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From the Varieties of Democracy to the defense of liberal democracy: V-Dem and the reconstitution of liberal hegemony under threat

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, democracy has been facing increasing challenges. How has comparative regime research responded? Focusing on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, this paper argues that the perception of serious threats to democracy in general and liberal norms in particular has given rise to a convergence around the liberal conception of democracy, reversing a previous turn towards recognising its conceptual contestability. In tracing V-Dem's discursive turn from the contestation to the decontestation of democracy, the paper reconstructs two mechanisms that concern the ways in which academic research relates to the outside world and that have jointly pushed V-Dem scholars towards embracing unequivocally liberal conceptions of regime type and regime change. As a response to the crisis of democracy, this gradual abandonment of a pluralist conceptualisation of democracy is understandable but also deeply problematic as it contributes to downplaying the inherent limitations of liberal democracy.

KEYWORDS

Conceptions of democracy;
democracy measures;
liberalism; contestation;
conceptual politics;
democratisation;
autocratization

1. Introduction

It does not seem to be an appropriate time to write about the discursive hegemony of liberal democracy. Current academic and political debates rather revolve around the increasing contestation of liberal ideas, the manifold threats to liberal-democratic regimes and forces as well as the multifaceted crisis of liberal democracy as a template of political development.¹ Yet, as I want to suggest in this paper, it is precisely the perception of a serious threat to liberal democracy that has given rise to a certain reconstitution of liberal hegemony, at least as far as academia is concerned.

This discursive reconstitution comes in the shape of a notable convergence around the liberal conception of democracy, reversing a previous turn towards its contestation that emphasised alternative, social, participatory, deliberative, radical or 'non-Western' forms of democracy (Coppedge and Gerring et al., 2011; Koelble & Lipuma, 2008; Kurki, 2010;

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Youngs, 2015). I argue that this turn from the contestation to the decontestation of (liberal) democracy can be traced back to two mechanisms that both concern the ways in which comparative regime research relates to the outside world. First, the aim to theoretically grasp and empirically trace the current threats to both democracy in general and liberal norms in particular has suggested a return to unequivocal and unequivocally liberal conceptions of regime type and regime change. Here, it is scholarly logics of theory production and concept development that shape the ways in which real-world developments are processed within academia. Second, this intra-academic logic has been reinforced by the aim to inform and shape broader public and political debates by means of academic knowledge production and dissemination. As Piki Ish-Shalom (2006) has argued, this task comes with the need to transform academic propositions into public conventions and, ultimately, political convictions. This transformation, again, has pushed scholars towards embracing clear-cut and uncontested conceptions, amongst other things.

In order to empirically sustain this argument, I analyze the evolution of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, which is a very prominent and highly visible case in point. In a matter of a few years, the indicators and indices provided by V-Dem have become one of the most widely used measures of political regime dynamics, increasingly replacing previously predominant indices such as the Freedom House ratings and the Polity scores (see Boese, 2019; Boswell & Corbett, 2021). In addition to the widespread usage of V-Dem data, the V-Dem Institute also publishes an annual Democracy Report, 'which is used extensively as an authoritative account in the policy-practitioners' community' (Lindberg & Medzihorsky, 2020, p. 4). In the course of this rise to prominence,² V-Dem has also seen a remarkable discursive transformation, which is the topic of this paper: Having started as a project aimed at taking seriously the essential conceptual contestability of democracy (Coppedge et al., 2016; Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011; Lindberg et al., 2014), the evolution of V-Dem over time is characterised by a clear-cut process of decontestation. While the V-Dem Institute continues to produce data on a variety of conceptions of democracy, in line with the original mission of the V-Dem project, its academic publications and policy-oriented reports are characterised by an increasingly narrow and taken-for-granted focus on liberal democracy.

In what follows, I trace this discursive evolution of V-Dem, following the methodological logic of what Ish-Shalom has called 'discourse-tracing'.³ Based on a close reading and comparative analysis of V-Dem's flagship publications,⁴ I will reconstruct the two mechanisms outlined in the beginning and show how they coalesce to produce the shift from the contestation to the decontestation of democracy. Given V-Dem's widespread use, the high academic and political visibility of its publications as well as the fact that it is by far the most successful and well-known attempt to push for recognition of the conceptual diversity of democracy, the findings on V-Dem's discursive evolution are relevant in and of themselves. Yet, I also want to suggest that broader regime research might be characterised by a similar trend of turning away from a pluralist conceptualisation of democracy – a perspective that was never a mainstream approach anyway. While I cannot systematically assess this general proposition here, it is supported by an analysis of all 120 V-Dem Working Papers published between March 2015 and early May 2021, which include a broad range of studies based on V-Dem data. Indeed, usage of the

different conceptions of democracy in this working paper series exhibits a similar trend of decontestation, even if in these decidedly academic and largely quantitative studies it is electoral rather than liberal democracy that predominates.⁵

In the next section, I start by laying out the theoretical and conceptual foundations that inform this paper (2.). Then, I introduce V-Dem, summarise its approach to the varieties of democracy, and briefly discuss why V-Dem's original mission remains important even, or in particular, in the context of the current crisis of democracy (3.). The main empirical parts of the paper systematically analyze key publications from V-Dem with a view to the ways in which they process real-world developments (4.) and try to inform and shape public and political debates (5.). The overarching question is how these two ways of relating to the outside world during a time in which this very world has seen important changes have shaped V-Dem's approach to conceptualising democracy. The sixth section, then, presents the analysis of V-Dem's Working Paper series. In the conclusions, I summarise the main findings and reiterate the argument that the current crisis of democracy does, in fact, reinforce the importance of democracy's conceptual openness, which is at the heart of its capacity for innovation.

2. Liberal hegemony, conceptual contestation and the essential contestability of democracy

Concepts, according to Reinhart Koselleck, 'are like joints linking language and the extra-linguistic world', and they do so in two ways: As 'indicators', concepts point to the real-world context in which they are used, and as 'factors in political and social life', they shape the ways in which 'this reality is perceived' (Koselleck, 1996, p. 61). The way in which meaning is attached to concepts, producing potentially competing conceptions, therefore is of immediate social and political relevance (Ish-Shalom, 2021). The consequence is what Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki have dubbed 'conceptual politics', referring to *'the ways in which contested concepts – like democracy – are interpreted, used, and fought over by actors, and how certain meanings and definitions come to influence real world phenomena'* (Hobson & Kurki, 2012b, p. 3; emphasis in the original). In this discursive struggle, a key dynamic concerns the process of decontestation, the process of 'fixating a concept with a single doxic conception' with the result that one specific meaning becomes commonsensical, taken for granted or, in the Gramscian terminology, hegemonic (Ish-Shalom, 2021, p. 15).⁶

Decontestation is particularly salient in the case of what W. B. Gallie famously called 'essentially contested concepts', that is, concepts whose intrinsic features inevitably produce 'endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users' (Gallie, 1956, p. 169). Democracy is a case in point. Theoretically speaking, the basic concept of democracy (broadly understood as 'rule by the people' and/or 'popular sovereignty') and its different components (contestation and participation, equality and freedom) can be specified in very different ways, giving rise to competing conceptions or models of democracy (Collier et al., 2006; Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011; Kurki, 2010). Empirically, however, the 1980s and 1990s saw a process of decontestation in the course of which the actual struggle over the meaning of democracy diminished greatly and a conception of democracy as 'modern, representative, liberal, political democracy as practiced within nation-states' (Schmitter, 1995, p. 15) became hegemonic. This observation has

been made with a view to both research on democracy (Collier et al., 2006, p. 222; see also Guilhot, 2005, pp. 101–165) and to the real-world struggles over democracy and democratisation (Burnell, 2010, p. 2; see also Hobson & Kurki, 2012a; Kurki, 2010; Robinson, 1996; Wolff, 2021).

The overall result has been a convergence around a decontested, liberal conception of democracy, which came to form a constitutive element of liberal hegemony in the post-Cold War context.⁷ In line with the dual role of concepts as indicators and factors, this decontestation has had two specific consequences for the interplay between comparative regime research and real-world developments. On the one hand, the quality and evolution of political regimes came to be analyzed through the narrow lens of liberal democracy, both in qualitative research and in attempts to measure democracy (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011; Grugel, 2002; Munck, 2009). On the other, liberal democracy became the (almost) unquestioned template of political order that informed and guided international efforts at promoting democracy around the world (Burnell, 2000; Guilhot, 2005; Kurki, 2010; Robinson, 1996), with corresponding indicators being used as yardsticks for measuring their impact or success (Finkel et al., 2007; Scott & Steele, 2005).

3. The original V-Dem mission – and why it is still relevant today

The very starting point of the V-Dem project was the twofold recognition of the irresolvable conceptual contestability of democracy and of the de facto process of decontestation that had unfolded during the 1980s and 1990s. In a key article that laid out what would later become V-Dem's conceptual framework (Coppedge et al., 2020, pp. 5–6), the authors observe:

There is no consensus on what democracy at large means, beyond the prosaic notion of rule by the people [...]. Political theorists have been emphasizing this point for some time, and empiricists would do well to take this lesson to heart. (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 253)⁸

In line with other academic interventions around that time that questioned the taken-for-grantedness of the model of democracy applied in Western democracy promotion,⁹ Coppedge, Gerring and colleagues argued that existing measures of democracy did not offer appropriate tools for informing and evaluating democracy promotion (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 248, 252, 261). As a remedy, the authors proposed six conceptions of democracy, which were to reflect the most important models of democracy as discussed in the literature: Electoral, liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy. Taken together, these conceptions, or principles, of democracy were meant to 'offer a fairly comprehensive accounting of the concept of democracy as it is employed today' (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 253). Out of these six conceptions, five made it into the actual V-Dem project, which includes separate indices for electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy (Coppedge et al., 2016; Lindberg et al., 2014).¹⁰ While certainly not the only *raison d'être* of V-Dem, this explicit focus on the varieties of democracy – as the very name of the project suggests – was certainly one of the key distinctive features vis-à-vis existing indices (see also Coppedge et al., 2020, p. 2; Lindberg et al., 2014, p. 159).¹¹

As the protagonists of V-Dem recount, their key motivation was not so much a theoretical or normative concern with the conceptual contestability of democracy but rather a policy-oriented needs assessment, namely the finding ‘that no democracy indicators existed that were sufficiently fine grained and reliable to assess the impact of democracy-promotion programs’ (Coppedge et al., 2020, p. 5). As the founding article of 2011 explicitly argued, the demand for better indicators by ‘rich-world policymaking bodies’ was however only one practical argument (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 259):

As soon as a set of indicators becomes established and begins to influence international policymakers, it also becomes fodder for dispute in other countries around the world. A useful set of indicators is one that claims the widest legitimacy. A poor set of indicators is one that is perceived as a tool of western influence or a mask for the forces of globalization (as Freedom House is sometimes regarded). (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 259)

The opening up towards competing conceptions of democracy was, therefore, also a deliberate attempt to include concerns against overly narrow, or specific, measures of democracy in light of real-world contestation.¹² As a consequence, the recognition of various and at least partially competing conceptions of democracy was not only seen as theoretically appropriate but also as politically important. The attempt to ‘impose a particular definition upon the concept, insist that *this* is democracy, and then go forward with the task of measurement’, while possible, ‘is unlikely to convince anyone not already predisposed to the author’s point of view’ (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 258; emphasis in the original).¹³

Before turning to the analysis of V-Dem’s discursive evolution, I will briefly make the case that this emphasis on the conceptual diversity of democracy today remains academically and politically important. As a cursory glimpse at the literature shows, key comparative studies on the crisis of democracy point to the inherent limitations of liberal democracy as a relevant part of the problem and, more specifically, to the persisting relevance of the three alternative conceptions of democracy traditionally emphasised by V-Dem (participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian).¹⁴

According to Coppedge and Gerring et al. (2011, p. 254), the key question from the perspective of the *participatory* conception of democracy is: ‘Do ordinary citizens participate in politics?’ The overall answer, when looking at real-existing (liberal, representative) democracies, is: Not really – and increasingly less so. Empirically, there is little doubt that the current discontent with democracy, which shows up in opinion polls but also in the popular support to ‘populist’ movements and forces in many countries around the world, results at least in part from a crisis of representation (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 240; Przeworski, 2019; Schäfer & Zürn, 2021). One much-discussed response to this discontent, therefore, concerns the introduction of elements of participatory and/or direct democracy to compensate for the limitations of existing representative institutions, as in the famous, if already somewhat outdated example from Porto Alegre (Brazil). To be sure, it is contested how and under which conditions elements of participatory democracy actually broaden political participation and, thereby, effectively compensate for some of the limitations of representative democracy. But this should not be taken as an excuse not to seriously consider the potential of participatory ‘innovations’ as means to deepen or transform democratic regimes – particularly in times of crisis (Schäfer & Zürn, 2021, pp. 209–218; see Escobar & Elstub, 2019).

From the perspective of the *deliberative* conception of democracy, current democratic practices do not fare much better. In quite a few countries, the rise of 'populist' forces and movements as well as the partially related increase in political polarisation has certainly contributed to undermining key liberal features of democracy, such as the independence of the judiciary or freedom of expression; but it has also seriously harmed the deliberative quality of political debates and processes (see Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Schäfer & Zürn, 2021). Technological change, which provides 'extraordinary new means for promoting disinformation, group hatred, and political polarization' (Diamond, 2021, p. 36), adds to this (see also Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, pp. 81–83). In this sense, the lack of 'respectful dialogue [...] among informed and competent participants who are open to persuasion' (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 253) constitutes a serious problem for contemporary democracies. Hence, deliberative features of democracy are important indicators of the current crisis of democracy (V-Dem, 2019, pp. 19–20), while scholars discuss deliberative innovations such as, e.g. mini-publics as means to address the current democratic malaise (Escobar & Elstub, 2019; Schäfer & Zürn, 2021, p. 210).

The *egalitarian* conception of democracy, probably, points to the most important blind spot of liberal democracy: the tension between the democratic principle of political equality and the existence of social inequalities that lead to systematically skewed patterns of political participation and representation, access and influence. When Adam Przeworski concludes that the current crisis of democracy 'has deep roots in the economy and in society' (Przeworski, 2019, p. 206), this proposition is particularly based on the observation that this fundamental tension, which characterises the coexistence of capitalism and democracy, has been intensifying over the last couple of decades (because of rising socio-economic inequalities and the weakening of social democratic parties and trade unions). In a similar vein, Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn relate the widespread discontent with democratic regimes, which becomes manifest in the popular support to 'populist' movements and forces in many countries around the world, to increasingly unequal patterns of interest representation: The highly skewed descriptive representation of different socio-economic status groups in parliaments (which has increasing in recent decades) and the rising power of non-majoritarian institutions at the national and international level, they argue, combine to produce political decisions that tend to ignore the preferences of important parts of the population (Schäfer & Zürn, 2021). Normatively, this indicates that addressing growing socioeconomic inequalities constitutes a key task to (re-)establish the 'social foundations' of democratic regimes (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 222). Empirically, it implies that in order to understand the current crisis of democracy it is important to assess the questions of 'equal participation, representation, protection, and politically relevant resources' that are emphasised by the egalitarian conception of democracy (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 254).¹⁵

4. Processing outside change: from the varieties of democracy to autocratization

In 2014, the V-Dem Institute was established, and the years between 2014 and 2017 saw the release of data sets with increasingly global coverage (Coppedge et al., 2020, pp. 7–8).¹⁶ In 2017, V-Dem released its first Democracy Report. In this section, I analyze the series

of annual reports published between 2017 and 2021, focusing on the ways in which V-Dem has been adjusting its theoretical and conceptual lenses in response to increasing real-world threats to democracy. As I will suggest, the increasing attention to ‘autocratization’, in response to the widely discussed global dynamic of ‘backsliding’, ‘erosion’, or ‘regression’ of democracy,¹⁷ has been accompanied by an increasingly explicit decontestation of democracy, with the focus on the varieties of democracies fading more and more into the background (that is, into the appendix). The aim to measure and analyze autocratization has pushed V-Dem to adopt a linear conception of regime change and, thus, to return to a single and unequivocal conception of democracy.¹⁸

In the preface to V-Dem’s, 2017 Democracy Report, Staffan Lindberg emphasises that this ‘first annual report comes at a time when democracy and freedom are challenged in many countries’ (V-Dem, 2017, p. 5). In order to empirically trace what is identified as a ‘global democratic backslide’ (V-Dem, 2017, p. 8), the report focuses on V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). Still, this focus is explicitly recognised (V-Dem, 2017, p. 9, 14), and the section on ‘Liberal Democracy – Status and Trends’ is complemented by further sections that include similar assessments for the other four ‘principles’ and ‘indices’ of democracy. Also, symbolically, it is notable that the report starts by highlighting V-Dem’s provision of five ‘Indices for Democracy Ideals’ (V-Dem, 2017, p. 6).

The 2018 report introduces ‘autocratization’ as an overarching concept to grasp the ‘decline of democratic qualities’ or ‘democratization in reverse’, which is measured as a linear process defined in accordance to liberal standards and operationalised as changes on the LDI score (V-Dem, 2018, p. 17). Notably, in presenting the autocratization concept and data in the Executive Summary, the report simply talks about democracy and declines in democracy, as if the decision to conceptually focus on liberal democracy would not require any further information. As a second conceptual innovation, the 2018 report also introduces the new Regimes of the World (RoW) index, which draws on the well-established distinction between electoral democracies and liberal democracies (V-Dem, 2018, p. 19; see Lührmann et al., 2018). In doing so, the LDI and, thus, the liberal conception of democracy becomes the single and unquestioned normative benchmark against which the quality of more-than-electorally democratic regimes is measured. Notably, the academic publication that presents the new RoW index does not even mention the theoretical possibility of identifying high-quality democratic regimes by drawing on benchmarks that differ from the liberal conception of democracy, e.g. by drawing on (some of) the other democracy indices or components provided by V-Dem.¹⁹ At the same time, however, the 2018 report still starts by highlighting the existence of five ‘Indices for Democracy Ideals’ (V-Dem, 2018, p. 8) and later emphasises that ‘V-Dem is the first dataset to capture not only liberal and electoral aspects of democracy, but also to measure the egalitarian, participatory and deliberative components of democracy’ – components, which are then also used to give ‘an overview of which sub-components across all the varieties of democracy that register significant changes’ (V-Dem, 2018, p. 27).²⁰

With the 2019 report, the varieties of democracy further recede into the background. For the first time, the brief introductory presentation of V-Dem comes without mentioning the five different indices or ideals of democracy (V-Dem, 2019, p. 6). In fact, the notion of alternative ‘thick’ conceptions of democracy, which are measured by separate democracy indices, largely disappears from the report: In contrast to the Electoral and the Liberal

Democracy Index, the other varieties of democracy merely appear in the ‘thin’ version represented by the respective component indices.²¹ As an exception, ‘deliberative democracy’ is explicitly mentioned and discussed somewhat more extensively. This focus responds to the observation that ‘toxic polarization’, which is partially grasped by indicators from V-Dem’s Deliberative Component (e.g. respect for counter-arguments), constitutes an important driver of autocratization (V-Dem, 2019, pp. 19–20). Still, in this way, deliberative features, rather than defining the quality of democratic regimes, tend to become factors that influence regime dynamics (democratisation or autocratization) – dynamics that are, themselves, clearly defined along liberal lines (V-Dem, 2019, p. 14). The core theme of the report is the observation that the negative trends, in the meantime, have accumulated to the point that the world is ‘now undeniably in a “third wave of autocratization”’ (V-Dem, 2019, p. 10).

The 2020 and 2021 reports consolidate this trend. The main bodies of these reports do no longer mention any of the alternative principles, ideas or indices of democracy. V-Dem’s annual Democracy Report has basically become a report on the state of liberal democracy, with additional information on electoral democracy – just as the Freedom House reports (if, to be sure, with much better, more disaggregated and transparent data). This is how the 2021 report begins:

This is the 5th Annual Democracy Report from the V-Dem Institute at University of Gothenburg. It summarizes the state of liberal democracy in the world in 2020 against the backdrop of developments over the last 10 years [...]. (V-Dem, 2020a, p. 9)²²

Throughout the two reports, usage of the term ‘democracy’ (without adjective) clearly signals that its (liberal) conception is by now virtually taken for granted. For instance, the Executive Summary of the 2020 report includes not a single reference to ‘liberal’ or ‘electoral’ democracy (V-Dem, 2020a, pp. 6–8). Adjectives are only used when it becomes relevant to differentiate between ‘electoral’ and ‘liberal’ democracies and the respective indices. The 2021 report, which emphasises ‘liberal democracy’ in the Executive Summary (and beyond), clearly does so because the data presented in this report shows a decline in the number of democratic countries only when focusing on liberal democracies.

Also, when it comes to the issue of ‘pro-democracy protests’, V-Dem obviously sees no need to explain what exactly ‘democracy’ means in this context, even if the corresponding new indicator is explicitly informed by a liberal conception of democracy (V-Dem, 2020a, pp. 20–23).²³ Through the liberal lens, then, pro-democracy protests can only come in two shapes: In democratic countries, they ‘resist the dismantling of democracy’, while in autocracies they ‘are demanding more democracy’ (V-Dem, 2020a, p. 7). This sidesteps the fundamental implications of democracy’s conceptual contestability, namely, that pro-democracy protests in (liberal) democracies may well demand more or better or another (e.g. more egalitarian, more participatory, or more deliberative) democracy, and frequently do so (see Giugni et al., 1998; Rossi & Della Porta, 2015; Wolff, 2020).

This clear-cut discursive shift cannot be attributed to the specific nature of the Democracy Reports, whose orientation at reaching a wider audience might be seen as making conceptual debates too complex an issue. A similar trend applies to the academic articles that present the annual data in the journal *Democratization* and which heavily draw on the annual democracy reports. In fact, the first of these articles, which ‘analyses the

state of democracy in the world as of 2017' (Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 1321), does not even mention the fact that V-Dem covers different conceptions and, hence, includes different democracy indices; neither in the brief presentation of the V-Dem project (Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 1322) nor elsewhere in the text or the endnotes.²⁴ As a consequence, the decision to conceptualise 'autocratization' as a 'decline of democratic qualities' according to liberal standards does not seem to require major explanation or justification (see Lührmann et al., 2018, pp. 1321–1322). The follow-up article, in defining autocratization, even explicitly equates a 'worsening on the scale of liberal democracy', with movements 'away from [full] democracy' (Lührmann et al., 2019, p. 896). Even if the 'full' is in square brackets, this makes it sufficiently clear that the V-Dem authors by now define and understand 'full democracy' as meaning 'liberal democracy' and liberal democracy only.

In contrast to these journal articles that basically present the findings from Democracy Reports, more academic contributions from the V-Dem Institute define autocratization 'as substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy' (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1096) and, accordingly, use V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index.²⁵ This is in line with the overall pattern observed in V-Dem's Working Paper Series, in which the electoral conception outweighs all other conceptions, including the liberal one (see Section 6). This observation, however, does not contradict the thesis of an increasing decontestation of democracy along liberal lines. In fact, the simultaneous use of both a minimalist (electoral) and a more substantive (liberal) conception of democracy has been at the heart of liberal approaches to conceptualising and measuring democracy throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as in the explicitly liberal Freedom House ranking that also includes a minimalist 'electoral democracy' index (Merkel, 2004, p. 34). In the liberal reading, electoral democracy constitutes the interim stage on the conceptually linear path towards full, that is, liberal democracy – as explicitly assumed in V-Dem's 'Regimes of the World' index (Lührmann et al., 2018). Correspondingly, Lührmann and Lindberg's decision to define and operationalise autocratization in a more 'parsimonious' way that 'does not include liberal aspects of democracy', is justified by purely heuristic purposes, namely: to facilitate 'the analysis of questions such as how liberal constraints influence the likelihood of autocratization' (2019, p. 1110).

5. Acting on outside change: from the contestation to the defense of liberal democracy

As briefly mentioned above, the V-Dem project from its very beginning was motivated by explicitly political concerns. Since the establishment of the V-Dem Institute, this policy orientation has only increased. As Staffan Lindberg emphasised in the preface to the 2017 Democracy Report:

I am also proud that V-Dem has managed not only to produce an infrastructure for research that is now being used by tens of thousands of scholars, but which is also becoming a key resource for policymakers and practitioners. This is something we always strive for – to be of use to the 'real' world beyond academia. (V-Dem, 2017, p. 5)

Yet, in response to the changing global context, the nature of V-Dem's mission changed decidedly. In line with the empirical-analytical focus on autocratization analyzed in the

previous section, the political aim to do something about it, that is, to raise public awareness and, eventually, to contribute to defending liberal democracy against accumulating threats, swiftly took centre stage. As argued by Ish-Shalom (2006), the aim to inform both broader public debates and policy-making suggested efforts to translate theoretical constructs into public conventions and, ultimately, political convictions. This comes with the two processes of politicisation and simplification,²⁶ which together reinforce the logic described above: In order to make a strong public and political claim about the ‘reality’ of the ‘global wave of autocratization’, simple and definitive statements based on unequivocal and well-established conceptions were certainly helpful.

In the context of this paper, I cannot prove that this policy orientation actually contributed to causing the discursive decontestation assessed above. Yet, without a doubt, the strength of the message contained in the V-Dem reports and articles is based on findings that highlight the precise number of countries that have undergone a process of autocratization (and the share of the world population affected by this); on figures that illustrate the decline in democratic qualities around the world; and – generally speaking – on clear-cut information about ‘the wave of autocratization’. In addition, two examples demonstrate how the aim of making clear and attention-grabbing statements is guiding the democracy reports. First, whereas the 2020 report emphasises (at several points) that ‘[f]or the first time since 2001, autocracies are in the majority: 92 countries’ (V-Dem, 2020a, p. 6), no mention is made in the 2021 report that updated V-Dem data has democratic countries once again in the majority (readers have to calculate the numbers themselves in order to find out; V-Dem, 2021, p. 14). In contrast, as mentioned above, the 2021 reports upholds the autocratization narrative by emphasising that 2021 has been ‘Another Year of Decline for Liberal Democracy’ (V-Dem, 2021, p. 7, 13). This shift in the emphasis – from democracy in general in 2020 to liberal democracy only in 2021 – is clearly due to the fact that, in between the two reports, the number of electoral democracies as well as the sum for both sub types of democracy actually increased. A second example of the politicisation and simplification dynamic at work concerns the treatment of the case of India in V-Dem’s Democracy Report 2021: In this year, an update in the underlying V-Dem data led to India being re-classified as an electoral autocracy for the year 2019, thus losing its status as a democracy. Given the size of the Indian population, this has dramatic consequences for the share of the world population living in autocratic versus democratic regimes – but, and this is crucial, the change would have to be reported retrospectively for the year 2019, not as new development for 2020. In the Executive Summary, however, the related observations – that ‘68% of the world population’ live in autocracies and that with India ‘[t]he world’s largest democracy turned into an electoral autocracies’ – are clearly presented as if referring to 2020 (V-Dem, 2021, p. 6). The same happens in the main text (see V-Dem, 2021, p. 9, 13), and it is only quite late that the correct date of the change is given and explained (V-Dem, 2021, p. 14, in particular: footnote 29).

The focus on liberal democracy also responds to the perception that it is specifically liberal norms that are becoming under threat. Just as prominent protagonists of ‘autocratization’ such as Victor Orbán in Hungary or Donald Trump in the US explicitly challenge liberalism, while at least rhetorically endorsing democracy (V-Dem, 2020b, pp. 13–14), ‘liberal aspects of democracy often are the first to erode’ (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1110, note 65; see also V-Dem, 2020a, pp. 16–17). This does not only call for measuring

autocratization according to liberal-democratic standards as ‘an early warning tool’ (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1110, note 65), but also implies that these liberal aspects constitute key elements when it comes to preventing erosion and defending democracy (see V-Dem, 2020b). In this sense, for instance, the preface to V-Dem’s 2020 Democracy Report starts by quoting Russian president Vladimir Putin having declared ‘declared liberalism to be “obsolete”’ – and immediately responds by emphasising that ‘the value of political liberalism continues to shine’ and that ‘Enlightenment principles [...] have led the world from societies governed by repression and prejudice to open societies based on merit and freedom’ (V-Dem, 2020a, p. 4). In this context, pointing to the essential contestedness of the concept of democracy would certainly not help the mission. Similarly, the observation of ‘rising numbers of pro-democracy protests’ is directly, and simply, translated into ‘demonstrating that those living in autocratizing and autocratic regimes are continuing to fight for rights and freedoms’ (V-Dem, 2020a, p. 4) – without considering that ‘pro-democracy protests’ have also been observed in liberal democracies and in democratising regimes and that protests in demand of (more) democracy are far from necessarily (and only) guided by specifically liberal agendas (see Section 4).

Brief glimpses at two explicitly policy-oriented activities of the V-Dem Institute reinforce this interpretation. First, the document ‘Defending Democracy against Illiberal Challengers’, which is meant as a ‘resource guide’ for all those that ‘firmly believe in democracy and liberalism and want to defend these values’ (V-Dem, 2020b, p. 4), openly buries the idea that there might be relevant varieties of democracy:

Without liberal rights and institutions democracy is not meaningful and unlikely to endure. Elections become an empty shell. Such rights and institutions include the rule of law, minority rights, and horizontal accountability through parliaments and courts. Fundamentally challenging these rights and institutions – as illiberals do – threatens the persistence of democracy [...]. (V-Dem, 2020b, p. 6)

Second, the ‘Case for Democracy’ initiative explicitly aims ‘to translate and distribute knowledge from the academic sphere to policymakers and practitioners on the dividends of democracy’ in order to provide ‘an evidence-based case for democracy’, which is ‘of utmost importance in the present era’ (V-Dem, 2021, p. 36). Again, it is immediately plausible that such an endeavour can hardly work with complex and competing notions of democracy, trying to sort out which types of democracy might indeed be associated with improvements in ‘economic and human development, health and socio-economic protections, environmental protection and climate action, as well as international and domestic security’ (V-Dem, 2021, p. 36). The rhetoric surrounding the ‘Case for Democracy’ initiative also almost ideal-typically confirms one of the processes that, according to Ish-Shalom, accompany the migration of academic propositions into the public and political spheres: the transformation of probabilistic and conditional findings into ‘absolute, lawlike statements’ (Ish-Shalom, 2006, p. 572). Thus, an academic V-Dem Working Paper, which finds statistical evidence indicating that the variation in economic performance is lower in democracies, which also have a lower probability of experiencing economic crisis (Knutsen, 2020), becomes a source demonstrating ‘that democracy functions as an economic safety net – *ensuring stable growth* and a lower probability of economic crises’ (V-Dem, 2021, p. 36; emphasis added). This entirely sidesteps the fundamental academic insight that probabilistic findings from large-N studies, even if significant and

robust, do not imply that, for any individual country in a specific context, 'more democracy' will necessarily lead to more (stable) growth or any other positive outcome statistically associated with regime type.

6. The broader trend: the decontestation of democracy in V-Dem-based research

Motivated by both academic and political concerns, V-Dem started as a project that aimed at questioning what was perceived as overly simple hegemonic conventions and convictions that had come to predominate also academic research (and the measurement of democracy in particular). As seen in the previous sections, this academic and political mission changed significantly in the face of increasing real-world challenges to liberal hegemony – challenges that particularly confronted the liberal conception of democracy. In response, autocratization became the main empirical focus of research, and the defense of liberal democracy the key aim in terms of public outreach and political advocacy. This led to the (re-)turn to a clear-cut, uncontested and unequivocally liberal conception of democracy. As a consequence, V-Dem shifted from contesting the attempt 'to impose a particular definition upon the concept, insist that *this* is democracy, and then go forward with the task of measurement' (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 258) to doing exactly this. To be sure, V-Dem continues to provide data and measurements for the various indices and components of democracy. But the academic studies from the V-Dem Institute and, even more so, its policy-oriented publications are characterised by the taking for granted of a supposedly universal conception of democracy as liberal democracy. In this section, I present evidence that suggests that the gradual abandonment of the pluralist conceptualisation of democracy may be part of a broader trend in comparative regime research.

In order to assess the proposition that the trend towards a decontested, liberal conception of democracy is not limited to the writings of the team at the V-Dem Institute, I analyze V-Dem's Working Paper series. This series, by early May 2021, included 120 papers written by a broad range of authors with or without institutional connections to the V-Dem Institute²⁷ but which, in one way or another, work with the V-Dem data. All 120 working papers were coded according to whether they refer in a meaningful way to one or more of the different conceptions of democracy as used by V-Dem (electoral, liberal, deliberative, egalitarian, and participatory). 'Meaningful references' encompass the actual use of an individual conception (and/or of corresponding indices or indicators) or, at least, the mentioning of the specific conception as something substantively relevant. Excluded are, thus, references that are merely incidental or in passing, as in cases of a simple listing of the different conceptions in the presentation of the V-Dem data set. In addition to these conception-specific codes, a broader code 'Any reference to varieties/alternative conceptions' was assigned to papers that generally highlight the existence of conceptual varieties of democracy and/or that contain any type of reference to specific alternative conceptions or indices of democracy (beyond the liberal and the electoral type). This latter category, therefore, also includes papers that merely list the different conceptions grasped by the V-Dem dataset.

The results, as summarised in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#), confirm the above trend. Whether looking at meaningful references to the deliberative, egalitarian and participatory

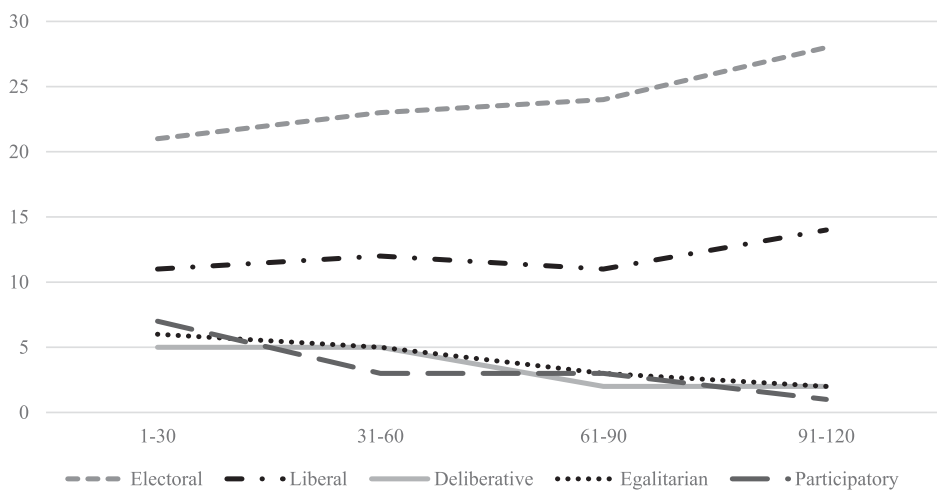


Figure 1. Conceptions of democracy in V-Dem Working Papers. Note: Meaningful references to V-Dem’s different conceptions of democracy in V-Dem Working Papers 1–120, divided into four groups of 30 papers. Multiple codes per paper are possible. Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/publications/working-papers>.

conceptions individually, at the usage of any of these non-liberal conceptions, or – even broader – at any references to the conceptual diversity of democracy: In all cases, the V-Dem Working Paper series exhibits a gradual loss of interest among scholars between the first thirty issues (published between 2015 and 2016) and the most recent thirty papers (published between 2019 and 2021). In contrast to the flagship publications of the V-

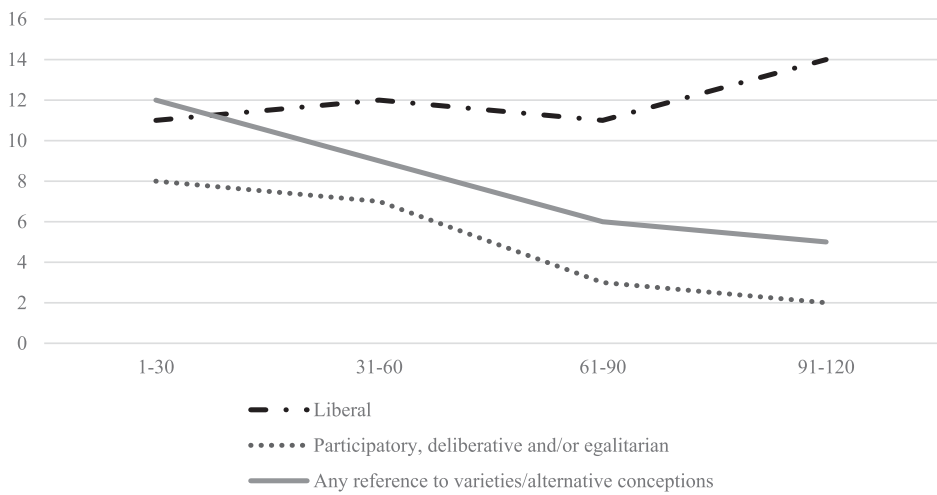


Figure 2. Liberal vs. alternative conceptions in V-Dem Working Papers. Note: Meaningful references to either the liberal or at least one of the alternative conceptions of democracy in V-Dem Working Papers 1–120, divided into four groups of 30 papers. ‘Any reference’ also includes incidental references to alternative conceptions or to the conceptual diversity of democracy. Multiple codes per paper are possible. Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/publications/working-papers>.

Dem Institute, the more academically oriented working papers most frequently use the electoral conception of democracy (Figure 1). Within the overall sample of V-Dem Working Papers, it is two types of studies that predominantly use the Electoral Democracy Index. First, the quantitative, large-N studies, which abound in the Working Paper series, clearly prefer rather minimalist, procedural indices, as is generally the case in statistical democracy research (Munck, 2009, p. 17). Second, an increasing number of publications in the series looks at autocratic regimes and uses democratic standards and indices merely as a benchmark to determine their object of study. In order to identify regimes that are clearly not democratic, these studies look at which countries do not fulfil the minimal criteria of electoral democracy or polyarchy.

Still, even in this context, the usage of the liberal conception also clearly gains in relevance – in particular when compared to the non-liberal alternatives. Among the earliest group of working papers, 37% (11) refer in a meaningful way to the liberal conception of democracy and 27% (8) to at least one of the alternative conceptions. For the most recent group of papers, the share with liberal references reaches 47% (14), while merely 7% (2) refer meaningfully to at least one of the other conceptions. This is, of course, only a very basic frequency analysis. However, it should say something that among the most recent batch of working papers, which are published by an institution that is still called the Varieties of Democracy Institute, only 17% (5 out of 30) include some kind of reference to the conceptual diversity of democracy. As Figure 2 shows, this share has continuously gone down: from 40% (12 out of 30), to 30% (9), 20% (6) and, finally, 17% (5). The overwhelming majority of the more recent publications in the V-Dem Working Paper Series, thus, does not even mention the fact that different conceptions of democracy exist and/or that V-Dem data also contains democracy indices other than the electoral and the liberal one.

7. Conclusions

As I have shown in this paper, V-Dem has gradually moved away from its original emphasis on the conceptual varieties of democracy, adopting an increasingly decontested view on democracy as liberal democracy. In order to counter all those ‘illiberals and authoritarians [who] are putting democracy at risk’ (V-Dem, 2020b, p. 4), V-Dem has chosen to use unequivocal, decontested and simple concepts: democracy is liberal democracy or it is not; democratisation is the process of approaching full, that is liberal democracy; and autocratization is the opposite: any movement away from liberal democracy. As a result, the case of V-Dem nicely illustrates how the perception of serious threats to liberal democracy has given rise to a reconstitution of liberal hegemony within the academic study of political regimes and the related policy-oriented research. Given the widespread reception and usage of V-Dem research and publications among both scholars and practitioners, this finding is relevant per se and, as my analysis of the V-Dem Working Paper series indicates, it is plausibly not an isolated phenomenon.²⁸ Further research, however, will have to more systematically investigate whether the discursive shifts and the causal dynamics identified here represent broader trends within comparative regime research.

The shift from the contestation to the decontestation of democracy is politically understandable: Both academically and politically, it constitutes a plausible response to the threats to democracy and liberalism that come with what V-Dem calls the most recent

‘wave of autocratization’. But still, the (re-)turn to a decontested meaning of democracy is not only theoretically problematic, given that the insights on the conceptual contestability of democracy that motivated V-Dem in the first place remain as valid as ever. As I have argued, the existing scholarship on the ‘backsliding’, ‘erosion’ or ‘regression’ of democracy suggests that there are also good political reasons to hold fast to a pluralist conceptualisation of democracy – precisely in light of the current challenges to democracy.

In fact, my admittedly brief glimpse at the debate on the current crisis of democracy suggests a political response that does not merely aim at defending what exists but that, simultaneously, tackles the serious problems of real-existing democratic regimes from perspectives that go beyond a narrow liberal view. In this paper, I have focused on the alternative conceptions of democracy as envisaged by V-Dem as well as on academic contributions that generally buy into the overall normative position of liberal democracy.²⁹ To be sure, however, the essential contestability of democracy also means that the struggle over the meanings and futures of democracy goes beyond traditional mainstream conceptions – in particular, because they all tend to have a fairly strong North-Western imprint (see Koelble & Lipuma, 2008; Morozov, 2013).

The observation that (would-be) autocrats and authoritarian movements attack liberal democracy should not lead us to dismiss the well-founded calls for rethinking, reforming, deepening or transforming democracy. The capacity for innovation, which is perhaps the central strength of democracy broadly conceived, resides precisely in its conceptual openness.

Notes

1. Instead of many, see Bermeo (2016), Diamond (2021), Haggard and Kaufman (2021), Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), Przeworski (2019), and Schäfer and Zürn (2021).
2. The remarkable success story of V-Dem is told in detail by the protagonists themselves in Coppedge et al. (2020).
3. Inspired by the logic of process-tracing, discourse-tracing refers to the systematic analysis of (academic) texts with the aim to reconstruct the processes through which a given discourse is transformed into another (Ish-Shalom, 2006, pp. 566–567; see also Ish-Shalom, 2013, pp. 3–4).
4. These flagship publications include the above-mentioned Democracy Reports as well as the annual articles in the journal *Democratisation* that present the findings from these reports to an academic audience.
5. In fact, I noted a roughly similar tendency in my own writings as well (compare, for instance, Wolff, 2012 and Berger-Kern et al., 2021). In this sense, this contribution should not so much be read as an outsider’s critique of V-Dem but as an insider’s critical reflections on current trends in comparative regime research.
6. The notion of ‘decontestation’ is taken from Freedman (1998; see also Collier et al., 2006, p. 218; Ish-Shalom, 2006, p. 568).
7. The importance of the discursive hegemony of liberal democracy as a key element of the liberal (post-Cold War) order is emphasised by scholars from most different theoretical camps (see, for instance, Fukuyama, 1989; Ikenberry, 2011; Jahn, 2018; Robinson, 1996).
8. The former argument – that there is no consensus on what democracy means – is not only an empirical claim. In fact, the authors explicitly refer to the ‘essentially contested’ nature of the concept of democracy (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 257): ‘In our view, the traditional approach falls short because its self-assigned task is impossible. The highly abstract and contested nature of democracy impedes effective operationalization. This is not a problem that can be solved – at least not in a conclusive fashion.’ (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 258)

9. See Hobson and Kurki (2012a); Koelble and Lipuma (2008); Kurki (2010); Wolff (2012); Youngs (2015). To be sure, neo-Marxist and postcolonial scholars had criticised the conception of (neo-)liberal democracy underlying North-Western democracy promotion much earlier (see Abrahamsen, 1997; Escobar, 1995; Gills et al., 1993; Robinson, 1996).
10. In contrast to the 2011 article, later publications also include a seventh conception or principle of democracy, namely consensual democracy (Coppedge et al., 2020, pp. 36–37; Lindberg et al., 2014, p. 160). Originally, the V-Dem team also planned to ‘eventually measure majoritarian and consensual varieties of democracy’ as well (Lindberg et al., 2014, p. 160), but this option was later discarded (Coppedge et al., 2020, p. 40). Analyzing the concepts of consensus and majoritarian democracy, Coppedge found both of them to represent ‘over-generalizations’ that were simply ‘not useful’ for comparative empirical research (2018, p. 24).
11. In fact, as Coppedge and Gerring et al. argued, further ‘problems of measurement flow, in no small part, from this definitional conundrum’, that is the illusionary goal of obtaining a single, universally accepted conception of democracy (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 249).
12. ‘Among practitioners and government representatives outside the US, and especially in parts of the Global South, there was also some wariness about whether these measures were biased toward a US-centric understanding of democracy’, Coppedge et al. note with a view to the the-predominant Polity IV index and the Freedom House ratings (Coppedge et al., 2020, p. 4)
13. Accordingly, one of the ‘payoffs’ of the V-Dem approach was its potential to ‘foster greater agreement on the disaggregated components of democracy, even while recognizing the inherent impossibility of agreement on one way of assembling these components into an overall conception of ‘democracy’” (Coppedge & Gerring et al., 2011, p. 248).
14. In the context of this paper, it is impossible to do justice to the wealth and diversity of studies on the phenomenon at hand. Instead, I will deliberately draw on a selected number of recent studies that include broad overviews of the academic debate.
15. As I have noted elsewhere, V-Dem has, for instance, two indicators that assess the distribution of ‘political power’ in terms of ‘socioeconomic position’ and ‘social groups’, which are part of the egalitarian democracy index. Another crucial V-Dem indicator, which measures descriptive representation in the national legislature according to socioeconomic status (‘Representation of disadvantaged social groups’), is, however, not included in the egalitarian (or any other) democracy index (Wolff, 2018, p. 700).
16. With its establishment, the V-Dem Institute quickly became the V-Dem project’s ‘de facto headquarters’ (Coppedge et al., 2020, p. 3). Still, the broader project also involves scholars – including in the Steering Committee and as Principal Investigators – who are not member of the Institute. The flagship publications that are analyzed in the following mainly represent scholars from the V-Dem Institute, while the Working Paper Series includes a much broader set of scholars, including and going beyond those associated with the V-Dem project.
17. For the broader debate, see Bermeo (2016), Diamond (2021), Haggard and Kaufman (2021), Przeworski (2019), and Schäfer and Zürn (2021).
18. To be sure, it also would have been possible to work with a variety of conceptions of autocratization (and democratisation). But such an approach, while in line with the original logic of the Varieties of Democracy project, would have led to potentially contradictory assessments of autocratization (conceptualised as declines in liberal, egalitarian, deliberative and participatory standards, respectively). To the best of my knowledge, this option is nowhere considered or discussed.
19. The reason given for the focus on the distinction between electoral and liberal democracies – ‘because it is the most common’ (Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 63) – is certainly valid, but still curious for a project that is (still) called Varieties of Democracy. It should be noted, however, that the RoW ‘is not officially endorsed by the Steering Committee of V-Dem’ (V-Dem, 2018, p. 94).
20. When it comes to more detailed assessments of the data and trends for the alternative democracy indices, the main body of the 2018 report contains an explicit discussion of the

Egalitarian Component Index. In contrast, discussion of the Participatory and the Deliberative Component Index is relegated to the appendix (V-Dem, 2018, pp. 87–93).

21. Originally, V-Dem introduced a thin and a thick version for each of the five principles of democracy. While the thick version is represented by the different democracy indices, the ‘thin version, which we refer to as its ‘component’, includes only the most distinctive attributes of that principle, minimizing its overlap with the other principles’ (Lindberg et al., 2014, p. 160).
22. To be sure, the reports continue to provide information on the alternative ‘components’ indices, but in the appendix only. The only references to the non-liberal components before the appendix appear as a side information to Figure 12 (V-Dem, 2021, p. 24; V-Dem, 2020a, p. 18).
23. For the assessment of the indicator ‘Mobilization for democracy’, ‘pro-democratic’ events are regarded as such ‘if they are organized with the explicit aim to advance and/or protect democratic institutions such as free and fair elections with multiple parties, and courts and parliaments; or if they are in support of civil liberties such as freedom of association and speech’ (V-Dem, 2022, p. 230).
24. The only references to alternative conceptions of democracies are to ‘egalitarianism’ and, in endnote 22, ‘to V-Dem’s principle of egalitarian democracy’ (Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 1335, 1338). In line with the corresponding Democracy Report (V-Dem, 2018), Lührmann et al. (2019, pp. 902–904) includes a discussion of the ‘deliberative aspects’. The most recent ‘State of the world’ articles, in contrast, contain not a single reference to any of the alternative principles, conceptions, aspects or components of democracy (Maerz et al., 2020; Hellmeier et al., 2021 – the latter, in note 31, however does refer to ‘deliberation [...] as another component of democracy’).
25. For critical assessments of the overall notion of a ‘wave’ of autocratization as well as the specific way in which it is defined and operationalised by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), see Tomini (2021) and Skaaning (2020), respectively.
26. ‘Politicization refers mainly to changes in how theory is perceived and approached; simplification refers mainly to the disregard for the epistemic procedural rules that apply to theories.’ (Ish-Shalom, 2006, p. 572)
27. Still, it has to be noted that V-Dem Working Papers usually include at least one author who is or was (at least temporarily) affiliated with the V-Dem Institute or the V-Dem project. The following analysis, therefore, still reflects trends within the larger V-Dem universe.
28. As argued in Section 4, the predominant use of the electoral conception of democracy in the V-Dem Working Paper Series should not read as contradicting this overall finding.
29. Even the conceptual diversity of V-Dem’s original five democracy indices is limited by the fact that the component of ‘electoral democracy’ is a part of all the other four democracy indices as well (Lindberg et al., 2014, p. 161).

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