Abstract: Political theory from its very onset has determined that democracy is inconceivable without a crisis. This applies to the ancient writings of Plato, Aristotle, Polybios to the modern era with writings of Tocqueville, Marx and Max Weber or since the 1970s the leftists Jürgen Habermas (1973) and Claus Offe (1972), the conservative Crozier, Huntington, Watanuki (1975), the leftist Neo-Schmittian Chantal Mouffe (2000), or Colin Crouch (2004). The message from political theory, from left to right has been clear: Yes, democracy is in crisis. Empirical research is much more cautious. Most empirical research denies a wholesale crisis of democracy. Pippa Norris is talking about “trendless fluctuation in system support.” Both groups of political scientists hesitate to explain exactly what “crisis” means.

The paper tries to develop analytically meaningful concepts of democracy and crisis, identifies the major challenges to democracy and presents preliminary results from a research project which has evaluated the negative and positive developments of well-established democracies during the last 30 years. The research results include expert judgments (democracy index), Population surveys (subjective dimension) and partial analyses of single institutions, organizations, and procedures of democracy. While single dimensions of democracy are facing major problems, others have been improved. In sum: There is no systematic evidence that democracy’s quality has declined over the last decades nor that we can meaningfully speak of a crisis of democracy.
Wolfgang Merkel

Introduction

There is no other concept in political and social sciences that has acquired as much notoriety as the word “crisis:” Crisis of the welfare state, crisis of political parties, crisis of parliament, Euro crisis, crisis in the Middle East, crisis of dictatorships and the ever recurring crisis of democracy.

There are three major debates on the crisis of democracy. First, there is a public discourse. Here, one opinion seems to prevail, at least on the European continent, which holds that individual aspects of the crisis such as the crisis of trust in political elites, political parties, parliaments and governments all together accumulate into a general “crisis of democracy.” Although removed from the mainstream discourse of public media, political theory from its very onset has determined that democracy is inconceivable without a crisis. This applies to the ancient writings of Plato, Aristotle, Polybios (Meier 2004; Keane 2009; Held 1996: 13ff.), goes through the early modern age with Thomas Hobbes, and reaches the beginning of the modern era with writings of Tocqueville, Marx and Max Weber (see Schmidt 2008). The crisis debate gained a new momentum from the 1970s onwards: It took off with the leftists Jürgen Habermas (1973) and Claus Offe (1972) and the conservative Crozier, Huntington, Watanuki (1975) and arrived at the new millennium with the Neo-Schmittian Chantal Mouffe (2000), or Colin Crouch (2004) who precipitated the Europe-wide debate on “post-democracy.” The message from left to right has been clear: Yes, democracy is in a crisis. It has been based on their own normative ideals like, the alleged sunken Golden Age of democracy. However, the empirical research on democracy is more cautious. Even though it concedes that partial challenges and problems of democracy exist, e.g., Russell J. Dalton (2008) notes a decreasing trust in political authorities or dissatisfaction among democrats, or Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam (2000) speak of a weakened performance of democratic institutions (ibid: 25ff.). Admittedly, they do not diagnose a crisis of democracy altogether. Pippa Norris (1999, 2011) denies that there is a crisis of trust in democracy; she speaks only of “trendless fluctuations in system support” (Norris 2011: 241). Moreover, if at all a rather harmless “democratic deficit” existed, it would be due to a combination of rising expectations of increasingly critical citizens, negative media reports and a subjective perception of the weak performance of democratic governments.

Is the crisis of democracy an invention of theoretically complex but empirically ignorant theorists, who usually adhere to an excessively normative ideal of democracy? Or are empirical analyses confined to partial diagnostics, and are being satisfied with a positivist “superficiality” of survey data and vote analysis without being able to recognize the deeper causes and crisis phenomena that arise from cumulative interdependence of individual crisis occurrences?

The question of the crisis of democracy cannot be answered without combining theory and empirical analysis and clarifying what is meant by “democracy” and “crisis.” The answer to the crisis question is largely contingent on the content and contours attributed to these two central concepts. I will address the question by the following steps:

1. Critical review of three prominent crisis-of-democracy theories
2. Clarifying the two core concepts of democracy and crisis
3. Which research strategies can we apply to investigate whether there is a crisis of democracy?
4. The research strategies and some preliminary empirical results:
   - Democracy Indices (indicators: Experts)
   - Surveys (the subjective dimension: The people)
   - Partial analyses of single partial regimes of democracy (actors, organizations, institutions)
1. Crisis Theories

During the seventies of the twentieth century the crisis debate on democracy has gained new momentum. Jürgen Habermas (1973) and Claus Offe (1972, 1979, 1984) are its most visible representatives both on national and international levels. Barely three years after Habermas and Offe’s writings on legitimation or structural problems in late capitalism, Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington and Joji Watanuki (1975) published an extraordinarily influential report for the Trilateral Commission entitled “Crisis of Democracy,” which dealt with the governability of democracies in Europe, the U.S.A., and Japan.


1.1. Jürgen Habermas: Legitimation crisis in late capitalism

Jürgen Habermas’ “Legitimation Crisis” has influenced the debate about legitimacy of capitalist democracies far beyond Germany and beyond the seventies of the twentieth century. The title of Habermas’s book does not refer to democracy as a regime but to a democratic state in late capitalism. He refers to the four different types of crises, first one concerning the economy (Type 1: Economic Crisis), then the political-administrative system (Type 2: Rationality Crisis), then core institutions of democracy (Type 3: Legitimation Crisis), and finally the individuals and their work ethics (Type 4: Motivational Crisis).

If one looks closely at the four different types of crisis, it is clear that they must be read as a sequence of escalating crises that could lead to an existential threat to democracy. Habermas sees that the legitimation crisis of formal democracy has an exogenous trigger. Following neo-Marxist political economy, he sees the contradictions in capitalist economy as the triggering causes of the legitimation crisis. Economic crises in capitalism are periodical and unavoidable. The state, or more precisely the government, must respond to the economic crisis since special demands are made on the political system in such situation. Those claims have a stronger pronunciation in welfare-state capitalism than liberal capitalist democracies. There, the economic crisis is perceived as a political problem, which the “political-administrative system” has to solve. Government is confronted with a specific dilemma. First, it must improve the conditions for capital accumulation to the extent that investments are profitable again. Second, it has to respond to the increase in the economic and social welfare demands by the citizens. The dilemma was depicted by James O’Connor (1974) as “fiscal scissors” of the late capitalist welfare state: In times of economic recession increased pressures are put on the state to increase spending on unemployment and social security, but due to a rising unemployment, declining investment and declining consumer spending the government has to diminish expendable revenue. If government (the state) does not solve this dilemma quickly, not surprisingly it results in a “crisis of rationality” of the administrative system.

If the rationality crisis lingers on citizens protest (voice) or defect (exit) from democratic institutions and organizations. The mass withdrawal of support leads to the legitimation crisis of the state. Habermas (1975) does little to explicate the concrete mechanisms, but he obviously hints at abstention in general elections, withdrawal from parties, and loss of trust in the state. The output weakness of the political-administrative system turns into an input crisis, which hits the core of the democratic regime. Depending on how strong is the mass retreat of citizens, the legitimation crisis can escalate into a motivational crisis. Political integration begins to be at stake. If the legitimation crisis continues, it touches the level of the individual. The legitimation crisis unfolds as a crisis of social integration. The necessary routine of socio-cultural reproduction breaks and becomes
dysfunctional for the state (Habermas 1975: 75). This may lead to an erosion of work ethic and rejection of normative principles of the whole capitalist and democratic order. It pushes the existence of the entire late capitalist state on to the brink. The following figure illustrates the sequences of crises again.


The sequence of the crisis should not to be understood as a deterministic process. At each stage, the crisis could be stopped if the respective sub-systems would perform their proper functions. Only if that does not happen, at the end it can bring about an existential crisis for capitalism and “formal democracy.”

**Analytical potential**

How yielding is Habermas’s theory of crisis for empirical research on the crisis of democracy? It should be determined on basis of the above-mentioned criteria.

**Diagnostic capacity: Crisis symptoms**

The first two phases of crisis get an adequate description of their symptoms. Habermas ascribes insufficient crisis-solving capacity to the political-administrative system. He underestimates the operational capacity of the democratic governments. The incapability of the national and international administrative and financial institution to deal with the Euro crisis can well be conceived as a “rationality crisis.” There can be no doubt that the rationality crisis spilled over in a legitimation crisis of the Greek state in particular, but also the political elites, parties and governments in Portugal and Spain.

But despite serious economic as well as social-welfare losses, no life threatening systemic crisis of democracy has emerged so far.

Habermas’s crisis theory turns out to not be very useful when it comes to the concrete institutions, organizations, and procedures of democracy, which are so important for empirical research on democracy. Do the triggers of the economic and administrative system affect only the political elites and political parties or also the democratic institutions government and parliament? Do they affect the entire democratic system? Habermas is not able to answer these questions because his (former) conceptual understanding of democracy as just a “formal” set of procedures and institutions beclouded his view on the concrete interactions between the citizens, political elites, organizations (parties) and institutions (government and parliament). But without a concrete analysis of these interactions we cannot gain insights into the internal mechanisms, dynamics and the deepness of legitimation crisis of democracy.
Diagnostic capacity: Crisis scenarios

The diagnostic and prognostic insights into the sequence of crises are undoubtedly one of Habermas's strengths. However, the interdependent internal developments within the single stages of the crisis and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of specific institutions and procedures were not taken into consideration (see above). There is also an underestimation of the resilience and survivability of democracy as a political regime. Moreover, if there is not a preferable regime alternative in sight for the majority of the population democracy will not collapse despite some problems of legitimation of single democratic actors (parties and political elites).

Explanatory power: Root-cause analysis

The release of political crisis through economic crises is by no means an exclusively neo-Marxist perspective. Furthermore, the pressure on the governments created by the economic crises can hardly be argued with. Even the effect on the citizen's trust in democratic institutions is by and large confirmed by empirical research on democracy. However, there is a political-economic bias with the exclusive focus on economic crisis as the ultimate cause for the political crisis of legitimacy. A possibility that the crisis of confidence in the democratic decision-making structures is not caused by the crisis of capitalism but its triumph – has not been taken into account. Politics was deprived of its capacity to steer or to influence the economy by the deregulated (financial) markets, banks, hedge funds and large investors. "Politics" has become increasingly impotent in the eyes of citizens. The problems were brought about not by the declining accumulation of capital, but by the triumph of neoliberal deregulation of markets. Self-disempowered governments therefore may have caused a creeping crisis of democracy in a few countries severely hit by the financial and Euro crisis such in Southern Europe.

Diagnosis: Beginning and end of crisis

Habermas fails to distinguish, whether we are dealing with crisis Type I or II, i.e., either with an existential crisis or an erosion of democracy. Habermas cannot indicate when a crisis begins and when it ends. Of course, we cannot just specify numerical thresholds to identify the onset of the crisis, such as a declining voter turnout, a loss of party membership, or an increasing loss of confidence of citizens in the democratic institutions. This will not work in a specific case, and certainly will not work on the level of generalized theory. But if we cannot define when a crisis actually begins, the term will not provide substantial analytical power.

What are the challenges to democracy, which can lead to a crisis, according to Habermas? Here is a tentative list:

- Periodic crises of capitalism
- Inadequate handling of economic crisis by "politics"
- Loss of legitimation through an output-weakness
- Loss of trust of citizens in democratic institutions leads to input problems


The report: "Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracy to the Trilateral Commission" by Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki is not a crisis theory in the classical sense. Far below the level of abstraction of Habermas's "theories of legitimation," the three authors of the report do not begin with theoretical considerations or normative explanations, but with a question: "Is political democracy, as it exists today, a viable form of government?" (Crozier et al. 1975: 2). The answer can be boiled down to the following lines: As a result of rapid growth of social complexity, proliferation of pluralist private interests, erosion of traditional values, and in particular increasing demands of citizens democratic governments are losing their ability to formulate the common good or to effectively implement and enforce their policies. "The system becomes one of anomic democracy, in which democratic politics becomes more an arena for the assertion of conflicting interests than a process for the building of common purposes" (ibid: 161). Democratic governments
lose the ability to govern and face a bleak future. The authors of the Trilateral Report, see four frontal attacks on the continued existence of effective governance and thus to democracy itself:

1. **Delegitimation of political authority**
The relentless pursuit of equality and individualism leads to a loss of public confidence in the authority of political leadership. But a trusted political leadership is one of the most important conditions for effective governance (ibid.: 161).

2. **Increase in participation**
The increase in political participation is simultaneously cause and consequence of the declining political authority. But swelling participation leads to polarization and this in turn leads to a decrease in confidence among citizens and by citizens against the state.

3. **Disaggregation of interests**
The disaggregation of social interests and intensification of political competition lead to a pluralization of political preferences, as reflected in an increasing fragmentation of the party system.

4. **Rising expectations and overload**
The sixties and the early seventies of the twentieth century have led to rapidly rising expectations of citizens. Among them, matters of economic welfare and social security had a prominent place. Governments faced with a rising expectations of the people, can only fulfill them inadequately. At its worst, overload can lead to ungovernability of democracy.

While Habermas has criticized the small and insufficiently authentic participation in the “formal democracy,” Huntington complains about the “excess of democracy:” “Needed instead is a greater degree of moderation in society” (Huntington 1975: 113). Despite this starkly different understanding of democracy, both the conservative authors of the Trilateral Report and the “progressive” Jürgen Habermas detect a common reason for the crisis of democracy: A limited capacity for action by the government, which is not able to keep up with the rising demands. Huntington and colleagues see the main cause for the crisis in the claims of citizens; according to Habermas, the cause are divergent system imperatives of capitalist economy and the social welfare expectations of citizens. However, the results are the same: Government overload and a crisis of trust.¹

How useful are the theses of the Trilateral Report for the empirical research on the crisis of democracy? Here, too, we can apply the four criteria outlined above (analytical potential):

1. **Diagnostic capability: Crisis symptoms**
Growing popular expectations towards the state are clearly diagnosed. The identification of an increasing diversity of interests, an increased political participation, and an intensification of political competition as crisis symptoms come from a conservative-minimalist-ellitist understanding of democracy. According to this view, faith in authority and a good dose of political apathy are considered desirable characteristics of democracy.

2. **Diagnostic capacity: Crisis scenarios**
Unlike in Jürgen Habermas’s crisis theory, the trilateral report does not indicate a sequence of crisis stages. Loss of authority, rising participation and over-pluralized interests lead to an overload of government. The respective causal relationships remain largely in the dark. Nevertheless, Crozier et al. indicate a political cycle as a self-healing force of democracy: Rising participation comes with polarization, this in turn leads to growing distrust between citizens and a realization of individual

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¹ For a lucid analysis of the structural similarity between socialist and conservative crisis theories, see: Offe (1979).
political powerlessness, which then leads to a decline in participation (Trilateral Report 1975). Moderate participation is for Crozier et al. an important precondition for a stable democracy capable of being governed.²

3. Explanatory power: Root-causes analysis
The symptoms are simultaneously being the root causes of the crisis. They are not exogenously triggered by an economic crisis, but endogenously fabricated by a too liberal and too participatory democracy.

4. Diagnosis: Beginning and end of crisis
Crozier and colleagues also cannot specify sharp dividing lines for the start and the end of the crisis. These lines are largely descriptive and are a record of too strong participation, excessive pluralism, and competition; but when these occurrences subside – it also marks the end of the crisis.

The Trilateral Report cannot reveal its strong normative fixation on a conservative-elitist conception of democracy. According to this understanding, stable democracy should be free from at least three impositions: From excessive expectations, from strong participation and from too many economic and welfare responsibilities by the state. They have a normative fixation on the “lean state.” This state should return to its “core competencies.” This sets an extraordinary low threshold for “governmental overload,” without giving any theoretical justification beyond a conservative understanding of democracy.³

We can distill the following challenges to democracy from the report:

- “Demand inflation” among citizens
- “Over-participation”
- Overload of government
- Decline of political authority

1.3. Colin Crouch (2004): Post-Democracy

The most influential critical debate about the state of democracy of the recent years has unfolded in the course of the post-democracy debate (Postdemokratie 2006; APuZ 2011; Leviathan 2011). The term “post-democracy” comes from Rancière (1995, 2002) but was elaborated in greater detail by Colin Crouch (2004). According to Crouch, the democratic moment is long gone for the democracies of Western Europe and North America. Globalization, deregulation, the loss of collective organizational capacity in society have eroded democracy from within. Formal processes and institutions of democracy continue to exist, but they are rapidly becoming a formal game that has lost its democratic substance (Crouch 2004: 22). Crouch diagnoses rising inequalities. However, he does not focus primarily on the individual inequality, but on the new imbalance of collective organizations of capital and labor. Class antagonisms today are as rugged as they were 50 years ago. However, this time it is the underprivileged who miss a collective identity and a capacity for concerted action (ibid.: 62). That worsens their position considerably, compared to the 1950s and to the 1970s.

The influence of private money on political campaigns, the powerful position of global companies, the proliferation of lobbyists simultaneously with the erosion of collective organizations of the lower classes and of workers’ interests have created a post-democratic power situation that consumes democratic gains of the twentieth century. Privatization and (neo-)liberalization are inversely proportional to democracy in the post-democratic age (Crouch 2004: 57). The traditional

² Huntington’s obsession with the moderate participation echoes the conservative idea of democracy during the 1950s and 1960s (Hermens 1951; Dahl 1956; Sartori 1962; Eckstein 1961; Bracher 1969; Sternberger 1971).

³ In the past three decades, the OECD countries have been following, at least implicitly, the advice of the Trilateral Report. In particular: the deregulation of the markets (financial), i.e., a withdrawal of the state from economic regulation. This did not lead, ironically, to a sustainable overload relief of the state. Because the deregulation has led to the banking and financial crisis after 2008, which in turn, has led to the fiscal risks and burdens that far exceeded those that the Report had initially lamented.
mass democracy, which was based on strong parties and the collective organization of social interests is in peril and gets slowly dissolved before our eyes.

Analytical potential:

1. Diagnostic capacity: Crisis symptoms
The shifts in power and influence have changed the power-architecture in economy and society. The consequence has been the ongoing disempowering of politics. The rise of global firms, the new dimension of lobbying and the growing influence of money on election campaigns and political parties have increased dependence of parties on economic interests. On the other hand, the decline of unions resulted in weakening of their pressure on governments. The unions, which saw themselves as an advocate of egalitarian and “substantive” democracy in the twentieth century, were effectively disarmed in most of the OECD countries. The equal chance to influence policy outcomes in equal measure, both by the capital and by the labor became an illusion.

2. Diagnostic capacity: Crisis scenarios
Crouch does not elaborate on how the crisis unfolds. He describes only in general terms the following parable: Democracy emerges from its pre-democratic conditions and finds its zenith in the Keynesian welfare-state democracy from the 1940s to the 1970s. Thereafter it begins to descent into the post-democratic realm. This does not end in a democratic collapse, but it results in an anemic version of democracy, in which formal democratic organizations, institutions and procedures continue to exist, but the markets and democratically not legitimated actors of global capitalism have extracted the democratic substance.

3. Explanatory power: Root-cause analysis
With the analytical advantage of observing directly the social and political results of neoliberal globalization, Crouch, unlike Habermas, does not see the causes of the democratic legitimacy problems in economic crises. On the contrary, he sees them in the triumph of neo-liberal post-Keynesian capitalism, which has undermined democracy from within. Today, important questions of economic and financial politics are no longer decided by democratically legitimated political instances, but by global companies, banks and deregulated markets.

4. Diagnosis: Beginning and end of crisis
Crouch also denotes no clear criteria for designating the beginning and the end of crises. Historically, he locates the beginning of the crisis in the early seventies of the twentieth century. During that time the Keynesian welfare state got dismantled and the private sector actors won the balance of power against the unions. After that power shift, democratic politics begun to act in favor of business interests.

We must not look back in melancholy on the democratic moment, and can still use Crouch’s considerations for the empirical analysis of a crisis.4 Crouch’s concept of post-democracy (2004, 2011) refers to the broken relationship between formal and social democracy, as it was explicated also by Hermann Heller (1934), Wolfgang Abendroth (1964) or Thomas Meyer (2005). In addition, he referred to the fact that major policy fields (esp. financial and fiscal policies) has slipped from politics hand. With Colin Crouch we can summarize the following challenges to democracy.

Challenges:

4 Crouch focuses almost exclusively on the class conflict. He misjudges the 1930s (USA) and the 1950s and 1960s (Europe) as a Golden Age of democracy, or “the democratic moment.” He strangely does not take into account the situations of the Afro-Americans in the U.S.A., women, ethnic minorities or gays on both continents during these periods. They were either formally excluded or de facto marginalized in political participation and representation. There can be no doubt that the situation of these groups is in post-democratic times much worse than has been during the democratic moments (Sauer 2011; Merkel 2011).
Institutions of democracy are becoming a facade
Political decisions migrate to private actors and anonymous markets
Money and lobbies infiltrate parties and election campaigns
Medialization and manipulation of politics

Summary:
All three "theories" do not make it easy to derive empirically testable hypotheses. This is especially true for the most complex theory variant of Jürgen Habermas, although he elaborates most clearly the causalities of a deepening crisis of democracy (more precisely, the late capitalist system). Habermas's complex and even holistic theories cannot be validated in the Popperian sense. Nevertheless, Habermas's theses on legitimation problems of individual democratic institutions and organizations are heuristically more important today than they were in the 1970s. His thesis if and how economic crises are challenging the stability and quality of democracy should be one of the first to be examined in times of financial and Euro crises (2008 ff.).

Colin Crouch's analysis of globalization and (neoliberal) European integration points to another set of challenges. They can be injected into the question: "Who governs? " Do democratically legitimized institutions or global companies, international financial markets, central banks or lobbies rule us? While Crouch only hinted at it, other economists like Stieglitz (2012) and Krugman (2012) and political scientists (Pierson/Hacker 2010) have recently brought to attention the rapidly increasing socio-economic inequality of the OECD world. Here most pressing challenges to democracy have emerged: Who is still participating in politics? Whose interests are represented? Are we going into the direction of two-thirds representative democracies in which the lower social classes are politically marginalized? The Trilateral Report provided us with the thesis, that democratic governments are overloaded by too many responsibilities and expectations of the citizens, and are simultaneously missing the necessary authority, adequate skills, resources and power to deal with them. Are the increased expectations of citizens on the one hand and the lack of capacity of democratic governments on the other caused by a structural trust gap of the citizens (also Norris 2011)? Will this be a standing or only a conjunctural feature of mature democracies?

It is astonishing that the crisis of democracy theories hardly ever deal with core institutions and key actors of representative democracy. This is especially true for political parties. The political party research is barely acknowledged, and was hardly examined by crisis theories. Nevertheless, the party research has discovered important insights, which could be integrated into a general crisis research (Katz/Mair 1994; Dalton/Wattenberg 2000; Mair/Müller/Plasser 2004; Mair 2006). Peter Mair goes here the furthest, he sees hollowing out of party competition and a disconnection of parties from their social representative duties. He believes that they have primarily become an appendage of the state (Mair 2006).

In overall terms, we can formulate three bundles of challenges to democracy out of the crisis theories:

1. (Financial) capitalism as a challenge to national democracy (Who governs?)
2. Supranationalism (globalization, EU) as a challenge to the national democratic state (Who governs?)
3. Socio-economic inequality as a challenge to the democratic principle of political equality (Who participates and which interests are represented?)

These three challenges are exogenous to the core of democratic institutions. They, however, may change them from within. The transformation of exogenous challenges to internal structural changes (institutions, organizations) can have two different consequences. First, a productive handling of the challenges, adaptation of the institutions to the changing environments and a positive impact
through appropriate policies onto external challenges. If those strategies would be applied, challenges would lose their crisis-generating character. A second possible consequence could be that challenges would not be handled productively. Democratic procedures and institutions would be damaged in their democratic substance. Examples of this would be: Social uprooting of the parties (Mair 2006), increasing social selectivity of political participation and increasing dominance of the executive over the legislative institutions. Even more serious, however, would be if the “formal institutions” (Habermas) of democracy would no longer be the production site of policies. In this case they would become a version of Colin Crouch’s post-democratic facade: Institutional skeletons, which are no longer able to have an effect on the real environment. Major policy decisions would immigrate from the sphere of democratic politics into the world of companies, markets and supranational regimes.

Crisis theories have their strength in discovering the major challenges of democracy; they are complex enough to distinguish between the form and substance of democratic institutions; they also point at sequences and causes of democratic crises. They are silent about thresholds when challenges transform into a crisis of democracy, when the crisis begins and when it ends. They also seem to systematically underestimate the capacity of democratic and state institutions to deal with challenges, transformations, and crisis. But a systematic weakness of all crisis theories is that the neither define their concepts of democracy nor of crisis. In contrast to them I argue that it depends very much on the concepts of the two phenomena whether one can speak of a crisis of democracy or not.

2. Democracy as a contested concept

At which democracy concept should we refer when we want to analyze a potential crisis of democracy? Democracy is a contested concept. Normative discourse on (good) democracy is as old as democracy itself, and it has grown in intensity in the twentieth century. The boundless variety of different theories of democracy became difficult to penetrate (see e.g., Held 1996; Schmidt 2008). Normative theories of democracy can be classified historically-chronologically, ideologically, procedurally-institutionally, or according to their authors. Most of them occur as mixed classifications, which read like a long catalogue of democracy with adjectives: conservative, liberal, social, pluralist, elitist, decisionist, communitarian, cosmopolitan, republican, deliberative, participatory, feminist, critical, post-modern or multi-cultural democratic theory – just to name the most obvious ones. We need a simplified taxonomy. In the never-ending battle for gaining supremacy over the definition, content and limits of democracy, we can distinguish three groups of simplified democratic theories: minimalist, medium (proceduralist) and maximalist model.

The minimalist model

Minimalists, like the influential economist and democracy theorist Joseph A. Schumpeter (1883-1950), assumed that free, equal and secret ballots are not only the core of democracy, but democracy itself. Via elections, according to Schumpeter’s model of democracy the represented have an opportunity to hold representatives of the previous legislature responsible, and depending on their assessment: To either elect them again or not. The minimalists, who like to see themselves as realists, thus limit the essence of democracy to the “vertical accountability” between the governed and the rulers (Przeworski 2007: 475).

Schumpeter’s “realist” theory of democracy (1942) is the classical one among the minimalist models of democracy. Human rights or the rule of law are certainly regarded by the minimalists as important prerequisites of democracy, but not necessarily as its inherent elements. The influence of civil society over the rulers or direct-democratic meddling of the people in government’s affairs are seen as incompatible with the rationalist-realist model of democracy.

For the crisis analysis of mature democracies the minimalist concept is of little use. When looking at the competitive selection of rulers alone we cannot discern if a democracy is in crisis or what causes of the crisis could be. We also have to check whether parties in parliament and
government are substantially representing interests of voters. We have to investigate what trust citizens have in the core institutions of democracy, such as the rule of law, which protects the civil and political rights of the voters. We, finally, have to analyze if the elected representatives are actually governing, and do not act on behalf of or are dependent on large corporations, banks, lobbies, and international organizations. This model goes far beyond Schumpeter's, even though some scholars (e.g., O'Donnell 2010) tried to interpret Schumpeter's model of democracy as less minimalistic.

The mid-range proceduralist model

Advocates of a medium-range proceduralist model of democracy regard the minimalist understanding of democracy as thin and inadequate. They add to the undisputed democratic core of free, universal, equal and fair elections the spheres of law and control of horizontal accountability. They also advocate an expansion of political participation beyond elections. Moreover, only the embeddedness of free elections in guaranteeing regimes of political rights, civil rights, and checks and balances can make formal democratic elections democratically meaningful. Jürgen Habermas and other adherents of this model of constitutional democracy postulated an indispensable “co-originality” (Gleichursprünglichkeit) of civil and political rights.

In liberal democracies political participation should not be limited to voting. Additional opportunities like referenda, civil society activities, public discourse or deliberation should complement electoral participation. This “mid-range model” includes participatory democratic ideas that go beyond constitutional containment (or safeguarding) of democracy and call for further democratization of economy and society. The range of the defenders of this democratic tradition ranges from liberal pluralists like Norberto Bobbio to fervent proponents of deliberative participation like Jürgen Habermas and James Fishkin (1991) and advocates of “participatory” or “strong” democracy such as Carol Pateman (1970) and Benjamin Barber (1984).

What the minimalist and the middle concept of democracy have in common are the restrictions on norms, principles and procedures that underpin the democratic decision-making, i.e., the democratic performance of democratic institutions.

The maximalist model

Maximalists include the output and outcome dimension. Policy outcomes are integral part of their concept of democracy. Among those outcomes are public goods, such as internal and external security, economic and social welfare, fair distribution of basic goods, income, social security and life chances. Only a “social democracy” can secure the political principle of equality. Social democrat Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932), Weimar constitutional lawyer Hermann Heller (1891-1933), and today's Amartya Sen (2000), Thomas Meyer (2005) and neo- and post-Marxists represent this position. However, the last three decades of increasing inequality among the OECD countries has brought the issue of socio-economic distribution back into the limelight of democratic theory (Hacker/Pierson 2010; Stiegitz 2011).

Thus, growing socio-economic inequality is considered an early warning sign for democratic challenges lying ahead. It can threaten to damage central facets of democracy like equal participation and fair substantial representation, and it could erode faith of citizens in democracy and therefore undermine its legitimacy.

The answer to the question if there is a crisis of democracy largely depends on the preferred definition of democracy. Minimalist concepts, due to their exclusive focus on free electoral competition and vertical accountability, do not possess an adequate analytical sensorium to early recognize when substantial parts of the democratic state are already in crisis. Maximalist concepts have the opposite analytical problem: They have such high normative standards that only few democracies can pass their “social democratic test.”

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6 O'Donnell (2010) itself represents a far more demanding normative model of democracy, in which, he includes, in particular, the rule of law and horizontal accountability.

7 Social democracy is a concept of democracy and not necessarily limited to social democratic parties.
We therefore opt for a medium-range concept what we call "embedded democracy." It does not conceal its normative background – namely, the co-originality of civil and political rights protected by the rule of law and horizontal accountability.

**Embedded democracy and crisis diagnosis**

Figure 2: The concept of embedded democracy


Five partial regimes constitute embedded (constitutional) democracy: democratic election (A), political participation rights (B), civil rights (C), horizontal accountability (D), effective power to govern (E).

A. Electoral regime

The electoral regime has a central role in democracy, because elections are the most visible expression of popular sovereignty. A democratic electoral regime requires universal active and passive voting rights as well as free and fair elections. They are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for democratic governing.

If the crisis infects a democratic electoral system, it strikes at the heart of democracy. On the other hand, changes of voting behavior, such as increasing voter abstention, increasing volatility or actual discrimination against ethnic groups, classes, or women are an early warning sign that participation and representation do not sufficiently reflect the totality of the demos.

B. Political rights

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Political rights go beyond elections. Only collective formulation of opinion and political will enables meaningful electoral competition. Political rights are embodied in freedom of speech and the right to associate, demonstrate and formulate petitions. Besides public media, pluralist private media should have considerable influence.

The most important political actors in partial regimes of established democracies are parties. They compete for votes, they form governments, and have to make sure that governments really govern. Changes in political parties and the party system may reveal early crisis tendencies in the political system. When for example integrative catch-all parties experience a robust electoral decline, anti-system, right-wing populist parties get stronger and the number of parties proliferates it will become more difficult to form stable governments. If the consistent decline in party membership and the transformation of mass parties into cartel parties continues it will undermine basic organizational pillars of representative democracy.

C. Civil rights

Civil liberties and negative defense rights must complement democratic elections and political participation. “Negative” freedom rights protect citizens from illegitimate state interference. They grant legal protection of life, liberty and property, as well as protection against illegitimate arrest, exile, terror or unjustifiable intervention into personal life. These individual rights tame majoritarian democratic will and prevent a “tyranny of the majority” (Tocqueville).

D. Horizontal accountability

Accountability and responsibility of the government should not only be periodically guaranteed on elections, but also assured steadily through checks and balances. The independence of the judiciary and in particular judges is especially important.

Democracy crises are often characterized by the fact that the balance of power between the executive and legislative shift to the detriment of the latter. This can be a slow gradual process, but it can also rapidly occur as a result of economic, foreign and domestic political crises. Constitutional courts are a special part of the judiciary branch. Their actions can have ambivalent effects on democracy. Due to their thin democratic legitimacy, they should not serve as co-legislators and compete over parliamentary rights with parliament. Judicial self-restraint is important for the democracy-enhancing rulings of constitutional courts. However, as guardians of the constitution they also have the right and duty of preventing democratically problematic legislation launched by temporary parliamentary majorities.

E. Effective governance

The fifth partial regime specifies that only those individuals, organizations and institutions that have been legitimized by free and general elections are entitled to make authoritatively binding political decisions. Military, but also powerful companies, banks or financial funds should not be able to decide on security and financial or economic policy. Despite an impressive wave of democratization in Latin America since the 1980s and despite further democratization in Southeast Asia (Merkel 2010: 205ff., 261), military is still a determining part of the security policy in many of these young democracies. In advanced democracies the military is not the obvious problem. But a similarly problematic limitation of the sovereign prerogatives of the parliament and government should be seen in the global financial institutions like the IMF or supranational regional institutions such as the European Central Bank and the European Union or globally acting banks and hedge funds.

Internal and external embeddedness

Partial regimes are able to exert their effects on democracy only when they are mutually "embedded." Democracy is thus not seen as a monolithic regime, but as a system of partial regimes that reciprocally complement but also limit each other. Democracies are embedded in an environment. It encloses democracy, enables or restricts, stabilizes or destabilizes it. The most important external conditions of embeddedness are socio-economic context, civil society and

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9 Though, it has achieved extreme influential positions in countries such as Israel or the U.S.A., especially when it comes to questions of war and peace, military budgets and arms purchases.
international or regional integration in organizations, coalitions and policy regime. If these embedding external conditions are very thin or impaired, it often results in defects of democracy itself or at least makes democracies more fragile and unstable.

Internally, the specific interdependence and independence of the different partial regimes of a democracy secures its normative and functional coherence. Externally, the partial regimes are embedded in rings of enabling or restricting conditions for democracy that protect them from or make them vulnerable to outer as well as inner shocks and destabilizing tendencies. The concept of embeddedness follows a systemic logic, i.e., the individual parts are interdependent. Crisis-ridden changes in one partial regime can infect other partial regimes. The analytical advantage of the concept in analyzing a crisis of democracy lies in the possibility to trace early crisis infections in one partial regime to the other. It also allows to check which are typical patterns of crisis trajectory or where the healing remedies can come from and how they spread throughout the whole democratic system.

3. Crisis – poorly defined concept

When it comes to conceptualization of democracy, there is no consensus. Instead, we have different concepts that define the number, scope and limits of corresponding institutions and procedures in their distinctive manner. Nevertheless, respective individual concepts can usually be clearly determined. They retain their own particular analytical substance. The same cannot be said for the concept of crisis. It is used to an excessive extent in sociology and political science, and yet is rarely defined. In particular, a question of when a crisis of democracy begins and when it ends remains unresolved. Boundaries between normality and crisis remain not specified. “Crisis” comes from ancient Greek and initially meant opinion, judgment, but also decision. Since then, the term became more specific and designated as uncertainty, precarious situation, aggravation, decision and turning point. “The concept imposed choices between stark alternatives—right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death. Until the early modern period the medical meaning, which continued to be used technically, remained dominant virtually without interruption” (Koselleck 2006: 358). “From the seventeenth century on, the term, used as a metaphor, expanded into politics, economics, history, psychology” (ibid.).

Since then, the concept of crisis has migrated to almost all economic, social, political, and personal aspects of social as well as personal life. The term gained importance and became a catchphrase (ibid.). Even economics, which describes itself as “exact science,” has no clear or non-controversial concept of an economic crisis. If they talk about economic crisis, they mostly speak about a negative trend in economic growth. Crisis of the business cycle is the most clearly defined concept. It is determined when two consecutive quarters of “negative growth” occur. However, other macro-economic variables, such as inflation, employment, investment, trade and capital flows could define economic crises as well. There is no specification regarding a threshold at which crisis defined in those terms begins. In political discourse, the term has completely lost its analytical contours and has become a banal, ubiquitous and universal word. “The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment” (Koselleck 2006: 399).

In simple terms, we can distinguish in crisis theory at least two uses of the term:

1. First, an acute crisis.
   It threatens the very existence of political order and requires unmistakable action. This perspective is taken to a certain extent from Marx’s crisis theory of capitalism. If we transpose this understanding of an acute and final crisis into the democratic system, crisis might seem as a preliminary stage for a democratic collapse, i.e., a system change towards an autocratic regime. In the neo-Marxist variant of the early 1972, a collapse of the “late capitalist state” could be a final stage of a progressing crisis sequence (Habermas 1975; Offe 1972). Though, an ultimate collapse is far from being certain.

2. With the fading of neo-Marxism this variant of crisis theory has almost entirely disappeared, at least as far as mature democracies of the OECD world are concerned. It
has been replaced by a concept of latent crisis. Latent means at least two things: First, it means that the crisis can drag on and the end cannot be conceptually predicted. Compared with the Marxist concept of crisis, this concept is theoretically opaque. But the assumption is that the crisis is hollowing out democracy from within (Crouch 2004). The formal institutions remain in place, but the democratic idea of democratically legitimated and constitutionally chosen popular government atrophies. What remains is nothing more than a diminished subtype of (defective) democracy (Offe 2003).

Since it is hard to expect a system collapse for mature democracies; therefore, the second type of crisis concept (Crisis Type: II) should be honed. Nevertheless, the two types of crises should not be conceived dichotomously but rather as two intervals on a continuum. There is no theory which could help us to draw a clear line between the two intervals. That line is blurred as it is the line between a democracy in the state of normalcy (if it exists at all) and the state of entering the crisis. But if the term crisis should be taken out of its indefiniteness to be meaningfully applied to empirical comparative research on democracy, it must be sharpened. In order to be analytically productive, the concept of crisis of democracy must fulfill the following conditions. It must be:

- Capable to diagnose relevant symptoms of crisis
- Capable to diagnose the crisis trajectory
- Capable to indicate factors that trigger crises of democracy

Capable to develop criteria for the beginning and the end of crisis. This is certainly a challenging checklist. However, it helps us to improve the heuristic and analytical aptitude of crisis theories for an empirical research on democracy. But how can we employ such a concept in a concrete analysis. I want to propose three strategies to analyze the state of health of democracy. The three strategies can and have to be used apart. But only if they are combined they allow a holistic view on the specific democracy as a whole.

### 4. Research strategies

I want to present the following three strategies for an empirical analysis of democracy in crisis. None of the single strategies is unproblematic and each leaves blind spots in the analysis. However, a combination of them could provide a promising overall strategy.

**Strategy 1: Democratic indices**

If we want to analyze whether democracy is in a systemic crisis, we can turn to indices which measure the quality of democracies. Here we have two types: they either use expert assessments (Freedom House, Polity) or “objective” indicators selected on the base of a theoretical model of democracy that seek to capture the democratic quality of a political regime (Democracy Barometer). If the quality indices are available over a relevant period of time and can identify an aggregate downward trend of the well-established democracies, we could speak of empirical evidence for a decline of quality of democracy and if the decline is robust and significant of a (creeping) crisis of democracy.

For the crisis question of consolidated democracies, Freedom House and Polity are of no use: experts assessment follow a too gross measurements scale and can therefore signal no variance for the top 30 democracies over the past decades. They are therefore unsuitable for a crisis analysis of mature democracies. According to Freedom House, those democracies do not change in their high quality, they therefore cannot be diagnosed as being in crisis. The Freedom House index measures the quality of political and civil rights in about 200 countries. There is no built-in sensitivity, which could show for example the difference in the quality of democracy between Sweden and Finland on one side and Berlusconi’s Italy or George W. Bush’s U.S.A. on the other side. The Democracy
Barometer\(^{10}\) (democracybarometer.org) has developed a democracy index (100 indicators) which exhibits a high sensitivity towards variances between the “30 best democracies.” The Barometer (DB) allows to capture aggregate indices that relate to the entire democratic system, but also has single scores for the three core principles (freedom, equality, power control) or the “9 core functions of democracy,” such as participation, transparency, representation and rule of law. This can help us to identify both holistic and partial trends of democracy since 1990\(^{11}\).

Through the DB we recognize trends (Appendix Table 1), which do not confirm a comprehensive crisis of democracy. The overall index shows even a slight increase in the quality of democracy from 1990 to 2007. However, this does not apply to all countries; some of them do reveal negative trends. Also, the question of a democratic threshold remains: at which point of democratic decline can we speak of a democracy in crisis? Can we determine such a threshold? At least with respect to the aggregate index of the 30 best democracies, the borderline question between consolidated democracies and democracy in crisis remains an artificial one, since there was an increase in the overall quality over the last two decades.

As has been noted above, not all democracies improved their quality. For example, a clear decline of the Italian (Late 1990ies onwards) or the US-American democracy (2000 onwards) can be observed: One can call it the Berlusconi and George W. Bush effect. But it also shows us that it is empirically wrong to assume a general trend within the world of mature democracies. In addition, a conceptual question arises: will a common threshold of the crisis of democracy apply to all mature OECD democracies alike, as much to Greece as to Denmark, as much to Germany as Italy? Can thresholds of crisis for some democracies be higher than for others because they have a long democratic tradition, a stable rule of law, a powerful economy or apathetic population? If this is the case, and evidence speaks for it, how far can the evidence of these indices carry us on the crisis question? In any case, we need to contextualize the data in order to interpret it appropriately, i.e. case by case.

Thus, the unitary terminology of “crisis of democracy”, “legitimacy crisis of late capitalism” or “post-democracy” is not only empirically wrong, but it is misleading in suggesting that not only single democratic regimes of specific countries may be in crisis, but a complete type of political regimes, namely “democracy” is in crisis. The empirical figures of Democracy Barometer falsify such a view.

Let us have a look at the partial regimes of “embedded democracy”. Do we see a visible decline in quality there? Figure 2 shows the aggregate quality of the electoral regime plus political rights (participation, competitiveness, representation), civil rights regime (individual liberties, rule of law), horizontal accountability (mutual constraints) and effective power to govern covered by the democratic functions “government capability” (see DB). The graphs are rather flat and signal no dramatic changes over the last two decades. The most visible, but nevertheless a small decline, can be observed in the effective power to govern. But even this loss of governing capacity of national governments is not dramatic in general.\(^{12}\)

In Figure 3 I unpacked the electoral regime and separated its three main functions: competitiveness, representation and participation. The degree of electoral competitiveness remained stable throughout the last two decades. But two other significant trends appear. The quality of descriptive representation has steadily increased since the beginning of the 1990s. This can be ascribed to a relevant part to the better representation of women in parliament. In contrast, the quality of participation, especially measured in terms of social selectivity, has visibly decreased. This is mainly due to an increasing social selectivity which is increasingly crowding out the lower strata of the society. The disease of social selectivity in political participation, which started much earlier in the US, has now reached most of the European democracies.\(^{13}\) However, as disturbing as this erosion

\(^{10}\) The Democracy Barometer (DB) is a joint venture of the University of Zürich and the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. It started to measure the 30 best democracies in the world and now has data of ca. 75 countries.

\(^{11}\) For the conceptual tree of Democracy Barometer and the indicators are derived step by step from the three core principle see the conceptual paper at: democracybarometer.com

\(^{12}\) That does not mean that national governments have lost regulative and controlling power against financial markets and their main actors. But in general the data are no acute warning signal.

\(^{13}\) The following indicators cover the quality of participation (…..) and representation (……..)
of actual political equality is, it displays rather a slow hollowing out of a specific dimension namely political equality of the well-established democracies than a dramatic crisis.

The Democracy Barometer displays “objective” indicators selected by experts and derived from three core principles of democracy to 100 indicators through four steps. The question arises: Do the citizens, the people, the demos perceive the development of democracy in a similar way as the experts? This may even be a more important question because it is the people in the last instance who decide whether democracy slips into crisis by expressing their preferences through exit, voice and loyalty. The “objective” dimension of quality of democracy has to be checked and complemented by the “subjective” dimension of the citizens’ support for and trust in democracy.

Strategy 2: The Subjective Dimension - Drawing on surveys

One can speak of a crisis of democracy when the majority of a population perceives it as a crisis. This conclusion does not require a real democratic theory, at best it needs only theoretical backups in a form of plausible questions such as: “Is there an alternative preferable political regime to democracy in your opinion?” “Do you have trust in the government, parliament, political parties, political elites, etc.?” This is, in analogy to Weber’s legitimacy belief, a belief of citizens that democracy is the most legitimate and most preferable political regime. A first look at the levels of satisfaction with democracy, which have been measured by Eurobarometer since 1973, also shows that over the last four decades the level of satisfaction for all the countries in the European Union has been extremely stable (see Appendix Figure 4 and 5). According to these figures, we cannot speak of a crisis of democracy from the subjective perspective of the citizens at all. A strong and stable majority of the people is highly or fairly satisfied with their democracy. Of course there are significant variations concerning the satisfaction across the different countries. But it is interesting that the satisfaction with democracy in Italy has been growing since the mid-1990s when Berlusconi became Prime Minister. The people’s opinion obviously contradicts the expert judgments measured by “objective” indicators of the Democracy Barometer, where a clearly declining quality of democracy has been observed. It opens an interesting question beyond the case of Italy to be addressed in the discussion: how do we judge the question of a crisis or even only quality of democracy – by the judgments of democracy experts or by the common opinion of the people?

But how deep can such aggregated survey indices go? Are they describing only the surface of reality and cannot detect changes that occur in institutions and processes below the surface? Aggregate indices do not register internal shifts, for example when citizens lose their confidence in the core institutions of representative democracy (majoritarian institutions) such as parties, parliaments, governments, when their confidence in non-majoritarian institutions (police, rule of law, judiciary, central banks) is very high at the same time (see Zürn 2012, 2013). A first detailed look at polls seems to confirm this (see Appendix: Tables 6 and 7). From the mid-nineties onwards citizens’ trust in government showed a clear and steady, almost simultaneous downward trend whereas democracy as a whole still enjoyed the same high support as in the two decades before. Public trust in parties has not declined but has stayed below the already extraordinary low level of 20%. Given that in 2012 less than 30% of the citizens trusted parliament (the crucial institution in representative democracy) and only 15% had trust in political parties (the most important organization in modern democracies), the overall satisfaction with democracy as a whole has to be questioned. One obvious interpretation is: many people do not exactly know what democracy means and their satisfaction is also nurtured by the absence of preferable alternatives to democratic regimes. The high trust in non-majoritarian institutions such as the police and the legal system compared to the low trust in democratic majoritarian institutions and organizations (parliament, political parties) may indicate a
slow hollowing of the people’s esteem for democratic principles, norms, procedures and institutions without eroding the general support for democracy as a whole.

These “objective” and “subjective” indices of democracy are still too rough to look into the structural developments within the different democratic institutions, organizations, and modes of policy making. They therefore have to be complemented by analyses which study specific challenges to democracy such as the decline of political parties, the relation between markets and democratic politics and policy making, the balance between individual liberties and collective physical security, the power of the media, etc.

**Strategy 3: Single analyses of major challenges to democracy**

Is there a crisis of political participation? A crisis of representation or rule of law? What about the question “who governs” in advanced democracies of the twenty-first century? These are topics and domains that can be investigated in specific comparative quantitative or qualitative studies. Even case studies can contribute to our knowledge.

Those partial analyses can be legion. Our research group at the Berlin Social Science Center is carrying out more than a dozen single studies analyzing mainly a sample of the European countries including the advanced Anglo-Saxon democracies. The results cannot be fully reported here, but they can be summarized in the following trends:

**Participation:**
- Electoral participation is declining.
- The social selectivity in electoral participation is significant and it is increasing.
- Indifference, alienation and electoral abstention are increasing.

**Representation:**
- Big parties (catch all parties, mass parties) are consistently losing voters. However this does not have a negative effect on government stability. It increases the chances for smaller innovative parties to emerge and to establish. It also increases the range of choices for the voters, but tends to enforce the social fragmentation of society.
- Parties do not sufficiently respond to programmatic demands of the voters.
- In parliaments, the lower third tends to be underrepresented in its interests and values.

**Civic Rights:**
- Human rights tend to be violated more often in consolidated democracies than it is widely assumed.
- In many democracies (i.e. USA, UK, France), the fragile balance between liberty and civic rights on the one side and security demands on the other side tilts in favor of security.

**Governing:**
- The triumph of neoliberal capitalism has problematically restricted the governing capacity of democratically elected governments in financial and fiscal policies.
- The Euro Crisis has led to a disempowerment of national governments in Southern Europe. Non-elected organizations or foreign governments determine to a large extent the sovereign power of domestic democratic institutions to decide. Particularly national parliaments have lost discretionary power.
- The last decades have witnessed a centralization of ownership and control over the mass media. The commercialization of TV and Radio has led to declining quality in news and political debates. Political leaders have paid increasing attention to those who control the media. However, “media have less influence than media malaise theory claim” (Newton/Merz 2013).

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15 A German and English version will be published next year.
5. Conclusion

This seems to be a long list of malaises of modern democracies. It confirms to some extent what Habermas, Offe, and Crouch have brought forward to substantiate that there is a crisis of democracy. However, apart from the substantial losses in the capacity to govern in financial and fiscal policies most of the other challenges to democracy appear to be of lesser significance than the theorists have proclaimed. And: they have to be discounted with significant improvements concerning the rights and the role of women and of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. Moreover, the talk about “THE” crisis of democracy, or the crisis of mature democracies, or of late-capitalist democracies, or of post-democracy is overgeneralizing some single crisis tendencies in some countries in order to substantiate the grand thesis of a general crisis of democracy as a whole, i.e. the crisis of a type of political regime. It neglects the fact that some of the diagnosed crisis phenomena may exist in some countries, but do not exist in others. Social selectivity in voting is high in the US and Switzerland, but not in Belgium, Sweden, or Denmark (democracybarometer.org); the loss of national autonomy in financial and fiscal policies may be dramatic in Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, but it is not in the US and not so much in Germany; the people's support for “their” democracy is very high in Switzerland, rather high in the US, but not very high in Italy, and extremely low in today Greece; the decline of catch-all parties may be a problem in Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, but it is not in UK or USA (single member district electoral systems protect them).

What is the quintessence of this paper? I posed the general question: is there a crisis of democracy? I tried to refine a concept of democracy which is sensitive enough to capture challenges to democracy and developments in different spheres of democracy which cannot be discovered by minimalist Schumpeterian concepts of democracy. I also tried to clarify the concept of “crisis” which is one of the most used, but least clear terms in democracy research, if not in political science as a whole. Even after this attempt of making analytically sense of the concept, it is not clear how we can determine the threshold of crisis or how can we define when a crisis begins and when it ends. Nevertheless, after the critical review of theory and concepts, I proposed a threefold research strategy:

- Consult the indices of quality of democracy as expert judgments.
- Consult surveys which ask the people - the demos - whether they are satisfied with their democracy and whether they trust its institutions.
- Conduct partial analyses of single institutions, organizations, and procedures of democracy.

The results of these three layers of empirical research are far from being as clear as sweeping diagnoses of “post-democracy” on the one side or the “critical citizen” and “trendless fluctuations” argument on the other side suggest.

The quality indices are conclusive: there is no crisis of democracy, even not a decline in quality of democracy. The Index of Freedom House and Polity IV are so rough that they cannot observe any fluctuation over the last three decades of the 30 best democracies. According to Freedom House they are stable, the quality of democracy has remained on the highest level of the score scale, they do not change with regard to their democratic quality. The Democracy Barometer, which is able to distinguish the quality of democracy in Berlusconis Italy and the United States under George W. Bush from Finland, Sweden or Switzerland, something that the two other indices are not, sees the aggregate quality of the 30 best democracies in 2007 even slightly higher than in 1990. On this aggregated research level of objective quality indicators, the answer is clear: there is no crisis of democracy.

If one asks the people on level 2 about their democracy, the answer is split. On the one side, the citizens are slightly more satisfied with their democracy in 2010 than they were in 1973

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16 The new data covering the years till 2010, which will be released soon, confirm these findings.
On the other side, they are most critical against the core institutions of democracy: governments, parliaments, and above all political parties.

The analysis on level 3 has shown that there are weaknesses of and challenges to democracy: there is an increasing social selectivity in voting, there is an asymmetric representation of the higher and middle classes compared to the lower third of society, deregulated capitalism has restricted the sovereignty of democratic governance, and supranational regimes interfere into national democracies and their policy making with a rather thin democratic legitimacy. However, most of these challenges (with the exception of financial markets) have not been so serious that it would be justified to speak of a crisis of democracy.

Through these analyses some rifts appeared: the rift between political theorists and empiricists; the rift between democratic scholars and the people and finally the rift within the people itself. How do we deal with them if we want to answer the crisis question? The discrepancy between empirical analysis and political theory is smaller than we assumed in the literature review on the subject in our introduction. Our analyses reveal that there are trends of democratic decline, however not in each partial regime of democracy and not in each country, and with less intensity than the crisis and post-democracy debate suggests. But if we accept the judgments of experts can we neglect the citizens' view that they are highly or fairly satisfied with democracy with good theoretical reasoning? Do we solve the puzzle by arguing that the normative substance of democracy is in crisis (crisis theory and partial analyses) while the people do not care or do not see it? One obvious interpretation is: many people do not exactly know what democracy means and their satisfaction is also nurtured by the absence of preferable alternatives to democratic regimes. The high trust in non-majoritarian institutions such as the police and the legal system compared to the low trust in democratic majoritarian institutions and organizations (parliament, political parties) may indicate a slow hollowing out of support of the citizens for core democratic institutions without eroding the general support for democracy as a whole. More to the point: could the democratic substance of democracy and its institutions erode while the demos does not acknowledge it or does not care? What about the simple supposition that citizens may also be cognitively dissonant? Probably it is a combination of all. If we assume that the demos is ignorant as described above, the question arises: is democracy then in crisis, as democratic scholars would argue? Or is the demos itself the main arbiter about what democratic is and what it is not? If the latter is true, then core democratic institutions would be in crisis, but democracy as a whole would not be. One last word to the "people" as they appear in the classical "satisfaction-with-democracy" surveys. "The" people is a myth. It may be and it is as we have shown that the majority of people are satisfied with democracy. But the satisfaction is unevenly distributed across classes. The higher educated and the middle classes are much more satisfied with democracy and the meaningfulness of their own participation than the lower classes are. The aggregate figure simply conceals the growing class bias in present democracy which can be interpreted as a major challenge to democracy and a sign of hollowing out the democratic core principle of actual political equality.

These interpretations raise the more fundamental question: which link exists between stability/instability and crisis of democracy? If we talk about acute crises of democracies, the answer is clear: instability or destabilization of democracy is a major feature of the crisis of democracy. At this point, actors come into play. Only if powerful antidemocratic movements or parties emerge and mobilize against democracy can we talk about an acute crisis of democracy. This is not even the case in Greece today, since the left may be anti-European, but it is not antidemocratic. If powerful antidemocratic forces do not emerge and there is a slow creeping hollowing out of democratic substance beyond the knowledge and consciousness of the citizens, or with their permissive consensus, than we should speak of a latent crisis of democracy, even if the majority of the people is still "satisfied with democracy". However, the conceptual question we raised above is not yet solved: when does a crisis of democracy begin and when does it end?

A more precise exploration of these phenomena seems to be particularly important in order to find out if there are subterranean tectonic shifts under the surface of overall satisfaction with democracy, and if it can lead to a change in the understanding of democratic legitimacy among the population in the long run: Increasing portions of the citizens will abstain from voting, parties lose their members, markets dominate democratic politics, democratic governments are deprived of the proper means to govern and the people will remain being satisfied. This is a much more probable
scenario than an acute crisis of democracy or its collapse. But it will change the functioning of democratic institutions, organizations, procedures and even some principles of democratic governing in the 21st century. A theoretical dilemma will emerge: the people, the last instance and arbiter of democracy, may democratically accept (e.g. by elections or documented in surveys) those changes, which democratic scholars will consider as undemocratic. The rift between democratic theorists and the citizens regarding what democracy is and is not may then increase in the future.
6. References


Kosselleck, Reinhart (2006):


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7. Appendix

Figure 1: Democracy Barometer

![Quality of Democracy (30 „best“ democracies)](image)

Note: The figure exhibits the yearly average over all 30 countries covered by the Democracy Barometer.

Figure 2: Development of partial regimes of Embedded Democracy 1990-2007

![development of partial regimes of Embedded Democracy 1990-2007](image)

Note: The figure shows yearly means for the 30 blueprint democracies.
Figure 3: Development of partial regimes of Embedded Democracy 1990-2007 (Participation and Representation separately)

Note: The figure shows yearly means for the 30 blueprint democracies.

Figure 4 and 5: Eurobarometer: Satisfaction with democracy

Very or fairly satisfied with the way democracy works in ...

Eurobarometer surveys

Rounded figures, weighted data, missing values included for calculation, EC / EU in its historic composition (SESIS, 2016-13-18)
Figure 6: Decline of catch-all parties

Figure 7: Trust in majoritarian and non-majoritarian institutions
Figure 8: Voter turnout in Western and Eastern Europe

Source: Database „Elections, Parties, Governments“ of the Research Unit „Democracy“ at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB), 10/04/2012.