

# Democracy and its Discontents: Why Representative Democracy is in Crisis today and how to respond

## ABSTRACT

Today the modern representative democracy based on the rule of the people is facing various challenges pointing at a state of crisis. Apart from an ongoing political debate about the theoretical concept, recent empirical data indicate that the traditional relation between the political system and the citizens is problematic as well. The overall research question is the following: Why is representative democracy in crisis and how should it be reconsidered and reformed? The political debate on the democratic model is structured in two forms of criticism to support the claim that the representative democracy needs to be rethought. First, theoretical criticism of Schumpeter, Green, Chomsky, Crouch and Brown is presented. Second, contemporary critics are Brennan and Tormey. Basis for this analysis is the social and political situation in Germany. Key terms are consumerism and the media, social inequality, public disappointment, distrust, disinterest, lack of political knowledge and the rise of populism. Several alternative responses to the crisis are evaluated. The first is an alternative perspective on the role of the citizen whereas the second calls to replace democracy with a form of epistocracy. This chapter develops a set of recommendations on how to respond to the crisis of representative democracy.

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# 1. Introduction

"The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter" - Winston Churchill<sup>2</sup>.

This quote does not draw a very positive picture of the functioning of modern democracies which are based on the rule of the people. The political debate on representative democracy and the role of the citizen has existed for several decades already and authors such as Simon Tormey (2010, p. 60) and Colin Crouch (2004, p.4) increasingly refer to a crisis of representative democracy. In addition, these authors rely on empirical data that indicate a growing gulf between the workings of representative democracy in theory and reality. Democracy's proper functioning is undermined by this clash. Where does the perceived discrepancy between reality and theory come from? So far, investigating into the reasons for the dilemma of representative democracy usually means seeking the weaknesses inside the system. Most theoretical criticism is based on an implicit and unquestioned idea on how democracy should function which I call the traditional model. Despite the continuous clash of theory and reality, this traditional concept of democracy is rarely questioned. To make sense of the political debate on the crisis, these pre-set values and ideas on democracy need to be looked into. Maybe democracy is inherently flawed? Maybe the talk about a crisis of democracy is endless unless the very concept and its values are rethought?

This thesis aims therefore not only at understanding present challenges to representative democracy and citizenship but as well at reconsidering their conceptualisation. If Churchill was correct, the crisis of representative democracy is mainly about the relation between the system and its citizens. It might be necessary to reform and rethink the political system and traditional value attributed to universal suffrage. To include both, challenges and potential remedies, the overall research question consists of two parts. First, why is representative democracy in crisis today and second, how could it be reconsidered and reformed? Investigating these aspects is of high political and social significance as they affect every citizen living in a western democracy.

The current political debate about western democracy is presented to show that the present political system based on universal suffrage is not functioning properly. To support this claim, the analysis is structured in the following way. First, an outline of traditional views on democracy and the role of citizens is given in order to construct a model of Western representative democracy as point of reference. Second, the political debate on the crisis of democracy is divided into theoretical and contemporary criticism of the democratic model. The choice of authors seeks to present the most interesting ways to bring out the weak spots of democracy. The theoretical criticism supports that the representative democratic model is inherently flawed. Contemporary criticism relies on empirical data and an analysis of the present situation which indicate a clash between democratic theory and reality. In the third section, responses to the crisis are given. With regard to conceptual criticism, the approaches of Joseph Schumpeter and Jeffery Green defend a

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<sup>2</sup>Retrieved

<<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/winstonchu105424.html>>

different perspective on the role of citizens in a representative system. The contemporary criticism is answered by Jason Brennan, who rethinks the tradition of universal suffrage. This chapter evaluates these alternative answers and offers an outline on how to reform the relation between representative democracy and citizens.

As mentioned, the claim about the critical state of representative democracy is based on the present social and political situation. The authors I refer to mostly rely on their specific set of data from the past or the US which indicates the existence of challenges to democracy. Empirical data from Germany have been chosen to widen the application of these contributions to the political debate. This shows the relevance of theoretical criticism for the present situation outside of the US. Public surveys, voter turnouts, documentaries, political satire and newspaper articles are considered. The choice is limited to media which are recognized as serious and reliable such as the news and website of the first public TV channel ARD, and the newspapers *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel*. These data reflect public discontent with the political system and indicate that citizens increasingly turn away from traditional politics. Political disinterest, apathy, frustration and disappointment find their expression in the abovementioned media but additionally in popular support for populist parties. Ergo, the recent rise of populism in Germany is another indicator for a crisis of representative democracy.

## 2. Literature and Structure

As explained before, the method is first to establish which democratic system serves as point of reference. Central is the concept of citizenship and its function in this specific democratic model. Due to the variety of complementary approaches, several works of the last three centuries are taken into account to construct one model. In general, the majority of theories share a view on democracy that focuses on the rule of the people and the legitimation of a government via the people's consent and trust. In formulating this model, this chapter mainly relies on David Held's approach to democracy which combines various theories. Alexis de Tocqueville, Enlightenment and liberal thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke as well as modern theories of James and John Stuart Mill are referred to. Overall, the model of reference is the representative mass democracy which emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Western Europe and the US.

After this, the historical development after the Second World War is outlined. Looking at the problematic relationship between citizen and political system is fundamental to understand why democracy is in crisis today. Mark Mazower (1998) describes this post-war development from active citizenship to passive consumerism. The media play a crucial role in the political debate and Mazower likewise devotes special attention to it. Turning to theoretical criticism, the recent development hints at an inadequacy of the traditional way of thinking about the role of the citizen. Schumpeter (1942) has formulated his critique of the democratic model already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and more recently, Green (2010) reconsiders citizenship. Further, the functioning of representation is challenged due to the incompatibility of democracy with capitalism and social inequality. Noam Chomsky (2002), Joseph Stiglitz (2013) and Wendy Brown (2011) are used to make this argument. In addition, the citizens' frustration as

democracy mainly serves an economic elite is dealt with by Crouch (2004, 2008). Additionally, contemporary criticism analyses the continuously growing distrust in politicians, public disappointment and dissatisfaction as undermining factors. In accordance with Crouch, Tormey (2010) explains how politically active and organised people increasingly bypass political parties and processes of representation. Moreover, problematic is the shortage of sufficient political knowledge and education as analysed by Brennan (2017). Another argument defending the existence of a crisis is the rise of populist parties or movements. Crucial for this claim is the work of Paul Taggart (2000, 2004), Margaret Canovan (1999, 2004) and Cas Mudde (2007, 2015). To analyse the rise of the populist party AfD (alternative for Germany) in Germany, Alexander Häusler and Rainer Roeser (2015) are referred to.

The last part evaluates different responses to the crisis of representative democracy. As it is fundamental to understand the critical situation, the incompatibility of citizenship today with the traditional concept on the citizens' role is addressed. This chapter distinguishes different ways of answering the crisis and develops a set of reforming recommendations. Schumpeter and Green are both offering an alternative perspective on the main role of the citizen. Their concept of modern mass democracy differs fundamentally from the traditional one. For both, the citizenry does not have a legislating or decisional power but is rather to be defined in relation to the political leaders. Schumpeter's concept of leadership democracy and Green's ocular model are discussed. Another approach adheres to the idea that people decide via elections directly and a priori on political issues but introduces conditions one has to fulfil to be allowed to participate in the democratic process. Brennan suggests turning to an epistocratic model and to limit the right to vote to those citizens who possess sufficient political knowledge to grasp political issues. He holds that the widespread lack of knowledge is taxing in a democracy. A discussion of strength and weaknesses of both approaches allows to single out the most valuable aspects. These are an emphasis on the role of the citizen as spectator, strengthening popular control via critical observation of political leaders and reforming political education. Citizens should still vote to select their representatives but the right to vote must be obtained by passing a test on political knowledge and information. These reforms could allow to improve the democratic system and maybe even to end (the talk on) its crisis.

### 3. Constructing a Model of Representative Democracy

As the roots of democracy go back to Antiquity, the democratic model has undergone significant changes since then. These changes are mainly due to the continuous expansion and growth of citizenry. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the modern liberal democracy emerged in which the people rule and a legitimate government is accountable to all citizens (Brown, 2011, p. 19; Held & McGrew, 2003, p. 9). Mass democracy theoretically includes all adult people in the political process via the regular election of representatives (Held, 2006, p. 94f.). The representation of the people via political parties developed out of the adaption of theoretical foundations to the context of modern mass democracies. Defining aspects are the separation of ruler and ruled, the

supreme jurisdiction over a clearly marked territory, the claim to a monopoly of power by the state organs. The consent of the citizens is the legitimation behind the existence of this monopoly of power. Connected to popular sovereignty is the notion of the People's voice or will, expressed in regular elections. The modern nation-state in Europe provides the political and legal framework for this kind of political rule (Held & McGrew, 2003, p. 10).

To follow the chronology of theories, Tocqueville, Kant, Locke and Hobbes are looked at first. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville repeatedly refers to the fundamental equality of status among the people, a value which became enshrined in the definition of democracy. The equality he had in mind does not imply social and economic equality but the absence of inherited status privileges (Tocqueville, 1840, p. 65, 72). Fundamental equality as citizenry is complemented by the value of liberty in modern European democracy. Both are found in Social Contract theories. According to Locke and Hobbes, the state can only come into being if all members of society enter into an agreement to surrender some of their individual rights to a sovereign, in exchange for protection of other rights. The underlying assumption is that without this social contract and consequently without the sovereign's protection, the individual could not enjoy any natural rights. As Hobbes explains, every human would be in a constant struggle and fight to protect his or her rights against others. It is thereupon reasonable that the people entrust the state with sovereign power (Held, 2006, p. 60).

A central idea is that the sovereign comes into being based on the citizens' trust and will (Tormey, 2015, p. 41f.). The government and its actions accordingly depend in their very existence on the legitimation via the people's consent (Redhead, 1995, p. 113). It has to be remembered that Hobbes did not think about a democratic but an absolute representation. Whereas his government is not accountable to the people, the opposite is the case in modern democracies (Tormey, 2015, p. 42ff.). With regard to the role of the citizen, Kant held that the creation of the social contract turns people into citizens. They now possess the ability to judge, choose and act with regard to private and public affairs. Crucial is the concept of human autonomy which denotes the Kantian capacity of humans to use their reason and be self-reflective. Only if this autonomy exists, can a government be legitimate (Robertson & Cureton, 2014). As mutual respect of liberties is part of the political framework of the social contract, liberty and rights are always linked to obligations, a civic duty, to obey the laws of the state. Overall, the notion of popular sovereignty and representation is still at the core of the present democracy. It requires a vivid civil society, the depersonalization of power and a continuous contact between representatives and the people (Diel, 2016). In addition, relevant to the model is the exclusion of emotions from politics. Liberal theorists limited emotions to the private sphere to ensure the rational functioning of the political system (Schaal & Heidenreich, 2013).

Fundamental aspects of these ideas can be found in the work of James Mill on representative democracy. He saw the general interests of the citizens reflected in governmental action and excluded the people from the government (Green, 2010, p. 82). Important is the conception of the people as quasi-legislative force. In the electoral process, pre-existing public interests can be communicated to the government. Individuals possess a developed set of ideas and wishes according to which each person chooses those representatives they see as defending their opinions (Green, 2010, p. 88). Along similar lines, John

Stuart Mill saw public opinion as existing independently and the act of voting as determining the content of politics and legislation after the elections (Green, 2012, p. 91). Representation, for Mill, was a tool to ensure a proper way of governing which meant not by the people themselves or in a totalitarian manner (Tormey, 2015, p. 45). His approach set the direction towards a representative form of democracy which is accountable to the represented people. Summed up, the model of the modern democracy constructed for this chapter is a representative system that necessitates the citizens' active involvement to be legitimate and accountable. It confers rights on the people to authorize their own laws and chose its representatives and assumes the existence of a rational public opinion that gives the right direction to politics.

## 4. The Political Debate: Two Forms of Criticism on Representative Democracy

To recall the research question: If the representative democracy is in crisis today, how should the political system be reformed and rethought? To argue for the existence of a crisis of representative democracy, the political debate is structured in two forms of criticism. This distinction is not sharp as several aspects fit into both forms.

Today's social and political situation which undermines the functioning of democracy has its roots in the post-Second World War period. During this era of economic boom in especially Germany, citizenship moved from active involvement to passivity. Mazower provides a chronological analysis of this transformation of the citizen. His *rise of consumerism* denotes the retreat to the private life and an emerging political apathy or indifference. This emphasis of the private sphere is a reaction to the experiences of the first half of the 20th century. In the public perception, the horrors and suffering which accompanied two World Wars became connected to political ideologies and state power. The consequence was a tiredness and distance towards politics. To be able to move on in life, the Germans sought to close the historical chapter of Nazism and instead focused on the domestic life (Mazower, 1998, p. 306). Here, Mazower also points to the central role of the media. Especially the spread of the television set the conditions for a revolution in advertisement which treated people as consumer: passive, conformist, under commercial pressure to consume and manipulated in their desires via advertisement (p. 311). This can be related to the above mentioned Kantian individual autonomy to use one's own reason that is central to the idea of citizenship. Kant did not take into account that personal liberty, one central value in democracy, could actually become detrimental to the functioning of the system. Related to Mazower's point about the retreat of citizens to the private sphere, it is exactly the individual's autonomous decision which allows for a growing distance to politics instead of enhancing involvement. The individual has the freedom to choose to not be interested into the current public debates and to remain uninformed. This argument is also supported by contemporary critics such as Tormey (2010, p. 75), an aspect shown later.

## 4.1 Theoretical Criticism

Conceptual criticism on democracy is not just a recent phenomenon. Already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Schumpeter argued for a different kind of democracy. He was convinced that people are generally not able to depict reality as it is and not capable of becoming politically informed citizens. This applies to uneducated and educated classes as it is independent of the availability of information (Schumpeter, 1942, p. 261). Schumpeter rejected the reliance on the use of human reason to judge political issues and opted for a leadership democracy which is looked at in the last part of this chapter. One of his most famous sentences is that “people cannot be carried up the ladder” (p. 262). Even political education could not enable people to become reliable judges of everyday national or international politics. As citizens lack an actual will, human beings are open to manipulation and inducement for example via the media or populist parties. This picture contradicts the Enlightenment thought that sees human reason as an essential human capability.

To prove his argument, Schumpeter relied on economic research illustrating how commercials and advertisement can successfully affect people’s desires and thereby rule over potential reason (p. 257). Consequently, advertising and the media are manipulative forces (p. 263). These forces allow interest groups and politicians to artificially manufacture the collective will of the people while claiming that this will is grounded on the individual wills of all people. Accordingly, the idea of a general political will is an illusion (p. 254). It is moreover delicate that people tend to react promptly to issues concerning them directly. They apparently prefer short-term solutions to a sophisticated long-term plan (p. 261). So even if concrete manipulation is absent, individuals tend to fall back on primitive patterns of thinking and acting when entering the political arena. Schumpeter’s theory supports the claim that representative democracy is in a critical state as he shows that public will and the rule of the people as such never existed. Consequently, the idea of the rule of the people is inherently flawed and senseless.

Turning to recent theoretical criticism, crucial aspects are the actual role of the citizen as spectator, social inequality and the rule of elites in a neoliberal reality. Green, Chomsky, Stiglitz, Brown and Crouch are chosen to justify the claim that representative democracy cannot function the way the model requires. To begin with, Green defends that the classical understanding of participation in a democratic system assumes that the people influence the content of the law as co-legislators. In fact, not the collective citizenry decides but rather the majority or even just a powerful minority. For Green, this exclusion of the people from the legislation process is a concealed reality in the classic democratic model (Green, 2010, p. 68). Inequality of power between the governed and the governing is actually inherent in the classic democratic model (Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 305). Democracy promised collective authorship of laws but failed to create this collectivity and to empower the people’s voice (Green, 2010, p. 205). Therefore, the twenty-first century citizen’s perception of democracy differs from the traditional theories in which the people’s will is expressed and heard by the leaders. People rightly feel that their voices do not matter.

This reality demands for an alternative to the focus on the people’s voice (p. 9). Green refers to the eyes of the citizen as decisive political organ. He opposes the traditional vocal model of popular power to his revised plebiscitary model, the ocular democracy, which relocates the popular power in

the leader, not in the law (p. 13). As alternative concept of citizenship, Green introduces the *citizen-spectator* or *citizen-being-ruled* (p. 33f.). He argues that traditional models on democracy and citizenship neglect this intermediate form and are therefore not accurate enough. For Green, today's citizens are mainly psychologically *involved* in politics via their interest, but without actively participating (p. 34, 49). Tormey agrees to this and adds that the public power to observe is significantly reinforced by the emergence of the new social media (Tormey, 2015, p. 96).

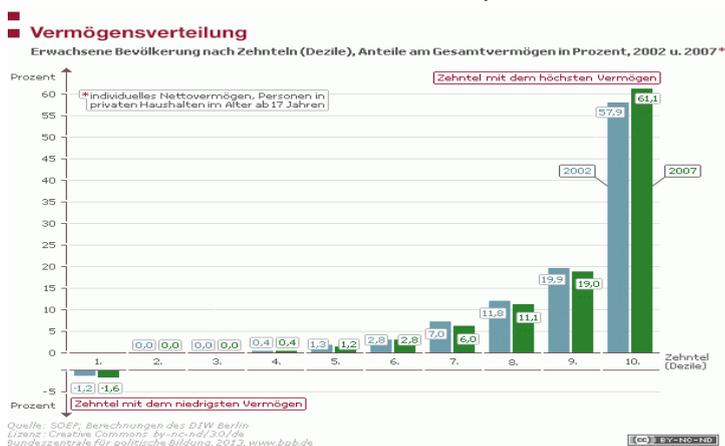
Second, social inequality undermines the proper functioning of representative democracy. In this chapter, equality refers to the socio-economic situation and not to Tocqueville's equality of status. In the political debate, there is agreement on the need for some socio-economic equality in a democratic society. However, none of the authors defines which level of social inequality is unacceptable. The overall point of the analysis nevertheless remains valuable. Who are important and interesting contributors to the analysis of social inequality? To begin with, Chomsky holds that the western capitalist order is based upon the unequal distribution of wealth. Economic and political power is concentrated in the hands of a wealthy elite; the majority of the people remains widely excluded from power. As equal weight of individual voices is supposed to be a corner stones of the democratic model, the present extreme inequality in society challenges democracy (Hermann & Chomsky, 2002, p. 1 and Resnick, 2016). Stiglitz too describes how in a capitalist society, a rich elite occupies an all-powerful position to determine the direction of politics (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 160). The political parties rather meet business interests instead of enhancing the social wellbeing. This leads to a large gulf between the public will and the decisions taken in fact (p. 149).

Realizing that one is left behind in the political process can lead to disillusionment, resignation and apathy (2013, p. 4). Brown agrees that extreme social inequality undermines the possibility that the people legislate in common, as one entity. Accordingly, present day neoliberalism compromises several democratic conditions: institutions and practices of equal opportunity, absence of excessive wealth and poverty, orientation of politics towards the interests of the citizenry. Brown further identifies political education as threatened by neoliberalism (Brown, 2011, p. 20). She holds that if citizens only serve as human capital, engagement and political education are rendered unnecessary and unworthy of being pursued (p. 28). Related to the aspect of social cohesion, inequality can lead to resentment, disappointment, envy and distrust in the lower income and wealth groups. Support for this argument is found in the work of Max Scheler although he was not criticising democracy as such. Democracy held the ideal and promise of social equality, but failed to eliminate social inequality. If people are aware of this tension between ideal and reality, this can result in *Ressentiment*. He claims that in a society where publicly recognised, formal social equality is accompanied by great differences in actual power, possessions and education, *Ressentiment* will be widely spread (Scheler, 1912/1978, p. 9). As pointed later, Scheler's account carries explanatory power with regard to the situation today.

Significant social inequality exists in Germany despite the country's economic prosperity. In 2010, the lowest tenth of the population only possessed a share of 3,7 percent of the entire net income, whereas the upper ten percent held around 23 percent. The latter's share is therefore higher than the sum of the lowest four tenths. Taking a look into the national distribution of wealth,

the situation is similar: in 2007, the richest ten percent of all adults possessed around that 61 percent of the entire wealth, in contrast to around 27 percent who did not have any income at their disposal. The Federal Bank affirms this unequal distribution. Its study of 2013 holds that from September 2010 to July 2011, the richest ten percent owned 59,3 percent of the net wealth of all households. Recently, the ministry of Labour and Society published its poverty report of 2017 which reveals how the lower income groups increasingly renounce political participation as they realise they cannot influence politics. The report states that political changes are more likely to materialise if they are supported by the high-income groups. These data indicate that the social inequality in Germany reduces the political influence of lower income groups. Even if there is no pre-determined level of unacceptable inequality, the present situation in Germany offers a possible ratio. If ten percent of the population possesses almost 60 percent of the net wealth, social inequality is seen as problematic.

Table 1: Distribution of wealth in Germany in 2002 and 2007



As argued above, social inequality is accompanied by disproportional distribution of power. Crouch also detects a miss of influence of ordinary people on the government and political decisions and points out how leaving out the lower classes of society could amount to a crisis of the representative model of democracy (Crouch, 2004, p. 4). His theory of *Post-democracy* can be seen as both, theoretical and contemporary criticism. Post-democracy implies that society has already left the era of democracy behind and boredom, frustration and disillusion have settled today (p. 7, 19). The term post signifies the reduced importance of a system in the present. Even if the formal framework of democracy remains, it is not filled with deliberation and democratic values, the citizens are not the real decision makers (p. 20). As Mazower pointed out, citizenship transformed into mass consumerism in the 1950s. Crouch explains that since then, a powerful minority of business leaders with clear interests successfully makes the system work for them. Socio-economically weak citizens without clearly formulated opinions fail to do so (Crouch, 2008, p. 5). Political parties today rather seek to meet these business interests and shape the public opinion instead of representing it. A rapid decline of political involvement

followed as the role of the citizen became predominantly to complain and blame, a form of citizenship Crouch calls negative (2004, p. 9, 13). This negative citizenship cannot ensure the functioning of the democratic system. Crouch's theory is supported in the next part by the work of Tormey and the analysis of empirical data. Complementary to this argument, Brennan's analysis of the absence of political interest mainly blames the citizen for becoming passive consumers.

As a last remark, it should be acknowledged that equality is not the only value in a democracy. Liberty is part of the model as well and these two values clash continuously. According to classical concepts, the modern liberal democracy is inherently fragile as it constantly has to balance between the principles of liberalism, that is individual rights, and the democratic strand, which refers to popular sovereignty (Canovan, 2004, p. 244). Although Canovan does not refer to a crisis of representative democracy, the theoretical contradiction she identified reinforces the claim of this chapter that the system does not function properly.

## 4.2 Contemporary Criticism

To some extent, the contemporary critics deal with similar aspects. The role of the media, public disappointment, frustration, and distrust have been touched upon already but still matter today. Added are accounts on the complexity of the political system and issues, the focus on emotions and public perception, the rise of populism and the dearth of political education. This part focuses on how citizens turn away from established politics in multiple ways. As one option, Tormey states that if citizens are politically interested today, their activities bypass democratic parties. Another expression of dissatisfaction is the growing support for populist parties. Canovan, Mudde and Taggart are referred to here. In addition, the absenting political education and interest is elaborated on by Brennan. Empirical data are interpreted more extensively than in the previous part to back up the theoretical arguments.

First, the role of the media is investigated. Tormey holds that the coverage of politics in the media has declined enormously, partly due to the process of privatization (Tormey, 2010, p. 23). The neologism *infotainment* describes how political topics today have to be entertaining to sell (p. 24). For example, a scandal which involves a politician's private life attracts more attention than a profound analysis of economic and political developments. The manipulative power of advertisement which distances people from politics is also described by Herman and Chomsky (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p.14). As opposed to political issues, advertisement reaches into every sphere of the individuals' private life. In all media, citizens are constantly confronted with commercials addressing them merely as consumer whose buying mood needs to be sustained via light entertainment (p. 17). Consequently, little room remains for interest in political issues. Another effect of present day mass medialization is a new policy making that increasingly appeals to emotions rather than rationality (Diel, 2012, p. 174). As illustrated below, it seems that mainly populist parties profited from this shift. They managed to address people's emotions more successfully than the established parties. On the other hand, the media could contribute to political education as information is more easily accessible. Especially the Internet provides a constantly growing amount of available knowledge. The new tools to check the politicians' performance, political debates and decisions, seem to expose politics to the critical and

constant gaze of the public (Tormey, 2010, p. 97). This potential power of the people is dealt with later again.

The focus on the politicians' performance furthermore indicates a problematic shift towards a personalized system. The success and failure of a political party and campaigns seems to depend increasingly on one charismatic person and the ability to obtain popular support (Crouch, 2004, p. 26). As Taggart puts it, the choice of leaders in a representative system should be based on the topics they cover. If politics become too personalized, leaders are instead followed due to their public appearance (Taggart, 2000, p. 110). The depersonalized power requirement of a representative democracy is therefore no longer fulfilled nowadays. Green would object here that political success has always depended on the public self-presentation of politicians. Personalization would accordingly not subvert the system as it is part of its functioning. With regard to Germany, personalization can be found in connection to the Social Democrats. The power of and public support for their party decreased over the past decade but since his nomination as chancellor candidate earlier this year, Martin Schulz seemed to revive his party, the popular support grew again. Allegedly, the political program and core values of the party which remained the same, do not suffice to convince the electorate. The voter's choice appears predominantly related to the charisma of a politician whereas an ideal representative democracy requires a depersonalized attribution of power.

Another undermining factor for participation in a liberal democracy is the high complexity of political processes and topics. Even if citizens take part in elections, they cannot give informed consent as they lack understanding of such complexity (Brennan, 2017, p. 151). The dilemma of information being too difficult is also identified by Tormey (2010, p. 72f.). In the age of globalization, international institutions with state-like qualities add a new level of scope and complexity to the existing system of representative politics (p. 86). This expansion reduces the ability of individuals to fully grasp current politics and reinforces rejection of the system (Taggart, 2000, p. 117). Furthermore, the national hegemony of power is not only bypassed by these organisations, but likewise by the power shift towards corporations. These economic actors do not have any democratic legitimation but appear mighty enough to dictate national and international politics (Tormey, 2010, p. 74). Therefore, globalization challenges the relation between democracy and citizens by adding complexity and shortage of popular influence to the domain of politics. Despite the absence of full understanding but as a result of the availability of enormous amounts of information, people are at least aware that national sovereignty and power is increasingly corroded by global problems and transnational institutions and corporations.

In general, the communication between representatives and people is malfunctioning, public control and accountability seem non-existent (Diel, 2016). The people complain that although they are allowed to vote, only an economic elite is represented afterwards. The neologism *Elitokratie* (elitocracy) can sum up this impression (Bittner, 2016, p. 4). As a consequence of not feeling heard, the people, therefore the basis of democracy, reject the political system. This allows to question the very legitimacy of elected governments. Citizens are promised that their views will be taken into account but the interests that made them chose one party are not found in real politics. This problem is reflected in decreasing voter turnouts and public surveys (Tormey, 2010, p. 17). Apparently, citizens become increasingly politically apathetic and

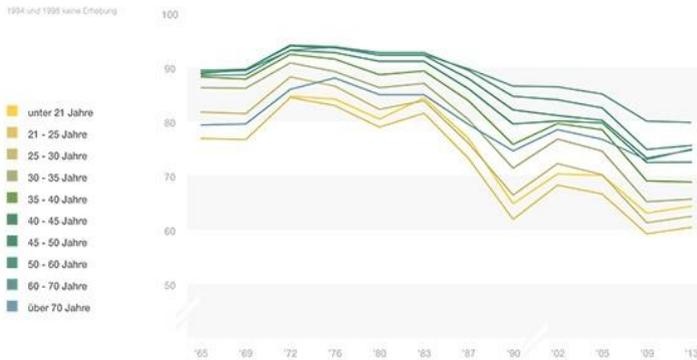
disinterested as they do not feel represented or understood by the politicians (Der Spiegel, 2016). The frustration, or to use Scheler's term *Ressentiment*, of the people partly stems from democracy's failure to lead to the promised equality. The people expected growing wealth to accompany democracy (Tormey, 2010, p. 63). It is therefore not actual regression or increasing poverty which leads to disappointment but rather unfulfilled expectations about a never-ending growth of wealth (Bittner, 2016, p. 5). Democracy no longer means a growing prosperity among all people, representation no longer equals being heard (Bittner, 2016, p. 5).

The people respond with distrust against politicians (Tormey, 2010, p. 21). In Germany, a mutual lack of trust in fact leads to a growing discrepancy and gulf between citizens and their government. The latter seems to not trust the people anymore and increasingly collects data on citizen's private lives (Tormey, 2010, p. 100). The citizens consequently feel surveilled and distrust the governing system. In recent political satire in Germany, this public perception is dealt with regularly. Growing resentment can be measured as decreasing voter turnouts, although the national average participation in elections remained relatively high (in 2016 between 60,5 and 73,8% on the federal level) and in the Saarland elections of 2017 almost 70% of the population gave their vote. On the local and regional level however, there is an opposite tendency. In 2016, three federal states held parliamentary elections which saw a popular participation of only around 35% in Saxony-Anhalt and Baden Württemberg and 56% in Rhineland-Palatinate (Der Spiegel, 2016). It might be justified to ask whether one third or around half of the population can actually legitimate the new parliament. On the other hand, these data can be interpreted along the Greenian approach which holds that elections are not the main political involvement of citizens. Low voter turnouts are consequently less relevant and not a sign of political disinterest. They cannot reflect how citizens participate in the political system. If citizens are critical spectators in a democracy on a daily basis, low voter turnouts are unsuitable measurements as they focus on the sporadic expression via the citizen's voice.

*Table 2: Participation in federal elections in Germany according to age groups*

## ■ Wahlbeteiligung nach Altersgruppen

In Prozent, Bundestagswahlen 1965 bis 2013



As a different consequence of public distrust, populist parties grow stronger. Due to its capacity to manipulate and direct the people's opinion, populism is often portrayed as a symptom of this crisis (Tormey, 2010, p. 62). To understand how populism impairs representative democracy, it is first necessary to look into the theories on populism. To begin with, Canovan describes populism as being highly adaptable and flexible (Canovan 1999, p. 4). She emphasises the inclusive language of 'the people' used by populists to obtain popular support (2004, p. 243). Taggart agrees to a large extent with her approach although he points to the importance of the heartland as an imaginary patriotic reference point (Taggart, 2000, p. 95). For populists, politics should express the of a general will of the people and not serve the elite (Mudde, 2012, p. 153). To boot, Mudde opposes populism to the liberal democracy due to its rejection of pluralism and minority rights and the exclusion of outgroups, such as immigrants or refugees (p. 160). At first glance, the populist call for more referenda has the qualities of seeking to strengthen the power of the people. However, it has to be taken into account that most countries are representative democracies which means that regular direct public votes would by-pass professional politicians and thwarts the processes of a representative model (Canovan, 2004, p. 242). Canovan also points to the high level of personalization which can be found in populist policies. Populist parties depend less on party structures than on the personality and charisma of one leader (p. 241) which goes against the ideal of depersonalized democratic power. Furthermore, democracy promises to empower the people but the very processes and institutions for this empowerment are part of a complex network which the mass of the people cannot understand (p. 245). This absence of understanding leads to disappointment, a sentiment which is picked up by populist parties declaring that power has been taken away from the people. According to Canovan, populism might threaten democracy as it can grow out of these weak spots and paradoxes of the system

What can be said about the rise of populism in Germany? In recent elections in three Federal States, the AfD reached around 12,6% in Rhineland-Palatinate, 15% in Baden-Württemberg and even up to 20% of all votes in Saxony-Anhalt. Since its creation in 2013 and until 2016, the AfD managed to obtain increasing public support. They successfully re-mobilized the electorate and non-voters (Elmer & Hebel, 2016). The party covers topics typically dealt with by a modern populist right party: the EU, immigration, Muslims and the pluralisation of sexual and cultural ways of life are rejected and political correctness should be abandoned (Häusler & Roeser, 2015, p. 10). Instead, tradition, culture and the homeland (or heartland) are embraced and glorified. The AfD also claims to repel the extreme right and defend direct democracy but at the same time employs a subtler and *culturalized* form of racism. It accuses the existing parties and the media of not telling the truth to the people. One of its main slogans is that the AfD possesses the courage to tell the truth (p. 23, 8). Related to this, the neologism *Lügenpresse* (lies-press) expresses this accusation. Insulting the media is another defining aspect of right wing populist parties referred to by Mudde (Mudde, 2007, p. 67). The general allegation of the media responds to the pathological distrust among the population mentioned in the previous part: 39% of the Germans think that the term *Lügenpresse* carries truth in it (Bittner, 2016, p. 6). This public opinion was influenced by the fundamental harmony between Chancellor Merkel's policy and its media's coverage. The media's traditional role of critically checking the government was not fulfilled which triggered widespread scepticism about the media's credibility (p. 7).

An alternative view would be that support for populist parties can be an indicator of the vitality of democratic deliberation as populism contributes to the formulation and representation of the people's interest and democratic deliberation (Crouch, 2008, p. 6). Large parts of the electorate believe that important issues are no longer adequately addressed by the political elites. Parties are increasingly perceived as being all the same, independent of their political colour. Populists claim to channel this public perception and position themselves against the established and apparently malfunctioning political parties (Tormey, 2010, p. 62). Their frustration makes people turn to and receptive for maybe extreme but above all different ideologies (p. 85). It is questionable whether populist parties contribute to the vitality of the democratic system if they argue against democratic values, the established forms of representation and the very system itself.

As another form of protest, Tormey describes how citizens turn away from political parties and rather organise themselves politically outside the representative system. Even if he acknowledges growing political apathy, he holds that people increasingly become politically active due to their disappointment about the representative system (p. 64f.). Tormey claims that representative democracy is not the dominant arena for public political expression anymore, an idea which is also considered by Crouch (Crouch, 2004, p. 15). Tormey describes political movements in Spain, Brazil, Turkey and the *Occupy* protests to illustrate alternative forms of popular organisation (Tormey, 2010, p. 29ff.). Similar examples can further be found outside his book, such as the anti-TTIP demonstration in 2015 in Berlin with around 200.000 participants, the *March of Science* in 2017 as globally organised demonstration and the protests of *Pulse of Europe* that explicitly distance themselves from parties (Koch, 2017). Contradicting Tormey are, however, demonstrations such

as those in April 2017 in Cologne against the AfD. Here, also political parties mobilized and the (now former) minister president of Northern Westphalia, Hannelore Kraft, spoke at the demonstration. These examples show that established parties might be a part of new forms of political organisation and not bypassed as Tormey depicts. Further, he appears to be quite optimistic concerning the political education of average citizens and their will to actively participate in politics. The examples he provides in support of his theory are surely relevant but too few to prove that the majority of the people is politically interested.

As it is based on more empirical evidence, the analysis of Jason Brennan seems more convincing. According to Brennan, the worst undermining factor for representative democracy is the lack of political information and knowledge of the average citizen. He says that most people know almost nothing about politics or are even wrongly informed. Only a knowledgeable minority has an actual interest in politics (Brennan, 2017, p. 99). Brennan divides the voters in three types: hobbits, hooligans, vulcans. Most voters are either hobbits or hooligans who, in the former category, know little or nothing about politics. Hooligans, on the other hand, adhere like football fans to their ideology and conviction without considering alternatives. The ideal voter would be the rational, prejudice-free vulcan. In fact, this is only the minority of the electorate (p. 19ff.). Brennan further rejects the traditional emphasis on the human rationality and rather holds that most people prefer to not be rational in political choices as this rationality does not pay off. This argument is based on the assumption that in representative politics, the individual as an entity does not have a significant amount of power or influence (p. 95). Absence of knowledge and irrationality are not sanctioned in a democratic system and apart from personal interest, there is consequently no incentive to become a well-informed and rational voter (p.51). Brennan proves the lack of political education empirically through scientific studies and questionnaires among the population of the United States (p.52). If asked about concrete party programs before elections or the function of politicians and state institutions, the majority of the people did not know the answer or was falsely informed. Based on these findings, he states that there can be no such thing as a popular will or public opinion.

Although he acknowledges the possibility of improvement, Brennan comes to similar conclusions as Schumpeter on the average citizen's capacity to grasp political issues. Brennan's doubts on the citizens' rational capability are supported by voter behaviour in Germany. The AfD obtained wide public support in the state elections since 2013 despite the factual falsity of some arguments and the lack of a fully formulated party program. Apparently, the electorate did not choose them because of the coherent content of their program but rather as an expression of dissatisfaction with the existing parties in Germany (Häusler & Roeser, 2015, p. 7). This behaviour of the voter has often been referred to as *Protestwähler* (protest-voter) in the national public debates but is also in accordance with Taggart's elaborations (Taggart, 2000, p. 110). It should be asked if expressing critique via protest-voting could be a rational choice of the citizen. If developed party programs are not perceived as binding after elections anymore, is it not rational to distrust complete programs? Looking at the composition of the AfD electorate reveals that the party simultaneously appealed to different groups in society. The AfD mobilized right-conservative, upper middle-class voters, mainly older and white males,

but also members of the lower income classes and prior non-voters (Augstein, 2016). Along the lines of Tormey's account, the public support for populist parties could be a new channel to express public discontent. However, since the AfD sought to develop a proper program for the last elections, it cannot be mere protest against program-based politics that led to the success of this party. Nevertheless, lacking rationality and knowledge could explain how the plainly formulated populist messages reach a wider public compared to existing, more complex appeals.

Based on this analysis, the contours of the crisis of representative democracy are visible. In the political debate, many different arguments are forwarded to support of that democracy is in a critical state today. This chapter structured the contributions into theoretical and contemporary criticism to include the most relevant accounts on the malfunctioning of the political system. Defined as fundamental problem was the relation between citizen and the system. The traditional idea of the rational and informed individual who has a political opinion cannot be found in reality. Especially Brennan's analysis accuses mainly the citizen of being responsible for the clash between democratic theory and practice. Anyhow, his answer is only one cause of a complex crisis. Inherent flaws of democracy and public distrust will not disappear even if the electorate reaches higher levels of education. Reforms thus need to consider the flaw of both, political system and real citizens. In the next part alternative options are analysed.

## 5. How to react to the Crisis of Representative Democracy?

It has been established that in present day representative democracy a growing discrepancy between the theoretical role attributed to the citizen and developments in reality exists. How to respond to these findings? Although social inequality in wealth has been identified as one great challenge to democracy, it cannot be addressed within the scope of this chapter. The necessary analysis is of a rather economic nature and already subject to other research. As the relation between citizen and democratic system is emphasised here, the different approaches presented deal with the (desirable) role of the citizen. The first one is to change the way citizenship and its function is conceptualized. Schumpeter and Green address the theoretical flaws of democracy and offer new perspectives on the actual role of the citizen. The second answer suggests leaving the concept of democracy behind and opt for a different political system, an epistocracy, with a limited form of suffrage. This idea is defended by Brennan.

Schumpeter's approach is based on the assumption that the popular will does not exist. He claims that individual citizens lack an actual will, meaning they do not know what they want and have no sense of reality. He prefers a leadership democracy. Instead of building upon the entire population's expression of its public will via political involvement, Schumpeter argues in favour of allowing only the necessary minimal participation in democracy. The most important right of the citizens is to vote a government out of office if it is deemed dysfunctional. As a legitimization tool, such retrospective regular elections would suffice. Citizens should judge the leader's performance and could thereby also influence the content of politics. Despite of the historical

distance, Schumpeter is still relevant today as the present political debate deals with the citizen's role and involvement in the political system.

The public control of political leaders can be found in Green's work as well, although he defends a different understanding of the role of the citizen in a representative democracy. So far, his account has been used to describe the gulf between democratic theory and reality as Green's analysis offers an accurate description of today's mass democracy. To recall crucial elements of his theory, he holds that the citizens' function in a democracy is and should be to critically observe. Beyond that and to improve the democratic system, Green introduces the concept of candor which means that the politician cannot control the conditions of his or her public appearance (Green, 2010, p. 19). Candor functions along the lines of the disciplinary power of the Foucauldian gaze (p. 23, 154). In addition to regular elections to hold politicians accountable, leaders are thus constantly exposed to the critical gaze of the people (Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 304). Being spectator in a democracy should be an everyday occupation and involvement of the citizens. To implement the principle of candor, Green suggests organising regular leadership debates, public inquiries or trials and press conferences (Green, 2010, p. 199). On these stages, the leaders struggle to obtain support of the people through their public appearances and mass media (p. 126). This ocular model could create a real unity of people as all citizens belong to one single, powerful spectatorship (p. 209). Public debates do already exist before elections, in Germany the next "chancellor duel" will take place in September 2017 before the federal elections. Along the lines of Green's argument, party leaders of the smaller parties recently demanded not only for their inclusion in the debate but also of the populist AfD. As the present debate only involves the parties forming the government, it damages democracy and the reputation of the media (Der Spiegel, 2017). The other parties' appeal supports the desirability of more public debates.

Against his theory it can be argued that it is hard to prove whether people are actually interested spectators or whether their passivity rather expresses political apathy. How to measure interest in politics? If surveys, interviews with people on the street and voter turnouts are taken to be reliable sources for this, there exists a widespread lack of information and interest in politics (Brennan, 2017, p. 51). Another problematic point is that limiting the citizens' main role to observation is an idea which is not necessarily bound to a democratic system but would similarly suit an oligarchy (Sager, 2012, p. 593). Further, Green does not link the principle of candor to the politicians' ability to govern decently or to better politics in general (p. 594). Besides, he overlooks empirical attempts to strengthen the effect of the people's voice. As Tormey holds, citizens increasingly find ways outside the political system to become active participators in politics. Nevertheless, Green's ocular model of democracy is a useful theoretical alternative to the classic conception of representative democracy as it offers a new perspective on the relationship between politicians and citizens. Understanding that accountability refers to the constant gaze of the people on political leaders sheds a different light on the role of the citizen. If critical observance becomes the desired norm, distrust about and distance to political parties are no longer challenges to democracy but instead included in its functioning. Green's theory can show how to use the media as a tool to control and hold politicians accountable, but his approach lacks a connection to the improvement of the content of politics. The focus on the personality and charisma further turns the problem of personalized politics into a desired norm.

Green's theory is strong in showing how the debate on the crisis of representative democracy could come to an end through a change of perspective.

The second alternative opts for a limited involvement of the citizens in elections and a different political system. This approach questions the traditional universal suffrage as fundament of representative democracy but keeps the focus on the citizen's voice as democratic organ. The role of the citizen is still to legitimize the government in the election process yet the right to vote has to be obtained by passing a kind of test. John Stuart Mill already pointed out that a conditional right to vote is desirable as the individual's vote carries too much weight to be given to just anyone. He differs crucially from Schumpeter in his belief that people become more educated the more they are involved in politics (Brennan, 2017, p. 22). Brennan is also sceptical about Mill's assertion. Despite acknowledging that democracy does deliver more or less decent results, Brennan holds that in general political participation is corrupting the people. Democracy, universal suffrage and participation have no intrinsic value themselves as each political system should be looked at as a mere tool to deliver political results (p. 30). Political results might be better if democracy was replaced by a form of epistocracy with limited voting rights (p. 43). For Brennan, better educated citizens chose more competent leaders which ultimately leads to better politics (p. 278). A license to vote should ensure a certain level of political knowledge and understanding among those who are allowed to vote.

Brennan further rejects the classical liberal value attributed to the right to political participation since even without this right, people could develop a capacity of morality and empathy. These rights are accordingly not necessary to turn people into morally good citizens and their intrinsic value should be questioned (p. 205). Further, equality and dignity for every human being are attributed to democracy due to more or less arbitrary cultural codes and traditions which in principle could be changed (p. 226). Overall, Brennan does not defend his epistocratic model as the ideal form of government and rather wants to grant it a chance in reality. At first sight, it seems that Brennan defends an elitist view but he seeks to develop his theory with a focus on the results of a system beneficial to all citizens. In an interview in *Der Spiegel* in 2017, Brennan defined several features of what content politics might have if the right to vote would be restricted: free trade, support for immigration and gay rights, in favour of higher taxes, concern about the climate change and the rejection of military interventions (*Der Spiegel*, 2017). Moreover, Brennan's claims are quite controversial and, as he himself points out, the universal suffrage is deeply enshrined in Western political thought and in the minds of the people. A fundamental tradition like that might be an arbitrary and culture-specific feature still that does not mean that it can be abandoned overnight. For centuries, the right to vote has been fought for, by people and for other people. If one nevertheless seeks to touch this right, it must be done carefully and gradually.

How to respond to the present crisis of representative democracy now? A single solution could not address the complexity of challenges and aspects presented throughout this chapter. Hence, a set of recommendations seems more adequate. As all authors focus on the role of the citizen, they do not deal with the economic or global dimension of the crisis of representative democracy. Capitalism and consumerism should be and are already dealt with

by further research. Relevant here is that Green offers new thinking about the role of citizens whereas Brennan emphasises the traditional weight of the citizen's voice. Green seeks to re-empower the people by creating awareness for the powerful position they already possess. Brennan rather redistributes power according to knowledge and competence. Why not complement the Greenian inclusion of all citizens and Brennan's demand for better educated voters?

Green's citizen-spectatorship keeps the traditional involvement of the entire population in politics while changing the way citizens participate. To value this involvement, one reformation would be to create more public awareness about the people's role as critical observers. The principle of candor can turn the distrust towards politicians from being a problem into being a necessary prerequisite for successful public control. The new role of citizen should be accompanied by a reformed political education to train the competence of critical observation. Earlier and expanded education, new subjects on citizenship should prepare the population for its role in the political system and ensure understanding of political issues. The foundations of the political system would be mediated on a national and global level. This would allow for an evaluation of a politicians' competences in addition to their public appearance. It is desirable to control the politicians in various ways as this improves accountability. The principle of candor should be implemented via extensive media coverage of political topics, debates and press conferences. This might require legal obligations for the privatized media to devote a certain amount of coverage to politics. If citizens are confronted with politics and leaders' performances, the distance between citizenship and political system could be bridged. To respect the historical weight of elections, they should remain a regular tool to choose political leaders who represent the public opinion. The right to vote could nevertheless be subjected to certain conditions to value its importance. However, a licence should not prevent the majority of people from obtaining the right to vote but rather be a tool to check the individual capacity to possess a political opinion. Carefully working out the characteristics and features of this test should be considered in specific research. Thinking about conditions on suffrage has been a taboo so far, nevertheless Brennan has pointed out that this might lead to benefits for all. The formulated set of recommendations revolves around the strength of both approaches: control of performances in the political system. Not only the politicians' but also citizens' performances could be checked and if necessary sanctioned.

## 6. Conclusion

In the beginning, the question was asked why representative democracy is in crisis today and how it should be reconsidered and reformed. A twofold analysis of the political debate along the lines of theoretical and contemporary criticism has identified several undermining factors such as social inequality, public frustration, distrust and lack of political knowledge. The analysis of this debate and empirical data further indicate that the predominant conceptualization of democracy is incompatible with reality. On the one hand, the problematic relationship between citizens and political system is crucial to understand why modern democracy does not function properly. On the other hand, the way democracy is looked at is inadequate to describe how the system actually

works. The traditional model and the implied notion of active citizenship need to be reconsidered to end the discrepancy of theory and reality. This chapter evaluated different answers on how to reform the system and rethink the role of the citizen. The conclusion is that the strengths of all approaches could be included in a set of recommendations. A deconstruction of the universal right to vote is not desirable. For this reason, it is better to think about measures for improvement along the traditional lines of citizenship. The new citizenship acknowledges the crucial role of the people as critical spectator while keeping the traditional legitimation of the representatives via elections. Conditions on the right to vote could be implemented if they are accompanied by expanded, intensified and earlier political education. A combination of proper political education, a licence or test based on this education and a new emphasis on the citizen's role as constant observer seems to be a good combination of different responses. Taken together, this allows to check the performance of both, leaders and citizens. Overall, this chapter favours reforming representative democracy and not abandoning it, as by now:

“Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others”

- Winston Churchill <sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup>Retrieved on April 28, 2017 from <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/267224-democracy-is-the-worst-form-of-government-except-for-all>>