RESLIDE Conceptual Note

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Introduction

The impetus for creating this *conceptual note* stems from the observation that, in the abundant academic and political debate on democracy and its crises, as well as in the everyday use of the term, the concept of 'democracy' is often underspecified. In academic discourse, there is concern about the expansion of the concept to connote undemocratic modes of action. In political debate, 'democracy' is used vaguely to motivate political aspirations ranging from the expansion of group rights to the unrestricted exercise of executive power. Yet language is power, which is why a more nuanced understanding of what is and is not democracy, and what can and cannot legitimately be cast as democratic political action, would serve not only public debate and scholarly work, but also the actual evolution of our existing democracies.

In the following sections, key concepts related to democracy – as both a mode of governance and an aspiration for people's self-governance – will be discussed. The discussion focuses on the key principles that different conceptions of democracy considered crucial for its realization. In addition, concepts offering alternatives to (liberal) democracy, such as illiberalism and authoritarianism, will be distinguished.

1. Democracy and its many attributes: from the electoral to the liberal

Electoral democracy is a minimal and procedural conception of democracy that can serve as a basis for more elaborate conceptions (Coppedge et al., 2011, 2024). In this conception, *elections* are the "core institutional pillar" of democracy (Teorell et al., 2016, 3). In the strictest sense, associated with the work of Schumpeter (1942, 1950), democracy simply refers to a regime that holds contested elections. Dahl (1971, 2) defined democracy as "a political system one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely *responsive* to all its citizens". Thus, according to the *electoral principle*, the core value of democracy is the responsiveness of elected representatives to citizens, achieved through periodic elections.

Yet even in the minimal sense of the term, merely holding elections was never conceived as sufficient for a democracy. Rather, Dahl (1971; Teorell et al., 2016) emphasized that elections should be accompanied by eight institutional guarantees of **polyarchy**: the freedom to form and join organizations, the freedom of expression, the right to vote, the right to be eligible for public office and to compete for political support, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, and institutions that are dependent upon votes, as well as the expression of preferences (Boese and Wilson 2023).

As becomes clear, free and fair elections, although indispensable for democracy, can only be guaranteed by a broad set of institutions that ensure their democratic qualities. Dahl's (1971) concept of polyarchy requires that citizens be "considered as political equals" (1971, 1). For

Dahl, **political equality** means that every member of a political community has their interests considered equally in the political process (Beramendi et al., 2024). The V-Dem Institute disaggregates the concept of political equality, or "the extent to which members of a polity possess equal political power" (Coppedge et al., 2025, 215), into various dimensions, notably participation in voting, agenda-setting, and influencing the implementation of policy. In general terms, political equality refers to citizens' equal capacity to stand up for their rights and interests and to vote in elections, as well as to have a say in the political process between elections.

For the purposes of the RESLIDE consortium, what matters is that, arguably, political equality can only be achieved when broad protection of civil liberties is in place (Levitsky and Way 2010). To function, electoral democracy therefore necessarily includes elements associated with **liberal democracy**, making the distinction between the two conceptions somewhat fluid.

Liberal democracy combines the core requirements for electoral democracy, as outlined above, with a liberal component that emphasizes the protection of the rights of individuals and of minorities through constitutional checks on electoral majorities and executive power (Coppedge et al., 2025). According to the *liberal principle*, the core value of democracy lies in protecting such civil rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority (ibid). Counter-majoritarian institutions, such as independent judiciaries and a strict separation of powers, are necessary to prevent temporary majorities from dismantling core liberties such as the right to vote, freedom of speech, media and association, and equality before the law (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2025). Importantly, the democratic process itself must also be protected – for example by enshrining it in the constitution – from the possibility of elected majorities subverting it (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2025).

Liberal democracy is a composite of two separate concepts – democracy and **liberalism** – whose union has, however, been taken almost for granted in the contemporary Western debate. Yet democracy and liberalism are distinct concepts that have, at times, been seen as at odds with one another. Held (2006, 62) defines liberalism as an "attempt to uphold the values of freedom of choice, reason and toleration in the face of tyranny, the absolutist system and religious intolerance". Liberalism strives to carve out a private sphere in society, free from State and Church, where individuals are free to "pursue their own preferences in religious, economic and political affairs" (ibid.), and make this space as large as possible. Liberals consequently advocate a constitutional state that protects the private sphere and the liberties it entails by forging institutional arrangements that limit executive power, protect property rights, enforce the rule of law and civil rights, and secure freedom of expression.

Holm (2024) argues that contemporary liberalism has operated with three core scripts: a political one (liberal democracy), an economic one (neoliberalism), and a moral one. While liberalism has generally endorsed individual development, diversity, and tolerance towards

different self-expressions, Holm (ibid.) argues that, particularly in recent decades, the moral script of liberalism has amounted to an expanding and politically contested set of individual rights, particularly in the realms of gender and sexuality.

At the international level, after World War II, Western liberal democracies under the lead of the United States, created the **rules-based international order.** Related to concepts such as the "liberal international order" or "liberal internationalism" (e.g., Jahn 2018; Ikenberry 2018), the rules-based international order refers to the constellation of institutions and ideas that guided international relations (at least in the Western hemisphere) in the period between 1945 and the 2020s.

Key features of the post-1945 order were 1) the hegemonic role of the United States as its leading power (Jahn 2018), combined with 2) a strong role for multilateral institutions, notably the United Nations, in coordinating international affairs based on shared principles of conduct (Ruggie 1993, cit. in Ikenberry 2018); 3) security cooperation, with the US as a hegemonic leader; 4) economic openness built around Western capitalism and the liberalization of trade and finance; and 5) a progressive belief that the institutional and relational features of the order would push an increasing number of states towards becoming liberal democracies at the domestic level (Ikenberry 2018).

The culmination point of the liberal international order emerged in the decade after 1989, with a widespread conviction in the triumph of liberal democracy in both domestic and international affairs, epitomized in Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis. In the 2020s, the rules-based order is broadly said to be in crisis (Holm 2025), possibly of a terminal nature (Ikenberry 2018). Some (e.g., Holm 2025) argue that liberal democracy effectively became depoliticized in the post-1989 period, and that the current upheaval marks the re-politicization of forms of democracy and of the organization of international affairs more broadly.

2. The critics of liberal democracy: the democratic and the illiberal

At the core of the RESLIDE consortium is the acknowledgement that it is the *liberal* component of democracy that is most acutely threatened in the contemporary political environment. Such criticism can be conceptualized as originating from both democratic and undemocratic sources.

First, the "liberal" in liberal democracy can arguably be criticized from a democratic standpoint for excessive proceduralism and individualism. This is the critique advanced by **deliberative** and **participatory** democrats (e.g., Lafont 2020). Deliberative democrats place much weight on consensus as the basis of legitimate political decisions. Yet consensus is not merely the "mindless aggregation of existing preferences" (Coppedge et al., 2011, 253), but refers instead

to *considered* judgement about the common good (Held 2006). Participatory democrats, for their part, are motivated by uneasiness about "delegating authority to representatives" (Coppedge et al., 2025, 451). They favour direct over representative democracy and argue that democratic self-government cannot be reduced to political equality, but requires an "effective capacity to both shape the policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own" (Lafont 2020, 2).

Modern democracies are virtually always **representative democracies**, where the citizens of a polity choose representatives to govern on their behalf. These representatives are then held accountable by the citizens, notably through periodic elections. Representative democracy can be contrasted with **direct democracy**, where citizens make decisions directly, for example on legislation. Conceptually, it is a modern amalgamation of two distinct and even contradictory concepts: democracy, connoting rule by the people, and representation, connoting mediation (Manin 1997). Originally, a system of government based on representation was seen as something entirely different from – and in some cases, for example by Madison, the architect of the US Constitution – as superior to "democracy" (Manin 1997). Modern parliamentary democracies can be regarded as attempts to overcome the gulf between the principles of representation and democracy by assigning a central role to a deliberative assembly – the parliament – in the legislative chain.

Political representation refers to "making present the represented by standing for, speaking for, and acting for them, while, at the same time, the represented remain de facto absent" (Castiglione and Pollack 2018, 2). Key sub-concepts of political representation are substantive and descriptive representation, or "what the representative does and what the representative is" (Pitkin 1967, 59, cit. in Castiglione and Pollack 2018, 2). However, how exactly representation should reflect the "original" opinion of the citizens, how representatives should view their role and how they should act, what importance should be placed on the likeness between representatives and the represented, and what constitutes "good" representation, all remain contested questions.

Yet representative democracy is widely perceived to be in crisis (e.g., Castiglione and Pollak 2018, Lafont 2020) or "hollowed out" (Mair 2013). As Holm (2025) has argued, the upheaval in contemporary political systems marks the re-politicization of forms of democracy or, in Mudde's (2019) words, the re-politicization of politics. Mudde (2019, 581) sees this re-politicization as being at the heart of the "populist claim". He (2004; 2019, 578) has famously defined **populism** as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite, which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people".

Populists endorse an extreme version of **majoritarian democracy** (Mudde 2019; Zaslove & Meijers 2024). The *majoritarian principle* holds that the will of the majority should be sovereign and that the many should prevail over the few (Coppedge et al., 2025). It fits the populist understanding of "the people" as a homogeneous entity whose "will" is the ultimate source of legitimate political power (Zaslove and Meijers 2024, 1135). In this view, horizontal checks on power, which are key to liberal democracy, prevent the will of the majority from prevailing and are thus *undemocratic*. Yet most scholars (e.g., Mudde 2019; Zaslove & Meijers 2024) take a critical view of the very concept of "majoritarian" democracy. This position is based on the long tradition of democratic and republican thought, in which horizontal checks on power have always been seen as a prerequisite for a system to qualify as "democratic".

Majoritarianism as a *political idea* can be directly contrasted with the consensus model of democracy (Lijphart 2012), where the former seeks to centralize power in a unitary constitution, centralized parties, and plurality electoral laws, and the latter seeks to disperse power through proportional electoral laws, a federal system, and diffusely organized parties (Coppedge et al., 2025). Yet there is also a deeper sense in which the consensus and majoritarian principles stand in contrast to one another. Both emphasize the "will of the people", but whereas for populists as "extreme majoritarians" (Mudde 2019) the will of the people is taken as given – either as a simple aggregate of individual wills, as expressed in elections, or as simply the unquestioned opinion of "the people" as a monolithic entity – the consensus model of democracy emphasizes the *quality* of that majority opinion and the process of arriving at it. The "general will" should reflect the *considered* opinion of all those affected, established through an inclusive political process (Held 2006).

The political challengers of liberal democracy promote not only a populist or majoritarian, but also what they label as an "illiberal" version of democracy. Laruelle (2024, 4) defines illiberalism as "a cluster of ideologies that articulate a rejection of some or all of the different scripts of liberalism. It blends diverse intellectual traditions and policy norms and practices that promote majoritarianism, sovereignism, and traditional hierarchies (social, sexual, gender, cultural) and recognize the right to particularism and some forms of exclusivity". Laruelle (ibid.) points out that illiberalism is intrinsically connected to the concept of liberalism; in fact, she considers it a "by-product thereof".

3. The endgame and its alternative

Illiberal populists thrive in polarized political environments. Research has long shown that excessive **polarization** in the electorate harms democracy, and conversely, that reducing political polarization is key to democratic stability (Bermeo 2003; Sartori 1976). Notably, some degree of "polarization", in the form of diverging opinions and attitudes, is a normal and even necessary feature of democracy. Yet when conflict becomes so excessive that it "breaks down

the resolution mechanisms" in a democracy (Kawecki 2024), polarization turns "pernicious": the "normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of 'Us' versus 'Them'" (McCoy et al., 2018 cit. in Brüggemann and Meyer 2023).

Polarization is a multi-dimensional concept. In a broad sense, it refers to a process of social divergence (Brüggemann and Meyer 2023), with different facets. *Ideological* polarization refers to diverging attitudes towards political issues (DiMaggio et al., 1996). *Party system* polarization reflects the "degree of ideological differentiation of parties in the system" (Dalton 2008, 900). More recently, research has focused on *affective* polarization, which refers to the differentiation of political *identities* and is characterized by intense dislike between "in- and outgroups", most often understood as partisan groups, particularly in the US context (Iyengar et al., 2012; Kawecki 2024).

Finally, a concept that has drawn less attention but that is potentially highly consequential in contemporary politics is *communicative* or *discursive* polarization, understood as divergence in "mediated public communication" (Brüggemann and Meyer, 2023). Discursive polarization marks the breakdown of a Habermasian "integrated public sphere", an arena for citizens to discuss matters of common concern in a way that everybody agrees not on the issues discussed, but on the basic rules of the game: which issues are "settled" and outside public debate, and which are discussed and where (Lafont 2020; Habermas 1989; Brüggemann and Meyer 2023). The endpoint of discursive polarization, in turn, would be a society "split up into different and largely separated communities of communication that regard radically different ideas as consensus, as part of legitimate debate, and as being beyond legitimate discussion" (Brüggemann and Meyer 2023, 133). The "meta-consensus" about acceptable positions in public debate would be broken down (Kawecki 2024).

Indeed, research has found that the world is now experiencing a new wave of *autocratization*, with more people globally living in autocracies than in democracies (e.g., Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Nord et al., 2025).

Contemporary literature on regime transformations defines **authoritarianism** and autocratization mostly in negative terms, as the opposites of democracy and democratization, and as a decrease in, or lack of, democratic attributes (for an overview, see e.g., Merkel & Lührmann 2019). According to Juan Linz (2000), key defining features of authoritarian political systems are limited political pluralism, the absence of an elaborate, guiding and mobilizing ideology, and a leader or small group that exercises power within ill-defined limits.

Closed autocracies (e.g., North Korea and China) have no multiparty elections for the legislature or the chief executive, and no channels exist for opposition forces to legally contest executive power. *Electoral or competitive autocracies* (e.g., Hungary and Turkey) have *de jure*

multiparty elections that nonetheless fail to be free and fair; constitutional channels exist for meaningful competition over executive power, but the incumbent violates at least one of three key democratic attributes: 1) free and fair elections, 2) broad protection of civil liberties, and 3) a reasonably level playing field (Coppedge et al., 2025; Levitsky & Way, 2010). The latter type of regime has become more prevalent recently, while closed autocracies have declined globally (Nord et al., 2025).

The most extreme form of authoritarianism is **totalitarianism.** Unlike authoritarianism, totalitarianism is rooted in ideology that the ruling regime seeks to extend to all areas of life. Dissent and individual autonomy are not tolerated. Instead of governing, the ruling regime seeks to indoctrinate citizens. Harcourt (2023) argues, following Arendt (1951), that totalitarian regimes legitimize themselves by reference to the rule of law, expropriating the vocabulary of liberal democracy. Yet they embrace a "higher law", stemming from, for example, divinity or, in the case of the Nazi regime, genetics and biology (Harcourt 2023).

4. The RESLIDE consortium's mission

In politics, no outcome is pre-determined. The core task of the RESLIDE consortium is to counter potential tendencies towards illiberal democratic outcomes by uncovering risks for, and trends towards, democratic backsliding, and by providing decision-makers and the public with tools to counter such trends. The main goal is to strengthen the **resilience** of (Finnish) liberal democracy. Democratic resilience refers to the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to either external or internal challenges without losing its democratic character, that is, without substantial regression in the quality of democratic institutions and practices (Boese et al., 2023; Merkel & Lührmann 2019).

The concept of democratic resilience has been disaggregated in various ways to improve empirical observability and measurability. Merkel and Lührmann (2019) disaggregate the qualities of a resilient democratic system into three "abilities": the ability of a democratic regime to 1) withstand challenges without major changes, 2) adapt through internal changes, and 3) recover after initial damage and disorder. Boese and co-authors (2023) view democratic resilience through a temporal lens and divide the concept into two stages. By "onset resilience", the authors refer to the ability of a regime to maintain or improve its democratic character, namely, to avoid the start of autocratization processes altogether. By "breakdown resilience", they refer to regimes that manage to avert ongoing autocratization, that is, to avoid regime change from democracy to autocracy even though the process was already underway.

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Appendix: Short definitions of key concepts

Electoral democracy

According to this procedural and minimal definition, democracy is a regime that holds contested elections (Schumpeter 1942, 1950). The *electoral principle* emphasizes that the core value of democracy lies in the responsiveness of elected representatives to citizens, achieved through periodic elections. Yet merely holding elections has never been perceived as sufficient for a democracy and should be complemented by Dahl's (1971) eight institutional guarantees for "polyarchy": the freedom to form and join organizations, the freedom of expression, the right to vote, the right to be eligible for public office and to compete for political support, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, and institutions that are dependent upon votes as well as the expression of preferences. According to Dahl (ibid.), polyarchy requires political equality, which can only be guaranteed by broad civil liberties. In this sense, electoral democracy requires "liberal" components.

Liberal democracy

Liberal democracy combines the requirements of electoral democracy with a liberal component that emphasizes the broad protection of civil and individual rights, judicial independence, and constitutional checks on electoral majorities and executive power (Coppedge et al., 2025). According to the liberal principle, the core value of democracy lies in the protection of civil rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority (ibid.). Counter-majoritarian institutions, such as independent judiciaries and a strict separation of powers, are necessary to prevent temporary majorities from dismantling core liberties such as the right to vote, freedom of speech, media and association, and equality before the law, as well as to protect the democratic process itself (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2025).

Electoral or competitive autocracy

Electoral autocracies (e.g., Hungary and Turkey) have *de jure* multiparty elections that nonetheless fail to be free and fair; constitutional channels exist for meaningful competition over executive power, but the incumbent violates at least one of three key democratic attributes: 1) free and fair elections, 2) broad protection of civil liberties, and 3) a reasonably level playing field (Coppedge et al., 2025; Levitsky & Way, 2010). This type of regime has become more prevalent recently, while closed autocracies have declined globally (Nord et al., 2025).

Closed autocracy

Closed autocracies (e.g., North Korea and China) have no multiparty elections for the legislature or the chief executive, and no channels exist for opposition forces to legally contest executive power.

The majoritarian principle

In the majoritarian conception of democracy, the power of elected incumbents takes precedence over horizontal accountability, that is, the checks and balances that form the core of the liberal conception of democracy. The *majoritarian principle* holds that the will of the majority should be sovereign, and that the many should prevail over the few (Coppedge et al., 2024). While the majoritarian principle is inherent in all forms of electoral democracy to some extent, majoritarianism as a political idea holds that political institutions should be designed in such a way as to concentrate power, for example in the form of strong and centralized parties; a unitary rather than a federal constitution; and plurality rather than proportional electoral laws. According to Rhoden (2015), "majoritarian" democracy corresponds to democracy that is "low" on the liberal component, rejecting, for example, certain individual rights, but it remains a version of liberal democracy. According to him, therefore, all democratic systems *de facto* have a liberal component.

Resilience

Democratic resilience refers the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to external or internal challenges without losing its democratic character, that is, without substantial regression in the quality of democratic institutions and practices (Boese et al., 2023; Merkel & Lührmann 2019). The concept of democratic resilience has been disaggregated in various ways to improve empirical observability and measurability. Merkel and Lührmann (2019) disaggregate the qualities of a resilient democratic system into three "abilities": the ability of a democratic regime to 1) withstand challenges without major changes, 2) adapt through internal changes, and 3) recover after initial damage and disorder. Boese and co-authors (2023) view democratic resilience through a temporal lens and divide the concept into two stages. By "onset resilience", the authors refer to the ability of a regime to maintain or improve its democratic character, namely, to avoid the start of autocratization processes altogether. By "breakdown resilience", they refer to regimes that manage to avert ongoing autocratization, that is, to avoid regime change from democracy to autocracy even though the process was already underway.