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Exploring the erosion of 'real existing' democracies

From Günter Roth

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1. Introduction

For some time now, there has been a debate as to whether democracy is in crisis, only simulated or already a thing of the past, as the term 'post-democracy' suggests (see Blühdorn 2013; Crouch 2008). In contrast, Wolfgang Merkel takes a more cautious view in the anthology "Democracy and Crisis", pointing out on the one hand that talk of the crisis of democracy is as old as democracy itself and on the other hand that he sees "challenges" for which no antidotes have yet been found, in view of globalization, social inequality and the rise of semi-loyal parties such as right-wing populists (Merkel 2020a, 129). However, the same author is much more skeptical about the state of democracy during and after the 'corona crisis', given the state of emergency of an enormous concentration of power in the executive and blatant restrictions on freedom (Merkel 2020b). In the following, 'only' the state of democracy 'before Corona' is considered, although even then an erosion or erosion of democracy can already be observed, which at least partially explains the subsequent intensification in the state of emergency of the 'Corona crisis' (the latter, however, is the subject of the article "Crisis policy - on the way to authoritarian technocracy").

1. What is democracy and how can its quality be measured?

The assessment of the quality of democracy initially depends on ideas and expectations of what a democracy should be; lower expectations lead to a milder judgment than if high expectations are formulated (see Merkel and Kneip 2018). In the first perspective, the focus is on the fact that rights to freedom and participation as well as political competition exist in principle, i.e. that free elections take place and that there are basically equal opportunities for democratic participation. Far-reaching claims look more closely at the extent to which freedom, participation and democratic, constitutional controls are effectively in place, in particular

the extent to which all citizens can use or enjoy their rights equally or whether there are power imbalances (see Merkel & Kneip, 2018).

Most measurements, indexes and rankings on the quality of democracy tend to follow a lean, liberal understanding, with minimum requirements for freedom and participation rights, participation and competition (cf. Abromeit and Stoiber 2007, 42 f.). This is also a consequence of Anglo-Saxon dominated research and the prevailing political culture of a liberal majority and competitive democracy (see Schmidt 2019, p. 204 ff.; 289 f.).. Accordingly, many indices often show hardly any differences within the 'mature' (Western) democracies, so that such indices have even been declared "useless" (Krause and Merkel 2018, 32).[1] Measurements of the quality of democracy should therefore also highlight differences or defects within states that define themselves as fundamentally free and democratic, but also when we should speak of an autocracy. [2]

Among the concepts for measuring the quality of democracy, the 'Freedom House Index' is a very frequently used one. It distinguishes between 'free', 'partially free' and 'unfree' states or regimes (freedom is virtually synonymous with democratic) on the basis of two dimensions: 'political rights' and 'civil liberties', each with several items based on assessments by selected experts (cf. Schmidt 2019, 294 ff.). The first dimension of the Freedom House Index is intended to reflect the right to form political parties and to compete for political leadership positions in open, competitive elections. The second dimension is civil rights, i.e. the extent to which citizens' rights to freedom, organization and protection are respected and protected by the state. However, the Freedom House Index can be criticized for the fact that, for years, very high values have hardly changed for developed democracies, which also applies to many other indices (e.g. 'Polity Index' or 'V-Dem') (cf. Merkel and Kneip 2018, 19). With regard to the Freedom House Index, Manfred G. Schmidt critically notes, for example, that the USA is classified as 'free' (83 out of 100 points):

> "Freedom House, on the other hand, has been remarkably lenient in its assessment of the USA for years, despite Guantanamo and targeted killings on government orders. Israel, which also practises state-mandated killing and acts as an occupying power in the Palestinian territories, also receives remarkably lenient ratings for civil liberties." (Schmidt 2019, 295 f.)

On the other hand, the maximum value (100) shown in the Freedom House Index for Sweden also gives food for thought, because it suggests that there are no deficits of the kind otherwise discussed for many democracies (unequal participation, concentration or abuse of power and lack of control), as if Sweden had an ideal democracy that could not be improved.

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1 The criticism of common concepts of democracy measurement applies, for example, to one of the pioneers, Vanhanen: he builds on Dahl's factors of participation and competition and determines the degree of participation simply as the share of voter turnout in the population and the degree of competition as the share of votes for the strongest party (W=100-SP), from which an index is calculated after multiplication, in which Italy achieved a top value (cf. Schmidt 2019, 60 f.)although other measurements and citizens' perceptions often deliver very poor results with regard to the functioning of democracy in Italy.

2 Here, too, there is anything but unanimity in academic judgments, especially since autocratic regimes such as in Russia or Turkey at least maintain the appearance of democracy (cf. Schmidt 2019, 299 f.).

Incidentally, a similar fundamental criticism also applies to the increasingly frequently used approach of the *'Varieties of Democracy'* ('V-Dem')which, despite its elaborate scientific construction, is unfortunately only based on the judgments of selected academic experts and also shows strikingly similar, usually relatively consistently high values for Western European democracies (cf. Graziano and Quaranta 2022, 19 ff.; Papada et al. 2023). It also remains unclear to what extent the various sub-indices lead to an overall assessment, with the index of liberal democracy usually taking center stage.

Due to such criticism, which will not be elaborated on here, the relatively sophisticated *Democracy Barometer* was developed to better identify differences between 'developed' democracies and over time (Bühlmann et al. 2012).[3] The measurement is based on three theoretically founded core dimensions, *freedom*, *control* and *equality*, which are differentiated by means of "functions": 1. *freedom* as individual freedom, rule of law and public sphere, 2. *control* as competition, control of powers and governance; 3. *equality* as transparency, participation, representation, which in turn was aggregated into 18 sub-dimensions with around 100 individual indicators to form an index with values from 0-100 (cf. Engler et al. 2020; Merkel and Kneip 2018). A special feature and advantage of the Democracy Barometer is that it uses indicators and data from official statistics and surveys instead of subjective assessments by academic 'experts'. This is because their individual views may be distorted and not very reliable (see Graziano and Quaranta 2022). This applies not least against the - little-noticed - background that academic experts (like most representatives of all elites, in politics, media and business) come to a large extent (and today more than ever) from relatively privileged social milieus of the bourgeoisie and are therefore not necessarily politically neutral or objective per se. [4]

Citizens' assessments should therefore also be taken into account when evaluating democracy, whereby the interesting question arises as to the extent to which these views correspond with the assessments of the aforementioned experts. However, citizens' understanding and expectations of democracy in the respective country also play a potentially distorting role, i.e. any critical (or uncritical) assessments by citizens can in turn result from high (or low) expectations, whereby the type of democracy implemented in the respective country presumably also has an impact on this (cf. Fuchs and Roller 2018). The fact that a people are satisfied with their democracy can therefore also be due to a distorted perception or distorted opinions. The latter is likely to be the case, for example, when surveys in more or less autocratic states such as China, Russia or Turkey show that many citizens are satisfied with their regime, even though there are serious shortcomings (Merkel 2020a, 126). In addition to

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[3] Unfortunately, however, the Democracy Barometer no longer seems to be updated, especially as the mainstream of academic research appears to follow the V-Dem, which seems to be backed by the enormous financial power of numerous international institutions (governments, big business or 'philanthrocapitalist foundations').

[4] For the first argument, see e.g: Hartmann 2007, 2013for the latter, see e.g: Klein and Stern 2005

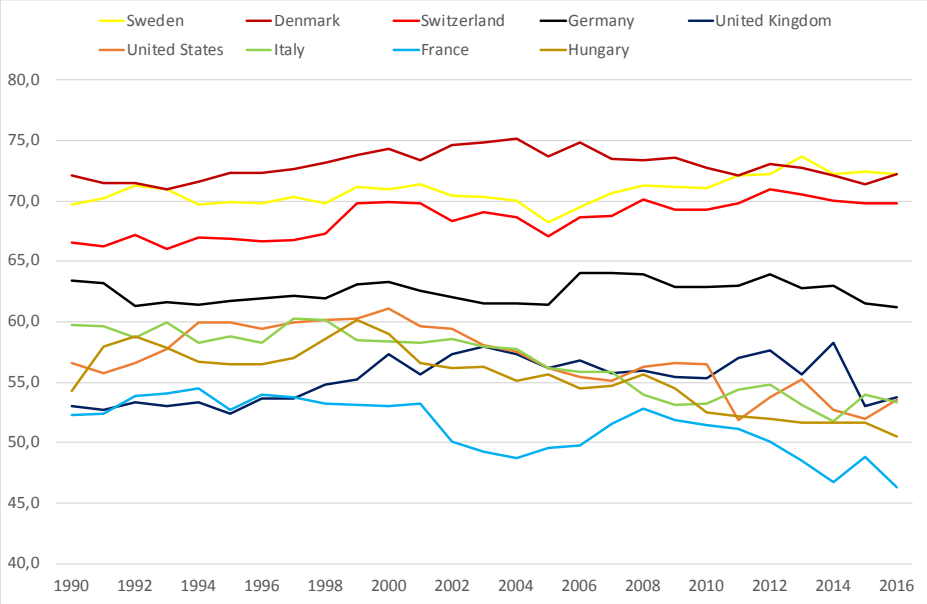
manipulation or social pressure, responses could also be influenced by general conditions, such as the economic situation in a country. It is therefore questioned to what extent the frequently used summary indicator of satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in one's own country is sufficient as a valid assessment of the quality of democracy, especially since it does not specifically refer to individual functions (e.g. the functioning of constitutional control or participation) (cf. Quaranta 2018, 195).

2. Empirical findings on the quality of democracy

Overall assessment of the quality of democracy according to the Democracy Barometer

First of all, the data from the Democracy Barometer shows considerable differences in the quality of democracy even within the countries that are usually perceived as 'mature' democracies (see Figure 1). France and Italy in particular perform relatively poorly compared to Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland, but the United Kingdom (2016: 53.8) and the US democracy (2016: 53.6) also rank just above 50 (scale of 0-100), i.e. in a problematic range, meaning that serious 'defects' in democracy can be identified here (cf. Schmidt 2019, 419). With values of just over 60, Germany ranks stably above this critical range, but also far behind the frontrunners such as Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland, although there is still room for improvement and a more or less large distance from the maximum value (100).

Illustration 1: Quality of democracy according to the Democracy Barometer (1990-2016)



Source: Own compilation according to: Democracy Barometer (http://www.democracybarometer.org/concept_-de.html).

A clear downward trend can certainly be observed in some countries, such as France, Italy, Hungary and the USA, with France even falling below the critical value of 50 and even below that of Hungary, which is almost naturally perceived as a 'defective' democracy by the public in this country (shown in the 2016 Democracy Barometer with a value of 50.5).[5] Incidentally, Greece's rating in the Democracy Barometer has also slipped well below the critical value of 50 (2016: 42.8). During the financial and euro crisis since 2007, Greece has had to accept a tendency to undermine democracy through the intervention of international 'financial institutions' such as the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank, which has brought left-wing and right-wing populist parties to power. This case also shows that one should not confuse or mix up symptoms (populism), causes (defects in democracy) and effects (threats to democracy).

The citizens' view of the quality of democracy

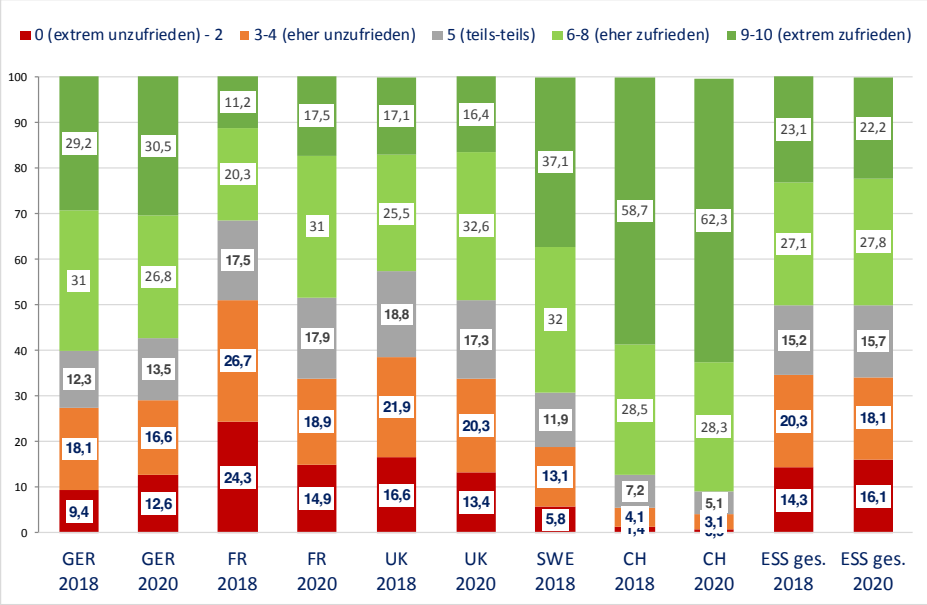
How do citizens themselves view the functioning of democracy in their country? First of all, it should be noted that the democratic system of government as an *idea* enjoys overwhelming approval today, even if criticism of its actual functioning is virulent: in Germany, 95% rate the statement "We should have a democratic political system" as "good" or "very good"; in the

5 In contrast, France has an astonishingly high score of 0.803 in the V-Dem (Liberal Democracy Index, 2018), while Hungary has a score of 0.381, which raises the question of the extent to which double standards are being applied here.

UK, France and the USA, the figure is much lower at around 70%, but still a large majority (see World Value Survey 2017-2020).

Germany is in the middle range in Europe when it comes to citizens' assessment of the functioning of democracy, with a majority of 57% of respondents in this country being rather satisfied with the functioning of democracy (2020), but there were also 29.2% who were dissatisfied and 13.5% who were ambivalent (Figure below).

Illustration 2Citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in their country (2018, 2020)



Source: European Social Survey: "And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?, GER (Germany), FR (France), UK (United Kingdom), SWE (Sweden), CH (Switzerland).

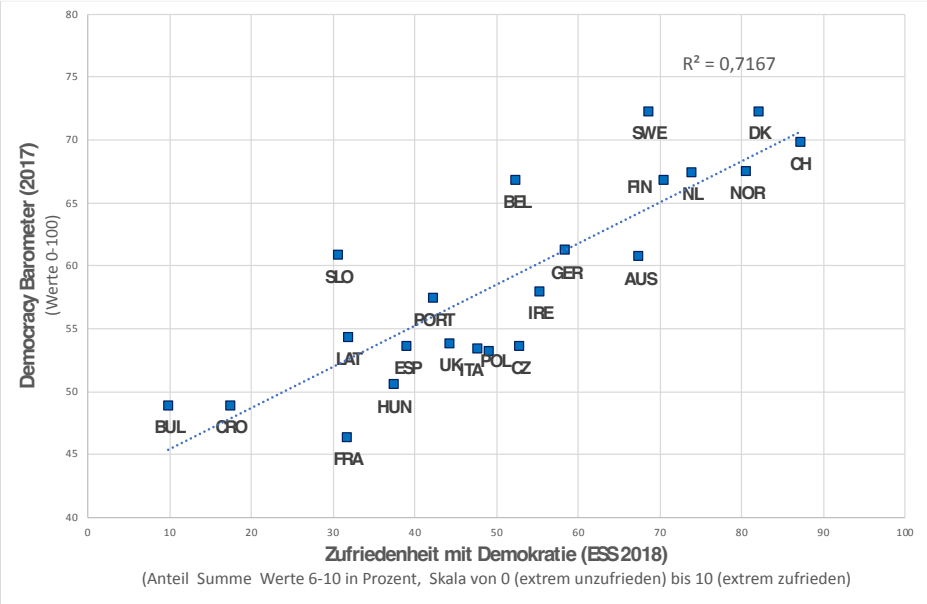
Citizens' dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Germany in 2020 (during the coronavirus crisis) appears to have increased further compared to 2018. [6] In Switzerland's decentralized, participatory direct and consensus democracy, on the other hand, over 90% of citizens are satisfied with the functioning of their democracy and satisfaction has apparently increased further during the crisis (European Social Survey 2018, 2020). The Swiss were not only able to vote on the coronavirus regulations several times, but also enjoyed a rather liberal approach to Covid-19, albeit not to the same extent as Sweden, the pioneer in this regard. In contrast, the high proportion of those dissatisfied with their democracy in France in 2018 (51%) is striking, with 'only' 34% expressing more or less dissatisfaction in 2020 (similar to the UK). However, even in 2020, only just under half of French citizens are satisfied with the functioning of their democracy. Compared to Switzerland or Sweden, these values show a clear need for improvement, which is likely to be found in more effective participation in parti-

6 The field phase of the European Social Survey began in fall 2020 and in some cases continued well beyond 2020 (see https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org).

cular - centralist majority democracy and presidential democracy appear to be in need of reform.

Incidentally, however, the perception of the functioning of democracy by citizens shown correlates very strongly with the values of the Democracy Barometer (cf. Krause and Merkel 2018, 40 f.) (Figure 3). [7]

Illustration 3: Quality of democracy according to the 'Democracy Barometer' (2017) and citizens' satisfaction with democracy (2018)



Source: Own compilation according to: http://www.democracybarometer.org and European Social Survey.

In contrast, the assessments of the V-Dem by selected academic experts correlate less strongly with citizens' satisfaction with their democracy.[8] In addition, a complementary look at the mostly medium-strong, but sometimes also weak, correlation between the values of various democracy indices shows that some, such as the V-Dem, are clearly skewed to the right, i.e. apparently rate the established Western democracies too positively (see Graziano and Quaranta 2022, 24).[9]

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7 Merkel (ibid.) shows a correlation coefficient of 0.81 for 2012; the ESS data from 2018 even correlate with the Democracy Barometer (2016) at 0.847 (own calculations).

8 Pearson's correlation coefficient is 0.608 between the values of the liberal democracy index (v2x_libdem) of the V-Dem as at December 31, 2018 and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in 22 European countries (2018) according to the European Social Survey (sum of the shares of values 6-10, scale from 0=very dissatisfied to 10=extremely satisfied).

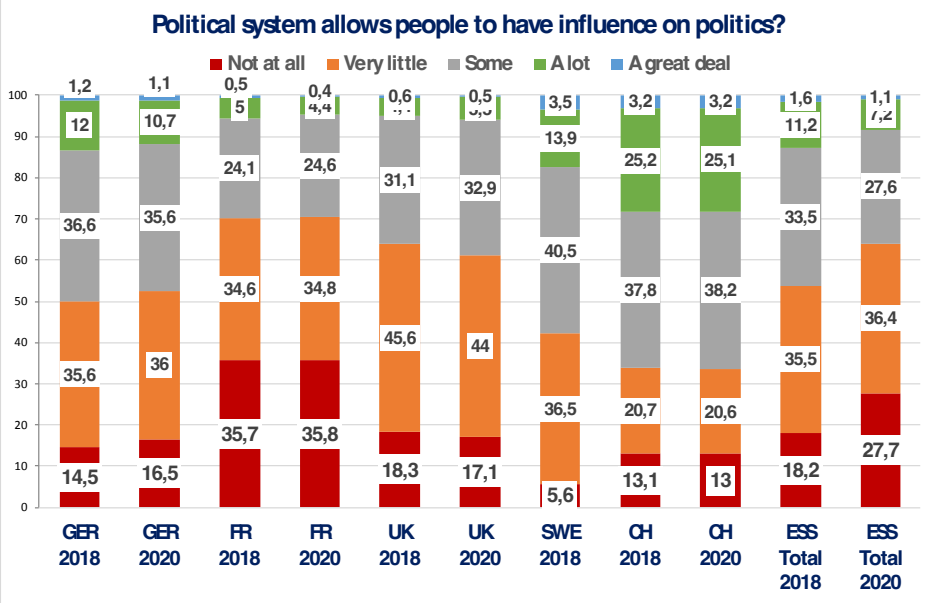
9 In 2017, the correlation between the Democracy Barometer and the Freedom House Index was 0.751, to the Polity Index only 0.095 and to the V-Dem 0.684 (Graziano and Quaranta 2022, 24).

"Government of the people, by the elites for the rich"

However, the quality of democracy is demonstrated not least by the fact that citizens have fundamentally equal rights and opportunities to participate in the sense of a government of the people, by the people and for the people (as Abraham Lincoln famously put it). As expected, governments in democracies should therefore take into account the interests of the majority of the people and be voted out of office if they fail. Accordingly, the economic theory of 'rational choice' also expects democratic governments and parties to orient themselves primarily towards the majority of the economic center, the so-called 'median voter' (who lies in the middle of the income distribution) (cf. Schmidt 2019, 187 ff.).

In contrast, however, empirical studies on political 'responsiveness' show that there are major distortions in reality: First of all, citizens often see themselves as having little or no influence on politics, even in democracies (Figure 4). Once again, people in France and the UK are particularly skeptical about their ability to have a say in politics, with 60-70% denying this. Although the figure is lower in Switzerland (34%), this is a surprisingly large group that feels more or less powerless politically, despite the possibility of a referendum.

Illustration 4: Citizens' assessments of their ability to influence politics (2018, 2020)

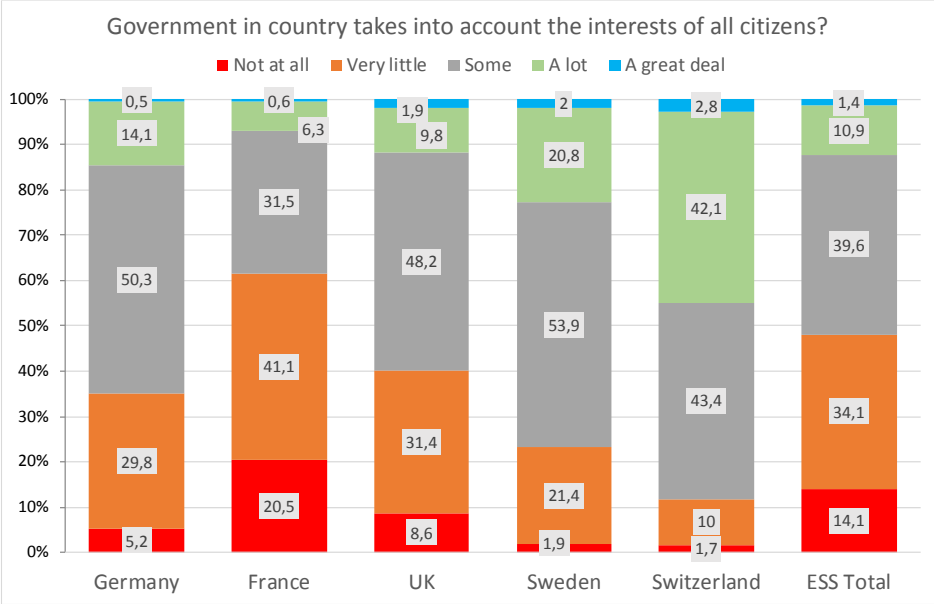


Source: European Social Survey And how much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics? GER (Germany), FR (France), UK (United Kingdom), SWE (Sweden), CH (Switzerland).

Respondents were correspondingly critical of the question of whether their country's government takes the interests of all citizens into account, which should at least generally be the case in democracies. In Germany, only a good 14% of respondents agree with this to a high degree, while a good half are ambivalent and believe that the interests of citizens are 'somewhat' taken into account; however, 35% also say that the government does not take

the interests of all citizens into account at all or only very little (Figure 5). Here, too, France stands out, where the vast majority (62%) perceive that the interests of all citizens are not taken into account at all or only very little (Italy, by the way, shows even more critical values, only surpassed in this respect by Bulgaria and Croatia, see European Social Survey).

Illustration 5Assessments of the political consideration of citizens' interests by democratic governments (2020)



Source: European Social Survey. "How much would you say that the government in [country] takes into account the interests of all citizens?"

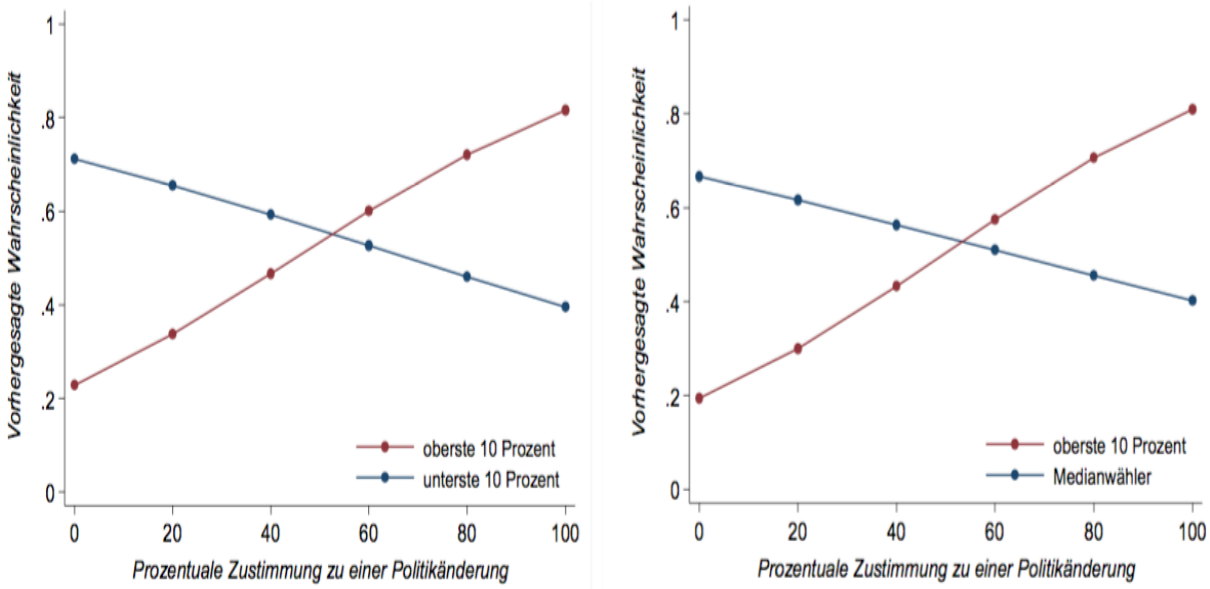
Finally, the critical perceptions of citizens can be confirmed by empirical analyses of the 'responsiveness' of political decisions: To this end, a group led by Armin Schäfer investigated the extent to which the political decisions made (legislative decisions) were accompanied by attitudes towards them among the people in Germany for the period from 1998 to 2013, differentiated according to income groups and occupational status (Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2016, 2018).

This shows that the political interests and views of the rich (as well as civil servants and the self-employed) are perceived and implemented much more frequently, particularly in the case of socially controversial issues (e.g. raising the retirement age or merging work and social assistance, so-called 'Hartz IV') (Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2016, 2018). If the richest income group unanimously shared a political demand or point of view, this was implemented with a probability of 80%; if the majority of the richer were against a demand, the probability of implementation fell to around 20% (Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer 2016, 2018) (Figure 6).

If, on the other hand, a political demand was supported by a majority in the poorest income group, the probability of its realization also *decreased* significantly. It is particularly interesting that this correlation applies similarly to demands shared by a majority of the middle income

group or the so-called 'median voter' (the voter who lies exactly in the middle of the income distribution) (cf. ibid.). This means that not only the lower, but also the middle income groups find less support for their political demands among the political elites than the rich (the same applies when other status aspects such as profession or occupational status are considered).

Illustration 6Probability of the implementation of political demands according to the share of approval in different income groups (Germany, evaluation of laws in the period 1998-2013)



Source: Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2016, Fig. 4-10.

It should be noted that this finding, which is very problematic for a democracy, was made at a time when the SPD was a leading party in or part of the government, a party that to this day claims to be particularly committed to 'the little people' and 'social justice'. A survey on social justice also shows that the perceptions of the increasingly homogeneous political representatives in the Bundestag have been drifting apart from those of ordinary people for some time: while a large majority (60%) of members of the German Bundestag were of the opinion that income and wealth in Germany were by and large fairly distributed, only a minority of 28% of the population shared this view (Vehrkamp and Kleinsteuber 2007).

Obviously, political elites have turned away from and become independent of the people, i.e. even in democracies such as Germany, which still performs reasonably well in the Democracy Barometer and in the view of citizens, there is a blatant disregard for and lack of feedback to the majority will of the people. This can be seen in many other major political decisions, such as the eastward expansion of the EU, the introduction of the euro, the 'eco-tax' or participation in various wars, in Afghanistan and many others. Moreover, it was not only in Germany that inequality grew noticeably, regardless of whether center-right or center-left gov-

ernments were in power (Piketty 2019). The title of the essay by Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer (2018) puts it in a nutshell: "Government of the People, by the Elite, for the Rich".

The fact that the social composition of political representatives has become increasingly elitist presumably contributes to the growing 'democratic imbalance'. Analyses of the USA, for example, show that until 1980, governments were predominantly recruited from the lower and middle classes, while since then the upper classes have increasingly dominated and that this development is clearly associated with increasing tax relief for the rich and growing inequality (Hartmann 2009). In Germany, 87% of the members of the 20th Bundestag have a university degree, but only 18.5% of the population as a whole, i.e. people with low-value school-leaving qualifications and ordinary 'working people' are the most politically underrepresented group, without this being a major public issue.[10] This follows the general trend that academic education is not only seen as a prerequisite for professional success, income and social status, but that leading positions in politics, business, media and culture are now almost exclusively held by the academically educated (Hartmann 2007).

Similar origins, socialization and education mean that political elites always have more similar attitudes than a '*bloc bourgeois*', which differs greatly from the attitudes and interests of the mass of the population (Amable and Darcillon 2020). This division can be seen along the social and economic policy fault lines of welfare state regulation or redistribution (versus market freedom) as well as the question of national identity and social order, the handling of globalization and immigration or gender issues, whereby the less educated and poorer tend to demand welfare state regulation in the interests of social security and equality, and tend to advocate a strong nation state and more conservative socio-political attitudes and ideas of order, while the political elites tend to have more liberal attitudes (pro-market freedom and pro-social liberalization, multiculturalism and globalization) (Amable and Darcillon 2020; Giger and Nelson 2013; Gilens and Page 2014; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Van der Waal, Achterberg, and Houtman 2007). In this respect, it can be explained that economic and even more so socio-cultural inequality grew more and more regardless of whether center-right or center-left governments were in power, as their leaderships became increasingly similar and dissimilar to the popular milieus (Piketty 2019).

3. Conclusion

At the very least, an erosion of democracy can hardly be denied in countries such as France, but also to some extent in Germany, whereby the problem of social and political inequality is the linchpin. Here as there, large sections of the so-called 'common people' (formally less

[10] https://projekte.sueddeutsche.de/artikel/politik/bundestag-diese-abgeordneten-fehlen-e291979/. Significantly, the categories 'workers' and 'poorer' were not surveyed at all in this evaluation, but it can be assumed that, as in other countries, these are extremely rarely represented (Carnes 2016).

educated and working people with low or medium incomes) have long had the - justified - impression that politics in the 'real existing' democracy is systematically to their disadvantage, and this is increasingly unaffected by election results and whether center-right or center-left governments are in power. In the face of the ruling 'bloc bourgeois', so-called 'ordinary' people see fewer and fewer opportunities to exert influence, so that they often stay away from elections or participation in parties and migrate to right-wing authoritarian protest parties. The latter are characteristically classified as 'populist' by the academic elites in politics, the media and social science, with 'populist' rhetoric being "simplistic" or "under-complex", "personalizing", "emotionalizing", "scandalizing" and characterized by "Manichean thinking" ("good-evil" or "black-and-white") (Zick, Küpper, and Berghan 2019, 178). In this way, however, the elites and the political center only present themselves as 'reasonable' and tend to label large parts of the people or the 'populus' as a stupid, emotion-driven rabble, which in turn confirms those who are thus reviled. This fails to recognize that 'populist' agitation, however distorted, false or reprehensible it may be, works because it meets a need of those it addresses that is not taken into account by the other parties (Decker and Brähler 2018, 31). The condemnation of 'right-wing populism' thus obscures the causes and the growing erosion of democracy, with a 'neo-liberal' policy of a 'new center' à la Blair or Schröder, also followed by the 'Brahmanical left', with the thesis of the end of class society or 'right-left opposites' and a promotion of social inequality (Mouffe 2018). The erosion of democracy and the rise of 'populism' is due not least to the increasing tendency towards technocracy, whereby unpopular political decisions and 'reforms' (from Thatcher to Schröder or Merkel) have been pushed through as supposedly 'without alternative' in the face of crisis constructs and scenarios such as global location competition or 'demographic change' (Séville 2017). The technocratic-authoritarian temptation has come to a head since the so-called 'corona crisis' in 2020, with initial comparative analyses showing that the authoritarian tendencies that grew enormously during this crisis were all the stronger in those countries where the quality of democracy had already deteriorated or eroded beforehand (Engler et al. 2021). See the further article "Crisis policy - On the road to authoritarian technocracy".

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