

UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to answer the following research question: how to explain the current crisis of democracy?

The paper will first present the current state of both democratic and non-democratic regimes in the world. This will show that even democratization has been one of the main macro-political phenomena of the last century, this trend has radically changed with new pessimism about democracy and the resurgence of authoritarianism. Secondly, it will identify the scope of this analysis in western democracies and the relevant literature concerning the theoretical problem of understanding the crisis of democracy. Hence, it will summarize the main theoretical approaches and some recent contributions which are particularly relevant in terms of empirical research, method, and theoretical analysis.

The third part of the paper will explain the crisis of democracy as a lag in the process of adaptation. It is mainly devoted to the notion of the crisis of democracy and adaptability. It offers three main hypotheses in order to address the research question of the paper. These hypotheses depict the tensions of the utmost importance which have impacted democracy in terms of citizens' disengagement, radicalization of politics, less responsive policies, and deviation from traditional sources of legitimization.

It will finally discuss why regimes should be adaptable if they want to preserve their identity and how the crisis of democracy changes not just the models of democracy, but the idea of democracy.

Keywords: crisis of democracy, adaptability, ultimate tensions, western democracies

Introduction

Political scientists have proposed many different interpretations of the crisis of democracy and offered useful insights and analytical indication. However, most of the existing theories of crisis of democracy to date give only a partial point of view on the phenomenon. This raises some fundamental questions: how to explain the current crisis of democracy? why democracies are in crisis? which are the key causes of this phenomenon? which is the definition of crisis of democracy? What lessons can be learned from the crisis of democracy?

Following Samuel P. Huntington (1968) in his research on the political order in changing societies, I refer to the idea of adaptability of both democratic and non-democratic regimes, as their capacity to change in order to protect their identity. I present this idea, not a fully-fledged theory, which can show us how democracy changes in a dynamic evolution made by tensions, which reach an ultimate extent and force the regimes to adapt themselves in order to improve (or at least preserve) their identity.

The current crisis is a time of ultimate tensions for western democracies.

Democratic and Non-Democratic regimes in the world

The aim of the following paragraphs is to describe the recent debate on the global status of democracy. The most illuminating account of expansion of democracy's historical trajectory was put forward by Huntington (1991) in his book "The Third Wave: Democratization in the late Twentieth Century." Huntington found that democracy's advances have occurred primarily in three waves, as periods in which the number of democratic regimes has risen substantially, with transitions to democracy considerably outpacing breakdowns of democracy.¹

Since 1974, after the end of the regime of the Estado Novo in Portugal, the Third Wave spread worldwide from Southern Europe to Latin America and then it swept through Asia and moved across the former Soviet bloc. At the beginning of the Third Wave, there were about 46 democracies in the world, but soon, as Huntington noted: "democracy seemed to take on the character of an almost irresistible global tide moving on from one triumph to the next."²

Huntington never did pinpoint exactly the end of the Third Wave and this matter is still debated among scholars. He just posed a crucial question about the future: "to what extent would the Third Wave go beyond the first and the second wave?" and offered some suggestions about the future developments of democratization, when he writes: "Judging by the record of the past, the two most decisive factors affecting the future consolidation and expansion of democracy will be economic development and political leadership"³ and Huntington emblematically added: "Economic development makes democracy possible; political leadership makes it real."⁴

Using Freedom House's data, if the Third Wave came to an end in the first years of the Nineties, it would be made by more than sixty cases of transition to democracy.⁵ Many changes on the global democracy map happened since the publication of Huntington's book and the principal sets of macro-political data show the end of the optimistic long-term scenario for the expansion of democracy to those areas of the world which have been organized as non-democratic regimes.

Even though different theoretical and methodological approaches have been elaborated in order to explain democratization, the trajectory of democracy in the opening decade and a half of the twenty-first century remains a matter of some disputes among political scientists. Diamond and Plattner

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, p. 24.

² *Ibidem*, p. 21.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, p. 316.

⁴ *Ivi*.

⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom House Annual Reports*.

(2015) recently contrasted different perspectives regarding whether there has simply been democratic slowdown or downturn. They observed a progressive shift from a sometimes over-optimistic view of the future, to a more sceptical account of post-Cold War democratic transitions, and to a largely pessimistic analysis of ongoing events. Many scholars contemplate an era of democratic decline, as the beginning of a new phase characterized by the absence of democratic progress with the rise of new global counter-democratic actors as China, Iran and Russia. It is not only in soft-power competition that the advanced democracies are falling short. Increasingly, they are looking weaker in terms of hard power as well, shrinking their defence budgets even as authoritarian states rapidly increase their spending on arms. As Carothers (2015) describes “Democracy’s travails in both the United States and Europe have greatly damaged the standing of democracy in the eyes of many people around the world.” Nevertheless, alternative interpretations have been proposed about the real nature of this phase of the recent evolution of the conditions of democracy in the world.

On the one hand, Diamond (2015) points out that “democracy had a remarkable global run, as the number of democracies essentially held steady or expanded every year from 1975 until 2007.”⁶ According to Diamond there has been a democratic recession, with a decline in aggregate Freedom House scores since 2006 and similar results are reported by other indexes (i.e. the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy).

Indeed, Diamond notes that “there has been no net expansion in the number of electoral democracies, which has oscillated between 114 and 119 (about 60 percent of the world’s states).”⁷ With reference to the rate of democratic failure, during the first fifteen years of the new century, democracy collapsed in 25 countries. What is more relevant is not the number of cases of failed democratization, but how those regimes in transition toward democracy regressed to something different from pure authoritarian regimes. As argued in details by Diamond, their transitions have happened “not only through blatant military or executive coups, but also through subtle and incremental degradations of democratic rights and procedures.”⁸ They represent the emerging category known with the expression competitive authoritarianism, which is an ever higher diversified genus. Levitsky and Way (2010), who coined the expression competitive authoritarianism, describe it as the category of “regimes that combine competitive elections with serious violation of democratic procedure – proliferated in the post-Cold War era.”⁹ This type of regime combines elements of democracy and autocracy, and involves significant freedom together with either limited suffrage rights, restrictions on electoral competition or constrained accountability of elected rulers. The rise of hybrid regimes has forced observers to go back and re-evaluate the record of democratisation since the Third Wave.

A new transitional path started at the end of the Nineties in Russia and Venezuela, where less electoral fairness, limited political pluralism, violations of rights and freedoms of opposition undermined democratic conditions and reconverted entire regimes into systems of personal power under the ruling-party hegemony.

It was Russia’s failed democratization that led many scholars to change their views about the prospects for a global democratic revolution. This trend also includes the institutional crisis in Central African Republic (2001), the suspension of the elected parliament in Madagascar (2009), the military coup in Mali (2012), the Ukraine crisis (2014), the failure of pro-democracy protests by the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (2014), the impeachment controversy in Brazil (2016), the transition to an

⁶ Larry Diamond, Facing up the democratic recession, *Journal of democracy*, 2015, p. 141.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

⁹ Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

ever more authoritarian regime in Turkey (2015) where Recep Tayyip Erdogan has established a strong centralized control of the power made by marked intolerance and violent repression of dissent. Moreover, although encouraging signals come from recent developments in terms of democratization in the East Asian region, they are still ambiguous for democracy in countries like Myanmar and clearly negative in countries like Thailand. On the one hand, in Myanmar, where Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the general elections on 8 November 2015, the political transition is still uncertain and in its early stages, because the Tatmadaw, the military elite which took the control of the country in 1962, has still enough power based on untouchable prerogatives and political functions granted by the 2008 constitution, to be seen as the only true veto player.¹⁰ On the other hand, the army seized power in Thailand in two military coups in 2006 and 2014. This case of failed democratization represents an example of East Asian authoritarianism.

This democracy-in-retreat narrative is not limited to Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, but it includes also the chain of events happened in the Middle East and North Africa in the last years. Most of the movements of mass protests of the Arab Spring did not create the conditions for democratizing. With reference to those recent developments, Diamond notes that: "The Arab Spring has imploded in almost every country that it touched save Tunisia, leaving in most cases even more repressive states or, as in the case of Libya, hardly a state at all."¹¹

These failed attempts of transition to democracy confirm Huntington's (1991) conviction that the process of change can be done and achieved its purposes only with actions of pro-democracy elites, compromises and elections. Indeed, Huntington reminds us that "the electoral dynamic led from authoritarianism to democracy, the revolutionary dynamic led from one form of authoritarianism to another."¹² It should be taken seriously Huntington's (1991) assertion that: "The resort to violence increased the power of the specialists in violence in both government and the opposition. Governments created by moderation and compromise ruled by moderation and compromise. Governments produced by violence ruled by violence."¹³

The assessment of the condition of democracy worldwide is still an open question and this new phase can be explained in different ways. For example, Plattner (2015) claims that the three chief reasons are: "(1) the growing sense that the advanced democracies are in trouble in terms of their economic and political performance; (2) the new self-confidence and seeming vitality of some authoritarian countries; and (3) the shifting geopolitical balance between the democracies and their rivals."¹⁴ Levitsky and Way (2015) do not believe in the narrative of the crisis of democracy above described and critic what they call the "myth of the Democratic Recession" born from a misunderstanding of the unusual developments of the 1990s. According to Lewitsky and Way, the negative perception on democratic conditions of the world is not consistent with the real state of democracy which has improved since the end of the Cold War. They argue that even the decrease in overall Freedom House scores up through 2013 has been very slight, and that the indicators produced by other organizations such as Polity IV, the Economist Intelligence Unit, and the Bertelsmann index show no decline at all. This general misinterpretation is rooted in a flawed understanding of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Lewitsky and Way put it, the current exaggerated pessimism is the result of unrealistic expectations of the future which went not realized.¹⁵

There is an overwhelming consensus among scholars about new conditions of resurgence of many authoritarian regimes around the world. The leading authoritarian regimes (Chinese partitocracy,

¹⁰ Min Zin, Burma Votes for Change: The New Configuration of Power, *Journal of Democracy*, 2016.

¹¹ Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, *Democracy in Decline?*, JHU Press, 2015, p. 112.

¹² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, p. 148.

¹³ Ivi, p. 207.

¹⁴ Marc F. Plattner in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, *Democracy in decline?*, Johns Hopkins University Press and the National Endowment for Democracy, 2015, p. 7.

¹⁵ Steven Lewitsky and Lucan Way, *The myth of democratic recession* in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, *Democracy in decline?*, Johns Hopkins University Press and the National Endowment for Democracy, 2015, p. 59.

Russian neo-czarism, Arab monarchies or Iranian theocracy) have developed some institutional innovations and political reforms both in their domestic and foreign policy. In a few words, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, in some fields (i.e. economic growth) authoritarian regimes outperform democracies. For example, they seemed more resilient in the last financial crisis. As captured by Runciman (2013), with reference to the authoritarian regime: “They can take decisive action without fear of the electoral consequences, allowing them to impose short-term costs for the sake of long- term benefits. This is the advantage of autocratic systems that Tocqueville identified: they are better at thinking about the long term in the short term.”¹⁶

On one side, their internal reforms are an attempt to avoid and prevent the risks of both endogenous and exogenous causes of collapse. Their main aim has been to make these institutional and political systems more adaptable in order to become immune to the classic reasons of their inevitable breakdown. On the other, they adopted a new international strategy which enlarges their influence worldwide in order to compete with democracies, shape new organizations, write rules aimed at reforming the international order, project their powers beyond their borders, and finally contain possible future waves of democratization by proposing authoritarianism as alternative to the idea of democracy. China is the best example of this new season for authoritarian regimes. Firstly, the macroeconomic consequences of the global financial crises affected asymmetrically democracies and autocracies, with stronger impact on the former than the latter. In this dynamic, China has grown as a leading power which proposes its own model and strategy of economic integration/involvement to the world. It is the Beijing Consensus theorized by Cooper Ramo (2004) as “a fusion of Chinese thinking with lessons learned from the failure of globalization culture in other places.”¹⁷ Secondly, following the model of analysis of Hellman (1998) on post-communist transitions in terms of economic reforms¹⁸ and extending this model to the Chinese case, it is clear that China has been particularly capable to take advantage from the absence of a free debate on the reforms, which means governing without the political short-term transitional costs. According to Runciman (2013): “The Chinese have a range of short-term advantages. Unlike past communist regimes, they are not constrained by ideology. Unlike democracies, they are not constrained by constitutional checks and balances. They can enforce technocratic solutions to economic problems more easily than we can.”¹⁹ Thirdly, China has also opened the way to new strategies for controlling content on internet. King, Pan, Roberts (2013) find that the Chinese authorities did not to suppress criticism of the state or the Communist Party, but the purpose of the censorship program is to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected.²⁰ Finally, as Huntington (1968) explained in his theory of institutionalization, one of the most important feature for the survival of a political system or organization is its adaptability. One of the measures identified by Huntington in order to conceptualize the level of institutionalization is the generational age of the political system.²¹ In this perspective, the Chinese model of governance has revealed itself to be one of the most adaptable in what has been usually a risky aspect for many non-democratic regimes: the peaceful succession and replacement of one set of leaders by another one.

¹⁶ David Runciman, *The Confidence trap a history of democracy in crisis from World War I to the present*, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 309.

¹⁷ Ramo Joshua Cooper, *The Beijing Consensus*, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004, p. 5.

¹⁸ Joel S. Hellman, *Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions*, 1998.

¹⁹ David Runciman, *The Confidence trap a history of democracy in crisis from World War I to the present*, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 318.

²⁰ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, Margaret E. Roberts, *How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression*, *American Political Science Review*, 2013.

²¹ Huntington Samuel, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, pp. 13-14.

From this brief overview on the current status of democracy in the world, it follows that both the good functioning of democracy in many consolidated regimes and the gradual transition of non-democratic regimes toward democracy seem ever more difficult.

In terms of our research interests, it might be useful to perfect the scope of this analysis by proceeding to a differentiation between two main phenomena the current debate on the status of democracy is focused on. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that although these phenomena are clearly intertwined in facts, they are not clearly delimited in theories. It seems that there are many overlaps in the recent literature between cases of crisis which occur in the transition to democracy and those ones which occurs in the function of democracy. Actually, they are two distinct phenomena and a demarcation between them is the first step in order to identify the subject matter of this study. Following Schmitter's (1995) distinction between transition and consolidation,²² I endeavour to separate the analysis of crisis of democratization, namely the crisis in regimes in transition toward democracy, which can undermine, limit or interrupt the transition of regime, from the analysis of crisis of democracy, as the crisis in stable democracies, which can impact on the function and organization of regime. Therefore, this analysis does not consider the conditions for democracy to enlarge where it does not exist, rather than those ones for democracy to work where it already exists. With knowledge on these differences, it should be fairly easy to identify the scope of this analysis on the crisis of democracy in the crisis of western democracies.

The privileged context of this paper is the crisis of democracy in the advanced industrial societies. Multiple and more frequent crises have been taking place in many consolidated democratic regimes where governments fail to solve problems, politics takes extremist directions and entire institutional systems perform poorly and face a loss of legitimacy because of feelings of mistrust that have gradually broadened to include evaluations of political institutions. In a few words, the performances of democracy have been disappointing, and these conditions of dissatisfaction and distress risk to undermine the legitimacy of institutions in many consolidated democracies. In Dalton's (2004) assessment of most empirical measures of democracy in use: "the cross-national breadth of this pattern suggests it is a general feature of contemporary politics in advanced industrial democracies, not the specific experience of only a few nations."²³ Even if with many differences between countries, this phenomenon is mainly related to the European states and the US.

Accordingly, the next pages will be related to the theoretical approaches for the study of consolidated democratic regimes, and more in particular of the Western democracies. The main aim of the next part of the paper is to turn to the most prominent theoretical approaches in order to understand the mechanisms responsible for democratic crises. Understanding the crisis of democracy and investigate on it causes, features and effects will be useful not only as a theoretical exercise, but also in order to consider measures to help many democracies to flourish again.

The crisis of democracy in the advanced industrial societies

Different theoretical approaches

The larger goal of this section is to clarify and place in perspective the diverse theories of crisis of democracy that have emerged in these studies. Before assessing the main theoretical approaches, some theoretical clarifications are needed. First of all, as suggested by Sartoris's (1970) strategy for

²² Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitology: The Science or the Art of Democratization?*, in Joseph Tulchin with Bernice Romero (eds.), *The Consolidation of Democracy in Latin America*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Schöck, Kurt, 2005, pp. 11-41.

²³ Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices, The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford University Press Inc., 2004, p. 39.

avoiding conceptual stretching,²⁴ an explanatory theory of the crisis of democracy should be sufficiently general to encompass the regularities observed across both time and space but at the same time enough parsimonious in order to offer tools for precisizing the definition and hence, distinguishing the crisis of democracy, from other crises (for example an economic crisis) that can however hit a democratic regime. It means to separate the crises of regime from all the cases of regime in crisis without ignoring that the former can be caused by the latter. For example, during the economic crisis started in 2008, western democracies were in crisis. The global financial crisis has installed doubts in peoples' confidence about the democratic systems and their performances. On the one hand, often the research literature links the decline in support to economic decline or an economic crisis, and some authors have analyzed the current crisis of democracy as engendered by the global financial crisis. On the other hand, many different studies consider the relations democracy-crises. Merkel (2014) mentions the thought of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Tocqueville, Marx and Weber, and reminds us that "political theory has posited from the outset that democracy is inconceivable without crisis."²⁵ With reference to this point, Urbinati (2016) stresses that "constitutions and procedures were constructed in view of allowing a crisis of consent (hence the break of unanimity and the adoption of the rule of majority) without shattering the system and without curtailing freedom of opinion and criticism either."²⁶

For the sake of brevity, I cannot do justice to all the theoretical nuances and explanations, yet the summary identifies certain definitional and conceptual benchmarks that have played a crucial role in orienting these studies. The literature on the crisis of democracy offers at least three main theoretical approaches and explanations that scholars have employed until today.

The first school of thought emphasizes the problems of governability and poor institutional performances as possible causes of the crisis of democracy. Laski's (1933) research is one of the first works on the crisis of democracy. He tried to study in depth democracy's ability to endure especially when faced by non-democratic challenges. Actually, the first comprehensive analysis on the issue is the work by Huntington, Crozier and Watanuki (1975), entitled "The crisis of democracy: report on the governability of democracies to the Trilateral Commission." They studied the condition of democracy in the US, Europe and Japan. They articulated a deepen description of how disappointing policy outcomes of governments could cause risks of disengagement from politics and disenchantment with the democratic process. Huntington, Crozier and Watanuki focused their attention on the fact that during the Seventies, the consolidated democracies missed adequate authority, resources and powers to deal with the problems of their societies. In order to understand the reasons of that crisis, Huntington further developed the same argument that he had already proposed in 1968 in the core assumption that "the most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government."²⁷ According to Huntington, Crozier and Watanuki, democratic governments could face a crisis of governability which could have been overloaded by too many responsibilities and expectations of citizens in a period of international economic recession. Twenty-five years later, Pharr and Putnam (2000) updated that analysis by arguing that the problem of weakened performances of democratic regimes is mainly caused by governments' diminished capacity to act in an interdependent world. In the detailed research made by the two authors, the current crisis does not depend only on the unsatisfactory functioning of democracies and the new growing public expectations, but also on the widespread use

²⁴ Giovanni Sartori, *Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics*, *The American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4, 1970.

²⁵ Wolfgang Merkel, *Is There a Crisis of Democracy?*, *Democratic Theory* Volume 1, Issue 2, Winter 2014, p. 11.

²⁶ Nadia Urbinati, *Reflections on the meaning of the crisis of democracy*, in Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, *Democratic Theory*, Volume 3, 2016, p. 6.

²⁷ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p. 1.

of information which has altered the criteria by which people judge their governments. Indeed, their most important theoretical contribution is to pinpoint the increasing limits to national governments' autonomous powers to act in an ever more integrated international order. Following these premises, Fukuyama's (2015) intervention in the ongoing debate relies on the conviction that "the legitimacy of many democracies around the world depends less on the deepening of their democratic institutions than on their ability to provide high-quality governance."²⁸

What distinguishes these theories is that they locate the most significant triggers of the crisis of democracy in the institutional capacity to act and in their outcomes. These authors are representative of a theoretical approach which reflects a top-down perspective on the phenomenon of the crisis of democracy. They evaluate the effectiveness of institutions and governments, and focus the research on the questions: How effective are institutions? Do they perform well? Is effective governability possible for democracies? How promptly do institutions act?

The second school of thought emphasizes the dissatisfaction with democratic institutions and the decrease in political support. Although, Huntington, Crozier and Watanuki's contribution, as well as that one by Pharr and Putnam, also consider the problem of the disappointment with democracy, other works based on opinion research have directly extended this theoretical argument in order to explain the crisis of democracy from another perspective: that of citizens' perceptions. As Dalton (2000) pertinently writes: "perceptions are reality when explaining individual citizen behaviour."²⁹ The logics of the argument is grounded in many contributions and ideas from the research on political support. For example, it is based on the seminal work by Almond and Verba (1963) about individuals' attitudes towards the political system, as composed of cognitive, affective and evaluative orientations, which are respectively: the knowledge of the system, feelings towards it, and judgment of it.³⁰ Another important turning point has been that one of the study of the effect of education and habituation to democratic practices on people's attitude towards politics. Indeed, consolidated democracies' citizens have a higher level of habituation to critical thinking and higher expectations on the democratic process. This reflection has been crucial in order to develop a new field of study on political stability of regimes, trust in institutions and support to politics. Citrin (1974) argued that the past naive idealism about institutions' capacity was gradually disappearing and people simply became more realistic about politics. From a research on the condition of support to government in the US, Citrin stressed that the American society was developing a democratic political culture and he recalled John Stuart Mill's belief, when he argued that "a democratic political culture is characterized by a vigilant skepticism (or realist cynicism) rather than an unquestioning faith in the motives and abilities of political authorities."³¹ Fuchs and Klingemann (1995) made the first broad compilation of empirical data on citizen orientations towards governments and their data claimed that the political attitudes of contemporary publics had fundamentally changed. They commented those findings by clarifying that the fundamental change which took place in the relationship between citizens and the state provoked a challenge to representative democracy.³² In a few words, these researches opened the way to the studies on the rise of what Norris (1999) called "critical citizens"³³

²⁸ Fukuyama Francis, *Why is democracy performing so poorly?* in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, *Democracy in decline?*, Johns Hopkins University Press and the National Endowment for Democracy, 2015, p. 16.

²⁹ Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices, The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford University Press Inc., 2004, p. 116.

³⁰ Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes in Five Western Democracies*, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 15.

³¹ Jack Citrin, *Comment: The political relevance of trust in government*, *American Political Science*, 1974, p. 988.

³² Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Dieter Fuchs, *Citizens and the State*, OUP/European Science Foundation, 1995, p. 429.

³³ Pippa Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

or in the words used by Klingemann (1999) “dissatisfied democrats.”³⁴ According to Klingemann, this attitude translates a general dissatisfaction with political institutions, even if people are still supportive of democratic principles. He describes it as “a common attitudinal pattern in advanced industrial democracies.”³⁵

In other words, this second group of researches reflects a bottom-up perspective on the crisis of democracy. They are more focused on the representation gap or discrepancy, as the difference between citizens’ preferences and governments policy. That is to say, what Norris (2011) studies in terms of a structural trust gap caused by the effect of the increased expectations of citizens and the lack of capacity of democratic governments, or more simply, what forty years before Pye (1971) called the “gap between wish and performance.”³⁶ This sort of theories is intended to offer a descriptive point of view on crisis of democracy that is based on an empirical account of citizens’ behavior and expectations. They answer to the questions: Are citizens satisfied by their democracy, governments, parties? How do citizens change their attitudes towards politics, institutions and democratic principles?

However, both these approaches still leave a number of important questions to address. These researches often outline segmented analyses which tend to underestimate the complexity of the changing conditions of many democracies offering a partial explanation of the phenomenon: the first approach is made by theories on qualities of government and the second is made by theories on qualities of participation. It might be better to use the term qualities rather than quality because in both cases there is a description of at least more than one aspects of every causal principle. For example, in the case of participation, these researches describe at least level, type and direction of participation (i.e. if it has changed in nature rather than declined in its level with increasing abstention rate, if it has changed direction by supporting or opposing targets of political expression, etc). Finally, they do not contemplate the evolution of the role of some democratic institutions, the involvement of non-political actors in the policy-making processes, the emergence of new issues in the political debates, etc. For example, some authors explain the current status of the advanced democracy with relevant alternative aspects related to long-term changes in the social and political conditions of advanced industrial societies. According to Alesina, Spolaore and Wacziarg (2000), the root cause of the public’s disenchantment with politics are in the increasing economic changes caused by the global economic interdependence.³⁷ While, as Inglehart (1990) claims modernization creates new public values and skepticism towards politics.³⁸ His research shows how modernization has changed citizens’ interests because of the growing attention towards new postmaterial values and the lag of governments’ responses about these new issues caused new political attitudes against the incumbents and mainstream political movement, in support of alternative political parties. In 2000, Dalton tested this hypothesis and his evidences suggest that: “the process of social modernization is admittedly only a partial explanation, accounting for perhaps 20–30 per cent of the total decline.”³⁹

Using Urbinati’s point of view on this issue, they reflect the two broad conceptions of politics that the polysemy of crisis involves. On the one hand, one technical or problem-solving which refers to an objective and detectable condition of instability that asks for a functional resolving by authority. On the other hand, one rhetorical or discursive which is expression of subjective evaluation by

³⁴ Hans-Dieter Klingemann, *Mapping Political Support in the 1990s: A Global Analysis*, in Pippa Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Lucian W. Pye *Identity and the Political Culture*, in Leonard Binder, Joseph La Palombara, *Crises and Sequences in Political Development*, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 110.

³⁷ Alberto Alesina, Enrico Spolaore, and Romain Wacziarg, *Economic Integration and Political Disintegration*, *American Economic Review*, 2000.

³⁸ Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton University Press, 1990.

³⁹ Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices, The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies* Oxford University Press Inc., 2004 p. 96.

citizens.⁴⁰ In a few words, these two groups of scholars consider the same problem, from two different, but at the same time interrelated and complementary points of view. Both the sets of factors considered by them are undoubtedly of crucial importance.

The latest approach is more theoretical than the previous ones and it has had an enormous impact, both within and outside the scholarly community because it deals with this issue in terms of crisis of the idea of democracy. Habermas' (1973) theory is based on the concept of legitimation crisis and it is contextualized in the wider perspective of the study of the political system shifts to the economic and the socio-cultural one during the capitalist development. Habermas described how many different crises shape "an objective force that deprives a subject of some part of his normal sovereignty."⁴¹ This process is seen as made by a chain of crises in a tendency in a tendency that involves modern capitalist states and creates a legitimation deficit. With reference to the political system, according to Habermas we can distinguish output crises from input ones. On the one hand, the former engender a rationality crisis. On the other hand, the latter engender a legitimation crisis, which is an identity crisis because it involves the essential structures of the social system.⁴²

The most recent contributions that follow the theoretical model of explanation heralded by Habermas, but not in the same way he originally conceived it nor with those conclusions, are Crouch (2004), Tilly (2007) and Rosanvallon (2008). Their contributions to this research would be analyzed in more details because of the conceptual innovations that their theories offer to this field of studies.

Crouch (2004) goes beyond the narrow conceptualization of the crisis of democracy. He stresses that there is a drift towards post-democracy and identifies some broader mechanisms of transformation which creates new social and institutional conditions that he defines "post-democracy or a post-democratic façade."⁴³ Formal processes without democratic substance because of globalization, deregulation, loss of collective capacity. As Crouch argues, post-democratic societies continue to have and to use all the institutions of democracy, but they are gradually becoming not more than formal praxes which does not produce any relevant outcomes, because decision-making procedures are in the hands of small circles of a politico-economic elite.⁴⁴ He affirms that "politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times."⁴⁵ The first effect of this transition from democracy to post-democracy will be the paralysis of individual political capacity of citizens: "growing incapacity of modern citizens to work out what their interests are."⁴⁶

Tilly's (2007) research proceeds essentially from the conviction that "democracy is a good in itself, since to some degree it gives a regime's population collective power to determine its own fate."⁴⁷ He has further developed the theory in order to "explain variation and change in the extent to which the state behaves according to its citizens' expressed demands."⁴⁸ His main innovation is related to the new conception of democratization and that one of de-democratization. A crucial and intriguing part of his theory is to conceive democratization as a two-way street. Therefore, democratization is seen as a continuous process that is not limited to the transition of regime and in this view Tilly identifies a reverse process which makes democratic regimes less democratic. It is what he calls de-democratization. Tilly has the ambitious aim of developing a new paradigm of political transitions based on broad mechanisms of institutional changes which are substantially: an increase in the

⁴⁰ Nadia Urbinati, Reflections on the meaning of the crisis of democracy, in Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, Democratic Theory, Volume 3, 2016, p. 6.

⁴¹ Jurgen Habermas, Legitimation Crisis, Polity Press, 1973, p. 1.

⁴² Ivi, p. 3.

⁴³ Colin Crouch, Post-democracy (Themes for the 21st Century Series), Wiley, 2004, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Ivi, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 28.

⁴⁷ Charles Tilly, Democracy, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.6.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 59.

breadth and equality of participation, a reduction in arbitrary power, and an increase in protected consultation. Indeed, Tilly argues that a:

“A regime is democratic to the degree that political relations between the state and its citizens feature broad, equal, protected, mutually binding consultation. Democratization then means net movement toward broader, more equal, more protected, and more mutually binding consultation and de-democratization means net movement toward narrower, more unequal, less protected, and less mutually binding consultation.”⁴⁹

Rosanvallon’s (2008) account of this issue is focused on two main aspects, which are the functions and dysfunctions of electoral representative institutions, and the organization of distrust.⁵⁰ He articulates a theoretical framework, which has sought to logically explain how a steady erosion of confidence in representative institutions would produce what he calls “counter-democracy.”⁵¹ According to Rosanvallon, in electoral-representative democracy, citizens express a democratic distrust in three counterpowers: powers of oversight, forms of prevention, and testing of judgments. They broadly are the main pillars of what he calls counter-democracy: “By “counter-democracy” I mean not the opposite of democracy but rather a form of democracy that reinforces the usual electoral democracy as a kind of buttress, a democracy of indirect powers disseminated throughout society—in other words, a durable democracy of distrust, which complements the episodic democracy of the usual electoral representative system.”⁵²

In other words, democracy and counter-democracy coexist today in our societies, and as Rosanvallon claims, in many cases counter-democracy emerges because the distance between civil society and institutions increases, when a “democracy of rejection” subverts a “democracy of proposition,” new noninstitutionalized actors develop a political ability to issue a veto, and when “democracy of accusation” subvert the “democracy of confrontation,” namely with the advent of the people as judge judicial processes can subvert ballot boxes.⁵³ With reference to the last point, Rosanvallon reminds us that: “Over the past twenty years, it has become commonplace to remark on the increasing prominence of judges in the political order.”⁵⁴ These processes have allowed the development of ever stronger forms of depoliticization or unpolitical counter-democracy. He asserts that “counter-democracy has its dark side: the unpolitical. This depoliticization has given rise to a vague but persistent feeling of malaise, which paradoxically has grown even as civil society has become more active, better informed, and more capable of intervening in political decisions than ever before.”⁵⁵ One of the most relevant symptoms of the unpolitical is the rise of populist movements. In Rosanvallon’s analysis: “Populism claims to resolve the problem of representation by conjuring up an image of a unified, homogeneous people. It radically rejects whatever it assumes to be inimical to such unity and homogeneity: foreigners, enemies, oligarchy, elites. With ever more vehement attacks it seeks to drive a wedge between the people and its supposed enemies. Populists denounce “otherness” in moral terms (by vilifying the “corrupt” and “rotten”), in social terms (by condemning “elites”), and in ethnic terms (by attacking “foreigners,” “immigrants,” “minorities,” etc.).”⁵⁶

The first theoretical framework has primarily sought to explain the crisis of democracy in terms of government capacity. The second one offers an interpretation of the crisis of democracy as a participation crisis or a decline of confidence. While these approaches concern the so-called circumstantial matters, namely those ones which represent specific features varying in time and space, the third one concerns democracy as an idea and the fundamentals of the democratic model. The third

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Rosanvallon Pierre, *Counter-Democracy Politics in an Age of Distrust*, Cambridge University Press 2008, pp. 15-17.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 306.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 266.

approach does not properly address the issue as focused on circumstantial factors but on the problems created by multiple environmental changes that can be both endogenous and exogenous to specific democratic systems and occur in the context where they work. Each of these distinctive reflections on the crisis of democracy directs our attention to important theoretical insights about the causal mechanisms, both endogenous and exogenous to western democracies' structures, that can engender a crisis of democracy.

Relevant contributions of empirical research, method and concepts

Some scholars have recently furthered a unified approach incorporating existing theoretical components from all those ones previously mentioned and some new general assumptions related to how government's capacity, citizens' participation and models of democracy and its own idea have changed in the last decade. Among them, there are by Dalton (2000, 2007), Merkel (2014) and Urbinati (2014, 2016). Maybe more than any other, their contributions are useful to understand the current crisis of democracy because they offer respectively an empirical research, a complete method of description and a deep theoretical analysis.

Dalton derives empirically testable hypotheses and outlines an empirical analysis of the crisis of democracy based on two assumptions. If there is a crisis of democracy:

- 1) the dissatisfaction must have been generalized to the political regime and its principles.
- 2) it is a crisis in terms of how democracy works rather than of how democracy is organized.⁵⁷

Dalton (2000, 2007) poses the question "has a malaise finally touched the democratic spirit?" and notes a decreasing trust in political institutions and supposes that the dissatisfaction is the effect of the decline of democracies' responsiveness in terms of "the capacity of political actors to act according to the interests and desires of citizens."⁵⁸ Therefore, he does not consider just the government capacity in terms of effectiveness of policies, rather than the consistency of these policies with citizens' priorities. In a few words, Dalton explains that institutions and politics promote interests that are different from the citizens' ones. For example, in the case of the US, Americans' dissatisfaction with government goes beyond the incumbents in office and hits the institutions themselves.⁵⁹ Based on long-term cross-national data on trust in political institutions, politicians and parties Dalton deems "there is a contemporary malaise in the political spirit involving the three key elements of representative democracy (what I will refer to as the three Ps): politicians, political parties, and parliament."⁶⁰

Departing from this depiction of the current state of affairs, Dalton tested alternative theories with empirical data and shows that "there is clear evidence of a general erosion in support for politicians and government in most advanced industrial democracies. This downward spiral is replicated in almost every other case, the major variation being in the timing and pace of decline. This is striking. Regardless of recent trends in the economy, in large and small nations, in presidential and parliamentary systems, in countries with few parties and many, in federal systems and unitary states, the direction of change is the same."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices, The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies* Oxford University Press Inc., 2004 p. 41.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 22.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 35.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 36.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 30.

According to Dalton, some hypotheses might explain the crisis of democracy because they can influence the political support, offer an explanation to the growing distrust and describe how systematic forces change the relationship between citizens and the state in advanced industrial democracies.⁶² Some of them are following summarized:

- a) economic performance;
- b) policy performance;
- c) ideology and policy polarization;
- d) changing values;
- e) social capital;
- f) media effects.

He identifies correlates of support rather than predictors, because of limits to explore causal relationships related to cross-sectional data.⁶³ If one looks closely at Dalton's research about the economic hypothesis, it is clear that it must be cast in doubt, at least about the later twentieth century, because "economic performance, whether measured in objective or subjective terms, does not appear to be a significant contributor to the long-term decline in political support."⁶⁴ The empirical research made by Dalton suggests that "there is unlikely to be a single explanation for the declines in political trust. (...) Thus, declines in political trust may reflect a convergence of causes rather than a single explanation. Recognition of these multiple influences may be a first step in understanding why political support is changing among contemporary publics."⁶⁵

Merkel (2013, 2014) elaborates on the question "Is democracy in crisis?" and bases his comparative analysis based on different definitions of democratic theories. He proceeds from the conviction that "a systematic weakness of all crisis theories is that the neither define their concepts of democracy nor of crisis. In contrast to them I argue that it depends very much on the concepts of the two phenomena whether one can speak of a crisis of democracy or not."⁶⁶ Indeed, he distinguishes between minimalist, medium (proceduralist) and maximalist model, and explains why the minimalist concept is of little use for the crisis analysis of consolidated democracies. Hence, Merkel proposes a middle-range definition based on five intertwined partial regimes which create the conditions of what he calls: embedded (constitutional) democracy. These regimes are: "democratic election (A), political participation rights (B), civil rights (C), horizontal accountability (D), effective power to govern (E)."⁶⁷

According to Merkel, the crisis of democracy is often characterized by the fact that parliaments are weaker with ever less power, while executives are stronger with more power. Hence, the balance of power between the executive and legislative is radically changed. This is just one aspect related to the current conditions of democracy.

Urbinati's (2014, 2016) analysis is particularly important and useful because it offers both one of the most updated description of the current crisis of democracy, provides a thorough theoretical study and adds important considerations to this debate. In recent years, many scholars have pointed to the conditions of crisis. Indeed, recent academic writings have produced different descriptions of the crisis. Although many factors may shape the crisis, some of them are ones that often escapes notice. Urbinati elaborates her analysis including also some of the aspects that have been underestimated in many recent researches. For example, Urbinati speaks of the growing power of non-political actors, the importance of markets and the technocratic executives that substituted elected ones in some

⁶² Ivi, p. 4.

⁶³ Ivi, p. 62.

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 127.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 78.

⁶⁶ Wolfgang Merkel, *Is There a Crisis of Democracy?*, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2013, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Wolfgang Merkel, *Is There a Crisis of Democracy?*, *Democratic Theory* Volume 1, Issue 2, Winter 2014, p. 14.

European member states as “indicative of the pervasive belief that democratically elected institutions are incapable of achieving, or too slow in making, rational policy decisions in the domain of finance and the economy.”⁶⁸ Urbinati focuses her contribution on the European Union and she defines it as a “non-democratic Europe, whose decisions heavily reflect a disproportionate power of one of its member-states and the banks, add to the mounting feelings of political mistrust.”⁶⁹

As Urbinati emphasizes, during the last years, consolidated democracies did not provide effective solutions to the economic crisis. At the same time, democracies have shown a decline of citizens’ confidence in their elected leaders and in the effectiveness of democratic institutions with the rise of challenger parties, nationalist rhetoric and populist movements.⁷⁰ As already mentioned in the first paper of this paper, Urbinati suggests that the crisis of democracy should have this possible meaning: “a radical break (either/or situations like war, dictatorial break, and revolution); b) a process of political and juridical judgments that partakes of the system of decision-making in a constitutional government and is engrained in political liberty; and c) a teleological judgment guided toward an end that it already presumed or a new epoch and a new order or a catastrophic fatal trend.”⁷¹ From this polysemy she derives two notions of crisis of democracy:

“in one sense, crisis is endogenous to this system since it denotes politics in its own right as an art by means of which free citizens judge on their deeds, make judgments in and for the public, propose their critical opinions, and devise decisions according to consented procedures; and in another sense, crisis denotes a radical break or a situation of exceptionality and/or emergency that can take on catastrophic characteristics (something that a constitutional democracy is not supposed to face).”⁷²

Her most important insight is in terms of diagnosis of the crisis: “what we witness is the crisis of parliamentary democracy (that is to say of the power of suffrage) and the expansion of the executive power (or the contraction of lawmaking) and consequently a transformation of the function, implementation, and meaning of representation.”⁷³ With reference to the sphere of consent, Urbinati concludes that “crisis pertains to the form of citizenship participation itself thus as it becomes less propositional and vocal and more reactive and visual.”⁷⁴ Indeed, she considers also a problem of communication and distance between what she calls “institutional democracy” and “extrainstitutional democracy.”⁷⁵ Hence, following this argument, Urbinati proposes that “clearly, the issue at stake here is representative democracy, or a diarchic political order that contemplates two sources of authority: that of procedures (the constitutionalized decision making system) and that of opinion (the broad domain of the public sphere within which people freely form and express and change their political judgment). Crisis would in this case denote a problem of communication between these two levels.”⁷⁶

Lastly, Urbinati stresses: “Modern democracy’s procedures and constitutions wanted to be guidelines for governing the crisis, which they assumed were congenital to democracy, not accidental.”⁷⁷ Therefore, the crisis of democracy might be seen also as the lack of capacity of democracies to govern the crises and be paradoxically governed by the crises.

⁶⁸ Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured Opinion, Truth, and the People*, Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 83.

⁶⁹ Nadia Urbinati, Reflections on the meaning of the crisis of democracy, in Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, *Democratic Theory*, Volume 3, 2016, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, p. 4.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ *Ivi*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p. 11.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ Nadia Urbinati, Reflections on the meaning of the crisis of democracy, in Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, *Democratic Theory*, Volume 3, 2016, p. 6.

It should be acknowledged that these contributions this field of inquiry, clearly outline and define the features and the scope of this research.

Western democracies lag behind in the process of adaptation

At this time, I have thus sketched three broad interpretations of the theories of crisis of democracy as reference points. In my view, all the above mentioned approaches to the crisis of democracy contain a grain of truth as aimed at explaining many aspects of this phenomenon and at the same time, they are heuristically important because of the contribution given to the problem of understanding the crisis of democracy. However, departing from this depiction of what in Urbinati's words is "the new wave of discourse on the crisis,"⁷⁸ I would argue that the main issue of this studies, namely the crisis of democracy, is just a part of a wider phenomenon, that one of the process of adaptation of all political regimes, both democratic and non-democratic ones. More in details, what we call crisis of democracy, is a phase of ultimate tensions on western democracies which show a lag in their process of adaptation.

From this reflection, it follows that:

- vast enduring processes gradually develop new environmental challenges and stresses which reshape the contexts where political regimes (both democratic and not-democratic) work and cause growing unexpected tensions on them or divides within them. Accordingly, these growing tensions and divides can be both exogenous and endogenous, and they differ from specific events, episodic aspects or circumstantial factors in short periods of time which can be however critical;
- with reference to democracy, when a democratic system is not able to withstand the status quo of tensions created by the new context where it works, these tensions became worse and grew ever more until an ultimate extent. Beyond it, the initial condition of that given democratic system changes. Adaptation requires institutional changes of procedures and organizations. In other words, when tensions reach an ultimate extent, the change would inevitably take place. Hence, regimes are forced to adapt themselves in order to protect the existing democratic values and develop new ones. While, without an adaptation, these tensions and divides create social, political and economic inconsistencies or contradictions that seem unbearable and undermine democratic values, which eventually can cause a reverse transition of regime;
- models of democracy come in succession as forms of organization of societies, in which the crises are periods preceding a passage from a model of democracy to another, namely to a democracy which is more adapt and adaptable to preserve its identity in new environmental conditions.

In this wider theoretical perspective, it is possible to look at the history of democracy in a new light, as ever less focused on a rigid idea of what we consider democracy and ever more based on a dynamic conception which contemplates how models of democracy change successively over time, and develop as functionally differentiated expressive models which can adapt themselves to special social values and environmental conditions of a given society. In this more comprehensive vision of the evolution of democracy, democratic systems have been able to improve (or at least preserve) their democratic identity because of their adaptability in crises. Accordingly, the crisis of democracy is a phase which implies two conditions: (i) growing tensions on democracies which reach moments of ultimate extent; (ii) growing paralysis of democracies as effects of a lag in the process of adaptation, which keeps their existing institutions and patterns operating unaltered despite the unavoidable need of an adaptation to the new contextual conditions. This study explains that democracy overcomes the

⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 3.

crises if it proceeds in a process of adaptation. Democracies can flourish if their democracy is seen as a continuous never ending process of perfection of their models, which makes them fit for the environmental conditions of society.

This definition of crisis of democracy differs from the other proposed by the above mentioned authors because it implies that the condition of crisis is different from that of crisis of trust or lack of popular support, or from poor government's performances. The phenomenon of the crisis is described in terms of long-term tensions and paralysis caused by a lag in the process of adaptation. This is different from what Urbinati (2016) suggests in her recent contribution on the issue. According to Urbinati, it is possible to reconstruct its meaning and obtaining some reference points. Among the meanings of the word crisis there are those ones of: turning point, interrupting regularity, phase of changes and breaking. Urbinati recovers the idea of crisis derived from the Greek and used by Aristotle as "judgment" and "trial" of crucial importance.⁷⁹ She grounds her analysis on these two meanings which can be considered significant for the aim of this research because "directly referable to politics (and democracy)."⁸⁰

In terms of our research interests, the adaptability of regimes is the linkage-variable that might connect democracies with their context, and explain how democracies respond or endure to changes in the context where they exist and why do some democracies succeed better than others. The strong, wide and long-term processes of contextual change produce some tensions and divides which create recurrent crises of democracy and subsequent passages from one model to another. I use the words "tension" in order to define the indirect effects of the contextual change, which gradually push models of democracy over the edge, until these models change and become more adapted to the current context and adaptable to future ones. According to Huntington (1968): "Adaptability is an acquired organizational characteristic. It is in rough sense, a function of environmental challenge and age. The more challenges that have arisen in its environment and the grater its age, the more adaptable it is."⁸¹ Even if Huntington described the idea of adaptability, he did not translate it into a comprehensive theory. Actually, he considered it not more than a conceptual attribute of his institutionalization theory. It might be worthy to update and further develop this theory. For example, it should be corrected when Huntington identifies the age of the regime as one of the factors which makes more adaptable. Indeed, regimes do not develop just their own solutions to every challenges, but their leaders can learn from the experiences of other regimes. Therefore, under the current conditions, even a young regime which has not yet achieved relevant phases of adaptation, can adapt itself and overcome that crisis and the next ones by treasuring of the experiences of other regimes, their failures and successes, their mistakes and solutions.

Merkel (2013) and Runciman (2013) are two authors who recently mention the adaptation and adaptability of democracy with reference to crisis of democracy. Actually, Merkel proposes a different theoretical explanation of the crisis, which is based on his idea of embedded democracy. While Runciman studies seven crucial international crisis (not crises of democracy) since 1918, which have influenced the transition to democratic rule and the conditions for stable modern democracies. For example, with reference to democratic systems, as Runciman (2013) clarifies: "When things get really bad, we will adapt. Until they get really bad, we need not adapt, because democracies are ultimately adaptable."⁸²

Following this approach means to read again the evolution of democracy in terms of its adaptability. For example, the American democracy changed many times since its foundation and every phase of

⁷⁹ Nadia Urbinati, Reflections on the meaning of the crisis of democracy, in Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, *Democratic Theory*, Volume 3, 2016, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ Huntington Samuel, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p. 13.

⁸² David Runciman, *The Confidence trap a history of democracy in crisis from World War I to the present*, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 285.

adaptation has been the outcome of a long-term process of gradual development of new environmental challenges which created growing tensions and they forced its institutions to adapt in order to preserve and improve their democratic identity.

Among the tensions and key moments of adaptation of the American democracy there are:

- the Jacksonian democracy: the abolition of property requirements or substantial tax requirements for the franchise. The suffrage issue was only one of a number of important issues that divided the population. As Engerman and Sokoloff (2005) describe: “vigorous political struggles were necessary to do away with property or tax-based qualifications in the majority of the original thirteen states.”⁸³ The existence of such tensions that reached an ultimate extent is clearly depicted in Engerman and Sokoloff’s words: “the remarkably high rates of voter participation, especially by modern standards, suggest that the bulk of the population was keen to exercise political influence. This evident enthusiasm for voting seems likely to have contributed to how suffrage institutions evolved, as it became ever more difficult for legislators or delegates to constitutional conventions to resist the pressure to broaden access.”⁸⁴ These laws did not just extend the suffrage (the US had the highest proportion of the population voting in the world by the middle of the 19th century), but they adapted that democracy.

- the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1944, the Swedish Nobel-laureate economist Gunnar Myrdal described the conflict between the democratic ideals of the American creed and the reality of the daily racial discriminations in his famous report “An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy.” As Myrdal (1944) observed: “The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of the American. It is there that the interracial tension has its focus. It is there that the decisive struggle goes on.”⁸⁵ It was after World War I, namely under the war-stimulated revival of democracy, that the white racism problem threatened to come alive as one of the most problematic contradictions of the American society, but the clash on the social level became protest decades later and culminated in the late Sixties. Hence, it would be wrong to say that this tension started in the years of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which outlawed segregated education, or the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Indeed, it already started a few decades after the Jim Crow laws (1890) and before the African-American Civil Rights Movement. For example, even the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was based on the legal theory that Charles Hamilton Houston developed in the late Twenties in order to fight against segregated education as the concentrated expression of all the inequalities blacks endured. That nation’s racial divide became protests which reached an ultimate extent with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (1963) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1968). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the civil rights legislation adopted in the following years improved the democratic identity of the American democracy, because they banned discriminations, ended racial segregation and unequal application of voter registration requirements. In a few words, that change made the American democracy more inclusive.

Some hypotheses on the current crisis of democracy

Moving the research from the concepts to the analysis, some plausible hypotheses can be proposed, but they still need to be rigorously tested before validity can be claimed for them. Even if the theoretical explanation above described is an attempt to further develop Huntington’s (1968) theory of institutionalization and the insights provided by the third approach, both this theoretical

⁸³ Stanley L. Engerman and Kenneth L. Sokoloff, *The Evolution of Suffrage Institutions in the New World*, *The Journal of Economic History*, Volume 65, Issue 4, 2005, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 16.

⁸⁵ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Harper & Brothers, 1944, Introduction.

explanation and the hypotheses listed below are derived from my own personal impressions. According to Merkel (2013): “Crisis theories have their strength in discovering the major challenges of democracy.”⁸⁶ Hence, some hypotheses are described about the causes of the current crisis of democracy. They are examples of the gradual patterns of development of new environmental challenges that create growing tensions on democracies in the long term until a moment of ultimate extent. They are not exhaustive, nor they are ranked, neither their impact can be considered as homogenous between consolidated democracies.

Drawing on this comprehensive theoretical explanation, I propose some main hypotheses and their impact on current democracies. I consider three tensions of outmost importance which have impacted in terms of citizens’ disengagement; radicalization of politics; less responsiveness of policies and deviation from traditional sources of legitimation. These three main hypotheses describe both patterns of change in the environmental conditions of western democracies and their effects in terms of growing tensions over them:

1. citizens’ disengagement: western societies were committed to collective loyalties (nation, democracy, ideology, union, party, etc.) and material issues (welfare state, economic rights, active policies against unemployment) until the last years of the Sixties. For example, political participation was highly ideological and policy-making mainly aimed at developing the modern welfare state, and addressing social problems in order to provide income maintenance, health care, housing. Both collective loyalties and material issues made possible a condition of public engagement which lasted since the Thirties. As Pierson (1995) observes “in all the advanced industrial democracies, the welfare state was a central part of the post-war settlement that ushered in a quarter century of unprecedented prosperity”⁸⁷ and he adds “the political role of the welfare state has been equally significant. Promises of social protection enhanced the legitimacy of Western democracies. Guarantees of social benefits helped workers adapt to changing market conditions and encouraged wage restraint. More generally, the expanded scope of government activity generated a range of linkages between state and society.”⁸⁸

During the Seventies, the economic turmoil created the conditions for the emergence of a new conservative political wave, whose main aim was to dismantle welfare state systems. In many advanced industrial democracies, it was the beginning of a retrenchment of the welfare state, under the conviction that social programs generated massive inefficiencies. The main process of gradual disengagement started in the Seventies, when western political systems became more committed to identity issues rather than material ones and to personal loyalties rather than collective loyalties. Both identity issues and personal loyalties are not neutral and have divided these societies in Europe and North America opening the way to controversial political debates and individualism. This happened because new political issues created a clash of values and ethical judgments. On the one hand, as Urbinati (2016) points out, in many European states “with the end of 1970s democracies faced the growth of anti-generalist interests.”⁸⁹ On the other hand, with reference to the American society, Mansbridge (1990) notes the relevance of a reductionist attribution of human behaviour to self-interest,⁹⁰ while according to Bethke Elshtain (1993) a destructive obsession with rights has sapped the mutual respect and understanding that are necessary for the good functioning of a democracy.⁹¹ Dalton (2004) reminds us there has been an extensive and long-term shift in public attitudes towards

⁸⁶ Wolfgang Merkel, *Is There a Crisis of Democracy?*, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2013, p. 10.

⁸⁷ Paul Pierson, *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Retrenchment*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 3.

⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Nadia Urbinati, *Reflections on the meaning of the crisis of democracy*, in Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, *Democratic Theory*, Volume 3, 2016, p. 15.

⁹⁰ Jane Mansbridge, *Self-Interest in Political Life*, *Political Theory*, Vol. 18, 1990.

⁹¹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*, House of Anansi Press Incorporated, 1993.

government, as a presumable consequence of common processes of social and political change.⁹² This new phase of social life in the US has been studied also by Putnam (2000) in his “Bowling alone.”⁹³ Putnam describes an alarming trend started since the 1960s or 1970s of withdrawal of Americans from their communities.

The main effects of this long-term process of disengagement are ever more divided and conflicting societies.

2. radicalization of politics or politics of the extremes: this second hypothesis is grounded on Milanovic’s (2016) findings about the trade-off between globalization and democracy. On the one hand, he analyses the winners and losers of globalization in terms of changes of cumulative growth in real income (income adjusted for inflation and differences in price levels between the countries), in the period that started with the fall of the Berlin Wall and finished with the outset of the global financial crisis in 2008. On the other hand, he explains the decline of middle classes in western democracies.

During these twenty years, that Milanovic terms the high globalization,⁹⁴ real income did not grow for most of the people of the rich economies of the OECD. In a few words the losers of globalization are middle and lower middle classes in OECD countries.⁹⁵ Milanovic stressed that: “about three-quarters of the people in this group are citizens of the “old-rich” countries of Western Europe, North America, Oceania (the three areas are sometimes represented by the acronym WENAO), and Japan.”⁹⁶ As he summarizes in a graphic representation, these percentage gains draw a reclining S curve called elephant curve: “the great winners have been the Asian poor and middle classes; the great losers, the lower middle classes of the rich world.”⁹⁷ This trend is confirmed also if this effect of globalization is analysed in terms of absolute gains.⁹⁸ Milanovic’s research is crucial, because he shows the decline of western middle classes: “The existence and function of the middle class is under attack by rising inequality. The middle class in Western democracies is today both less numerous and economically weaker vis-à-vis the rich than it was thirty years ago. In the United States, where the change has been the most dramatic, the share of the middle class, defined as people with disposable (after-tax) incomes around the median (more exactly, between 25 percent below and 25 percent above the median), decreased from one-third of the population in 1979 to 27 percent in 2010.”⁹⁹ Since their democratization, this is the first time in which there is a contraction of the middle class in the western societies.

These changes have been more radical in the United States, but they happened in many other European countries. With reference to their political impact on democracy and its stability, Milanovic follows Tocqueville when affirms that: “People in the middle class favoured democracy because they had an interest in limiting the power of both the rich and the poor: to keep the rich from ruling over them and the poor from confiscating their property.”¹⁰⁰ Namely, this shift in economic power away from the middle in favour of the top ones, made the former politically irrelevant.¹⁰¹

These findings are represented in the following figures from Milanovic’s recent book:

⁹² Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices, The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies* Oxford University Press Inc., 2004, p. 22.

⁹³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

⁹⁴ Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 11.

⁹⁵ Ivi, p. 20.

⁹⁶ Ibidem.

⁹⁷ Ibidem.

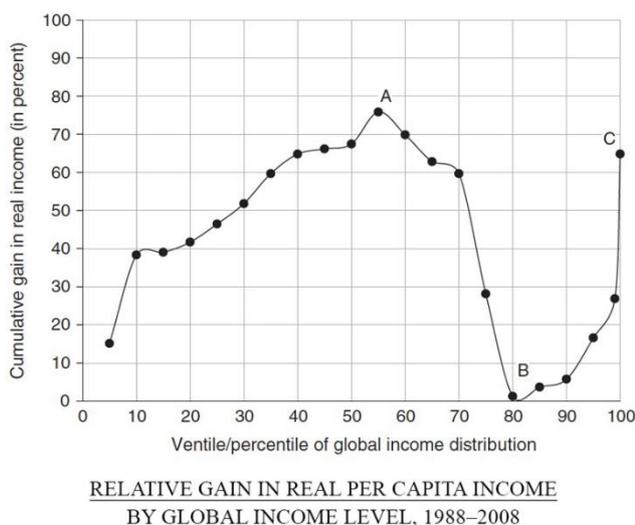
⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 26.

⁹⁹ Ivi, p. 194.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁰¹ Ivi, p. 198.

The elephant curve - Source: Milanovic (2016); Data source: Lakner and Milanovic (2015).¹⁰²

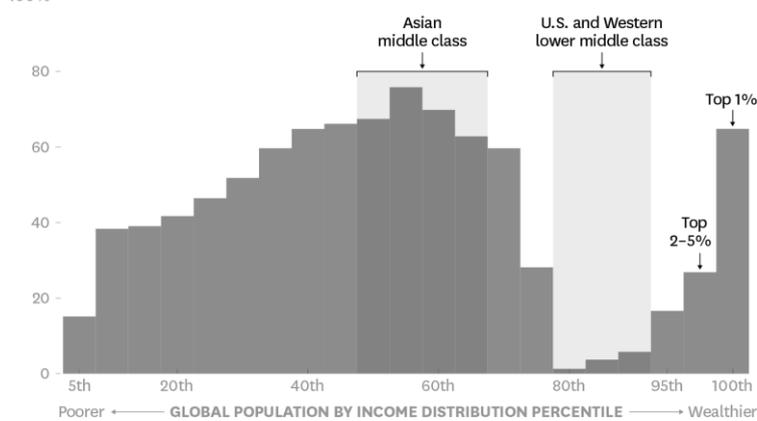


The Global Incidence Curve - Source: Milanovic (2016); Data source: Lakner and Milanovic (2015).

Who Has Gained from Globalization

The global 1% and the Asian middle class.

REAL INCOME GAINS IN PERCENTAGE, 1988 TO 2008



NOTE INCOMES ARE REAL, PPP-ADJUSTED, IN 2005 DOLLARS.
SOURCE BRANKO MILANOVIC

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The chart shows the world’s population along the horizontal axis, ranked from the poorest to the richest percentile; real income gains between 1988 and 2008 (adjusted for countries’ price levels) are shown on the vertical axis.¹⁰³

Milanovic’s reflections still leave open a number of important questions. For example, he offers a possible explanation of the effect of the decline of the middle class, but this phenomenon can be studied with reference to the radicalization of politics and the rise of populist movements. Indeed, if we consider Milanovic’s finding, it follows that democracies are instable not just because of the weaker role of the shrank middle-classes, but because of the stronger role of an ever extended part of citizens that cannot be considered within middle-class, nor within the upper class. On the one hand, this part of the society could reject moderate political parties and proposals, because their plans of reforms imply changes in the long-term and more uncertain perspective of the future. On the other hand, it could prefer to support the political extremes, which use a more charismatic than programmatic strategy and promise great changes in the short-term. In this sense, they simply want more in less time. The above mentioned change of political behavior can be explained if we

¹⁰² Christoph Lakner and Branko Milanovic, *Global Income Distribution: From the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the Great Recession*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁰³ Branko Milanovic, *Why the Global 1% and the Asian Middle Class Have Gained the Most from Globalization*, Harvard Business Review, 2016.

understand that this part of the population would like a change of their life in the short-term or simple because this part of the population cannot wait a change that might happen only in the long-term. The gradual transition from the middle-class to a poorer class can cause a structural movement of votes from moderate to extremist parties and cause a growing radicalization of politics. In other words, it can be the beginning of a new clear division of the electorate and the political parties, as a case of “structural dealignment”¹⁰⁴ toward the extreme parties in opposition to moderate political parties. In Europe, this process might reshape party systems of western democracies into new frozen party systems, or with Sartori’s words, new structurally consolidated or institutionalized ones.¹⁰⁵

3. less responsiveness of policies and deviation from traditional sources of legitimation: globalization of policies has substantially transformed functions, powers and roles of national governments and policy-makers. Most of the researches on this issue are based on the common assumption of the decline of state autonomy relative to other factors and actors. Scharpf (2000) claims that globalization leads to a loss of political control and creates a dynamic whereby national governments are increasingly blamed for policy outcomes that are beyond their control.¹⁰⁶ As Drezner (2007) phrases it: “Globalization undercuts state sovereignty, weakening a government’s ability to effectively regulate its domestic affairs.”¹⁰⁷ At the same time, policies have been usually less responsive and the legitimation of governments has been radically changed. Firstly, there has been a shift from national to supranational decision-making processes. Indeed, policy-making processes are ever less national institutional ones and ever more mixed or supranational ones. For example, the recent reforms of the economic governance in the EU confer more powers to supranational institutions (i.e. European Commission and European Court of Justice). Secondly, there has been a shift from political to independent technical institutions for the control of many decision-making processes, their policies and implementation. Finally, there is a third shift of power towards those states which are the primary actors writing the rules that regulate global or international convergence processes. This suggests that some states are privileged because they influence the formulation of rules and policies so as to avoid of altering their preexisting ones and adjustment costs. This is particularly clear if we consider the state of the European integration after the sovereign debt crisis. Today the European Commission and new national independent fiscal authorities have more powers than before, while representative political institutions have ever less powers. On the one hand, technical institutions can contribute to the formulation of the budget, but they also exercise an ex-ante and ex-post control. On the other hand, national laws have established new independent technical bodies which take part to the decision-making process before the approval of the budget by national parliaments. Finally, with reference to the third shift, under the current conditions, there is supremacy of some member states over the others.

These processes of policy convergence happened since decades, not just concerning with fiscal policies and not just because of the European integration. Similarly, policy convergence is the main strategy of action for financial policies, budgetary policies, labor standards, environmental regulation, taxation, antitrust issues, consumer health, trade policies, and more in general of all the so-called regulatory issues. Drezner (2007) clarifies which their political effect is: “They matter in world politics because of the way they affect the distribution of resources as well. Fundamentally, however, international regulatory regimes strike a political chord because they symbolize a shift in the locus of politics.”¹⁰⁸ Other examples are related to the transnational governance made by new nongovernmental organizations, the so-called epistemic communities and public policy networks. According to Otto Holman: “transnational governance is about control and authority but – unlike

¹⁰⁴ Romain Lachat, *Measuring cleavage strength*, University of Montreal, 2007, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 37.

¹⁰⁶ Fritz W. Scharpf, *Interaktionsformen, Akteurzentrierter Institutionalismus in der Politikforschung*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2000.

¹⁰⁷ Daniel W. Drezner, *All Politics Is Global: Explaining International Regulatory Regimes*, Princeton, New Jersey Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ivi, p. 5.

‘government’ in democratic polities – not necessarily about legitimacy and democratic accountability.”¹⁰⁹ For example, this is the case of the OECD or the Washington Consensus. The first was founded in 1961 in the form of a convergence club. The second was promoted by the most powerful state players and subsequently transmitted to developing societies through the influential international financial institutions.¹¹⁰ The Washington Consensus was followed in the Eighties by many governments as the most appropriate model of economic and political strategy based on neoliberal principles (i.e. deregulation, privatization and the liberalization of trade). Another example is the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (BCBS).

This external constraint makes the political participation completely irrelevant because voters can change leaders, governments and majorities in parliaments, nonetheless their votes cannot change policies, because there is a pre-electoral decision of many policies that are adopted by democratic governments. Urbinati notes that “the transformation of political decision making into an epistemic process clashes with democracy quite dramatically.”¹¹¹ Indeed, under these circumstances, citizens did not contribute to the policies they are subject to. In a few words, it might be interesting to answer to the question: which is the legitimacy of these policies?

If the policies are ever less responsive and the governments ever less representative of citizens, this process of gradual transformation of national policy-making is changing the legitimacy of governments, which seem to be legitimate because of the adoption of policies which are indicated from outside their political system rather than from inside them. In a few words, voters are left aside. Hence, today governments’ source of legitimation is not grounded on citizens’ votes in a democracy, but on external actors, who indicate which goals to be achieved, how to achieve them and control on policies. As Urbinati clearly explains: “there is someone else beside the citizens who is authorized to decree what the substantive problems are and whether they are solved or not.”¹¹² Going towards an external top-down source of legitimation which does not require the participation of citizens rather than an internal bottom-up legitimation which does require the participation of citizens. Today many governments are endorsed by actors which are different from their electors. This is de-facto a different source of legitimation which is alternative to the democratic one.

According to Schmitter (2015) “Parliaments have become less central to the decision- making process, having been displaced by the concentration of executive power and a wider role for “guardian institutions” dominated by (allegedly) independent technocrats. Governing cabinets include ever more unelected members who are chosen for their “nonpartisan” status.”¹¹³ This transition to a decision-making model based on closed independent groups can undermine the political role of elected institutions by reducing national parliaments’ functions to represent, control and decide, into a mere role of rubber stamp. In Urbinati’s words: “deliberative fora and committees of experts are meant to rectify democracy by reducing the function of parliaments to a final yes-no vote.”¹¹⁴

Conclusion

As this study suggests, democracies and other regimes are in a context made by changing societies, and the regimes which can endure, flourish and overcome crises are those ones which develop good

¹⁰⁹ Otto Holman, in Patricia Kennett, *Governance, globalization and public policy*, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2008, p. 58.

¹¹⁰ Patricia Kennett, *Governance, globalization and public policy*, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2008, p. 8.

¹¹¹ Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured Opinion, Truth, and the People*, Harvard University Press, 2014, p. 97.

¹¹² Nadia Urbinati, *Reflections on the meaning of the crisis of democracy*, in Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon, *Democratic Theory*, Volume 3, 2016, p. 8.

¹¹³ Philippe C. Schmitter, “Crisis and transition, but not decline” in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, *Democracy in decline?*, Johns Hopkins University Press and the National Endowment for Democracy, 2015, p. 41.

¹¹⁴ Ivi, p. 118.

capacities of adaptation. The current state of democratic and non-democratic regimes shows that: most of the current authoritarian regimes are more adaptable today than before, while western democracies are suffering for a lag in the process of adaptation. Indeed, today many authoritarian regimes are able to overcome some of their crucial weaknesses that historically represented their Achilles' heel. For Example, as mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper, many authoritarian regimes have consolidated procedures for the peaceful succession and replacement of one set of leaders by another one. However, as Runciman's (2013) research show, democracies have been more adaptable than other regimes and they keep adapting to their circumstances.¹¹⁵

The current crisis of democracy will be overcome when western democracies will adapt themselves to new contextual conditions. This interpretation of the conditions of many democratic regimes, as a lag in the process of adaptation, offers important reflections with reference to the above mentioned theoretical approaches. Some of these relevant theories describe how the crisis reveal itself, others are focused on the origin of the crisis or on one particular crisis of democracy. Moreover, as clearly explained by Merkel, most of them do not indicate a specific definition of democracy nor of crisis of democracy. It is important to compare the idea I propose and the above mentioned theories, but it would consume too much space to explain here. Therefore, it might be better to briefly refer to some of them. For example, it seems that Tilly's theory and concepts of democracy, democratization and de-democratization are just focused on the idea of consultation and how its conditions are improved in a phase of democratization or undermined in a phase of de-democratization. My idea of adaptability of democracy open the way to a key of understanding which considers all its changes and not just those ones related to the electoral dimension or procedures of consultation. In other words, in Tilly's approach democratization means ever more democracy, in the approach here proposed, adaptation means ever better democracy for specific conditions of every time period. At the same time, the interpretation of the current crisis of democracy, in terms of growing tensions and paralysis because of a lag in the process of adaptation, differs from those ones of all the above mentioned authors. For example, Merkel (2014) finds that indices of democracy do not indicate neither acute crisis nor in a latent one in consolidated democracies, but at the same time, but finally, he adds "we are witnessing some "subterranean" erosion of democracy not recognized by the demos."¹¹⁶

Every crisis of democracy and phase of adaptation has a strong impact which goes far beyond the institutional, political or social dimension, and has relevant theoretical implications. Indeed, periods of crisis and adaptation change not just the state of democracy and the existing democratic systems, but they change the democracy as idea. Every democracy, even those ones that are considered as the best democracies, are imperfect regimes in a never-ending process of adaptation.

Accordingly, it might be important to stress that those regimes which can endure and preserve their political identity are those ones which are more adaptable. If it would be possible to update Huntington's (1968) famous claim: "the most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government,"¹¹⁷ today it would be focused on identity and adaptability of a regime. Hence, it would say: the most important political distinction among countries concerns not their identity but their adaptability. That is to say, the capacity of every regime to change in order to protect its identity.

Matteo Laruffa

¹¹⁵ David Runciman, *The Confidence trap a history of democracy in crisis from World War I to the present*, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 58.

¹¹⁶ Wolfgang Merkel, *Is There a Crisis of Democracy?*, *Democratic Theory* Volume 1, Issue 2, Winter 2014, p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Huntington Samuel, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p. 1.

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