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

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Gerald Stourzh-Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Menschenrechte und der Demokratie

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Representative democracy as a contested concept

Introduction

- Long-term history of democracy as a contested concept
- Conceptual history of democracy on the basis of parliamentary records

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

- 'Democracy' in the British parliamentary context in the eighteenth century
- The challenge of the French Revolution to the Westminster Parliament
- Trends in the conceptual history of democracy in the nineteenth century

The early twentieth century

- Entangled parliamentary revolutions in Britain and Germany, 1917–19: Redefining democracy, the people and parliament
- Trends in the conceptual history of democracy in the twentieth century

The early twenty-first century

- From consensus on more participation to polarisation over direct democracy: Redefinitions of representative democracy in the United Kingdom, France and Germany in the beginning of the 21st century

Long-term history of democracy as a contested concept

Associations of democracy have changed dramatically from negative to positive

- For much of history, a distinctly pejorative connotation
- Since WW2 supporters of practically all ideologies have identified themselves as democrats though still from divergent perspectives.

Social sciences: democracy as objectively estimable and measurable

Historical research: attention to the language of of democracy by historical actors

- The history of political thought: conceptualizations by political philosophers
- Conceptual history: analysis of meanings attached to democracy in the everyday language of politics in a variety of temporal and national contexts

Conceptual history of democracy on the basis of parliamentary records

Not based on any normatively defined and supposedly universal analytical concept of 'democracy'

Analysis focuses on the uses of the term 'democracy' and related vocabulary by historical actors themselves as part of their political action

Challenge: Meanings assigned to the word democracy have changed radically through history

- We are seldom measuring exactly the same thing in the longer term if searching with a single term.
- A broader set of words and changing vocabularies need to be considered.

Parliamentary debates as sources for comparative history

Meeting places for a high variety of political discourses and concepts moving in societies

- Discourses from other forums recycled
- Sources on key political categories by representative political elites claiming to speak for the people
- Allow the contextual analysis of everyday language of politics in decision-making situations

Facilitate diachronic and synchronous international comparisons and observations on conceptual transfers

Digitisation -> computer-assisted analyses

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

Agents of the People: Democracy and Popular Sovereignty in British and Swedish Parliamentary and Public Debates, 1734–1800 (Brill: Boston & Leiden 2010)

- Parliamentary debates on the political role and representation of the people and on democracy

- The persistence of the classical, pejorative, conception of democracy throughout the eighteenth century

- The gradual revaluation of the concept of democracy in the British parliament prior to the French Revolution

- A clash between British and French concepts of democracy and demonstrates the first parliamentary definitions of the sovereignty of parliament as the sovereignty of the people

- Parliamentary discourse in the context of public debates

- The evolutionary role the British Parliament played in redefining the concept of democracy
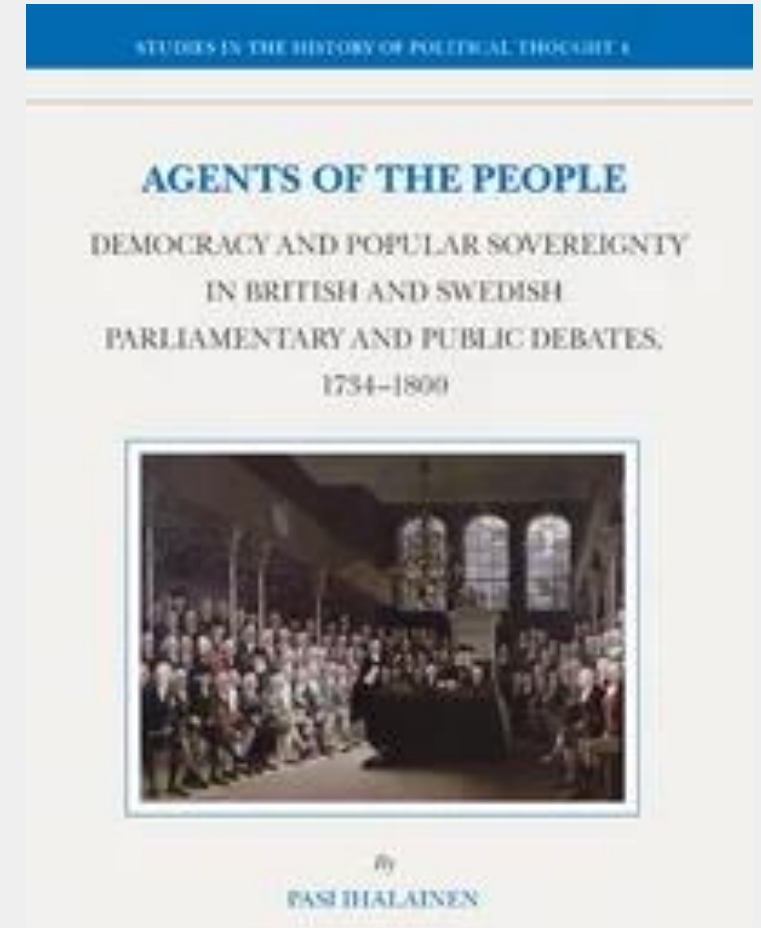
'Democracy' in the British parliamentary context in the eighteenth century

Democracy was not a commonly used term: not an all-encompassing concept

In classical political thought, 'democracy' only as an element of the mixed constitution, side by side with monarchy and aristocracy

- not as a legitimate form of government alone
- a potentially dangerous innovation
- rather the most miserable form of government

The American colonists never claimed to be fighting for "democracy" but for the representation of the people

- the "democratic element" of the British constitution began nevertheless to feature more prominently in Westminster
- calls for parliamentary reform

Radical publications defended a democratic government over a monarchical one and represented the people as the real sovereign

- Richard Price: "omnipotence" in the people; all government as the execution of "the will of the people"

A more optimistic and future-oriented concept of democracy was gradually emerging.

The challenge of the French Revolution to the Westminster Parliament

The challenge of the French Revolution

The Revolution as 'one of the key moments of democracy'

- yet 'democracy' was a minor concept during the Revolution

The Revolution radicalized

- 'democracy' beyond classical constitutional theory
- associated with revolutionary tumults and the principle of the sovereignty of the people
- combined with the idea of the representation of the people
- Didier Thirion of the radical Mountain Party: 'we want all the liberty that really exists only in democracy; if our mass prevents us from having pure democracy, let us at least have representative democracy, that is to say, a real people of representatives, assembled unceasingly to look after our interests, which will be their own'. (1793)
- Jacobin constitution (1793): "a democratic republic"
- Maximilien Robespierre (1794): combined "democracy", "republic" and "representation", presenting "representative democracy" as the goal

Confrontations in the Westminster Parliament

The French revolutionaries' more radical understanding of democracy -> contestation on the concept in the British Parliament

- Burke (1790): an undesirable kind of democracy; attacked the British radicals
- PM Pitt (1792) as a response to Thomas Paine: the British system was a "proper democracy" with "a representative assembly"
- PM Pitt (1793): the war against France waged over the way in which democracy should be understood
- Fox (1793): "the people are the sovereign in every state"
- The Earl of Mansfield 1794: "[w]e know, and did know even before the sad example of France, that a wild and lawless democracy is the sharpest tyranny that can be endured by man"
- Lord Minto (1799): "the sovereignty of parliament" was synonymous with "the sovereignty of the people

'Democracy' after the French Revolution
(see also Bonin, Ihalainen & Haaparinne)

Reconsiderations of the political role of the people also in representative systems which experienced no open revolution

- a transnational and evolutionary (rather than merely French revolutionary) process.

References to democracy became more common and regularly debated towards the end of the eighteenth century

- yet in terms of scale and content very different from meanings assigned to democracy in later times

The French Revolution diversified the use of the concept, paving way for more optimistic interpretations of democracy

- yet the majority of those using the concept continued to do so in a pejorative sense.

Trends in the conceptual history of democracy in the nineteenth century (see also Bonin, Ihalainen & Haaparinne)

Mixed government gradually replaced first by representative, popular or parliamentary government and finally by democratic government

- France: *démocratie* as equality in a social sense, merged with 'republic'
- Britain: negative connotations until at least the 1880s, the model of 'parliamentary' government preferable
- Germany: a foreign concept in a constitutional monarchy
- The influence of Tocqueville's "American democracy" on European debates
- Debate on "democracy in crisis" since the 1880s

The First World War as 'a fight for democracy'

By the late 1910s: 'democracy' as a representative popular regime with formal equality before the law and universal (male) suffrage

Entangled parliamentary revolutions in Britain and Germany, 1917–19: Redefining democracy, the people and parliament

The Springs of Democracy: National and Transnational Debates on Constitutional Reform in the British, German, Swedish and Finnish Parliaments, 1917-1919, Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki 2017

- The First World War
  - -> discrepancies between the people's sacrifices and their chances for political participation
  - -> crises of legitimacy in several European polities.
- Comparison between British, German, Swedish and Finnish parliamentary and party press debates on the contested concepts of war, reform, revolution, democracy (rule by the people) and parliamentarism.
- Special attention to transnational links between national debates
- Focus here on Britain and Germany only
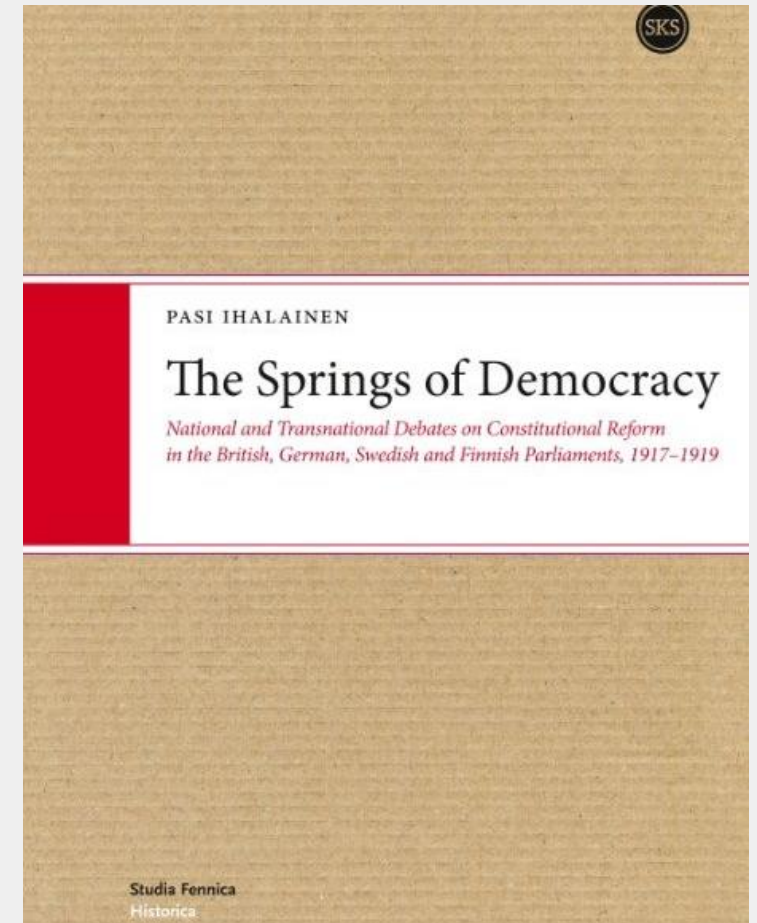
War and reform in Britain and Germany

The British reform process earlier and more consensual

- To win the war and prepare for reconstruction
- The Conservatives adapted themselves in wartime circumstances
- The moderation, integration and nation-centred views of the Labour Party
- A model for reformists in Germany and Sweden (Finland)

Interconnections between British and German reform debates

- Similar pressures rising from the war
- The influence of war propaganda challenging 'Western democracy' and 'Prussianism' -> the war as a conflict on the proper form of democracy
- The reform processes became discursively intertwined from March 1917 -> rightist theories of domestic treason in Germany

The Russian Revolution, Britain and Germany

Democracy in the 'West' defined in relation to 'the Russian democracy'

- Radical revolutionary ideas challenged 'bourgeois' and 'Western' parliamentarism -> redefinitions

Britain: suffrage reform as an illegitimate 'revolution' >< a 'parliamentary revolution' as a substitute to socialist

Germany: suffrage reform destruction of the established system >< a moderate Social Democratic revolution as an alternative to the Russian

Ideological variations in understanding democracy

- representative or direct democracy or soviet rule
- 'bourgeois democracy', political, social and economic democracy or dictatorship of the proletariat?

Redefining democracy: Britain

War propaganda about fighting for democracy affected parliamentary discourse -> also limited women's suffrage

The lack of vision of a transnational democratic breakthrough changing the world and Britain (unlike in other countries)

Anti-democratic views not articulated

- Nationalistic rhetoric used to justify the reform
- the majority of the Conservatives moving to the side of democracy
- the Conservatives and Liberals defined the prevalent political system as democracy
- debates on the domestic implications of democracy saved for postwar

'I have no fear of democracy. I welcome it, but with this proviso – that the democracy must be, a true and not a false one. It must be a democracy that is really representative. . . . We want the co-operation of all classes of this country. . . We want to get rid as far as possible of friction and antagonism.' **Baron Parmoor (Conservative)**

Redefining democracy: Germany

'Democracy' open to dispute

- 'Western' democracy generally rejected, nevertheless women's suffrage
- some socialists and liberals brought up strengths in 'democracies'
- the right rejected all democratisation as treason

Most parties still hesitant about democratisation in late 1918

- SPD monopolised as a normative and programmatic concept, which reinforced old associations between democracy and socialism
- Eduard David (1919): 'the most democratic democracy in the world'

Attempts to vernacularise/nationalise democracy

- the notion that popular will was more than the mere will of a parliamentary majority (*Volksstaat*)
- *Volksgemeinschaft* as an alternative

The Treaty of Versailles deteriorated 'democracy' further

- Germans as victims of Western 'democracy'

'Democracy' in Western parliaments after the Russian Revolution

Debates related to transitions to parliamentary governments based on democratic suffrage were primarily nation-state-centred

- the exceptional international events of spring 1917 increased transnational thinking

Britain: evolution of the established popular government

- special features in the process (the limited senses of democracy; isolationalism) visible through comparison

Germany: no reason to talk about wartime parliamentarisation

- democracy, the political role of the people, democracy and parliamentarism were conceptualised in specifically German ways delimiting the legitimacy of parliamentary democracy

Comparative analysis challenges the exceptional, self-evident or self-sufficient nature of the national reform processes

- not just in small countries such as Finland and Sweden but also in Britain and Germany

Trends in the conceptual history of democracy in the twentieth century

New democracies challenged by authoritarian movements and anti-democratic discourses

- national parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union: crisis discourses -> redefinitions of representative government as 'parliamentary' or 'representative democracy' yet ideological divides

After the WW2, new European democracies designed to prevent the re-emergence of authoritarian forms of democracy (Müller 2011; Conway 2020)

Since the 1960s, trust in politicians and parliaments decreased as collective values have fractured (Inglehart 1977); measured political activity declined (Mair 2013; Torney 2020).

- changes in communication transformed the relationship between the represented and representatives (Best & Vogel 2020)
- alternative modes of representation, calls for participatory and direct democracy. populism (Setälä 1999; Mudde 2004; Vibert 2007; Beetham 2011)
- from representative democracy to "audience democracy" or "monitory democracy": representative claims presented by an increasing number of non-elected actors (Manin 1997; Keane 2009; Saward 2010)

From consensus on more participation to polarisation over direct democracy

Redefinitions of representative democracy in the United Kingdom, France and Germany in the beginning of the 21st century

By Hugo Bonin, Pasi Ihalainen & Zachris Haaparinne

Democracy in crisis?

How exceptional is "the crisis of democracy" of the early 2000s?

Are occasional tensions between the people and parliament a normal – even essential – feature of representative democracy?

How has parliamentary / representative democracy been reforming itself to respond to changing societal circumstances?

How has the dominant form of institutionalised (representative) democracy, shifted in the early twenty-first century in the United Kingdom, France and Germany?

How have political actors argued for the need to change democracy and what kinds of complementary elements have they demanded and on what grounds?

Distant reading bigrams in UK parliament

The traditionally strong parliamentary system and associations between parliament and democracy reflected in discourses on democracy

'Parliamentary democracy' dominated and 'representative democracy' was consistently among most common bigrams

Complementary forms since 1997: 'direct democracy' and 'participatory / participative democracy' not very common, 'e-democracy' and 'digital democracy' trendy

Figure: People & Parliament, British corpus, 20 most common bigrams of democracy

Varieties of 'democracy' in the UK parliament, 1990-2019

Fig. 1. UK, both chambers, relative term frequencies of the selected bigrams of varieties of democracy, 1990-2019. The inclusion of the mainstream and alternative qualifiers of democracy in the same graph demonstrates the relative rarity of the latter in Britain in comparison to France and Germany.

Source: People & Parliament, British coprpus: frequency of the search term.

Frequency of '"representative democracy", "parliamentary democracy", "participatory democracy" "participative democracy", "e democracy" "digital democracy", "direct democracy"' by Date (n of tokens, normalized by terms)
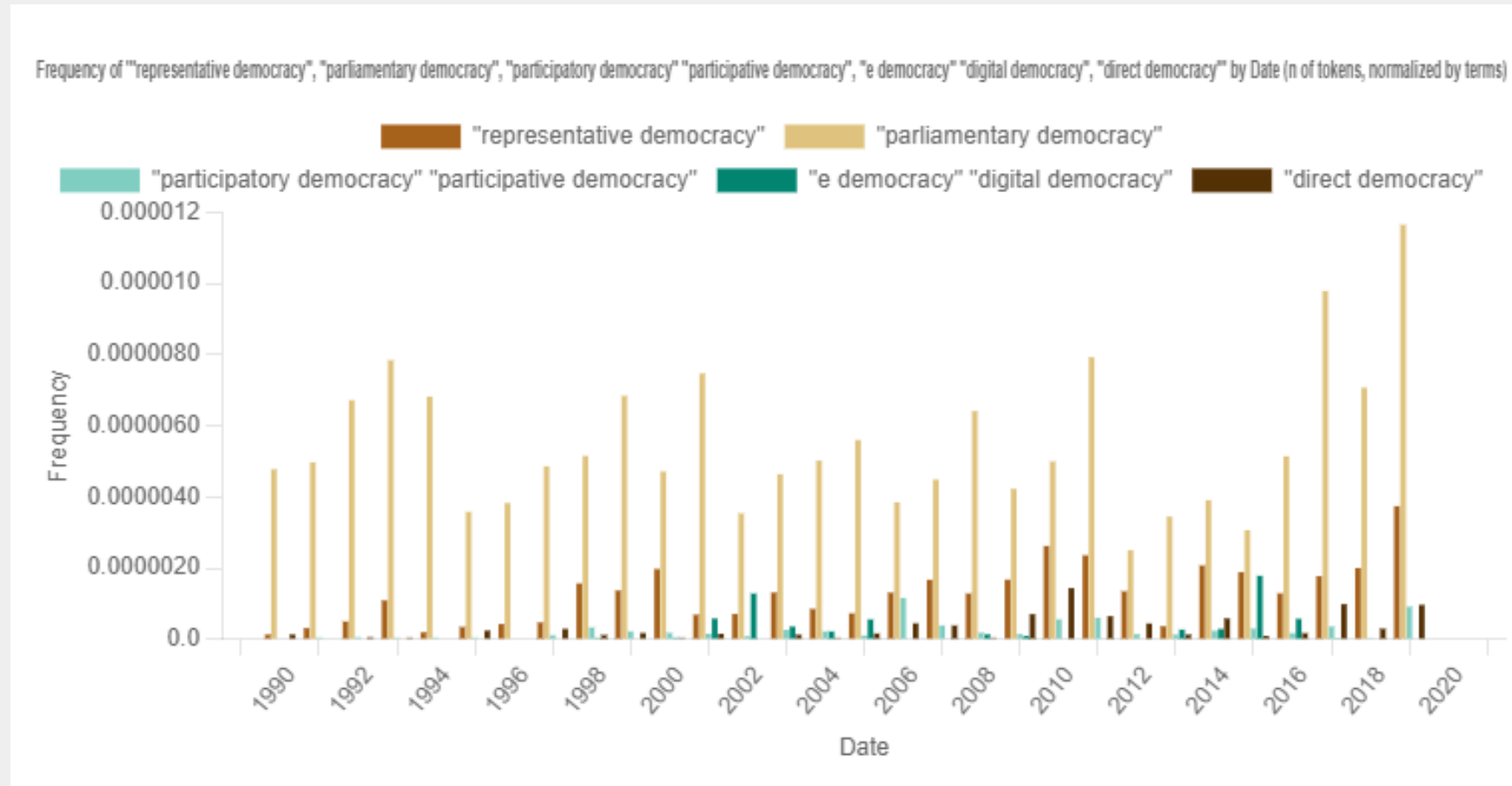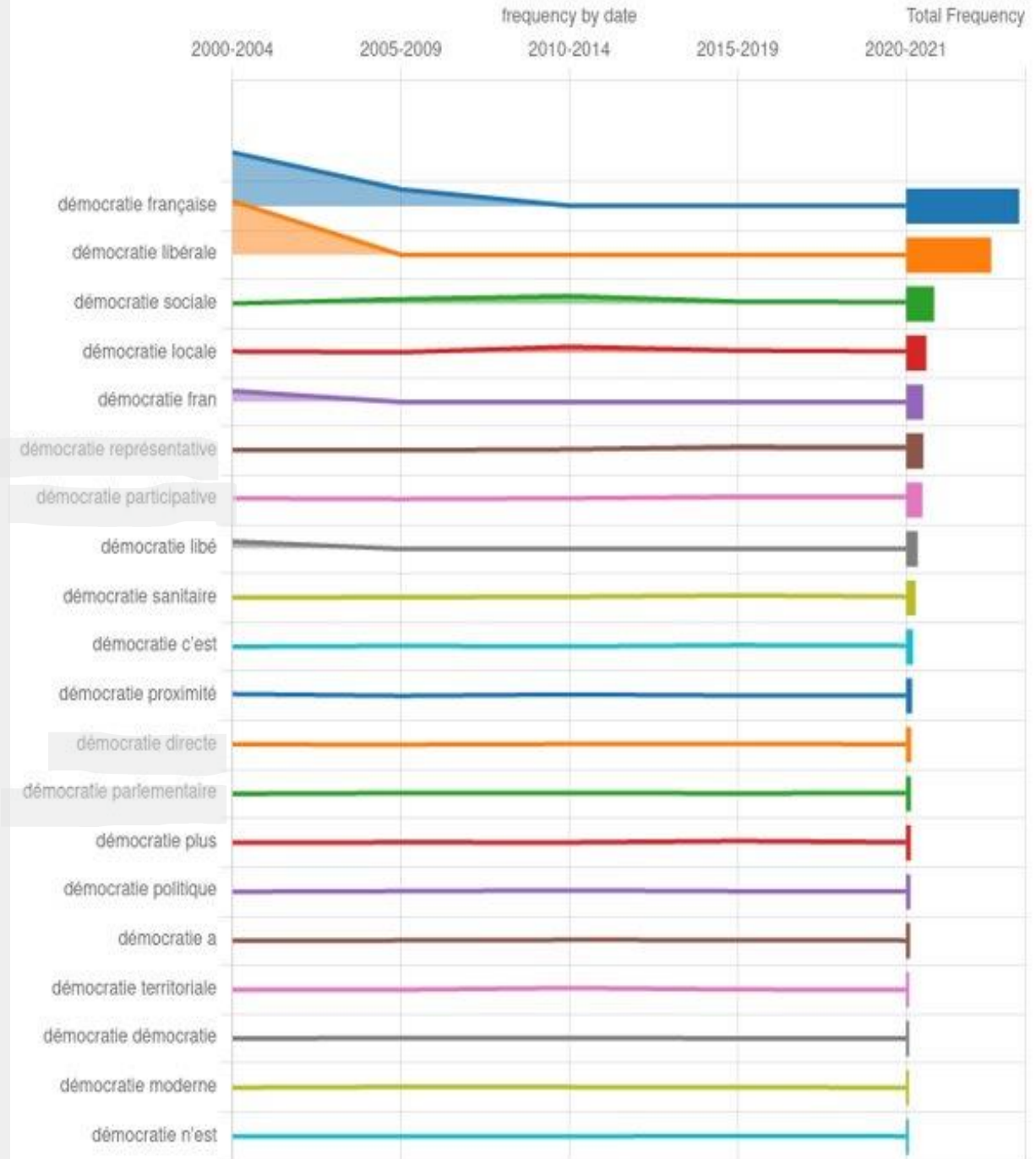
Distant reading bigrams in the French parliament

France as semi-presidential republic since 1958: weaker parliament? Obvious constitutional pressures.

Existing institutions: *'démocratie représentative'*, *'démocratie parlementaire'*

Alternatives: *'démocratie participative'*, *'démocratie directe'* high on the lists of most common bigrams

Figure: People & Parliament, French corpus, 20 most common bigrams of democracy

frequency by date

Total Frequency

2000-2004   2005-2009   2010-2014   2015-2019   2020-2021

démocratie française
démocratie libérale
démocratie sociale
démocratie locale
démocratie fran
démocratie représentative
démocratie participative
démocratie libé
démocratie sanitaire
démocratie c'est
démocratie proximité
démocratie directe
démocratie parlementaire
démocratie plus
démocratie politique
démocratie a
démocratie territoriale
démocratie démocratie
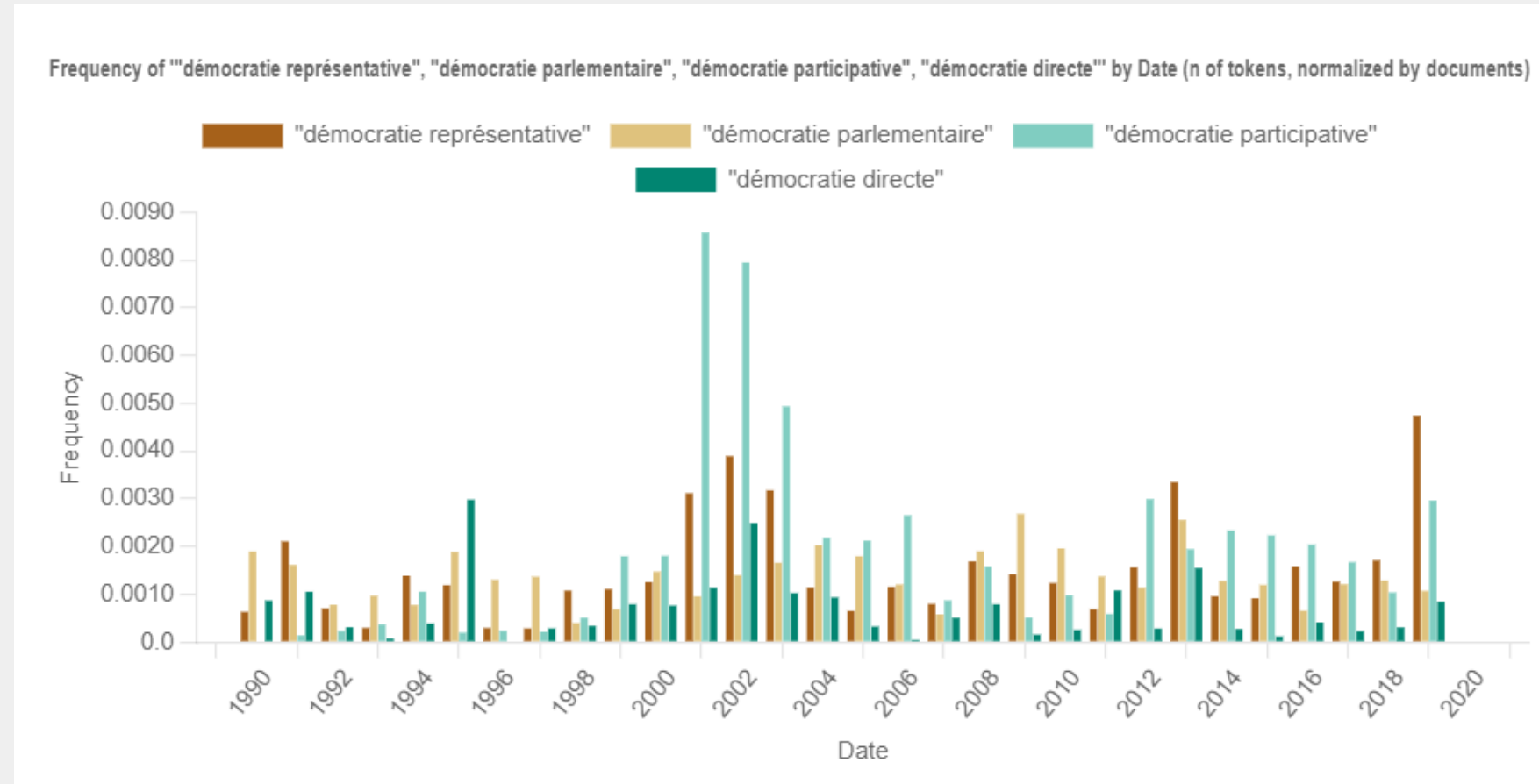démocratie moderne
démocratie n'est

Varieties of 'democracy' in the French parliament, 1990-2019

Figure 2. France, both chambers, relative term frequencies of the selected bigrams of varieties of democracy, 1990-2019.

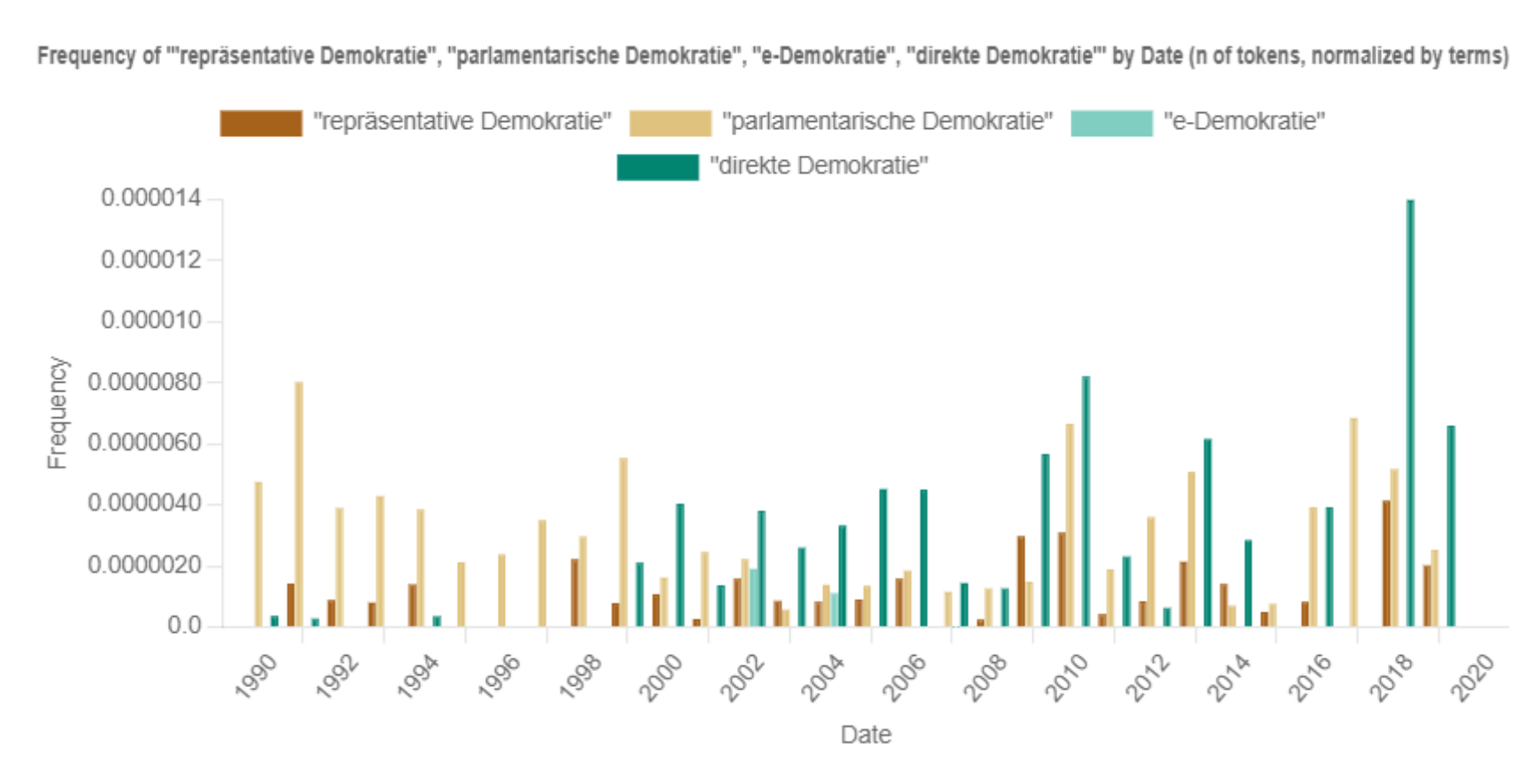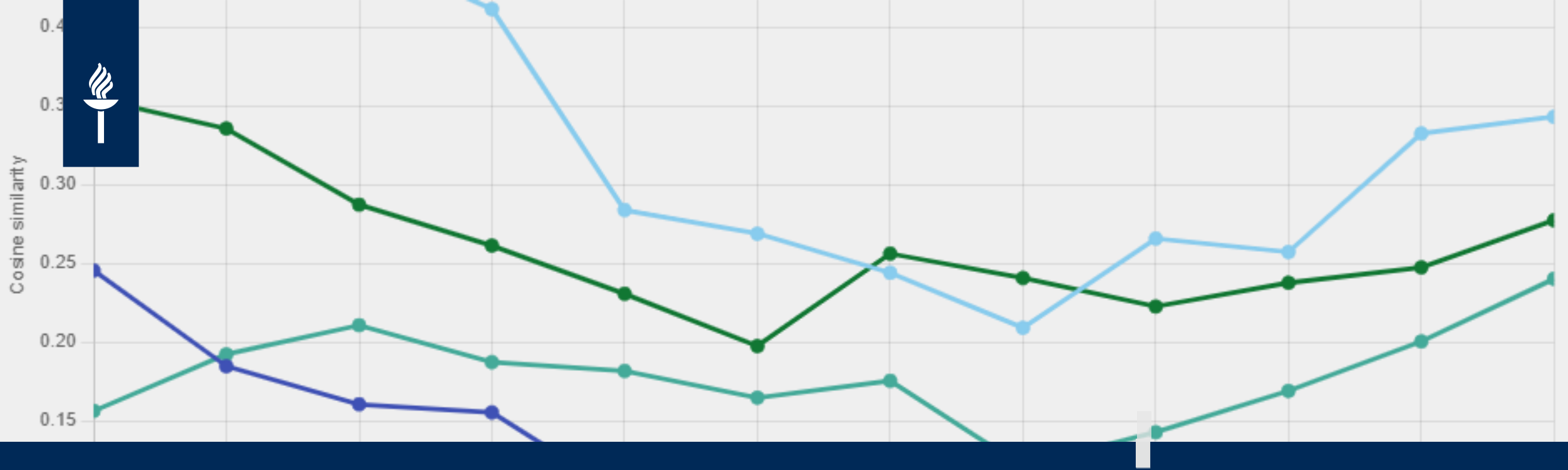Source: People & Parliament, French corpus, frequency of the search term.

Frequency of '"démocratie représentative", "démocratie parlementaire", "démocratie participative", "démocratie directe"' by Date (n of tokens, normalized by documents)

Distant reading bigrams in the German parliament

Traditions doubtful about parliaments as representatives of the popular will; anti-democratic traditions

Democratic innovations curbed by the Basic Law of 1949 as an antidote to excesses of direct popular rule

References to '*parliamentarische*' and '*repräsentative Demokratie*' remained rather stable since the German unification.

There has been a noticeable rise in the intensity of discussion on '*direkte Demokratie*', bypassing conventional forms. The bigram covers elements that might be called 'participatory' in Britain and France.

Figure: People & Parliament, German corpus, 20 most common bigrams of democracy

frequency by date | Total Frequency

1990-1994 · 1995-1999 · 2000-2004 · 2005-2009 · 2010-2014 · 2015-2019 · 2020-2021

uns demokrati
direkt demokrati
parlamentar demokrati
freiheit demokrati
mehr demokrati
reprasentativ demokrati
dass demokrati
wehrhaft demokrati
rechtsstaat demokrati
menschenrecht demokrati
deutsch demokrati
feind demokrati
demokrati demokrati
lebend demokrati
programm demokrati
europa demokrati
starkung demokrati
toleranz demokrati
liberal demokrati
stark demokrati

Varieties of 'democracy' in the German parliament, 1990-2019

Fig. 3. Germany, relative term frequencies of the selected bigrams of varieties of democracy, 1990-2019.

Source: People & Parliament, German corpus, frequency of the search term. The terms are stemmed for the consideration of cases.

Frequency of '"repräsentative Demokratie", "parlamentarische Demokratie", "e-Demokratie", "direkte Demokratie"' by Date (n of tokens, normalized by terms)

Towards more participation in the early 2000s

'The era of pure representative democracy is coming to an end': Suggested updates in UK

A widely felt need to reform parliamentary democracy: new driving forces of democratic change

Calls to advance participatory democracy during Tony Blair's premiership (1997-2007)

Optimism about reforming parliamentary democracy; e-democracy, involving citizens at local level

Referendum as a controversial form of participation, especially with reference to the EEC/EU: possible damage of 'plebiscitary democracy' to parliamentary democracy; direct democracy used to overrule parliamentary majority?

Eurosceptics accused the EU of democratic deficit: Neither representative nor participative democracy in forms proposed by the EU would do.

The era of pure representative democracy is coming to an end (Peter Mandelson (Lab), March 1998)

The e-revolution ... must deliver for our democracy... [to] create something that revives our tired, downtrodden Parliament and makes us, once again, the forum of our nation ...'[and create conditions for] 'a new era of genuine participation in our democracy' (Graham Allen (Lab), HC, 12 March 2002)

Although our system of representative democracy ... is at the heart of our constitution, it can be enhanced by devolving more power directly to the people (Gordon Brown (Lab), Chancellor the Exchequer, HC, 3 March 2007)

'A participatory and direct democracy': Local focus and minor reforms in France

Focus on local context (proximity; decentralisation) in debates on "*démocratie participative*" and "*démocratie directe*"

Vague democratic innovations mentioned as complementary to representative democracy; 'participation' and 'direct' often went hand in hand (local elections, councils and budgeting)

Finding a balance between direct or participatory and representative democracy emphasized; needed to be subordinated to elected representatives

The prospective European Constitution -> discussions remained francocentric

What was retained by the Senate and then by the National Assembly is an interesting element, in particular for the animation of local life, with the right of petition, the possibilities of organising local consultations and local referendums. This goes in the direction of a wider participation of the population. As for major national issues, they are dealt with both through the powers of parliament. (Dominique Perden, Justice Minister, UDF, about the 2003 constitutional reform: Sénat, 11 December 2002).

'We, the parliament, are the boss': Calls for adding direct democratic elements to the Basic Law in Germany

Unlike in Britain or France, the reformists appealed to the proposal for the European Constitution as a model for rethinking democracy in Germany, including referendums.

All parliamentary parties except CDU spoke strongly in favour of increased direct democracy.

Examples from local and *Länder* level and Switzerland; *e-Demokratie*, Internet petitions

History-political references commonplace

Europeanisation always means parliamentarisation and parliamentarisation only goes with democratisation. (Axel Schäfer, SPD, BT, 22 September 2006).

In a parliamentary democracy, we, the parliament, are the boss. That is the normality. (Andreas Schmidt, CDU, BT, 14 December 2006.)
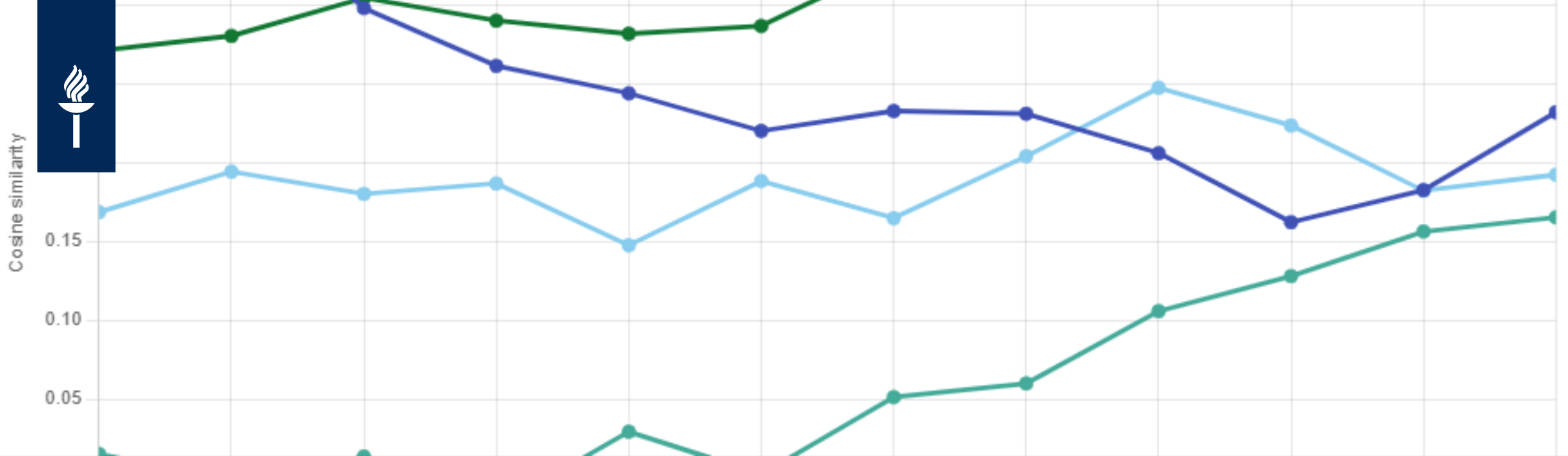
Back to defences of representative democracy in the late 2010s

'A shock to the system': Brexit and parliamentary democracy

Many MPs had understood representative democracy and democratic innovations as compatible: even participatory rather than just representative democracy; referendum as participatory democracy and applicable to representative democracy …

Declining interest in e- or digital democracy

The Brexit Referendum of 2016 -> the will of the people as expressed in the referendum >< parliamentary sovereignty

Implications of the 2016 referendum on representative democracy

We took a choice to ask the people this very big question, because I believe in our parliamentary democracy but when it comes to the very big decisions I think it is right to consult the people (David Cameron (Con), HC, 27 June 2016).

Direct democracy, as we have just learned, can be a shock to the system, particularly when most of the elected representatives disagree with the result (Bernard Jenkins (Con), HC, 20 April 2017).

The whole concept of parliamentary representation is itself on trial. It is on trial in a way that perhaps none of us had ever envisaged. (Robert Buckland (Con), Justice Secretary, HC, 22 October 2019)

'For a democracy more representative': Polarisation at the national level in France

Move of direct and participative democracy from local context to national level

A stronger distinction between direct and participative democracy and a more polarized understanding on referendums

Brexit, Macron 2017 election, Yellow Vests movement, Great National Debate and Citizens Convention for Climate as factors -> 'popular sovereignty' >< 'representative sovereignty'

Left-wing MPs (and a few extreme right) in favour of direct democracy; participation as alternative for mainstream parties

From *the term 'participatory democracy', …, is* not very precisely defined. (13 July 2018)…to *the conclusions of the Great National Debate should encourage us to reflect on the inclusion of participatory democracy processes in our texts* (Nicole Belloubet, Minister of Justice, LREM, NA, 3 April 2019).

This form of participatory democracy remains to be developed at national level, inspired in particular by the success of the Great National Debate (Édouard Philippe, Prime Minister, LREM, NA, 9 April 2019).

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Threatening 'crisis of our representative democracy': Countering a populist challenge in Germany

AfD radicalized calls for direct democracy with populist calls for popular sovereignty.

AfD accused of abusing historical memory, exercising extra-parliamentary opposition and attempting to turn direct democracy populistically against parliamentary democracy

Rhetoric of welcoming increased participation but little concrete measure; increased caution with referendums

Strengthening defenses of established parliamentary democracy in all other parties

... through direct democracy, parliament and government are even more committed to their first task of serving the people of the state (Staatsvolk). Direct democracy is also always a control instance of the citizens vis-à-vis the political decision-makers. (Alice Weidel, AfD, BT, 21 March 2018)

Direct democracy does not mean that it is more democratic than representative democracy. In fact, the opposite is often the case. ... any strengthening of direct democracy is at the same time a weakening of parliament. (Christoph Vries, CDU, BT, 19 April 2018)

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

Democracy remains a contested concept redefined in representative governments by parliaments in interaction with public and academic debate

Much of the discussion on democracy in parliaments focused on improving representative democracy through a range of procedures and institutions.

A rising discourse and apparent consensus about the need for increased participation in the early 2000s -> polarisation over direct democracy as either a way to control representative democracy or as a threat to it in the late 2010s

Transnational aspects: shared and cross-national structural changes such as overall societal transformations, media developments, European integration and the rise of populism, including dramatic processes such as Brexit (yet direct references rare)

Redefinitions of representative democracy: The early 2000s

Generally felt need to respond to calls for more participation in representative democracy.

Existing direct democratic practices at the local or regional level as justification for applying them at the national level.

The rise of the internet: increasing variety of direct communication opening new possibilities for participation.

Democratic innovations often framed through the notions of direct and/or participatory democracy, yet mostly understood as complementing rather than challenging representative democracy.

Calls for referendums motivated by party-political interests to challenge the current parliamentary majority.

Redefinitions of representative democracy: The late 2010s

The Brexit referendum, populist tendencies, discourses on democratic innovations, new social movements -> more polarised conceptualisations of the alternative forms of democracy.

Most mainstream parties: direct democratic instruments endangering representative processes; participatory spaces continued to be valorized as long as they remained subordinate to representative ones.

UK: the will of the people expressed in the referendum >< parliamentary sovereignty; more critical views on direct democracy, less emphasis on participation, withering away of digital democracy discourses.

France: direct democracy demanded by extra-parliamentary movements and extreme parties >< participatory democracy as complementary to representative democracy.

Germany: calls for direct democracy instruments by extreme parties >< challenging representative democracy; debates on what exactly was meant with more citizen participation and direct democracy.

Thank you for your attention. Time for questions and answers.

- Academy of Finland Professor Project "Political Representation: Tensions between Parliament and the People from the Age of Revolutions to the 21st Century",
https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/hela/en/research/political-representation