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Understanding Democratic Stress

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ABSTRACT

This article opens a Special Issue on Democratic Stress. Against the background of recent debates on ‘democratic crisis’, we argue that the concept of ‘democratic stress’ provides a useful way to understand the diversity of pressures that representative democracy faces in the contemporary context, as well as a valuable ‘organising perspective’ for developing more nuanced analyses. We then map out the main contributions of the articles included in this special issue, and survey the way in which they further this agenda, conceptually and empirically.

KEYWORDS

Democracy; democratic stress; institutions

Introduction

Over the past decade a series of seismic economic, political and health crises have elicited a wide range of academic studies seeking to unpack the impacts of these phenomena on democracy. Our contribution adds to these debates. We contend that the complex and diverse pressures faced by representative democracies require more careful consideration and nuanced analysis than it is often the case. In this article, we deploy the concept of ‘democratic stress’ as notion and organising perspective that allows to capture these dynamics, especially when focusing on democratic institutions. We also draw on the contributions in this Special Issue to show that, conceptually and empirically, we need to pay closer attention at how ‘symptoms’ of and responses to phenomena that are often presented as ‘democratic crisis’ operate to grasp more fully their institutional roots and impacts. In this way, we seek to provide a new angle to understand how democracy changes and evolves, both as a concept and in its institutional manifestations, in ‘hard times’ – in line with *Representation*’s longstanding aim to foster scholarship and new perspectives on these issues.

Is Democracy at a Crossroads?

Despite a general lack of univocal definitions, there is consensus within academia that democracy is under increasing pressure (Jones & Matthijs, 2017; Urbinati, 2014). On the one hand, liberal democracy has no effective normative or institutional challengers

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in the Western world (Urbinati, 2014), and it would be misleading to believe that it is at risk of being overshadowed by a competing form of government (Gagnon & Vasilev, 2016). On the other, however, democracy is still profoundly vulnerable: the ‘messy compromises and contentious outcomes’ that define its very meaning are under scrutiny and criticism (Urbinati, 2014), while its effectiveness and fairness face mounting scepticism (Katznelson, 2015).

While recent concerns about the resilience of democracy have gained scholarly attention, it is important to note that this is not a new phenomenon. Many within the literature have criticised democracy’s intrinsic and unresolvable contradictions (Schmitt, 1923 [1988]), and questions as to whether democratic institutions are able to resolve the day’s challenges to governance and legitimacy are as old as democracy itself (Katznelson, 2015). As Runciman (2013) argues in *The Confidence Trap*, crisis has never been the exception to the rule and, instead, should be understood as an inherent feature of democracy, or even a sign of its functioning. In many respects, bearing crisis is simply what democracies do. Thus, while it would be misleading to argue for a wholesale crisis of democracy, what we see is the emergence of crises in certain sectors of democracy (Merkel, 2016). Against this background, what is often hyperbolically labelled as a ‘democratic crisis’ in scholarly and public discourse is in practice a case of democratic systems experiencing a specific problem caused by identifiable ‘stressors’ (Gagnon & Vasilev, 2016). Our contribution is informed by this view: we take the concept of ‘democratic stress’ as a way of understanding the diversity of pressures on representative democracy that are not in themselves signs of ‘crisis’, but instead could lead to crisis, if left unchecked.

Democratic stress refers, broadly, to tensions arising from how formal democratic institutions process react to, or themselves stimulate, informal democratic pressures placed on those institutions by actors external to them. If crises are not new and democracy is constantly under stress, what is new then about the current context and what are the stressors that hamper the functioning of democracy today? Our argument, which draws on and cuts across the contributions in this Special Issue, is that studies of the crisis of democracy would do well to focus more carefully and sensitively on the signals and signs of pressures within and between democratic institutions, and the wider public sphere, which may be indicative, if not conclusively showing, symptoms of a forthcoming ‘crisis’ within our democratic institutions.

In addition to the growing body of scholarly research concerned with anxieties, disfigurations, dysfunctions, recessions of democracy (e.g., Della Porta, 2013; Urbinati, 2014; Diamond, 2015) a debate has emerged about whether established democracies are backsliding in incremental but important ways. Studies of democratic backsliding tend to discern and discuss this phenomenon by evaluating public attitudes and opinions, often providing detailed and comprehensive studies of global survey datasets (Foa & Mounk, 2017). Debates have emerged about whether global survey data accurately show the existence of a crisis. Mechkova, Lührmann, and Lindberg (2017) draw on the Varieties of Democracy database – a global survey of expertise on the evolution of democracy covering over 200 hundred countries – to suggest concerns of a crisis are ill founded.

Studies of democratic institutions themselves – and the pressures placed upon them – help us to move towards a more nuanced analysis. This approach has been explicitly

developed in influential academic work (e.g., see by Albertus & Menaldo, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Reviewing these contributions, Gandhi (2019, p. e11) argues that ‘democracy is a fragile creation that can be undone by unscrupulous elites who use the institutions of democracy to slowly but surely undo it’. More optimistically, however, Gandhi (2019, p. e15) also echoes ‘a call to revisit questions related to the design of institutions ... our grasp of the conditions that support democracy requires a better understanding of the relationship between formal and informal institutions’. In short, institutions, both in their formal and informal types, are crucial political sites of contestation over the future of democracy.

The articles in this special issue build on this perspective, by conceptualising and analysing evolving institutions – political parties, legislatures, social movements and democratic ‘innovations’ – and how they structure, respond to and interact in complex ways with political forces and ‘informal’ institutional dynamics that place them under *pressure for* democratic change. The articles seek to further a disciplinary agenda in understanding how democratic pressures influence, or are influenced by, the *institutions* of democracy. Institutionalism, and institutional change, is a central theme of political science (Buhari-Gulmez, 2010; Hay & Wincott, 1998; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010; March & Olsen, 1983; Schmidt, 2008). Institutionalists take institutions seriously by explaining how they serve to structure and influence political change, as well as exposing how institutions themselves evolve and change as a result of political pressures. Institutions are important, because their *institutionalization* can have profound effects on building public policies that can achieve societal goods, and tackle fundamental public crises – like that posed by Covid-19 most recently, or the 2008 financial crash. On the other hand, institutions can also suppress political change, and act as a bulwark against justice and fairness, as the Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted via its global campaign against institutional racism. As Lowndes and Roberts (2013, p. 204) put it, ‘in confronting the big political challenges of the twenty-first century ... political institutions constitute both a threat and an opportunity’.

The articles in this Special Issue were written before the Covid-19 pandemic, and first presented at a collaborative workshop in January 2017, co-organised by the UK Political Studies Association Italian Politics and Anti-politics Specialist Groups. Needless to say, much has changed since then. The Covid-19 crisis has led incremental processes of ‘democratic backsliding’ to snowball into full scale authoritarianism in some representative democracies – while putting all liberal democracies under new and unexpected pressures. The Covid-19 crisis has worked in many respects as a critical juncture for western liberal democracies and their institutions (Giovannini & Mosca, 2021), but signs of democratic stress predate the tectonic shift imposed by the pandemic. As such, we argue that the diverse articles making up this special issue bring important contributions to understanding our current democratic context by emphasising some of the more incremental and nuanced shifts in democratic institutions that had been underway for a while before the pandemic, and remain of critical importance. The remainder of this introductory article outlines the concept of democratic stress as an ‘organising perspective’ for analysing the challenges faced by liberal representative democratic institutions in a nuanced manner. We then survey the way in which the articles in this special issue further this agenda, conceptually and empirically.

Democratic Stress: An Organising Perspective

None of the articles in this special issue start from a singular concept of democratic stress, or from a unified conceptual or theoretical framework. They do not test a common set of hypotheses and their empirical focus, while centred on European politics and the Western liberal democratic context, encompasses multiple spheres of politics. Nevertheless, we suggest that it is possible to relate these articles together around a common theme of democratic stress, which we used to frame discussion of the papers as they were being developed.

As suggested above, democratic stress refers, broadly speaking, to tensions arising from how formal democratic institutions process, react to, or themselves stimulate, informal democratic pressures placed on those institutions by actors external to them. These ‘informal pressures’ include types of political communication, lobbying, protest, social movement activity, public opinion, or political rhetoric, and can be enacted by a variety of actors in civil society, during and outside of election periods. They communicate expectations of democratic institutions and provide the ‘input’ and ‘throughput’ that are integral to democratic systems (Schmidt, 2013). However, the *intensity* or *frequency* of these informal pressures may lead to problems in democratic institutions being able to *respond* effectively to them (‘outputs’).

Studies that contribute to our understanding of democratic stress do not need to use the concept directly. It is an organising perspective for understanding democratic crisis in a more nuanced way, by conceptualising it in terms of institutional tensions and pressures, or *stresses*. An organising perspective is not a theory with sets of hypotheses, but instead comprises ‘a framework for analysis that provides a map of how things (inter)-relate and leads to a set of research questions’ (Bache & Flinders, 2004, p. 33). The organising perspective of democratic stress points scholars from differing theoretical and empirical traditions to an inclusive discussion of the future of our democratic systems, aware of the severe challenges representative democracies face, but without a language that overdramatises current developments.

Democratic stress as an organising perspective privileges analytical nuance and careful empirical and conceptual work over the catastrophising language of crisis. Moreover, we value how diverse empirical perspectives on democratic institutions can contribute to our understanding of precisely *what* the tensions really are that representative democracies are encountering. While existing research tells us an awful lot about democratic trends and their causes, too often, we suggest, debates about the *implications* of the research for our understanding of the future of democracy can hinge on important questions of empirical or conceptual specification of the problem. For example, in research on political trust, evidence of declining trust is often viewed as inherently bad for democracy (Foster & Frieden, 2017). But is this really the case that it is bad, or cause for scholars to claim there is a crisis? Scholars have raised critical questions about how *mistrust* may even be good for democracy, under certain conditions (Bertsou, 2019). Our response to these debates is to encourage further conceptual specification and empirical mapping of the kinds of stresses that our democracies experience under conditions of political distrust (see Wood, 2021).

Hence, while the articles in this special issue are indeed diverse, and most were written before the Covid-19 pandemic and its catastrophic effects on the global economy, we

believe that their concern for carefully interrogating the relationship between formal democratic and informal democratic institutions and political pressures provide crucial insights for scholarly debate, precisely because they focus our attention at the institutional level and clarify more closely what kinds of tensions we are seeing emerge.

From ‘Crisis’ to ‘Stress’

To develop a more nuanced agenda for mapping and explaining democratic stress – as a particular perspective on democratic crisis – it is first important to interrogate what is of value in the identification of a crisis of democracy, and what is missed. Simon Tormey does this in his conceptual contribution to the special issue. He surveys and maps various contemporary definitions of ‘crisis’, from Marxist to pluralist definitions, showing that judgements about ‘crisis’ are highly dependent on the theoretical framework used, and the theorist’s normative assumptions. While crisis may be useful terminology in a situation where strong language is necessary, ‘focusing on “stress” might help us understand the crisis in a *more fine-grained manner*’ (Tormey, 2021, italics added). Democratic ‘stress’ therefore, is a useful terminological shift towards thinking about how democratic *pressures* interact with the *institutions* of democracy, with a view to discerning how those pressures work.

Tormey’s suggested terminological shift is beneficial because it allows political scientists working in different normative theoretical traditions, but doing similar empirical work, to speak to each other in more productive ways. Marxist colleagues, for example, may identify and debate similar empirical stresses on institutions as Liberal colleagues, while displacing, if temporarily, the normative question of what *should* be done implied by democratic crisis. This is not to say it is impossible to empirically identify crisis symptoms, or that normative debate should be stifled. But any meaningful debate about what should be done about crisis symptoms – a necessary debate prompted by the use of crisis terminology – would rely on us agreeing normative theoretical frameworks (Marxist, Liberal or other) that are questions for normative political theory or philosophy, rather than analytical political science or political economy. The benefit of Tormey’s argument is therefore to clarify that if we are interested in a fine-grained (empirical) understanding of crisis symptoms (assuming we are), then framing them using the language of democratic stress can make for a more productive and insightful empirical agenda, than can the concept of crisis, which immediately provokes contentious normative questions.

Anti-politics and Political Distrust

Building on Tormey’s work, this special issue provides nuanced conceptual and empirical analyses of several contemporary trends in democratic politics. Distrust is commonly seen as a negative trend for representative democracy. Indeed, a number of scholars have claimed political distrust can have a deleterious effect on political culture, encouraging fewer civic acts and fostering disengagement and antagonism (for a review see Bertsou, 2019). While much literature suggests this may be the case (e.g., see Ezeibe et al., 2020, on how political distrust led to the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria), political distrust need not have quite such catastrophic effects. Indeed, under certain conditions,

distrust may be necessary to weed out toxic political behaviours from elected representatives. A level of reasoned mistrust in political processes can uphold standards and provide a bulwark against abuses of power.

In his contribution to this special issue, Wood assesses how political distrust, conceptualised as ‘anti-politics’, can enable reflexivity in politics and renew liberal democracy. He suggests that, when informed by a desire to encourage participation in wider society, or turn to forms of expertise and evidence outside the state, distrust can have productive effects for liberal democracy. However, when it supports elitism or populism, distrust is much less productive for liberal democracy. For Wood, the question of whether political distrust can or should serve as a democratic good or not, hinges on the political ideas informing distrustful attitudes, which in turn can support innovative democratic alternatives, or go hand in hand with more pernicious ideologies. The key is to provide a nuanced assessment of the tensions between these ideas and those of traditional liberal democratic representation.

Wood’s contribution is to substitute normative assumptions arising in liberal democratic political thought that tie political distrust to democratic crisis (a common assumption made in existing research), with a concern for conceptualising how political scientists might tease out the implications of political distrust for democratic practices and behaviours, and, only then, explain their implications for liberal democracy. This does not mean abandoning normative assumptions about what practices are good/bad for liberal democracy, but instead making those assumptions more transparent than in existing research. In doing so, Wood clarifies how political scientists would go about exploring links between attitudes of trust/distrust towards political institutions, and political ideas and preferences for alternatives. He then clarifies the analytical payoff of doing so – namely, *making clear what is at stake for democratic politics* when political distrust is observed.

Protest Parties

Empirically, this special issue re-examines key trends that are often heralded as aspects of democratic crisis, but shows how careful empirical analysis can lead us to reinterpret the drivers and effects of those trends. One critical aspect is the growth of ‘protest’ political parties in opposition to ‘traditional’ social democratic or conservative parties. Protest parties like Emmanuel Macron’s *La République En Marche!* have been viewed as signalling a changing socio-political order, as voters’ shifting worldviews breakdown traditional left-right cleavages and loyalties, and discontent with established politicians, leads to growing support for new political forces. Growing support for ‘protest parties’ tends to be used as evidence for a democratic crisis, acting as a ‘channel for disaffected voters’ (Norris, 1999, p. 224). The implication being that the ‘protest’ element of ‘protest party’ voting is implicitly indicative of disaffection and disengagement from democratic politics.

Camatarri’s contribution to this special issue is an excellent example of applied research on democratic stress, which adds nuance to this assessment. In his study of support for protest parties in Europe, he shows that few of the ‘protest parties’ seeing their votes increase across Europe would benefit from an increase in ‘protest’ motivations. Camatarri’s findings are hugely valuable because they push us to ask questions about why, and to what end, do voters for protest parties actually cast their votes, and

therefore, the *quality* of pressure – or stress – they are placing on democratic institutions. In other words – are democracies really seeing growing ‘protest’? Recent studies in *Representation* show that the growing popularity of anti-establishment protest parties correlates negatively with the level of liberal democracy, so in other words we may well be seeing protest growing (Caamaño & Bértoa, 2020). However, research also shows anti-establishment parties are more similar to older parties they share ideological positions with, in terms of the education and background of party leaders, than they are similar to other anti-establishment parties (Tarditi & Vittori, 2021). Viewed in light of these findings, Camatarri’s work suggests the need for further research to precisely identify what voters are protesting about when they are voting for protest parties – or whether, counterintuitively, their protest votes may in fact be directed to other longstanding political players.

Constitutional Reform

Democratic crises are often presented as moments far-reaching institutional upheaval. In the US, Howell and Moe (2021) argue that ‘the contemporary American public ... harbours a rising appetite for systemic, institutional change’. In Europe, McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) warn of ‘pernicious’ institutional change including institutional ‘collapse’ led by old or new elites, or more ‘positive’ processes of democratic ‘reform’. Second chambers in democratic legislatures can be identified as obvious targets for reform or upheaval to restore trust. They often exist in tension with lower houses as competing sites of legitimacy, and frequently provide an institutional site for reformers’ ambitions to increase trust in democratic systems. However, institutional change of these ingrained structures is not straightforward. In the pages of this journal, Nunez et al. (2016) show that democratic ‘innovations’ in advanced European democracies are incremental at best. Dandoy, Dodeigne, Reuchamps, and Vandeleene (2015) also show the limitations of second chamber reform, analysing Belgium’s experience between 2012 and 2014. Advanced liberal democracies exhibit surprising stability against trends of political polarisation.

In this special issue, Michelangelo Vercesi furthers this line of research by analysing reforms to second chambers in seven representative democracies between 2006 and 2016. Vercesi shows these reforms are rarely successful. Of eight case studies, he finds that only two were effective. Vercesi concludes that while democratic stress sets in train attempts at reform, ‘*the same factors do not account for the outcome (success or failure), at least not on their own*’ (Vercesi, 2021, italics added).

Vercesi’s research contributes to this shift in our understanding of political reform of second chambers under conditions of democratic stress. His research has implications for how far political representatives ought to push for reform, and under what conditions. Research in *Representation* shows that angry and engaged members of the public tend to support more systematic reform options, including binding deliberative mini-publics, as reform options (Bedock & Pilet, 2020). Given the relative lack of success in pursuing less systematic reforms, could legislators seek to go further and deeper in their reform efforts? When would they be more likely to succeed in doing so? Vercesi suggests the conditions of democratic stress provide a window of opportunity for legislators to reform. Coupled with inter-party agreement about the need for reform, and the type of reforms

proposed, reform can be successful. He hence contributes to moving the broader research field towards the question of the conditions under which legislative reformers might seek reform to second chambers, under conditions of democratic stress.

Populist Communication and Populist Ideology

Populism has been identified as one of the principal drivers of democratic ‘backsliding’ and ‘collapse’. Scholars have examined how populist rhetoric influences voters to support radical right wing policies, and support insurgent populist parties. Populism’s effects are widely debated, and scholars advocate competing approaches to the topic. Weyland (2021), for example, argues that only an approach viewing populism as a *political strategy* employed by political elites can properly account for its pernicious effects. By contrast, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) and other advocates (see Hawkins, Carlin, Littvay, & Kaltwasser, 2018) of an ‘ideational’ approach suggest this is better placed to consider the ambiguous effects of populism, without assuming it is always employed for pernicious ends.

Combining strategic and ideational approaches, Bobba and Seddone (2019) contribute to existing research furthering this agenda. Bobba and Seddone analyse key documents and social media content from political parties in France and Italy to show that some populist parties do not always use populist communication strategies, while other parties that do not have populist ideas nevertheless use populist communication strategies. This research suggests populists who believe in the ideas of populism may use standard, pluralist, political communication, while non-populist politicians may see the utility of populist rhetoric in social media communication.

Such nuanced findings contribute to a broader empirical agenda developed within *Representation* – which shows populist communication may not provoke greater political engagement (Ardag, Castanho Silva, Thomeczek, Bandlow-Raffalski, & Littvay, 2020), but that populist parties can find reservoirs of support either in non-populist voters who support their policy proposals, or centrist voters who harbour populist attitudes (Loew & Faas, 2019). At the same time, as Scantamburlo (2019) finds through research in Spain, populist parties tend to represent poor voters more directly than traditional parties, and this has a knock-on effect of traditional parties paying more attention to issues of poverty in their manifestos.

Within this broader research agenda, Bobba and Seddone show the need to combine analytical approaches to populism to further distinguish populism’s contingent dynamics and effects. Combined with Scantamburlo’s (2019) results, Bobba and Seddone’s findings may suggest that populist communications could be successfully deployed by mainstream politicians to pressurise for a shift in policy focus towards poverty and its causes. They also contribute by highlighting the need for further research on the relationship between populist pressures and non-populist ideas and attitudes in determining political behaviours.

Democratic Innovations

Stresses and strains come not just from extremism and the radical right and left, but also from those who hope for democracy to extend further and deeper than it traditionally has

in western European democracies. Democratic ‘innovations’ – including mini publics and participatory budgeting among other mechanisms – have been trialled across the continent in attempts to renew public trust and engagement in democracy. Some of the most innovative initiatives have been developed outside states by social movements as ‘bottom up’ exercises to make demands of politicians and policy makers. These innovations generate ‘stress’ to the extent that they demonstrate how democracy can be enacted in a more direct, participatory or deliberative style, thus creating pressures on representative democracy to be more flexible, responsive and engaged with the views of citizens. However, the pressure or ‘stress’ they create needs to be opened up to substantive analysis, rather than being the end-point or ‘limitation’ assumed in much existing literature.

Della Porta and Felicetti’s contribution makes substantive steps forward in this regard. They analyse how societal mobilisation behind democratic innovations can enable their success. They compare the G1000 exercise in Belgium and the crowd-sourced citizens’ constitution in Iceland, assessing the process through which democratic innovations are implemented, and how the support or challenge of social movements throughout each stage of the innovations’ implementation serves to instil both initiatives in the mindset of the wider public. As such, Della Porta and Felicetti provide a vital new way of looking at the potential value of democratic innovations. They look not simply at the design of these initiatives or the theories underpinning them, innovatively democratic though they are. Instead, they focus attention on *process* questions of societal support or challenge; ‘in each one of the three stages of their development, there are important insights to bear in mind in order to minimise challenges and exploit the opportunities that these experiments offer to foster democratic engagement’ (Della Porta and Felicetti, 2021).

Della Porta and Felicetti’s study is important because it points the way to assessing the institutional conditions under which social movements can successfully exert pressure on formal institutions to make sure democratic innovations are properly embedded in political decision making. This is an under-appreciated matter in existing research, which tends to focus on evaluating how and when democratic innovations succeed or fail, isolated from their wider political context and the social movements that push for democratic innovations to succeed.

Why Democratic Stress, and Academic Nuance, Matters

The contributions to this special issue add to wider studies of the evolution of democratic institutions in the face of volatile socio-political pressures, which have been well documented over the previous decade; democratic stress. They do not suggest that there is no democratic ‘crisis’, nor do they engage in intellectual obfuscation (Healy, 2017) or advocate sticking our collective academic heads in the sand in the face of totemic social, economic and ecological crises the world faces today, and how these are closely tied to democratic backsliding and growing authoritarianism. Rather, they are *critical* of unthinkingly internalising one interpretation of a concept or trend and how it relates to characteristics and drivers of ‘democratic crisis’. Democratic innovations, protest parties, constitutional change, populism and anti-politics have all been characterised as evidence of (or response to) democratic crisis, but this special issue shows, conceptually and empirically, that we need to look closer at how these trends operate to fully appreciate their institutional drivers and effects.

In sum, the crisis of democracy may indeed be real, but its institutional drivers and effects need deeper elaboration. While Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and other right-wing populists, global demands for democratisation led by Black Lives Matter, and institutional changes wrought by the global pandemic may indeed be evidence of multiple interlinked crises, the kinds of institutional change these movements and ruptures drive is not a clear-cut matter. We require a different language to explain complex change processes. This is the value of shifting our language to include democratic stress, and accumulating knowledge about how such stress works at an institutional level.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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