

89 Langsaether and Knutsen 2025; Jansesberger and Rhein 2024.

90 Homola 2019; Kopkin and Roberts 2023; Castro and Navajas 2025.

91 Reybrouck 2016; Landemore 2017; Sintomer et al. 2023.

projects is to rethink the old socialist slogan of "joining heads and hands": to incentivize them through the continued invitation into participation in the Civil Democratic model, and into remembering their own power and responsibility that way. Having populist actors as open actors in representing these strata in decisions is the one right way for their regulated inclusion because it restricts their arguments to the respective areas.

Importantly, the model addresses a gendered crisis of democracy as well. Men, whose agentic identities make them more sensitive to the erosion of political efficacy, stand to regain a sense of agency through meaningful political participation. Women, on the other hand, have long suffered from systematic underrepresentation and policy non-responsiveness. Civil Democracy provides them with more precise and effective ways to express preferences that are otherwise neglected in current institutions. In this way, both genders benefit: men more subjectively, by restoring their sense of control; women more objectively, by overcoming structural disregard.

By restoring efficacy across resource divides and social identities, including gender, Civil Democracy offers the most robust and legitimate way to resolve democracy's current crisis.

Conclusion

Ending the current crisis of democracy demands understanding its dynamics. This chapter has studied four of them, with the loss of democratic efficacy resulting from the partitioning misfit as the reason underlying them all.

Regaining agency, as we have seen, has been described as an urgent task since Beck, Stoker, and Žižek. The literature on post-democracy and technocratic market rule describes exactly what results from the partitioning misfit, with participation so far becoming simulated rather than empowering.

Reentering dialogue and overcoming polarization demands understanding how the partitioning misfit makes parties more ideological, sets wrong incentives to politicians and media, and makes voters angry.

Redoing the right thing means overcoming how populists damage societies with bad policies whose success rests on offering symbolic agency with emotional simplification and anti-elite rhetoric. While claiming to restore control, populists operate within the same partitioning logic that caused the crisis, just replacing deliberation with spectacle. In power, they weaken institutions, ignore expertise, and deepen dysfunction through short-term emotionally appealing policies.

Finally, rejoining heads and hands is the imperative resulting from the unequal distribution of political efficacy across social groups. While educated elites

integrate politics into their projects, manual workers, caregivers, and time-poor elites lack the resources for meaningful engagement. And while women are objectively more disregarded by irresponsive elites, men suffer subjectively more from the loss of democratic efficacy. Both the cultural realignment from class- to value-based politics and the gendered nature of ceased democratic efficacy fuel support for populist parties.

Each of these analyses points to the necessity of Civil Democracy: individualizing participation and representation is necessary for restoring democratic efficacy, reopening political imagination, and enabling true sovereignty. It restores shared agency and hence cooperation. By restoring control, it makes populism obsolete. And it bridges cognitive and cultural gaps. To end the crisis, we must hence stop asking how to defend the old forms and start asking how to equip people to act again. That is the path from democratic erosion to renewal.

10 Growing Democracy in Unexpected Places

Is democracy inherently unsuitable for certain societies, or have past failures resulted from specific institutional mismatches? This chapter examines why democracy has struggled outside the Western world, focusing on the role of partitioning representation in shaping political efficacy and legitimacy.

Why did Syria's early democratic experiment fail, and how does this compare with similar collapses in Gambia and Somalia? What cultural and institutional factors historically enabled democracy in Europe, and can these be found elsewhere? Are India and Benin exceptions proving democracy's broader viability, or do they share structural conditions overlooked in Western-centric analyses? How do modern autocracies sustain themselves by exploiting societal divisions, and can an alternative democratic model overcome these weaknesses? Finally, does Civil Democracy offer a pathway to more stable democratic governance in non-Western contexts, and can it actively contribute to democratization rather than merely sustaining existing democratic institutions?

10.1 "Democracy is Unsuitable for my Country"

From Syrian independence from France in 1946 to the beginning of the Baathist dictatorship in 1963, Syrians got called to the polls in democratic elections in 1947, 1949, 1953, 1954, and 1961. In the long-term view of comparative democracy indices, Syria from 1944 to 1948 was considered on a par with France under de Gaulle, and from 1954 to 1957 even with Taiwan in the 1990s, Tunisia after the Arab Spring, or Turkiye from 1983 to 2010,[1] all not judged to be full-fledged democracies, but not bad, and far from the blatant dictatorship with tens of thousands disappearing during the six decades of the Asad regime. For most of the 1950s, Syrian elites pushed back against a rising tide of destabilization through trying various political and institutional reconfigurations in order to keep parliamentarianism afloat.[2]

Under these 1946–1963 institutional conditions, Syria experienced a dynamic cultural climate marked by a burgeoning literary scene and a relatively free press, especially in the initial years following independence. Despite occasional censor-

1 Syria got +5 on the Polity IV scale from –10 to +10 in 1944–1948, and +7 in 1954–1957; Marshall and Jaggers 2010.

2 Rey 2022.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111827902-011

ship during military coups and a short-lived union with Egypt, the Syrian public sphere was considered a model for the Arab world.[3]

We know that, sadly, the story did not end well. On March 8, 1963, an initially loose coalition of army officers and members of the Baath party overthrew Syria's parliamentarian regime in a bloodless coup. Following fascist and Leninist recipes, the Baathists executed a "revolution from above" that blended military rule with ideological mobilization in a new authoritarian order. They outmaneuvered rivals, purged non-aligned officers, and replaced Syria's pluralist institutions with a totalitarian structure that lasted for six decades through mass surveillance and violent suppression of dissent, with tens of thousands of Syrians vanishing into security prisons and killed in massacres,[4] in 2011 leading to a civil war that killed over 600,000 people and displaced 14 million.

However, at least prior to 2011 the dire humanitarian record did not halt observers from acknowledging other achievements in decades in which other Islamic societies were shattered by unrest.[5] Authoritarianism seemed to be more suitable for bringing stability and some development to Syria than democracy.

And this view of democracy as probably incapable of providing stability and good decisions for non-Western societies has found many followers, both among scholars and within the concerned publics. The probably best-known proponent of this idea is Samuel Huntington, with his argument for cultural differences playing a significant role in shaping political trajectories, leading him to see some societies as inherently less compatible with Western democratic norms.[6]

While contested, his thesis has influenced political discourse in many non-Western states, particularly in the Islamic world, East Asia, and Eastern Europe, where leaders have used it to justify autocratic governance. Electoral systems in many democratizing countries produced governments that lacked genuine liberal democratic values: "illiberal democracy",[7] reinforcing skepticism about democracy's ability to function outside its traditional Western context.

Other empirical cases of failed democratic experiments contributed to an outright rejection of democracy as a viable governance model. Russia's transition to democracy in the 1990s is a prime example. The post-Soviet period, marked by economic collapse, elite capture, and political instability, created a perception that democracy was synonymous with chaos and decline.[8]

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3 Martin 2015.

4 Perthes 1995; Hinnebusch 2001.

5 Dam 1979; Perthes 1995; Hinnebusch 2001.

6 Huntington 1996.

7 Zakaria 1997.

8 Gaber et al. 2019; Gel'man 2020; Rosenfeld 2021.

For Asia, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew famously posited that Confucian traditions emphasize social harmony and respect for authority over individual rights and electoral competition.[9] Evidence in democratic South Korea suggests otherwise: Asian cultural models are different from Western ones, but they are not anti-democratic.[10] But many countries in Asia fail to decisively move towards democracy,[11] and popular attitudes as beliefs and perceptions about the legitimacy of political systems play an important role in that blockade.[12]

However, nowhere is this narrative as powerful in shaping the political landscape as in the Middle East, the region with the lowest average democracy scores worldwide. Historical governance structures in Islamic societies are, despite Syria's viable 17-year window of democratic opportunity, widely seen as facilitating authoritarian persistence rather than democratic development.[13] In Iran, the Islamic revolution in 1979 set the strongest signal for seeing a true choice for citizens as culturally inadequate. In 2011, numerous protest movements in Iran and especially the Arab Spring showed once again the power of the demand for good governance and freedom, and the fact otherwise known from surveys that Islamic attachments do not need to diminish support for democracy.[14] But the subsequent collapse of democratic transitions in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen reinforced the argument that democracy would be unworkable in the region. Surrounded by the chaos of failed states, the violent radicalism of competing religious movements, and the general state of economic and personal insecurity, most citizens in the region, at both the elite and mass level, display little appetite for democracy, despite all corruption, bad governance, and unhappiness with rights and life situations.[15] Tellingly, many Arab citizens support democracy in principle but agree to the statement "Democracy is unsuitable for my country" nevertheless.[16]

To all these frustrated democracy lovers, Rethinking Democracy has yielded a powerful lesson—yes, there has been an incompatibility as a matter of principle, but this incompatibility regards partitioning representation. It does not regard democracy as such. Not in the form of Civil Democracy.

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9 Zakaria 1994.
10 Choi and Woo 2018; Akaliyski 2023.
11 Rodan 2022.
12 Dore 2016.
13 Kuru 2019.
14 Tessler 2002; Ciftci 2010.
15 Bellin 2018.
16 Benstead 2015.

10.2 It's Partitioning Representation, Stupid

The tragedy of the Syrians was that they had inherited one aspect of colonial heritage no one was aware of: partitioning representation, but without the supporting formation of social relations, with the problems of creating democratic efficacy in not adequately structured societies we observe in today's Western democracies.

The parliamentarism in Syria's political tradition had roots reaching back even before the short-lived colonial influence. With no other democracy concept available than the traditional Western one, this became enshrined in an electoral law introducing a two-round majority list vote that favored local notables and candidates of traditional parties.[17] But these nobles, while representing their geographical constituencies, did not reflect the actual cleavages in a society struggling with what the chances of modernity, with industrial production and full sovereignty in newly imposed borders after colonial rule, might mean. While the traditional elite had a strongly democratic inclination and was even after the disgrace in the 1948 war and a short-lived junta of 1949–1954 capable of restoring parliamentary rule, neither rural underclasses demanding more influence nor the new ideological cleavages of the Cold War and emerging strongman sentiments were represented in full adequacy.[18] A creation of democratic efficacy comparable with the one in Western societies with their politically solved class struggles did not take place. Therefore, radical politics and authoritarianism, factual latecomers to Syria's political discourse but false friends answering to loss of control as seen in Chapter 9, were able to attain the dominant position they hold in the whole region today.[19]

The French buildup of the Syrian army had recruited officers from historically disadvantaged groups and thus been socially more inclusive than the Syrian parliament and generally the political elites. Thus, whenever ambitious officers overthrew the democratic institutions, they did not meet much popular resistance. Despite the formal vote on their side, elected politicians were not able to mobilize against abandoning democratic procedures. One reason was their lack of awareness of the primacy of civilian rule: in every coup some of them were willing to side with the usurper. Structurally more important, however, was their missing legitimacy both on input and output. They neither represented cleav-

17 Atassi 2018; Rey 2022.
18 Rey 2022.
19 Rey 2022, esp. pp. 145–147.

ages nor were able to negotiate progress.[20] In eroding Syria's democratic period, the short-lived union with Egypt played a role likewise already described for the current Western democracy crisis: Egypt's Nasser was populist no less than those we see in many Western societies today[21] and supported by alienated citizens for the very same reasons.

With its sequence of nine successful rebellions between 1949 and 1970 that finally turned a thriving departure into a mortuary, the Syrian case is special in the long and sad history of democracy breakdowns. In the overlooked role partitioning representation has played in them, it is not.

The end of the Syrian democracy experiment provides evidence for a new view on the seeming historical incompatibility between Islamic culture and democracy. This view sees the relevant difference between Islamic and Western culture in terms of the success of traditional democracy not grounded in values but in the fact that the institutions of partitioning representation demanded a Western-style organization of society in partitioning groups as discussed in Section 4.4 above, while Islamic societies did have some partitioning group boundaries that would have allowed for partitioning representation but no tradition of peaceful negotiated equilibria among such groups. In the medieval centuries that saw European cities organized in the group-representing council, the organizing principle of Islamic societies was that of the bazaar, a place in which individualized networks are maintained. In view of the theory presented above, Islamic societies are hence structurally individualized societies and thus indeed incompatible with partitioning representation—but not with democracy as such, as long as it is individualized enough in participation and representation. And that argument relates not only to Islamic societies, but also to cultures such as those of Christian Orthodoxy or China.

Evidence for this view from a different direction is provided by the fact that successful democracy has not demanded Western culture. Successful partitioning representation does not demand beliefs in the Holy Trinity or the specific Western history of enlightenment but the combination of group homogeneity norms with the acceptance of group-overarching institutions to achieve representational efficacy, and some equilibrium between the groups. This combination can be present in other cultural foundations.

Two good examples are India and Benin, two societies discussed as "democratic outliers" as they developed stable democratic institutions in situations where, according to theories based on income, education, or neighborhood,

20 Martin 2015; Atassi 2018; Mubayyiḍ 2018; Rey 2022.

21 Bayat 1993.

such an outcome would not have been expected.[22] In both cases, and notwithstanding great differences in origins from India's caste system[23] and the pre-colonially grounded social rules of a large number of different ethnic groups in Benin,[24] three prerequisites of partitioning representation were given without a long-time Christian tradition: (1) a number and not-too-uneven size distribution of groups inhibited destructive power imbalances; and (2) group homogeneity norms, which we have seen to have the largest impact on democratic efficacy due to the clarity of democratic mandates they allow for and (3) norms and traditions of accepting overarching institutions were present in both cases. Through the combination of established group homogeneities with the acceptance of group-overarching institutions and some equilibrium between the groups, decades of successful democratic problem-solving could grow.

India's democratic longevity used the caste system for creating group-based political identity and providing citizens with a sense of political efficacy despite socio-economic disadvantages, which made mass democratic participation work,[25] particularly as lower castes mobilized politically through reservation policies and grassroots activism.[26] The Congress Party's dominance in the early decades ensured elite cohesion and a broad-based coalition that managed social cleavages, while electoral institutions remained robust, with an active Election Commission ensuring fair processes.[27]

In Benin, ethnic fragmentation necessitated political coalition-building, leading to power-sharing and democratic continuity.[28] Since the democratic transition of 1991, Benin has avoided the kind of majoritarian dominance that has often led to democratic breakdown elsewhere in Africa. The 1990 National Conference provided the foundation for a democratic bargain between diverse political and social actors.[29] Electoral rules further reinforced this equilibrium, requiring candidates to form cross-ethnic alliances to secure victory, thus creating incentives for cooperation and democratic endurance despite economic fragility and regional instability.[30]

22 Doorenspleet and Kopecký 2008.
23 Dumont 1970; Piliavsky 2023.
24 Seely 2009; Wilfahrt 2021.
25 Shani 2022.
26 Jaffrelot 1988; Chandra 2004.
27 Singh and Roy 2019.
28 Creevey et al. 2005.
29 Riedl 2022.
30 Magnusson and Clark 2005.

Unfortunately, the parallel with the Western model is so complete that problems with individualization and mediatization have reached these two non-Western success cases, as well. The available space does not allow discussion in detail how developments under Narendra Modi in India[31] and under Patrice Talon in Benin[32] mirror problematic developments in Western democracies.

But even in their somewhat shaky outlook, both cases add to the argument that there existed indeed a cultural fitness for partitioning representation, but (a) even though the West presented the most visible case for such a fitness, it was this specific aspect and not Western culture as a whole that made it; and, more importantly, (b) that it would be wrong to equate that with a cultural fitness for democracy as such.

10.3 The Vision: Civil Democracy's Stability Promise

If the great democracy obstructor of the past has been partitioning representation without a supportive group-based relational formation, does that mean that Civil Democracy is a chance for a widespread transition to democracy that would allow humans to determine their own fate in all those areas that have been so far stuck under autocratic regimes?

Individualizing participation and representation will lead to revitalizing democracy from its current dire state to new levels of democratic efficacy, good decision-making, and stability—and yes, this hypothesis applies to non-Western countries which to date live under the impression that democracy would not suit their societies, as well. As with regard to Western societies, the proof of this hypothesis will only be provided by using Civil Democracy in political practice. As in these other cases, it can only be provided through individuals who understand and share the vision.

To that aim, it is helpful to provide more information on two questions. First, are the problems that Civil Democracy aims to solve really the problems that were responsible for previous democracy breakdowns? And second, can we assume that Civil Democracy will help not only to sustain itself when present but to install new democratic institutions in currently autocratic societies? Replacing a dictatorship with an autochthonous democracy demands a vision and a strategy. Civil Democracy provides both.

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31 Jaffrelot 2021; McDonnell and Cabrera 2019; Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020; Jaffrelot and Verniers 2020; Naseemullah 2021; Sircar 2022; Santhosh and Paleri 2021; Roy 2024; Bhat 2024.
32 Kohnert and Preuss 2019; Riedl 2022.

To give a complete answer to the first question is, of course, beyond the space available here. The long-time comparative Polity V data set documents 60 cases of democracy breakdown for the period 1947 to 2018, and to discuss all of them in detail would make for another book. But we can again use the Syrian case for first evidence to be broadened in further research.

The mechanism whereby democracies die when partitioning representation meets individualized and mediatized societies can be broken down to three reasons:: people lose political efficacy, information is no longer channeled into the best decisions, and actors promising to solve these two problems through centralization of decision-making find more and more support. From Adam Przeworski's study of challenges to democracy,[33] we know that placing too much weight in single-leader positions increases the stakes of political competition to levels where democracy risks breaking down.

Looking into the cultural foundations of partitioning representation has provided us with an additional mechanism by which the traditional democracy model may fail: if groups exist but are not used to problem-solving negotiations but rather to hierarchical relations, their members will likely see the solution of their problems not in supporting representatives within democratic institutions but in having their group dominate other interests. They will hence accept and support actors who secure this dominance over other groups. It is most often short-sighted support insofar as it ends up in the inefficiencies of autocracy, benefiting mostly the leading figures due to the lack of adequate control, but it is another mechanism for democratic failure.

The Syrian case study presents evidence for both mechanisms. With regards to the inability of partitioning representation to create political efficacy if representatives do not mirror cleavages, we have already seen that elected representatives stood for only their geographical constituencies which did not reflect the actual cleavages in Syria's society aiming for modernization, with disadvantaged classes and new ideological cleavages lacking representation within the democratic system. Syria's parliamentarism was not able to yield democratic efficacy as it reflected neither actual cleavages nor the demand for making clear decisions.

And the idea that efficient decision-making would demand power centralization in one person, which would then make too much dependent on that person to allow them and their supporters to accept peaceful electoral succession, had been infused into Syria's popular perception through the widespread popular admiration for the populist (and democracy-abolishing) regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser,

33 Przeworski 2019, see p. 3 above.

led to the short-lived 1958–1961 union with Egypt, and was further supported by the hierarchy-based ideology of the Baath party.

On the other hand, the underclasses, the young, and minoritarian groups such as the Alawites were groups that hoped to be better off and believed the promise of being better represented by the socially diverse young officers than by the elected honorables.

We have chosen the case study of Syria because it is the best analyzed of the four most severe cases of democracy breakdown among the 60 cases mentioned above, measuring severity as the product of the lengths of the preceding democratic and the subsequent non-democratic period, and the difference in the average Polity ratings between the two periods. The Syrian democracy breakdown in 1963 ranks #3 in this measure, preceded by Gambia 1994 at #1, Myanmar (then Burma) 1958 at #2, and followed by Somalia 1969 at #4. Preliminary analysis indicates that the two arguments are valid for Burma/Myanmar 1958, but as the availability of studies of the country prior to 1958 is very limited, we add insights from studies on Gambia and Somalia to give a little bit more information about the importance of the two arguments for democracy failure in non-Western societies.

As in Syria, in Gambia and Somalia a political efficacy that would have anchored democratic institutions in the population was not given, leading to a similarity of largely unopposed coups in all three cases.

Gambia's independence after 1965 had established a majoritarian representation system following the US model, with first-past-the-post one-member districts and a directly elected president. Dawda Jawara, a former veterinarian who had made good contacts with many influential farmers before independence, had won all presidential elections up to 1992, and his People's Progressive Party gained a majority of the votes in all seven parliamentary elections between 1962 and 1992. But his electoral victories no longer expressed democratic efficacy. Corruption had risen, a coup and its successive suppression as well as a short-lived union with neighboring Senegal had not been cleared, and the young aimed for more influence but were unable to invest in building a successful challenger party. When a young lieutenant named Yahya Jammeh replaced Dawada as head of state by force in 1994, there was no wide protest that would have shown that people would have seen democracy as a way to express their preferences.

Somalia reinforces this picture of coups unopposed through the lack of democratic efficacy. Corruption was an issue here as well; the instability of democratic power succession played a larger role, and the new ruler was likewise a young officer. Consequences were more severe than arguably even in Syria, after 22 years leaving a deeply traumatized country to fall into civil war and to top the lists of

failed states for two decades.[34] Apart from corruption, serious problems left unaddressed by the democratic institutions are not easily identified in the available literature. But the fact that democratic institutions were not anchored in providing democratic efficacy for the broad population is evident, as well.

The second argument of groups seeking advantage in supporting authoritarian regimes after a history lacking traditions of successful group negotiations can be found in both cases, as well. In Gambia, some ministers and bureaucrats, Muslim elders, sections of the public disillusioned with corruption and economic hardships as mentioned, and of course the military quickly accepted the coup and stayed complicit for a long time.[35] In Somalia, a proportional election system neither prevented dissatisfaction with civilian rule as ineffective, which led to the coup initially being greeted with some public confidence and cautious optimism, nor did it prevent some clans speculating about better conditions under army rule.[36]

While a comprehensive study of democratic breakdown in the remaining 57 of the 60 cases mentioned above is far beyond the scope of the current text, these three severe cases show that the double argument based on the concept of partitioning representation and its preconditions and problems adds to understanding why democracy did not always succeed as it did in Western industrial societies. It hence gives support to the argument that a failure of traditional democracy in a society does not need to imply a general mismatch between the particular society's culture and structure and democracy, but may have been due just to the more specific absence of a Western-style partitioning culture and social structure.

Instead, democratic institutions aiming for sustainability in a society's cultures need to avoid these two problems. They need to create democratic efficacy, and they need to demonstrate that groups do not need to fear exclusion and oppression.

As argued in Part II, the first is exactly what Civil Democracy aims for. The ability to contribute to many political decisions in direct democratic manner creates direct democratic efficacy, through the individualizations of participation without the grassroots democratic instability. And the openness of civil society actors and of multiple affiliations creates indirect democratic efficacy wherever actors are able to address problems that parts of the population experience.

The second aspect will need careful adoption. Fearing a tyranny of the majority has always been part of thinking about democracy, but ways to overcome it are

34 Menkhaus 2007; Walls 2009.
35 Saine 2008, pp. 99–110.
36 Lewis 1972, pp. 401–406.

easier and in more flexible ways implemented with Civil democracy than using traditional concepts of partitioning representation. For example, "governments of national unity" have often been seen critical by democracy scholars because under traditional conceptions of partitioning representation, they lack meaningful opposition.[37] But if the stakes of a ministerial team are lowered because its task is to prepare and to execute decisions that are then made using Civil Democracy, that creates both meaningful control of the elected executives and a sense of shared agenda that transcends group boundaries and trickles down to foster group-overarching cooperation in the general population. Or, to give another example, if infrastructure projects are not discussed and decided separately but within the context of national development plans, chances are good for an architecture of plans that considers all parts of the population equally. If smaller parts of the electorate are given the option to veto out specific proposals, that sets incentives to create proposals and hence decision drafts acceptable even to minorities.

How Civil Democracy can be adopted in each specific case to make it factually durable remains to be studied in further research. But compared with the fate of traditional democracy in societies lacking the cultural and social preconditions for partitioning representation, the expectation that it will allow for more sustainable experiences of democracy is well grounded.

10.4 The Strategy: Civil Democracy's Democratization Potential

The potential of Civil Democracy to overcome the problems that have made previous democratizations fail and hence to stabilize democratic institutions is great news for any upcoming situation in which an autocratic regime fails and leaves a power vacuum. But do oppressed populations have to passively wait until such a day may arise, or can Civil Democracy help them to establish democratic institutions out of their own agency?

Autocratic states function by extracting resources from their subjects, and a significant portion of these resources is allocated to maintaining the regime's dominance and suppressing democratic aspirations. The ability of societal actors to resist the state's extractive pressure and withhold key resources can hence serve as a catalyst for democratic change.

37 Mehler 2009; Cheeseman and Tendi 2010; Graham et al. 2017.

On the level of partitioning groups, this is an insight which scholars of democratization have long made. A study on early experiences in the third wave of democracy early argued that for democracy to become a viable alternative, "a country must possess a civil society in which certain community and group identities exist independent of the state and in which certain types of self-contained units are capable of acting autonomously in defense of their own interest and ideals".[38] Workers that are able to mobilize for a general strike have oftentimes been able to press for democratic reforms.[39] But the ability of the workers as a group to do so demanded the existence of established social norms to have the single worker feel a worker identity and derive political efficacy from being part of the group's collective action, with workers chosen here as just one example of a social group that is able to deprive the state of certain resources that are important enough to press for changing course.

But partitioning social groups are only one of the three levels of agency in societies, and the rule that *actors able to resist the pressure of an autocratic state to withhold resources necessary for the functioning of that state are able to press for democracy* is true on all three levels.

The earliest instances of democracy or proto-democracy in ancient Greece, medieval Switzerland, and the early 19th century United States were all grounded on the agency of the individual head of household to withhold resources from a state, based on respective geographies and the technologies of the time.[40] But these were rare examples over millennia during which technologies and geographies in most cases fostered the centralization of power.

Today, however, the situation is different. Civil Democracy enables whole societies, the third and highest level of possible agency, to create collective action. Confident that they will be able to resolve upcoming tensions in a peaceful and constructive manner, they can unite to withhold resources from any regime.

Overcoming current dictatorships needs decision-making on strategical and tactical levels.[41] A lot of shorter-term decisions have to be made. What weak points of perpetrators does the movement focus on? How is the division of labor within the movement organized? Who connects it with outside actors? How can local activists be supported in staying disciplined, fearless, and nonviolent? What are the strengths of local activists and the weaknesses of the regime's resources? How can bystanders be reached and regime followers made to think?

38 O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, p. 517.

39 Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Schneider 2009.

40 Scholtz 2001.

41 Sharp 2010; Popovic and Miller 2015; Schock 2005; Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Goodwin 2001; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Brancati 2016.

What channels can be implemented even into security forces? When will it be time to enter more decisive action?

This organizational work finally needs to be done on site, and it needs strong ties that cannot be built solely over virtual communication. In the situation of many dictatorial regimes with harsh punishment for plotting to overthrow them and with the internet allowing communication and decision-making over large distances, having significant percentages of the population in the relative security of exile is a great help nevertheless. With the notable exception of North Korea, that is the case for all current autocracies worldwide.

Using Civil Democracy, exiled activists can make decisions that involve whole exile communities and thus prepare the ground for entering homebound populations with internet access to join in common decision-making.

But already devising the post-regime change program described above is a catalyst for the cultural transformation towards freedom. When the stability of institutions begins to cease and sustainability is no longer a given, the power of imagination is needed to envision and establish new, better ways of interaction and create new institutions. The citizens of autocratic countries need to understand what new challenges and new possibilities have become available, turning these insights into new, sustainable institutions, and leave the comfort zone of fatalist acceptance to make them real.

With platform servers encrypted and securely placed in democratic societies, regimes will have no access to private information on individuals within the opposition network. Security forces will nevertheless be able to get access to the data that is public within the network, especially decisions, decision options, open actor positions, and data about open actors as far as these have been made public. This implies that identities will have to be kept secret for the longest part of the process. But issue-related options can be judged, and arguments be exchanged, without revealing information that could be used by the regime to harm activists.

Civil Democracy produces a regular ritual of thinking through political decisions. Ordinary citizens see themselves in the shoes of politicians because they become politicians. They will still be grateful for the political work open actors do for them. But they will always know that these actors are not fundamentally different from them. With each decision they are invited to participate in, they will be reminded that it is possible to take one's fate into one's own hands. Many among them will become open actors, making their own thoughts and arguments visible to contribute to the processes of finding better solutions and to learn together. That way, they will create a society in which everyone is free to find their own right way.

Conclusion

Democracy's failures outside the Western world are not due to inherent cultural incompatibility but rather to institutional mismatches—particularly the absence of partitioning representation's historical foundations.

Syria's democratic breakdown, like those of Gambia and Somalia, resulted from weak political efficacy and the inability of electoral institutions to reflect societal cleavages, making democratic rule unstable and vulnerable to authoritarian takeovers. In contrast, Europe's long history of partitioning representation, rooted in Christian institutional frameworks and medieval power-sharing structures, created conditions for democratic stability through political efficacy. However, Christianity, though helpful, was not demanded: India and Benin demonstrate that when social groups maintain internal cohesion and accept overarching institutions, stable democracy can emerge without Western cultural preconditions.

The problem, then, is not democracy itself but the specific institutional model used. With Syria, Gambia, and Somalia, three of the most severe democracy failures can be explained by problems Civil Democracy is either specifically designed to solve or allows to be solved more easily than traditional democracy models.

By individualizing participation and representation, Civil Democracy addresses the weaknesses of partitioning representation and provides an alternative that can sustain democracy even in societies where it has previously failed. Moreover, it could serve not just to maintain existing democracies but also as a tool for democratization, enabling citizens under autocratic regimes to organize, resist oppression, and build new democratic institutions from below.

11 Solving Global Problems

Postwar order was underpinned by partitioning representation, which is now losing its legitimacy. It is thus becoming fragile. Our analysis of the crisis therefore doesn't only relate to established democracies. It shapes the whole world.

In order to explore the potential of the theory of partitioning representation and democratic efficacy for the understanding and solution of global problems, this chapter turns to studying the postwar global order. How did partitioning representation work on the global level? What were the aims of its establishment? How has it been understood in the theory of international relations? What institutional mechanisms did it use? How did it become a universally successful principle? And on the other hand: How far did this apparent success reach? What were its costs? What are the signs of its current crisis? For what reasons is it under critique?

As a specific and urgent example, we turn to examining current global climate governance. What are the main problems identified? How does solving them relate to democratic efficacy? What democratic innovations have been proposed so far, and with how much success?

Turning to Civil Democracy as a potential solution, how hard or easy would it be to initiate? Where would be a good starting point for applying it? How would that look in practice? How does the policy creation framework as presented in Section 8.4 above play out on a global scale? How can its use be expected to turn out in changing discourse?

And is all that a helpful path towards a more stable, more just, and more sustainable global order? How does Civil Democracy relate to the current competition for global leadership, to the path of hegemonic succession as seen in past centuries, and to current Chinese aspirations? What is expected to follow the so-called "Pax Americana"? Can poor, uneducated world citizens be entrusted with responsibility? How has previous philosophical and democratic theory looked upon this question? And what have we learned now which we did not know before?

11.1 The Arc of Partitioning Global Order

The global order established after World War II was built on the same foundational logic as the representative democracies of the West: partitioning representation. Just as national democracies divided their populations into electoral units represented by political elites, global governance institutions represented the peo-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111827902-012

ples of the world through their nation-states. In this architecture, every individual had a voice only indirectly, through their government's seat at the table. Conceiving of the world as structured in non-overlapping groups with distinct identities and interests, the architects of this system thought to establish political efficacy and, based on the hope that modern democracy would soon spread across the entire world, aimed for democratic efficacy for all world citizens. Even though this hope did not materialize, the system allowed for a remarkable stability of peaceful cooperation across different ways of living that earned it the description of a liberal order.

Based on the experience of the success of partitioning representation, using it for building global order was a conscious and strategic design choice. During the early 1940s, American and British planners envisioned a postwar order grounded in the authority of sovereign states, designing global and regional institutions that gave voice exclusively to national governments.[1] The state-centric principle quickly globalized: in the Arab world, wartime elites modeled the formation of the Arab League on the same intergovernmental logic that shaped the UN, translating nationalist aspirations into participation within a partitioned global order.[2] Likewise, humanitarian efforts and anti-racist campaigns helped universalize this Western framework by filtering international cooperation through recognized state authorities and channeling decolonial demands into calls for equal representation among governments.[3] The late 1940s created a new common sense: that the people of the world could—and should—speak only through the states that claimed to represent them.

This conception of world order was reinforced in international relations theory by the two emerging and long-term competing theories of realism and liberal institutionalism. Realists conceived of an anarchic system composed of sovereign states seeking security and advantage,[4] while liberal institutionalists envisioned cooperative regimes among these very same sovereign actors.[5]

Institutions like the UN, Bretton Woods, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) were designed to translate the principle of partitioning representation into operational practice by assigning all voice and authority to sovereign states. In the UN, representation was strictly nation-state-based, with voting power in both the General Assembly and Security Council allocated to govern-

1 Wertheim 2019; Ehrhardt 2023, 2024.
2 Wichhart 2019.
3 Reinisch 2011; Kim 2018.
4 Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2003.
5 Keohane and Nye 1977; Krasner 1983; Keohane 1984.

ments alone.[6] Bretton Woods institutions similarly rested on intergovernmental negotiation and control, despite their global reach.[7] GATT was conceived as a forum for state-to-state bargaining, with national trade interests articulated exclusively through governmental delegations.[8] This design reflected the broader postwar liberal internationalist vision, which combined universalist ideals with a framework that recognized only states as legitimate actors.[9]

After 1945, sovereignty became a universal principle of international legitimacy. The expansion of international society brought newly independent states into a system that recognized as legitimate actors only governments treated as sovereign and granted territorial integrity even within arbitrarily drawn borders.[10] This process was not simply imposed by the West: postcolonial struggles translated demands for individual rights into those for sovereign statehood, replacing imperial domination with partitioned representation.[11] Formal statehood became the primary condition for global membership and recognition. Thus, despite inconsistencies, sovereignty functions as a collectively recognized social institution.[12] Material and symbolic benefits of statehood—diplomatic status, aid, and legal protections—have incentivized even weak or fragmented actors to pursue recognized statehood as their only viable path to participation.[13]

In large parts of the world without the required traditions, partitioning representation remained an alien concept that was accepted as being without alternative despite large humanitarian cost in its implementation. But its classification as unavoidable always rested on performance elsewhere. So, the demise of partitioning group boundaries and group-specific interest identities through globalization and mediatization, and the resulting structural individualization of interest and opinion structures, weakened the functioning of partitioning representation on the global level in parallel with that in its former Western heartlands.

It is hence no surprise that the liberal global order now faces its own crisis, with analyses of declining legitimacy converging from different directions. The most visible is the growing geopolitical instability due to the erosion of U.S. hegemony and China's normative divergence and network strategies increasingly chal-

6 Schlesinger 2003; Borgwardt 2005.
7 Helleiner 2014; Keohane 1984.
8 Irwin 2008.
9 Iriye 2002; Mazower 2012; Sluga 2017.
10 Bull and Watson 1984; Zacher 2001.
11 Reus-Smit 2011.
12 Wendt 1992; Krasner 1999; Lake 2009.
13 Fazal and Griffiths 2014; Griffiths 2014, 2017.

lenging the liberal hegemon's authority.[14] At the same time, liberal institutions are increasingly losing their functionality to manage transnational crises in a legitimacy-reinforcing way.[15] But what comes next?

At the turn of the century, G. John Ikenberry had explained the durability of the postwar order with the argument it had set "low returns to power and high returns to institutions."[16] In Ikenberry's view, it paid more for everyone to play by institutional rules than to aim for dominance. On this basis, he became one of the steadiest commentators on the ongoing crisis of the liberal global order, always critical (especially of specific aspects of how America played its role in it), but always stopping short of accepting the liberal model might ultimately end.[17]

But the accumulation of problems has pushed imagination towards more radical critique. Some go as far as describing the whole postwar order as historical exception, depending on U.S. dominance and elite buy-in,[18] with the implication of inevitable instability ahead.

Others imagine another kind of stability emerging, arguing that the liberal global order has been fundamentally outgrown: its core logic of partitioned sovereignty and universal liberal norms no longer suits the realities of a plural, globalized, and digitally networked world.

The normative architecture of the postwar order—built on claims of universal values and liberal justice—has been destabilized by a new normative pluralism[19] and a widening array of legitimacy claims that are increasingly impossible to represent through the lens of state sovereignty.[20]

This erosion of normative legitimacy is accompanied by institutional transformation. Networked governance mechanisms link regulatory regimes, public-private partnerships, and informal transnational coalitions in ways that often bypass traditional state institutions and are more adaptive to the demands of a globalized economy and mediatized civil society than state-based hierarchies, which, instead of evolving, struggle to cope with them.[21]

The final blow comes from within: the liberal order's base in its former heartlands has eroded. It once drew domestic support from the middle classes in Western societies, especially the United States, for whom partitioning representation

14 Allan et al. 2018; Larson 2024; Kim 2024.
15 Norrlof et al. 2020; Huang 2021; Peoples 2024.
16 Ikenberry [2001] 2019, p. 266.
17 Ikenberry 1998, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2018a, 2018b, 2020; very comparably also Nye 2017.
18 Cooley and Nexon 2022; McKeil 2022, 2025.
19 Acharya 2014a.
20 Reus-Smit and Zarakol 2023.
21 Lavenex et al. 2021.

ensured stability and control. While globalization has created new middle classes outside the West, they often lack both experience with democracy and the function of partitioning representation as a stabilizing instrument. They are no substitute for the liberal order's fading core support.[22]

Ikenberry, while keeping his optimism, sets the stakes high for what is needed:

> In looking into the future, what is needed is our own grand synthesis of new techniques and mechanisms, [and a] spirit of pragmatic experimentation and institutional innovation that should inspire a new generation of liberal order building. At each turn over the past two centuries, liberal democracies have had to discover what sort of international order they wanted to build. Now they face this challenge again. Liberal internationalists will need to gather their two hundred years of ideas and projects into a grand effort—illuminated by ideals but grounded in pragmatism—to ensure not just the future of democracy but the survival of the planet.[23]

This is precisely what we're working towards.

11.2 Climate Governance

The survival of the planet is in fact the example that makes the failure of partitioning representation on the global scale the most obvious. In substance, it is a central task to be solved as a matter of survival. In procedure, it is a key example of how Civil Democracy enables us to solve global problems.

One decade after the much-lauded Paris climate agreement, emissions are still on the rise and temperatures are increasing faster than ever before. The old model of climate governance has failed to fulfill its goals.[24]

Scholars identify two main problems: structural coordination issues and implementation deficits. One the one hand, transnational climate governance is fragmented, resulting in significant coordination challenges that undermine the effectiveness of global climate initiatives. The current "orchestration" model and manifold transnational climate initiatives often lead to overlapping and competing initiatives instead of cohesive strategies.[25] Extending beyond mere organizational inefficiency, these coordination issues reflect deeper structural problems within the global governance framework. Decentralized subnational climate ef-

22 Ramirez 2025; Williams 2025.
23 Ikenberry 2020, p. 309–311, substantially shortened.
24 Fisher 2024; Herman 2024.
25 Abbott et al. 2015, 2020; Hale and Roger 2014; Bäckstrand and Kuyper 2017; Chan et al. 2022.

forts may be impactful at local levels but cannot be scaled and are frequently overlooked transnationally.[26] Moreover, the complexity and lack of strategic coherence in transnational climate governance hinder the replication and scaling of successful initiatives. For instance, the absence of robust data for measuring performance in many initiatives prevents a comprehensive assessment of their effectiveness.[27] This gap between intended outcomes and actual performance is exacerbated by the insufficient integration of non-state actions into the broader governance framework, leading to a persistent "ambition gap".[28] Addressing these coordination challenges requires a fundamental shift towards more cohesive and democratically legitimate governance structures that can align diverse actors towards common goals.

A second focus is on implementation and accountability deficits. The implementation of climate policies, particularly those involving non-state actors, suffers from significant accountability and transparency deficits. As cities, regions, and businesses take on increasingly prominent roles in climate mitigation, the gap between their pledges and actual performance becomes a critical issue.[29] The current governance framework, which relies heavily on orchestration through international organizations, often leads to fragmented implementation efforts, with insufficient monitoring mechanisms to ensure accountability. This lack of oversight weakens the credibility of climate governance, as many initiatives fail to meet key design criteria.[30]

Furthermore, the optimism surrounding subnational actors' contributions to climate action often does not translate into substantive outcomes.[31] Although the Paris agreement encouraged the inclusion of sub- and non-state actors, their integration falters.[32] Without a comprehensive framework that ensures rigorous monitoring and verification, the gap between pledges and actual performance persists, weakening overall climate governance efforts.[33] The lack of effective implementation mechanisms also highlights the broader issue of insufficient motivation among actors to fulfill their commitments.

Taken together, these much-discussed issues point to the need for a democratic overhaul of transnational climate governance. Improving coordination de-

26 Chan et al. 2016; Hale 2016; Bernstein and Hoffmann 2018; Hsu et al. 2020.
27 Widerberg and Stripple 2016.
28 Michaelowa and Michaelowa 2017.
29 Hsu et al. 2016.
30 Michaelowa and Michaelowa 2017.
31 Chan et al. 2019.
32 Hale 2016.
33 Kuramochi et al. 2020.

mands a common framework based on a clear principle, and there is currently no other such principle available except individual democratic responsibility. Bridging the implementation gap demands democratic efficacy, pointing to the need for more democratic institutions that can provide the necessary legitimacy and motivation for effective climate action and oversight.

Traditional climate governance frameworks, dominated by state actors and elite-driven processes, have failed to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and interconnected global landscape. These frameworks often lack the legitimacy and inclusivity required to mobilize the broad-based support necessary for effective climate action.[34] The current model's inability to adequately represent the diverse interests and voices of global civil society has led to widespread disillusionment and a crisis of legitimacy, particularly among those most affected by climate change but least represented in decision-making processes.[35]

Far beyond being a nice-to-have normative goal, democratizing climate governance is a practical necessity to enhance the effectiveness of global climate action, integral to the formulation of policies not only to be fair but also to be effective and widely supported.[36] It would allow the power imbalances inherent in the current system, where market-based solutions often prioritize the interests of powerful actors over those of vulnerable populations, to be addressed.[37] Able to integrate broader stakeholder participation and enhance transparency and accountability, democratic governance structures are necessary for the legitimacy needed to implement more ambitious and effective climate policies.[38] Emphasizing direct participation and the co-production of knowledge would build the necessary social trust and collective will.[39] Enhancing democratic efficacy in climate governance is hence both urgent and essential, offering a path towards more equitable, effective, and sustainable solutions to the pressing challenges of climate change.

We have already seen how deliberative democracy has been recommended for use in faltering democracies. The same has happened for climate governance, with the argument that the complexity of the issues at hand requires thoughtful and informed deliberation, and this demands legitimacy, inclusivity, and the inte-

34 Bäckstrand 2006; Bernstein 2011.
35 Pelling 2011.
36 Rawls 1971; Mansbridge et al. 2010.
37 McCarthy 2006; Swyngedouw 2015.
38 Bäckstrand and Kuyper 2017.
39 Jasanoff 2003; Wyborn et al. 2019.

gration of diverse knowledge systems.[40] Fostering processes that engage citizens and stakeholders in meaningful dialogue helps to reconcile competing interests and values, leading to more robust and widely supported policy outcomes.[41] Deliberative processes are expected to enhance the deliberative capacity of societies, equipping them to respond more effectively to environmental challenges through collective reasoning and social learning. Democratic practices play a critical role in accelerating transformations across institutional, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability, so democratic mechanisms can act as catalysts for meaningful change in governance systems.[42]

But the scaling problems of deliberative democracy discussed above[43] are multiplied at the global scale. The design of citizens' assemblies with face-to-face interaction is possible for climate questions but struggles to scale effectively to the "maxi-public" required for global climate governance, where billions of stakeholders across different cultures and political systems must be engaged.[44] On the larger scale, for example, the assumption that participants' motivations and opinions can be significantly changed through deliberation does not always hold true.[45] Trust in the outputs of deliberative processes is also not guaranteed,[46] and the need to have outputs of mini-publics mediated by elected representatives can dilute or transform intentions.[47] Just as with regard to the national level, the emphasis on deliberative democracy has given rise to a certain sobering,[48] even before taking into account the challenges of structural coordination issues and implementation deficits discussed above and the inability of mini-publics to aid in solving these issues.

In its established face-to-face mini-publics form, deliberative democracy will not be the change that climate governance urgently needs.

40 Dryzek and Stevenson 2011; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014; Niemeyer 2013; Dryzek and Pickering 2017.

41 Baber and Bartlett 2015.

42 Niemeyer 2014; Pickering et al. 2022.

43 See pp. 17 and 81–82 above.

44 Farrell et al. 2019; Giraudet et al. 2022; Rountree et al. 2022.

45 Strandberg et al. 2021; Már and Gastil 2023.

46 Már and Gastil 2023; Van Dijk et al. 2024.

47 Junius 2023.

48 Vrydagh 2023; Macq and Jacquet 2023.

11.3 Towards Global Democracy

Civil Democracy, however, is that change, and, conceivably, soon. Starting citizen-based global governance does not need an intergovernmental treaty. It merely requires a working Civil Democracy platform and some initial participants who understand the principles, procedures, and potential of Civil Democracy. Setting in motion the dynamic of democratic efficacy in transnational climate governance is straightforward.

Since Seattle 1998, global conferences have usually been marked by NGO presence aiming to exert pressure in the direction of solutions to problems. But the orchestration of these "NGO concerts"[49] of civil society initiatives without any democratic mandate does not create the public awareness needed for holding governments to account, nor is it able to hold citizens themselves accountable in fragmented global environmental governance.[50]

Using the individualized trust storage system of Civil Democracy, this will change quickly. Uniting civil society using Civil Democracy allows more pressure to be exerted and allows world citizens and civil society organizations to make decisions quickly and take more responsibility compared with the present state. The deepening engagement of non-state actors in post-Paris governance has already led to contestation and changing perceptions of legitimacy.[51] Civil Democracy's structured approach mitigates these challenges by offering a procedural framework that balances inclusivity with efficiency and efficacy, in order to achieve effectiveness.

When Greta Thunberg dismissed the world climate conference in Glasgow 2021 as a large "blah, blah, blah", that was part of the problem. Politicians are not almighty shapers of their country's and the world's fate, the way children want their parents to be. Despite the power they command in certain areas, they are ordinary humans with finite options, reacting to pressures exerted upon them. And global civil society will be able to exert much more power using Civil Democracy, be it in being present with detailed plans and a democratic mandate in core negotiations, dismantling industry lobbyist disinformation, or making clear to national representatives what is demanded.

How that may look will be influenced by many imponderables. But to get an idea, let us consider the example of pressing for more resolute policies to decrease the environmental impact of air traffic. Flying accounts for a sixth of all transpor-

49 Hale and Roger 2014, Hickmann and Elsässer 2020.
50 Dauvergne 2018; Budiman and Smits 2020; Russell and Christie 2021.
51 Bäckstrand et al. 2021.

tation emissions, and the effect is much higher when non-CO_2 impacts on climate are considered. Air travel is also highly unequally distributed among the world population, and international flights are currently not counted as part of any country's emissions. But despite their significant, growing contribution to global emissions, international aviation has avoided a significant climate governance response so far. There is an urgent need for decarbonization of this industry far beyond the current out-of-sector offsets, very probably including the need for substantial "degrowth"[52] in this area. Major barriers against the necessary emissions reduction exist, including both market failures and sensitivities over restraining demand.[53] A democratic incorporation of all actors can provide the procedural legitimacy for robust legal frameworks to address such issues.[54]

However, in the process of developing world citizen-based climate governance using Civil Democracy, demanding a global framework for limiting emissions from air travel would already be an early decision on the decision schedule, most probably in preparing for a climate conference, following step 7 in the policy creation framework described in Section 8.4 above. To develop such a global framework for limiting emissions from air travel, a structured, participatory process under Civil Democracy as described above is essential.

As described above, this framework advises three steps that are not technically necessary but support making good decisions. As long as trust in political actors is high, they will most likely be made with a very high amount of citizens preferring representation, but they add to the transparency of the process and to the quality of the options upon which to decide in substantive matters later. Especially at the beginnings of building civil democratic practice, network extension will be an important step (Step 8), where key stakeholders, for example environmental experts, industry representatives, and civil society groups, are identified, and they and most importantly all world citizens aiming to contribute to more sustainable policies in this area are invited to contribute. This ensures diverse perspectives and expertise are included from the outset. A second helpful preparative step is goal definition (Step 1). In this case, the broad objective of reducing air travel emissions is clarified, and the establishment of possible specific targets and milestones. This step aligns all participants on a common purpose, such as achieving a specific percentage reduction in aviation emissions by a certain year. The next preparative step is information-gathering (Step 2), with participants agreeing on a shared set of authoritative sources to create a common understanding of the

52 Kallis 2011; Andriotis 2018.
53 Rayner 2021.
54 van Asselt 2021.

issue. This counters the fragmentation of discussions and creates a shared basis, such as data on current emissions and potential reduction strategies. And as reducing air travel emissions is still a field in which innovation is expected, the final preparatory step is idea generation (Step 3), where creative solutions for reducing aviation emissions are solicited from the global network. This might include ideas for technological innovations, regulatory measures, or market-based mechanisms like carbon-pricing.

Once a range of ideas has been collected, preparation is concluded and policy generation enters the inner, necessary stage that starts with drafts (Step 4). Either an author (or group of authors) is selected and commissioned to write a central text to be created, or draft proposals are invited for submission and one of those texts is chosen. Participants are then invited to propose changes (Step 5) to the draft, which are debated and voted upon. The resulting text is refined until a final version (Step 6) is agreed upon.

To ensure implementation, executive roles (Step 9) are defined, assigning specific responsibilities for carrying out the agreed-upon policies. As mentioned above, executives for the implementation of agreed-upon policies remain necessary, but the serving aspect of their role and the fact that policy implementation is mainly teamwork become more evident.

Iterations (Step 10) allow for the framework to be revisited and revised as needed, adapting to new developments and expanding participation. Such an ability of revision remains important in any context, but is of special importance in the context of a growing movement.

In developing such a global air travel framework and many more ambitious policies using this inclusive, iterative process, Civil Democracy will quickly change the game for future climate conferences. In a social movement starting from a few idealistic and well-educated innovators, world citizens advance from the back seat of being only represented by their governments with their blurry mandates and limited ambitions. They become themselves part of the negotiation process, with their civil society actors, insofar as they have gained their trust, as central mediators. Here we have the civil society representation in intergovernmental institutions that has long been demanded, but in contrast to existing models[55] now with a specific democratic mandate.

From here on, usage of Civil Democracy for the scaled deliberation in transnational climate governance will grow into a global network involving world citizens in all aspects of devising, coordinating, and implementing climate-related efforts. This process will take time and demand extensive further research, and a lot

55 Biermann and Gupta 2011.

of experience is to be gained along the way. But it is a clear way out of the current malaise.

11.4 New Order

Facing common challenges, processes of working together and solving problems together have already been applied at the global level in the era of partitioning representation. In the perspective of the history of mankind, we have come from many different tribes and went through a long development in which these tribes gradually came into more contact with each other and developed more overarching institutions that allowed them to reap the benefits of cooperation. Some of our tribes have already been tied together in nation-states for a long time, and history has seen how concepts of community, shared past, and shared responsibility have been transferred from the clan level to the national level. The current common problems press us to proceed towards embracing our common humanity globally, with shared concepts of community, past, and responsibility worldwide. Civil Democracy is the necessary institutional foundation for that process that directs our focus to the problems we have to solve and conflicts we have to resolve on the way, ending the fruitless emphasis on national differences under partitioning representation.

For those last five centuries in which the partitioning concept of the nation-state developed, global order has been mostly shaped by a sequence of what have been called "global hegemons", polities that took a leading role in international relations. The sequence starts with the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th centuries. After periods of instability in between, from 1832 onwards the United Kingdom had established itself as the second global hegemon, and from Pearl Harbor onwards, the United States took this role.[56] By succeeding against fascism and offering a democracy-based model, it laid the foundation for postwar stability and growth, and after having won the "systems competition" of capitalism vs. communism with the end of the Soviet Union, seemed to be the unquestioned leader not only of the free but of the whole world. Atrocities happened when the United States decided not to intervene, as in Rwanda, and ended when it took action, as in Yugoslavia. In matters as diverse as economics, science, and popular culture, American discourse led, and the world followed.[57]

56 Kindleberger 1973; Wallerstein 1974–2011; Arrighi 1994; Ikenberry [2001] 2019.
57 Ikenberry 2011b, [2001] 2019; Nye 2004; Mandelbaum 2005; Maier 2006.

But it is not only since rampant populism deliberately exchanged this global leading role for short-term egoism, since the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, or since the financial crisis of 2008, that this hegemony has faded. In the long-run perspective of flowing and ebbing of global leadership, many observers see US hegemony as declining[58] and expect China to be the coming hegemon.[59] They may be right—but only with an important twist.

Those expecting Chinese hegemony see these developments through the lens of the past of an unprecedented success story of economic growth. From Mao's death to the Covid pandemic, Chinese per-capita income has increased by 3,200 percent, equating to an annual growth of almost 8 percent across half a century, by far the most impressive success story in creating wealth in the whole of economic history. Some economists and even more non-economists expect that to continue. Others, however, point to the fact that Chinese growth, for reasons of demography and inequality, has continually slowed down since 2007, building a housing bubble comparable to that of Japan in the late 1980s and of the US up to 2007, and that a stagnation comparable to that of Japan in the 2000s may be a more appropriate expectation.[60]

Global leadership always means institutional leadership, and only for the last five centuries have institutions for large-scale leadership been bound to be national ones. They do not need to be. The hegemon was always the polity that to the largest extent combined unleashing the potential of free individuals shaping their own futures with an institutional framework that allowed them to unite in collective agency to solve their problems, and it always included being open to their citizens' innovation, critique, humor, and satire. Chinese leadership cannot exhibit these competencies without democracy.[61]

Instead, the most likely next candidate for this position is actually us, the population of the world, united and capable of collective action through Civil Democracy. This model exerts more soft power and links more economic potential than any single society alone can do, being the only chance to avoid the status grievances that naturally result from every nationally based international order.[62] The so-called Pax Americana of the postwar decades will then not be followed by a Pax Sinica but by a "Pax Civica" that rests on the whole of world population in expressing their preferences through Civil Democracy. Within it, the Chinese, together with the Indian people, the two civilizations that together contain one

58 Kennedy 1987; Todd 2003; Layne 2006; Bacevich 2008; Acharya 2014b.
59 Jacques 2012; Doshi 2021; Zhao 2021.
60 Pettis 2013, 2014; Magnus 2018; Klein and Pettis 2020.
61 Nye 2011; Callahan 2013; Shambaugh 2013.
62 Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021.

in three contemporary humans, will have a natural *primus inter pares* role that reflects their historical and economic weight and their technological and cultural productivity. Not more, but not less either.

With this perspective of a global governance based on all individual world citizens alike, Civil Democracy paints a picture that many today are unable to imagine. We live in a world of vast inequalities. The 10 richest individuals in the world hold more wealth than the poorest 40 percent of the global population combined. The richest 1 percent globally are responsible for more than twice as manycarbon emissions as the poorest 50 percent of the world combined. The daily income of over 700 million people globally is less than what an average American spends on coffee in a day. And a child in Norway will likely receive over 16 years of quality education, while a child in South Sudan might not even complete three years of school.

The last comparison in particular is a last cognitive defense for those who are unwilling or unable to imagine a world citizen-based global governance. How could uneducated, poor people in unstable conditions take responsibility for global governance? But this is an argument that has been brought forward at every moment when the franchise has been expanded and new groups have joined the club of those who are able to participate in decisions. Switzerland's ability to uphold continuous direct democracy does not depend on being among the richest European countries—its practice of direct democracy began in 1874 when its per-capita income was at Africa's level today.[63]

Against notions stressing inequality as hindrance, Civil Democracy continues a tradition of imagining to join humankind in shared solutions to problems. It can be traced back to the rejection of the closed city-state as foundation of political life in the Cynic philosopher Diogenes' (c. 412–323 BCE) self-declaration as *kosmopolites*, citizen of the world,[64] and began anew with Immanuel Kant's Perpetual Peace.[65] In the 20th century, Charles Beitz was the first to argue that basic principles of justice should apply not just within states, but globally.[66] The perspective of deliberation made Jürgen Habermas aware that deliberative legitimacy should extend to all world citizens, and James Bohman argued along similar lines for extending deliberative mechanisms globally in a partitioning transnational "demoi-cracy" building on a multitude of peoples.[67] Starting from the normative view that global institutions have moral obligations to individuals based on

63 Maddison 2010.
64 Paone 2018.
65 Kant [1795] 1988.
66 Beitz 1979.
67 Habermas 2001; Bohman 2007.

shared humanity and global interdependence, Thomas Pogge and Mathias Risse argue for institutional reforms to ensure justice and equitable resource distribution beyond the nation-state.[68]

A transformation of these philosophical demands into sustained, detailed proposals for institutionalizing global justice and democratic legitimacy on a world citizen basis was first presented by David Held's proposal of reforming international institutions (like the UN) through including second chambers or assemblies of directly elected citizen representatives.[69] Daniele Archibugi's outline of a political framework contains global institutions legitimized by citizen participation, with proposals such as a global referendum, direct elections to international bodies, and the creation of legal mechanisms for individual access to global courts, even including bottom-up democratic innovations such as transnational activism and digital participation as components of a pluralist cosmopolitan order.[70]

However, this impressive tradition has so far remained largely academic. The reason is that it has never fully considered the role of procedural democratic efficacy in both its direct and indirect components. Civil Democracy changes that. A second chamber to any international institution gains the influence that will result in factual power only with sustained participation of citizens and political actors. This demands democratic efficacy and, in the presence of continuous scarcity, individualized participation and representations as described above.

Part IV of this book will study the movements necessary to make world citizen-based global governance a reality, and evidence for the fact that its time has finally come.

Conclusion

Solving today's global problems demands rethinking the institutional foundations of global governance. Climate governance exemplifies the deeper issue: we are trying to solve transnational problems with nation-bound tools. The repeated failure of top-down pledges and fragmented negotiations reveals not just a lack of political will but a structural absence of democratic legitimacy and citizen agency at the global level.

The solution cannot lie in technocracy alone, nor in scaling existing deliberative formats that rely on national structures or limited participation. What is

68 Pogge 2002; Risse 2012, 2019, 2020.
69 Held 1995, 2004; Archibugi and Held 1995.
70 Archibugi 2008; Archibugi et al. 2011.

needed is a model that both empowers individuals to shape collective outcomes and builds robust legitimacy across borders. Civil Democracy offers such a model—not by imposing a singular global will, but by enabling democratic coordination among diverse actors who trust one another because they choose to act together.

The key innovation lies in scaling democratic practices horizontally. Rather than rely on geographic constituencies or random mini-publics, Civil Democracy lets individuals participate directly and representatively through overlapping civil society networks. It allows problems to be addressed by those concerned and capable, without excluding others from oversight or deliberation. This architecture transforms the apparent tradeoff between inclusion and effectiveness into a synergy.

Such institutional redesign also challenges the conventional logic of global order as hegemonic succession. After five centuries dominated by nation-based hegemons, it is time to see that it was never national territory that grounded leadership but an institutional quality that offered room for free individuals shaping their own futures in a structure that united them in collective agency. The next "hegemon" needs to be a transnational democratic movement grounded in voluntary leadership and networked legitimacy. Solving global problems means scaling democracy: not just its ideals, but also its institutions. This is the way, and the only way, for world citizens to reclaim agency over the shared future of the planet.

Part IV **Starting the New Dynamic**

12 Two Steps to Stability

When will all these considerations turn into reality? Never, in twenty years, or now? There are good reasons to see the time as ripe. If you are among the readers who occasionally look in the footnotes, this is the additional reason for rethinking democracy I delicately hid in footnote 24 on page 5 because it seemed to deter rather than to convince first-time readers: we have been here before.

To understand that, we start by looking at the current state of multiple interacting and escalating crises. How has their multiplicity been understood so far? How do we see it from the perspective of rethinking democracy? What outlook do we have now? Is this polycrisis phenomenon unique to the current era?

And if not: How can we explain that? Is there an underlying continuous dynamic? And if so, how can we explain that it manifests in discontinuous change and crises? What has changed in our lives, in comparable ways a century ago and more recently? And why was the last century so special, starting with highest of hopes, then soon falling into the most appalling abysses, rising again to hitherto-unseen stability and prosperity, only to make room for another dynamic into crisis?

Finally, what does this dynamic tell us about what lies ahead? Despite everyone being quick to say that history never repeats itself, are there parallels with the past that may give an indication about the future—that may even give us hope?

12.1 The Second Polycrisis

The present moment has become increasingly described as a "polycrisis": a state in which multiple, interconnected crises reinforce and amplify one another.[1] Unlike traditional crises that may be acute but isolated, a polycrisis denotes a configuration of overlapping systemic breakdowns that interact and escalate. The concept captures how ecological, economic, political, and cultural disruptions are no longer sequential but structurally entangled.

Initially, the accumulation of crises had been seen only as a multiplicity, merely attributed to chance in the terms used.[2] But based on the theory developed above, we see instead that the terms "polycrisis"[3] and "meta-crisis"[4] are more ad-

1 The first part draws heavily on Scholtz 2024a, the rest of the chapter on Scholtz 2016.

2 Headey et al. 2010; UN News 2012; Brand and Wissen 2012; Brand 2016; Spash 2021; Haass 2022; Cottle 2023.

3 Tooze 2022; Henig and Knight 2023; Villa Braslavsky 2023; WEF 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111827902-013

equate to grasp the concurrency of escalation. The main reason for the polycrisis is the metacrisis: all the multiple crises (the polycrisis) are interconnected and part of a single overarching crisis (the metacrisis). There is one single reason underlying all of them: all societies have grown to a level of complexity that requires involving citizens in policy definition, but around the world, we have been fixated on the concept of partitioning representation that once was able to provide democratic efficacy within the specific context of Western industrial society, but not outside of it and not now anymore after this window has closed. We need to apply a new concept and replace partitioning representation with Civil Democracy. This one crisis is the metacrisis behind the perceived polycrisis.

The good news is that, like all crises, it will be limited in time.

The multiplicity of crises, and especially the fact that coping with environmental destruction seems so impossible, has led to apocalyptic commentaries fearing "a dying age that presages no new ages at all".[5] At the end of this book, we can be much more hopeful: understanding the reason for the multiple crises and knowing that the number (and potential power) of people who currently suffer is much larger than those who profit from the world being as it is, prepares us for looking forward to change. Much damage has been done and cannot be undone. But there is a way to reverse the current destructive trends.

The contrasting voices of despair and hope regarding the current era are not new. More than 30 years ago, Anthony Giddens likewise protested against Jean-François Lyotard's deep pessimism.[6] Today, the optimistic argument can be much more specific: For Giddens, the assumption that "modern institutions [will] one day [... be] fundamentally altered" ends his examination[7] without any hint of what these fundamentally altered institutions might look like. In contrast, we have seen specifically which modern institutions need alteration, why they must change, and how to implement these changes.

This pattern of deep crisis and upcoming change is not unique to the current era. The current polycrisis consists of different parts, some very obviously visible, others less present or short-lived in public discourse: texts on the polycrisis and metacrisis widely agree in mentioning the environment, economic crises, epidemics, and crises of domestic and of international political institutions under the general perspective, but terrorism and wars of aggression, social inequality, and migration are equally as important.

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4 Azmanova 2020; Stein 2022.

5 Cottle 2023, p. 269.

6 Lyotard 1979; Giddens 1990, 1991.

7 Giddens 1990, p. 178; very similarly, Beck [1986] 1992.

Nine parallel areas of social crisis were likewise part of the first crisis of modernity which affected mainly the Western world and built up over the second half of the 19th and the early 20th century and mainly ended in 1949. Economic crisis occurred in 1929 as in 2008,[8] and a pandemic in 1919 just as in 2020.[9] The advent of democracy, as, for example, France in the 19th century and Germany between 1848 and 1949, was even much more of a rupture than its current crisis; international political institutions were in crisis before 1945 as they are today; successful terrorist attacks that sparked wars occurred in 1914 as in 2001; wars of aggression began in 1939 as in 2023; social inequality built up over the 19th and early 20th century as it has done since the 1980s; and migration led more than 10 percent of the world population to leave their place in the 19th and early 20th century, on an absolute scale comparable to current phenomena, and therefore much higher in relative terms. A slight difference is the fact that the environmental crisis, which in its current form is still growing, reached its peak within the first metacrisis relatively early, for the United States and Britain already around the turn of the 20th century.[10] Despite important differences between the two crises, we can learn a lot in understanding the prospects of the current one through addressing their similarities.

12.2 The Larger Picture

Crises result from discontinuous change in the institutions that guide our interactions.[11] Industrial society was based on one set of institutions, pre-industrial society implied another set of institutions, and the period in which these parallel crises occurred was a time of institutional change. The current historical era is again a time of institutional change as much as that of the emergence of industrial societies.[12]

The basis of this change is the vastly increased availability of resources and information that has occurred in the modern growth process. The growth process of scientific knowledge, and hence information and improved expectations, started with the scientific revolution in the 15th century, but it became relevant for human interaction mainly with the rise in per-capita incomes that increased

8 Bordo 2008; Reinhart and Rogoff 2009; Mitchener and Mason 2010; Crafts and Fearon 2010; Almunia et al. 2010.

9 Gallo 2021; Patterson et al. 2021; Brussow 2022; Munnoli et al. 2022; Honigsbaum 2023.

10 Wohl 1983; Hamlin 1990; Tarr 1996; Sellers 1997; Hamlin 1998; Hays 1999.

11 As discussed above, see 9.1, p. 123–125.

12 Wagner 2012.

the availability of actions from the industrial revolution in the 18th century. Together, they make up the increased complexity of situations of individual interaction.

The increased complexity leads the structure of human interaction to change in two ways, important enough to term them "principles of modernity". The first change is the one from tradition to rationality:[13] in a poor world with few resources and little information, one is limited to solutions that have so far been found. Sustaining a found solution to coordination problems, and hence of social order established, has higher priority than, for example, worrying about efficiency or distributive consequences of prevailing institutions. If someone challenges them, they are always defended for having been handed down by previous generations. This is tradition: interaction guided by the norm to accept the way things are, in order to protect the trust that everyone can expect existing conventions to be followed.

In a world with abundant resources and information however, enough information can be made available to allow discovery of the results of different solutions, and enough resources to bear the cost of an eventual change. Arguments of tradition, habitual practice, and emotional attachment may still count, but they are no longer the dominant ones: "[W]hereas traditional man tended to reject innovation by saying 'It has never been thus,' [modern man] is more likely to ask 'Does it work?' and try the new way".[14]

A second change has been described most importantly by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.[15] He states it as a normative concept for the present. In the long-term view, it is an empirical one: the change from domination to deliberation. Whenever a decision has to be made in a poor world with few resources and little information, the cost–benefit relation with regard to decision-making is best if information retrieval, and hence decision-making, are delegated to the actor with the highest endowment of resources and information—that is, to the individual with the highest social status. The resulting norm is the acceptance of hierarchical authority.

In a world with abundant resources and information, the cost–benefit relation with regards to decision-making is best if information retrieval is dispersed among all involved actors and the decision is made together or through a general decision-making mechanism, such as, for example, competition. This is evident in the stark contrast between past European agricultural societies, where precisely

13 Weber [1922] 1947.
14 Lerner [1958] 1965, p. 49.
15 Habermas 1992.

determining one's social status was crucial, and today's world, where such distinctions are far less central.[16] Reinforced by Habermas, societies pivot towards the deliberative acceptance to hear everyone's arguments.

The changes in these two principles together make up a theory of modernity. But it entails a simplified understanding of modernization as a single step open to all societies alike. Such a simplified understanding of modernization characterized the naïve modernization theory of the 1950s.[17] Its obvious inability to describe what actually happened in the world led to wide critique[18] and later the almost complete abandonment of the concept in sociology,[19] despite the fact that modernization shapes the lives of billions of people. It is hence necessary to understand why modernity does not have the simple form of a single step.

The answer to this question is found in the structure of human interaction.

Not all individuals on earth interact with each other directly. Instead there are many forms of groups that have internal institutions which allow the group to act as a unitary actor in superordinate interactions: organizations.[20] Individuals interact in households, and the internal institutions of these households allow them to hold houses and reproduce. Individuals interact in firms, and internal institutions allow them to act as unitary actors within markets. Individuals interact in parties, and internal institutions allow them to act as unitary actors within political life. Individuals interact in schools, and internal institutions allow them to act as unitary actors within the education system. And so on. Although the different types of organizations like families, firms, schools, and political parties are (to different degrees) much older, the word "organization" as a sample term for all of them came to be used only from the 1960s onwards. Organizations form an intermediate level in the structure of human interaction.

Despite their contemporary omnipresence, the emergence of organizations demanded a separation of spheres, between the rules that apply to everyone and those that apply only within an organization. Of course, families have their specific rules in all times and every culture. But to make the organization a generally applicable concept, it needed the group homogeneity norms and acceptance of overarching institutions described above[21] as the characteristics of the European partitioning concept. We have already seen the role of this concept in starting the modern growth process in the Western world. It not only resulted in mod-

16 Hunt 1996; Bourdieu 1979; Peterson and Kern 1996.

17 Lerner [1958] 1965.

18 Among others, Frank 1967; Wallerstein 1974; Said 1978; Sharīatī 1980; Wagner 2012.

19 Knöbl 2003.

20 Arrow 1964.

21 See Section 4.4, pp. 51–52

ernizing Western societies earlier, however, but also in a specific, and specifically violent, two-step structure.

12.3 Two (Times Two) Steps to Modernity

On the one hand, the reason for the general two-step structure is the sphere separation organizations create with regard to interaction. Whether the principles of modernity or their pre-modern counterparts are applied depends not only on the availability of resources and information but on their relation to what's at stake. In the continuous growth process, the point at which structuring interaction along rationality and deliberation became superior to using the pre-modern principles of tradition and hierarchy was reached much earlier for high-stake interactions between organizations and when individuals established organizations meant to be long-lasting, than for the everyday low-stake interactions of humans within organizations.

On the other hand, the reason that the 20th century was so violent in Western societies and that the 21st century is currently on a track uncomfortably resembling European developments that occurred a lifetime ago, is the fact that some interactions have negative effects on others ("negative externalities") that need to be regulated by rules, and that the separation between a sphere within organizations and one above them applies with regards to such regulations, too.

Together, the differentiations of what's at stake and where negative externalities are regulated create a 2 × 2 matrix structure with four single waves of institutional innovation over the whole process, occurring in about the 1810s–1920s, 1940s, 1970s–2000s, and upcoming, that is much better able to cover what happened over the last two centuries and is going to happen soon.

In the understanding of the resulting explanatory model, the process of modern growth still begins in a stage of agricultural poverty, in which all interactions accept traditional and hierarchical norms, and ends in a stage abundant in resources and information, in which all interactions follow rational and deliberative norms, very much as in the understanding of the proponents of naïve modernization theory.

However, in societies with cultural traditions of partitioning representation, this growth process creates an intermediate stage in which the higher-stakes interactions around organizations were already rational and deliberative, while the lower-stakes interactions within organizations were still guided by traditional and hierarchical norms.

In historical reality, this intermediate stage became known as "industrial society". Everyone old enough to have lived from the 1950s through 1970s knows

from their own experience how much everyday interaction in these times was still guided by the conventional respect for hierarchy and tradition and the disrespect for misfitting and deviant individuals, despite pride in rationality and democratic norms on the macro level.

The changes necessary to abandon the respective former conventional understandings and to agree on new ones able to regulate negative externalities were huge in both cases. They were even huge at the lower level of finding new agreements in day-to-day interaction on the individual level. They are, however, manyfold higher on the macro-social level of finding new agreements up to interactions on the global scale. That is the background of these two deep crises.

In both cases, change started with changes in the interactions on the lowest level. From 1813 onwards, young women could read in print how Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice*, "resolved to ... constitute my happiness",[22] rejecting demands to align her romantic choices with social expectations. That was the rebuff to traditional and hierarchical notions in the high-stake situation of creating a household, and the most visible symbol of the introduction of what became termed the "modern family".[23] But when wedding bells had faded, its reality was still very traditional. Divorce and diversity in living arrangements like cohabitation, non-marital birth, and same-sex unions were not included. Challenging these norms emerged as a powerful social force only in 1968, when the availability of resources and information had proceeded far enough to allow a young generation to demand the introduction of rationality and deliberation in everyday private life.

Some time later, a number of decades in the first transition and much quicker in the second, the introduction of rationality and deliberation created new intra-organizational institutions in economics and politics. In the first transition, the growing availability of resources and information in the 19th century created the "modern" forms of large, bureaucratic economic organizations[24] and political parties. In the second, they lost much of their hierarchical power and evolved more into network clusters of individual interaction. In education, these were the decades when norms diffused to obtain primary and tertiary grades.

We see in retrospect how the new kind of organization without corresponding macro institutions sparked negative external effects that accumulated into the crisis of the 1930s. Traditional conceptions of elite bargaining were unable to counter

22 Austen [1813] ca. 1890, ch. 56.

23 Shorter 1975.

24 Merton et al. 1952; Chandler 1977. The term "bureaucratic organization" refers to Weber [1922] 1947.

inefficient market structures that had emerged with modern enterprises. Primary without secondary education left workers basically productive, but easily substitutable and without substantial bargaining power, especially with unions aiming for revolution, that is, top positions in traditional hierarchies,[25] instead of for using bargaining power to press for higher wages. The resulting high inequality created economic instability, as a lower share of national production went into stable consumption while much was assigned dependent upon return expectations. But these destructive results were only corrected later, with effective competition laws, differentiated secondary schooling, and the acceptance of non-revolutionary unions as necessary macro-level innovations, in the United States as a forerunner under the Roosevelt administration and much of Europe only after World War II.

For political parties, the necessary learning was about parties' responsibilities for upholding the very macro-level institutions. In the United States, this lesson had already been learned after the destructive party competition that led to the Civil War of 1861–1865.[26] In Europe, the combined effect of economic crisis and ongoing authoritarian conceptions led large parts of the populations to fall for the appeal of communist and fascist parties which both saw democracy only as a useful instrument to its own destruction. Communism disguised traditional authoritarianism under modernist propaganda, proved short-term stable in the empire it was able to achieve in World War II from a heartland lacking any traditions of partitioning representation, and died out only decades later due to its internal inefficiency.

In the Western part of Europe, the fascist combination of destroying all democratic institutions and creating political efficacy through external aggression drew authoritarian characters into violence and destruction. But it soon collapsed, giving rise to the general acceptance of democracy as the adequate feedback to the responsibility for parties in a second part of the transition, best expressed in Churchill's dictum about democracy cited above[27] that summarized the sudden general acceptance that democracy was not an Anglo-Saxon (and Swiss) cultural peculiarity but a general necessity for any industrial society.

25 Lees 1982; Lipold and Isaac 2009.
26 Potter 1976; Holt 1978.
27 See p. 13.

12.4 The Time is Ripe (1)

In the theoretical 2 × 2 matrix made up in the last section, the fourth cell is as yet unfilled.

For more than a half century, changes on the micro and meso level have shattered the nation-state-based regulated setting of democratic efficacy in industrial societies. Civil Democracy is the starting point and a main step in finding a new regulated setting that can work on turning the normative demands of Beitz, Pogge, and Risse into reality.[28] Only with democratic efficacy will global citizen participation with global referendums, direct elections to international bodies, and global courts to which individuals worldwide feel bound,[29] be able to grow. Individualizing both participation and representation through individualized trust storage will create a rich network of open actors, interlinked by trust relations. These networks enable second chambers to international institutions to gain real influence. Actual power depends on sustained participation of citizens and political actors, which in turn requires democratic efficacy and, under conditions of ongoing scarcity, precisely the individualized participation and representation described above.

However, that is institutional change, and institutional change meets the resistance of convention: people are used to the fact that things have worked as they always have. But such conventions can change: we have discussed already in Chapter 9 crises as periods when taken-for-granted assumptions are shattered. Both crises of modernity show that.

Conceptions about democracy are cognitive concepts, and preferences over cognitive concepts are studied as values. The question of how long the ongoing democracy crisis will last until enough individuals are willing to give Civil Democracy a try can hence be studied using the knowledge of research on value change. This strand of social science began just three years after 1968, with Ronald Inglehart's article on "The Silent Revolution in Europe".[30] In this paper, Inglehart asserts that individuals develop enduring political values during adolescence and early adulthood, typically between ages 15 and 25—his so-called "formative years hypothesis". These values, shaped by prevailing societal and economic conditions, are seen as remaining relatively stable throughout life. Inglehart argued that postmaterialist values—prioritizing freedom, participation, and self-expres-

28 See Section 11.4, p. 173.

29 Archibugi 2008; Archibugi et al. 2011.

30 Inglehart 1971.

sion—emerged in cohorts raised in secure environments, while those raised in scarcity retained materialist priorities.

This claim that formative experiences shape value orientations has found ample support.[31] But does that mean that one's world is entirely fixed after the coming-of-age process is completed? More recent studies have provided a more nuanced view. For instance, citizens socialized under socialism later adapted their democratic outlook depending on regime performance,[32] and other views in areas as different as euthanasia or welfare state evaluation show that changing one's opinion is possible later in life, too.[33] With that in mind, let us look back on the transition parallels.

One parallel provides a good yardstick. In both transitions, one exceptionally visible terrorist attack started a war and shattered the illusion of institutional stability for an entire generation, creating a permanent sense of insecurity that redefined how individuals related to the world around them. For the present, that has amply been shown for the attack of 9/11.[34] For the past first transition, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 very similarly shattered prevailing illusions of institutional stability and ushered in a sense of insecurity that redefined individual and collective worldviews, even more so since much larger parts of the respective (male) generation went through the war that followed, World War I.[35]

If we take Sarajevo 1914 as an anchor in time, it took 35 years until postwar institutions became established in 1949. The generation born after the turn of the century had initially been drawn to the populist and even fascist promise based on the shock that the old stability was gone.[36] But they were likewise the ones who were able to agree to open group-based negotiations in democracy and labor relations that allowed for reconciliation, stability, and the prosperity of the postwar period.

That was a time in which we can safely assume adult value orientations to be more fixed compared with today. On the side of fascist aggression, World War II had rested on a mindset that democratic stability was impossible and that political efficacy could only be achieved through domination and the elimination of all that was seen as alien to the supposed homogeneity. Its destructive power was only possible under the leadership of a generation born in the 19th century that had

31 Inglehart and Abramson 2013; Rekker 2016; Grasso et al. 2019.
32 Neundorf 2010.
33 Neundorf and Soroka 2018; Tormos et al. 2023.
34 Pyszczynski et al. 2003; Kosloff et al. 2006; Holland 2015; Zine 2022.
35 Roper 2005; Donson 2006; Hershey 2023.
36 Donson 2006.

experienced stability and control under conditions of tradition and hierarchy, and could imagine it only under such conditions. Their generational resignation was the necessary base for the new development, notwithstanding some exceptional figures who had been convinced of the possibility of democratic stability and democratic efficacy throughout the time of fascism and became leaders for the time that followed.

One argument that it could take even more time this time is the fact that the current task is much more complex than that one lifetime ago. Postwar democracy deviated from interwar democracy in the main acceptance of democracy as being without alternative, as expressed in Churchill's famous dictum,[37] but otherwise the differences were minor, and for role models one could borrow from decades of successful democratic problem solutions. Civil Democracy, on the other hand, is an entirely new approach that, at the time of writing this book, has never been tried anywhere in the world.

We have, however, seen that under current conditions of information abundance Inglehart's thesis of generational succession may no longer be valid. We can process information. Changing one's opinion is possible later in life. Already the period from the climax of cheerfulness to the beginning of awareness of crisis can be said to be shorter in the current transition than in the first: this time, the highest point of optimism can reasonably be set at the end of the Cold War in 1989 while previously it was reached with the Paris World Exhibition in 1900, with time differences of 12 and 14 years, respectively. On the sad side, the war of aggression based on the mindset that democratic stability would be impossible and political efficacy could only be achieved through domination, started only 21½ years after the beginning of crisis awareness, while it took 25 years in the earlier case.

Based on this comparison of crises, Foa and Mounk's dire findings reported at the very beginning of this book[38] contain a factually long-run positive message. For sure, there is imminent danger that under conditions of rampant populism some of those who uttered support for military dictatorship may engage in actions they will later be deeply ashamed of. But it can be safely assumed that the majority of them did not aim for living in times where public criticism of the government is dangerous, media is censored, civic organizing is tightly controlled or suppressed, curricula are aligned with regime ideology, and corruption and patronage are widespread, as living under military dictatorship usually looks like. Like the European generation of the early 20th century, they uttered the

37 See p. 13.

38 See p. 1–2.

need to have something different. Chances are that they will be open to a better alternative.

Measured from the parallel of 1914 and 2001, despite the much higher complexity of the current task, it may be possible that it will not take until 2036 until the new equilibrium is found. 2036 would be the result of a calculation that takes the 35-year time span from 1914 to 1949 as fixed. To name just one example, if the "boomer" generation misses its chance and it takes that long until resolute climate governance based on global democratic efficacy takes place, the long-term global temperature level will be not 1.5 °C but rather 2.5° or even higher than now.

In any case, in this comparison of crisis timelines, the second half of the 2020s relates to the time around 1940 when Churchill inspired Britain to endure fascism and Roosevelt prepared America for its leading role in the postwar order. That moment, like ours today, was one of fear, fatigue, and fading belief. Yet, it was turned into leadership. This time, it is not one country alone that must rise to the challenge. It is all of us.

Conclusion

The current "polycrisis" describes overlapping global ecological, economic, and political crises whose escalation stems from the deeper "metacrisis" of outdated political institutions. Today's situation is global, but reminiscent of the earlier metacrisis in the first half of the 20th century.

Both crises arose from institutional shifts in response to rising complexity in human interaction. Increased resources and information led to changes from tradition to rationality and from domination to deliberation. While earlier accounts saw this as a single, universal step, the reality is more complex due to the mediating role of organizations (families, firms, schools, parties) that structure interaction.

The shift from tradition to rationality and from hierarchy to deliberation unfolded in two transitions, one with changes in high-stakes interactions, the other in everyday life. Between them emerged industrial society as an intermediate stage where modern principles applied between, around but not yet within organizations. The fact that in each transition the adequate regulation of negative externalities lagged behind is the reason for the two metacrises.

Civil Democracy is the core of the regulation of negative externalities that is yet missing as the final fourth part of global modernization. As in the first transition, institutional change meets resistance, yet research on value change shows opinion shifts are possible. Parallels to the World War II era allow us to estimate

that the 9/11 generation may, despite today's complexity, reach a new equilibrium before 2036.

As in the 1940s, this is a moment of crisis and opportunity. This time, it requires global leadership and transformation.

13 A Movement of Movements

The first three parts of this book have offered a theory of the current crisis, a proposal for how to overcome it, and evidence for why that proposal can work. The previous chapter even showed that a similarly severe (arguably even much deeper) crisis a lifetime ago gave rise to new social agreements. While the content of those agreements, the partitioning institutions established during and after World War II, has become part of today's problem, the dynamic of rapid transformation after 1950 offers hope: industrial societies began functioning in ways that would have seemed unimaginable in 1930. But one question remains: how could any of this actually become reality?

Over the course of developing this theory, I've heard one objection more often than any other: "That may all sound very promising—but politicians will never allow it." Do you find yourself thinking the same? Then this chapter is for you. And if you don't—if you already know that we don't need permission from those in power to start building something better—read on anyway. Because this chapter is also about the "how": how change begins, how movements gain momentum, and how we can make it happen.

13.1 Movements From Below

To begin answering this question, let us look backward. How, in past centuries, has democracy ever come to pass?

Democracy did not spread because existing elites benevolently shared power. It spread because they were compelled to. And the force that compelled them, again and again, was coordinated pressure from below.

In the absence of such pressure, authoritarian systems endured. For most of the two thousand years between the decline of Athenian democracy and the emergence of modern democratic institutions, political systems were hierarchical by default. A few local exceptions—like the autonomous cantons of 13th century Switzerland or frontier towns in 18th century North America—were able to introduce and maintain collective self-rule in the way that had been the case in ancient Greece: in contexts where people could defend themselves, produce what they needed, and make decisions without permission from centralized authority. But these were rare cases heavily dependent on supporting geography.

The modern era introduced a new pattern. From the 19th century onward, democratization was no longer driven by self-reliant individuals but by organized social groups. These were the foundational actors of modern democratic transi-

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tions: rising bourgeois classes, industrial workers, professional associations, religious institutions, student unions, and ethnic or regional movements. What allowed them to succeed was their collective capacity to impose pressure on ruling elites. Democracy emerged where these groups could operate autonomously, build internal solidarity, and act as organized interlocutors in power struggles.[1] Their effectiveness rested not merely in their size, but in their ability to act coherently, to coordinate demands, to sustain mobilization, and to negotiate from a position of structural leverage.[2]

What gave these groups their leverage is strikingly consistent across cases: their ability to withhold critical resources. When business elites in 19th century England and France withdrew investment and refused to fund outdated authoritarian structures, they forced elites to offer concessions.[3] When organized labor across Europe mounted strikes and withdrew productivity, they destabilized the political status quo and compelled the extension of political rights.[4] Wherever democracy emerged, it did so not just because people wanted it, but because organized actors also denied regimes what they needed to function—whether labor, capital, credibility, or acquiescence. From Southeast Asian labor movements to African trade unions, from indigenous resistance in Guatemala to business-led negotiations in Latin America: even where democratization came through negotiation or elite pact-making, it was preceded by popular mobilization that made continued rule untenable.[5] Established regimes do not give up power when they are asked politely. They shift course when the cost of inaction becomes too high.

Democratization occurs when actors can coordinate to withhold what the regime requires. And throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the actors best positioned to do this were coherent social groups.

This insight, however, leads to a challenge in today's context: if democratic breakthroughs have historically depended on organized groups, what happens when such groups diminish? We have discussed above the deep structural individualization modern Western societies have undergone. The cohesive, conformity-enforcing social groups of postwar decades have gone. Instead, people navigate network-based relationships shaped by individualized life paths, weak ties, and diverse affiliations. We have seen how this transformation undermines traditional democracy with its reliance on aggregating stable, homogenous group interests. At the same time, it undermines the abilities of groups to organize themselves in

1 Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Heller 2022.

2 Tilly 1978; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Tusalem 2007.

3 Moore [1966] 1973; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006.

4 Collier 1999; Neureiter 2013.

5 Neureiter 2013; Kraus 2007; Brett 2008; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986.

order to exert pressure on a government. And that poses a problem. In the 1990s and 2000s, many philosophers and sociologists lamented the implosion of collective action stemming from individualization.[6] Were they right?

For decades, the dominant theory of mobilization rested on a sobering insight: collective action is unlikely without coercion or material incentives. Mancur Olson famously argued that individuals in large groups face what he called a "free-rider problem": if everyone benefits from a public good regardless of their contribution, the rational choice is to do nothing—and wait for others to bear the cost.[7] The implication was clear: only tightly bound groups, with strong identities or sanctioning mechanisms, could overcome this problem and sustain action.

But we have seen above that humans are not solely driven by self-interest. We are wired for pattern confirmation—that is, we gain intrinsic satisfaction when our ideas and efforts lead to real-world outcomes. This applies not only to private projects, but also to shared societal goals. When individuals believe their actions can shape collective outcomes—when they sense democratic efficacy—they are far more willing to contribute, even without material reward, just to be part of force that drives change.

This fundamentally challenges the assumption that only cohesive groups can drive change. Even in individualized societies, people can and do mobilize—when the structure of participation allows them to recognize their impact. The task is not to rebuild old-style mass organizations, but to design democratic platforms where individual actions visibly contribute to shared improvement.

The fact that individual action matters is even underlined when we see the history of how democracy emerged in longer-term perspective. The era of group-driven democratization was the 19th and 20th centuries, when organized classes, churches, unions, and associations pressed for institutional change. But history did not begin there. The few cases of democracy prior to the 19th century had not been built on such demarcated groups, but on empowered household heads: hoplites in ancient Athens, freemen in the Swiss confederation, settlers in early American frontier towns. These were male household heads able to defend themselves and the households they led: a completely different form of individuals held together and able to withhold critical resources. Demarcated groups are hence not the only possible base for democratic transformation. Both household heads and groups are examples of what social sciences call actors—entities made up of individuals and connected by internal institutions that enable them to recognize problems, form intentions, and take the initiative. What matters is not

6 Baudrillard 1992; Sennett 1998; Putnam 2000; Bauman 2000, 2001, 2007.
7 Olson 1965.

their form but their capacity to press for change by refusing to comply with a broken system and insisting on a better alternative. In today's structurally individualized societies, traditional group identities no longer provide that capacity. But this does not mean that pressing for change is impossible. On the contrary, when individuals come to see their agency reflected in new forms—individualized participation and individualized representation—a new kind of actor becomes possible: a social movement of the whole society, capable of regaining democratic efficacy on a societal scale.

I vividly remember a very impressive example of a situation like today, with everyone knowing that the system is broken, and no one able to imagine that the situation could change: I visited the GDR in summer 1989.

At that time, the GDR was widely perceived as one of the most stable regimes in the Eastern bloc. Social groups were weak, opposition was marginalized, and the repressive capacity of the state appeared unshaken. Almost no one, neither in the public nor in academia, and not even in the intelligence community, expected serious change.[8] Yet by the end of that year, the Berlin Wall had fallen, the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) had collapsed, and the GDR was headed towards reunification with the West. What happened?

Surely, the revolution did not emerge from any strength of established organizations. Opposition groups existed, but their resources were limited, their membership marginal, and their public resonance minimal. The mass mobilization that swept through Leipzig and other East German cities in Fall 1989 was not centrally planned or orchestrated. It emerged instead from spontaneous coordination: individuals, each responding to their own sense of political frustration and situational cues, converged on common sites of action without needing central leadership or dense organizational networks.[9]

Citizens were not mobilized by ideology or party platforms, but by the growing realization that they were not alone in their discontent—and that the risks of action were declining. Key shifts in perception created a new sense of political efficacy: the belief that participation might, this time, make a difference. In the decision to engage, the perceived capacity to act became pivotal.[10]

Participation created feedback effects, and a domino effect emerged. When some individuals took to the streets, others—friends, coworkers, neighbors—began to see protest as feasible. Individual social networks amplified the process: though not centrally organized, they provided trust-based channels for informa-

8 Ash 1990; Walder 1994.
9 Opp 1991; Opp and Gern 1993.
10 Opp 1994.

tion and mutual encouragement. As more people showed up, the perceived costs of joining fell while the benefits rose: each demonstration felt more momentous, more likely to bring real change. People who had publicly conformed to the regime's norms now saw an opportunity to express their true views.[11] A self-reinforcing loop began: action changed expectations, which led to more action, further weakening the regime's grip. And when police and army units refused to intervene—as they did on the pivotal night of October 9 in Leipzig—participants interpreted this as a signal that the regime's coercive capacity was collapsing. From there, mobilization exploded. Within weeks, the system crumbled.

The GDR example shows how radical and unforeseen political change can emerge without powerful social groups, even in the presence of repression. What is necessary is the convergence of individual perceptions and a structure that allows for coordination and a rising expectation of political efficacy.

Halfway between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and today, this hope was first nourished and then shattered by another sequence of events that became history, this time with much sadder outcomes.

In the Arab Spring of 2010/11, a domino effect developed which was very comparable to that in the GDR in 1989. After the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor on December 17, 2010, long-accumulated frustration broke forth. Protests started in Tunisia, on January 5 in Algeria, on January 7 in Jordan, on January 25 in Egypt, and soon in Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, and elsewhere. Only 17 days after the beginning of the Egyptian protests, long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak resigned; soon after, Algerians saw a decades-awaited lifting of the state of emergency in Algeria; and in October, Libya's Muhammad Gaddafi was killed by rebels. But this last event already segued into not-at-all encouraging long-term results of the revolt. Only Tunisia saw some long-term improvement. Syria and Libya fell into devastating civil war. Egypt steered towards an orderly transition to democracy, but in the upcoming elections the only group with the organizational capacity to appeal to voters outside the urban centers was the Muslim Brotherhood— actors that throughout their history had nurtured an exploitative relation with democracy and an opposition to many values that had driven the revolution. So, when once again the military took power, it met a public exhausted and disillusioned by how partitioning representation had perverted its success.[12]

What had been missing was both a working vision and a strategic instrument. With regard to the vision, those pressing for an end to the dictatorship aimed for freedom and democracy as seen in Western societies, without anyone being aware

11 Opp 1991; Kuran 1995.

12 Lynch 2012—of course, without referring to the term "partitioning representation".

of the relationship between the collectivist Western heritage and the working of partitioning representation. The visionary imagination of the revolutionaries did not go beyond implementing the tools offered by traditional democracy. The case of the GDR was no different, but the citizens of the GDR could just enter the Western (i. e., Western German) model. In the long run, this process of just being subsumed into a system developed without them did not satisfy Eastern Germans' efficacy demands, and hence resulted in long-term grievances. But for the moment, it was possible. None of the Islamic societies that joined the Arab Spring had a comparable possibility.

The lack of a strategic instrument has been subject to a discussion that started even before the beginning of the Arab Spring. Back in October 2010, Malcolm Gladwell loudly railed "The next revolution will not be tweeted" against the euphoria of digital movements in the *New Yorker.* He argued with Granovetter's distinction between weak ties and strong ties,[13] and with the American civil rights movement as a historical case study: in this movement, strong relationships had been much more important at the start of the movement than the information channels. Gladwell illustrates this with the example of a small group of young black students who sat down in a café reserved for whites at the beginning of 1960 and waited for hours to be served, with growing media coverage and against growing aggression from whites, just five years after the Emmett Till murder.[14] Without close friendships, many of the activists would not have become involved in the civil rights movement. Gladwell's argument is that to achieve real change, one has to overcome resistance. And that only works through the binding nature of close relationships; the purely informational function of contacts across structural gaps is not enough.[15]

Between December 2010 and the summer of 2011, it looked as if Gladwell was about to be proven wrong but events soon turned otherwise. But even for these movements, there are studies that argue that a core of non-virtual strong ties is needed.[16] And after the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement came to an end without leaving behind any major positive changes, academia and media that had bought into the image of the tech-induced protest movement were soon accused of being internet-centric.[17]

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13 See p. 60 above.

14 Emmett Till was an African American boy whose brutal murder in August 1955 sparked the civil rights movement (Branch 1988).

15 Gladwell 2010.

16 Alaimo 2015; Lowrance 2016.

17 Freelon et al. 2015.

I would argue that the problem is to be found elsewhere. Social movements that want to make lasting change must be able to make complex decisions beyond the question of when and where to meet for the next rally. And social movements that want to implement democracy must be able to make those decisions in a democratically legitimate way. Facebook and the former Twitter, the latter regardless of since being turned into an instrument of populist propaganda, do not allow for that.

The lesson from both 1989 and 2011 is not only that democratic change depends on collective action, but also that this action must be institutionally sustained. In the absence of internal structures for inclusive, legitimate decision-making, even the most inspiring uprisings risk faltering after their initial victories. The problem is not that social movements cannot mobilize—but that they cannot govern. Traditional social media may be sufficient to gather crowds and broadcast grievances, but they are ill-equipped to facilitate the kind of deliberation and strategic coordination that democratic transformation requires.

What is needed is a participatory infrastructure that enables individuals not only to act but also to decide—together. A space where agency does not dissolve into chaos or hierarchy, but is organized, visible, and cumulative. In the next section, we will explore how such an infrastructure might look in today's digitally networked societies—not as another platform of control, but as a distributed framework that connects and empowers diverse actors towards collective democratic capacity.

13.2 Movements From Above

Introducing Civil Democracy does not need permission from those in power. But since it begins as an entirely new, never-before-tested approach, every application case is a helpful demonstration. For this reason, it is good that there are so many collectives that benefit from good decisions made through the inclusion of their members.

Civil Democracy is not a technology reserved for national referendums or post-conflict negotiations. It is a method for inclusive decision-making wherever people share a community of trust. That means it can begin not at the top of society, but wherever individuals care about shared outcomes—from parents organizing childcare in a city district, to members of a religious congregation deciding on common projects, to customers and cooperatives thinking through future priorities.

This flexibility serves two vital purposes for the movement. First, each local or sectoral application functions as a living proof of concept. Second, it offers

something rare to those already in positions of responsibility: a way to lead better. Civil Democracy is not a challenge to their role, but a tool to fulfill it more wisely.

Wherever trust relations exist, Civil Democracy can take root. And wherever it takes root, better decisions can grow.

In times of democratic fatigue, it is easy to grow suspicious of power itself. But the picture is more complex. Leaders entrenching themselves in self-serving networks exist. But many others enter public life with a genuine desire to serve. Civil Democracy is a way to support their mission. By allowing them to share responsibility with citizens and civil society, it allows them to lead with more inclusion, legitimacy, and connection.

From academic research, we know that there are many individuals with an inner drive and self-conception committed to public values, policy participation, compassion, and self-sacrifice, who with higher probability work in the public and nonprofit sectors and demonstrate higher levels of ethical behavior.[18] Across all regions of the world, individuals have exemplified service-oriented leadership —even at personal risk. Nelson Mandela, Václav Havel, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf led their nations not for personal gain, but to restore dignity, rights, and democratic agency. Others have done so with far fewer resources. Thomas Sankara governed Burkina Faso with personal austerity before being assassinated. Rigoberta Menchú and John Lewis risked their lives to fight systemic injustice from within civil society and parliament. Salvador Allende and Marielle Franco died for representing voices long excluded from political power.

These examples remind us that not all power is the enemy. Many mayors, community organizers, and mid-level administrators seek precisely what Civil Democracy offers: a way to engage communities without manipulation, to convene differences without division, and to serve not over but with the people. For such leaders, Civil Democracy is a way to succeed on their own terms. It empowers those who are already motivated to serve, strengthens the ethical core of their institutions, and builds the legitimacy they need to move their communities forward.

So far, we have discussed Civil Democracy mostly in national and global terms. But some of its most immediate and effective applications lie in local communities, especially where people already know each other, share concerns, and are affected by the same decisions. Two such areas are schools and faith communities, where bonds of trust already exist and where today many decisions are made in small circles, leaving others passive or disengaged. Civil Democracy offers

18 Perry and Wise 1990; Ritz et al. 2016; Holt 2018; Meyer-Sahling et al. 2019; Ripoll and Breaugh 2025.

a lightweight structure that invites broader participation without overburdening individuals or undermining existing leadership. In a congregation or parent network, it can bring shared concerns into structured deliberation and strengthen the very social fabric on which such communities rely.

In urban governance, Civil Democracy addresses some of the most urgent dilemmas facing local administrators today. City managers and municipal officials need support in facing structural inefficiencies, shrinking budgets, and growing public expectations, and in navigating the contradictions of privatized service models, inter-agency fragmentation, and legitimacy gaps in public consultation.[19] In this context, Civil Democracy delivers institutional clarity and decision-making legitimacy. It empowers city officials to engage with citizens and civil society in ways that are accountable and efficient. It is compatible with the goals of local government reform, helps overcome the democratic deficits of outsourced services, and strengthens horizontal coordination in metropolitan regions. In collaborative networks, it gives structure to the role of trust and helps turn diffuse participation into real decision-making capacity. From traffic redesign to climate resilience planning, Civil Democracy connects leadership with lived experience, without getting lost in the bureaucratic maze or the theater of public meetings.

Other possible application cases will benefit from the advantage that Civil Democracy is not bound by borders. Far below the global applications discussed above, it is particularly suited to communities that are geographically dispersed but socially cohesive and today often lack formal institutions despite shared values, interests, and challenges. Diaspora populations, for example, often struggle with questions of representation: Who speaks for individuals in exile? How, to give one specific example, can Kurdish communities across several states organize around shared goals? Traditional democratic mechanisms fall short in these contexts.[20] Civil Democracy does not.

The same applies to religious minorities, such as Muslim communities in Europe, which are often accused of being opaque or externally controlled.[21] Civil Democracy offers these communities a way to demonstrate transparency, diversity, and internal legitimacy—without requiring them to conform to institutional models shaped by other cultural contexts.

These examples point to one of Civil Democracy's greatest strengths: its ability to generate legitimate decisions in spaces that conventional democratic tools don't

19 Svara 1990; Nalbandian 1999; Brenner 2004; Feiock 2007.

20 Bauböck 2009; Lafleur 2013; Délano and Gamlen 2014; Gamlen 2014.

21 Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2011; Thomas 2012.

reach. It transforms diffuse networks into deliberative communities—without requiring a state to authorize their voice.

Some of the most strategic applications of Civil Democracy will not happen outside of institutions, but within them. Even established organizations face pressures for legitimacy, renewal, and better decision-making. Civil Democracy's governance model allows institutions that already claim to represent the public or their members to do so in a better and more credible way.

A first and urgent case is public media. Public Service Media (PSM) has long been championed as a democratic resource, tasked with pluralism, accountability, and cultural inclusion. But in many democracies, it now faces declining trust, accusations of political bias, and irrelevance in a fragmented media ecosystem.[22] Scholars have debated whether PSM still serves the public or has become part of the political establishment.[23] Civil Democracy offers an institutional alternative: governance by specialized open actors rather than opaque political appointments. This model allows viewers and civil society actors to participate meaningfully in agenda-setting, content review, and oversight, thus restoring public legitimacy, reducing polarization, and improving content quality through diversified input.

A second promising site for reform is the political party. Parties are already in a continuous debate over reforms to better include their members—through primaries, digital platforms, or policy votes.[24] Without seriously addressing the scarcity problem and without using and further expanding existing trust relations, these often amount to symbolic participation. Elites retain agenda control, and personalization erodes collective deliberation.[25] In contrast, Civil Democracy enables parties to open real deliberative space between members and organized actors, clarifying who speaks for whom and how trust is earned. Parties that adopt it internally can credibly claim a mandate for broader democratic innovation—and are structurally better positioned to implement it nationally. Wherever democratic institutions are expected to listen, but lack the means to do so credibly and effectively, Civil Democracy provides a blueprint for rebuilding trust from within.

Taken together, these cases reveal the overlooked potential of leadership in advancing democratic renewal—not by commanding from above, but by enabling participation from within. Civil Democracy equips institutions and leaders with structure and practical pathways to inclusive legitimacy. Whether in media boards or party branches, city halls or diaspora councils, its principles can be quietly adopted and widely applied. And each successful application makes the next

22 Donders 2016; Van-den-Bulck 2018; Vanhaeght 2019; Sorensen 2020; Iordache and Raats 2023.
23 Jakubowicz 2007; Bardoel and d'Haenens 2008; Donders 2015; Ramsey 2018; Donders 2021.
24 Rahat and Hazan 2010; Van Biezen et al. 2012; Cross and Katz 2013; Sandri 2015.
25 Poguntke and Webb 2005; Barnea and Rahat 2007; Faucher 2015; Scarrow 2015.

one more plausible. What begins as a tool for problem-solving becomes a model for reimagining authority itself—anchored in trust, distributed through deliberation, and sustained by the very people it is meant to serve.

13.3 Movements From Between

Civil Democracy provides the theoretical framework to link empowered individuals and civil society groups for decision-making in their communities in exchange with their leaders. But this theoretical framework needs to be made real in a vital layer of technical infrastructure. Real democratic transformation requires connective infrastructure between citizens and institutions. Just as no energy flows without a grid, no democratic transformation can scale without shared architecture that links initiative to impact, deliberation to decision, and participation to power.

Over the past 30 years, venture capital has created a large number of new giants with monopolies or near-monopolies in their respective markets.[26] Despite all the successes of open-source and small- and medium-sized projects and firms, we have become used to the fact that tech-based big change is implemented by firms aiming for a market dominance that allows for the returns venture capital seeks. And we lament the problematic social and political side effects that go along with this new normality.[27]

On the contrary, the landscape of digital participation is characterized by strong fragmentation. Over the past 15 years, an impressive array of civic technologies has been deployed to improve democratic participation. Among the best known are Decidim, Kialo, LiquidFeedback, DemocracyOS, Citizenlab, Civocracy, vTaiwan, and Loomio. Each claimed to make democratic participation more direct, informed, and scalable.

And yet, a sobering pattern has emerged. Despite their technical sophistication and civic intent, these platforms have largely remained isolated, partial, and structurally uncoordinated. None has sparked a broader shift towards democratic efficacy. None has enabled collective decision-making to scale beyond bounded contexts. And none has transformed the systemic logics of political representation and legitimacy and been able to revert the looming democracy crisis.

Consider LiquidFeedback, which gained visibility through its adoption by the Pirate Party in Germany. Initially praised for its novel combination of delegation and direct voting, LiquidFeedback already aimed to combine the benefits of rep-

26 Srnicek 2017; Philippon 2019; Autor et al. 2020.

27 Srnicek 2017; Zuboff 2019.

resentative and direct democracy, just without seeing the necessity of individualizing representation. Thus, the practical implementation suffered from struggles over the centralization of influence among a few "super-delegates" and over power and procedure. Over time, the enthusiasm for Liquid Democracy's radical promise gave way to recognition of its limitations.[28]

The same arc can be observed with Decidim, Barcelona's ambitious civic tech project. Its launch in 2016 was accompanied by a new political imagination rooted in collective intelligence, democratic innovation, and technopolitical empowerment. The platform enabled rich participatory processes, blending online and offline interaction, and gained a global following. But by 2023, sobering realities had emerged. The platform's expansion into municipal bureaucracies brought with it the tensions of institutional logic: instead of becoming a tool for democracy-driven governance, it was often absorbed into governance-driven democratization—used to legitimize decisions rather than shape them.[29]

This pattern is consistent across platforms. There are many more platforms and tools: one list from 2022 contains 78 entries.[30] But these participation tools mostly continue to operate in non-communicated silos. They neither share identity layers, nor federate decision structures, nor enable cross-platform aggregation of arguments or trust.[31] Indeed this is a classic case of fragmentation: innovative tools abound, but without common standards, shared protocols, or interoperable formats, their effects are atomized. As a result, democratic participation remains bounded to specific platforms, actors, and events, unable to scale across domains or build cumulative power.

But they are the starting points for the necessary "movement from between" to build a broader democratic infrastructure. Civil Democracy's vision does not rest on building a new monopoly behemoth in the form of one single, superior participation platform. As familiar as it is from the world of venture-backed technologies, that model would again concentrate power and stifle diversity. It would not fit what democracy means: distributed agency, plural legitimacy, and resilience through openness. Instead, Civil Democracy rests on a different vision:

28 Deseriis 2022.

29 García et al. 2023; Balcells et al. 2023; Barandiaran et al. 2024.

30 https://airtable.com/shrxxpcHHnMc1xZSx, cited in People Powered, 2022, Guide to Digital Participation Platforms. The 2022 version of the guide is only available at https://civil-democracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Digtial-participation-platforms.pdf; the 2025 version of the Guide (https://www.peoplepowered.org/platform-ratings) links to a list which is rated but shortened to 30 entries.

31 Poblet et al. 2019, esp. pp. 61–65.

weaving together existing tools, actors, and processes into a federated network of decision-making.

To implement Civil Democracy as a working and uniting infrastructure, it needs to provide functionality, integrity, and tolerance, and it needs to address three recurring questions across these three dimensions: Who gets included? What makes the system stable? And how does it grow? The resulting 3 × 3 matrix is presented in Table 13.1.

Functionality requires that a system work well in a rapidly changing world. No single platform, however well designed, can anticipate all the challenges of structuring options, aggregating arguments, or facilitating deliberation. (1) A linked system enables dispersed learning: different platforms can try different approaches, share results, and collectively discover what works. (2) Innovation accelerates when platforms can evolve in parallel rather than await centralized updates.[32] And (3) growth accelerates when the communities of democracy-aware and tech-savvy users linked to them join the movement.

Integrity is about trust and durability. People are more likely to participate in democratic processes when (4) they can do so through platforms they already trust—or can easily leave if trust is lost. A federated system offers this flexibility. It also ensures (5) resilience: if one node falters, others remain. Moreover, (6) legitimacy becomes polycentric. It arises not from a central authority but from mutual recognition among different platforms. Decisions made in one space can be validated, respected, or built upon in others—without requiring uniformity.

Tolerance speaks to democracy's obligation to include diverse voices and worldviews. Political cultures vary. So do ethical preferences around transparency, privacy, and deliberation. A monolithic platform would inevitably exclude or marginalize some of this diversity. (7) A linked system allows for localized cultures to be reflected in design, language, and interaction styles—enabling meaningful participation without forcing conformity. It also supports (8) ethical pluralism: different communities may prioritize different values in possible tradeoffs between anonymity, open deliberation, or consensus-building, and still operate within the same overarching democratic structure. And (9) because each platform brings its own users, organizers, and cultural logic, Civil Democracy grows not through a single campaign, but through community-led adoption, with each node strengthening the whole.

Together, these arguments make clear why Civil Democracy must be implemented as a "linked democracy",[33] not as a single platform. An open, modular,

32 March 1991; Dorf and Sabel 1998; Geels 2002; Sabel and Zeitlin 2012.

33 Poblet et al. 2019, esp. 75–84.

Table 13.1: 3 × 3 demands for the implementation of Civil Democracy.

	Functionality **What works best?**	**Integrity** **What builds trust and resilience?**	**Tolerance** **What fits diverse needs?**
Diversity Who gets included?	*(1) Dispersed Learning* Platforms can explore and share different designs	*(4) Trust Flexibility* Users choose platforms they trust and can switch if needed	*(7) Localized Cultures* Interfaces, languages, and political styles can vary by community
Redundancy What makes it stable?	*(2) Innovation Through Diversity* Parallel development allows for faster evolution of better tools	*(5) Resilience* No single point of failure—if one platform is captured or collapses, others persist	*(8) Ethical Pluralism* Some communities may prioritize privacy, others transparency—both are possible
Scalability How does it grow?	*(3) Strategic Alignment* Movements can adopt Civil Democracy under their own name and grow the ecosystem	*(6) Polycentrism* Legitimacy arises from mutual recognition across platforms, not central control	*(9) Community-Led Growth* Each platform brings new users, norms, and energies into the system

linked architecture invites many actors to contribute, critique, and improve the system from within,[34] in order to give Civil Democracy the capacity to grow as a movement of movements. With the ability to use its own method for making democratic decisions, it always retains the ability to balance anarchic experimentalism with necessary unity, in order to become an infrastructure that belongs to no one but empowers everyone.

13.4 The Time is Ripe (2)

History shows that big societal change occurs when ideas, beyond having become visible, are reinforced through trusted networks and repeated exposure. Change becomes unstoppable when enough people in the right clusters understand, adopt, and support the new norm.[35] Civil Democracy needs enough citizens, enough civil society activists, some decision-makers, and enough funders and programmers to understand its necessity and functioning. What can be said about the

34 Baldwin and Clark 2000; Gawer and Cusumano 2014; van Dijck et al. 2018.
35 Centola 2022.

readiness of today's societies beyond the general observations about value change and generational succession made above?

The big change towards the general acceptance of open-group negotiations in the first transition, as discussed above, needed the failure of fascism, the experiences of surviving soldiers that homogenous groups allow survival in a world without hierarchical structure, the push for secondary education, and the hunger for peace to make democracy seem inevitable when Churchill made his joke in 1947 in a whole continent that in the 1930s had been skeptical about it far beyond Germany. Big changes like this do not occur too often. But we can study another example, one without major war and devastation, to see how an interlocking of previously unconnected developments can make big change possible.

This example is provided by the story of credit card introduction, which nicely exemplifies general insights from research on disruptive change.

The emergence of credit cards in the mid-to-late 20th century completely transformed how we handle money. But this emergence required much more than just a new technology. It required an entire ecology of interlocking changes: banking digitization, interbank standardization, consumer trust, retail scale, regulatory protection, and cultural redefinition of debt and convenience. None of these alone could have done it. But together, they reached a tipping point where adoption became suddenly inevitable. By looking at how credit cards overcame the resistance of banks and changed financial participation forever, we can better understand how a Civil Democracy might revolutionize how we make decisions as a society.

Before credit cards became common, consumer finance was dominated by installment loans (where you pay fixed amounts over time), checks, and lending models that mainly served wealthy people. Banks had built complex systems requiring extensive paperwork, manual approvals, and in-person visits to bank branches. After having worked well for decades, this model increasingly failed to meet the needs of a growing middle class that wanted more financial flexibility. But banks were hesitant to invest in this new technology because the business case wasn't yet proven.[36]

When major changes happen in an industry, they usually begin with small, fragmented alternatives before fully taking over. Disruptive innovations typically start by serving niche markets, gradually gaining strength as conditions evolve. Platform-based solutions often begin as complementary services before eventually replacing established players.[37] Before credit cards became mainstream, we like-

36 Batiz-Lazo and Del Angel 2018.

37 Christensen 2003, 2006; Kumaraswamy et al. 2018; Cozzolino et al. 2018.

wise saw fragmented alternatives like department store charge accounts, traveler's checks, and early bank-issued cards. These hinted at the potential for a more flexible payment system. However, these early solutions were limited—often tied to specific stores or requiring full repayment at the end of each month. Nevertheless, the early credit card systems had to overcome significant resistance from the banking establishment, which didn't immediately see their potential.[38]

Similarly, we have seen throughout the book the many governance experiments occurring today. Each of them demonstrates another aspect of the possibility of alternative ways of making decisions. However, these efforts remain isolated and lack the integrated structure that Civil Democracy provides. Just like the crisis of democracy, the emergence of these alternatives is a reaction to the fact that our traditional voting model is no longer sufficient.

Established institutions often resist transformative change because of entrenched interests, rigid internal processes, and an aversion to risk. Even when inefficiencies become visible, institutional leaders may continue to support legacy systems because of the uncertainty of alternatives.[39] In the credit card case, the initial resistance came from banks' reluctance to move away from highly profitable installment-based lending models. Many banks dismissed credit cards as risky and unnecessary, clinging to their established credit assessment processes. Yet, as the market evolved, their resistance weakened. Finally, and despite longtime skepticism, even major banks had to join the emerging credit card networks.[40]

A new standard becomes dominant when two conditions are given. On the one hand, when the old one fails to respond adequately to changing conditions—as, unfortunately, is the case in the current crisis of partitioning representation. On the other hand, when a viable alternative is already waiting, as is the case with Civil Democracy.

In enabling major changes, public expectations play a crucial role. As societies evolve, institutions that fail to adapt lose their legitimacy in the eyes of the public.[41] In the credit card case, consumer expectations about banking fundamentally changed when more people lived in urban areas, relied on flexible payment options, and expected financial institutions to offer faster, more convenient services. The rapid expansion of credit card networks was a direct response to these changing expectations. They simply filled an unmet need once they gained momentum.

38 Batiz-Lazo and Del Angel 2018.
39 Adner 2002; Christensen 2003, 2006; Danneels 2004; Markides 2006.
40 Batiz-Lazo and Del Angel 2018.
41 Lucas and Goh 2009.

Similarly, today's citizens demand more engagement in political decisions. Social movements, online activism, and decentralized networks demonstrate that people want a more direct role in shaping policies that affect their lives. Civil Democracy meets this expectation by shifting governance from occasional elections to continuous, issue-based decision-making where citizens can participate more directly, and have representative networks of precisely trusted open actors for the many decisions they do not want to bother with.

Innovations that change power structures often introduce new models of interaction that established players cannot easily copy. Systemic change requires an "ecosystem approach", where new models completely replace existing hierarchies rather than simply improving them.[42] For credit cards, the real turning point came when financial institutions moved from single-bank credit schemes to multi-bank networks like Visa and Mastercard, enabling seamless transactions across different merchants and borders. The umbrella organization that later became Visa International established the rules and systems that allowed credit cards to function across international borders, creating a truly global payment network.[43]

In the case of Civil Democracy, the innovation lies in its network-based model of governance. It enables decision-making through interconnected platforms, much like how Visa and Mastercard created a universal financial infrastructure. A voter may be registered on one platform, participate in a decision hosted on another, receive an indirect ranking from trusted open actors using yet other ones, about options entered and with arguments supported using yet other platforms, but always able to experience democratic efficacy by knowing how his actions shaped his specific influence. Just as consumers gradually abandoned cash for more efficient financial tools, citizens are ready to move beyond outdated electoral systems in favor of continuous, participatory, and scalable decision-making. The question is no longer whether Civil Democracy will emerge, but just when and how quickly it will reshape governance as we know it.

Conclusion

Democratic transformation is possible: by drawing strength from below, from above, from between, and at the right time.

42 Tushman and Anderson 1986; Christensen 2003.

43 Batiz-Lazo and Del Angel 2018.

Democracy historically emerged when actors could organize to withhold what regimes required—capital, labor, legitimacy. The singular early cases saw that on the level of households; the 19th and 20th centuries saw it on the level of those demarcated social groups whose dissolution is behind the partitioning misfit. But unexpected radical change remains possible, as historical moments like the GDR in 1989 and the Arab Spring in 2011 show, especially with Civil Democracy providing both the long-term vision and the short-term strategic infrastructure that the latter so dearly missed.

In that change, current leaders need not be opponents. Many seek meaningful engagement but lack tools to involve citizens credibly and constructively as the principles of Civil Democracy allow. For them, its path to legitimacy through structured inclusion, and to participation-strengthened leadership is a viable offer.

Between these two levels, an infrastructure is needed for which central building blocks already exist. They just need to be linked. Only a federated, interoperable architecture can support the diversity, trust, and growth Civil Democracy needs.

These insights provide good hints for the time being ripe. Major change requires interlocking developments of readiness, discontent, and a viable alternative. That alignment is now within reach. Civil Democracy offers the way to move from fragmentation to formation and from democratic decline to democratic design. The next step is ours.

14 Redoing Democracy

You have reached the end of this book. The project it invites is just starting. The pages behind us have reviewed a system that no longer makes sense to many of those it claims to represent. What lies ahead is not a conclusion, but a beginning, and one that no author, expert, or government can undertake alone.

If you've come this far, something has kept you engaged. Perhaps a feeling that the world is changing too quickly for old frameworks to hold. Perhaps seeing growing political dysfunction, rising conflict, or democratic fatigue. Perhaps simply the desire to believe that things can still get better.

This chapter is written for that part of you.

It will not summarize everything that came before. Instead, it will point to what lies ahead. It will specify what is possible and what is necessary. It will outline the beginning of a new kind of politics—not a new party, not a new ideology, but a new capacity to act together in a way that is more honest, more flexible, and more responsible than what we currently have.

At the heart of this book is the claim that democracy thrives when people experience it as meaningful. Not merely as a right on paper, but as a practice that makes their voices heard, their decisions consequential, and their participation worthwhile. That experience has a name: democratic efficacy.

It is this sense of democratic efficacy that has eroded. Not only in fragile democracies, but in the most established ones too. Citizens go to the polls and see little difference in outcomes. They deliberate and find that no one is listening. They organize but see success only for those who flatten nuance and silence complexity.

This failure is not the fault of the people. It is the fault of institutions that no longer fit the social world they are meant to govern. "Partitioning representation", the model of democracy that demands people choose one party, one identity, one representative, worked under simpler social conditions, in a few specific parts of the world. In today's individualized, networked, and plural world, it traps us in artificial choices and declining trust.

The necessary way out has been described as "Civil Democracy". It is built on two institutional innovations: meta-decision freedom, which allows citizens to choose how and when to participate; and actor openness, which replaces fixed hierarchies with dynamic, transparent relationships between political actors and those they represent.

Together, these create conditions in which democratic efficacy can return, or in many parts of the world be experienced for the first time. Civil Democracy

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111827902-015

turns people from participants into co-authors of the future. A deeper sense of belonging and agency is its core promise. Better decisions will follow.

From the beginning of history, we have experienced politics as domination. This legacy runs deep. Across continents and centuries, the primary political experience has been shaped by coercion: rulers issuing commands, subjects obeying, dissent punished. Even modern democracy was only able to give us a voice when we conformed to certain expectations. This long historical pattern has left its mark on our cultures and psychologies. We have become used to *not* being responsible. We have become accustomed to waiting for others to act, to blame others when things go wrong, and to see our own power as conditional on recognition by superior forces. It has been an artificially extended collective childhood. The last centuries, with all their convulsions and at times dreadful violence, are part of a likewise long-stretching adolescence of mankind: a collective state of suspended maturity, in which the capacity for responsibility becomes present but is still underdeveloped—held back by institutions that reinforce dependency.

Civil Democracy proposes to finish this adolescence and enter into adulthood. It does not assume that responsibility will emerge automatically. Rather, it creates the conditions under which responsibility can grow: through structured participation, meaningful choice, and visible impact. People cannot be expected to act responsibly in a system that systematically disempowers them. But when decisions become traceable, when delegation becomes voluntary and transparent, and when outcomes are experienced as jointly owned, responsibility begins to emerge.

This is not only true at the individual level. It is true for groups, too. Many of today's most enduring conflicts stem from long-standing asymmetries in agency, with some benefiting from partitioning representation while others lose out. Reconciliation begins when both sides see eye to eye, both acknowledging destructive dynamics and their own responsibility for their continuation. Only that offers a shared future in which responsibility is rebalanced.

Civil Democracy enables this rebalancing. It offers democratic agency without the Western industrial preconditions traditional democracy demanded. It allows for the mutual recognition that no one can be secure unless everyone has the capacity to shape the world we live in. In all long-standing conflicts, reconciliation begins when people are given the tools to act together despite history. Civil Democracy provides those tools to make tensions governable, turning a system for better decisions into a structure for livable peace.

The last chapter discussed how movements can be catalysts for change. The work ahead does not start with laws, parliaments, or grand summits. It will begin with people. A few individuals, somewhere, will send a signal—not by issuing a manifesto, but by acting together in a new way. That signal may come from a town where citizens want to break through civic apathy. It may come from a pub-

lic broadcaster seeking new forms of legitimacy and connection. It may come from a transnational movement—for climate, peace, or justice—that has realized that protest is not enough, and that delegation must be earned.

Wherever it begins, the first act is the same: a group of people commits to making decisions together with shared responsibility and visible structure. They agree to a rhythm. They define an agenda. They reach out to others. They deliberate, they vote, they reflect. Their decisions carry forward, they evolve, they invite correction. And most importantly, they invite others to join.

Each and every decision is an exhibit of this living process. A proof that cooperation, representation, and complexity can coexist. Each successful step generates trust—and trust generates reach. From ten to a hundred, from a hundred to thousands. This is not viral growth in the shallow sense of social media replication. It is complex contagion: the kind of behavioral spread that takes root only when people see that others like them are already doing it.

This process can be organized. It needs decision sequences: structured paths of interlinked decisions that begin with achievable goals, build mutual understanding, and prepare a culture of responsibility. It includes the steps discussed in Chapter 8: network extension, goal-setting, information-sharing, idea generation, drafting, negotiation, iteration, and accountability. The model is ready. It just needs to go live.

Movements do not begin by mass appeal. They begin with signals of commitment. What matters is not the number of participants in the first weeks—but the quality of their engagement, the clarity of their purpose, and the ability to model a future worth joining. If you are reading this, you may be among those first few. The movement of movements begins with someone who recognizes that the time of waiting is over—and that the work of redoing democracy is ready to be started. Civil Democracy is designed for plural contributions, allowing each to do what they are uniquely positioned to offer.

In Chapter 2, we met Clarence, Catia, Thomas, and Vivianne—not as ideal types, but as real-world figures with imperfect lives and evolving commitments. Each of them represented a type of democratic actor, shaped by their experience and disposition. Clarence's enthusiasm is contagious and builds momentum. Catia's clarity helps to find the right strategy. Thomas provides both grounded critique and dependable effort. Vivianne was an example of those who can open doors to important resources, be it knowledgeable open actors, media relations, or funding. None of them brings perfection, impressive titles, or ready-made followers. It is their willingness to start anyway, their initiative and commitment that counts.

So, where do you begin? It doesn't matter which of these (if any) you resemble. What matters is that you step forward. That you take responsibility. That you

act—as yourself, and together with others. Civil Democracy does not need perfect people. It needs those who are willing to give it a try. What role you play is less important than the fact that you choose to play one—now, not later.

Imagine a society where political conversation is not dominated by partisanship, cynicism, or fear, but shaped by curiosity, clarity, and shared responsibility. Where decisions aren't made behind closed doors or in media spectacles, but through visible, inclusive processes. Where citizens participate because they know they can make a difference—and because they have seen that it works.

In such a society, differences remain—but are channeled constructively. Representation is no longer a one-time delegation or a fixed bundle of loyalties but a dynamic relationship. People who lack time are not excluded, because they can delegate transparently. People with knowledge are not sidelined, because their contributions can be recognized and trusted. And democracy becomes what it was always meant to be: a collective capacity to build a future worth living.

To contribute to this vision, you just need to jump on board.

The path ahead is not scripted. It will not unfold according to a central plan. But it does have a shape—and that shape is already forming wherever people are willing to act with responsibility, humility, and courage. Civil Democracy is not waiting for approval. It is waiting for participants. For you.

Perhaps you are the kind of person who builds. Or translates. Or stabilizes. Or questions. Perhaps you have never seen yourself as political. What matters is not your ideology, your expertise, or your past. What matters is your willingness to shape the future—together with others, transparently, responsibly. This is not about joining the "right side". It is about building the shared side—the place from which decisions can be made across difference, with integrity, with care, and with courage. Join others you know, or write to join@civil-democracy.org.

History doesn't change itself. We do.

Thank you for joining me in rethinking democracy. Redoing democracy begins now, with you. The world will be ready to turn the tide when you are.

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Civil Democracy Glossary

Abstention from ranking
The deliberate choice by a citizen or actor not to submit a ranking for a specific decision. It preserves autonomy, prevents uninformed input, and allows the system to redistribute influence without distortion.

Actor openness
A principle that allows any actor—political party, NGO, expert, individual, or informal network figure—to take on a representative role, provided they are willing to publicly disclose how they rank decision options.

Civil Democracy
A new model of democracy built on the principles of individualized participation and individualized representation. It enables citizens to either vote directly or be represented by trusted actors of their own choosing.

Collective meta-decisions
Group-level decisions about how decisions should be structured—what options are included, what rules are used, or how results are validated.

Decision-easing
The process of reducing the cognitive burden of participation by offering voters a draft ranking based on their trust portfolio. Voters can modify this draft as they see fit, preserving autonomy while lowering entry barriers.

Decision proposal
A suggested ranking of options provided to a citizen based on their trust portfolio. It serves as a starting point for participation and can be accepted as is or modified before submission.

Democratic efficacy
Political efficacy institutionalized through predictable and repeatable ways of participation, resulting in the experience that formal political action leads to real, institutionally enabled outcomes.

Dialogical capacity (efficacy-based)
The ability to remain open to dialogue, even across difference, because one feels one's voice matters and one's perspective has weight. It emerges when citizens experience democratic efficacy and erodes when they feel powerless or unheard.

Direct democratic efficacy
The experience of having a tangible, personal impact on public decisions by participating directly—through voting, proposing, or deliberating. Often associated with referendums or assemblies, it reinforces citizens' sense of control and relevance.

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Formal political action
Formally institutionalized political participation. Traditionally, voting. In Civil Democracy, a citizen's act of entering a ranked preference for a decision option—whether directly via participation or indirectly through their indirect ranking.

Indirect democratic efficacy
The experience of political influence mediated through trusted representatives. Historically delivered through party-based group representation, it now requires new mechanisms to remain effective in individualized societies.

Indirect ranking
A ranked preference list constructed by combining the rankings of the actors a citizen trusts, weighted according to that trust. It enables meaningful representation without the distortions of fixed group-based delegation.

Individual trust storage
The secure infrastructure, typically digital, that records which actors a citizen trusts to represent them, and to what degree. It enables the dynamic generation of indirect rankings and allows citizens to adjust their representational settings at any time.

Meta-decision freedom
The institutionalized freedom for each citizen to choose for any decision whether to participate directly or to be represented. Turning the delegation of political agency into a personal decision, it solves the tension between direct and representative democracy.

Motivational responsibility
The willingness to act with care and foresight because one knows one's actions influence outcomes. It arises from experiencing efficacy and forms the moral core of sustainable democratic engagement.

Open actor
An individual or organization that accepts the role of representation by publicly disclosing their rankings and remaining open to trust from others. Open actors form the core infrastructure of individualized representation.

Option acceptance
An expression that an option, while perhaps not preferred, is acceptable and would be supported over doing nothing. Distinguishing acceptance from preference helps prevent majority tyranny and promotes compromise.

Option-ranking
The act of ordering decision options from most to least preferred. In Civil Democracy, this forms the core unit of participation, whether entered into directly by the voter or derived from their trusted actors.

Option selection
The act of designating one or more options as preferred among those presented. It is the final outcome of a ranking process and determines which alternative is enacted.

Partitioning misfit
The structural disconnect between individualized citizens and institutions still organized around partitioned group identities. It describes the representational breakdown at the heart of the current democratic crisis.

Partitioning representation
A traditional model of political representation based on dividing society into non-overlapping groups (classes, parties, or territories), each of which is assigned exclusive representatives. This structure matched Western mid-20th century social conformity but does not fit structurally individualized societies.

Pluralist solidarity
A civic ethos in which individuals recognize the legitimacy of others' views, even when divergent, and share responsibility for collective outcomes. It grows when efficacy and fairness are present and is vital for sustaining democracy under diversity.

Political efficacy
A person's belief that they can understand politics and influence outcomes. Divided into internal (self-confidence) and external (system responsiveness), it is subjective and not necessarily tied to institutional reality.

Private efficacy
The felt ability to exert control in one's personal life—whether in family, work, or community. It supports political efficacy by sustaining the basic emotional resources (confidence, clarity, self-worth) needed for public engagement.

Scarcity problem
The persistent human limitation of time, attention, and cognitive capacity that restricts meaningful participation. It explains the need for flexible, trust-based delegation and motivates the design of meta-decision freedom.

Structural individualization
A long-term transformation in which social life becomes increasingly shaped by personal networks rather than the stable group memberships which previously ensured opinion similarity within a group.

Trust portfolios / representation portfolios
The set of actors a citizen selects to represent them across decisions. Each actor is assigned a weight, reflecting the degree of trust a citizen places in them. These weights are used to calculate indirect rankings. These portfolios are individualized, adaptable, and reflect each citizen's unique pattern of political trust and alignment.

Vote detachment
A core feature of traditional voting systems in which the connection between a citizen and their vote is deliberately broken at the moment of submission. While ensuring secrecy, it prevents adaptive participation and disables individualized representation.

Win/loss tracking
A mechanism that tracks how often a citizen or group ends up on the losing side of decisions. If persistent, it is possible to respond by weighting their voice more heavily in future rounds—countering structural exclusion and restoring legitimacy.

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