

Research Paper

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The Future of Democracy in Europe

Technology and the Evolution of Representation



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Summary

- There is a widespread sense that liberal democracy is in crisis, but little consensus exists on the specific nature and causes of the crisis. In particular, there are three prisms through which the crisis is usually seen: the rise of ‘populism’, ‘democratic deconsolidation’, and a ‘hollowing out’ of democracy. Each reflects normative assumptions about democracy.
- The exact role of digital technology in the crisis is disputed. Despite the widely held perception that social media is undermining democracy, the evidence for this is limited. Over the longer term, the further development of digital technology could undermine the fundamental preconditions for democracy – though the pace and breadth of technological change make predictions about its future impact difficult.
- Democracy functions in different ways in different European countries, with political systems on the continent ranging from ‘majoritarian democracies’ such as the UK to ‘consensual democracies’ such as Belgium and Switzerland. However, no type seems to be immune from the crisis. The political systems of EU member states also interact in diverse ways with the EU’s own structure, which is problematic for representative democracy as conventionally understood, but difficult to reform.
- Political parties, central to the model of representative democracy that emerged in the late 18th century, have long seemed to be in decline. Recently there have been some signs of a reversal of this trend, with the emergence of parties that have used digital technology in innovative ways to reconnect with citizens. Traditional parties can learn from these new ‘digital parties’.
- Recent years have also seen a proliferation of experiments in direct and deliberative democracy. There is a need for more experimentation in these alternative forms of democracy, and for further evaluation of how they can be integrated into the existing institutions and processes of representative democracy at the local, regional, national and EU levels.
- We should not think of democracy in a static way – that is, as a system that can be perfected once and for all and then simply maintained and defended against threats. Democracy has continually evolved and now needs to evolve further. The solution to the crisis will not be to attempt to limit democracy in response to pressure from ‘populism’ but to deepen it further as part of a ‘democratization of democracy’.

1. Introduction

There is a widespread sense that liberal democracy is in crisis, and that the rapid development and proliferation of digital technology has something to do with it. But how exactly to understand the crisis, and the role of technology in it, is far from clear. Many see digital technology as an important driver of the crisis, and perhaps even as its main driver. Others – and not just technology companies and their cheerleaders – see digital technology as at least part of the solution.

This research paper focuses on the relationship between democracy and digital technology in Europe.¹ To the extent that perceptions of a crisis in liberal democracy in Europe can be confirmed, the paper investigates the nature of the problem and its causes, and asks what part, if any, digital technology plays in it.² In particular, it explores arguments that the development and prevalence of digital technology are undermining democracy in Europe. The paper further considers whether, and how, the crisis might be addressed and democracy revitalized – and how digital technology might help in this revitalization.

Until recently, fundamental questions around the state of democracy in Europe or the US received relatively little attention in the foreign policy debate. Where Western foreign policy think-tanks focused on democracy at all, they tended to consider how it could be promoted and supported *elsewhere* in the world. In the last few years – and in particular since the decision by the British people to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 – there has been a proliferation of projects that seek to ‘defend’, ‘protect’ or ‘secure’ democracy within Europe and the US. But these projects tend to focus on ‘foreign interference’ in Western democracies – and in particular on the use of digital technology by authoritarian states such as China and Russia to ‘polarize and pervert the politics of democratic societies’, as one Washington, DC-based think-tank puts it.³

In the last few years – and in particular since the decision by the British people to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 – there has been a proliferation of projects that seek to ‘defend’, ‘protect’ or ‘secure’ democracy within Europe and the US.

It is understandable that foreign policy think-tanks should focus on this external aspect of the crisis of liberal democracy in Europe and the US. But doing so inevitably tends to suggest that the crisis is driven primarily by external actors. It ignores the *internal* problems with the way democracy functions and has evolved in the past few decades. This research paper takes a different approach, starting from the assumption that any crisis of liberal democracy is driven primarily by internal forces (though,

¹ In this research paper, ‘Europe’ refers to the whole of the continent as a geographic space rather than to the European Union or its member states, but does not include Russia and Turkey.

² The analysis – particularly in Chapter 2 – partly draws on and develops material published by the author during the research project that informed this paper. See Kundnani, H. (2018), ‘Digital technology and the crisis of liberal democracy’, Commission on Democracy and Technology in Europe, 25 September 2018, <https://demtech.chathamhouse.org/digital-technology-and-the-crisis-of-liberal-democracy/>.

³ Centre for a New American Security (undated), ‘Countering High-Tech Illiberalism’, <https://www.cnas.org/countering-high-tech-illiberalism>.

of course, external actors may seek to exploit the situation). It examines these drivers and explores how the challenges might ultimately be solved by making democracy in Europe more responsive to citizens – in part through the use of digital technology.

Democracy is notoriously difficult to define beyond the basic idea of popular sovereignty – or, in the famous formulation that President Abraham Lincoln used in the Gettysburg Address in 1863, ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’. There have of course been multiple forms of democracy in different historical periods and in different parts of the world. For the purposes of this paper, the only assumption about the form that democracy should take in Europe is that it must be *liberal* democracy: in other words, a system of popular sovereignty together with guaranteed basic rights, including freedom of association and expression and checks and balances to prevent the emergence of a ‘tyranny of the majority’.

Although the terms ‘liberal democracy’ and ‘representative democracy’ are often used interchangeably, they are actually quite distinct concepts. It is possible, for example, to imagine a more direct democracy that would also be liberal in the sense of guaranteeing basic rights. This paper does not assume that representative democracy, which emerged as the dominant form of democracy in Europe and North America in the late 18th century, should forever remain the form that democracy takes in Europe. In fact, one way of understanding the current crisis is as a crisis of the representative model, which may no longer satisfy European citizens. This paper explores, among other things, some ways in which it might be possible to move beyond representative democracy and, in doing so, increase rather than reduce the quality of democracy in Europe.

The paper is structured as follows. Chapter 2 explores three different prisms through which the crisis of liberal democracy in Europe can be understood: ‘populism’, ‘democratic deconsolidation’ and a ‘hollowing out’ of democracy. Chapter 3 examines several different ways in which the development of technology may already be impacting, and may in future impact, democracy in Europe. Chapter 4 examines in detail how democracy currently works in Europe, and in particular the complex picture of democratic institutions and processes across the continent. Chapter 5 assesses the potential for a revitalization of political parties, which have been central to the model of representative democracy to date. Chapter 6 explores experiments in participatory democracy that could complement or ultimately even replace representative democracy.

Chapter 7 draws some conclusions. However, as the chapters preceding it will attempt to show, the crisis of liberal democracy and the development of digital technology are both hugely complex subjects about which there is much uncertainty. This is despite the tendency by many who write about them to suggest there are simple answers. Defining the relationship between the crisis of liberal democracy and digital technology is extremely difficult. Rather than reaching premature conclusions, this paper aims to establish a conceptual framework for further research: to map the terrain, as it were. It argues that, while the development of digital technology is a factor in the crisis of liberal democracy in Europe, it is not, as some analysts suggest, the main driver of the crisis and may even ultimately help to solve the crisis.

2. What Crisis of Liberal Democracy?

A number of indicators point to a state of dysfunction in democracy in Europe. Satisfaction with democracy has been declining.⁴ The party system has changed dramatically with the rise of radical political parties, which has increased the overall number of parties in many European legislatures and may diminish the effectiveness and ideological coherence of governments. Over the past few decades, there has been a general decline in voter turnout in many European countries, particularly among groups such as younger or less well-educated voters. There has also been a decline in the membership of political parties – and a rise in electoral volatility as voters have become more likely to change affiliation. As a result of these trends, some fear that Europe may be part of a worldwide ‘democratic recession’.⁵

However, it is worth remembering that the perception of a crisis of democracy has existed for as long as democracy itself. As David Runciman puts it, ‘the onward march of democracy has been accompanied by a constant drumbeat of intellectual anxiety’.⁶ One of the strengths of democracies seems to be their ability to reform and renew themselves – indeed, crises can be the catalyst for such reform and renewal. In these moments, it can be quite difficult to distinguish a democracy that is working well from one that is working badly. Advanced democracies do currently seem to be going through just such a moment. Yet if there is a crisis in at least this sense, there is little consensus about its causes and how to solve it. This chapter discusses three distinct ways of interpreting the situation.

Populism

Perhaps the most prevalent prism through which the crisis is often seen is the concept of ‘populism’. At a famous conference on populism at the London School of Economics and Political Science in May 1967, Richard Hofstadter gave a talk entitled ‘Everyone is talking about populism but no one can define it’.⁷ Although political scientists such as Cas Mudde and Jan-Werner Müller have since come up with precise definitions, there is still no shared definition.⁸ Moreover, academic definitions often exclude some of the figures, movements and parties, particularly on the left, that are routinely described as populist in policy debates. In practice, populism is often used as a ‘label that political elites attach to policies supported by ordinary citizens that they don’t like’, as Francis Fukuyama put it.⁹

⁴ See Foa, R. S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and Williams, R. (2020), *Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020*, Centre for the Future of Democracy, January 2020, <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/DemocracyReport2020.pdf>.

⁵ Diamond, L. (2015), ‘Facing up to the Democratic Recession’, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2015, pp. 141–55, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Diamond-26-1_0.pdf.

⁶ Runciman, D. (2013), *The Confidence Trap. A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. xii. On the history of democracy as a ‘history of crisis’, see also Nolte, P. (2012), *Was ist Demokratie? Geschichte und Gegenwart* [What is Democracy? Past and Present], Munich: C. H. Beck, pp. 19–20.

⁷ An account of the conference can be found in Berlin, I. et al. (1968), ‘To Define Populism’, *Government and Opposition*, Volume 3, Number 2, April 1968, pp. 137–79. The paper was subsequently published under a different title. See Hofstadter, R. (1969), ‘North America’, in Ionescu, G. and Gellner, E. (1969), *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp. 16–18.

⁸ Mudde, C. (2004), ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition*, 2004, Vol. 39 (4), pp. 542–63; and Müller, J.-W. (2016), *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁹ Fukuyama, F. (2016), ‘American Political Decay or Renewal?’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2016, pp. 58–68, here p. 68.

In the past few years, the concept has been applied to an extraordinary range of figures, movements and parties in Europe – and even, in the case of Brexit, to a *decision*. The effect of this inflationary use of the term has been to obscure the heterogeneity of populism.¹⁰ Analysts have tended to emphasize the similarities rather than differences between the diverse figures, movements and parties, whether on the left or right, that are sometimes described as populist. This has prompted misleading generalizations about what such actors and/or organizations stand for. For example, scholars of populism and other analysts who think of the crisis of liberal democracy in terms of populism often talk about a generic ‘populist playbook’ as if all populists operated on the basis of identical political logic.

The complexity and heterogeneity of populism mean that it is difficult to generalize about its implications for democracy in Europe.

Analysis of the causes of populism has been divided between explanations that focus on cultural factors and those that emphasize economic factors. Cultural factors include opposition to changes in values since the 1960s, anger about immigration, and racism and Islamophobia. Economic factors include wage stagnation, the loss of manufacturing jobs, growing inequality, and economic insecurity or ‘precariousness’. Yet in no national or regional context can support for populist figures, movements or parties simply be reduced to either set of factors, though their relative weight may differ from one context to the next. Instead, populism is a function of a complex interaction between both sets of factors – as well other factors such as digital technology – that we are only beginning to understand.

The complexity and heterogeneity of populism mean that it is difficult to generalize about its implications for democracy in Europe. So-called populists are often seen as a threat to liberal democracy. But left-wing parties that are described as populist are unlikely to restrict minority rights, for example, in the way that many fear far-right parties will. Many left-wing parties, such as Spain’s Podemos, emerged out of protest movements against austerity and actually stand for a radical deepening of democracy. However, because some of the leaders of parties such as Podemos admire South American socialist leaders like the late Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, some observers fear that, if elected into government, they would seek to abolish checks and balances and consolidate power in their own hands. Some argue that Syriza sought to do this while it was in power in Greece between 2015 and 2019.

Even to describe all right-wing populists as straightforwardly ‘anti-democratic’ is too simple. In Germany, for example, politicians and media outlets often characterize the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) as *demokratiefeindlich*, or ‘hostile to democracy’, and refer to the other parties as ‘democratic forces’ by contrast. But in some ways the AfD has revitalized democracy in Germany: 1.2 million of the 5.9 million people who voted for it in the 2017 general election were previously non-voters. As a result, the AfD helped raise turnout from 72 per cent in 2013 to 77 per cent in 2017. Other populist parties in Europe, including those on the far right, have had a similar effect in reintegrating alienated voters into the democratic process. Thus, however abhorrent their views may be, there is nevertheless, as Yascha Mounk puts it, ‘something democratic about the energy that propels ‘populist’ parties’.¹¹

¹⁰ On the heterogeneity of populism, see Manow, P. (2018), *Die politische Ökonomie des Populismus* [The political economy of populism], Berlin: Suhrkamp.

¹¹ Mounk, Y. (2018), *The People vs. Democracy. Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 52.

Seeking a more precise definition, many analysts have adopted the term ‘illiberal democracy’ in talking about populism in Europe. The concept was first used by Fareed Zakaria in 1997 to describe non-Western democracies whose elected governments were ‘routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms’.¹² Many fear that left-wing and right-wing populists in Europe could do the same, though it is not clear whether this view interprets illiberal democracy as a stable model or simply as a stage on the way towards authoritarianism. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has explicitly embraced the idea of ‘illiberal democracy’.¹³ But analysts like Jan-Werner Müller argue that it should be rejected altogether because it allows figures such as Orbán to claim democratic legitimacy.¹⁴

Democratic deconsolidation

A second way to understand the crisis is through the concept of ‘democratic deconsolidation’ – that is, the transition of a democracy into an authoritarian state. Political scientists used to believe that a democracy was irreversibly consolidated once power had changed hands peacefully several times, as this signalled it would no longer revert to authoritarianism. Democratic consolidation was widely believed to be closely linked to economic development – no established democracy with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita over about \$14,000 in today’s terms had ever collapsed – and was thus understood as part of the process of a state’s modernization.¹⁵ This made democracy in Europe seem extremely stable. But in recent years, this confidence has been challenged.

Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk have drawn attention to data suggesting that, across the West, the percentage of people who say it is ‘essential’ to live in a democracy has plummeted.¹⁶ People have become ‘more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives’.¹⁷ In particular, Foa and Mounk identify a ‘democratic disconnect’ among millennials (those born after 1980) that cannot be attributed to an ‘age’ rather than ‘cohort’ effect – that is, they are not likely to change their views of democracy over time. There is no reason to think that this generation will become more committed to democracy as its members get older.

These findings are a matter of some dispute, however. Some have argued that overall support for democracy and for non-democratic alternatives has not changed much in the past two decades. In particular, millennials in Western democracies are not very different in their views of political systems than young people in the mid-1990s were.¹⁸ Others have argued that young people are

¹² Zakaria, F. (1997), ‘The Rise of Illiberal Democracy’, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1997, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy>.

¹³ Website of the Hungarian Government (2014), ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp’, 30 July 2014, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>.

¹⁴ See, for example, Müller, J.-W. (2016), ‘The Problem with “Illiberal Democracy”’, Project Syndicate, 21 January 2016, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-problem-with-illiberal-democracy-by-jan-werner-mueller-2016-01>; and Müller, J.-W. (2018), ‘“Democracy” Still Matters’, *New York Times*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/05/opinion/hungary-viktor-orban-populism.html>.

¹⁵ Przeworski, A. and Papaterra, F. (1997), ‘Modernization: Theories and Facts’, *World Politics*, Volume 49, Issue 2, pp. 155–83. See also Mounk (2018), *The People vs. Democracy*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Foa, R. S. and Mounk, Y. (2016), ‘The Democratic Disconnect’, *Journal of Democracy*, July 2016, pp. 5–17, <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Foa%26Mounk-27-3.pdf>; and Foa, R. S. and Mounk, Y. (2017), ‘The Signs of Deconsolidation’, *Journal of Democracy*, January 2017, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/02_28.1_Foa-Mounk-pp-5-15.pdf.

¹⁷ Foa and Mounk (2016), ‘The Democratic Disconnect’, p. 7.

¹⁸ Voeten, E. (2017), ‘Are people really turning away from democracy?’, *Journal of Democracy*, 28 April 2017, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Journal-of-Democracy-Web-Exchange-Voeten_0.pdf.

actually more enthusiastic about democracy than older people are.¹⁹ There is also a lack of clarity about the relationship between democratic deconsolidation and populism. Many assume that those less committed to democracy might tend to vote for populist figures and parties. But some have also suggested that centrists are actually more hostile to democracy than populists are.²⁰

Whatever the truth about attitudes to democracy in Western Europe, democratic deconsolidation or ‘backsliding’ is already a reality in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, Hungary and Poland seem to be deconsolidating as liberal democracies. If Hungary should now be categorized as an autocracy, as many analysts argue, it has already disproved the idea that democracies with per capita GDP over about \$14,000 in today’s terms can be seen as safe.²¹ Not all of the populists in Europe should be seen as identical to Orbán, of course. But whether or not democracies elsewhere in Europe are also likely to deconsolidate, developments in Central Europe suggest that this is at least possible.

In part because it is unclear who exactly is becoming more hostile to democracy, the causes of democratic deconsolidation are even less clear than the causes of populism. If there is a growing indifference towards democracy, it may be related in part to the development of technology – particularly for young people who, for example, are used to the immediacy of social media (see Chapter 3). To some extent, it also may be a function of the political systems of particular European countries or of ‘Europeanization’ (see Chapter 4). But it may also be a response to the way that the quality of democracy has deteriorated, which brings us to another way of thinking about the current crisis.

A hollowed-out democracy

A third way of thinking about the crisis of liberal democracy is the idea that, throughout the West, democracy has been gradually hollowed out over several decades. Although, according to this argument, democracy continues to function in formal terms, it has become increasingly empty – and is now what the British sociologist Colin Crouch called ‘post-democracy’.²² Crouch’s version of this argument focuses on the rise in the power of corporations to influence decisions that were previously taken by national governments in response to popular pressure. This version of the idea of post-democracy is closely linked to debates about neoliberalism.²³ Other versions of the argument emphasize that the phenomenon of ‘hyper-globalization’ described by Dani Rodrik has hollowed out democratic decision-making at the national level.²⁴

Whatever the explanation, it seems that there is an increasing disconnect between citizens and government. In an influential book published in 2013, the Irish political scientist Peter Mair argued that a ‘void’ had emerged as the political class had abandoned its representative function and retreated into the institutions of the state, and as citizens had retreated into apathy. In particular, the decline in membership of political parties and increase in political volatility showed that parties

¹⁹ Zilinsky, J. (2019), ‘Democratic deconsolidation revisited: Young Europeans are not dissatisfied with democracy’, *Research and Politics*, January–March 2019, pp. 1–7.

²⁰ Adler, D. (2018), ‘Centrists Are the Most Hostile to Democracy, Not Extremists’, *New York Times*, 23 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/05/23/opinion/international-world/centrists-democracy.html>.

²¹ Mounk, Y. (2018), ‘Hungary’s Election Was a Milestone in the Decline of Democracy’, *Slate*, 9 April 2018, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/04/the-re-election-of-hungarys-authoritarian-prime-minister-disproves-everything-we-thought-we-knew-about-democracy.html>. Mounk calls Hungary ‘a dictatorship with a thin electoral veneer’.

²² Crouch, C. (2004), *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity.

²³ See Crouch, C. (2011), *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge: Polity.

²⁴ Rodrik, R. (2011), *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy*, New York and London: W. W. Norton.

no longer functioned as vehicles of social interests that mediated between citizens and government. 'The zone of engagement – the traditional world of party democracy where citizens interacted with and felt a sense of attachment to their political leaders – is being evacuated,' Mair wrote.²⁵

One of the key empirical indicators on which Mair's argument was based was the apparently chronic decline in turnout in elections throughout Europe. For much of the post-war period, voter turnout had remained relatively stable. However, from the 1990s onwards, turnout began to fall sharply everywhere in Europe. In this sense, the hollowing out of democracy is closely related to the idea of democratic deconsolidation, which also focuses on the increasing indifference of voters towards democracy. But hollowing out goes further by explaining this indifference as a somewhat understandable response to a structural failure of liberal democracy in Europe.

Similarly, the idea of a hollowing out of democracy reframes populism as a symptom rather than a cause of the crisis of liberal democracy. Some analysts see 'post-democratic' tendencies as a driver of the rise of populism and 'illiberal democracy'. For example, Cas Mudde writes that 'populism is an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism'.²⁶ If one understands populism in this way, it also changes the extent to which one views it as a threat to democracy. In fact, in some cases it may be less an attack on democracy than a corrective. The key question is how centre-left and centre-right parties respond to populism as defined in this way – in particular, whether they are able to reconnect with alienated voters.²⁷

The idea of a hollowing out of democracy reframes populism as a symptom rather than a cause of the crisis of liberal democracy.

Another interesting version of this argument emphasizes the increasingly technocratic nature of governance – again often as a function of hyper-globalization. In this analysis, populism is seen as a kind of complement to, or in a dialectical relationship with, technocracy.²⁸ This is particularly relevant within the EU, which is perhaps the ultimate experiment in technocratic governance. It is therefore unsurprising that populists should emerge to challenge technocracy and seek to restore a sense of popular control. In this context, debates about democracy in the EU can be understood as an expression of a European version of the increasing tension between 'responsive' and 'responsible' governance identified by Mair.²⁹

Ideological differences

Although each of these three paradigms explains the crisis in a different way, and there are some tensions between them, there is also some overlap. In particular, the idea of a hollowing out of democracy can be seen as a way to explain populism and democratic deconsolidation. The different analyses also share some elements: in particular, many of those analysts who see the crisis,

²⁵ Mair, P. (2013), *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London: Verso, p. 16.

²⁶ Mudde, C. (2015), 'The Problem with Populism', *Guardian*, 17 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/17/problem-populism-syriza-podemos-dark-side-europe>.

²⁷ Berman, S. (2016), 'Populism is not fascism', *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-10-17/populism-not-fascism>.

²⁸ See, for example, Bickerton, C. and Accetti, C. I. (2017), 'Populism and technocracy: opposites or complements?', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 20:2, 2017, pp. 186–206.

²⁹ Mair, P. (2009), *Representative versus Responsible Government*, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Working Paper 09/8, September 2009, <http://www.mpifg.de/pu/workpap/wp09-8.pdf>. The title of the paper is somewhat misleading: the crucial distinction Mair makes in it is between 'responsive' (rather than 'representative') and 'responsible' government.

respectively, in terms of populism or a hollowing out of democracy share the view that there is something fundamentally problematic about the structure of the EU itself, whether because the bloc is too technocratic or because it is an example of ‘undemocratic liberalism’. Chapter 4 further explores the role of the EU in the crisis of liberal democracy in Europe.

Each of the three paradigms also reflects different normative assumptions about how liberal democracy ought ideally to function. In particular, each differs on the extent and kind of polarization that is good for democracy. Those who understand the crisis through the prism of populism tend to see polarization in rather simple and negative terms. But those who see the crisis through the prism of ‘hollowing out’ distinguish more clearly between polarization on economic issues and on cultural ones, and argue that there has not been *enough* polarization on economic issues in the past few decades – a deficit that in turn has shifted political debate, and polarization, to more toxic cultural issues.

There is no apolitical or technocratic way to understand the crisis – or, rather, attempts to do so themselves reflect centrist assumptions about liberal democracy.

These normative differences on the question of polarization correspond to some extent to differences between more adversarial and more consensual political cultures in Europe, which, as Chapter 4 will show, are reflected in the variety of democratic institutions and processes present in different European countries. But they also reflect ideological differences. Put simply, centrists tend to believe in consensus and see polarization as a threat to democracy, while those further on the left or right of the political spectrum tend to see it as necessary – or even as the essence of democratic politics. These differences illustrate that there is no apolitical or technocratic way to understand the crisis – or, rather, that attempts to do so themselves reflect centrist assumptions about liberal democracy.

The question of the role of technology in the crisis, on which the next chapter focuses, adds yet another layer of complexity. It is not just that there is so much uncertainty about the effect that digital technology is having on democracy at present or will have in future. Much of what is written about the role of technology in the crisis of liberal democracy is flawed because it does not make explicit its assumptions about the nature of the crisis, or about how liberal democracy ought to function. In order to understand exactly the role of technology in the crisis of liberal democracy, one needs to connect technological developments with the difficult political questions discussed in this chapter about how the crisis itself can be understood.

3. The Role of Technology

During the past decade there has been a remarkable shift in how the relationship between democracy and technology is perceived. In 2010, there was much discussion of what Larry Diamond, the editor of the *Journal of Democracy*, called ‘liberation technology’.³⁰ New digital tools, he wrote, would empower citizens to ‘report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom’. In short, digital technology was seen as being on the side of democracy, which it would help consolidate and deepen. The role of social media in the Arab Spring a year later seemed to confirm this view of digital technology as a liberating force.³¹

In recent years, however, this optimism has given way to pessimism as utopian thinking about digital technology has been replaced by dystopian thinking. In particular since the decision by the British people to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016, technology has become widely seen as a threat to democracy. Social media is now often described as a vehicle for disinformation rather than as a way to democratize information and expose the truth. It is also often seen as a factor in the rise of populism and as a cause of democratic deconsolidation. In short, digital technology is now widely seen as a driver of the crisis of liberal democracy.

This chapter explores whether this is really true. It examines various aspects and forms of digital technology that are currently having, or may in future have, an impact on democracy in Europe. Much of the debate about the role of digital technology in the current crisis focuses on the impact of social media. But it is widely accepted that the forms of digital technology that may already be having an impact on democracy in Europe are merely the beginning of a bigger revolution that could transform society in even more dramatic ways in the medium and long term – particularly through artificial intelligence (AI). The chapter therefore also examines ways in which other forms of digital technology could have an impact on democracy in Europe in the future, though this analysis is inevitably somewhat speculative.

Social media and the current crisis

Although the idea of ‘liberation technology’ was based mainly on the effect that social media seemed to be having in authoritarian states, it was also hoped that social media would act as a positive force in consolidated democracies by informing and engaging citizens. In particular, it was hoped that social media would ‘enable greater access to information, facilitate collective organizing, and empower civil society’.³² Social media has indeed enabled much greater participation in politics, particularly by young people.³³ In that sense, it has fulfilled its promise. But at the same time,

³⁰ Diamond, L. (2010), ‘Liberation Technology’, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 21, Number 3, July 2010, pp. 69–83, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Diamond-21-3.pdf>.

³¹ The term ‘social media’ is used in this paper as shorthand for all kinds of internet-based platforms that allow users to share content, including shared-news websites, photo- and video-sharing applications and websites, and closed messaging applications.

³² Deibert, R. (2019), ‘The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media’, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 30, Number 1, January 2019, pp. 25–39, here p. 25, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-road-to-digital-unfreedom-three-painful-truths-about-social-media/>.

³³ See Boulianne, S. and Theocharis, Y. (2018), ‘Young People, Digital Media, and Engagement: A Meta-Analysis of Research’, *Social Science Computer Review*, 5 December 2018.

the way that social media undermines the ability of mainstream media organizations to control the flow of ideas and information – which in the early 2010s was identified as a positive change – is now widely seen as a problem.

In particular, it is widely believed that social media has contributed to the emergence of a ‘post-truth’ politics. It is argued that social media ‘increases volume and speed of information flow and the relative volume of opinion over fact’ and thus leads to what has been called ‘truth decay’.³⁴ Social media ‘makes it possible for disinformation and misleading information to spread quickly and widely – and thus feeds Truth Decay by enabling the blurring of the line between information and fact and magnifying the relative volume and effect of opinions and beliefs over objective facts’.³⁵ In short, social media is corroding political discourse. But the danger with such arguments is that they idealize an imaginary past in which ‘democracy and factual knowledge were uncontested’.³⁶

It is also frequently claimed that social media is creating polarization. According to Jamie Bartlett, ‘information overload and connectivity has encouraged a divisive form of emotional tribal politics in which loyalty to the group and anger outrank reason and compromise’.³⁷ This leads to the formation of ‘tribes’ who share a sense of struggle and grievance and leaders who are unable to reach the kind of compromises necessary to the functioning of liberal democracy. However, though these arguments about social media polarization have become widely accepted, they are based on limited evidence.³⁸ Moreover, they are based on the assumption that polarization in politics is itself a problem. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, some argue that in some ways there has not been *enough* polarization in our politics in the past few decades.

Much commentary has also focused on social media’s use of algorithms to confirm user beliefs and biases and thus create ‘filter bubbles’ or ‘echo chambers’.³⁹ For example, Bartlett writes that the ‘splintering of established mainstream news has allowed people to personalize their news sources in ways that play to their pre-existing biases’.⁴⁰ Some research has concluded that users are more inclined to share content or opinions they agree with, which creates ‘selective exposure’.⁴¹ But more recent research challenges the idea of echo chambers and argues that social media actually increases exposure to alternative views.⁴² Some even argue that ‘the “echo chambers” narrative’ has itself been ‘amplified and distorted in a kind of echo chamber effect’.⁴³

³⁴ Kavanagh, J. and Rich, M. D. (2018), *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, pp. 110–21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁶ Müller, J.-W. (2019), ‘The Pre-History of Post-Truth’, Project Syndicate, 26 April 2019, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-pre-history-of-post-truth-by-jan-werner-mueller-2019-04>.

³⁷ Bartlett, J. (2018), *The People vs. Tech. How the Internet Is Killing Democracy (and How We Save It)*, London: Ebury, Kindle edition, location 398–401.

³⁸ Some data suggest that ‘affective polarization’ has actually decreased in some European countries in recent decades, including in Germany, Norway, Sweden and the UK. See Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M. and Shapiro, J. (2020), ‘Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization’, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 26669, January 2020, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26669#fromrss>.

³⁹ The term ‘filter bubble’ was first used by Eli Pariser. See Pariser, E. (2012), *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*, New York: Penguin. The term ‘echo chamber’ was first used by Cass Sunstein. See Sunstein, C. (2001), *Republic.com*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁴⁰ Bartlett (2018), *The People vs. Tech*, location 444.

⁴¹ Kelly Garrett, R. (2009), ‘Echo Chambers Online?: Politically Motivated Selective Exposure among Internet News Users’, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Volume 14, Issue 2, January 2009, pp. 265–85.

⁴² Blank, G. and Dubois, E. (2019), ‘The myth of the echo chamber’, Oxford Internet Institute, 9 March 2018, <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/blog/the-myth-of-the-echo-chamber/>; Blank, G. and Dubois, E. (2018), ‘The echo chamber is overstated: the moderating effect of political interest and diverse media’, *Information, Communication and Society*, Volume 21, Issue 5, pp. 729–45; and Flaxman, S., Goel, S. and Rao, J. M. (2016), ‘Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption’, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 80, Special Issue, January 2016, pp. 298–320.

⁴³ Guess, A., Lyons, B., Nyhan, B. and Reifler, J. (2018), *Avoiding the echo chamber about echo chambers: Why selective exposure to like-minded political news is less prevalent than you think*, Miami: Knight Foundation, https://kf-site-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media_elements/files/000/000/133/original/Topos_KF_White-Paper_Nyhan_V1.pdf.

Whether or not social media corrodes political discourse, many see it as empowering particular political actors – i.e. social media changes the balance of forces within democracy rather than directly undermining it. In particular, social media is widely seen as having empowered populists, who, it is claimed, are particularly ‘adept at using social media to amplify their message, recruit and organise’.⁴⁴ Yet there is little evidence, for example, that social media helped Trump win the presidential election in 2016.⁴⁵ Moreover, a wide range of other figures, movements and parties – such as ‘Black Lives Matter’ in the US – have successfully used social media in much the same way. In other words, it is far from clear that social media particularly benefits populists more than other actors.

What may emerge from this era of online collective action is a ‘chaotic, turbulent pluralism’.

A more persuasive argument is that the effect of social media is to empower all kinds of outsiders rather than populists as such. Mounk argues that social media closes the technological gap between insiders and outsiders and thus reduces the advantage that elites previously had in shaping political discourse. Thus social media favours change over the status quo, and the forces of instability over the forces of order. ‘In empowering outsiders, digital technology destabilizes governing elites all over the world and speeds up the pace of change,’ he writes.⁴⁶ Yet even this conclusion may be premature. After all, authoritarian governments are also increasingly using social media to increase social control and maintain ‘stability’. In particular, China is working with social media companies to develop its social credit system. Authoritarian governments may yet turn out to be more successful in their use of social media than those who seek to overthrow them.

A different way of thinking about the effect of social media is in terms of increased political turbulence. A group of four academics (two political scientists, a physicist and a computer scientist) have shown how social media ‘reshape the context in which citizens operate and influence their decisions about whether to participate politically’.⁴⁷ What may emerge from this era of online collective action is a ‘chaotic, turbulent pluralism’.⁴⁸ Social media enables citizens to mobilize more quickly than before – though it is difficult to predict how and when this will happen. Moreover, the movements that emerge from this activity are often leaderless and unsustainable.⁴⁹ In short, the only thing we can say about social media with any certainty is that it increases uncertainty in politics.

Another critique of social media is that it is contributing to democratic deconsolidation. According to this view, people may be becoming impatient with democracy because it is too ‘analogue’. As Mounk writes: ‘The daily experience of liking and sharing posts on social media may habituate users to a simulated form of direct democracy that makes the existing institutions of representative democracy appear intolerably outmoded.’⁵⁰ But if technology has in this sense contributed to this crisis of liberal democracy, it may also have a role in enabling its *reconsolidation*. For example, there has been much

⁴⁴ Bartlett, J., Birdwell, J. and Littler, M. (2011), *The New Face of Digital Populism*, London: Demos, p. 15, https://demosuk.wpengine.com/files/Demos_OSIPOP_Book-web_03.pdf?1320601634.

⁴⁵ Sides, J., Tesler, M. and Vavreck, L. (2018), *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 194. See also Groshek, J. and Koc-Michalska, K. (2018), ‘Helping populism win? Social media use, filter bubbles, and support for populist presidential candidates in the 2016 US election campaign’, *Information Communication and Society*, Volume 20, Issue 9, pp. 1–19.

⁴⁶ Mounk (2018), *The People vs. Democracy*, p. 149.

⁴⁷ Margetts, H., John, P., Hale, S. and Yasseri, T. (2016), *Political Turbulence: How social media shape collective action*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Mounk, Y. (2018), ‘Can Liberal Democracy Survive Social Media?’, *New York Review of Books*, 30 April 2018.

discussion of the potential of digital technology to facilitate democratic participation. Some have even seen the possibility of using it to scale up and update the kind of direct democracy that existed in ancient Athens – in effect creating a kind of ‘virtual agora’.⁵¹ This possibility is examined in more depth in Chapter 6.

A future threat to democracy?

Even if there is little conclusive evidence that digital technology has contributed to the current crisis of liberal democracy, this does not mean that it could not threaten democracy in the future. The remainder of this chapter examines possible ways in which the further development of digital technology could undermine the necessary preconditions for democracy in Europe to function. Some fears focus on the nature of the development of technology itself – particularly around its potential to manipulate human beings and undermine their ability to make informed, autonomous choices. Others have to do with the increasing power that technological change is giving to corporations, which are already taking on some of the functions of government – in particular law enforcement – but without democratic legitimacy.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which digital technology could undermine democracy is through the further development of computational propaganda. In particular, there is now much concern about what are termed ‘deep fakes’ – that is, ‘hyper-realistic digital falsification of images, video, and audio’.⁵² A number of such ‘deep fakes’ have already gone viral – such as an image appearing to show Emma González, a survivor of the February 2018 mass shooting in Parkland, Florida and a campaigner for gun control, tearing up the US constitution. The fear is that, as technologies for manipulating audiovisual content evolve further, it could become even more difficult for citizens to identify ‘fake news’. This could distort policy debates and even elections and erode trust in institutions.

There has also been much discussion of the way in which technology companies such as Facebook and Google carry out surveillance on users in order to predict and even manipulate their behaviour.⁵³ The development of artificial intelligence (AI) based on big data and machine learning could take such manipulation even further.⁵⁴ Governments have already begun to ‘nudge’ citizens towards healthier or more environmentally friendly behaviour.⁵⁵ But what is sometimes called ‘big nudging’ – that is, the combination of big data with nudging – could in future be used to control political preferences in ways that would undermine democracy. As a group of European computer scientists and academics have warned: ‘The more is known about us, the less likely our choices are to be free and not predetermined by others.’⁵⁶

⁵¹ Mounk (2018), *The People vs. Democracy*, pp. 57–58.

⁵² Chesney, R. and Citron, D. K. (forthcoming), ‘Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security’, *California Law Review*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3213954.

⁵³ Zuboff, S. (2019), *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York: PublicAffairs. For a critical review of Zuboff’s book, see Morozov, E. (2019), ‘Capitalism’s New Clothes’, *The Baffler*, 4 February 2019, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/capitalisms-new-clothes-morozov>.

⁵⁴ See Raines, T. (2019), ‘Democratic disruption: technological change’, *SITRA*, 1 April 2019, <https://www.sitra.fi/en/articles/democratic-disruption-technological-change/>.

⁵⁵ See, for example, the UK’s Behavioural Insights Team or ‘Nudge Unit’, <https://www.bi.team>.

⁵⁶ Helbing, D., Frey, B. S., Gigerenzer, G., Hafen, E., Hagner, M., Hofstetter, Y., van den Hoven, J., Zicari, R. V. and Zwitter, A. (2017), ‘Will Democracy Survive Big Data and Artificial Intelligence?’, *Scientific American*, 25 February 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/will-democracy-survive-big-data-and-artificial-intelligence/>.

Some thinkers like Yuval Noah Harari go even further and speculate that the development of AI could ultimately lead to the end of the human agency upon which democracy depends.⁵⁷ ‘Together, infotech and biotech will create unprecedented upheavals in human society, eroding human agency and, possibly, subverting human desires,’ he writes. ‘Under such conditions, liberal democracy and free-market economics might become obsolete.’ In particular, he argues, AI could lead to a shift in the relative efficiency of democracies and dictatorships. ‘The main handicap of authoritarian regimes in the 20th century – the desire to concentrate all information and power in one place – may become their decisive advantage in the 21st century.’⁵⁸

Even if democracies survive this competition, Harari argues, they could become increasingly hollowed out as the advance of AI leads citizens to delegate decisions to intelligent machines. ‘We might willingly give up more and more authority over our lives because we will learn from experience to trust the algorithms more than our own feelings, eventually losing our ability to make many decisions for ourselves,’ he writes.⁵⁹ A hint of how this might work can already be seen in voting advice applications such as StemWijzer in the Netherlands and Wahl-O-Mat in Germany, which advise users on who to vote for based on their preferences or views on particular policy issues. As AI progresses further, it is possible to imagine citizens outsourcing voting choices entirely to digital tools.

Democracies could become increasingly hollowed out as the advance of AI leads citizens to delegate decisions to intelligent machines. Indeed, it is possible to imagine citizens outsourcing voting choices entirely to digital tools.

A final, more indirect way in which technology could challenge democracy in future is through the effect of automation on work and thus on income inequality. Automation promises to increase productivity and efficiency and to create new jobs. But it also threatens huge disruption that could displace workers and lead to changes in the occupational, sectoral and skills-based composition of employment, as well as in the level and distribution of wages. In the worst-case scenario, the result could be a kind of ‘jobs apocalypse’ in which many jobs become obsolete.⁶⁰ In particular, as machines become more adept at cognitive as well as manual tasks, the next wave of automation could lead to the loss of service sector jobs much as the previous wave hit manufacturing sector jobs.

There is little consensus about how many and which jobs are vulnerable to the next wave of automation. An influential 2013 study predicted that as many as 47 per cent of all jobs in the US were at risk from ‘computerisation’.⁶¹ More recently, others have argued that studies such as these, which rely on an ‘occupation-based approach’, overestimate the threat from automation. A 2016 study for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that focused on specific

⁵⁷ Harari, Y. N. (2018), ‘Why Technology Favors Tyranny’, *The Atlantic*, October 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/yuval-noah-harari-technology-tyranny/568330/>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Cukier, K. (2019), ‘The Economic Implications of Artificial Intelligence’, in Cummings, M. L., Roff, H., Cukier, K., Parakilas, J. and Bryce, H. (2018), *Artificial Intelligence and International Affairs*, Chatham House Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, pp. 29–42, here p. 34, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/artificial-intelligence-and-international-affairs>.

⁶¹ Frey, C. B. and Osborne, M. (2013), *The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerisation?*, Working Paper, Oxford: Oxford Martin Programme on Technology and Employment, <https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/future-of-employment.pdf>.

tasks rather than occupations suggested that only around 9 per cent of jobs in advanced economies are ‘automatable’.⁶² The impact of automation is also likely to differ from one European country to the next, depending on the structure of each economy and the vulnerability of specific sectors within it.

The next wave of automation is relevant to the future of democracy in Europe because of its potential to widen inequality. A certain degree of economic equality is commonly seen as a precondition of democracy – which is why levels of inequality in many European countries are such a problem. This connection between equality and democracy goes back to the Greek concept of *isonomia*, or ‘equality of political rights’.⁶³ The degree and kind of equality needed for a functioning democracy are debatable – different countries within Europe may have different levels of tolerance of inequality. But if inequality grows too much, democracy risks becoming plutocracy.

In this sense, the question is not so much how *many* jobs may be eliminated by automation but what *kinds* of jobs – and in particular, whether automation will tend to disproportionately replace worse-paid jobs or also affect better-paid jobs. Although the 2016 OECD study concluded that automation was unlikely to destroy large numbers of jobs, it also predicted that ‘low qualified workers are likely to bear the brunt of the adjustment costs as the automatibility of their jobs is higher compared to highly qualified workers’.⁶⁴ Thus, the authors argue, the challenge for the future is to cope with the rising inequality that will result. In the worst case, automation could lead to a new ‘useless class’.⁶⁵ Some argue that this will necessitate a universal basic income in order to maintain social cohesion.

However, it is also possible that the next wave of automation could have a flattening effect on income scales because some highly paid jobs could be more vulnerable to automation than lower-paid ones. One German entrepreneur even predicts that in future nurses will get paid more than doctors because their function will be harder to replace by algorithms and robots.⁶⁶ This example is speculative, but it illustrates the idea that automation could affect jobs in complex and surprising ways. Rather than increasing inequality as the previous wave of automation did, the next wave of automation could actually decrease it. As with other technological developments, the potential impact of automation on democracy in Europe is uncertain.

In short, there is much we do not know – and cannot know – about how technology might affect democracy in the future. Some developments may affect Europe differently from the US or other parts of the world. Much will depend on the crucial issue of how technology is regulated – which may also be different in Europe compared to other jurisdictions. The EU has sought to take the lead in creating consumer-oriented rules to control digital businesses through a framework based on ‘European values’. But it remains to be seen how much influence this will have, particularly if technological developments are in future dominated by US and Chinese companies.⁶⁷ Chapter 7 of this research paper returns to the issue of regulation.

⁶² Arntz, M., Gregory, T. and Zierahn, U. (2016), *The Risk of Automation for Jobs in OECD Countries: A Comparative Analysis*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, No. 189, Paris: OECD Publishing.

⁶³ See Nolte (2012), *Was ist Demokratie?*, pp. 35, 434.

⁶⁴ Arntz, Gregory and Zierahn (2016), *The Risk of Automation for Jobs in OECD Countries*.

⁶⁵ Harari (2018), ‘Why Technology Favors Tyranny’.

⁶⁶ Cited in Cukier (2019), ‘The Economic Implications of Artificial Intelligence’, p. 37.

⁶⁷ See Helgadóttir, A. G. (2019), ‘Will Europe scare off Silicon Valley’, *The World Today*, August/September 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/will-europe-scare-silicon-valley>.

4. Democratic Institutions and Processes in Europe

Against this background of enormous complexity and uncertainty, how can democracy in Europe be made more responsive? To begin to answer this question, it is necessary first to examine existing democratic institutions and processes in Europe. Democracy in Europe functions in different ways and at different levels, depending on the country and context. There is a wide range of political systems in the region. The existence of the EU adds a further level of complexity, as the political systems of member states interact with the EU's own structure in varying ways.

Patterns of democracy in Europe

European political systems range from what Arend Lijphart described as 'majoritarian democracies' such as the UK, in which power is concentrated in the hands of the majority, to 'consensual democracies' such as Belgium and Switzerland, in which power is shared, dispersed and restrained in certain ways.⁶⁸ Lijphart mapped 36 consolidated democracies around the world to two variables: (a) the extent to which the state was primarily federal or unitary in structure; and (b) the relative importance of the executive compared to political parties and vice versa. On the 'federal/unitary' measure, European countries range from the extremely federal, such as Germany, to the extremely unitary, such as the UK (though the latter has become somewhat less unitary in recent decades). On the 'executive versus parties' scale, there is more uniformity: political parties in Europe tend to be powerful relative to the executive, though there are exceptions such as France and the UK where the executive is comparatively strong.

A comparison of the three most populous European countries illustrates in more detail the diversity of democratic systems in the region. Until recently the UK was the paradigmatic 'majoritarian democracy', which is also sometimes referred to as 'Westminster democracy'. One-party government is the norm in the UK – though this may be changing as the party system fragments – and the cabinet is dominant relative to parliament. Members of the lower house are elected in single-member districts according to the plurality method ('first past the post'). Government for the most part is extremely centralized, though this has changed to some extent in recent decades with devolution to the nations and regions of the UK. The upper house, the House of Lords, is relatively weak. The constitution – often described, not entirely accurately, as 'unwritten' – is flexible, though the UK's central bank, the Bank of England, has independently set monetary policy since 1997 (central bank independence was one of Lijphart's indicators of a more consensual democracy).

Germany is quite different on both measures: it is the most federal of the 36 democracies Lijphart surveyed, and parties are relatively powerful compared to the executive. Two-party coalition governments are the norm.⁶⁹ Parliament's power relative to that of the cabinet is greater than in the UK. Members of the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament, are elected through a mixture of

⁶⁸ Lijphart, A. (1999), *Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

⁶⁹ The Christian Democratic Union and the Christian Social Union, its Bavarian sister party, are considered here as one party.

first-past-the-post returns and proportional representation. The upper house, the Bundesrat, is one of the most powerful in the world, and institutions like the central bank and the Constitutional Court are extremely independent. In the case of the central bank, Germany has successfully ‘uploaded’ this preference for independent institutions to the EU level – indeed, the European Central Bank (ECB) is even more independent than the Bundesbank was.

France is quite different again. Unlike both Germany and the UK, it has what is often described as a ‘semi-presidential’ system, in which the president is directly elected and powerful relative to parliament.⁷⁰ Thus the executive is almost as powerful as in the UK. One-party government is the norm, though a president of one party sometimes ‘co-habits’ with a parliament in which another party has a majority. Members of the lower house, the National Assembly, are elected to represent single-member districts as in the UK, but in two rounds of voting according to a mixed majority-plurality method. Like the UK, France is relatively unitary. The Constitutional Council functions as a kind of supreme court but is relatively weak.⁷¹ On the other hand, since the introduction of the euro the country in effect has had an extremely independent central bank in the form of the ECB (again, an indicator of a more consensual system).

In general, European democracies have become more consensual over time. In part this has been because of the fragmentation of party systems, which has made multi-party coalition governments more likely. In part it is also because for countries that joined the EU, membership has introduced (in Lijphart’s terms) more constitutional rigidity – and, for eurozone countries, a more independent central bank – than was previously the case. This shift to a more consensual form of democracy could be seen as a good thing. Lijphart saw consensual democracy as a ‘kinder, gentler’ form of democracy than majoritarian democracy.⁷² However, because it diffuses power and may therefore create a sense of lack of accountability, it may also have played a role in undermining popular confidence in liberal democracy in Europe.

Over the past few decades, there has been a dramatic expansion of ‘non-political, or depoliticized, modes of decision-making’ as powers previously held by national legislatures have been ceded to courts, central banks and supranational institutions.

In particular, many analysts see the growth of independent or ‘non-majoritarian’ institutions in the context of hyper-globalization as a problem. Over the past few decades, there has been a dramatic expansion of what Mair calls ‘non-political, or depoliticized, modes of decision-making’, as powers previously held by national legislatures have been ceded to courts, central banks and supranational institutions.⁷³ This has in part been a deliberate move by nation state governments to regulate highly technical policy areas and maintain price stability, and in part a consequence of the proliferation of

⁷⁰ A ‘semi-presidential’ system is one in which a president exists alongside a prime minister, who is dependent on the confidence of the legislature as in a parliamentary system. The term was developed in particular to describe the French Fifth Republic, established in 1958. Among European countries, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Romania also have semi-presidential systems.

⁷¹ The Constitutional Council has existed since the creation of the Fifth Republic in 1958. Lijphart writes that its original function was to ‘protect executive power against legislative encroachment’ – in other words, the opposite of the function of a constitutional court as normally understood. Since 1974, relatively small minorities can submit questions of constitutionality to the court, though lower courts still cannot refer cases to it. Lijphart (1999), *Patterns of Democracy*, pp. 213–14.

⁷² *Ibid.*, Chapter 16.

⁷³ Mair (2013), *Ruling the Void*, p. 19. See also Mounk (2018), *The People vs. Democracy*, p. 59; and Zielonka, J. (2017), *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 43–46.

international treaties and organizations during the past 40 years. The cumulative result has been a ‘creeping erosion of democracy’.⁷⁴ This challenges the idea that the crisis of liberal democracy can simply be solved by shifting towards more consensual formats.

Given the heterogeneity of political systems in Europe, debates about reform also differ. In the UK, the debate focuses on further devolution to the nations and regions, the introduction of proportional representation in national elections, and further reform of the House of Lords. Each of these reforms would lead to a more consensual form of democracy. In Germany the Bundestag president, Wolfgang Schäuble, has sought to reduce both the size of the Bundestag and the power of the Bundesrat.⁷⁵ In France, figures such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the far-left party La France Insoumise, have demanded the end of what they see as a ‘presidential monarchy’ and called for a new ‘Sixth Republic’ in which the president would be more accountable to parliament, and in which parliament itself would be elected by proportional representation.⁷⁶

It is tempting to think there might be an ideal democratic system on which all European countries might converge. However, this temptation should be resisted. Each system is based on national norms that are the product of cultural preferences and historical contingencies. For example, the power of the French president is a response to the paralysis of parliament during the Fourth Republic (1946–58). In Germany the requirement that parties win 5 per cent of the vote in order to enter the Bundestag is a response to the failure of parliamentary democracy in the Weimar Republic, and in particular the fear that Bonn might in effect ‘become Weimar’ if parliament were similarly fragmented.⁷⁷ In short, there is no one political system that is right for all of Europe.

In any case, whatever its political system, no country in Europe seems to be immune from the current crisis of liberal democracy. Whether seen through the prism of populism, democratic deconsolidation or ‘hollowing out’, the crisis seems to have affected all European countries, though variations in political systems may mean that the crisis takes a slightly different form in each context. For example, the UK’s first-past-the-post electoral system made it harder for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) to enter parliament, yet on the other hand the pressure UKIP exerted led indirectly to the referendum on British membership of the EU. National debates on reform of democratic institutions should of course continue. But there is no simple institutional fix for the problems currently in evidence.

The EU dimension

Even if the democratic processes of individual EU member states can be made more responsive, there remains the question of the extent to which the EU itself is or is not democratic. There has long been a debate among academics as to whether the EU has a ‘democratic deficit’.⁷⁸ As European integration has continued over the past few decades and power has shifted from member state governments

⁷⁴ Mounk (2018), *The People vs. Democracy*, p. 60.

⁷⁵ See ‘Dem Bundestag gelingt es nicht zu schrumpfen’ [The Bundestag fails to shrink], *Die Zeit*, 3 April 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2019-04/wahlrechtsreform-bundestag-wolfgang-schaeuble-scheitern>; and Spiegel Online (2019), ‘Schäuble verlangt Bundesratsreform’ [Schäuble demands Bundesrat reform], 4 May 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/bundesrat-wolfgang-schaeuble-fordert-abstimmungsregeln-zu-aendern-a-1265762.html>.

⁷⁶ Mélenchon, J.-L. (2017), *L’Avenir en commun. Le programme de la France insoumise et son candidat* [Common future: The programme of France Insoumise and its candidate], Paris: Seuil, p. 26.

⁷⁷ Graf, F. W. and Meier, H. (eds) (2018), *Die Zukunft der Demokratie. Kritik und Plädoyer* [The Future of Democracy: Critique and Plea], Munich: C. H. Beck, p. 9.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Majone, G. (1998), ‘Europe’s Democratic Deficit’, *European Law Journal*, Volume 4, Issue 1, pp. 5–28; and Moravcsik, A. (2002), ‘In Defence of the “Democratic Deficit”: Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 40, Issue 4, pp. 603–24.

to the EU level, the fear has been that, as Alan Milward wrote in 2005, democracy in Europe might ‘slide slowly away through the interstices between the nation state and the supranation’.⁷⁹ Even those analysts (usually pro-European centrists) who see the crisis of liberal democracy in terms of populism understand it in part as a response to the lack of democracy in the EU. For example, Mounk describes the EU as the paradigmatic case of ‘undemocratic liberalism’.⁸⁰

The EU can be seen as an extreme example of a global trend within a regional context. The deepening of economic integration during the past 40 years – in other words Rodrik’s so-called hyper-globalization – has created the need for an expanded system of rules, which have to some extent displaced politics. Within the EU, the removal of barriers to the movement of capital, goods and people has gone even further than in the rest of the world during this period – thus requiring an even greater degree of ‘depoliticisation’ or ‘constitutionalisation’.⁸¹ This change has also been understood as an increase in the domination of the constitutional pillar of democracy over the popular pillar – or, quite simply, as ‘the triumph of law over politics’.⁸² Thus, questions about democracy go to essence of the EU.

In so far as the EU can be understood as a democracy in theoretical terms, it is as a ‘consensual democracy’ – which partly explains the particular difficulties that the UK, historically a majoritarian democracy, has had with it. But the EU does not neatly fit the model of a consensus democracy either.⁸³ The European Commission is usually seen as a kind of European executive, but the European Council (which consists of the heads of government of EU member states) is also seen as part of the EU’s executive branch – a kind of ‘cabinet’. The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (which consists of ministers from member states and is therefore sometimes also called the Council of Ministers) can be thought of as corresponding to the two chambers of a bicameral legislature, though if the Parliament is understood as the equivalent of the lower house, it is unusually weak.⁸⁴

Within the EU, the removal of barriers to the movement of capital, goods and people has gone even further than in the rest of the world – thus requiring an even greater degree of ‘depoliticisation’ or ‘constitutionalisation’.

In recent years the EU has taken some steps towards becoming more democratic in conventional terms. In particular, the powers of the European Parliament – the one EU institution that is directly elected – have increased. Partly as a result, it can be argued that European Parliament elections are no longer the ‘second order’ elections they once were.⁸⁵ In 2014 the EU introduced the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, in which party groupings in the European Parliament nominate a lead candidate for the

⁷⁹ Milward, A. S. (2005), ‘The European Union as a Superstate’, *The International History Review*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 90–105, here p. 105.

⁸⁰ See Mounk (2018), *The People vs. Democracy*, Chapter 2.

⁸¹ On depoliticization, see van Middelaar, L. (2019), *Alarums & Excursions: Improvising Politics on the European Stage*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, Chapter 7. Van Middelaar distinguishes between three types of depoliticization: ‘technical’, ‘constitutional’ and ‘procedural’. On constitutionalization, see Grimm, D. (2015), ‘The Democratic Costs of Constitutionalisation: The European Case’, *European Law Journal*, Volume 21, Issue 4.

⁸² Bickerton, C. (2018), ‘Beyond the European void? Reflections on Peter Mair’s legacy’, *European Law Journal*, Volume 24, Issue 4–5, September 2018, pp. 268–80, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/eulj.12287>.

⁸³ Lijphart (1999), *Patterns of Democracy*, pp. 40–45. For an illuminating discussion of the evolution and role of the various EU institutions, see van Middelaar (2019), *Alarums & Excursions*, Chapter 6.

⁸⁴ See Lijphart (1999), *Patterns of Democracy*, p. 41. To complicate matters further, the Council of Ministers also has executive functions. See van Middelaar (2019), *Alarums & Excursions*, Chapter 6.

⁸⁵ Reif, K. and Schmitt, M. (1980), ‘Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results’, *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 8, Issue 1, pp. 3–44.

position of European Commission president. In the 2019 election, turnout increased to 51 per cent.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, awareness of the *Spitzenkandidaten* remained low even in Germany – despite the fact that it was a German term and one of the leading candidates was German.⁸⁷ After the 2019 election, the EU abandoned the *Spitzenkandidaten* process – at least for the time being.⁸⁸

Despite these changes and the increase in turnout, the structure of the EU means that debates in the European Parliament continue to take place along largely national or geographic lines on the one hand – witness the debates between Germany and France, or ‘north’ and ‘south’, on the euro, for example – and along pro-European versus anti-European lines on the other. What is still missing is the sort of debate between left and right, for example around questions of redistribution, that, at least historically, has defined national elections. The rise of Eurosceptic parties has increased tensions between member states. And it has prompted centrist parties to join forces in response, which in turn has strengthened the perception – particularly among Eurosceptics – that the EU is run by a kind of ‘cartel’.

In part because of this tendency among ‘pro-European’ parties to close ranks against Eurosceptic ones, there is no rotation between parties following elections in the way that is familiar at a national level – not just in majoritarian democracies like the UK but also in more consensual democracies like Germany. It is almost as if the EU is permanently governed by a grand coalition without an opposition except for the ‘anti-Europeans’.⁸⁹ It may be that citizens of some member states – such as Austria, where grand coalitions have been the norm in post-war history – are more comfortable with this arrangement than citizens of other EU states are.⁹⁰ But the danger is that it gives voters the sense that they cannot vote out the government – a key precondition of democracy, at least in the common-sense use of the term.

Although there is a relatively wide consensus about these problems with the EU, there is little agreement about how they can be solved. There are two basic views. The first is that the only way to make the EU more democratic is to ‘complete’ European integration. According to this federalist view, the European Parliament must be given greater powers so that it more closely resembles the lower house of a typical bicameral legislature.⁹¹ In this model, the Council would become a kind of upper house representing the ‘regions’ of a post-national Europe. But however desirable in principle such a new settlement might be in the eyes of its advocates, it is difficult to imagine national parliaments voting to give up much of their own power and in effect turning themselves into regional legislatures.

⁸⁶ European Parliament (2019), ‘Elections 2019: highest turnout in 20 years’, news release, 27 May 2019, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20190523STO52402/elections-2019-highest-turnout-in-20-years>. On the 2019 elections, see also Youngs, R. (2019), ‘Democracy after the European Parliament elections’, Centre for European Policy Studies, 17 June 2019, https://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PI2019_10_RY_Democracy-after-the-European-Parliament-elections-1.pdf.

⁸⁷ YouGov (2019), ‘Europawahl: Jeder Zweite kennt keinen der deutschen Spitzenkandidaten’ [European election: One in two voters does not know any of the German Spitzenkandidaten], 24 April 2019, <https://yougov.de/news/2019/04/24/europawahl-ist-fur-wahler-deutlich-weniger-wichtig/>.

⁸⁸ However, two *Spitzenkandidaten*, Frans Timmermans and Margarete Vestager, did become vice-presidents of the European Commission following the election.

⁸⁹ On the absence of opposition in the EU, see Mair, P. (2017), ‘Political Opposition and the European Union’, *Government and Opposition*, Volume 42, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 1–17, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/political-opposition-and-the-european-union-1/7C9AEB444CBFE3FF85AE655C9CD4DD93>; and van Middelaar (2019), *Alarums & Excursions*, Chapter 7.

⁹⁰ Grand coalitions – that is, coalitions of the two largest parties – have governed Austria for over half of its post-war history. Grand coalitions have also been frequent in Belgium, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland. On the ‘democratic dysfunctions’ that can result from the extended use of grand coalitions, see Jacoby, W. (2017), ‘Grand Coalitions and Democratic Dysfunction: Two Warnings from Central Europe’, *Government and Opposition*, Volume 52, Issue 2, pp. 329–55, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/grand-coalitions-and-democratic-dysfunction-two-warnings-from-central-europe/DA79E0E2EBB11CD8A11E2EF93306A875>.

⁹¹ See, for example, Guérot, U. (2019), *Warum Europa eine Republik werden muss! Eine politische Utopie* [Why Europe must become a republic. A political utopia], Bonn: Dietz.

The opposite view is that EU member states should be re-empowered by repatriating competences back to the national level. Advocates of this approach have often pointed to the difficulty of creating a legitimate democracy at the EU level, in the absence of a common European language and therefore of a European public sphere and by extension a European *demos*.⁹² (Interestingly, however, the extraordinary development of translation software through machine learning may mean that the absence of a common language becomes less of a problem in the future.) Some even see it as a mistake to have introduced the direct election of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in 1979. In this alternative model of a democratic EU, legitimacy would come from national parliaments rather than from the European Parliament.⁹³

There have also been attempts to find a ‘third way’ between these two diametrically opposed views. Such attempts focus on various ways of bridging the gap between national parliaments and the EU institutions – Milward’s ‘interstices’ – and in particular on combining the greater domestic legitimacy of national parliaments with the more transnational approach of the EU institutions. Various proposals have been made about how to improve the representation and participation of the parliaments of member states in democratic institutions and politics at the EU level. For example, a group of French thinkers including the economist Thomas Piketty has recently proposed the creation of a ‘European Assembly’ that would include both MEPs and members of national parliaments.⁹⁴

Updating democratic institutions and processes

Reform of democratic institutions at the national and European levels would be enormously challenging and complex. But even in the absence of such measures, much can be done to improve democratic processes. In particular, digital technology can be used to make such processes more accessible, responsive and transparent. The debate around the impact of social media obscures the way in which many democratic institutions and processes in Europe have scarcely been touched by technology that has transformed many other aspects of life. For example, speakers are still required to be physically present in debates, and there is little use of digital information and data sharing during parliamentary sessions.⁹⁵

The debate around the impact of social media obscures the way in which many democratic institutions and processes in Europe have scarcely been touched by technology that has transformed many other aspects of life.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which technology can be used to update democratic processes is to introduce the option of voting online in elections – assuming, of course, that this can be done securely. Estonia has been a world leader in what it calls ‘i-voting’, which it introduced in municipal elections in 2005 and in parliamentary elections in 2007. In the 2019 parliamentary election, 44 per cent of votes were online. The option of voting online could help to increase turnout in

⁹² See, for example, Miller, D. (2015), ‘A Plea for Pluralism’, in van Middelaar, L. and Van Parijs, P. (eds) (2015), *After the Storm. How to Save Democracy in Europe*, Tiel: Lannoo, pp. 181–88, here p. 186.

⁹³ See, for example, Jörke, D. (2019), *Die Größe der Demokratie* [The size of democracy], Berlin: Suhrkamp.

⁹⁴ Henette, S., Piketty, T., Sacriste, G. and Vauchez, G. (2019), *How to Democratize Europe*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. The book was originally published in French as *Pour un traité de démocratisation de l’Europe* [For a treaty to democratize Europe], Paris: Seuil. See also the authors’ ‘Manifesto for the Democratization of Europe’, available at <http://tdem.eu/en/manifesto/>.

⁹⁵ See Simon, J., Bass, T., Boelman, V. and Mulgan, G. (2017), *Digital Democracy. The tools transforming political engagement*, London: Nesta, p. 8, https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/digital_democracy.pdf.

elections. It might also particularly benefit one specific marginalized group: disabled people.⁹⁶ However, there is little evidence so far to suggest that it would help include alienated voters of other kinds – for example, those who vote for populist parties. After all, in some cases older people, who may be less likely to vote online, disproportionately support such parties.

Another straightforward application of digital technology could be to increase transparency and access to information about democratic processes. A world leader in this area is e-Democracia, a Brazilian portal that aims to make the legislative process more transparent and improve citizens' understanding of it.⁹⁷ Similar attempts are under way in Europe. In 2015 the UK parliament set itself the challenge of being 'fully interactive and digital' by 2020, including providing more information in real time and using digital communication to explain law-making.⁹⁸ Volunteer organizations such as Democracy Club also seek to provide information about democratic processes. Elsewhere in Europe, websites such as asktheeu.org and fragdenstaat.de make it easier for citizens to use freedom-of-information laws.

However, further efforts are needed to engage the public more deeply in democracy, beyond online voting and informing citizens about democratic processes. Much of the remainder of this paper examines two particular ways in which it may be possible to improve democratic engagement. Chapter 5 explores how political parties, which historically played a crucial role in mediating between citizens and the state, could be revitalized. Chapter 6 explores a range of experiments in direct and deliberative democracy that involve citizens in debate and decision-making and thus have the potential to complement and perhaps even move beyond representative democracy.

⁹⁶ See Chowdhury, A. (2018), 'Online voting: fantasy or future?', Commission on Democracy and Technology in Europe, Chatham House, 24 October 2018, <https://demtech.chathamhouse.org/online-voting-fantasy-or-future/>.

⁹⁷ See Simon, Bass, Boelman and Mulgan (2017), *Digital Democracy*, pp. 19–23.

⁹⁸ Digital Democracy Commission (2015), *Open Up! Report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy*, 26 January 2015, p. 7, <http://www.digitaldemocracy.parliament.uk/documents/Open-Up-Digital-Democracy-Report.pdf>. For updates on the progress towards this goal, see Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy (undated), <https://www.parliament.uk/business/commons/the-speaker/speakers-commission-on-digital-democracy/>.

5. A New Age of Party Democracy?

‘The age of party democracy has passed,’ Peter Mair wrote in the early 2000s. ‘Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form.’⁹⁹ When Mair was writing, political parties seemed to be in chronic decline. But more recently, there has been something of a turnaround as new parties have emerged – often using digital technology in innovative ways. Though the emergence of these parties has not reduced political volatility, it suggests a possible reinvention of political parties that could refill what Mair called the ‘void’ in democracy in Europe.

The rise and fall of party democracy

Political parties emerged along with representative democracy in the late 18th century. In fact, the development of parties was so closely intertwined with the development of this form of democracy that it seemed impossible to imagine one without the other. As the American political scientist E. E. Schattschneider put it: ‘The political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.’¹⁰⁰ The function of parties was to simultaneously divide and unite citizens by aggregating voter preferences. Parties represented the interests of particular groups in society. At the same time, they also governed – or at least sought to. As Schattschneider put it, a political party is ‘an organized attempt to get control of the government’.¹⁰¹

There was initially much resistance to organizing citizens in this way. Many liberals opposed the idea of political parties. For example, the founding fathers of the United States saw them as dangerous. In the *Federalist Papers*, James Madison wrote of his opposition to ‘factions’, by which he understood ‘a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community’.¹⁰² Nevertheless, parties became increasingly central to democracy in both Europe and the US, though scepticism towards them continues in the idea of ‘special interests’ that are perceived to undermine democracy.

However, although political parties have accompanied representative democracy since its emergence in the 18th century, there has been an evolution in the role they have played – in particular in the 20th century. As the franchise was expanded in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mass parties emerged. These were ‘interest parties’ or ‘milieu parties’ based on class identities (like the German Social Democrats) or confessional identities (like the *Zentrumspartei*, or Centre Party, which represented Catholics in Germany). Such parties strove to create what Mair calls ‘closed political communities’ based on ‘closed social communities, in which large collectivities of citizens shared distinct social experiences’.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Mair (2013), *Ruling the Void*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Schattschneider, E. E. (1943), *Party Government*, New York: Rinehart, p. 3.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰² Madison, J. (1787), ‘The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection’, Congress.gov, Federalist Number 10, <https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The+Federalist+Papers#TheFederalistPapers-10>.

¹⁰³ Mair (2013), *Ruling the Void*, p. 78.

Following the Second World War, these parties sought to appeal to voters beyond their original milieu and consolidated into what Otto Kirchheimer called *Allerweltparteien* or ‘catch-all parties’.¹⁰⁴ Thus the German Social Democrats sought to expand their base beyond the urban working class, while the Christian Democratic Union was founded in 1945 as an inter-denominational party that would go beyond the Centre Party’s Catholic base. These post-war parties took ‘a more aggressive approach to elections, attempting to win often short-term and contingent support far beyond the limits of their once pre-defined constituencies’.¹⁰⁵ In other words, they became ‘primarily office-seeking parties’ that exchanged ‘representational integrity’ for electoral success.¹⁰⁶

Some political scientists have identified a further, more recent transition in the final decades of the 20th century, in which catch-all parties turned into so-called ‘cartel parties’.¹⁰⁷ As they sought to compete for the same voters, parties converged ideologically and increasingly colluded with each other – hence coming to resemble a cartel. In part as a response to declining participation, parties also turned increasingly to the resources of the state to sustain themselves, for example by relying more on state funding. Thus meaningful differences between parties shrank, and the gap between parties and voters widened, as parties withdrew further from their role in civil society and into the realm of government and the state. In short, parties went from being ‘social actors’ to ‘state actors’.¹⁰⁸

As they sought to compete for the same voters, parties converged ideologically and increasingly colluded with each other – hence coming to resemble a cartel.

Membership of political parties has clearly declined across Europe, particularly since the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰⁹ The percentage of voters who were members of a political party in Europe halved from an average of just under 10 per cent in 1980 to under 5 per cent in 2009. A particularly interesting example of this haemorrhaging of members is the British Labour Party. Its membership went from several million during the 1950s to under 200,000 during the era of Tony Blair. More broadly across Europe, even those who remained members of parties seemed to be less active and engaged, and many were members on paper only. Political parties were, as Mair put it, ‘rapidly losing their capacity to engage citizens’.¹¹⁰ It was against this background that he declared the end of the age of party democracy.

Given the centrality of parties in the history of representative democracy, this process of what political scientists call ‘de-alignment’ – that is, the weakening of citizens’ identification with parties – was extremely worrying. If Schattschneider was right that democracy was unthinkable without parties, their decline seemed to suggest the end of democracy altogether. At a minimum, the decline of parties seemed to be leading to a redefinition of liberal democracy away from its ‘popular’ element

¹⁰⁴ Kirchheimer, O. (1965), ‘Der Wandel des westeuropäischen Parteiensystems’ [The change in the western European party system], *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, pp. 20–41.

¹⁰⁵ Mair (2013), *Ruling the Void*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁰⁷ Katz, R. S. and Mair, P. (1995), ‘Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: the emergence of the cartel party’, *Party Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 5–28.

¹⁰⁸ Mair (2013), *Ruling the Void*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁹ Katz, R. S., Mair, P., Bardi, L., Bille, L., Deschouwer, K., Farrell, D., Koole, R., Morlino, L., Müller, W., Pierre, J., Poguntke, T., Sundberg, J., Svasand, L., van de Velde, H., Webb, P. and Widfeldt, A. (1992), ‘The membership of political parties in European democracies, 1960–1990’, *European Journal of Political Research*, Issue 22, pp. 329–45; Mair, P. and van Biezen, I. (2001), ‘Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980–2000’, *Party Politics*, Volume 7, Issue 1, pp. 5–21; and van Biezen, I., Mair, P. and Poguntke, T. (2012), ‘Going, Going, ... Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe’, *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 51, Number 1, pp. 24–56.

¹¹⁰ Mair and van Biezen (2001), ‘Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980–2000’, p. 5.

(that is, popular sovereignty, or government *by* the people) and towards its ‘constitutional’ element (that is, a system of basic rights and checks and balances, or government *for* the people). As Mair put it: ‘As parties fail, so too fails popular democracy.’¹¹¹

The emergence of ‘digital parties’

Some continue to believe that political parties are doomed and imagine a kind of ‘post-party democracy’. But recently there have been some signs of a reversal of the decline of political parties in Europe – in other words, signs of a possible ‘re-alignment’. In particular, there has been a proliferation of new parties – many widely seen as populist – that have been remarkably successful both in terms of membership and elections. Part of what makes these new parties interesting is the innovative ways in which they have used technology. This may in part explain their success. Whatever their ideologies and positions on specific policy issues, they may have hit upon a way of reconnecting citizens to political parties and thus refilling the ‘void’.

As we saw in Chapter 3, much attention has focused on how political figures, movements and parties use social media as a campaigning and mobilizing tool – i.e. to address external imperatives. This has been especially associated with populism, though nearly all mainstream parties now use social media in this way. But in terms of making democracy more responsive, the more interesting development may be the way in which some parties, mainly but not exclusively those usually categorized as populist, have used digital technology for *internal* purposes – as part or even as the basis of their own structure. In particular, they have created online platforms to consult members and take decisions, including determining policy choices and electing party officials.

Paolo Gerbaudo sees these parties as representing a new paradigm which he calls the ‘digital party’ or ‘platform party’.¹¹² The digital party, as he defines it, ‘mimics the logic of companies such as Facebook and Amazon of integrating the data-driven logic of social networks into its very decision-making structure’. It is constantly ‘eliciting feedback from its member/user base, crowdsourcing ideas from it, balloting on issues, measuring the response of the public and modifying its strategy and messaging accordingly’. By reinventing the relationship of parties with their members, these parties ‘present themselves as the solution to the democratic deficit that has turned political institutions into the preserve of technocrats and self-serving politicians’.¹¹³

The first digital parties were the so-called Pirate parties that emerged in various northern European countries in the mid-2000s.¹¹⁴ They did not just integrate technology into their internal structures but also mostly focused on issues specifically related to technology – in particular, digital copyright issues. (The original Pirate Party, in Sweden, was created in response to the Antipiratbyran, or Anti-Piracy Bureau, an entertainment industry pressure group that pushed for stricter copyright policy – hence its name.) What might be called the second wave of digital parties – like the Five-Star Movement (M5S)

¹¹¹ Mair (2013), *Ruling the Void*, p. 9.

¹¹² Gerbaudo, P. (2018), *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy*, London: Pluto Press.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ The first Pirate Party was set up in Sweden in 2006 by the former Liberal politician Rick Falkvinge. It won 7 per cent of the vote in the European elections in 2009, and thus sent two MEPs to the European Parliament. Pirate parties in the Czech Republic, Germany and Iceland also succeeded in getting candidates elected to national and European parliaments in the 2010s.

in Italy and Podemos in Spain, both of which came to prominence in the 2010s – have used a similar organizational template to that pioneered by the Pirates. However, they have stood on broader platforms and have had even greater success.¹¹⁵

No party arguably exemplifies the effectiveness of the approach more than M5S, which was created in 2009 by the comedian Beppe Grillo and the web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio. The party's name is a reference to the five issues on which it originally focused: public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, the right to internet access, and environmentalism. From the beginning its activities took place mainly online – initially through Grillo's blog and then through its portal, Rousseau. The latter can be understood as the party's 'operating system', through which decisions are taken on policy positions. In the 2018 Italian general election, M5S won 33 per cent of the votes to become the largest party in the Chamber of Deputies; it then formed a coalition government with the far-right Lega.

Podemos was created in 2014 by a group of young Madrid-based academics around Pablo Iglesias, who had become a regular guest on political talk shows in Spain. It is a more traditional left-wing party than M5S, having grown out of the anti-austerity *Indignados* movement. But like M5S it has embraced digital technology as a way to meet demand for 'real democracy'. It has its own portal, Participa, through which important decisions, including policy choices and elections to party office, are supposed to take place. In the 2015 election, Podemos became the third-largest party in the Spanish parliament with 21 per cent of the vote.

Although the new digital parties promote a 'participationist utopia of leaderlessness and horizontalism', they actually function in a much more centralized and top-down way than this rhetoric suggests.

However, there are a number of reasons to be sceptical of the promise of digital parties to 'deliver a new politics supported by digital technology' that is 'more democratic, more open to ordinary people, more immediate and direct, more authentic and transparent'.¹¹⁶ Digital parties are obsessive about participation, or what Gerbaudo calls 'participationism'.¹¹⁷ But in practice relatively few of their members take part in online deliberation and decision-making. For example, only 4 per cent of Podemos's 380,000 members contributed to the collaborative drafting of the party's platform in 2015.¹¹⁸ Larger numbers of members tend to take part in online votes. But these often produce a supermajority in favour of the party leadership.

Thus although the new digital parties promote a 'participationist utopia of leaderlessness and horizontalism', they actually function in a much more centralized and top-down way than this rhetoric suggests.¹¹⁹ Internal party democracy tends to be plebiscitary in practice. The party base mainly reacts to initiatives by the leadership rather than making proposals itself, and often simply endorses the position or mandate of the leadership. In fact, Gerbaudo writes, participation often

¹¹⁵ An alternative way of understanding M5S and Podemos is as 'techno-populist' parties. See Bickerton, C. J. and Accetti, C. I. (2018), "Techno-populism" as a new party family: the case of the Five Star Movement and Podemos', *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 10:2, 2018, pp. 132–50.

¹¹⁶ Gerbaudo (2018), *The Digital Party*, p. 4.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

simply functions to empower a ‘hyper-leader’ such as Grillo or Iglesias (though it is unclear how much this is a function of the use of technology rather than other factors).¹²⁰ In short, the digital party has a ‘problematic underside’.¹²¹

‘Populist’ parties as a model?

Nevertheless, despite this gap between rhetoric and reality, experiments by digital parties that are often categorized as populist may ‘prefigure the shape of a future democracy to come’.¹²² In particular, given the centrality of parties in the history of representative democracy, the use of digital technology by parties themselves may have more potential than online voting to reinvigorate democracy. Digital technology could help parties recover the role they once played in making government more responsive to the interests of particular groups, which in turn might help bridge the gap between ‘responsive’ and ‘responsible’ government. Thus, mainstream parties should carefully examine the ways in which digital parties have used technology to see if they can learn from them.

One mainstream party that has done this is the British Labour party, which has in some ways managed to buck the trend of decline among social democratic parties in Europe. After declining, as mentioned, from several million in the 1950s to under 200,000 in the Blair era, the party’s membership has increased again to over 500,000 (though of course this did not translate into success at the 2019 general election). While the revival in membership may partly be because of Labour’s shift to the left under Jeremy Corbyn, the party has also used methods similar to those of M5S and Podemos. In particular, Momentum, the campaign group established after Corbyn’s election as party leader in 2015, set up its own online ‘participation portal’, My Momentum, through which members can participate in discussions and take decisions.¹²³ The German Social Democrats have also begun to experiment with online voting.

Many of the new digital parties have demanded reform of democratic institutions and processes to create a more participatory democracy – one in which citizens are engaged in decision-making in a deeper way.

However, while mainstream parties may benefit from applying some of the techniques used by their digital counterparts, there remain a number of challenges that need to be addressed. One is around who exactly participates in new forms of online engagement. For example, the German Greens, long known for their *Streitkultur*, or ‘debate culture’, have introduced online surveys and petitions to stimulate discussion among members. But research shows that engagement via these tools has been disproportionately higher among members who are better off, better educated and already more active in the party.¹²⁴ Guillaume Royer, the participation coordinator of La France Insoumise, has suggested that participatory platforms can create a ‘tyranny of people with time’.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Ibid., Chapter 8.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹²² Ibid., p. 127.

¹²³ See Gerbaudo, P. (undated), ‘Momentum, Labour and the Rise of the Platform Party’, Pluto Press, <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/momentum-labour-online-digital-activism-social-media-party/>.

¹²⁴ Thuermer, G., Roth, S., O’Hara, K. and Staab, S. (2018), ‘Everybody Thinks Online Participation is Great – for Somebody Else: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Perceptions and Expectations of Online Participation in the Green Party Germany’, ‘WebSci’18 Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Web Science’, pp. 287–96.

¹²⁵ Gerbaudo (2018), *The Digital Party*, pp. 90–91.

As well as innovating in terms of their internal structures, many of the new digital parties have demanded reform of democratic institutions and processes to create a more participatory democracy – one in which citizens are engaged in decision-making in a deeper way than is currently the case. For many of them, alternative forms of democracy, particularly direct democracy, offer a way of moving beyond representative democracy. For example, Davide Casaleggio (Gianroberto’s son), who manages M5S’s Rousseau platform, wrote that ‘representative democracy – politics by proxy – is gradually losing meaning’.¹²⁶ The next chapter explores the potential of these alternative forms of democracy.

¹²⁶ Casaleggio, D. (2018), ‘A top leader of Italy’s Five Star Movement: Why we won’, *Washington Post*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theworldpost/wp/2018/03/19/five-star/>.

6. Beyond Representative Democracy?

According to the minimalist definition associated with the political economist Joseph Schumpeter, democracy is simply a matter of leadership selection. Democracy ‘does not and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of “people” and “rule”’, he wrote in 1942. It ‘means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them’.¹²⁷ However, this version of democracy now seems hopelessly anachronistic. It seems that citizens no longer simply want to elect their leaders every four or five years and do as they are told in the period in between. Rather, there seems to be growing demand from citizens to be more involved in the ongoing process of deliberation and decision-making.

In response to this demand, there has been a proliferation of experiments in other forms of democracy. Some complement and support the representative model that goes back to the late 18th century. But others suggest the possibility of moving beyond it. Decision-making could function quite differently while remaining within a constitutional framework that guaranteed the rule of law, an independent judiciary, media freedom and minority rights. In other words, liberal democracy may be compatible with alternatives to representative democracy. Europeans should therefore be open to forms of democracy that could complement or even ultimately replace representative democracy.¹²⁸

This chapter examines direct democracy and deliberative democracy, the two main alternatives to representative democracy. These two forms of democracy can be thought of as contrasting responses to the limitations and weaknesses of the representative model. Whereas direct democracy tends to polarize, deliberative democracy seeks to overcome polarization and create consensus. Views about these two forms of democracy therefore tend to reflect assumptions about how adversarial and competitive democratic politics should be (for example, deliberative democracy is popular among centrists). Direct democracy and deliberative democracy create different opportunities – and dangers – for liberal democracy.

Direct democracy

The aim of direct democracy, which goes back to the Athenian city-state, is to give the electorate an opportunity to take decisions in a more immediate way than is the case in representative democracy. Direct democracy’s most common methods are referendums, citizens’ initiatives, agenda initiatives and recall elections. Referendums are already widely used in Europe, particularly for amending national constitutions. Some European countries also have provisions for citizens’ initiatives (which give the electorate a vote on a measure proposed by a number of citizens) and agenda initiatives (which put an issue on the political agenda and require a specified authority, usually the legislature, to consider and/or act on a proposal).¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Schumpeter, J. (1942), *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 1.

¹²⁸ On the idea of a ‘post-representational democracy’, see Tormey, S. (2015), *The End of Representative Politics*, London: Polity Press.

¹²⁹ See International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2008), *Direct Democracy. The international IDEA handbook, 2008*, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/direct-democracy-the-international-idea-handbook.pdf>. Recall elections are not discussed in this chapter because they are rarely used in Europe.

Cultural attitudes to direct democracy vary across Europe in ways that do not fit neatly into Lijphart's contrast between majoritarian and consensual democracies. The UK – the paradigmatic majoritarian democracy – has selectively used referendums to deal with questions of constitutional reform, and with the issue of membership of the EU. Its recent experience illustrates how direct democracy can conflict with representative democracy. Germans, meanwhile, are suspicious of direct democracy, which is considered another 'lesson of Weimar'.¹³⁰ But Switzerland – according to Lijphart's typology, one of the most consensual democracies in the world – makes more use of referendums than any other country in Europe.

Nor is it even clear whether direct democracy should itself be categorized as a majoritarian or consensual element. Referendums are generally seen as 'the most extreme majoritarian method of decision-making, that is, even more majoritarian than representative majoritarian democracy'.¹³¹ But Lijphart argues that, when referendums form part of the process of amending a constitution, they should actually be seen as an 'anti-majoritarian device' – in particular, because they give minorities the opportunity to campaign against a proposed amendment. In other words, whether the introduction of referendums makes a democracy more majoritarian or consensual depends on their exact role in the political system.

Whether the introduction of referendums makes a democracy more majoritarian or consensual depends on their exact role in the political system.

Switzerland has had provisions for direct democracy in its constitution since 1778. Its political system is sometimes called a 'semi-direct democracy': that is, a representative democracy that makes extensive use of elements of direct democracy. Citizens' initiatives and referendums are used at both the national and cantonal level. Typically, Swiss citizens vote on several initiatives, constitutional proposals or treaties three or four times each year. Passage of a measure at the national level requires a double majority: that is, a majority of the overall vote and a majority of cantons in favour. Though the Swiss system has sometimes produced controversial decisions, such as the banning of the construction of minarets in 2009, it is generally considered to work well.¹³²

A number of other European countries, such as Denmark and Ireland, require referendums for constitutional amendments. Referendums have often been held as part of processes for deciding whether to join the EU or whether to ratify major EU treaties, such as the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. Thus the EU can be said to 'generate' referendums.¹³³ Because referendums have often led to the rejection of further European integration, some 'pro-Europeans' tend to oppose them. However, because of the way in which decisions taken in referendums have been overturned or, in the case of the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by Dutch and French voters, bypassed, many Eurosceptics also see referendums on EU-related issues as discredited.

¹³⁰ In Germany, referendums at the national level are permitted in two special cases. The first is in relation to proposed reconfiguration of the country's *Länder*, or states. For example, a referendum was held in 1951 on whether to merge three existing states into what became Baden-Württemberg. The second would be on adopting a new constitution under Article 146 of the existing Basic Law. However, referendums are widely used at the local and state level. See Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (undated), 'Direkte Demokratie' [Direct democracy], <https://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/lexika/handwoerterbuch-politisches-system/202013/direkte-demokratie?p=all>.

¹³¹ Lijphart (1999), *Patterns of Democracy*, p. 221.

¹³² See Kriesi, H. (2005), *Direct Democratic Choice: The Swiss Experience*, Oxford: Lexington.

¹³³ Helen Thompson on the Talking Politics podcast, 30 January 2020, <https://www.talkingpoliticspodcast.com/blog/2020/218-are-we-losing-faith-in-democracy>.

Notwithstanding these cultural differences and disillusionment about referendums on EU issues, the demand for direct democracy seems to be increasing across Europe – particularly, but not only, from populist figures, movements and parties. This is in part because of the development of digital technology, which has created the possibility of dramatically expanding the use of referendums. Historically, direct democracy was widely seen as being possible only in small city-states like Athens (though the Swiss case challenges this assumption). But as we have seen, some now see the possibility of using digital technology to scale up direct democracy and create a kind of ‘virtual agora’. Others have suggested that what Europe needs is ‘a digital version of Swiss democracy’.¹³⁴

The first key question here is which issues referendums should be applied to. Referendums seem to work best where there is a simple choice between two alternatives, each of which can be easily implemented by parliament. The debate about Brexit in the UK in the three years since the referendum in June 2016 illustrates this. What may have seemed like a simple binary choice between leaving the EU and remaining in it turned out to be a much more complex choice between different kinds of relationship with the EU. Moreover, leaving the EU is far from straightforward. Thus, a referendum meant to resolve a nationally divisive issue in a way that cut across political lines instead deepened division and caused paralysis for several years.

A second question is whether referendums should be advisory or binding. Binding referendums are not easily compatible with the structures of representative democracy and have the potential to undermine it, though the experience of Switzerland suggests they can work if they are well integrated into a system of representative democracy. Conversely, if referendums are merely advisory, and can be easily rejected by governments and parliaments, they risk being discredited. It can be particularly dangerous when there is a lack of clarity or agreement about whether a referendum is binding – as the example of the UK’s referendum on EU membership again arguably illustrates.

In addition to referendums, agenda initiatives have become increasingly popular in Europe – confusingly, these are often also referred to as citizens’ initiatives. In 2012 Estonia created a People’s Assembly to crowdsource proposals for reforming its democratic processes.¹³⁵ The assembly generated over 2,000 proposals, 15 of which were submitted to parliament. Parliament accepted three of the proposals and partially implemented four more. One of the laws passed created an ongoing right for citizen-led proposals to be submitted to parliament through a new platform, Rahvaalgatus. Also in 2012, Finland passed a Citizens Initiative Act, which enables citizens to submit legal proposals to parliament once they have 50,000 signatures. This process led to the introduction of equal-marriage legislation.

At the European level, the European Citizens’ Initiative aims to enable EU citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies.¹³⁶ But the mechanism is widely seen as having been a disappointment. Since it was introduced with the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007, only four petitions so far have reached the threshold of 1 million signatures required for the European Commission to take action – and none has yet led to a legislative proposal. This illustrates that agenda initiatives, rather

¹³⁴ Reutemann, T. (2019), ‘Swiss-Style decentralized direct democracy’, submission to Chatham House Commission on Democracy and Technology in Europe, 10 April 2019, <https://demtech.chathamhouse.org/submission/swiss-style-decentralized-direct-democracy/>.

¹³⁵ Eesti Koostöö Kogu (undated), ‘People’s Assembly’, <https://www.kogu.ee/en/activity/peoples-assembly/>; Simon, Bass, Boelman and Mulgan (2017), *Digital Democracy*, pp. 34–35; and Involve (undated), ‘Estonian People’s Assembly and Rahvaalgatus’, <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/case-studies/estonian-peoples-assembly-and-rahvaalgatus>.

¹³⁶ European Union (undated), ‘European Citizens’ Initiative’, <https://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative>.

than undermining the existing system of decision-making as referendums can, run the risk of failing to have an impact at all. In the worst case, agenda initiatives can resemble a petition which rulers can choose to accept or reject, as in the pre-democratic era.

Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy is a much more recent idea, which has emerged in theory and in practice only in the past several decades. Influenced by the work of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, it is based on the insight that the quality of political discourse matters in a democracy.¹³⁷ Advocates of deliberative methods such as James Fishkin argue that citizens must be able to weigh ‘competing arguments for policies or candidates in a context of mutually civil and diverse discussion in which people can decide on the merits of good information’.¹³⁸ The idea of deliberative democracy has become particularly popular in the past few years against the background of widespread concerns about the way in which social media may be debasing political discourse.

The hope is that deliberative methods may provide a way not just of elevating debate but also of bridging the gap between elites and the public that characterizes much of politics. Advocates argue that such methods can achieve this without abandoning the idea of expertise or lowering the quality of decision-making: ‘Popular deliberative institutions are grounded in the public’s values and concerns, so the voice they magnify is not the voice of the elites. But that voice is usually also, after deliberation, more evidence-based and reflective of the merits of the major policy arguments.’¹³⁹ It is also claimed that deliberative democracy reduces polarization – the process of deliberation can induce reflection and lead participants to change their minds.¹⁴⁰

Deliberative methods have usually involved the creation of a ‘mini-public’ – a small group of citizens that is representative of the population as a whole – that meets in person to deliberate on a particular political issue in an organized setting. The earliest version of this was the ‘deliberative opinion poll’, which Fishkin first described in 1988. Other forms of deliberative democracy include citizens’ juries and citizens’ assemblies. The idea behind each of these methods is that, if the group is genuinely representative and deliberates under the right conditions, ‘its considered judgments after deliberation should represent what the larger population *would* think if somehow those citizens could engage in similarly good conditions for considering the issue’.¹⁴¹

Citizens’ assemblies are now by far the most popular form of deliberative democracy – so much so they have become almost synonymous with it. They bring together a small group of citizens – usually around 100 or fewer – to discuss a particular issue and make recommendations. Citizens’ assemblies are often chaired by an academic, politician or judge, and receive evidence from experts in much the way that parliamentary committees do. Advocates of the approach say that, if they are well organized,

¹³⁷ On the influence of Habermas, see Nolte (2012), *Was ist Demokratie?*, p. 396 ff.

¹³⁸ Fishkin, J. S. and Mansbridge, J. (2017), ‘Introduction’, *Daedalus*, Summer 2017, pp. 6–13, here p. 7, https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/DAED_x_00442.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Dryzek, J. S. (2000), *Deliberative democracy and beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴¹ Fishkin and Mansbridge (2017), ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

such forums are a uniquely powerful tool for increasing participation in decision-making and creating a political debate that is ‘future-’, ‘fact-’ and ‘other-regarding’.¹⁴² Citizens’ assemblies have also been endorsed by the *Financial Times*.¹⁴³

Advocates of citizens’ assemblies often point to the example of Ireland, where the format has twice been used for constitutional reform. Between 2012 and 2014, a constitutional convention including 66 members of the public alongside 33 representatives chosen by political parties discussed the Irish constitution. The convention recommended the legalization of same-sex marriage, which, following a referendum in 2015, became enshrined in law.¹⁴⁴ Between 2016 and 2018, a citizens’ assembly consisting of 99 members of the public considered various questions, including abortion, fixed-term parliaments, referendums, population ageing and climate change. After 12 weekends of discussion, it voted to recommend ending a constitutional ban on abortion; in 2018, again following a referendum, the proposed change became law.

Citizens’ assemblies have also been used in a number of other European countries. Perhaps the best known is the Icelandic National Assemblies, which consisted of around 1,000 randomly selected citizens who met in 2009 and again in 2010 to agree a set of core values that would form the basis of a new constitution, though this was ultimately never adopted. The British and French governments have both also recently established citizens’ assemblies to discuss climate change. In the UK, there are a plethora of other citizens’ assemblies at the national level and in various cities and regions.¹⁴⁵ Citizens’ assemblies have also been tried in Austria, Belgium, Poland and Spain. The above-mentioned Estonian People’s Assembly included ‘deliberation days’ and is therefore also sometimes considered a citizens’ assembly.¹⁴⁶

Unlike with direct democracy, deliberative approaches have so far been largely analogue. The intensive interaction that gives deliberative democracy its value is difficult to replicate online.

Unlike with direct democracy, deliberative approaches have so far been largely analogue. The intensive interaction that gives deliberative democracy its value is difficult to replicate online. But one could imagine a kind of online citizens’ assembly, which could involve far more people than an in-person assembly – particularly as technology evolves – and, assuming it were representative, even obviate the need for a ‘mini-public’. An innovative experiment in online deliberation is vTaiwan, a consultation process that was developed by the Taiwanese government together with g0v, a digital activist group, following the Sunflower Movement of student/civic protests in 2014.¹⁴⁷ The process, which uses the opinion-mapping tool Pol.is, has been deployed to debate a series of complex issues and has led to a number of policy changes.

¹⁴² Clodagh Harris in ‘What Democracy Needs Now’, RSA chief executive’s lecture 2018, London, 2 July 2018, <https://www.thersa.org/events/2018/07/what-democracy-needs-now>.

¹⁴³ *Financial Times* (2019), ‘Deliberative democracy is just what politics needs’, 11 August 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/6bc199c8-b836-11e9-96bd-8e884d3ea203>.

¹⁴⁴ The Irish constitution requires that changes to the constitution be put to a referendum. Thus deliberative and direct democracy were combined in a two-stage process. See also the section above on direct democracy.

¹⁴⁵ The British organization Involve has a useful ‘tracker’ of citizens’ assemblies in the UK. See Hughes, T. (2019), ‘Keeping up with the citizens’ assemblies’, 28 June 2019, <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/news/keeping-citizens-assemblies>.

¹⁴⁶ See Jonsson, M. (2015), ‘Democratic Innovations in Deliberative Systems – The Case of the Estonian Citizens’ Assembly Process’, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, Volume 11, Issue 1, <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1311&context=jpd>.

¹⁴⁷ See Simon, Bass, Boelman and Mulgan (2017), *Digital Democracy*, pp. 29–33.

As with referendums, one of the principal challenges is to identify which issues are suited to deliberative methods. Citizens' assemblies seem to work well where the issue is clearly identifiable and the answers do not require deep understanding of policies and legal restrictions – often, this means a local issue that directly affects people's lives. But as Richard Youngs has argued, it is not yet clear 'whether participatory initiatives can move to a higher political level and contribute meaningfully to democratic revitalization'.¹⁴⁸ The Irish experience suggests that, when citizens' assemblies are scaled up, they may work best on conscience issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage. But it may also be possible to use them for other issues such as those associated with education and healthcare.

A second challenge is to 'systematize' deliberative methods.¹⁴⁹ This revolves around the question of how exactly deliberation should influence policy, and whether recommendations should be binding. Few experts advocate binding recommendations. But if citizens' assemblies are merely advisory, and do not translate into policy change, they may become indistinguishable from old-fashioned consultations and will likely do little to deepen democracy. In this respect, it is striking that China has also used deliberative methods such as citizens' assemblies, which suggests the approach is compatible with authoritarianism as well as democracy and can limit democracy as well as deepening it.¹⁵⁰

Towards an integrated democracy

Direct democracy and deliberative democracy both have the potential to help reinvigorate democracy in Europe. But much depends on how exactly they are used, and how each fits into other democratic processes and institutions. The challenge, therefore, is to integrate new elements of direct and deliberative democracy into the existing system of representative government. Much research now focuses on how to 'evaluate democratic innovations as complementary parts of a political system'.¹⁵¹ Integration may involve complex permutations of elements of direct and deliberative democracy and of online and offline forms of participation for different kinds of issues and at different levels of democracy in Europe.

The Irish experience suggests that citizens' assemblies and referendums can work well when used together. Other experiments around Europe also combine direct and deliberative democracy. As mentioned, the Estonian People's Assembly included 'deliberation days' as part of its process. In France, the Parlement et Citoyens website brings together elected politicians and citizens to discuss policy and collaboratively draft legislation.¹⁵² Many of the experiments in participatory budgeting that are taking place in cities around Europe, such as Decide Madrid, allow citizens to debate and propose legislation as well as vote on local investment projects.¹⁵³

As with the experiments by so-called digital parties, the issue of who participates in direct and deliberative democracy potentially raises difficult questions about inclusivity. There is a lack of data on this, often because of a fear that data collection would deter participation. For example, Better

¹⁴⁸ Youngs, R. (2019), 'Can Citizen Participation Really Revive European Democracy?', Carnegie Europe, 30 July 2019, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/07/30/can-citizen-participation-really-revive-european-democracy-pub-79588>.

¹⁴⁹ Farrell, D. M., Suiter, J and Harris, C. (2019), "'Systematizing' constitutional deliberation: the 2016–18 citizens' assembly in Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 34:1, pp. 113–23. There has been a 'systemic turn' in research on deliberation in recent years. See Jonsson (2015), 'Democratic Innovations in Deliberative Systems'.

¹⁵⁰ See Jun, M. (2012), 'Accountability without elections', in Leonard, M. (ed.) (2012), *China 3.0*, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, pp. 80–86, https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR66_CHINA_30_final.pdf; and He, B. and Warren, M. E. (2017), 'Authoritarian Deliberation in China', *Daedalus*, Summer 2017, pp. 155–66, https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/DAED_a_00454.

¹⁵¹ Jonsson (2015), 'Democratic Innovations in Deliberative Systems'.

¹⁵² Simon, Bass, Boelman and Mulgan (2017), *Digital Democracy*, pp. 24–28.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–51.

Reykjavik, a platform for generating ideas, abandoned the collection of data on age and gender after participation slumped.¹⁵⁴ But what data there is suggests that often participants are people who are already engaged in politics in other ways. For example, the Estonian People's Assembly found its participants were likely to be 'educated, professional, right-wing males'.¹⁵⁵ That said, there is some evidence that young people do participate, so to the extent that the crisis of liberal democracy is generational, these initiatives may help.

Even if these new elements of direct and deliberative democracy can be made to work, the extent to which they can help solve the broader crisis of liberal democracy is not yet clear. The evidence so far suggests a cautious assessment is advisable. In particular, regardless of whether populism is understood as a cause or symptom of the crisis, the introduction of alternative forms of democracy does not seem to do much to stop its rise. For example, Estonia's experiments with direct and deliberative democracy are generally considered to be among the most innovative and successful in Europe.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, as Youngs points out, this did not prevent the far-right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) from becoming the third-biggest party in the Estonian parliament in national elections in March 2019.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁵⁶ Eesti Koostöö Kogu (undated), 'People's Assembly'. See also Jonsson (2015), 'Democratic Innovations in Deliberative Systems.

¹⁵⁷ Youngs (2019), 'Can Citizen Participation Really Revive European Democracy?'

7. Conclusion

This research paper has argued that the crisis of liberal democracy cannot be blamed on the development and prevalence of digital technology, as is sometimes asserted or more often implied. Rather, the crisis has deeper causes about which there is little consensus, with views dependent on normative assumptions about democracy that are ultimately political. Nevertheless, it is clear that digital technology is transforming society, and in particular the public sphere, in ways that are not yet fully understood. The development of technology should not be seen as an irresistible force that cannot be shaped. At the same time, attempts to harness digital innovations in democracy will necessarily take place under conditions of uncertainty.

Digital technology is still relatively new, and European societies are only at the beginning of figuring out how to adapt to it. Moreover, adaptation to technological change is an ongoing process. As technology continues to evolve and its development perhaps accelerates in the coming decades, the way in which democracy functions will need to be updated accordingly. Above all, this will be a challenge for electoral and media regulators, who will need to maintain the state's ability to hold fair and free elections and to guarantee the existence of meaningful political discourse. They will also need to be careful not to overreach – the expansion of the power of unelected institutions in recent decades may have contributed to the current crisis.

At present, there is much discussion about how to regulate political campaigning on digital platforms.¹⁵⁸ But because little conclusive evidence exists about the impact of social media on democracy, there is also little agreement on how exactly digital campaigning can and should be regulated. In particular, attention currently focuses on how to prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation through social media.¹⁵⁹ But even to decide which content should be categorized as 'misinformation' or 'disinformation' is a challenge. It is also far from clear that much apparently populist content can or should be reduced to factually incorrect information or lies. Another important issue that is attracting attention is how to balance freedom of expression with the need to protect individuals from hate speech.¹⁶⁰

In response to public pressure, social media companies have begun to take various steps to regulate political content on their platforms. Twitter has banned political advertising altogether – though how exactly to define 'political' in this context, and whether removing such advertising is good or bad from a democratic standpoint, remains unclear. Google has restricted 'micro-targeting', which is the targeting of advertisements at users based on their political affiliation or interests. This step has been

¹⁵⁸ For a discussion of these issues in the UK, with recommendations about how the regulation of political campaigning can be updated, see Naik, R. (2019), 'Political Campaigning: The Law, The Gaps and the Way Forward', Oxford Technology and Elections Commission, October 2019, <https://oxtec.oii.ox.ac.uk/publication/legal-framework/>.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Ignatidou, S. (2019), *EU-US Cooperation on Tackling Disinformation*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/eu-us-cooperation-tackling-disinformation>; and Jones, K. (2019), *Online Disinformation and Political Discourse: Applying a Human Rights Framework*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/online-disinformation-and-political-discourse-applying-human-rights-framework>. In contrast to 'misinformation', 'disinformation' implies malicious intent.

¹⁶⁰ On hate speech, see, for example, Vidgen, B., Margetts, H. and Harris, A. (2019), *How much online abuse is there? A systematic review of evidence for the UK*, Policy Briefing – Summary, The Alan Turing Institute, https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-11/online_abuse_prevalence_summary_24.11.2019_-_formatted_0.pdf; and Alan Turing Institute (2019), *Response of The Alan Turing Institute's Public Policy Programme to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and the Home Office's Online Harms White Paper*, https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/response_of_the_public_policy_programme_to_the_dcms_and_the_home_offices_online_harms_white_paper.pdf.

welcomed by the US Federal Election Commission but criticized by political campaigns, which say that the restriction does not deal with the real problem of disinformation (much of which does not use micro-targeting) and that it penalizes campaigns that use micro-targeting in a legitimate way.¹⁶¹

To some extent it is inevitable that regulation will always be playing catch-up as technology develops. But there is also a need for a regulatory framework designed to shape future innovation: to ‘regulate things and products that do not exist yet’, as the former European commissioner for research, science and innovation, Carlos Moedas, puts it.¹⁶² There is already much discussion of how to ensure that AI develops in a ‘human-centric’ or socially responsible way – often revolving around maintaining the ‘human-in-the-loop’ principle. The European Commission has published guidelines for ethical AI.¹⁶³ However, it is not clear if these can be enforced, especially for AI development outside the EU. A specific concern is the possibility that bias on gender or racial lines could be embedded in future algorithms.

Exactly what form regulation should take, either for existing technology such as social media or in respect of future technologies, is beyond the scope of this research paper. But as important as the issue of regulation is, and however the difficult questions around it are ultimately resolved, it is clear that it will not be enough on its own to tackle the crisis of liberal democracy. Moreover, technology itself could be part of the solution – whether in helping to revitalize parties, as discussed in Chapter 5, or in developing the alternative forms of democracy discussed in Chapter 6. Yet as this research paper has emphasized throughout, there are no simple solutions.

Therefore, in the spirit of what has been called ‘democratic experimentalism’,¹⁶⁴ Europeans should be open to trying different forms of democracy. In this sense, the wide variety of political institutions and processes that exist in Europe (as examined in Chapter 4) constitute an advantage for reform prospects rather than a disadvantage. Rather than seeking to make Europe more homogenous, policy ideas and innovation should concentrate on maintaining this diversity. There is a particular need for experimentation with direct and deliberative democracy, and for further evaluation of how these formats can be integrated into the existing institutions and processes of representative democracy at the local, regional, national and EU levels.

We should not think of democracy in a static way – that is, as a system that can be perfected once and for all and then simply maintained and defended against threats.

Experimentation should proceed carefully and cautiously. The political systems of European countries function holistically, and therefore an element of democracy such as a referendum or citizens’ assembly that works well in one system may be ineffective or even disastrous when introduced into another. It may be possible to identify aspects of best practice that are transferable. But it may also be that experimentation produces findings of use only for the specific context in which the experiment has taken place. In short, advocates of reform should be open-minded and prepared

¹⁶¹ Corasanti, N. and Rosenberg, M. (2019), ‘Campaigns Say Google Ad Policy Sidesteps Problem of Disinformation’, *New York Times*, 21 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/us/politics/google-ads-disinformation.html>.

¹⁶² Panel discussion at the Web Summit, Lisbon, 7 November 2019, <https://vimeo.com/374953902>.

¹⁶³ European Commission (2019), ‘Ethics guidelines for trustworthy AI’, 8 April 2019, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/ethics-guidelines-trustworthy-ai>.

¹⁶⁴ Dorf, M. C. and Sabel, C. F. (1998), ‘A Constitution of Democratic Experimentalism’, *Columbia Law Review*, Volume 98, Issue 2, pp. 267–469.

to change course where necessary. This may be a particular challenge for the EU, because European integration is conceived as a one-way process and therefore makes the EU more path-dependent than other polities.

Perhaps most importantly, we should not think of democracy in a static way – that is, as a system that can be perfected once and for all and then simply maintained and defended against threats. Democracy has continually evolved since its emergence in the 18th century, in particular with the gradual extension of the franchise to groups, including women, that had previously been excluded. One way to think about the current crisis is that another moment may have arrived that requires democracy to evolve. In particular, citizens may now be demanding a kind of democracy that is more responsive than the current representative model. The solution is thus not to limit democracy, for example in response to the threat from perceived populism, but to deepen it further in what Claus Offe has called the ‘democratization of democracy’.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Offe, C. (2003), *Demokratisierung der Demokratie: Diagnosen und Reformvorschläge* [Democratization of democracy: diagnoses and proposals for reform], Frankfurt: Campus.

About the Project

This research paper is the product of an ongoing project on democracy and technology run by Chatham House. The project has been guided by a commission of 15 leading figures from around Europe with expertise in both democracy and technology:

- Francesca Bria
- Liam Byrne MP
- Wendy Hall
- Yvonne Hofstetter
- Toomas Hendrik Ilves
- Cyril Lage
- Guillaume Liegey
- Adrian Lovett
- Helen Margetts
- Luuk van Middelaar
- Julia Reda
- Andreas Rödder
- Marietje Schaake
- Shahin Vallée
- James Williams

The ideas of the commission members helped shape this research paper. However, the views it expresses are those of the author rather than of the commission as a whole.

During 2019, the project also invited submissions from the public to a series of three research questions:

1. What effect is technology having on democracy in Europe?
2. Against the background of social and technological change, how can democracy in Europe be made more responsive?
3. Are there ways in which technology can help revitalize democracy in Europe?

A total of 55 submissions were received, which can be read on the project website: <https://demtech.chathamhouse.org>.

In addition, the project invited members of the public to participate in three online working groups, led in each case by a group leader appointed by the project team at Chatham House. Using Google Docs, each of the three groups collectively produced an essay in response to one of the research questions. As with the input by commission members, the submissions and the essays produced by the three working groups helped inform and shape the analysis in this research paper.

About the Author

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Cover image: A woman writes a note on the Savita Halappanavar mural in Dublin on 26 May 2018, following a referendum on the 36th amendment to Ireland's constitution. The referendum result was overwhelmingly in favour of removing the country's previous near-universal ban on abortion.

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