



# What is democratic resilience?\*

Wolfgang Merkel

WZB Social Science Center Berlin, Berlin, Germany

## ABSTRACT

Resilience has become a key concept in many scientific disciplines, from engineering to psychology. With a specific time lag, it has also reached democracy research in political science. The term “resilience of democracy” or “democratic resilience” is increasingly used, but has not yet been fully developed into a concept for analytical purposes. This will be done here. The concept of resilience of democracy consists of four building blocks: arenas (institutions), actors, forms, and decisions (output). The institutional arenas act as interdependent opportunity structures for actors such as constitutional powers, parties, civic associations, and the builders or destroyers of the political community. Three possible forms of resilience can be distinguished in a political system: to withstand, to adjust, and to recover. Depending on unresolved problems, challenges, or attacks on a democratic system, these three forms are of particular relevance and impact. Moreover, the output of political decisions becomes increasingly important in political crises: resilience-oriented actors must fulfill three functions above all in policy-making: recognizing the future, solving problems, and making effective and fair decisions. The concept of democratic resilience allows single or small-n case studies to identify the weaknesses and strengths of democracy and track its trajectories.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 3 March 2025; Accepted 12 November 2025

**KEYWORDS** Democratic resilience; modes of resilience; arenas of resilience; actors of resilience; resilient outputs

## Introduction

Resilience has risen to become a key concept in science and society. It has come out of nowhere, as constitutional theorist Gunnar Folke Schuppert writes.<sup>1</sup> This is true only for the first decade of the twenty-first century. Today, resilience is used in many scientific disciplines as diverse as materials science, architecture, engineering, health research, psychology, sociology, ecology, sustainability science and now, for some years, political science.<sup>2</sup>

The term originates from materials physics, where it describes the ability of “materials to return to their original state after temporary deformation.”<sup>3</sup> More

**CONTACT** Wolfgang Merkel  wolfgang.merkel@wzb.eu

\*The open access publication was funded by the WZB Berlin Social Science Center.

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

generally, resilience means the ability of an object or a system to withstand external and internal disturbances, impositions and shocks without giving up its fundamental structures and functions. Resilience enables transformation but prevents systemic change. As a scientific concept, resilience is, on the one hand, an analytical category that seeks to grasp empirically “what is” (what resilience potential does a particular democratic system have?) and, on the other hand, postulates normatively “what should be” (how is a desirable resilient democracy to be established?). The empirical and normative dimensions of the concept of democratic resilience must at first be kept apart.<sup>4</sup> This article wants to transform the simple term “democratic resilience” into a more complex analytical concept. The studies of democratic resilience can be seen as a fifth and most recent phase in those democratization studies, which deal with systemic transformations: *breakdown of democracy*, *transition to democracy*, *consolidation of democracy*, *backsliding of democracy* and now, for only a few years, *resilience of democracy*. After World War II and after the breakdown of fascist totalitarian regimes, in particular the national-socialist dictatorship, historians, philosophers, sociologists and political scientists tried to explain why the age of totalitarianism had come about and why the young democracies that had emerged after 1918 broke down only a few years later.<sup>5</sup> This remains a common theme in research into political regimes and is currently experiencing a renaissance due to the growing right-wing populism on both sides of the Atlantic.

When the last right-wing autocracies fell in Greece (1974), Portugal (1974) and Spain (1975), and a decade later a wave of democratization swept through Latin America, a new phase of research began, focusing on the conditions for successful democratic transitions. And indeed, many of these *transitions to democracy* were successful, not only in Southern Europe, but also in Latin America, East Asia and even Africa.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the focus in posttransitional democratization research shifted towards *democratic consolidation*.<sup>7</sup> Following the implosion of the Soviet Empire (1989–1991), Eastern European countries joined the transition and consolidation club. The positive trend towards democratic consolidation continued until 2008.<sup>8</sup> Thereafter, a worldwide trend of democratic backsliding began and continues up to recent.<sup>9</sup> This time not only young and non-consolidated democracies were affected by democratic backsliding, but several consolidated liberal democracies in Europe and the US showed increasing trends of democratic erosion.<sup>10,11</sup> Only very recently the search for democratic resilience entered our research on democracy and democratization.<sup>12</sup>

### **From democratization to democratic backsliding**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe in 1989/1991, up to the present, two phases can be distinguished: the peak of the third wave of democratization at the turn of the century and thereafter stagnation and the backsliding of most democracies, electoral and liberal alike. But first, a mood of democratic awakening prevailed. Autocracies became democracies and, even in the established democracies of the West, it was about nothing less than the “democratisation of democracy.”<sup>13</sup> The optimism died down after two decades.<sup>14</sup> Now, the debate in both East and West focuses on democratic self-defense and the resilience of democracy. Why has the resilience of democracy become the big topic at present? What do we see as the forces that are draining it, and why is it necessary to strengthen it?

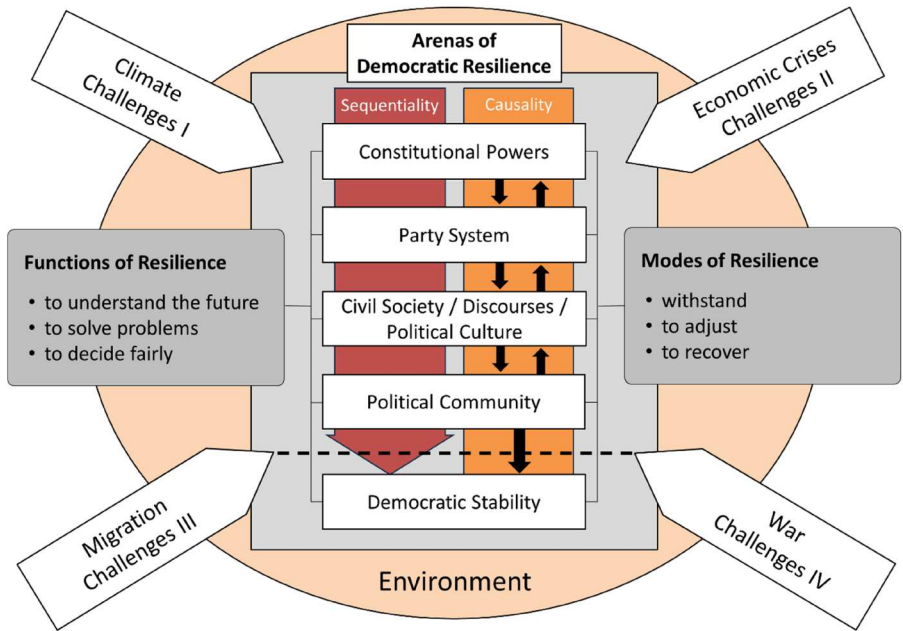
The first answer is: because capitalist democracy today is in danger of losing its ability to control political and economic affairs both internally and externally.<sup>15</sup> It is also challenged as a system by economically efficient autocratic (People's Republic of China, PRC) or hybrid (Singapore) regimes.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the capitalist dictatorship of the PRC today appears to some as a credible economic competitor to capitalist democracies in terms of efficiency and economic prosperity. Unrivalled high economic growth rates for two decades, cutting-edge high-tech innovations, and a perceived effective mode of governance in fundamental crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, appear from a distance as a seductive dispositive in view of the weaknesses and slowness of economic growth in European liberal democracies.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the normative price was high: autocratic rule, suppression of freedom, repression, and persecution of minorities are constitutive of the PRC regime. That is often forgotten in purely economic comparisons.

How a society – and its professional interpreters such as mass media, political elites and political scientists – looks at itself and its political constitution says as much about the prevailing “zeitgeist” as it does about the state of democracy. For almost ten years, academic books by renowned Western authors have flooded the market, their titles already proclaiming their essence: *Life and Death of Democracy*, *How Democracies Die*, *The End of Democracy*, *Decline of Democracy*, *The people vs Democracy*, *Crises of Democracy* or, more succinctly, *Democrisis*.<sup>18</sup> The optimistic exuberance of the first decade after 1989 has turned into its opposite in analogous exaggeration. Recently, however, a different perspective has begun to emerge in sync with the chants of doom and crisis. It can be briefly described as “democratic resilience” or “resilience of democracy.”<sup>19</sup> It does not deny the unresolved challenges of democracy or the discernible tendencies of democratic erosion. However, it does not take them as fate, but rather as the starting point to reflect on the conditions of possibility for democratic resilience in the years to come.

## What is “resilience of democracy”?

This article expresses a certain reserve towards the ubiquitous claim of crisis, decline and end of democracy.<sup>20</sup> “The” democracy in the singular is an abstract that cannot be found in the real world.<sup>21</sup> Denmark is not the USA, Finland not Romania, Canada certainly not Poland or Hungary.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether even most democracies of the liberal West are equipped to master the great challenges of the current decade of major transformations without damaging their basic liberal structures, losing executive competences to solve problems, and polarizing societies that do not break apart. These three parameters are vital for the survival of democracy. Whether they can withstand, for example, the transformative decarbonization of industrial societies with a fair burden sharing, or the new arms race in East and West or the right-wing populist wave accelerated through Trumpism in the US is decided by the resilience of democracy. But what is democratic resilience, what functions must it fulfil and what structures and actors does it need? I define “democratic resilience” as follows:

Democratic resilience is the capacity of a democratic regime to absorb external challenges and internal stressors and to dynamically adapt to the changing functional conditions of democratic governance without falling into regime change and abandoning or damaging democracy's defining norms, functions and institutions.



**Figure 1.** A model of democratic resilience.

In other words, it is about the way in which structures, functions and actors should interact within a democratic system of rule so that they can react as effectively and democratically as possible to changing contexts, such as external challenges and crises. Such a concept can be developed by combining “actor-centred institutionalism”<sup>23</sup> and system-theoretical functionalist considerations.<sup>24</sup> Taking those three building blocks, i.e. system, structure, and actors into account, the basic definition of democratic resilience can be graphically presented as follows in Figure 1. The corners paradigmatically outline four fundamental external challenges<sup>25</sup> that the liberal democratic system must overcome in the 2020s without losing the defining character of a liberal constitutional state. These four challenges are: CO<sup>2</sup>-neutral transformation of the fossil industrial state, economic crises and socio-economic inequality, migration pressure, and wars and other forms of violent external interventions. These are by no means the only impositions of this decade, but alongside the perennial question of war and peace, as in Ukraine and the Middle East, they are probably the most pressing, at least for the developed liberal democracies.

State, political and societal actors such as governments, political parties, interest groups, NGOs, courts, but also citizens are crucial actors in dealing with these and other challenges. In order to strengthen democratic resilience, they must act within the framework of democratic procedures and in accordance with the rule of law, at least for the most part and for the majority of actors. If actors, such as the presidential executive under Putin in Russia or Erdoğan in Turkey, act consistently with all their power resources against the rule of law, human rights, democracy and the democratic opposition, then rudimentary democratic regimes tip over into autocratic rule. If actors, such as the Hungarian government under Orbán’s Fidesz (2010–today) or

the PiS in Poland (2005–2007; 2015–2023), act illiberally, corruptly and undemocratically, they encounter harsh European legal and political restrictions that limit their scope of action. Nevertheless, right-wing populists sometimes successfully frame EU rules at home as illegitimate external interference. But even Hungary and Poland under the PiS governments did not simply tip over into authoritarian regimes, but were rather transformed from liberal to illiberal-defective democracies.<sup>26</sup> If anti-system<sup>27</sup> or semi-loyal<sup>28</sup> parties in government challenge liberal democracy, as in present Italy, Slovakia, or the Czech Republic it will depend on the appropriate anticipations and reactions of democratic parties and citizens as to how they can preserve, restore or even strengthen the resilience of democracy.

There are four elementary structural arenas of a democratic system (see Figure 1): constitutional powers, party systems, civil society, and political community within which actors interact and democratic resilience is produced or lost. The arenas have a dual character: on the one hand, they are political arenas with their norms and procedures, but at the same time they are also actors such as the executive (governments), the legislature (parliaments) or the judiciary (courts) that operate in these arenas. The four structural levels are in a dynamic relationship with each other through their institutional interdependencies and the respective actors who operate across all four arenas. As a result, positive and negative (anti-)democratic infections can quickly spread to the neighboring arenas. It is precisely this dynamic interdependence that must be kept in mind when analysing the democratic resilience of the system as a whole. I will briefly examine the four arenas and their actors and indicate where the risks and opportunities for democratic resilience lie in the present decade. The empirical focus will not be on the (neo)-authoritarian or illiberal regimes, but on the resilience of the currently (still) liberal democracies of Western Europe.

I want to develop a concept of democratic resilience based on theoretical and conceptual considerations as well as empirical observations, which will provide us with a holistic orientation towards the building blocks of the concept and their interdependencies for future empirical analyses.<sup>29</sup> This is not a lean concept for large n-analyses. It is supposed to serve as an analytical approach for case studies or small n comparisons. It is detailed enough to avoid conceptual stretching.<sup>30</sup> It avoids a two broad and imprecise application. It allows for status quo analyses to determine the state of democratic resilience in a given case. In addition, it also enables process tracing to observe how the specific core parameters of democratic resilience have developed over a certain period of time. The key questions are then: Which relevant actors were involved? What decisions did they make, when and why? What political outcomes did these interdependent decisions lead to the resilience or erosions of a particular democracy?<sup>31</sup>

### **Structure: constitutional powers**

In the course of globalization and Europeanisation, the balance of power between the executive, legislative and judicial branches have shifted in most liberal democracies. The executive in particular has benefited from this ongoing “denationalization” of policymaking,<sup>32</sup> as it is primarily governments that carry the decision-making at the G7, G20, the WTO (World Trade Organization) or the EU (European Union). National parliaments remain largely excluded from this and have consequently suffered a creeping loss of power.<sup>33,34</sup>

This shift in power was reinforced in many countries in Europe and across the Atlantic by the mode of executive governance fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. In Germany, as in most other European democracies, the executive branch took further decision-making power by decree or through emergency-like powers. They justified this shift of power by citing time pressure and uncertainty due to the progressing pandemic that would not allow for “time-consuming” parliamentary debates. This meant that the source of legitimacy of the participatory input of citizens and parliaments was reduced in favour of the output, understood as problem-solving by the executive.<sup>35</sup> That does not have to be illegitimate in such a dramatic emergency situation, but it threatens to leave behind sediments of memory among decisionist politicians willing to take action on the one side, and among sluggish institutions and citizens with an affinity for paternalism on the other. Two recent surveys conducted by Diermeier and Niehues or Svolik et al. show that this is not only a plausible assumption, but can be confirmed by experimental research or empirical surveys observed in Germany and other liberal democracies.<sup>36</sup> In the case of controversial political issues such as migration, climate policy and the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors find that considerable groups of the population are willing to forego “time-consuming processes” of parliamentary decision-making in times of crisis if it helps the presumed efficiency in solving those problems which are most pressing to them. This applies to right-wing supporters on the migration and refugee issue, to Green supporters on the climate issue, and in the COVID19 crisis across parties and social classes. However, a rule of thumb might serve: the higher the level of education, the lower the individual tendency to sacrifice democratic principles and procedures for presumed efficiency.<sup>37</sup> This fact also provides initial insights into how democratic resilience can be strengthened at this point through better (political) education.

Within the separation of powers, questions of democratic resilience are not least about containing the privileged position of the executive through well-functioning legislatures and judiciaries. On the positive side, for example, it should be noted that within the control of powers, the administrative courts in particular effectively fulfilled their control function under the rule of law during the COVID-19 pandemic in several European countries.<sup>38</sup> Thus, administrative courts repeatedly “overturned” executive decrees as disproportionate.

The battle between courts as guardians of democracy and the politics of executive aggrandizement can presently be observed in the United States of America.<sup>39</sup> The current situation in the US under Trump’s second presidency shows how important independent courts are. In the US Trump’s recruitment policy has significantly reduced the independence of the Supreme Court. This allows the president to repeatedly aggrandize the power of his executive branch. On the other hand, the US judicial system is too complex to be completely colonized even by the authoritarian governance of president Trump. Thus, the higher courts repeatedly rule against Trump’s blatant attempts to expand his executive power. The independence of courts as guardians of democracy will determine how much undemocratic damage Trump will leave behind after four years of authoritarian governance.

At least as important for the resilience of democracy is the behaviour of parliament. If, as in the US, the president has a majority in both houses of Congress and these majority stand disciplined behind the president, then he can rule authoritarily even within a democracy, as Trump has done so far. Much will depend on whether voters punish this authoritarian style of governance at the ballot box in the midterm

elections in 2026, thereby checking the president's power.<sup>40</sup> If this happens, democratic resilience will be strengthened. However, there is no guarantee of this, because Trump can react and rule increasingly by decree (executive orders). That would be the moment for the courts to step in as guardians of the democratic constitution.

In general, the three constitutional powers will have to balance decision-making between democratic norms and criteria of effective governance. The balance must avoid the disempowerment of parliaments and simultaneously enabling the executive to govern effectively. At the same time, decisions must remain bound to the validity of fundamental rights and basic democratic norms.<sup>41</sup> The three constitutional powers must enable social and political changes in order to adapt democracies to changing external and internal contexts. This is a fundamental condition for the resilience of democracy.

However, it is misleading to make the resilience of democracy largely dependent on constitutional institutions alone. Institutions are mostly frameworks within which actors operate. The most important ones are still political parties. This is particularly true of parliamentary democracies, but also applies – mostly to a lesser extent – to presidential systems as well.

### ***Actors: parties and party systems***

Political parties are the dominant actors in most parliamentary democracies of the EU – member states. The average voter turnout in the EU is about two-thirds of eligible voters. That is not outstanding, but it is a solid democratic legitimization. At the same time, serious surveys, such as those of the Eurobarometer, show dramatically low levels of trust in political parties among citizens.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, members have left political parties in droves or died off in the last twenty years. The right-wing populists in Europe are notable exceptions here. The electoral successes of the right-wing populists point to a significant weakness of representativeness by the established democratic parties. The particular problem here is that the right-wing populist parties are at best “semi-loyal” to democracy. In some countries, they have even taken on an anti-systemic character.<sup>43</sup> To strengthen democracy, democratic parties must succeed in drawing semi-loyal party supporters<sup>44</sup> of the right-wing populists back into the democratic camp. At the same time, they must isolate the openly anti-system<sup>45</sup> forces mostly present among the party functionaries. A simple legal ban on right-wing populist parties could mean fighting illiberalism with illiberal methods. It would be, above all, a slippery slope for liberal democracies.<sup>46</sup>

With the weakness of leftist parties in Western Europe,<sup>47</sup> the right-wing populists have been able to claim something like a monopoly on radical opposition to established politics and “those up there” over the last decade. This has given them a political significance and visibility that usually go beyond their share of the electorate. With the growing strength of right-wing populist parties, the parties of the democratic centre gradually lost voters. Only a few countries still have classic catch-all parties that can potentially attract and neutralize semi-loyal or even anti-system voters. Some European democracies (France, Germany, Spain, Greece) have both expressive left-wing and right-wing parties, which reinforce the centrifugal tendencies in the party system. The consequence is a thinning of the democratic centre, which in turn makes it more difficult to form winning democratic coalitions. When democratic parties in polarized multi-party systems fail to find coalition majorities, centrifugal competitive dynamics develop and pose a risk to democratic systems.<sup>48</sup>

Resilient democracies, however, need strong parties in both government *and* opposition that are loyal to democracy and willing to cooperate among each other, without giving up their programmatic diversity.<sup>49</sup> Even during profound crises, such as the pandemic, migration and climate change, the democratic opposition – however intensively it perceives its role – must not be delegitimized or temporarily disempower itself. Particularly in times of crises, when the executive is still attracting power and competences, the opposition has a democratic watchdog role to play.<sup>50</sup> In general, democratic parties must strengthen their representativeness and responsiveness, especially towards the vulnerable lower half of society.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, they should promote and not block other forms of participation such as referendums, town hall meetings or citizens' assemblies.<sup>52</sup> In the individualized societies of the twenty-first century, parties will no longer be able to guarantee social representativeness in the political system on their own. In this respect, additional opportunities for participation and representation also represent a relief for the parties and their responsibilities.

### **Civil society**

In the last three decades, real existing civil societies have not kept pace with the career of their theoretical concept. In theory, civil society was often considered a remedy for all conceivable malaises of democracy. Empirically, however, there has been a flight from small local associations and large national and supranational organizations in many advanced liberal societies. At the same time, political NGOs gained strength. This part of civil society has its undoubted strength in political activism as well as extra-parliamentary control of the powerful and ruling. NGOs such as Amnesty International (AI), Transparency International (TI), World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or Fridays for Future (FFF) uncover human rights violations and corruption scandals or bring violations of environmental standards to streets and courts. They have become relevant watchdogs of “monitory democracy.”<sup>53</sup> However, these politicized NGOs can hardly take over the social bridging functions of the classic civic associations. This is because political civil society “associations”<sup>54</sup> are increasingly formed today within their own social classes and narrowly defined moral-cultural milieus or sexual identities. This trend towards subcultural segmentation of society has intensified in many Western (civil) societies.<sup>55</sup> Thus, they sometimes tend to deepen the already existing cleavages in society and lead to an increasing political polarization.<sup>56</sup> This has been particularly visible in the debates on immigration, COVID-19 and climate change.<sup>57</sup> They tend to discursively tear down bridges in society rather than build and strengthen them. The exclusion of “others,” rather than the inclusion of “all,” characterizes the current texture and core dynamics of our (civil) societies. What is well advanced in the USA seems once again to be spreading in Europe with a certain time lag. If Tocqueville and Marx are each right in their own way, then the United States of America is once again holding up the mirror of its future to the old continent of Europe. Right-wing and sometimes outright antidemocratic and racist movements such as the Proud Boys in the US, PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) in Germany or rightist ethnopluralist movements in France and Italy demonstrate the dark side of civil society on both sides of the Atlantic. Not a pleasant outlook for democratic resilience even in the West.

For the resilience of democracy, it must be beyond doubt that the division of civil society into friend and foe is to overcome, or at least stopped. *Bridging social capital*

must be built across the diverse spheres of society. *Bonding social capital*, on the other hand, deepens the divides and undermines the communal sense of social belonging.<sup>58</sup> The political right divides society with its ethno-nationalism and chauvinism. But it is not only the right that divides liberal societies. The educated, socio-economically mostly privileged left-liberal cosmopolitans also use their widely fringed terms such as racism, sexism, corona – and climate denialists to set themselves apart as enlightened and morally superior thereby excluding the dissenting “amoral others” from the “community of the sensible, truthful and decent.”<sup>59</sup> This also dries up the humus of commonality. Without a certain degree of empathy, tolerance and a sense of community, free democracies cannot flourish. In particular, the opinionated left-liberal forces and media should renounce exclusionary narratives and support the depolarization of society.<sup>60</sup> If they dogmatize their political positions as the only valid and moral ones, they lose their liberal character and take on illiberal features.<sup>61</sup> In times of social and political polarization, this weakens democratic resilience at the grassroots.

### **Political community**

Resilient democracies need a certain degree of sense of belonging from their citizens. *E pluribus unum* or more contemporary *diversity in community* is the ideal formula for successful community building in the twenty-first century. Western European and North American societies are diverse and characterized by different identities. This offers a rich reservoir of cultural creativity and democratic pluralism, especially if it is possible to unite the different social identities in a tolerant society.<sup>62</sup> Every justifiable minority and community-compatible identity should be protected. Only then can its members see themselves as mutually recognized and feel they belong to a larger whole. But if identities—be they of nationalist, religious, sexual or ideological provenance—take on mutually intolerant forms and do not develop a sense of what is necessarily communal, political democracy loses its social basis. It disintegrates.<sup>63</sup>

The protagonists of public discourses should learn to distinguish again the relevance that exists between the correct recognition of even miniscule gender and identity groups and the comprehensive scandal of justice, which is that capitalist democracies give both the upper and lower classes an undemocratic guarantee of their status that can by no means be legitimized: as a rule, the top 20 per cent of a society remain at the top, the bottom 20 per cent at the bottom. To emphasize this once again: the free choice of one’s gender identity should be protected in a democratic society even for the smallest minorities. However, the systematic exclusion of the lower classes from public discourse or even fair life chances and career opportunities is an incomparably more relevant political problem for just, peaceful democratic societies and therefore for democratic resilience.<sup>64</sup> Typically, the former do have a relevant voice of their own in politics and the media, while the latter hardly ever do and, if at all, only in an advocacy capacity. However, the twenties of the twenty-first century, with the post-fossil transformation of the industrial state, will bring the social question back to the fore with force. Only if the great transformation can be organized through a fair distribution of burdens<sup>65</sup> for the higher and lower classes can we avoid the drastic American (North and South) inequality distortions and keep society together.<sup>66</sup> This will become important for society, community and the resilience of democracy already in the present and the near future.

Does the political and social community need an identity narrative for its resilient self-description? A nationalist-chauvinist one, as the right-wing populists of many developed countries seek to evoke? The attempt to write this has drawn nothing but a trail of blood through Europe in the past century. Whether this can be fundamentally different in the twenty-first century is doubtful. Not least for this reason, Dolf Sternberger and later Jürgen Habermas, two eminent German intellectuals, opposed the “thick” ethnic-nationalist narrative of ethnic nationalism and proposed the “thin” identity offer of constitutional patriotism.<sup>67</sup> As elaborate and democratic as this offer may be, it appears too intellectual to convey a crisis-proof sense of belonging to the people of a mass society. But this sense of belonging is the indispensable foundation that can be strengthened by an open society in which fair institutions and procedures allow for a just distribution of material goods, ideal values and equal life chances; not only on paper, but also in constitutional reality. For this, the twenties of this century could provide a kind of new “saddle time”<sup>68</sup> for advanced societies if societal transformations can be successfully combined with the necessary social burden-sharing.

## Functions and outcomes

However, institutional structures and actors do not fully describe the resilience of democracy. If a political system wants to secure its democratic existence, it must fulfil certain functions.<sup>69</sup> Easton distinguishes between input and output, respectively outcomes. Both are important for the survival and resilience of democratic systems. Going beyond Easton’s system analysis of political life, I will specify three fundamental political functions, which, not least in times of crises, largely codetermine the resilience potential of a democracy. These are: *Understanding the future, solving problems, deciding fairly*. The better they are fulfilled, the higher the resilience of democracy *ceteris paribus*.

### *Understanding the future*

Understanding the future and acting for the benefit of the democratic future of a political system in the long term is one of the weak points of democracy. We are living in times of increasing complexity in policy making, whether it relates to climate change, pandemics, pensions or economics. Rational policy making needs, i.a. two things: reliable knowledge and long termism. Therefore, the political system and its decision-making elites must open up to the insights of the sciences and to the people. The relevant scientific disciplines related to the respective policies can draw attention to problems in the future better than politics, which is bogged down in everyday business. Climate change is an outstanding example of this. Climate research has been publicly pointing out the destructive explosiveness of climate change for at least three decades. In open societies, however, those scientific findings, admonitions and warnings have found a broad public resonance only in the last decade. Then the classical democratic amplifiers, such as social movements, NGOs, civic associations, public discourses, courts and finally parties, have sensitized citizens and politicians. It has become a topic for rational politicians that they have to address if they want to win elections.

Science has, i.a. the societal task of informing politics and political decisions. It is an important prerequisite for evidence-based policy-making. But the final decision in democracies has to be made by political majorities according to *a priori* established procedures. In a democracy, majorities beat science. The question of strategy for effective and socially acceptable solutions is, of course, not primarily a scientific one. It is deeply political because, depending on the policy decision, different individuals, groups, interests, and social classes will win or lose. There are also diverse political traditions and pathways that impact political decisions beyond science. That became clear when the European Commission, and with it countries like France, the Netherlands, Finland, the Czech Republic, and other countries in Eastern Europe, saw the civil use of nuclear energy as a proven means of CO<sub>2</sub> neutral climate policies. However, parts of the German “traffic light coalition” (2021–2025), especially the Greens, strictly rejected nuclear energy. This example shows that the civilian use of nuclear energy is not primarily a scientific question in the political realm, but rather a genuinely political question.

*Follow the science* is therefore an understandable but problematic claim in pluralist societies. But which science should politics follow? *The sciences* must make their knowledge and diagnoses available to politics. However, when it comes to problem-solving strategies, they can only model different paths with their respective risks and opportunities. Climate research can talk only about the climate. It has no competence to assess the economic, employment or social consequences associated with specific climate policies. As a science, it must remain silent about this. This is ultimately a matter for politics. It alone can make generally binding decisions according to democratic procedures. But politics must remain open to the various sources of independent research. It must support them without influencing them. It must also accept the pluralism of scientific knowledge. This in no way precludes it from relying particularly on certain scientific findings in internal discourse and decision-making. What is important here is that an epistemization of politics as well as a politicization of science is avoided. What a future-oriented policy needs is the always open “loose coupling”<sup>70</sup> of the subsystems “science” and “politics.” Without scientific knowledge, effective evidence-based policies are impossible; without the final democratic decision, democracies would degenerate towards elitist expertocracies.

### **Solve problems**

The sciences and experts play an important role not only in identifying problems, but also in proposing evidence-based solutions to them. In recent years, the development of effective vaccines against the coronavirus or, in climate policy, the development of regenerative zero-carbon energy production has been outstanding.

But why are scientific findings not simply implemented 1:1, for example, in climate policy? Firstly, the sciences usually provide diagnoses, models, technical solutions and scenarios, but not political strategies for translating scientific findings into action. And where they do, they often cross the line between science and politics. Secondly, unlike highly specialized scientific research, politics is necessarily a generalist. Thus, in issues such as migration, pandemics and climate policy, there is not just one problem, but multiple consequential effects must also be considered. They affect civil rights, economic growth, the labour market, inequality, generational and gender issues, to name just a few.<sup>71</sup> The multidimensionality and the sometimes-conflicting goals must

therefore be integrated into a multidimensional framework of interests, values, trade-offs and compromises. Research usually focuses on only one goal, namely the scientific truth; democratic politics is necessarily multi-objective. Therefore, the activist imperative “follow the science” can degenerate into “scientific populism” and lead to the elimination of pluralist competition for the best solution.

If science determines the only viable solution, politics is left with hardly any significant autonomous space. It becomes superfluous. This is a form of technocratic populism that weakens the resilience and legitimacy of democratic politics.<sup>72</sup> At this point, we should once again recall Niklas Luhmann, who worked out the specific communication codes of partial social systems such as science, the economy and politics. Only if these codes are not usurped from the specific code of other subsystems do they retain their efficiency and legitimacy.<sup>73</sup> This applies to both science and politics, which have to cooperate despite different communication codes.

However, democracy has another particular problem when it has to decide rationally and implement politically effective long-term reforms. One can call this problem the “dilemma of asynchrony” of political investments and electoral returns. Democracy has short electoral cycles – mostly four years. These often tempt rational, vote-maximizing politicians to take short-term action because they want to be re-elected. This may often lead to longer-term problems. Long-term reforms, such as climate policy, pensions or education, are sometimes neglected because high economic, social and political investments are made at the beginning, but the electoral amortization of these investments can possibly only be collected in the following legislative period and then perhaps by the political opponent.<sup>74</sup> The classic example of these divergent time horizons in the recent German past was provided by the second Red-Green coalition government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (2002–2005). The implementation of the so-called Agenda 2010 and the market-oriented economic and social reforms, however useful they were for the economic recovery of the country and society as a whole, caused discursive and electoral damage, especially in their own social democratic camp. Ultimately, they led to the SPD’s electoral defeat in 2005 and, thereafter, contributed to the continuous electoral decline of the social democratic party. The beneficiaries were the CDU/CSU parties, because the newly won growth and employment boosts now paid into their electoral and governmental account. Also benefiting was “Die Linke” (The Left), which, after Agenda 2010, was able to present itself as the only true left party and defender of social justice. The loser was the SPD who launched the long-term reforms.

To overcome the political dilemma between short-term electoral gains and long-term problem solving has become crucial for the citizens’ trust in political elites and democratic institutions. A continuing loss of confidence in the democratic system’s ability to solve problems, in the resilience of its institutions, and trust in the political elites will sum up to a decline of legitimacy in democracy as a whole. Credible plans and their actual implementation in order to solve urgent economic, social and other problems are one of the most important sources for democratic resilience, particularly in times of multiple crises. Overcoming the dilemma of short-term investments and longer-term returns requires political leadership, especially when partisan rationalities and the needs of society as a whole diverge. Political leadership is not everything, but without political leadership, there can be no effective solutions to problems that benefit society as a whole. This typical example shows how important the interconnection between structures, actors and problem solving (policies) is for DR.

## Decide fairly

Resilient democratic politics must decide fairly or at least must be perceived by a majority of citizens as acting according to fair rules. Perceptions matter. The equal value of the interests of all citizens worthy of recognition plays an important role in working democracies. Taking this into account is not easy even in normal times. In deep and multiple crises, it is particularly difficult. In major transformations, which usually involve economic, social, technological and political turbulences at the beginning, the aforementioned rule of thumb comes into play: it is especially the lower income strata that have to bear the relatively greatest burden.<sup>75</sup> Opportunities and risks are highly unequally distributed in most capitalist democracies. However, resilient democratic politics must guarantee democratic procedures *and* fair outcomes. It is precisely in this respect that liberal democratic regimes can be superior to other political regimes. Liberalism guarantees openness and pluralism, while democratic procedures allow citizens to exert pressure on decision-making.<sup>76</sup> Procedures and outcomes perceived as fair are indispensable components for strengthening democratic resilience. Democracies with unfair outcomes and high inequality of income, wealth, and life chances may survive as electoral and even liberal democracies, such as the US or Brazil, but they tend to be less stable and less sustainable. Particularly in times of crisis and major socio-economic transformations, democratic governments must distribute the burden fairly and compensate the losers. This helps to ensure that the losers do not become further alienated from the democratic system and turn to extremist anti-system parties.

## Modes of resilience

The *functions* of democratic resilience are to be juxtaposed with their various *modes*. Mode means how resilient democracies react when they are exposed to exogenous shocks and internal stress, as they were in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and the US. Drawing on the existing literature on the subject, I propose three forms/ modes of resilient reactions: resist, adapt and recover (see Figure 1). The three reactions suggest a certain timeline. When stress hits a democratic system, its institutions and actors often respond with resistance. In doing so, they mobilize the potentials of democratic resilience that are built into democratic institutions or the minds of their citizens. The judiciary, for example, can reject the aggrandizement of executive power. Democratic parties can agree to exclude anti-system parties from participating in any governmental coalition. Such a *conventio ad excludendum*, excluded in postwar Italy (1948–1994) the neofascists (MSI) and the communists (PCI) from government at the national level. In present Germany, the democratic parties from the centre right to the left erected the so-called informal “firewall” which excludes the right-wing populist AfD from government coalitions and political alliances at the regional and federal level. Bans against political organizations can be issued by the institutions (such as constitutional courts) authorized to do so (executive, legislative, judiciary). In some European democracies, internal secret services surveille extremist parties. But these are ambiguous measures. For, the more that observations by the Internal Secret Service and outright party bans come to the fore, the more a democratic order runs the risk of triggering illiberal tendencies, which in turn cause stress in the liberal texture of democratic societies.<sup>77</sup> The sociologist Karl Mannheim saw the true potential of

democratic resilience in the “planned society.” The constitutionalist Karl Löwenstein, also a Jewish emigrant like Mannheim and inventor of the term “militant democracy,”<sup>78</sup> wanted to fight the enemies of democracy with “fire against fire.” The core of constitutional “militant democracy” was the prohibition of political parties. In Germany, the possibility of banning political parties was written into the constitution under the dark shadow of the horrendous crimes of the Nazi-barbarianism (Basic Law Art. 21, 2). Nevertheless, as constitutionally those bans are according to German Basic Law, they run the risk to foster an illiberal state-oriented culture of “observation and prohibition,”<sup>79</sup> thereby weakening the societal potential of democratic resilience.

If the defensive resilience of democracy is not effective enough or rapidly exhausted, the efforts to *adapt* the democratic routines, procedures and institutions to the new contexts and challenges can be considered as a second form of resilience. This could be observed particularly well during the Corona crisis in many democracies (and autocracies). The behaviour of citizens was subjected to strict legal regulations, particularly at the beginning of the crisis. For this, fundamental rights and freedoms had to be suspended at times. In Germany, the Infection Protection Act was amended in record time. But not only were laws changed; informal and somewhat unconstitutional forms of governance were also tried. The COVID-19 pandemic was in many countries the hour of the executive and parliamentary self-restraint. This is not to be normatively judged here. However, it shows the rapid and profound adaptive reactions of the political actors. Only after months of excessive executive power, the reawakened liberal resilience of the parliamentary system became apparent again. The dramatic phase of the pandemic was over. In many democracies, essential fundamental rights were temporarily suspended and restricted. However, no liberal democracy collapsed during or due to the pandemic. In the vast majority of democracies, all fundamental rights were restored after the pandemic. However, in some countries, such as Germany and Austria, aversion remained not only to the concrete measures, but also to democracy as a form of government that allowed to suspend temporarily basic rights. In the long term, it contributed to the polarization of both societies and the continuous rise of right-wing populism.<sup>80</sup>

After *resisting* and *adapting* to the new circumstances *recovering* from a crisis of democracy is the third form of democratic resilience. This means repairing crisis-related damage to or restrictions on democracy and restoring the institutional and procedural democratic status quo ante. Regardless of whether restrictions on democratic rights may be justified or not in dramatic crises, once the crisis is over, democratic resilience is a matter of re-establishing the principles of the rule of law and re-build the democratic culture of a society. However, a restoration of democratic rights can also happen through new democratic institutions and actors. An indispensable condition for this is that they will be established through democratic procedures and they conform to the democratic constitution.

This is possibly the most prerequisite-laden of the three modes of democratic resilience. We are seeing this in the US after Donald Trump’s first presidency (2017–2020), in Brazil after Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023), and since 2023 after die Polish PiS-government (2015–2023). The recovery process of democracy is far from complete in these three countries. During Trump’s second presidency, the process of democratic recovery, which began under the Biden administration, was stopped in 2024. Already, the first year of Donald Trump’s second presidency signals how much damage can be done to the democratic institution and civic culture even in a once-stable liberal democracy. To re-democratize the institutional and moral infrastructure after longer

and intensive periods of undemocratic hollowing out takes mostly longer than their authoritarian destruction. Re-democratizers often face a dilemma. Either they follow existing laws and remain strictly within the narrow scope of legality. This can take a long time and is met with open legal vetoes left behind by the old authoritarian or illiberal regime. Typically, these are coming from constitutional courts packed by the supporters of the old authoritarian government, strong authoritarian opposition in parliament, or, as in Poland's semi-presidential system, from the two PiS presidents since 2023 (Andrzej Duda and Karel Nawrocki) who have repeatedly used their presidential veto against the Tusk government's reform laws. But, if the newly elected democratic reformers do not have the patience to follow the restrictive but valid laws of the previous government and circumvent them, they will be criticized by the public for ruling authoritarily themselves. This can erode the respect for law and democracy throughout society.<sup>81</sup> The example of Poland after the PiS governments (2015–2023) also shows how difficult it is to transform a “defective democracy”<sup>82</sup> back into a functioning liberal democracy with democratic means. There is still a long way to go back and forward to a democracy for Brazil, Poland, the post-Trump US, not to speak of Hungary.

In their resilience study of 103 countries, Croissant and Lott<sup>83</sup> show that strong democratic resilience often prevents backsliding and the breakdown of democracies. In contrast, they are much more sceptical about the impact of democratic resilience on successful processes of democratic recovery. They do not see any correlation between their resilience indicators and the progress of re-democratization.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the extraordinary popularity of the term democratic resilience, the term has nowhere fully transformed into an analytical approach.<sup>85</sup> The question may be asked in conclusion: What is new about the concept? Scientific terms that quickly migrate into fashionable everyday usage often lose their contours and analytical suitability before they are developed into a concept. What new insights does the concept allow into political regime dynamics? What explains “democratic resilience” better than the concepts “democratic stability” or “democratic consolidation”? The very concept of democratic consolidation has a dual character: it allows for differentiated descriptions of the status quo, just as it allows for explanations of the process of democratic consolidation over time.<sup>86</sup> In such a process, structures/institutions, actors and policy outcomes can be deciphered in their respective interdependencies.<sup>87</sup> Without those interdependencies, we cannot understand the dynamics of either the erosion of democracy or democratic recovery.

Ultimately, I see two new aspects of added scientific value concerning the concept of democratic resilience. The first certainly contains traces of banality. The term democratic resilience is here and is increasingly being used. However, it still lacked further conceptualization. Although the term democratic resilience has some conceptual affinities with the concepts of democratic consolidation, that carries the dust of overly optimistic debates in the past. Those debates are more reminiscent of the democratic awakening after 1989 than of the creeping decline of democratic standards today. In this respect, the change of concepts has its own diagnostic value because it no longer bears the traces of a teleological perspective with regard to the final triumph of democracy.<sup>88</sup> But there is a second aspect. Democratic resilience emphasizes more the capacity of democratic systems to resist and recover after backlashes. It focuses

more on functions that are open to variation than on static structures or games that rational actors use to play. This is no small feat in times of poly-crisis.

Democracy research today is not so much about democratizing democracy as it was thirty or fifty years ago, but about defending it. Perhaps this is a historical hint; it is not necessarily “democracy” per se that is in crisis, but that many actually existing democracies are affected by an erosion of their liberal embeddedness. It is precisely the grey zone between resilience and democratic backsliding that democracies are increasingly slipping into. The political question is: how can this global trend be broken and how can democracies be saved and stabilized by democratic means? If we have a conceptual frame that allows specific insights into the interdependencies of institutions, actors, functions, and outcomes, then we can better explain under which conditions democratic resilience measures are successful and when they fail. And once we have such insights, we can also develop more context-sensitive countermeasures for the resilience of democracies in practical politics.

## Notes

1. Schuppert, *Wie resilient ist unsere "Politische Kultur"?*
2. Rampp, Endreß, and Naumann, *Resilience in Social, Cultural and Political Spheres*; Chandler and Coaffee, *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*; Bourbeau, *A Genealogy of Resilience*; Ibid., *On Resilience*.
3. Bröckling, *Resilienz. Über einen Schlüsselbegriff im 21. Jahrhundert*, p. 1.
4. Lührmann and Merkel, *Resilience of Democracy*.
5. Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown & Reequilibration*.
6. i.a. O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*; Huntington, *The Third Wave*; Przeworski, *The Games of Transition*.
7. e.g. Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*; Gunther, Diamandouros, and Puhle, *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation*; Merkel, *The Consolidation of Post-autocratic Democracies*; Morlino, *Democracy between Consolidation and Crisis*.
8. See Freedomhouse, *Freedom in the world 2025*; V-Dem, *Democracy Report 2025. 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*
9. i.a.: Lührmann and Lindberg, *A Third Wave of Autocratization is here*; Boese, Lindbergh, and Lührmann, *Waves of Autocratization and Democratization*.
10. i.a. Bermeo, *On Democratic Backsliding*; Lührmann and Lindberg, *A Third Wave of Autocratization is here*; Maerz et al., *A Framework for Understanding Regime Transformation*.
11. This is not the place to review the extensive body of literature on ‘democratic backsliding’. For an excellent overview, see: Bartels et al., “The Forum”.
12. Holloway and Mainwaring, *How Well Does ‘Resilience’ Apply to Democracy?*, 69.
13. Diamond, *Developing Democracy*; Norris, *Critical Citizens*; Offe, *Demokratisierung der Demokratie*.
14. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*; Norris, *Democratic Deficit*; Diamond, *Facing Up to the Democratic Recession*; Ibid., *Democracy in Decline?*; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*; Merkel and Kneip, *Democracy and Crisis*; Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*; Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*; McCoy and Somer, *Depolarizing Politics and Remaking Democracy*.
15. Lührmann and Merkel, *Resilience of Democracy*.
16. Ha, Knox, and Janenova, *Authoritarian and Democratic States*.
17. Gerschewski, *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule*; see also: Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, 82–83.
18. To the abundance of literature about democratic backsliding, please see Fn. 13.
19. Burnell and Calvert, *The Resilience of Democracy*; Boese et al., *How Democracies Prevail*; Merkel and Lührmann, *Resilience of Democracies*; Holloway and Manwaring, *How Well Does ‘Resilience’ Apply to Democracy?*; Kneuer, *Democratic Resilience as an Interactive and Dynamic Mechanism*; Bolleyer and Börzel, *Crises and Democratic Resilience*; Bianchi et al., *The Myth of Democratic Resilience*.

20. Merkel and Kneip, *Democracy and Crisis*.
21. i.a., Dahl, *Polyarchy*; Ibid., *Democracy and its Critics*; Held, *Models of Democracy*.
22. see i.a.: V-Dem, *Democracy Report 2025*; Freedomhouse, *Freedom in the World 2025*.
23. Scharpf, *Games Real Actors Play*.
24. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*.
25. I already emphasized that these four external challenges are not the only ones. External security, or pandemics are others. Of course, there are also “internal” challenges like polarization, domestic security, antidemocratic actors such as right-wing populists and extremists. But the overall logic of the concept would not change, since these are also challenges which the democratic actors and institutions within the democratic system have to deal with. In order to not overload the concept, I am focusing here on external challenges and internal reactions.
26. Agh, *Deconsolidation of Democracy in East-Central Europe*, 431–7.
27. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*.
28. Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown & Reequilibration*.
29. Goertz, *Social Science Concepts*, 27.
30. Sartori, *Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics*.
31. Collier, *Understanding Process Tracing*; Mahoney, *The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences*.
32. Zürn, *Democratic Governance Beyond the Nation-State*.
33. Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*; Schäfer and Zürn, *The Democratic Regression*, 72.
34. It is too early to judge which impact Donald Trump’s politics of Making America Great Again (MAGA) will have on the renationalization and de-democratization of national and global politics.
35. Bolleyer and Salát, *Parliaments in Times of Crisis*.
36. Diermeier and Niehues, *Demokratische Resilienz in Deutschland?*; Svobik et al., *In Europe, Democracy Erodes from the Right*.
37. Svobik et al., *In Europe, Democracy Erodes from the Right*.
38. Ginsburg and Versteeg, *The Bound Executive*; Meyer, Dos Reis and De Castro, *Courts and COVID-19*.
39. Merkel, *The Sultanisation of US Politics*.
40. Kaufman, *Weaponisation of Law*.
41. Here too, it is open to what extent Trump’s contempt for norms, procedures and the autonomy of parliaments will have a long-term negative impact on the institutional resilience of democracy in the USA and other democracies.
42. Eurobarometer, *European Parliament*.
43. i.a. Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism in Europe and the Americas*; Müller, *What is Populism*; Schmidt, *The Discursive Construction of Discontent*; Meléndez and Kaltwasser, *Negative Partisanship Towards the Populist Radical Right*.
44. Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown & Reequilibration*.
45. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*.
46. Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy*; Merkel, *Die Fallstricke der wehrhaften Demokratie*.
47. Häusermann and Kitschelt, *Beyond Social Democracy*.
48. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*.
49. Garritzmann, *How Much Power Do Oppositions Have?*
50. Keane, “Monitory Democracy?”; Merkel, *Who Governs in Deep Crises?*, 3.
51. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*; Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*.
52. Gutmann and Thomson, *Reflections on Deliberative Democracy*.
53. Keane, “Monitory Democracy?”.
54. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.
55. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 225.
56. McCoy and Somer, *Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization*.
57. Hartevelde, Mendoza, and Rooduijn, *Affective Polarization and the Populist Radical Right*.
58. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
59. Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*; Gidron, Adams and Horne, *Who Dislikes Whom?*
60. McCoy and Somer, *Depolarizing Politics and Remaking Democracy*.
61. Ellis, *The Dark Side of the Left*.
62. Walzer, *On Toleration*; Brown and Forst, *The Power of Tolerance*.

63. Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*; Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents*; Merkel and Zürn, *Conclusion*.
64. Fraser, *Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History*.
65. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.
66. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*.
67. Habermas, "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State"; Müller, "A General Theory Of Constitutional Patriotism", 107.
68. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*.
69. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*.
70. Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*.
71. Daviter, "Policy Analysis in the Face of Complexity"
72. Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 6, 11–13, 68–70.
73. Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*.
74. Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*.
75. Streeck, "A Crisis of Democratic Capitalism"; Pickety, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*; Milanovic, *Capitalism Alone*.
76. Ringen, *What Democracy is For*.
77. Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy*.
78. Löwenstein, "Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights".
79. Merkel, *Die Fallstricke der wehrhaften Demokratie*.
80. Weisskircher, "Introduction"12.
81. Bianchi et al., *The Myth of Democratic Resilience*, 37.
82. Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies".
83. Croissant and Lott, "Democratic Resilience in the Twenty-First Century".
84. *Ibid.*, 22.
85. Nevertheless, valuable partial attempts have been made to conceptualize democratic resilience: see i.a. Boese et al., "Waves of Autocratization and Democratization"; Lührmann 2021; Merkel and Lührmann, "Resilience of Democracies"; Bianchi et al., "The Myth of Democratic Resilience"; Croissant 2025. However, none of these authors has attempted to integrate the interdependencies of structures, actors and outcomes into a single concept.
86. i.a. Schmitter, *The Consolidation of Political Democracy*; O'Donnell, "Illusions About Consolidation"; Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*; Morlino, *Democracy Between Consolidation and Crisis*.
87. Merkel, "The Consolidation of Post-autocratic Democracies", 111.
88. Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm".

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Wolfgang Merkel* is a Director emeritus at the WZB Social Science Center and Professor emeritus of Political Science at the Humboldt University Berlin, Germany.

## Bibliography

- Agh, A. "Deconsolidation of Democracy in East-Central Europe." In *The Handbook of Political, Social, and Economic Transformation*, edited by W. Merkel, R. Kollmorgen, and H.-J. Wagener, 431–436. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Alonso, S., J. Keane, and W. Merkel. "Editors' Introduction: Rethinking the Future of Representative Democracy." In *The Future of Representative Democracy*, edited by S. Alonso, J. Keane, and W. Merkel, 1st ed., 1–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511770883.001.

- Bartels, L. M. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the new Gilded age*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008.
- Bartels, L. M., U. E. Daxecker, S. D. Hyde, St Lindberg, and I. Nooruddin. "The Forum: Global Challenges to Democracy? Perspectives on Democratic Backsliding." *International Studies Review* (2023): 1–27.
- Bermeo, N. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19. doi:10.1353/jod.2016.0012.
- Bianchi, M., N. Cheeseman, and J. Cyr. "The Myth of Democratic Resilience." *Journal of Democracy* 36, no. 3 (2025): 33–46.
- Boese, V. A., et al. "How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a two-Stage Process." *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (2021): 885–907. doi:10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413.
- Boese, V. A., S. I. Lindberg, and A. Lührmann. "Waves of Autocratization and Democratization: A Rejoinder." *Democratization* 28, no. 6 (2021): 1202–1210. doi:10.1080/13510347.2021.1923006.
- Bolleyer, N., and T. A. Börzel. 'Crises and Democratic Resilience: Patterns of Re-scripting in the US and Germany'; in: DVPW Panel "Crisis, Contestation, and Resilience of Liberal Democracies Around the World", Göttingen, 2024.
- Bolleyer, N., and O. Salát. "Parliaments in Times of Crisis: COVID-19, Populism and Executive Dominance." *West European Politics* 44, no. 5–6 (2021): 1103–1128. doi:10.1080/01402382.2021.1930733.
- Bourbeau, P. "A Genealogy of Resilience." *International Political Sociology* 12, no. 1 (2018a): 19–35. doi:10.1093/ips/olx026.
- Bourbeau, P. *On Resilience: Genealogy, Logics, and World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018b.
- Bröckling, U. 'Resilienz.: Über einen Schlüsselbegriff im 21. Jahrhundert', Soziopolis: Gesellschaft beobachten. [Preprint]. Accessed February 6, 2025. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-80731-7>, 2017.
- Brown, T. L. *Imperfect Oracle: The Epistemic and Moral Authority of Science*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.
- Brown, W., and R. Forst. *The Power of Tolerance: A Debate*. Edited by L. di Blasi and C.F.E. Holzhey. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Burnell, P., and P. Calvert. "The Resilience of Democracy: An Introduction." *Democratization* 6, no. 1 (1999): 1–32. doi:10.1080/13510349908403594.
- Carothers, Th. "The End of the Transition Paradigm." *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5–21.
- Chandler, D. and J. Coaffee, ed. *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience*. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Collier, D. "Understanding Process Tracing." *Political Science & Politics* 4 (2011): 823–830.
- Croissant, A., and L. Lott. "Democratic Resilience in the Twenty-First Century: Search for an Analytical Framework and Explorative Analysis." *Political Studies* 1 (2025): 1–28. doi:10.1177/003232172511345779.
- Dahl, R. A. *Democracy and its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Dahl, R.A. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. 5. print.: New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1971.
- Daviter, F. "Policy Analysis in the Face of Complexity: What Kind of Knowledge to Tackle Wicked Problems?" *Public Policy and Administration* 34, no. 1 (2019): 62–83. doi:10.1177/0952076717733325.
- Diamond, L. *Democracy in Decline?* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. doi:10.1353/book.40891.
- Diamond, L. "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession." *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141–155. doi:10.1353/jod.2015.0009.
- Diamond, L. J. *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Diermeier, M., and J. Niehues. *Demokratische Resilienz in Deutschland?*, IW Trends [Preprint], (3), 2021. doi:10.2373/1864-810X.21-03-05.
- Easton, D. *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Ellis, R. *The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998.
- Eurobarometer. "European Parliament: Directorate-General for Communication: European Parliament Eurobarometer – Democracy in action one year before the European elections – Executive summary", 2023. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861645833>.

- Fraser, N. "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History." In *Citizenship Rights*, edited by I. Štiks, and J. Shaw, 17–21. London: Routledge, 2017. doi:10.4324/9781315260211.
- Freedom House. *Freedom in the world* 2025. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>, 2025.
- Fukuyama, F. "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (2018): 90–94. 96–102, 104–114.
- Fukuyama, F. *Liberalism and its Discontents*. London: Profile Books, 2023.
- Garritzmann, J. L. "How Much Power do Oppositions Have? Comparing the Opportunity Structures of Parliamentary Oppositions in 21 Democracies." *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 23, no. 1 (2017): 1–30. doi:10.1080/13572334.2017.1283913.
- Gerschewski, J. *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. doi:10.1017/9781009199407.
- Gidron, N., J. Adams, and W. Horne. "Who Dislikes Whom? Affective Polarization Between Pairs of Parties in Western Democracies." *British Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (2023): 997–1015. doi:10.1017/S0007123422000394.
- Ginsburg, T., and M. Versteeg. "The Bound Executive: Emergency Powers During the Pandemic." *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 19, no. 5 (2021): 1498–1535. doi:10.1093/icon/ moab059.
- Goertz, G. *Social Science Concepts. A Users Guide*. Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Gunther, R., N.P. Diamandouros, and H.-J. Puhle, eds. *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. doi:10.56021/9780801849817.
- Gutmann, A., D. Thomson, et al. "Reflections on Deliberative Democracy: When Theory Meets Practice." In *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, edited by A. Bächtiger, 900–912. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Oxford handbooks), 2018.
- Ha, H., C. Knox, and S. Janenova. "Authoritarian and Democratic States: The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Efficacy of Public Health Outcomes." *Journal of Public Policy* 44, no. 4 (2024): 767–784. doi:10.1017/S0143814X24000163.
- Habermas, J. "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State." In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited by C. Taylor, and A. Gutmann, 107–148. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press (Princeton paperbacks), 1994.
- Hansen, S. E., and J. Kopstein. *The Assault on the State: How the Global Attack on Modern Government Endangers Our Future*. London: Polity, 2024.
- Harteveld, E., P. Mendoza, and M. Rooduijn. "Affective Polarization and the Populist Radical Right: Creating the Hating?" *Government and Opposition* 57, no. 4 (2022): 703–727. doi:10.1017/ gov.2021.31.
- Häusermann, S., and H. Kitschelt. *Beyond Social Democracy: The Transformation of the Left in Emerging Knowledge Societies*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2024.
- Held, D. *Models of Democracy*. 3rd ed., repr.: Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.
- Holloway, J., and R. Manwaring. "How Well Does 'Resilience' Apply to Democracy? A Systematic Review." *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 1 (2023): 68–92.
- Huntington, S. P. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.
- Kaufman, R. *Weaponisation of Law: Assault on Democracy*.: Toda Peace Institute, Report 252, 2025.
- Keane, J. *The Life and Death of Democracy*. 1st American ed. New York, NY: Norton, 2009.
- Keane, J. "Monitory Democracy?" In *The Future of Representative Democracy*, edited by S. Alonso, J. Keane, and W. Merkel, 212–235. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Kelsen, H. *The Essence and Value of Democracy*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013.
- Kneuer, M. 'Democratic Resilience as an Interactive and Dynamic Mechanism', in. *IPSA World Congress*, Buenos Aires, 2023.
- Koselleck, R. *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*. Repr. Stanford, Calif: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002.
- Levitsky, S., and D. Ziblatt. *How Democracies die*. 1st ed. New York: Crown, 2018.
- Lilla, M. *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. London: Hurst & Company, 2018.
- Linz, J. J. "Crisis, Breakdown & Reequilibration." In *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, edited by J.J. Linz, and A. Stepan. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

- Linz, J. J., and A. C. Stepan, 3–33. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Löwenstein, K. “Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights.” *The American Political Science Review* 31, no. 3 (1937): 417–432.
- Luhmann, N. *Ecological Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Lührmann, A., and S. I. Lindberg. “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is new About it?” *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095–1113. doi:10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029.
- Lührmann, A., and W. Merkel, eds. *Resilience of Democracy: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges*. London: Routledge, 2023.
- Maerz, S. F., et al. “A Framework for Understanding Regime Transformation: Introducing the ERT Dataset.” *SSRN Electronic Journal* 113 (2021): 1–30. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3781485.
- Mahoney, J. “The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences.” *Sociological Methods and Research* 41, no. 4 (2012): 570–597.
- Mannheim, K. *Diagnosis of our Time: Wartime Essays of a Sociologist*. London: Routledge, 1943.
- McCoy, J., and M. Somer. *Depolarizing Politics and Remaking Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025.
- McCoy, J., and M. Somer. “Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 234–271. doi:10.1177/0002716218818782.
- Meléndez, C., and C. R. Kaltwasser. “Negative Partisanship Towards the Populist Radical Right and Democratic Resilience in Western Europe.” In *Resilience of Democracy: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges*, edited by A. Lührmann, and W. Merkel, 81–101. London: Routledge, 2023.
- Merkel, W. “The Consolidation of Post-Autocratic Democracies: A Multi-Level Model.” *Democratization* 5, no. 3 (1998): 33–67. doi:10.1080/13510349808403572.
- Merkel, W. *Die Fallstricke der wehrhaften Demokratie*, in: *VerfBlog*, 2024/3/29, 2024. <https://verfassungsblog.de/die-fallstricke-der-wehrhaften-demokratie/>.
- Merkel, W. “Embedded and Defective Democracies.” *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (2004): 33–58. doi:10.1080/13510340412331304598.
- Merkel, W. *The Sultanisation of US Politics*, in: *Toda Peace Institute Report No. 238*, August 2025.
- Merkel, W. “Who Governs in Deep Crises? The Case of Germany.” *Democratic Theory* 7, no. 2 (2020): 1–11. doi:10.3167/dt.2020.070202.
- Merkel, W., and S. Kneip, eds. *Democracy and Crisis*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-72559-8.
- Merkel, W., and A. Lührmann. “Resilience of Democracies: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges.” *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (2021): 869–884. doi:10.1080/13510347.2021.1928081.
- Merkel, W., and M. Zürn, et al. “Conclusion: The Defects of Cosmopolitan and Communitarian Democracy.” In *The Struggle Over Borders: Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism*, edited by P de Wilde, 207. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Meyer, E. P. N., U. L. S. Dos Reis, and B. B. De Castro. “Courts and COVID-19: An Assessment of Countries Dealing with Democratic Erosion.” *Jus Cogens* 5, no. 1 (2023): 85–110. doi:10.1007/s42439-023-00072-1.
- Milanovic, B. *Capitalism Alone. The Future of the System Which Rules the World*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap and Harvard Press, 2019.
- Morlino, L. *Democracy Between Consolidation and Crisis: Parties, Groups, and Citizens in Southern Europe*. reprint., digital print. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Oxford studies in democratization), 1998.
- Mounk, Y. *The People vs. Democracy: Why our Freedom is in Danger and how to Save it*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.
- Mudde, C., and R. Kaltwasser, ed. *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective of Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Müller, J.-W. “A General Theory of Constitutional Patriotism.” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 6, no. 1 (2007): 72–95. doi:10.1093/icon/mom037.
- Müller, J.-W. *What is Populism*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2017.
- Norris, P., ed. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

- Norris, P. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Norris, P., and R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. doi:10.1017/9781108595841.
- O'Donnell, G. A. "Illusions About Consolidation." *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 34–51. doi:10.1353/jod.1996.0034.
- O'Donnell, G.A., P. C. Schmitter, and L. Whitehead, eds. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Offe, C., ed. *Demokratisierung der Demokratie: Diagnosen und Reformvorschläge*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2003.
- Piketty, T. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.
- Pogrebinschi, T. *Pre-Bunking Information: Civil Society's Strategies for Democratic Resilience*. Paper presented at the American Political Science Association, Annual Meeting 2025.
- Przeworski, A. *Crises of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. doi:10.1017/9781108671019.
- Przeworski, A. *Democracy and the Market*. 1st ed. West Nyack: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Przeworski, A. "The Games of Transition." In *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The new South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, edited by S. Mainwaring, G.A. O'Donnell, and J.S. Valenzuela, 105–152. Notre Dame, Ind: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1992.
- Putnam, R. D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Revised and updated. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020.
- Qadir, A., and J. Syväterä. "The Moral Authority of Science: Evidence from Parliamentary Debates in Seven Countries." *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 8, no. 3 (2021): 265–293. doi:10.1080/23254823.2021.1885461.
- Rampp, B., M. Endreß, and M. Naumann, eds. *Resilience in Social, Cultural and Political Spheres*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2019. doi:10.1007/978-3-658-15329-8.
- Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice*. Rev. ed., 5.–6. printing. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1999.
- Ringen, S., ed. *What Democracy is for: On Freedom and Moral Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Sartori, G. "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics." *American Political Science Review (APSR)* 64 (1970): 1033–1053.
- Sartori, G. *Parties and Party Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Schäfer, A., and M. Zürn. *The Democratic Regression: The Political Causes of Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024.
- Scharpf, F. W. *Games Real Actors Play: Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Schmidt, V. A. "The Discursive Construction of Discontent: Varieties of Populist Anti-System Ideas and Discursive Interactions in Europe." *Journal of European Integration* 44, no. 2 (2022): 165–182. doi:10.1080/07036337.2022.2032019.
- Schmitter, P. C. *The Consolidation of Political Democracy in Southern Europe (and Latin America)*. Ms. Florence, 1985.
- Schuppert, G. F. "Wie Resilient ist Unsere "Politische Kultur"?" *Der Staat – Zeitschrift für Staatslehre und Verfassungsgeschichte, Deutsches und Europäisches öffentliches Recht* 60, no. 3 (2021): 473–493.
- Streeck, W. "A Crisis of Democratic Capitalism." *New Left Review* 71 (2011): 1–25.
- Svolik, M. W., et al. "In Europe, Democracy Erodes from the Right." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 1 (2023): 5–20. doi:10.1353/jod.2023.0000.
- Tocqueville, A. de. *Democracy in America*. New York: Library of America, 2004.
- V-Dem. *Democracy Report 2025. 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2025.
- Walzer, M. *On Toleration*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Weisskircher, M. "Introduction: German Exceptionalism During the Fourth Wave of Far-Right Politics." In *Contemporary Germany and the Fourth Wave of Far-Right Politics*, edited by M. Weisskircher, 1–18. London: Routledge, 2024.
- Zürn, M. "Democratic Governance Beyond the Nation-State: The EU and Other International Institutions." *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 2 (2000): 183–221.