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Resilience of democracies: responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges

Wolfgang Merkel^{a*} and Anne Lührmann^b

Introduction

Illiberalism and authoritarianism have become major threats to democracy across the world. In the wake of this global development, the literature on the challenges, erosion, decline, and crisis of democracy has greatly proliferated.¹ These contributions differ in their analyses of the causes and consequences, but they make one common observation: the main contemporary challenge to democracy is its gradual demise after illiberal or authoritarian-leaning political leaders come to power in elections and aggrandize their prerogatives at the cost of parliaments and independent judiciaries.² We denote here “authoritarian” actors as being those that are openly in opposition to the democratic regime. Their intention is to transform democracy into some sort of autocracy. In established democracies, illiberal or “semi-loyal”³ actors who are not fully committed to the norms and institutions within democracies that constrain the executive and enforce civil liberties and the rule of law within democracy are more common.⁴ Though they might not attack the electoral regime as such, they often try to dismantle the liberal dimensions of the democratic regime.⁵ Often they do not follow a strategic masterplan, but the sum of their decisions and their style of governance leads to defective democracies, that is, those with increasingly illiberal characteristics.⁶ However, if the illiberal virus persists long enough, it transforms the liberal dimension, polarizes the political space, and may affect the institutional core of democracies as well. This results in a further step from a liberal democratic towards an autocratic regime.

In fact, opinion surveys and polls suggest that citizens’ trust in core democratic institutions such as parliaments and governments has declined in many western societies.⁷ Fewer citizens in established democracies trust those institutions they can vote for (parties, parliaments, governments) than those institutions that they cannot vote for, such as the military, judiciary, bureaucracy.⁸ This might indicate citizens’ preferences towards technocratic governance, rapid top-down decisions and expertise and a shift away from pluralistic competition and parliamentary deliberation. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has fostered a technocratic turn when most of the



executives in democracies used executive decrees and emergency rules.⁹ Yet, we wholeheartedly agree with Adam Przeworski that “one should not draw inferences about the survival of democracy from answers to survey questions”.¹⁰ In Western Europe for instance, there is a peculiar tension between the worrying survey results on trust in majoritarian institutions and the actual robustness and resilience of democracies, which continue to be strong, and unambiguously democratic political parties still win elections with wide margins.¹¹ One reason for this might be that support for democratic norms and values is still at high levels but trust in specific democratic institutions such as political parties and parliament is declining or simply very low.

Conceptualizing democratic resilience

We define democracies as political regimes that were established in free and fair multiparty elections taking place in a context where freedom of speech, association, and universal suffrage were guaranteed.¹² However, *liberal* democracies need more: their survival and quality depend also on institutionalized checks and balances that check the power of those who govern.¹³ The well constitutionalized horizontal accountability of such democracies is particularly relevant in times when the challenges and assaults on democracy are coming from within, often from democratically elected executives, presidents and prime ministers alike.¹⁴

Autocratization denotes a relevant decline of democratic regime attributes that may – but do not have to – result in democratic breakdown.¹⁵ Though “autocratization” describes political regime developments on a continuum from democracy to autocracy, it can start from and stop at any point on the regime continuum. In their comprehensive conceptualization of autocratization, Maerz et al. included two different starting zones on the regime continuum. They use the term “democratic regression” for autocratization that occurs within the limits of democracy; and call it “autocratic regression” when some remaining democratic traits decline within the demarcation lines of autocratic regimes and move closer to the autocratic end of the regime continuum.¹⁶ If such processes start and end in democracies with lower democratic quality, they are often termed “democratic erosion”.¹⁷ If they are less liberal, individual and minority rights are restricted, and checks and balances do not work satisfactorily anymore, those regimes can be called “electoral”

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or “defective democracies”.¹⁸ If democratic erosion does not come to a halt on the slippery slope of de-democratization, “democratic breakdown” could be the consequence.¹⁹

Autocratization is not a historically new phenomenon – there have been prior waves of autocratization in the twentieth century.²⁰ The current “third wave of autocratization” started – slowly but surely – more than a quarter of a century ago.²¹ As historical and contemporary cases of autocratization demonstrate, autocratization can be stopped in each phase and point in time. Nevertheless, the more advanced it has become before it is stopped, the more difficult it will be to return to the democratic status quo ante. The sooner it can be stopped, the more likely democratic continuity will be.

Little scholarly attention has been devoted to the issue of democratic resilience in the current period of democratic uncertainty, but the issue will be a decisive one for the quality of democracy and its capacity to survive, both in the present and in the future. While one finds abundant literature on “erosion”, “decline”, “de-democratization”, “de-consolidation” of democracy and the like, it is hard to find studies that analyse the resilience of democracy since 2010. An early exception is a 1999 *Democratization* special issue edited by Burnell and Calvert.²² Further, Costa Pinto and Teixeira argue that most aspects of democracy in Portugal have stayed resilient after the 2008 financial crisis.²³ Cornell, Møller and Skaaning analysed sources of democratic resilience in Northwest Europe during the 1920s-1930s.²⁴ Additional case studies of good democratic performers such as the Nordic countries, Switzerland, Costa Rica or Canada are largely missing. The dominant inquiry has always been about democratic decline and its causes. In a recent issue of *Democratization*, mainly on regression of democracy, the contributions of Larry Diamond and Ding and Slater²⁵ hint at some point to the “resilience” of democracy but without spelling the notion out conceptually.

The few extant explicit treatments of democratic resilience in political science tend to define democratic resilience as commitment to democratic norms and values. For instance, Burnell and Calvert view democratic resilience as an “attachment to democratic ideals (...), in spite of hostility from the officially prescribed values and norms and apparent indifference from many elements in society”.²⁶ In a book on Japan’s foreign policy, Teo defines democratic resilience as: “Japanese people’s regard for the constitution and democracy”.²⁷ In a broader perspective, Guasti conceptualizes democratic resilience as “the ability of the institutional

guardrails and civil society to withstand the attempts of technocratic populists to erode accountability.”²⁸

In a physical sense, resilience means “the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress [; and] an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change”.²⁹ There is no consensus across the sciences on what resilience means. In psychology, resilience means “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress”.³⁰ In engineering and architecture, resilience is defined by the “the ability of a building, facility, or community to both prevent damage and to recover from damage”.³¹ The closeness of that technical understanding to organization theory, where resilience is defined as the ability of a system “to withstand changes in its environment and still function”³², is not surprising; in urban planning, resilience means the “ability (...) to maintain or rapidly return to desired functions in the face of a disturbance, to adapt to change, and to quickly transform systems that limit current or future adaptive capacity”.³³ Taking these insights from across the sciences and transferring them to the context of political regimes, one can define democratic resilience as follows: *Democratic resilience is the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to challenges without losing its democratic character.*

Nevertheless, definitions are still a long way from being analytical concepts or usable “focused theory frames”³⁴ that allow us to reduce the complex real world of existing phenomena, order them into types or classes, and to formulate assumptions about the causal powers the core dimensions have when they interact with the outside world.³⁵ From a functionalist point of view³⁶, one can distinguish three possible reactions of political regimes to internal and external challenges³⁷:

- (1) The first stresses the ability to withstand without (major) changes.
- (2) The second emphasizes the ability to adapt through internal changes.
- (3) The third adds the ability to recover after initial damage and disorder.

These three “abilities” of resilience are neither *all* required by a democracy in order to be resilient nor are they mutually exclusive; rather they can coexist in various constellations. But they are

useful as the “functionalist” building blocks for constructing a “usable” concept of democratic resilience.

However, the functionalist perspective, i.e. the ability to withstand, adapt, or recover, is only one constitutive element of democratic resilience – but not a sufficient one. It has to be complemented by two additional constitutive dimensions, namely structural and actor-centred perspectives.³⁸ First, we need to scrutinize those rules and institutions which are relevant for the survival and democratic quality of the regime, in particular the institutional relationships between the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. Here we do not have to “re-invent the wheel”. The debate on the “perils and virtues” of presidential and parliamentary regimes by Juan Linz and its critics³⁹ is a useful foundation on which to build.

Second, below those macro-institutions, we should scrutinize the level of the most relevant political actors, namely political parties: Do democratic, semi-democratic or undemocratic parties structure political competition? The more semi- or undemocratic parties impact race and relevant policies, the higher is the centrifugal dynamic of the party system⁴⁰ and the lower is democratic resilience; the more democratic parties and actors dominate the competitive dynamic of the party system, the more resilient is democracy.

Below the level of constitutional powers and political parties there is a third level, namely civic culture and civil society. Citizens’ attitudes and behaviours are also relevant for democratic resilience. The more widespread and anchored democratic values and attitudes are in a society and the more vital and active civil society is, the more immune is democracy to external shocks and external challenges. In the famous chapter on “mores” in his “Democracy in America”, Tocqueville argued that “mores”, seen as the internalization of democratic norms into the collective consciousness of a society, may serve as a bulwark against non-democratic tendencies.⁴¹ As Maletz points out “[t]hese mores, if adapted to new conditions, may help to support effective democratic practice”.⁴² The deeper democratic principles are rooted in the traditions and mores of a society, the better they translate into open, participatory and effective institutions. The more stable the consensus among elites to play by the basic democratic rules of the political game and the fairer the policy output and outcomes of political decisions are perceived to be by the citizens, the more resilient a democratic regime will be. If such a consensus has waned as in the United States during the Trump era; all depends on whether the institutions are strong enough to absorb the undemocratic behaviour of powerful political actors.

The fourth and most fundamental level concerns the political community of citizens.⁴³ The more cohesive, the less unequal, conflictual and polarized the political community is, the easier it will be for political elites to accept compromises and play by the constitutional rules of democracy. Polarization increases and cleavages deepen the more citizens' common sense of belong evaporates and political communities are jeopardized. To modify Barrington Moore's famous saying: no political community, no democracy.

If we take into account the different structures and actors and their relative ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from challenges and turbulences, we may understand the internal dynamic within a democratic regime better. As an example: if the particular inability and unwillingness of a government to play by the rules can be countered by a strong parliament or an independent and "resilient" judiciary, the executive's attempt to aggrandize its power might be stopped and neutralized right in an initial phase. If the parliament is controlled by the government and does not oppose "executive aggrandizement"⁴⁴ beyond the constitutional constraints, and the judiciary is packed by government partisans, the virus of autocratization might spread fast through politics and society and erode democratic resilience on several or all four levels. Boese et al.⁴⁵ distinguish in their contribution to this special issue between *onset resilience* and *breakdown resilience*. *Onset resilience* means that democratic regimes resist episodes of autocratization right from the beginning. *Breakdown resilience* describes the potential of a democracy already on the slippery slope of autocratization to resist regime breakdown. The authors call this a "two stage concept of democratic resilience". Their empirical studies show that legislative constraints in particular prevent the executive from engaging in undemocratic aggrandizement, whereas it is the autonomous power of the judiciary that strengthens the resilience against breakdown considerably.

The two-stage concept of democratic resilience can be insightfully applied in large n-analyses. The four-level approach above is particularly applicable to case studies and small n-comparisons where the interactions on each and between the four levels can be observed. The two-stage concept reveals correlation patterns between the particular democratic resilience of specific forms of accountability in specific stages of regime development. The "four-level approach" (see previous section: constitutional powers, political parties, civil society, political community) can trace the virus of autocratization through the different levels of the democratic regimes, can identify the most vulnerable or resilient parts of it, and can discover its main drivers and opponents among the political actors. It is the sum of interdependencies between actors

(elites and masses, democrats and antidemocrats) and the functioning of institutions that determine the overall resilience of a democracy. Moreover, it allows us to recognize who the challengers to democracy are and the strong sources of democratic resilience. Both seem to us to be essential for pro-democratic interventions in turbulent times. The concept of resilience understood as a “focused theory frame”⁴⁶ amplified by functions, structures and actors can now fully be defined as follows.

A structural-functionalist concept of resilience

Democratic resilience is the ability of a democratic system, its institutions, political actors, and citizens to prevent or react to external and internal challenges, stresses, and assaults through one or more of the three potential reactions: to withstand without changes, to adapt through internal changes, and to recover without losing the democratic character of its regime and its constitutive core institutions, organizations, and processes. The more resilient democracies are on all four levels of the political system (political community, institutions, actors, citizens) the less vulnerable they turn out to be in the present and future.

From an aggregated statistics point of view (e.g. the V-Dem data set), one can argue that democracies are resilient if they manage to preserve the same or a similar level of democratic quality overall and in each of their core dimensions when faced with severe challenges. The same level of quality, however, does not necessarily mean the same processes, institutions, and actors.⁴⁷ On the contrary, we can assume that most democracies have to transform and adapt their traditional processes and strategies to changed and changing environments in order to fulfil their democratic functions designed by their respective constitutions.⁴⁸ We emphasize that practices, procedures, and even institutions have to adapt to keep the democratic quality of the political regime as a whole. The same does not apply to democratic principles such as individual liberty, popular sovereignty, equal political rights, and constitutional checks and balances as such. Institutions, procedures, and actors may change, but the core principles of democracy have to remain the same. Otherwise, democracy moves down the slippery slope of autocratization.

Moreover, political regimes should not simply adapt to external changes; they should also preventively shape their external environment in order to safeguard the invariant core of democratic principles and thus minimize present and future challenges. A democracy’s economic,

social, and politico-institutional preventive capacity is causal to its overall resilience. It is not only about institutions and actors but also about the regime's policy performance, which either strengthens or weakens the legitimacy of a (democratic) regime. Knowing that, the erosion of democracy can be seen as the mirror image of consolidating resilience. Several contributions to the special issue (e.g. Boese et al. and Welzel) confirm different versions of modernization theory from Lipset through Przeworski to Inglehart, Norris, and Welzel – that the level of socio-economic development in a democracy – directly or through its mobilization of cognitive resources – can serve as a bulwark for *onset resilience* and economic growth against the danger of regime breakdown.

Erosion is not inevitable

The erosion of democracy can be prevented or stopped by democratic resilience, which in turn can be constructed and strengthened through intelligent democratic reforms. There are multiple entry points to intervene and strengthen single elements and thereby the whole of the democracy. To explore those entry points, develop intervention strategies, and to evaluate their resilience effects on working democracies is a major new research field for countering the present challenges most democracies are facing.

In previous sections, we sketched the general elements of the concept of democratic resilience. We ought to clarify what the central internal factors and external preconditions of democratic resilience are, though the contributions in this special issue discuss in more detail how specific structures, processes, actors, policies and (un)democratic outcomes of the democratic system as a whole interact in specific circumstances at a certain point in time. A recent example, which is affecting all democracies, is the COVID-19 pandemic. Some governments have used the pandemic as an excuse to disproportionately limit democratic rights and freedoms in violation of international standards for emergency responses. Such “pandemic backsliding” has mainly affected countries with an already weak democratic systems such as El Salvador and Sri Lanka.⁴⁹ Many democratic governments have reacted to the pandemic by accelerating their processes of authoritative decision-making and diminishing the parliament's involvement in order to fight the pandemic effectively as it has been the case in well-established

democracies such as France, Germany, and Austria. Those measures were based on scientific advice from virologists, epidemiologists and public health experts. They were guided by the moral goal of saving human lives in most countries. The goal is understandable, but the concrete measures have temporarily limited individual rights and marginalized parliamentary legislation and control. Thus, even in well-established democracies emergency policies cause some democratic limitations, at least temporarily. First, they accelerate the already latent power shift from the legislature to the executive. Parliaments, the institutional core of representative democracies, were often degraded to ex post rubber stamping institutions after the decision was already made by the executive. It was the hour of the executive, where medical safety trumped political liberties.⁵⁰ Second, to contain the spread of the virus, democratically elected governments applied emergency powers and legislation, which temporarily limited basic human rights in particular the freedom of movement and the free exercise of profession.⁵¹ Third, such emergency measures were typically accepted by parts of the parliamentary opposition in 2020. Fourth, the majority of the people (the represented) accepted the emergency policies albeit with shrinking margins as the crisis went on in 2021.

The political response to the pandemic shows how institutions, actors, procedures, and the public is interdependently connected to each other. Moreover, it provides an inside view on how the democratic quality of governance may decrease in deep crises with majoritarian consent – even in well-established democracies. That certainly does not mean that we can identify a script for “how democracies die”⁵², since well-established democracies do have sufficient resilience even in times of emergency politics. Immediately after the pandemic, the time for “resilient recovery” has to come. But it may also be too optimistic to assume that all democracies simply turn the switch back to the status quo before the crisis at the end of 2019. It remains to be seen how fast political actors (especially in the executive), institutions, and the people can “forget” those emergency practices and recover, turning back towards the high standards of working liberal democracies.

On the one hand, there remains the danger of a “*ratchet effect*” of measures and policies implemented by governments during COVID-19, meaning that they be hard to undo after the pandemic abates. Even though some measures to surveil citizens appear to be legitimately needed to protect the public from COVID-19 today, they are prone to misuse by authorities in the future.⁵³ On the other hand, the standards for democratically acceptable and legitimate practices

of governance during man-made disasters might shift permanently. What is legitimate during the Corona crisis may also seem justifiable during other deep crises, such as global warming. The damage to democracy may then be minimized as acceptable collateral damage of governance in a permanent state of crisis.

On the way back to working democracies in “normal” times the third dimension of resilience, namely “recovery” will be called upon.

The contributions to this special issue

The contributions to the special issue address the themes of democratic erosion and democratic resilience from various perspectives. Vanessa A. Boese and her co-authors investigate the resilience of democracy since 1900. They define democratic resilience in a minimalist way as the ability to prevent substantial regression in the quality of democratic institutions and practices. They differentiate between “*onset resilience*” and “*breakdown resilience*” and position it in a “two-stage concept of democratic resilience”. The two-stage concept allows for interesting new insights into the specific impact of resilience at different stages of regime transformation. Over the period of almost 120 years, onset resilience, i.e. the ability of a democracy to withstand significant erosion, turned out to be rather high. Nevertheless, the worrisome finding is that democratic resilience weakened after 1989 when new democracies emerged from the collapsed Soviet Union. Compared to *onset resilience*, the second stage, i.e. *breakdown resilience*, proved to be much weaker since 1900. The authors test the impact of the classical determinants of regime development such as economic factors, neighbourhood effects, and previous democratic experience, thereby confirming many of the findings of the previous consolidation literature.⁵⁴ But the very new finding is that a strong legislature is important for safeguarding democracy and providing *onset resilience*, where the judicial control works as “democracy’s last line of defence” against breakdown,⁵⁵ fighting against autocratizers in the executive. It is interesting to note that this runs to some extent counter to what we know about the *onset resilience* of a democracy during the COVID-19 crisis when it was above all the judiciary that controlled the executive much more effectively than the parliament, which accepted many of the emergency decisions of

the government. This happened in Germany alone more than 150 times during the first year of the pandemic.

Melis G. Laebens and Anna Lührmann take up the question of what can stop democratic erosion and relate it to different spheres of accountability conceived as the institutional core of democratic resilience. Building on earlier works, their analysis distinguishes between three types of accountability: vertical, diagonal, and horizontal. All three types can impact a democracy's fate on their own, but they are more powerful the more they act jointly and simultaneously. As the two authors argue, incumbents are afraid to be voted out of power. That fear sometimes constrains their autocratic ambitions of governments. Protest, unrest, or an organized "monitory civil society"⁵⁶ may also prevent or stop the autocratic ambitions of the incumbents. They make clandestine autocratization apparent to a wider public. Independent media play an important role; that is why the first actions of autocratizers are often directed against non-governmental organizations and the media. The judiciary can stop repressive policies against the independence of the media and punish autocratizers for corruption. A strong parliamentary opposition challenges the power aggrandizement of the executive and makes it apparent to the citizens. Based on a comparison of three dissimilar cases and constructed analytic narratives of severe episodes of democratic erosion Laebens and Lührmann's analysis suggest that accountability mechanism may prevent the breakdown of democracy if institutional constraints work together with civil society. They constitute an effective bulwark against democratic breakdown particularly if contextual factors change in disfavour of the incumbent – for example due to economic crisis and corruption scandals.

Murat Somer, Jennifer McCoy and Russell Luke focus on one of the major shortfalls of contemporaneous democracies: polarization, or more precisely "pernicious polarization". Accepting that some polarization inextricably exists and may even be necessary in pluralist democracies and unequal capitalist societies, the three authors claim that democratic polarization transforms into toxic or pernicious polarization when the political interplay between opponents transforms into a political war between "Us and Them" and political opponents become enemies. That is what Carl Schmitt conceived as the essence of "the political". Almost one century later, at the beginning of the 2020s, Somer, McCoy and Luke claim that polarization – especially severe *levels* of sustained polarization rather than temporary surges in the *rate* of polarization – mostly fosters trends towards the decline of liberal democracy and benefits the radical actors in politics

and society. However, the three authors go beyond the empirical confirmation of that trend and ask which strategies in the conflict between incumbents and opposition lead to polarization or can trigger the opposite, namely depolarization. They identify an “endogenous explanation of polarization” and strategic ways to escape the pernicious dynamic of increasing polarization. Agency matters, according to the authors. Democratic resilience depends considerably on what kind of polarizing or de-polarizing strategies political oppositions employ against the incumbent autocratizers, and how. Depolarizing strategies might avoid the “pitfalls of pernicious polarization-cum-autocratization”.⁵⁷ More importantly, it matters whether actors employ generative, rather than preservative, strategies, shifting the axis of politics to new issues and cleavages that weaken the basis of polarizing politics. Thus, regenerative strategies of “active-depolarizing” and “transformative-repolarizing” strategies are most promising “to improve a country’s resilience to autocratizing pressures”.⁵⁸ Hence, the authors go beyond the level of pure (analytical) description and dare to move into the sphere of prescription providing analysts and political elites with a set of strategies and tools to use against pernicious polarization. Similar to Boese et al. and Laebens and Lührmann, Somer, McCoy and Luke consider those tools and strategies to be determined by time and timing. Tools and strategies have to be contextualized to the phase of democratic erosion. If, for example, the erosion of democracy has progressed and the checks and balances of parliament and the courts do not have the de facto constitutional power or perceived legitimacy to prevent the illegal aggrandizement of power by the executive, then the combination of oppositional mobilization and protest in the streets (or at the workplace) with concerted opposition during electoral campaigns may stop even seemingly unassailable incumbents from further autocratization.

But who are the most pernicious actors driving polarization in Europe, the US, India, Turkey, and parts of Latin America? Populism, mostly right-wing populism, represents powerfully the *Zeitgeist* of polarization and propagates politics as a political zero-sum game between *Friends and Foes* or *Them and Us*. Carlos Meléndez and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser analyse the emergence and the potential limits of the new radical populist key players in gaining majoritarian support from the voters. In order to balance the autocratizing power of the populist radical right (PRR) against the resilience of democracy, the authors follow a rather new approach in party research. They do not focus primarily on the voters and sympathizers of the PRR (positive partisanship), but on those citizens who wholeheartedly reject them, called negative

partisanship. Negative partisanship implies a deeply anchored antipathy and rejection of the populist radical right. It is combined with the conviction of individual voters that they cannot imagine ever voting for any party of the PRR. To investigate those forms of partisanship, the two authors have chosen the empirical sample of 10 Western European countries. Their findings show that on average around 10% of citizens in those Western European democracies have a clear positive partisanship in relation to the PRR, in part due to its illiberal leanings and in part due to its open authoritarian values and attitudes. But what is the ceiling of electoral support for the PRR? Can those parties extend their electoral influence significantly? Rovira Kaltwasser and Meléndez are sceptical. They hint at approximately 50% of voters with a marked negative partisanship in relation to the PRR. Moreover, that negative partisanship is accompanied by a positive identification with liberal democracy and the defense of immigration, European integration, and minority rights. At least for the moment, these empirical facts call for a less ubiquitous alarmist attitude to the challenge of the PRR to democracy in the public discourse in Western Europe.⁵⁹ They maintain that activating and mobilizing negative partisanship towards the PRR is an important remedy to limit the electoral growth of this party family. Another idea for an institutional remedy for stabilizing or even lowering the ceiling for the PRR could be compulsory voting. It would not only diminish the relative percentage of the PRR vote since the radical right mobilizes their voters much more efficiently than centre parties, but also counter the undemocratic underrepresentation of the lower classes.

After analysing the erosion and resilience of democracy on the macro-level of institutions and the meso-level of political actors, the micro-level of individual behaviour and democratic learning is still missing. Steven Finkel and Junghyun Lim are filling this gap. Their research question goes to a core desideratum of sustainable resilience when they ask: “Can democratic orientations and political participation in fragile democracies be fostered through civic education?” If this were the case, then we would have found one major piece of the puzzle of self-reproducing democratic resilience. The authors report that early work ascribed the generally positive effects to civic education, whereas more recent work has become increasingly sceptical. They set up an experiment in the Democratic Republic of Congo to try to get insight into the question in a field experiment. The results to some extent reproduce the assumptions and findings of the older and more recent research. On the one hand, the experiment shows a negative effect of civic education on support for decentralization and individuals’ satisfaction with democracy. On

the other hand, the participants in the experiment displayed positive democratic effects in the form of non-electoral participation and “democratic orientations such as knowledge, efficacy, and political tolerance”. In times where we observe “pernicious polarization” in many democracies (cf. Somer, McCoy and Luke in this issue), an increase in political tolerance appears to be key to democratic resilience. Accordingly, Finkel and Lim conclude that “civic education programs continue to have the potential to deepen democratic engagement and values, even in fragile or backsliding democratic settings” (Finkel and Lim in this issue). This is a hopeful message for democracies in challenging times: civic education may enhance democratic resilience even under unlikely circumstances.

Cristian Welzel is also optimistic with regard to the future of democracy in his contribution. His research is firmly rooted in modernization theory ranging from Seymour Martin Lipset to Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris. But Welzel gives his approach his own special twist. It is not simply economic development, but more specifically the steady increase of “emancipative values” which speaks for the resilience of a democracy, at least in the long run. Against the *Zeitgeist* of current research on democratic backsliding, he criticizes much of the “democracy-in-crisis-literature” as being negligent about the cultural foundations of autocracy versus democracy. He argues that the country’s membership in higher and lower emancipative “culture zones” explains about 70% of the global variation in autocracy versus democracy. And he affirms that this variation remained highly stable over time. According to Welzel, democratic backsliding is overwhelmingly limited to countries with low levels of emancipative values. The author emphasizes that the prospects for democracy depend on the further development of emancipative values among the citizens of a country. At least in the long run, there are good reasons to be optimistic. Nevertheless, the author concedes that there can be democratic backsliding in the short run. But seen from the perspective of the ascendant emancipative development as a generational profile, Welzel argues that the current episode of democratic erosion will stand out “as a temporary downward cycle (rather) than a lasting downward trajectory” (Welzel in this issue).

Not all authors in this issue would subscribe to this strong optimism. They have based their analyses not on long-term cultural perspectives, but on rather short-term observations with a strong leaning towards neo-institutionalist approaches. They emphasize political actors and actions. The contributors see the challenges of democratic erosion and take them seriously, but

they do not join the chorus intoning the inevitable crisis in democracy almost everywhere. On the contrary, almost all of the contributions diagnose erosions, but they also see and propose ways out of democracy's malaise. The message is that political agency matters. At least in the more developed democracies, most of the institutions and political agents are more prone to democracy than to autocracy. There is a spirit of reasonable, well-grounded, but cautious optimism that connects the contributions of this special issue. The more we know about democratic resilience, the more we can advise politics how to strengthen it.

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Notes

¹ See for example, Merkel and Kneip, “Introduction”, “Conclusion”; Lührmann and Lindberg, “A third Wave of Autocratization is here”; Diamond, *Ill Winds*; Mounck, *The People vs Democracy*; Urbinati, *Democracy Dified*; Svobik, “Polarization versus Democracy”; Keane, *The New Despotisms*; Maerz et al. “State of the world 2020”; Diamond, “Democratic regression in comparative perspective”.

² E.g. Bermeo, “Reflections”; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

³ Linz, *The Breakdown*.

⁴ Lührmann and Hellmeier, “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus.”

⁵ See for example Merkel and Kneip, “Democracy and Crisis”; Mounck, *The People vs Democracy*; Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave.”

⁶ Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies.”; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

⁷ Based on Eurobarometer data, Merkel and Krause show an average decline in trust in governments and parliaments in Europe between 1994 and 2013. Petrarca, Sanhueza and Weßels point out that while trust decreased somewhat at the end of the 2000s, there is no “common” pattern of decline in Europe in trust in parliaments and parties until 2018 using the Eurobarometer and GovElec data; see Merkel and Krause, “Krise der Demokratie?” 59. Petrarca, Sanhueza and Weßels, “Support for Insider,” 8.

⁸ For Europe see Merkel and Krause, “Krise der Demokratie?” 59; for other OECD countries see: Schäfer and Zürn, “Demokratische Regression,” 105.

⁹ Merkel, “Who Governs in Deep Crisis?”

¹⁰ Przeworski, *Crisis of Democracy*, 102.

¹¹ Merkel and Kneip, “Democracy and Crisis”; Maerz, et al., “State of the World”; Morlino et al., “What Is the Impact of the Economic Crisis on Democracy?”, 618.

¹² See Dahl, “A Preface to Democratic Theory”; Dahl, “Polyarchy”; Lührmann et al., “Regimes of the World”.

¹³ See for example O’Donnell, “Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies”; Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies”.

¹⁴ See for example Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Keane, “The New Despotisms”.

¹⁵ Lührmann and Lindberg, „A Third Wave“; Maerz et al., “Understanding Regime Transformation”.

¹⁶ Maerz et al., “Understanding Regime Transformation”, 7.

¹⁷ See Laebens and Lührmann, “Halting Erosion“.

¹⁸ Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies”.

¹⁹ Such a process from a liberal democracy to a closed autocracy can occur in a rather short period of time is historically shown in the last years of the Weimar Republic by the erosion (1929 - 1932) and breakdown (1933) of (liberal) democracy, followed by the closing of its autocratic regime in 1934. Classical on democratic breakdown is Linz, *Breakdown*.

²⁰ Huntington, *The Third Wave*, 17.

²¹ Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave”.

²² Burnell and Calvert, “The Resilience of Democracy.”

²³ Costa Pinto and Teixeira, “Portugal before and after.”

²⁴ Cornell, Møller, and Skaaning, *Democratic Stability in an Age of Crisis*.

²⁵ Diamond, “Democratic Regression”; Dinng and Slater, “Democratic Decoupling.”

²⁶ Burnell and Calvert, “The Resilience of Democracy,” 4.

²⁷ Teo, *Japan’s Arduous Rejuvenation*, 23.

²⁸ Guasti, “Populism in Power and Democracy,” 476.

²⁹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience>

³⁰ American Psychological Association. 2014. *The road to resilience*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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- ³¹ American Institute of Architects. 2016. *Architectural Graphic Standards*, 12th Edition. New York, John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- ³² McCarthy et al, “Adaptive organizational resilience,” 33.
- ³³ Meerow et al., “Defining urban resilience,” 39.
- ³⁴ Rueschemeyer, *Usable Theory*, 29.
- ³⁵ Goertz, *Social Science Concept*, 28.
- ³⁶ Easton, *System Analysis*. 1965.
- ³⁷ On the distinction between exogenous and endogenous threats to regime stability see also Gerschewski, “Explanations of Institutional Change.” Many contemporary challenges to regime stability come from actors, which are within the regime itself (e.g. elected executives undermining media freedom).
- ³⁸ Scharpf, *Games Real Actors Play*.
- ³⁹ Linz “Perils”; Linz “Virtues”; Linz and Stepan “Problems”; Przeworski et al. 2000, “Democratic Development”; Nohlen “El Contexto”; Cheibub et al. “Beyond presidentialism”.
- ⁴⁰ Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems*.
- ⁴¹ Tocqueville, *Amerika*, 183
- ⁴² Maletz, “Tocqueville on Mores and the Preservation of Republics,” 1.
- ⁴³ Easton, “A Systems Analysis.”
- ⁴⁴ Bermeo, “Democratic Backsliding.”
- ⁴⁵ Boese et al., “How Democracies Prevail.”
- ⁴⁶ Rueschemeyer, *Usable Theory*, 28
- ⁴⁷ This is due to democracy being multi-dimensional. A given level of democracy can reflect a wide variety of configurations of institutions, actors etc. See Boese et al. “Visualizing Authority Patterns.”
- ⁴⁸ See: Lührmann, “Conclusion” in this issue.
- ⁴⁹ Kolvani et al. “Pandemic backsliding.”
- ⁵⁰ Merkel, “Who governs in deep crisis.”
- ⁵¹ The time we are writing this is the end of March 2021. In most democracies, some sort of emergency measures still remain in place.
- ⁵² Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.
- ⁵³ Smith and Cheeseman, “Authoritarians are exploiting the Corona virus.”
- ⁵⁴ See for example Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*; Merkel, “Consolidation”; Morlino, *Democracy between Consolidation and Crisis*; Morlino; “Democratic Consolidation.”
- ⁵⁵ See Boese et al. in this issue.
- ⁵⁶ Keane, “Monitory Democracy?”, 212.
- ⁵⁷ Somer, McCoy and Luke in this issue.
- ⁵⁸ Somer, McCoy and Luke in this issue.
- ⁵⁹ There are hints that the assault of right and left-wing populism on liberal democracy is more frequent and successful in presidential systems in North and Latin America.