How Resilient is Representative Democracy? The Impact of Populist and Technocratic Challenges on the Political Party Representation

Politics in contemporary democracies appear increasingly polarized. This is evidenced by, for example, radically different views on themes related to climate change mitigation, morality and gender, immigration, but also on medical issues (e.g., vaccinations) and governmental decision-making procedures. The opposing views come partly out of an underlying dimension of how people view and evaluate the principles of representative democracy—*who* should be decisive in policy-making. Do they believe that (the majority of) 'the people' should rule, do they think that party platforms can aggregate preferences in a meaningful way, or do they believe that there is an 'objective' right decision? I.e., should decisions be made by popular majority, political parties, or by experts?

While this division is stylized here, the polarization and disagreement on important political themes is real, and it is related to the technocratic-populist dimension. Over time, both populist and technocratic tendencies within democracy, as well as the role of political parties, have been studied. Caramani (2017) analyses the way that populist and technocratic tendencies challenge party government. It has been shown that citizens adhering to populist parties are much more in favour of referendums and that they find minority right protection and free and fair elections less important for democracy—illustrating that populists have different views of democracy (e.g., Zaslove and Meijers 2021; Kokkonen and Linde 2023; Bjånesøy and Ivarsflaten 2016). Moreover, anti-intellectualism is associated to opposition scientific positions on e.g., climate change and nuclear power, and has been connected to populism (Merkley, 2020).

Moreover, mobilization along this dimension happens according to a few key characteristics of people. Rurality, wealth, and educational level are in particular expected to be important predictors of where people might place themselves on the technocratic-populist dimension. Bertsou and Caramani (2022) find people with a 'technocratic profile' tend to be higher educated, urban, and more politically interested than people with a 'populist' or 'party-democratic' profile. Tatham and Peters (2023) show that rurality and education combine into a 'yellow vest' dimension which predicts support for (costly) climate change mitigating policies. Further, examining whether citizens are willing to take a Covid-19 vaccine, one study finds that vaccine acceptance is higher when respondents were more trusting of their government, and when they had a higher level of education (Lazarus et al., 2021). And, more generally, studies have documented representational inequality on the basis of income and education (e.g., Gilens 2012; Mathisen 2022; Schakel and van der Plas 2021). Contemporary politics seem structured around an axis that juxtaposes science with ideology; and desires for change with traditional values. This symposium aims to shed some light on these issues.