Editorial: The future of democracy

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Future of Democracy

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Researchers and other observers of democracy have already for many years been deeply concerned about the state of democracy in the world. While some glimpses of hope remain, global reports of democracy have consistently demonstrated democratic decline, or backsliding, even in stable and established democracies. It has taken many forms across the entire spectrum of democratic nations. One of the most serious concerns is backsliding in some Western democracies, which have widely been considered as having very stable democratic systems. One of the most notable examples, such as in the US (Garnett et al. 2022), is the decline in electoral integrity, which is a crucial element in all conceptions of modern democracy. Moreover, Wuttke et al. (2020) demonstrate that even in some European countries young people in particular do not seem to genuinely support democratic values. Indeed, Freedom House concludes in their 2023 'Freedom in the world' report that global freedom has declined for 17 years in a row.

Scholars have responded by intensifying their efforts to study the current state of democracy in the world as well as its future. The articles in this Research Topic contribute in various ways to that endeavor. Lionel Marquis, Ursina Kuhn and Gian-Andrea Monsch use longitudinal data from Switzerland from 1999 to 2020 to study whether experiencing a sequence of crises – financial crisis, Covid-19, climate change etc. – depoliticizes or activates citizens. Some key points emerge from a multitude of findings. It seems that the cohorts, which now have at most reached middle age, are less engaged than the older cohorts are. Whether this can be attributed to generational differences is debatable. However, younger people demonstrate higher levels of political trust, which bears an optimistic message about the future of democracy. Moreover, as the authors observe, the younger cohorts may possess a great deal of potential for engagement, which is not yet showing.

One possible way in which ordinary citizens in the future might want to engage in democracy is through various deliberative mechanisms. Didier Caluwaerts, Kamil Bernaerts, Rebekka Kesberg, Lien Smets and Bram Spruyt conduct a systematic review of studies from different scientific disciplines regarding the ability of deliberation to decrease opinion polarization. Much is at stake, as the authors argue, since the increased polarization within Western democracies is quickly becoming a destructive force. Democratic deliberation, according to theory at least, could provide a solution. Empirical findings from political science give reason for some optimism. Deliberation is defined more loosely in other disciplines, which does not seem to bring out the effects of deliberation as clearly. The findings imply that it is only deliberation under specific circumstances that has the power to curb polarization: it needs to be properly facilitated and preferably occur among groups consisting of people with different

political views. While this is encouraging, the authors call for more work regarding the conditions that produce positive results.

While rescuing the future of democracy by introducing more deliberation would require some fundamental changes in the way representative institutions are responsive to citizens' demands between elections, Reuven Shapira discusses one example of making more subtle changes. As he points out, one important aspect in the current democratic backsliding is the lack of sufficiently durable mechanisms for ensuring change in executive power. In many countries, which have experienced backsliding, elected heads of state have managed to consolidate their grip on power in a way, which has been detrimental to the quality of democracy. Shapira suggests super-majority thresholds as a means of making reelection more difficult for incumbents. Although there are different conceivable versions, the basic idea is to increase the required share of votes needed by an incumbent so that it becomes more difficult for the incumbent to get reelected multiple times. Additionally, by requiring a larger vote share for reelection, the incumbent could be incentivized to rule in a way that attracts as many people as possible, further making it less likely that the incumbent could use his or her base to become an autocratic leader. As democracy struggles globally, Shapiro's suggestion invites to discussing whether we should be bolder in reforming voting systems, which, after all, essentially determine democratic output.

Finally, as a sobering reminder to all democracy scholars, Jan-Erik Refle makes the important point that democracy itself is a contested concept. Even in Western democracies, which we often tend to see as societies that are fundamentally quite similar, understandings of what democracy entails can vary significantly. From the viewpoint of measuring attitudes towards democracy, the multitude of different conceptions among survey respondents means that the responses can hardly reflect a shared understanding. Moreover, social desirability drives respondents in many countries towards expressing positive views about democracy, which results in minimal variation across individual responses. For some respondents, democracy is not familiar enough for them to provide meaningful responses to all items, which causes problems with non-opinions or missing data. To address the multidimensionality of democracy and to account for how people usually associate different properties of democracy with one another, Refle experiments with a question format where respondents are asked to assign points to individual elements of democracy. They can assign a total of 100 points in whichever item they like, thus revealing what they consider (un)important, and also how what kinds of associations they make. Although the method shows some promise, Refle also reminds that personal interviews might be required to capture the entire range of associations across various aspects of democracy.

In sum, the articles address the future of democracy with different techniques and objectives, but what they all have in common is that they approach democracy from a citizen perspective. In doing so, the articles seem to offer hope to those who are concerned about the future of democracy. People do not necessarily become entirely disillusioned with democracy despite a heightened insecurity resulting from various crises, but instead they may become a bit more trusting of a democratic political system. Deliberation shows great potential in building bridges between people holding politically opposing views, and in adjusting existing rules to facilitate positive democratic development. This is in line with what the latest 'Freedom in the world' report 2023 by Freedom House finds, namely that there are signs suggesting that

democratic decline may already have reached its peak. We may finally be close to reversing the negative trend that has lasted for almost two decades.

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