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Practices of Democracy A Theoretical Introduction

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Introduction

The last decades have brought many changes to politics. One can cite the diversification of political participation with the growth of everyday political mobilization like boycotts (de Moor, 2017). The development of the internet has also transformed drastically how citizens and political actors behave, communicate and interact in contemporary democracies (Coleman and Sorensen, 2023). The key actors of representative democracy – namely, political parties – have also faced major challenges, especially in an era of personalization of politics (Karvonen 2010; Garzia, 2019). Citizens' attitudes towards democracy have been transformed with an erosion of political trust and growing support for alternative models of government (Pilet et al., 2024c; Valgardsson et al., 2024). The access of populist actors to legislative and executive office in various countries (Argentina, Brazil, USA, Austria, Italy) has put democracy under tension, questioning democratic resilience and paving the way for the erosion of some key democratic principles (Albertazzi and McDowell, 2015; Vachudova, 2021).

Yet, surprisingly, textbooks that approach democratic government in the 21st century remain completely focused on representative democracy, its core principles and institutions, and how political actors organize within this framework. This logic of thinking is more and more at odds with the reality of contemporary political systems. Most countries allow for the organization of referendums, either organized top-down by political authorities or bottom-up by citizens (Morel and Qvortrup, 2017). The Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom in 2016 that led the country to leave the European Union or the 2022 referendum in Chile about the project of a new constitution are two recent prominent examples of the growing use of such instruments of direct democracy. And it is without mentioning countries like Switzerland or the United States of America where referendums

are completely common for several decades. The momentum is reflected both in the formal provisions adopted and in the use of these two practices of direct democracy. An increasing number of countries adopted provisions that allow for citizens' initiatives and the organization of referendums at national and subnational levels (Gherghina, 2017; Altman, 2018). Referendums are organized today on a broad array of policy areas that range from constitutional amendments or reforms of the political or electoral system to foreign affairs and post-materialist issues such as specific rights and freedoms.

More recently, a deliberative wave (OECD, 2020) has hit the shores of many democracies with a growing use of instruments of deliberative and participatory democracy like deliberative mini-publics or participatory budgeting (Sintomer et al., 2013; Paulis et al., 2020). One can think about the Irish Constitutional Conventions that led to a few referendums for changing some articles of the Irish Constitution, like including same-sex marriage into the legal definition of a marriage. Other recent examples would be the 2025 Climate Assembly in the Netherlands, or the 2023 Climate Assembly on the end of life (i.e., euthanasia) in France.

In many democracies, representative institutions have delegated some of their traditional prerogatives to independent bodies of experts (Vibert, 2007; Gilardi, 2008). Experts have always been involved in politics; public authorities have always consulted them. Still, in the last decades, their actual decision-making power has been expanded significantly to go well beyond a mere consultative role. Bodies of experts have been set up in many countries to advise but also to implement, evaluate and control public policies in various domains such as health, bioethics, environment, market regulation, or constitutional review. The European Union is probably the level of power where the role of experts has been most institutionalized (Majone, 1996; Gornitzka and Sverdrup, 2008). At the national level, experts have also been empowered. One example is the legal obligation in France, since 2011, for a body of scientific experts, the *Comité national consultatif d'éthique*, to organize public debates and to provide recommendations prior to the discussion of any law related to bioethics. These examples have led some analysts to conclude that our democracies are shifting towards some kind of expertocracy or technocracy (Fisher, 1990; Esmark, 2017). The most advanced form of this trend has been the appointment of technocratic cabinets, composed only (or mostly) of ministers that are non-elected and non-partisan experts like the Monti (2011) and Draghi (2021–2) cabinets in Italy, or the Ciolos (2015) cabinet in Romania (Costa Pinto et al., 2018; Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019; Pilet et al., 2024b).

The emergence of those alternative models to representative democracy across many democracies lies at the very heart of this textbook and how it proposes to approach the comparative study of democracy and how it is practised today. In this book, we use interchangeably practices of democracy, as reflected in the title, and models of democracy, as often referred to them in the literature. The textbook proposes a view that emphasizes the possibility to combine these practices/models to understand better what happens in contemporary political systems and societies. Direct and deliberative democracy as well

as technocracy have not replaced representative democracy. Representative institutions and principles remain the very core of contemporary democracies, but they are enriched and complemented by other mechanisms taken from those alternative models of government. The more hybrid nature of democracy has multiple consequences for the political dynamics within contemporary political system. They affect how citizens participate politically; how political parties behave in their relationship to citizens but also in their efforts to push for new policy decisions. They also redefine the structure of political opportunities for social movements and civil society actors in pushing for their political agenda.

All these transformations are not very much taken into consideration in textbooks on comparative politics. We therefore propose in this new volume, and throughout each and every one of its chapters, to embrace the new nature of contemporary democracies and to examine the core dimensions of political systems, taking into consideration how they relate to four main models of government: representative democracy, direct democracy, deliberative and participatory democracy, and technocracy. Our chapter authors systematically discuss at length the topic of their chapter through the lenses of those four models. With this approach, we provide a novel and more comprehensive view on the contemporary practices of democracy that provides the key elements for a better understanding of how our political systems are evolving in these first decades of the 21st century.

In this first chapter, we describe and discuss what are the core elements of the four models of government that structure the textbook: (1) representative democracy; (2) direct democracy; (3) deliberative and participatory democracy; and (4) technocracy. The elements of definition that will be presented will consolidate the conceptual basis that is necessary for reading and understanding the key insights that are provided in the other chapters.

Representative Democracy

The first model that we will systematically discuss throughout the chapters of this book is representative democracy. It is the core model along which contemporary democracies are organized across the globe. It is also the benchmark for international institutions or research institutes evaluate the quality of democracy in one country (see, for example, the V-Dem project on varieties of democracy in the world – www.v-dem.net). The predominance of representative democracy as *the* model of democratic government took centuries to consolidate. When the concept of “democracy” emerged in ancient Greece, it referred to direct rule by the demos (i.e., the people). Representation was a political concept that was irrelevant for the ancient Greeks when thinking about democracy. The word “representation” did not even really exist. The concept of representation – its meaning – only emerged in Latin under the Roman Empire. And the two concepts of representation and democracy were perceived as distinct models of government for many centuries. It is only with the consolidation of modern liberal democracy during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries that the combination of representation and democracy took shape (Dahl, 1989).