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Representative Democracy as a Contested Concept: Parliaments after the French, Russian and Digital Revolutions

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The history of human rights and democracy is a major field of activity in which the Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies at the University of Vienna is engaged. Gerald Stourzh, professor emeritus of modern history and one of the most renowned Austrian historians of his generation, has prominently positioned the history of human rights and democracy at the University of Vienna during nearly three decades of research and teaching. At the same time, his academic achievements in the field have provided profound and lasting incentives internationally. In the annual *Gerald Stourzh Lectures on the History of Human Rights and Democracy* distinguished scholars present new insights in this field and put them up for discussion.

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Abstract

Democracy is a highly contested concept that has undergone continual transformation. The analysis of its changing meanings benefits from comparisons over time and beyond national histories, nowadays supported by digital history. In this lecture, I analyse conceptual struggles over representative democracy in parliamentary contexts after three revolutions: the French, the Russian, and the digital. From the 1790s, we can find not only persistence of the classical, pejorative, conception of democracy but also gradual re-evaluations towards the reconciliation of representation and democracy in both British and French parliaments. From the late 1910s, we can observe transnational links, common features and national peculiarities in redefinitions of representative forms of democracy in Britain and Germany. In our time, theorists suggest that democracy is changing, but how can we grasp this change empirically? Taking parliaments as analytical nexuses, our research group has compared British, French and German debates. For most MPs in the 2000s, parliamentary or representative democracy had to be reformed to include more participation to reflect societal changes, new media structures and deepening European integration. Yet such consensus crumbled by the end of the 2010s, with a polarization over direct democratic instruments and a stronger defence of the representative model.

Introduction: A long-term history of representative democracy

In Western Europe, very few people would question 'democracy' as the proper name for the established political system and the ideal for organizing future politics in the 2020s. Yet there has also been a lot of discussion in Western politics, media, academia and civil society on democracy being under pressure and retreating globally.[1] There is well-founded concern about key institutions being challenged even within established democracies. The Russian invasion in Ukraine may have united Western democracies in supporting Ukraine but such democratic solidarity in foreign policy has not necessarily depolarized political debate or removed disagreements on the proper ways of how what are generally called 'representative democracies' should function.

Much of the debate on the state of democracy lacks a historical perspective – an understanding of the political processes through which representative democracy has come about and continues to evolve with time and changing societies. Multidisciplinary scholarship would benefit from a higher awareness of the historical contestedness of the term 'representative democracy': How have we come to adopt 'democracy' as a name for a political system while we continue to disagree on its implications as a goal? Is democracy in its representative form in danger – when viewed from a historical perspective – or can we expect its institutions to continue to reform themselves in changing circumstances?

In this paper, I propose some answers to these questions on the basis of my roughly thirty years of research on the comparative historical semantics of democracy.[2] The kind invitation of the University of Vienna to give the 14th Gerald Stourzh Lecture on the History of Human Rights and Democracy, the inspiring chance to meet Professor Stourzh

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[1] The Varieties of Democracy Institute at the University of Gothenburg concludes in its 'Democracy Report 2023' that "[t]he level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2022 is down to 1986 levels." (V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf); the 2023 edition of 'Freedom in the World' talks about "17 years of global deterioration" (see Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy | Freedom House). All websites accessed on 23 August 2023.

[2] Pasi IHALAINEN, The Discourse on Political Pluralism in Early Eighteenth-Century England: A Conceptual Study with Special Reference to Terminology of Religious Origin (Helsinki 1999); Pasi IHALAINEN, Protestant Nations Redefined: Changing Perceptions of National Identity in the Rhetoric of English, Dutch and Swedish Public Churches, 1685–1772 (Leiden/Boston 2005); Pasi IHALAINEN, Agents of the People: Democracy and Popular Sovereignty in British and Swedish Parliamentary and Public Debates, 1734–1800 (Leiden/Boston 2010); Pasi IHALAINEN, Cornelia ILIE, Kari PALONEN (eds.), Parliament and Parliamentarism: A Comparative History of a European Concept (New York 2016); Pasi IHALAINEN, The Springs of Democracy: National and Transnational Debates on Constitutional Reform in the British, German, Swedish and Finnish Parliaments, 1917–1919 (Helsinki 2017).

and other colleagues working on the history of democracy, and overflowing hospitality in Vienna have motivated me to revisit the long-term conceptual history of representative democracy by combining findings from earlier histories of democracy, my previous studies on the meanings of the concept of democracy in selected phases of the period from the late eighteenth century until recent history, and my ongoing Academy of Finland Professor Project on "Political Representation: Tensions between Parliament and the People from the Age of Revolutions to the 21st Century" for which we are building a comparative interface on parliamentary speech as a major forum for redefining representative democracy.[3]

I will be making observations on changing meanings assigned to 'representative democracy' by a variety of historical actors and groups in the context of parliamentary discourse. This journey of almost two and a half centuries takes us from the Age of the Enlightenment and Revolutions to the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the First World War, and further on to the political consequences of the digital revolution which we are experiencing in our days.

The milestones of our journey include: (i) Uses of the term 'democracy' in the British parliamentary context in the late eighteenth century, also at the time of the American Revolution, with a focus on reactions in this traditional representative institution that has played a major role in the formation of 'parliamentary' and 'representative democracy' as we know it (the 1770s and 1780s); (ii) alternative understandings of representation, democracy and finally 'representative democracy' in the radicalizing French Revolution and reactions to these in Westminster Parliament (the 1790s); (iii) trends in the conceptual history of democracy in the nineteenth century; (iv) entangled parliamentary redefinitions of the people, democracy and parliament in Britain and Germany in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution (the late 1910s); (v) trends in the conceptual history of democracy in the interwar and postwar West European parliamentary democracies; (vi) surveys of linguistic trends in parliamentary discourse after the revolutionary year of 1968 that finally lead us to the early twenty-first century when the comparative study of the languages of democracy common to and specific for

[3] Political Representation: Tensions between Parliament and the People from the Age of Revolutions to the 21st Century | University of Jyväskylä (jyu.fi).

political cultures is facilitated by the ongoing digital revolution in the historical sciences. Our focus will be on redefinitions of democracy in the British, French and German parliaments in the early 2000s and late 2010s, a comparative analysis allowing conclusions on prevalent trends in the transformation of representative democracy in the early 2020s.

Approach: democracy as a contested parliamentary concept

Before setting off on our historical journey, let me explain the scholarly approach I am applying to the history of democracy. My point of departure is that of a conceptual historian focusing on actor-based and context-related concepts of the past, not on any strictly defined analytical categories.[4] In mainstream political science – and also in social science history – it is typical to see democracy as definable and objectively measurable,[5] but this is not the approach suggested here. Derived from methodologies inspired by social constructivism and the linguistic turn, a conceptual historian rather focuses scholarly attention on the language of democracy and related vocabularies used by historical actors as part of their political activity – to define, maintain and redefine concepts and to influence their audiences and hence the state of affairs. Such an analytical interest in reconstructing competing meanings assigned to democracy by political actors in specific contexts in the past differs from a normatively defined and supposedly universal analytical category of 'democracy'. Instead, the analysis can focus on the uses of the very term 'democracy' by historical actors as part of their political action, and also on related vocabulary such as 'the people', 'sovereignty', 'parliament', 'representation' and 'referendum', for example.

[4] For overviews of conceptual history and the history of political thought, see Reinhart KOSELLECK, The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts (Stanford 2002); Quentin SKINNER, Visions of Politics: Regarding Methods. Vol. 1. (Cambridge 2002); Willibald STEINMETZ, Michael FREEDEN, Javier FERNÁNDEZ-SEBASTIÁN (eds.), Conceptual History in the European Space (New York 2017). For the more specific approach developed in collaboration with political scientists and discourse scholars, see Pasi IHALAINEN, Cornelia ILIE, Kari PALONEN, Parliament as a Conceptual Nexus, in: Pasi IHALAINEN, Cornelia ILIE, Kari PALONEN (eds.), Parliament and Parliamentarism: A Comparative History of a European Concept (New York/Oxford 2016) 1–16; Pasi IHALAINEN, Taina SAARINEN, Integrating a Nexus: The History of Political Discourse and Language Policy Research, in: Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice 23/4 (2019) 500–519.

[5] See footnote 1 and, for example, Roger D. CONGLETON, Perfecting Parliament: Constitutional Reform, Liberalism, and the Rise of Western Democracy (Cambridge 2010).

Conceptual history does not come without challenges. Meanings assigned to the word democracy have changed radically throughout history, and there may be an innate tendency among us to view the current state of affairs as a self-evident result of historical development, in which all previous stages of semantic change somehow naturally lead to where we are now and in which alternative paths of meaning seem less relevant. We rarely interpret or measure exactly the same meanings of a word over longer periods of time, especially if we limit our search semasiologically to a single term. Hence a broader set of words and evolving vocabularies need to be considered in the analysis in a more onomasiological sense. While an interest in the use of language in specific historical contexts is common for conceptual historians and historians of political thought, there are also differences in how the two fields of research approach the history of democracy. For historians of political thought, or intellectual historians, conceptualizations of democracy in texts authored by well-known political philosophers form the core of primary sources.[6] For conceptual historians, historical analysis focuses on the meanings attached to democracy in the everyday language of politics in a variety of temporal and national contexts, irrespective of the social standing of the speaker or author in the canon of thinkers. The closer to past political language as component of political action and decision-making we get in conceptual history, the better.

One way for conceptual history to move beyond philosophical texts as sources for the history of democracy is to explore parliamentary debates over a comparatively long period. Parliamentary debates are quite unique records of everyday political speech by MPs who claimed to be representatives of the people. Together with colleagues from political science and discourse studies, I have argued that these speeches should be seen analytically as nexuses, i.e. meeting places for a high variety of political discourses and concepts in a society,[7] while recognizing the importance of competing forums of debate and representation ranging from the press to academia, civil society organizations and social media that should be considered at least as context if not placed in the focus of analysis. Parliamentary debates recycle discourses from other forums of debate and can hence be used as primary sources for reconstructing key political categories of each

[6] Richard WHATMORE, What is Intellectual History? (Cambridge 2015).
[7] IHALAINEN, ILIE and PALONEN, Parliament as a Conceptual Nexus; IHALAINEN and SAARINEN, Integrating a Nexus.

historical period and political culture. The word 'democracy' has been put into active use by political elites and – from the early twentieth century onwards – representatives of most of the population. Unlike most alternative primary sources, parliamentary debates allow contextual analysis of political argumentation in decision-making situations by agents whose biographies are usually well known. In the press, the voices of competing political groups are rarely heard at the same time and in the same space, while in intensive parliamentary plenary debates ideological differences are brought to the open in a shared context. A further strength of parliamentary debates as a source for a long-term conceptual history is that they facilitate both diachronic and synchronous international comparisons and to some degree, observations on conceptual transfers, even if the speakers are not always explicit about their connections.[8] What is more, the ongoing digitization has completely transformed the way in which parliamentary debates can be utilized for historical research. The classical method of political history was to go to these records merely to check what a leading politician had exactly said or how he/she had voted in the chamber; it was practically impossible to read through all the extensive records. On account of digitization we can make use of a variety of search functions and increasingly also quantitative methods to estimate patterns in discourses on democracy as well as to discover relevant speech acts and debates during which forgotten political controversies have come to the open.[9]

For a conceptual historian interested in the long-term history of democracy as an essentially contested concept, it is easy to accept that associations linked with democracy have changed dramatically from negative to positive over time, but also remain diverse and in that sense contested. For much of history, from the emergence of the term in antiquity to the late nineteenth century at least, references to democracy typically carried

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[8] More extensively in IHALAINEN, The Springs of Democracy, 37–41.

[9] Pasi IHALAINEN, Berit JANSSEN, Jani MARJANEN, Ville VAARA, Building and testing a comparative interface on Northwest European historical parliamentary debates: Relative term frequency analysis of British representative democracy, in: Matti LA MELA, Fredrik NORÉN, Eero HYVÖNEN (eds.), Digital Parliamentary Data in Action, CEUR Workshop Proceedings 3133 (2022) 53, https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-3133/paper04.pdf. For more on digital research on parliamentary data, see the publication of the entire conference by Matti LA MELA, Fredrik NORÉN, Eero HYVÖNEN (eds.), Digital Parliamentary Data in Action, CEUR Workshop Proceedings 3133 (2022), https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-3133/; Hugo BONIN, Pasi IHALAINEN, Zachris HAAPARINNE, Applying digital methods to long-term conceptual history of democracy, a manuscript submitted for Pasi IHALAINEN, Jani MARJANEN (eds.), Writing Conceptual Histories and discussed in a workshop in Vienna in connection with my visit on 16 May 2023.

an overwhelmingly pejorative connotation, often with reference to Athenian democracy that had fallen in the hands of demagogues and dictators. Furthermore, for long 'democracy' remained a learned term, not one of everyday political language.[10] Only in the early twentieth century these connotations started to turn into more appreciative ones, democracy was temporalized in the sense that it became possible to imagine an ideal future political system called democracy. Yet only since the victory over Nazi-Germany, fascist Italy and autocratic Japan in the Second World War and the reconstruction of democracies in Western Europe in the postwar period supporters of practically all ideologies from Christian Democrats to advocates of versions of democratic socialism started to identify themselves as democrats – though still from very divergent ideological perspectives and often with conflicting goals in an age of Cold War. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the so-called people's democracies offered an understanding and organization of 'democracy' that diverged radically from that of Western representative democracy.

'Democracy' in the late eighteenth-century British parliamentary context

There have been many alternative ways to what has been called 'representative democracy' in different countries in the post-Second World War period. Yet the British parliament undeniably played a pioneering role in the formation of what is today the established form of democracy – parliamentary or representative democracy. The British parliament was the first to combine the notion of the representation of the people with parliamentary procedures, later with extended suffrage, and finally with the ideal of democracy as majority rule while respecting the rights of minorities.[11] While by no means called 'democracy' by contemporaries or deserving such a name in hindsight, the parliamentary system of Great Britain in the eighteenth century saw the emergence of features that were later associated with modern democratic politics, such as political

[10] Joanna INNES, Mark PHILP (eds.), Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750-1850 (Oxford 2013); Jussi KURUNMÄKI, Jeppe NEVERS, Henk TE VELDE (eds.), Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History (New York/Oxford 2018).
[11] See also Gerald STOURZH, Modern Isonomy: Democratic Participation and Human Rights Protection as a System of Equal Rights (Chicago 2021) chapter 4.

parties, the legitimacy of loyal opposition, the sovereignty of parliament (not yet the people), votes of confidence and the notion of MPs as politicians.[12]

One way to get hold of these historical transformations is to study debates about the political role and the representation of the people and about democracy and sovereignty, as communicated in the parliamentary records (based on early press reports). This allows us to reconstruct the meanings assigned to key terms by MPs. Such an investigation demonstrates the persistence of the classical, pejorative, concept of democracy throughout the eighteenth century. 'Democracy' was still a rarely used term, and when it was used, it was typically presented as no more than one element of mixed constitution, side by side with monarchy and aristocracy, not as a name for a political system as a whole. It remained unthinkable to aspire for democracy as the sole form of government as its tendency to deteriorate into the worst forms of government – demagogy, anarchy and tyranny – was received wisdom.[13]

Nevertheless, there was some revaluation of the concept of democracy in the British parliament prior to the French Revolution as a reaction both to challenges to the established political system by popular politics (such as the repeated election of John Wilkes to parliament) at home and to American calls for extended representation. The American colonists never claimed to be fighting for 'democracy' but demanded a better representation of the people. As such calls rose on both sides of the Atlantic, the British monarch began to speak more intensively in the name of the people when addressing parliament, and the 'democratic element' of the British constitution started to feature more prominently in the debates at Westminster. Soon calls for parliamentary reform multiplied but such a reform was never realized during the eighteenth century. Traditional notions of virtual as opposed to concrete representation and established constituencies with unequal suffrage retained their hold.[14]

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[12] Paul SEAWARD, Pasi IHALAINEN, Key Concepts for the British Parliament, 1640–1800, in: Pasi IHALAINEN, Cornelia ILIE, Kari PALONEN (eds.), Parliament and Parliamentarism: A Comparative History of a European Concept (New York/Oxford 2016) 32–48.

[13] IHALAINEN, Agents of the People; Pasi IHALAINEN, Zachris HAAPARINNE, From estate representation to the representation of the people and the nation in the Age of Revolutions, in: Maurizio COTTA, Federico RUSSO (eds.), Research Handbook on Political Representation (New York 2020) 84–97; BONIN, IHALAINEN, HAAPARINNE, Applying digital methods to long-term conceptual history of democracy.

[14] IHALAINEN, Agents of the People, chapter 4.

While British parliamentarians could vindicate the democratic element of the mixed constitution in a variety of contexts during the 1770s and 1780s, a backlash followed during the French Revolution in the 1790s when the incongruity between British classical and French revolutionary understandings of democracy became obvious. In a teleological narrative, the French Revolution has been presented as one of the turning points in the history of democracy – even as 'the birth of democracy'.[15] In reality, however, 'democracy' was a minor concept for the revolutionaries.[16] When the Revolution turned increasingly radical after the abolition of the monarchy and the founding of a republic in autumn 1792, there was a tendency to apply the term 'democracy' beyond the range defined by classical constitutional theory and to combine it with the revolutionary ideas of national sovereignty and the representation of the people. Hence by summer 1793, Didier Thirion representing the radical Mountain Party could say: "We want all the liberty that really exists only in democracy; if our mass prevents us from having pure democracy, let us at least have representative democracy, that is to say, a real people of representatives, assembled unceasingly to look after our interests, which will be their own."[17] Not being particularly innovative, Thirion recycled discourse circulating among some radical revolutionaries. In the Jacobin constitution of 1793, which was never implemented, the notion of a 'a democratic republic' already existed,[18] and in February 1794 the revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre combined 'democracy', 'republic' and 'representation', offering 'representative democracy' as a future goal.[19]

Some radical British publications, too, had defended a democratic government over a monarchical one, representing the people as the real sovereign in line with French revolutionary rhetoric. As the revolutionaries called for the introduction of the

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[15] François FURET, Mona OZOUF (eds.), A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution (Cambridge, MA 1989) xiii.
[16] Raymonde MONNIER, Démocratie et Révolution Française, in: Mots 59/1 (1999) 47–68; Pierre ROSANVALLON, The History of the Word "Democracy" in France, in: Journal of Democracy 6/4 (1995) 140–154; Ruth SCURR, Varieties of Democracy in the French Revolution, in: Joanna INNES, Mark PHILP (eds.), Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750–1850 (Oxford 2013) 57–68.
[17] Archives Parlementaires, ser. 1, t. LX, 24 June 1793, 407. "[…] et que nous voulons la liberté tout entière, qui n'existe réellement que dans la démocratie; si notre masse nous empêche d'avoir la démocratie pure, ayons au moins la démocratie représentative, c'est-à-dire, un véritable peuple de représentants, assemblé sans cesse pour veiller à nos intérêts qui seront les siens".
[18] IHALAINEN, Agents of the People, 409, and literature cited there.
[19] John DUNN, Democracy: A History (Boston 2005) 16–17.

sovereignty of the people as the leading principle everywhere in Europe, some British parliamentarians – most famously Edmund Burke – responded by denouncing French democracy as false. Burke and much of the British public associated democracy with revolutionary tumults and an undesirable French kind of democracy, denouncing any principle of the sovereignty of the people and attacking British radicals.[20] Similarly, David Murray, 2nd Earl of Mansfield, considered the French Revolution "a wild and lawless democracy".[21]

Such statements indicate that awareness of the contestation over 'democracy' was rising in Britain as well. Prime Minister William Pitt himself regarded it as necessary to respond to calls for democracy presented by Thomas Paine, assuring that the British political order provided a "proper representative assembly" and enabled "the true spirit of proper democracy".[22] Later, Pitt implied that the war against France was waged over how democracy should be understood, the British parliament being an ideal "mixture of democracy and aristocracy".[23] Contestation over the concept of sovereignty was also rising, reflected by opposition leader Charles James Fox who insisted in terms reminiscent of French revolutionary discourse that "the people are the sovereign in every state".[24]

Once the most radical phase of the French Revolution was over by the end of the 1790s, some members of the British parliament began to redescribe the established notion of "the sovereignty of parliament" as corresponding with the notion of "the sovereignty of the people".[25] Others emphasized the role of publicity as enabling control of their representative body by the people outside.[26] Parliament in Britain was not reformed in a response to the revolutionary discourses but its members set out to legitimate their institution in novel terms, reconstructing it with references to representation and the people and, in some cases, sovereignty and democracy in the

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[20] The Parliamentary Register; or, History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons, vol. XXVIII, 9 February 1790, 91. These editions are available in the databases House of Commons Parliamentary Papers and Eighteenth Century Collections Online.
[21] The Parliamentary Register, vol. XXXVIII, 21 January 1791, 21.
[22] The Parliamentary Register, vol. XXXII, 20 April 1792, 462.
[23] The Parliamentary Register, vol. XXXIV, 1 February 1793, 386.
[24] The Parliamentary Register, vol. XXXIV, 1 February 1793, 417.
[25] Gilbert Elliot-Murray-Kynynmound, 1st Earl of Minto, who had studied in Paris and served as Viceroy of Corsica. The Parliamentary Register, vol. VIII, 11 April 1799, 427.
[26] SEAWARD, IHALAINEN, Key Concepts for the British Parliament, 44.

classical sense of an element of the mixed constitution. British parliament played an evolutionary role in redefining the concept of democracy, even if more extensive redefinitions would need to wait until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A more optimistic and future-oriented concept of democracy was gradually emerging among Chartist reformers and from the 1830s and 1840s onwards it became possible – but still mostly outside parliament – to call for democracy without reservations.[27]

Trends in the conceptual history of democracy in the nineteenth century

Our explorations above of the language of democracy in the British parliamentary context of the late eighteenth century suggest that slight reconsiderations of the political role of the people were taking place also in representative systems that did not experience open revolution; much of this, however, remained rhetorical redescription of the established political order. We can nevertheless talk about a transnational and evolutionary (rather than merely the French revolutionary) process of the revaluation of democracy. References to 'democracy' were becoming slightly more common and the exact meanings of the term were debated more regularly towards the end of the eighteenth century. This happened not only in learned literature but also in the press and in parliament, in contexts of everyday politics, although the intensity of the debate remained modest compared to later times. While the French Revolution diversified the use of the concept and paved the way for more optimistic and future-oriented interpretations of democracy among radical groups, the majority of those using the concept continued to view democracy pejoratively.

Evaluations of democracy changed gradually in the course of the nineteenth century as the ideal of mixed government was complemented and finally replaced first by the notions of responsible, representative, popular or parliamentary government and finally by democratic government. Debates about 'democracy' diversified considerably both along ideological and national lines. Not only rising ideologies such as socialism adopted the language of democracy, but also separate conceptual histories of democracy

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[27] Robert SAUNDERS, Democracy, in: David CRAIG, James THOMPSON (eds.), Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain (Basingstoke 2013) 149–150; Robert SAUNDERS, Joanna INNES, Mark PHILP, Languages of Democracy in Britain, 1830–1848, in: Joanna INNES, Mark PHILP (eds.), Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions. America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750–1850 (Oxford 2013) 122–123, 128.

developed in various nations. As Hugo Bonin has suggested, *démocratie* was increasingly associated with social equality in France, influenced by comparisons with the United States. Another tendency was to conflate 'democracy' with 'republic,' a key constitutional concept in France during the Second and Third Republics. In Britain, by contrast, the notion of mixed government lived on for a long time, merging with the ideals of 'parliamentary' government. As a consequence, negative connotations of democracy remained dominant there at least until the 1880s. In both countries, Alexis de Tocqueville's description of 'American democracy' was influential and contributed to increasing and sometimes more positive references to democracy.[28] In Germany, however, '*Demokratie*' was considered foreign to the principles of the established constitutional monarchy and was often only associated with the socialist party.[29]

Specific national trajectories like these have left their marks to our days, complemented by narratives of national exceptionalism on pioneers in democracy that were constructed in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[30] It is noteworthy that the gradual rise of more optimistic conceptualizations of democracy as a form of and not merely one component of government from the 1880s onwards in Britain and the Third French Republic saw the simultaneous upswing of discourses on democracy and more particularly of parliamentarism being in crisis.[31] Since the late nineteenth century discourses on a crisis of democracy have remained a repeated commonplace.

The First World War and its aftermath as "a fight for democracy"

One reason for 'crisis' discourses were demands for mass democracy in the sense of universal suffrage and fears of consequences for the established social order. National (independence), labour and women's movements were among the extra-parliamentary

[28] Hugo BONIN, "At the sound of the new word spoken:" Le mot démocratie en Grande-Bretagne, 1770–1920 (Rennes 2024).
[29] Jörn LEONHARD, Another "Sonderweg"? – The Historical Semantics of "Democracy" in Germany, in: Jussi KURUNMÄKI, Jeppe NEVERS, Henk TE VELDE (eds.), Democracy in Europe: A Conceptual History (New York/Oxford 2018) 65–87.
[30] Irène HERRMANN, Jussi KURUNMÄKI, Birthplaces of Democracy: The Rhetoric of Democratic Tradition in Switzerland and Sweden, in: Jussi KURUNMÄKI, Jeppe NEVERS, Henk TE VELDE (eds.), Democracy in Europe: A Conceptual History (New York/Oxford 2018) 88–112.
[31] IHALAINEN, ILIE, PALONEN, Parliament as a Conceptual Nexus, 5.

groups that called for an extended if not universal suffrage and inclusion in decision-making. Hence, by the time of the First World War, 'democracy' had become increasingly regarded as a representative regime with formal equality before the law and universal suffrage for at least men. Sometimes though, 'democracy' could still and more specifically refer to the demands of ordinary people or leftist groups, even to mob rule.

The First World War transformed European societies in fundamental ways, and in several countries major redefinitions of what the people, democracy and parliament stood for occurred in the late 1910s. The war laid bare the discrepancies between the contributions of people to total warfare – often amounting to loss of life – and the limited opportunities provided by the established political systems for political participation in the form of voting. Such disparities – together with socially and economically hard times – led to crises of legitimacy of the representative systems practically everywhere, including nations that were not involved in warfare but nevertheless suffered from wartime hardships.[32] The extreme cases of the deepening crises of legitimacy included the Russian Revolution that started in March 1917, the Finnish Civil War in spring 1918 and revolutions in Austria and Germany in autumn 1918.

Whereas the political reforms triggered by the First World War have typically been discussed in national contexts, it is worthwhile to compare how the polities concerned discussed and redefined the contested concepts of democracy and parliamentarism in their representative institutions and party presses. Revisiting transnational links between national debates initiated by ideological networks, internationally connected MPs and media narratives crossing borders may also facilitate our understanding of the dynamics of this transformation. Even if countries such as the Netherlands and the Nordic countries were influenced by wartime reform pressures as well, we shall focus on Britain and Germany – two leading proponents of the military conflict and prototypes of two different political models – to illustrate the debates and redefinitions of democracy launched by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and ultimately the war.

In Britain, parliamentary suffrage had been extended gradually since 1832, yet many men and all women still lacked the vote during the Great War. Within the parliamentary system, the primacy of the House of Commons over the House of Lords

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[32] This section reviews the main findings of IHALAINEN, The Springs of Democracy.

had only been established with the Parliament Act of 1911, but the electoral system for the lower chamber did not satisfy the demands of the public. Violent campaigns for women's suffrage had ceased during the war but the issue remained unresolved, and many soldiers wounded and dying on the Western Front still lacked voting rights as well. Plans for suffrage reform in Britain during the war already started in 1916, acknowledging the sacrifices that the war demanded from her citizens, with the aim to strengthen support for victory and prepare for peaceful reconstruction. The war had created unforeseen national unity in the sense that even the Conservatives were willing to extend voting rights at least to all soldiers and to women who had contributed to the war effort in industry and the home front. Such openness for reform on the political right was supported by the moderation and nationalistic views held by the British Labour Party when compared to many continental socialist parties. In 1917 the British coalition government was able to move forward quickly once the international situation – with the beginning of the Russian Revolution and the entry into the war by the United States in April in the name of making 'democracy' safe – further increased the need to take measures to support domestic democracy also in Britain.

Some features of the debates about British reform deserve particular attention. Similarly to France, the concept of 'democracy' played a motivating role in war propaganda that had used the notion of fighting for democracy to persuade the Americans to join, and it also contributed to demands for more democracy at home. The British parliament nevertheless debated suffrage reform in relative isolation, without visions of a transnational, world-wide democratic breakthrough that were typical of the reform debates in many other countries. Further characteristics of the British debate include a lack of articulation of anti-democratic views, which reflects how widely the concept of 'democracy' had meanwhile been adopted for defining the established political system, including most of the Conservatives. As Sir Charles Cripps, Baron Parmoor, who travelled the political spectrum from the Conservatives to the Liberals (and later to Labour), put it in 1917: "I have no fear of democracy. I welcome it, but with this proviso – that the democracy must be, a true and not a false one. [...] We want the co-operation of all classes

of this country. [...] We want to get rid as far as possible of friction and antagonism, [...]."[33] Generally speaking, when advocating electoral reform, the British coalition government preferred to resort to nationalist language rather than to specify plans for broadening future 'democracy'. Disputes over the domestic implications of 'democracy' were reserved for the post-war period. The British reform was far from complete, given that women's voting age was set at 30 and remained dependent on property qualifications and the husband's enfranchisement.

Due to their timing in 1917-18, the debates on the extension of suffrage in Britain provided a model for reformists elsewhere in Europe. There were several interconnections between British and German reform debates, for example, rising from similar pressures resulting from the war and observations on the enemy's various efforts to win the war, including motivating the public with an extended suffrage. In both countries, the narratives of war propaganda affected the reform debates in parliaments. As already mentioned, to persuade the Americans to join them in their war effort, British and French propagandists had emphasized the defence of democracy against 'Prussianism', whereas German war propaganda had contrasted German *Volksgemeinschaft*, *Kultur* and liberty with decadent Western civilization and 'democracy'.[34] Thereby the war had been turned into a conflict over the proper form of government – for and against 'democracy'. Once some German reformists began speaking favourably of democracies in spring 1917, advising the German government to learn from 'democratic' reforms taking place both in Britain and Russia, this gave rise to rightist theories of domestic treason that would find fertile ground in post-war Germany. 'Democracy' remained open to dispute in Germany in ways unknown in Britain or France, 'Western' democracy being generally rejected.

For half a year following the outbreak of the Revolution in Russia in March 1917, expectations for 'democracy' remained high, but in November the Bolsheviks would give the Russian polity a new direction that challenged rather than supported parliamentary forms of democracy as envisaged in the West. What 'democracy' would stand for in

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33 House of Lords Debates, ser. 5, vol. 27, 17 December 1917, c. 194. See also the online versions at Historic Hansard.

34 Marcus LLANQUE, Demokratisches Denken im Krieg: die deutsche Debatte im Ersten Weltkrieg (Berlin 2000); LEONHARD, Another "Sonderweg"? 78.

Western European constitutions was defined to a great extent in relation to developments in Russia where expectations for a parliamentary form of democracy had been overtaken by radical socialist ideas that questioned 'bourgeois' and 'Western' parliamentarism as the way to 'democracy'. Whereas British conservative opponents of suffrage reform might characterize it as an illegitimate wartime revolution,[35] the supporters responded that it was introducing a peaceful parliamentary revolution as a substitute for a socialist revolution in the Russian fashion.[36] Whereas German conservatives presented democratic reforms as a destructive threat to the constitutional monarchy, the post-war governments by autumn 1918 and spring 1919 advocated a moderate Social Democratic revolution as an alternative to the Russian Bolshevik and German far-left ones.

In German debates, fundamental ideological differences in understanding 'democracy' were articulated. Most parties were still highly hesitant about democratization in late 1918 and early 1919, which led to the Social Democrats monopolizing 'democracy' as a normative and programmatic concept after having marginalized communist calls for more radical democracy. Even Social Democratic discourses reinforced old associations between 'democracy' and 'socialism' among non-socialist parties. Noteworthy are German attempts to vernacularize democracy and thereby link the concept to a particular kind of national polity – a practice imitated to some extent in the Nordic countries. Democracy, the political role of the people, democracy and parliamentarism were all conceptualized in specifically German ways that delimited the legitimacy of parliamentary forms of democracy. The notion of a 'popular state' (*Volksstaat*), for instance, provided an alternative to the traditional autocratic or bureaucratic state but might also imply that the will of the people was an organic entity and more than the will of a mere parliamentary majority, though the extent of such a conclusion varied depending on the user of the concept and the argumentative context. All German concepts of 'democracy' received a major blow by the Treaty of Versailles; its terms were released shortly before the debates on the Weimar Constitution were completed. The German Right interpreted the peace terms as the victimization of Germany by Western 'democracy', which tarnished the concept even further.

[35] Richard Chaloner, House of Commons Debates, ser. 5, vol. 92, 28 March 1917, c. 526.
[36] Herbert Samuel, House of Commons Debates, ser. 5, vol. 93, 22 May 1917, c. 2186.

While the governments in Britain and Germany were proposing updates in their parliamentary systems based on representation and a (more) democratic franchise, some leftist radicals called for the extension of direct democracy instruments and yet more radical socialists fought for soviet rule and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Many conservatives were unhappy about mass democracy being taken too far with (near) universal suffrage, while radical socialists continued to criticize what they saw as 'bourgeois democracy' and to demand the extension of 'democracy' beyond the political, towards social and economic democracy.

Trends in the conceptual history of democracy in the twentieth century

The twentieth century was the first era of 'democracy' in the modern sense of the word. Yet it was also a century when democracy was not only contested but fundamentally threatened by the anti-democratic discourses and authoritarian movements that rose in the 1920s and led to major totalitarian breakthroughs in the 1930s.

The state of democracy was debated in several forums in the interwar era, ranging from leading theorists to national parliaments and civil society organizations. Such discussions met in the confines of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) that brought together voluntary parliamentarians from different countries. In the conferences of the IPU, the delegates reacted to the rise of the autocratic regimes with discourses on the crisis of parliamentarism and democracy, yet had difficulties in finding universal solutions as there were major constitutional and ideological differences between and within the member states. Those recognizing a crisis often focused on the problems of parliamentarism as practised in the Third French Republic. Delegates from countries with established parliamentary cultures tended to underscore their democratic traditions, to deny the existence of such a crisis in their national case and to increasingly talk about representative government as 'parliamentary democracy'. Such narratives of national democracy were implicitly contrasted with deteriorating German democracy and were

used to construct national unity and identity. Speakers representing autocratic regimes, by contrast, typically presented their political systems as answers to the crisis.[37]

The Second World War led to the collapse of several democratic regimes. After the war, as Jan-Werner Müller and Martin Conway have argued, parliamentary democracies in France, Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe were redesigned to prevent the rise of dictatorship by popular vote as had happened in interwar Germany. This meant caution with the exercise of direct popular sovereignty and the prioritization of procedural parliamentarism instead.[38]

By the late 1960s, however, representative democracy in its post-war form was increasingly challenged by new social movements, not least by student radicalism. Political scientists have suggested several explanations for such decrease of trust in politicians and parliaments. It may have been connected to the crumbling of collective and Christian values and nationalism, which supported more diversified and individualistic thinking, and to rising levels of education, which decreased social distance between representatives and the people they represented.[39] Political activity measured by voting and, even more so, by party membership has been observed to be declining.[40] Changes in communication first with television and later on with the internet and especially social media have increased interaction between voters and politicians but also supported the deterioration of the authority of the latter in the eyes of the former.[41] Both the public and political scientists have called for alternative modes of representation, participation and direct involvement in the form of referendums, for instance. Populism

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[37] Pasi IHALAINEN, Renaming “representative government” as “parliamentary” or “representative democracy” during the interwar “crisis of parliamentarism”. Paper presented in the session “The Politics of Inter- and Supranational Parliamentary Institutions: Conceptual Historical Perspectives at the History of Concepts Group Annual Conference 2023, Warsaw, 29 September 2023. The primary sources include Union interparlementaire, Compte rendu de la XXVe conférence tenue à Berlin du 23 au 28 août 1928 (Lausanne 1928) and Union interparlementaire, Compte rendu de la XXIXe conférence tenue à Madrid du 4 au 10 octobre 1933 (Lausanne 1934).

[38] Jan-Werner MÜLLER, Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe (New Haven 2011); Martin CONWAY, Western Europe’s Democratic Age, 1945-1968 (Princeton 2020).

[39] Ronald INGLEHART, The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics (Princeton 1977).

[40] Peter MAIR, Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy (London/New York 2013); Simon TORNEY, Challenges to Political Representation: Participatory Democracy, Direct Democracy and Populism, in: Maurizio COTTA, Federico RUSSO (eds.), Research Handbook on Political Representation (New York 2020) 70–80.

[41] Heinrich BEST, Lars VOGEL, Individualistic representation in the liberal century – and beyond, in: Maurizio COTTA, Federico RUSSO (eds.), Research Handbook on Political Representation (New York 2020) 98–108.

with its uncompromising agenda that challenges many established practices of representative democracy has been on the rise. Political theorists have presented a variety of interpretations of the way in which representative democracy is evolving. There are proposals for a transition to 'audience democracy', notions that a 'monitory democracy' is emerging in which elected politicians are supervised by various bodies, or the idea that claims can nowadays be represented by non-elected actors, including celebrities.[42] But what kind of ongoing redefinitions would the empirical data of parliamentary debates suggest?

From participation as a synonym for democracy to controversies over direct democracy[43]

We started by asking how we have come to talk about democracy but still disagree on its implications. We asked further how exceptional 'the crisis of democracy' discussed in the early 2020s should be considered.

During our journey of roughly two and a half centuries, we have seen that parliamentary and representative governments have been constantly reforming and responding to changing societal circumstances. We have pointed to historical developments ranging from parliamentary redefinitions of representative government as a form of democracy in the days of the French and Russian Revolutions to the renaming of the political system as a parliamentary democracy in the 1920s and 1930s. We have further observed the emphasis on parliamentary procedures in post-Second World War Europe and increasing calls for more participation as a response to criticism of the shortcomings of representative democracy after 1968. Especially after 1968, national parliaments have been responsive when encountering societal challenges, taking measures to increase communication with the public and looking for ways to extend participation. This leads me to conclude that occasional tensions between the people and

[42] Bernard MANIN, The Principles of Representative Government (Cambridge/New York 1997); John KEANE, The Life and Death of Democracy (New York 2009); Michael SAWARD, The Representative Claim (Oxford 2010).
[43] Parts of this section are based on the preliminary results of a co-authored, unpublished study From reform to preservation: British, French and German parliamentarians on 'democracy', 2000–20 by Hugo BONIN, Pasi IHALAINEN, Zachris HAAPARINNE, University of Jyväskylä. References should be made to the final report once published.

parliament should be seen as a normal, healthy, and even welcome feature of sustainable representative democracy.

For the rest of this paper, I shall focus on the question how the dominant form of institutionalized democracy – representative democracy – has been redefined in three major Western European states in the early twenty-first century. How exactly have parliamentarians reacted to calls for updating democracy, what kinds of complementary instruments have they demanded, and what have they aimed at with the proposed innovations? Related questions are investigated in the ongoing project "Political Representation: Tensions between Parliament and the People from the Age of Revolutions to the 21st Century". In the project, digitized plenary debates in national parliaments are regarded as analytical nexuses for grasping multi-sited political discourses. Our nominalist analysis focuses on the uses of the term 'democracy' and related vocabulary by historical actors themselves as part of their political action. In cooperation between the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) & Utrecht University Research Software Lab (The Netherlands) we have built a comparative interface on parliamentary discourse called "People & Parliament" which currently includes parliamentary debates from nine Northwest European countries since the nineteenth century. While the interface provides keywords in context and visualizations of absolute and relative frequencies and of the most common neighbouring words,[44] I will focus here on word embedding models for related terms and more particularly on comparisons of similarity of context between terms.

In the case of Britain, we can clearly observe the continuing strength of a long parliamentary tradition. Frequent associations between parliament and democracy in parliamentary discourse reflect a high degree of amalgamation of the two concepts. Yet, associations between democracy and participation on the one hand and democracy and referendum on the other have also become more common. Such trends can be illustrated by word embedding models in which an algorithm calculates the contextual similarity of the word 'democracy' with 'parliament', 'participation' and 'referendum' in British parliamentary discourse over time. The models should be mainly seen as tools for formulating hypotheses rather than as providing any strict numerical measures. They

[44] IHALAINEN, JANSSEN, MARJANEN, VAARA, Building and testing a comparative interface.

may be affected by the seed terms appearing sometimes in very different contexts, for instance, and hence need to be verified with close reading.

The word embedding models suggest that associations between 'democracy' and 'parliament' increased especially during the late twentieth century and did not drop dramatically in the 2000s. Associations between 'democracy' and 'referendum' as an instrument of direct democracy had already existed in the beginning of the twentieth century and rose in the late twentieth century, declining somewhat in the early twenty-first century. Two waves of calls for 'participation' as a condition for 'democracy' would seem traceable: a first one after 1968 and another one in the early 2000s, but the associations have not reached the levels of those of 'democracy' with 'parliament' or 'referendum'.

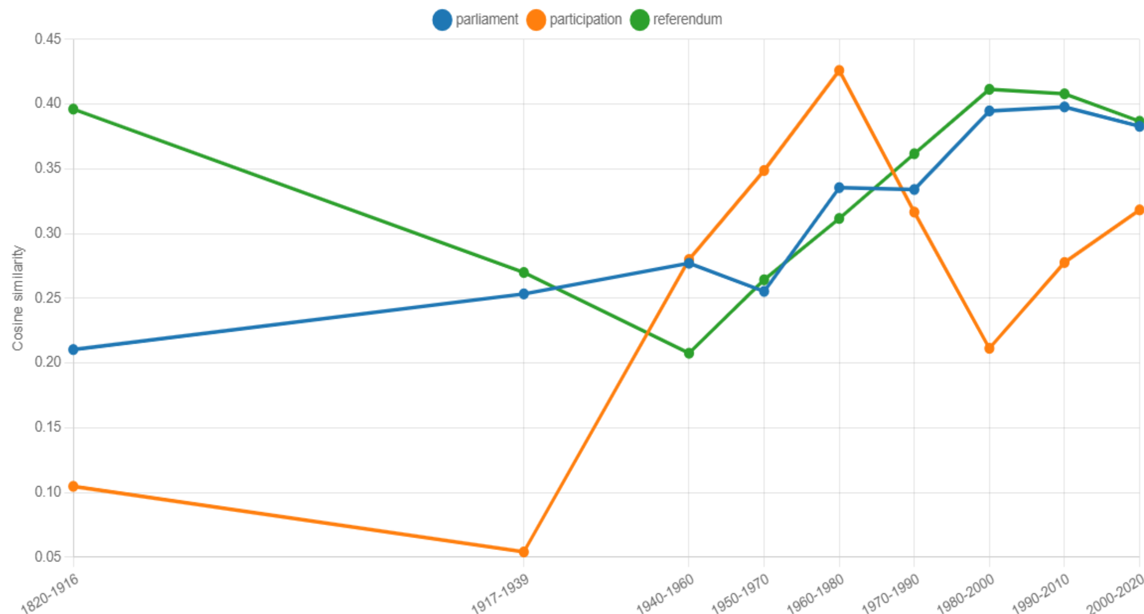

Figure 1. Similarity of the context of the term 'democracy' compared with the terms 'parliament', 'participation' and 'referendum' over time. Source: Word embedding models of People & Parliament (UK), Compare similarity (Universities of Jyväskylä and Utrecht).

When we compare the most common attributes qualifying 'democracy' in British parliamentary speech, we can observe the continued dominance of the bigram 'parliamentary democracy' as well as the consistent use of the bigram 'representative democracy' since the late twentieth century, while the alternatives of 'direct democracy'

or ‘participatory / participative democracy’ have not been very common even after 2000.[45]

The Fifth French Republic (since 1958), by contrast, has been a strong semi-presidential state with a much weaker parliament in constitutional terms than was the case in the Third and Fourth French Republics. Yet, there have evidently been pressures to complement the republican constitution that is so heavily focused on the president. When we view word embedding models for parliamentary discourse in France, adding the word ‘president’ to our sample to consider constitutional realities, we observe that associations of ‘democracy’ with ‘president’ have always remained weak and those with ‘parliament’ have declined with the constitution of the Fifth Republic. Associations with ‘participation’ were relatively high already in the Fourth Republic but have risen again in the 2000s, and those with ‘referendum’ have likewise gained strength. Indeed, both ‘referendum’ and ‘participation’ seem to have been more strongly associated with ‘democracy’ in France than has ‘parliament’.

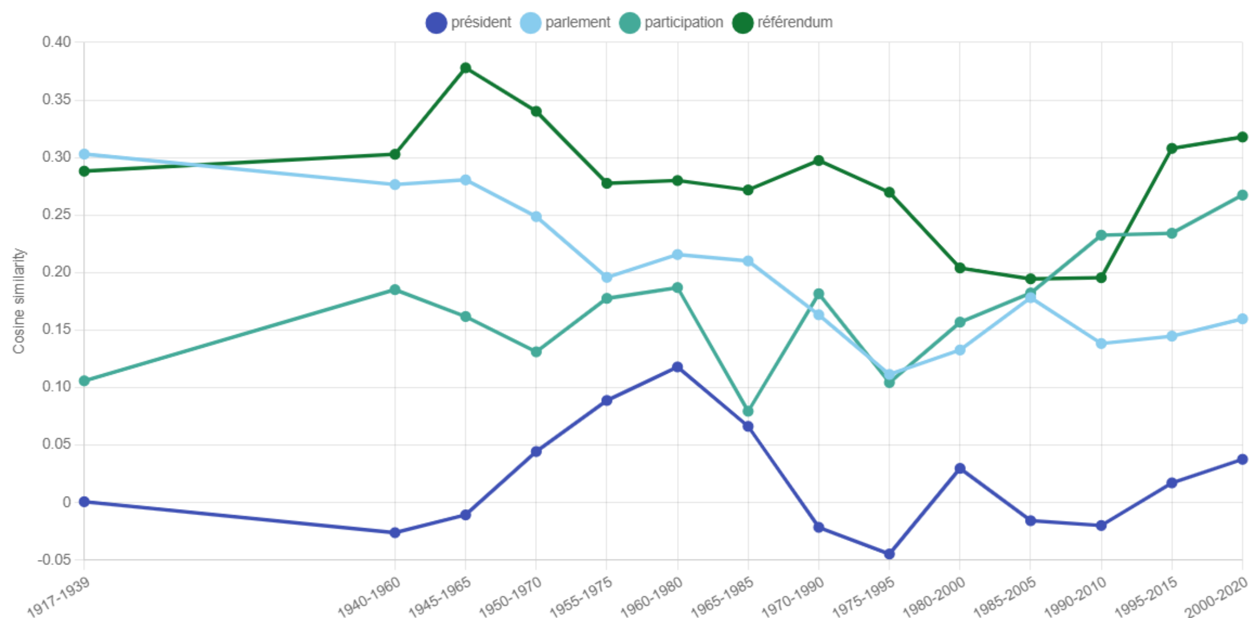

Figure 2. Similarity of the context of the term ‘*démocratie*’ compared with the terms ‘*président*’, ‘*parlement*’, ‘*participation*’ and ‘*référendum*’ over time. Source: Word models of the prototype of People & Parliament (France), Compare similarity (Universities of Jyväskylä and Utrecht).

45 People & Parliament (UK), Neighbouring words: bigrams (Universities of Jyväskylä and Utrecht).

Focusing on qualifiers of democracy in French parliamentary discourse, the existing representative and parliamentary institutions seem to have been recognized with the frequent use of the bigrams '*démocratie représentative*' and '*démocratie parlementaire*' but the alternative bigrams '*démocratie participative*' and '*démocratie directe*' also feature high in the lists of the most common bigrams – much higher than in Britain.[46]

In Germany, when compared to both Britain and France, traditions that were doubtful about parliament as representative of the popular will had been strong, and so were explicitly anti-democratic traditions until the founding of the Federal Republic (1949). Instruments of direct democracy were curbed by the Basic Law as an antidote to any excessive expression of popular will and consequent dictatorship as experienced in the Third Reich. The word embedding models suggest that associations between 'democracy' and 'parliament' were highest at the very beginning of the Weimar Republic and again in the early Federal Republic. The association then declined from the late 1960s but has recovered somewhat in the 2000s. Associations between 'democracy' and 'participation' have increased since the 1960s, which corresponds with expectations based on research literature and trends in other countries. Associations between 'democracy' and 'referendum' have been relatively high throughout the parliamentary history of the Federal Republic even though such an instrument has only been recognized for local and regional governance but not at the national level.

[46] People & Parliament (France), Neighbouring words: bigrams (Universities of Jyväskylä and Utrecht).

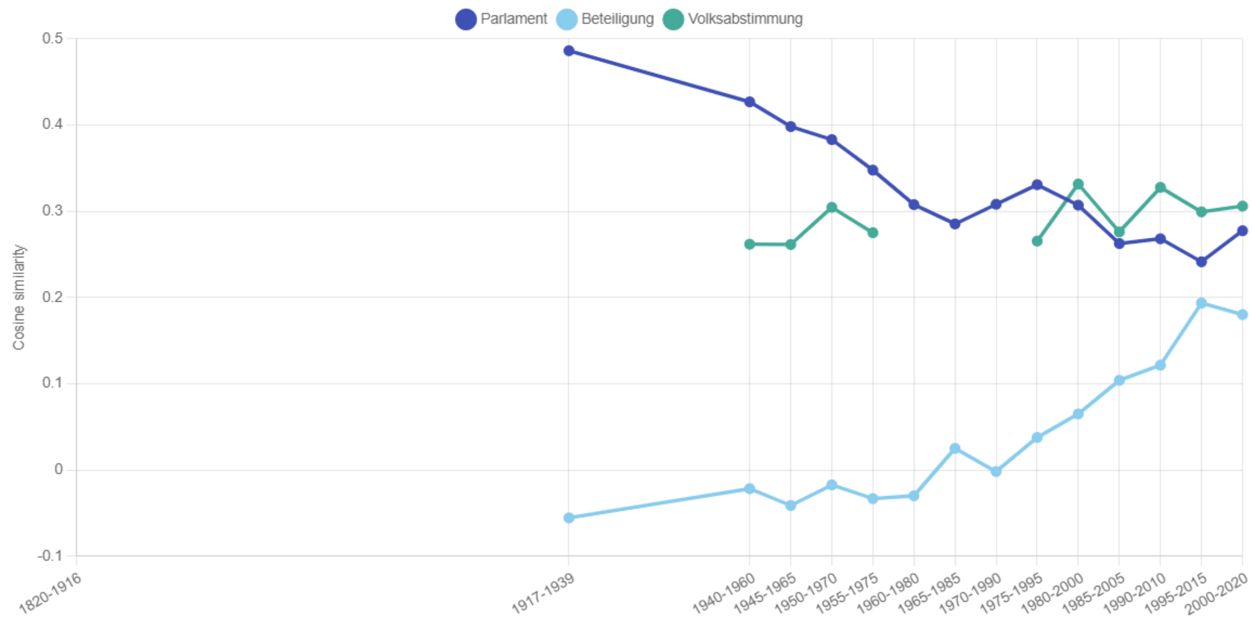

Figure 3. Similarity of the context of the term '*Demokratie*' compared with the terms '*Parlament*', '*Beteiligung*' and '*Volksabstimmung*' and change over time. The lack of visualization from the time of the German Empire and the gap in the line for *Volksabstimmung* is explained by rare occurrences of the term: at least 50 uses are required for each time slice to be considered in this model. Source: Word models of the prototype of People & Parliament (Germany), Compare similarity (Universities of Jyväskylä and Utrecht).

As we consult the most usual qualifiers of democracy in Germany, references to '*parlamentarische*' and '*repräsentative Demokratie*' have remained rather stable since German unification in 1990. At the same time, there has been a noticeable rise in the intensity of discussion about '*direkte Demokratie*' which in German parliamentary language includes both elements of participation and direct democracy.[47] This trend differs especially from Britain.

What exactly did politicians in Britain, France and Germany say about the ways in which democracy was changing in the early 2000s and late 2010s? Space for quotations and contextualization is scarce but let me take up some illustrative examples.

In the British parliament of the early 2000s, need to reform parliamentary or representative democracy in one way or another was widely felt. Especially Tony Blair's

47 People & Parliament (Germany), Neighbouring words: bigrams (Universities of Jyväskylä and Utrecht).

Labour government (1997-2007) made several proposals aimed at advancing participatory democracy. As Prime Minister Gordon Brown put it on 3 July 2007: "Although our system of representative democracy [...] is at the heart of our constitution, it can be enhanced by devolving more power directly to the people."[48] In parliamentary deliberation connected to the subject, optimism about possibilities to update parliamentary democracy prevailed and sometimes led to the glorification of the involvement of citizens at the local level or through 'e-democracy'. Referendums were a controversial form of participation; it was often suggested that such 'plebiscitary democracy' would damage parliamentary democracy as it allegedly had in interwar Europe or was likely to be abused to overrule a parliamentary majority. At the time when plans for the Constitution of Europe were discussed in the early 2000s, British Eurosceptics increasingly accused the EU of a democratic deficit and of violating the sovereignty of the UK parliament and hence British democracy with proposals on increased representative or participative democracy within the EU.[49]

In France of the early 2000s, both participatory and direct democracy were typically discussed in parliament with reference to the need to develop local democracy – a lot like in Britain. The bigrams '*démocratie participative*' and '*démocratie directe*' were often intermingled and could both be used to refer to innovations intended to complement existing institutions of representative democracy. In 2002, Dominique Perben (Union pour un mouvement populaire, UMP), Minister of Justice, welcomed reforms increasing participation at the local level, referring to "forms of direct democracy such as the right of petition, decision-making referendums and local consultation, or state experimentation". Yet the minister insisted at the same time on the continuous powers of parliament in a unitary state: "It's very clear: we are in favour of decentralization within a unitary Republic."[50] Unlike in Britain and Germany, French MPs rarely viewed the plan for the Constitution of Europe as affecting democracy in France.

[48] House of Commons Debates, vol. 462, 3 July 2007, c. 818-819.
[49] Previously discussed also in Pasi IHALAINEN, Miten edustuksellinen demokratiamme on muuttumassa? Digitaalisen käsitehistorian näkökulma | Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae (journal.fi) 1 (2023) 116–137.
[50] Sénat, Compte rendu intégral de la séance du 11 December 2002, p. 6: "les formes de la démocratie directe que constituent le droit de pétition, le référendum décisionnel et la consultation locale, ou encore l'expérimentation d'Etat". "C'est très clair: nous sommes favorables à une décentralisation au sein d'une République unitaire."

The German case differs from Britain and France in that ideas about reforming parliamentary or representative democracy led to more distinct party divisions. All parliamentary parties except the Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU) spoke in favour of increased direct democracy in the early 2000s, often invoking local and regional examples as well as the Swiss model. Andreas Schmidt crystallized the unwavering CDU stand in 2006: "In a parliamentary democracy, we, the parliament, are the boss. That is the normality."[51] What distinguished the German parliament further from the countries of comparison was the high awareness of the speakers on historical experiences and their use in political arguments, reflecting concern over the conservation or evolutionary development of German democracy against the experiences of the Nazi and GDR past. Very different from Britain and France were also explicit appeals to the plan for the Constitution of Europe as a model for rethinking democracy in Germany, potentially including referendums at the federal level that had not been included in the Basic Law.

By the late 2010s parliamentarians' views concerning the urgency of reforming representative democracy had changed in all three countries. Defending the established system had become more common but interest in democratic innovations had not disappeared. In the British parliament, the result of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the consequent parliamentary confusion gave rise to an atmosphere of crisis of representative democracy, as the will of the people as expressed in the referendum seemed to contradict the views of the majority of the sovereign parliament. Many MPs had seen representative democracy and democratic innovations as compatible before and sometimes viewed referendums as a tool for participatory democracy applicable to representative democracy, but now the views changed. Bernard Jenkins (Conservative) conceded that "[d]irect democracy […] can be a shock to the system […]".[52] The situation made Secretary of Justice Robert Buckland (Conservative), conclude that "[t]he whole concept of parliamentary representation is itself on trial. It is on trial in a way that perhaps none of us had ever envisaged".[53] Yet, once the resolution on the Brexit had been made,

[51] Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 16/73, 14 December 2006, 7262: "In einer parlamentarischen Demokratie sind wir, das Parlament, der Chef. Das ist die Normalität."
[52] House of Commons, 20 April 2017, c. 816
[53] House of Commons, 22 October 2019, c. 915.

debates on the state of representative democracy and on referendums ceased to a great extent as well, which may be a sign of continuing trust in an evolutionary development of British parliamentary democracy.[54]

In France, too, debates on direct and participatory democracy moved from the local to the national level while views on the desirability of referendums, in particular, became more polarized. Like in Britain there was a tendency to distinguish more clearly between the instruments of direct democracy such as referendums after citizens' initiatives and the instruments of participatory democracy such as citizens' debates. While left-wing MPs (and a few from the extreme right) spoke in favour of direct democracy, 'participation' was an alternative preferred by the centre parties in search of more representative democracy and the combination of the ideal of popular sovereignty with parliament as a representative institution. Minister of Justice Nicole Belloubet and Prime Minister Édouard Philippe (La République en Marche, LREM) both saw participatory democracy at the national level as something to be included in the French constitution,[55] but little was done to actually establish such practices.

In Germany, too, the rhetoric of participation continued to thrive while a populist challenge by the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) had made most other parties more cautious in their calls for direct democracy instruments. The AfD, which was founded in 2013 and entered the federal parliament in 2017, radicalized calls for direct democracy, emphasizing popular sovereignty in a populist manner, whereas other parties accused it of rejecting the teachings of historical experience, exercising extra-parliamentary opposition while sitting in parliament, and attempting to turn direct democracy against parliamentary democracy in a populist move. All parliamentary parties except the Christian Democrats carried on talking about the need to increase citizen participation in politics but little concrete measures were taken. Explicit vindications of the established parliamentary democracy were on the rise. As Christoph

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54 Previously discussed in IHALAINEN, Miten edustuksellinen demokratiamme on muuttumassa?

55 Journal officiel de la République française, Assemblée nationale, Compte rendu intégral des séances du 3 April 2019, 2e séance, 3445: "En somme, les conclusions du grand débat national doivent nous inciter à réfléchir à l'inclusion, dans nos textes, de processus de démocratie participative."; ibid., Compte rendu intégral des séances du 9 April 2019, 1ère séance, 3664: "Tous les élus locaux le savent: certains projets, certains événements nécessitent de consulter la population. Cette forme de démocratie participative reste à construire au niveau national, en nous inspirant notamment du succès du grand débat national." (Philippe).

de Vries (CDU) put it: "Direct democracy does not mean that it is more democratic than representative democracy. In fact, the opposite is often the case. […] One thing is clear: every strengthening of direct democracy is at the same time a weakening of parliament."[56]

Conclusion: Redefinitions of representative democracy at the beginning of the 21st century

Our journey from the Age of Revolutions to the early twenty-first century has shown how representative democracy was and remains a contested concept the meaning of which continues to be redefined by representatives in connection with parliamentary debates. As parliaments are a meeting place of discourses moving in societies, these redefinitions happen in interaction with other forums of discussion such as public and academic debates. Until the late nineteenth century, democracy could be viewed as merely one element of a balanced mixed constitution; otherwise it was rejected as a potentially dangerous system. In the days of constitutional reforms in the early twentieth century and in the interwar period, competing, ideologically motivated understandings of democracy were held, ranging from regulated parliamentary democracy to soviet or dictatorial rule. Curbing excess popular sovereignty then was a priority until the late 1960s but thereafter emphasis on participation, in particular, has increased. Constructing democracy remains a dynamic discursive process rather than some ideal state of affairs reached one day and then defended and maintained.

In the early twenty-first century much of the discussion in parliaments about the state of democracy has focused on improving representative democracy through procedures that increase participation. As a response to persistent calls for more participation and due to changing structures of the media in an ongoing digital revolution, the majority of the British, French and German parliamentarians welcomed increased citizen participation in representative government. In search of democratic innovations, they often referred to existing practices of direct democracy at the local or regional levels

[56] Deutscher Bundestag, Plenarprotokoll 19/26, 19 April 2018, 2325: "Direkte Demokratie bedeutet eben nicht, dass sie demokratischer ist als repräsentative Demokratie. Das Gegenteil ist häufig sogar der Fall. […] Eines ist klar: Jede Stärkung der direkten Demokratie ist zugleich eine Schwächung des Parlaments."

to justify their application at the national level as well. Some also considered the rise of the internet as increasing the variety of direct communication which opened new possibilities for participation. Innovations were often discussed as pertaining to direct or participatory democracy, without clear conceptual distinctions between the two, and both were mostly understood as complementing rather than challenging representative democracy.

By the late 2010s, the situation changed quite dramatically and was characterized by increasingly polarized views of direct democracy. The Brexit referendum in Britain with its transnational implications, populist tendencies in all countries, continued discussions of democratic innovations, and the rise of new social movements all contributed to views on direct democracy either as a way to control representative democracy (by extremist groups) or as a threat to it (by more established parties). Instruments of direct democracy were seen as potentially endangering the processes of representative democracy, and hence debates on what was exactly meant by more citizen participation and direct democracy became more vigorous. The ideal of increasing participation remained part of mainstream political discussion, especially in France and Germany, but only as complementary to representative democracy.

Transnational aspects in the parliamentary debates of these major European powers were rarely explicit. The debates were rather intertwined by shared and cross-national structural changes such as changing values of the public, the digital revolution, European integration, the rise of populism and dramatic political events such as Brexit. For more transnational debates of concepts of 'democracy' in the future, supranational representative bodies such as the European Parliament could be studied, just as the debates of the Inter-Parliamentary Union have proved useful for the period between the World Wars.

Citation:

Pasi IHALAINEN, Representative Democracy as a Contested Concept: Parliaments after the French, Russian and Digital Revolutions. 14th Gerald Stourzh Lecture on the History of Human Rights and Democracy 2023, online at <http://gerald-stourzh-vorlesungen.univie.ac.at/vorlesungen/> and <https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:2039839>.