

PLEBISCITARIAN ORIGINS AND TEMPTATIONS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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PLEBISCITARIAN ORIGINS AND TEMPTATIONS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The current crisis of representative democracy has been vigorously addressed within political theory over the last decade. Both liberals and the left generally agree that the growing disengagement and estrangement from politics, low trust in representatives, and the rise of right-wing politicians have something to do with the dysfunction of representative democracy. At this point, it is safe to assert that there is an understanding that representative democracy is ailing — an idea shared by a much wider audience in the liberal-democratic countries. Calls for either reforming the system or abandoning unrealistic hopes are increasingly pressing.

What should replace the broken model? Arguably, the most appealing plea is to substitute representative democracy with “direct democracy,” understood as delegating decisions to the popular vote. If elites are corrupt, let the people rule! How this can be done seems pretty obvious, too: let’s take a vote and learn the will of the people! This concept has recently become an important agenda for political parties and movements worldwide and made them successful. Examples include the Five Star Movement in Italy, Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s campaign in Ukraine, and the Indignados Movement in Spain. In the United States, an initiative to institute national referenda in the Constitution enjoys

considerable support: according to the polls (which are themselves a way to gauge swiftly the popular will), it is consistently approved by 2/3 of Americans¹.

New information technologies that make voting easier and more convenient are a significant boost to this agenda. In several countries, new technologies for gauging public opinion are being rapidly developed. Several cities, like Barcelona or Moscow, are now introducing the platforms for direct democracy; in some, voting takes an important role. Some countries advance national consultations by mail, such as Hungary. Others, like Russia, actively promote e-voting — a promising instrument to enhance access to voting and avoid the solutions that tend to create a frustrating mess, like mail voting.

As fears grow that democracy might be crumbling and backsliding, the emphasis on voting and elections seems to increase. Politicians tend to promote the identification of democracy with voting to raise the stakes. In the United States, both parties engage in accusations of subverting the sacred core of democracy — elections — claiming that “democracy is on the ballot.”

The identification of democracy with voting and elections seems to be overwhelming. Those who want to defend democracy rush to protect elections in the first place. Those who want to reform it, often demand more

¹ Smith D., Tolbert C., Keller A. Electoral and structural losers and support for a national referendum in the U.S. *Electoral Studies*, 2010. 29(3): 509-520.

voting. Those who want to reject it attack the elections.² Although in political science, much has been said about the insufficiency of voting for defining democracy, elections tend to constitute the essence of democracy. As comparative political scientist Gerardo Munck puts it, “Though proposals to overcome the limitations of a minimal, electoral definition of democracy abound, little progress has been made in following through on this statement by providing a clear alternative.”³

Therefore, it is legitimate to ask the following questions: How did it happen that popular thinking about democracy is so focused on voting? How did it capture the democratic imagination? How did we get here?

In this paper, I shall address these questions by arguing that current thinking about liberal democracy is significantly influenced by a mostly forgotten tradition of plebiscitary democracy. This tradition thrived during the interwar period in Germany and the United States and later seemingly disappeared but, in fact, retained a strong subterranean influence and continues to shape the current democratic imagination. I will demonstrate that this tradition was begotten with explicitly anti-democratic aims to tame democracy.

The paper will be organized as follows. First, I will briefly review the forerunners of the theory of plebiscitary democracy that emerged with the radical extension of suffrage in the 19th century — Caesarism and Bonapartism. The paper will demonstrate that under Napoleon III in France, an idea emerged of building a synthetic political regime that would combine

elements of democracy and monarchy. In the second part, I will introduce the doctrine of plebiscitary democracy by focusing on the writings of Max Weber and Carl Schmitt. I will outline their theory of leadership that allows for a monarchical or dictatorial rule in a seemingly democratic polity. I will also underline an important interpretation of elections as plebiscites, which opens an original perspective on voting. In the third part, I will show how the doctrine of plebiscitary democracy grew into Joseph Schumpeter’s famous conception, which would later become known as “minimal democracy.” I will argue that through Schumpeter, plebiscitary democracy entered mainstream political science and subsequently shaped popular understanding through such tools as democracy indices or guides for “democratization.” Lastly, I will draw several conclusions on why it would be important to disentangle democracy from plebiscitarianism to unblock our democratic imagination and prevent the further rise of plebiscitarianism even as conditions might be favorable for it.

2 In a gloomy verdict on the aspirations of contemporary democrats, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels focus their attack on “the central mechanism in the folk theory of democracy, elections.” C. Achen, L. Bartels. *Democracy for Realists*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. P. 317.

3 G. Munck. What is Democracy? A Reconceptualization of the Quality of Democracy. *Democratization*, 2016. 13(1): 1.

THE BIRTH OF BONAPARTISM FROM UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE

The 19th century marked a turning point in the history of democracy. A long-despised form of government was vindicated in a matter of a few decades and achieved the hegemonic status it enjoyed until now. This, however, happened at a considerable cost: to become the queen of political regimes, the democratic Cinderella had to undergo a significant conceptual transformation, losing much of its revolutionary claim for political self-government and acquiring the meaning of fundamental social equalization leading to equality of rights.⁴

The rise of democracy became entangled with the idea of democratization — understood as the extension of voting rights. That would become the main political battlefield for the next 100 years. The projects of extending the right to vote to the whole population appeared during the French Revolution, but the real struggle began somewhat later and ended with attaining virtually universal suffrage in most European countries after World War I, with some notable exceptions like Switzerland or Liechtenstein.

The American case deserves special attention, for it shows the interrelation between the extension of franchise and the gradual recovery of the term “democracy.” In the aftermath of a disastrous 1824 election, many practices and technologies of contemporary democratic politics were introduced in the United States. After the election that made John Quincy Adams

the sixth president through a questionable procedure of contingent election in the House of Representatives, the next election marked a dramatic expansion of the electorate, with 23 states out of 25 holding a popular vote. Masses were rapidly advancing on the front stage of political competition, and the ability to get out the popular vote became a new and crucial political skill. Martin van Buren — nicknamed “the little magician” and Andrew Jackson’s political strategist and would-be successor as the eighth president of the United States — quickly realized how to mobilize the masses. “Political machines,” as they were called in America, started functioning to organize the masses for the elections. These were powerful organizational structures with several layers that were meant to secure the vote at almost any cost.

At the same time, the 1828 election was the first to see something close to a party competition, with what would later become the Democratic Party rallying around Jackson. American politics infused with James Madison’s age-old fear of factions finally started developing political parties. It was not until 1844 that the name “Democratic” was fully recognized by the party, but the word “democracy,” once infamous, started its way toward rehabilitation. It was precisely at that moment that Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in the United States to compose his “Democracy in America,” where he foresaw the evolution of democracy as the

4 P. Rosanvallon. The History of the Word “Democracy” in France. *Journal of Democracy*. 1995. Vol. 6. No. 4.

extension of the popular vote.⁵

In Tocqueville's home country, however, the right to vote was very limited at that time, and the July Monarchy only extended it insignificantly. The real change came in 1848 with the revolution that resulted in an instant and sudden introduction of the universal male franchise and the new constitution with the president as a key figure. The constitution was drafted by the Republicans and was meant to unite the whole nation, the rich and the poor, in the ritual of vote. In the spring, with the elections of the Constituent Assembly, there was a universal joy and the spirit of fraternity reigning in France because of this display of political equality.⁶

However, the Republicans severely miscalculated. They had no idea the way the masses would perceive the elections. That became obvious not with the parliamentary but precisely with the presidential elections, where the masses suddenly rushed to vote by writing in the name of the monarch they adored — Napoleon. It didn't matter that it was a different Napoleon, his nephew Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. The Republicans failed to ban him from running for the presidency, and he won the presidential election decisively in the first round.

These events immediately gave rise to theories trying to explain this new role of the masses in politics. The keywords were Bonapartism

and Caesarism. Bonapartism was perceived already in the time of Napoleon I as an alliance between the sovereign and the masses against the aristocracy and the clergy. Napoleon I had, of course, his own plebiscites. However, these were a sham and had very little participation.⁷

In the wake of Napoleon III's constitutional coup in 1851-1852 that would make him an emperor for life through two plebiscites, the first theories ideologically justifying this system appeared. First, Louis-Napoleon suggested the idea of synthesizing monarchy with democracy: "To sum up the imperial system, it may be said, that its basis is democratic, since all the powers are derived from the people; while the organization is hierarchical, since it provides different grades in order to stimulate all capacities."⁸ And then there was the influential book "The Era of the Caesars" by Auguste Romieu that contained an important criticism of Republicanism: It asserted that the Roman Empire was, in fact, a democratic regime, more democratic than the Roman Republic.⁹

On the institutional level, this synthetic regime was cemented with a voting system. There were, of course, the plebiscites themselves that the emperor decisively won each time because each time the question was presented to the voters as a ready-made decision taken by the king, and the people perceived its role as a validation of this decision. However, there were also the regular local elections, and they

5 Tocqueville introduces the discussion of universal suffrage with caution for the French: "To no people can this inquiry be more vitally interesting than to the French nation, which is blindly driven onwards by a daily and irresistible impulse towards a state of things which may prove either despotic or republican, but which will assuredly be democratic." A. de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. Vol. 1. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1875. P. 198.

6 P. Rosanvallon. *Le sacre du citoyen*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. P. 216.

7 M. Crook. Confidence from Below? Collaboration and Resistance in the Napoleonic Plebiscites. In: M. Rowe (ed.) *Collaboration and Resistance in Napoleonic Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. P. 19–36.

8 Napoléon-Louis Bonaparte. *Des idées napoléoniennes*. Paris: Paulin, 1859. P. 100.

9 A. Romieu. *L'ère des Cèsars*. Paris: Ledoyen, 1850. P. 32.

also had a significant plebiscitarian flavor — one of the candidates was always endorsed by the emperor, and the whole administrative apparatus was busy trying to get this candidate elected. His support was indirectly the support for the emperor, which made Napoleon's plebiscitarian legitimacy constantly renewable.¹⁰

Instead of developing a strong and competitive party system, France suddenly got a plebiscitarian empire where parties served as a necessary background for acclamation to the leader. The impotent *sénatus-consulte*, a sham parliament, was relegated to consultative functions, with opposition parties having almost no influence on political life between the elections (even though in later years of the Second French Empire that slightly changed). The emperor was wisely towering over the whole party system, including his party.

¹⁰ S. Hazareesingh. Bonapartism as the Progenitor of Democracy: The Paradoxical Case of the French Second Empire. In: P. Baehr, M. Richter (eds.) *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. P. 129–152.

ANOTHER THEORY OF ELECTIONS

The Second French Empire buried itself in a woeful military adventure, which made many admirers of Napoleon abandon the Caesarist conception. In the French Third Republic, party politics were restored, the popular presidential election was banned, and the presidential election was held in parliament. Still, even this barely saved the republic from sliding into monarchy. However, after World War I, the Bonapartist design was taken up in Germany. Similar conditions were present: masses swiftly turned into key figures in politics with the radical extension of suffrage, and there was no longer a way to eliminate them. The franchise was extended almost to the limits familiar to us today. In unstable times, this generated a major issue: How should a polity be properly and responsibly governed in the age of mass politics?

That was precisely Max Weber's question immediately after the war. Weber was severely worried about the quality of parliamentary government, believing that the parliamentary system was encouraging narrow partial interests. He was also skeptical about the state bureaucracy's ability to behave responsibly and convincingly, rather than simply executing the commands. Weber also had a deep distrust for the people, for their ability to govern directly and without mediation — his nominalist worldview made him very suspicious of ascribing action to vague social aggregates. The system necessitated a real, identifiable political actor, one who would take the courage to make decisions and establish the course for the nation. And if that was to be done under the

condition of mass politics, there was no resort to monarchy anymore.

Weber's solution was to combine two different sources of political legitimacy in one system: over the legal-rational power of parliamentary representatives and bureaucrats, a new level should be built — a plebiscitary president enjoying charismatic legitimacy. The key element was the immediate connection between the people and the president, helping bypass the bureaucracy and the parliament. The president's legitimacy was to be founded on acclamations — a direct univocal support granted by the people. Weber was relying on an already established Bonapartist tradition. In Germany, it was Wilhelm Roscher who noticed that Bonapartist Caesarism is a combination of monarchy and democracy, and for that reason, it is equally celebrated by different or even opposing parties.¹¹

However, Weber took inspiration not only in France, but also in the United States. Another important source for him was Moisei Ostrogorski, a Russian theorist who did one of the first systematic studies of British and American democratic politics. Ostrogorski emphasized the functioning of American political machines run by political bosses hunting for votes, and "machines" would become a key concept for the Weberian project of plebiscitarianism. Ostrogorski focused on the concentration of power and concluded on empirical grounds that masses are never likely to be allowed to govern:

“When it is said that the people is not capable of self-government and,

11 W. Roscher. *Umriss zur Naturlehre des Cäsarismus*. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1888. P. 646.

therefore, that universal suffrage and parliamentary system are absurd, I am ready to admit the first point. But I find the conclusions drawn from it completely erroneous. The political function of the masses in a democracy doesn't consist in governing it — probably they will never be able to do that. As a matter of fact, it will always be the small minority who governs, in democracy as in monarchy. Concentration is a property of all power, this is a law of social order. However, it is necessary to keep the ruling minority threatened.”¹²

It was from Ostrogorski's analysis of American democracy that Weber took the idea of strong presidential power based on acclamations secured by party structures — political bosses who benefit from the spoils distributed by the president. And almost exactly in Ostrogorski's words, Weber asserted that:

“One must always remember that the term ‘democratization’ can be misleading. The demos itself, in the sense of inarticulate mass, never ‘governs’ larger associations; rather, it is governed, and its existence only changes the way in which the executive leaders are selected ... ‘Democratization,’ in the sense here intended, does not

necessarily mean an increasingly active share of the governed in the authority of the social structure.”¹³

Weber's proposed constitutional design that he advocated for as a member of the Constitutional Commission included the office of the Reichspräsident and, possibly, the infamous Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution.¹⁴ Reichspräsident enjoyed dictatorial powers in emergency cases and was supposed to resolve political crises (that seemed to be inevitable with the unruly parliament) with the powers of vetoing the bills and appointing the government. It was, in essence, an extraordinary magistrate.

With this dictatorial rule, Weber meant to introduce a responsible rule into the system — something democracy, according to him, is ultimately incapable of. The German ship was to be steered by a strong leader assuming the responsibility for its historical fate. The refusal to be run by a leader would have catastrophic consequences. As Weber put it, “The only choice is between a leadership democracy with a ‘machine’ and leaderless democracy, ruled by professional politicians with no vocation lacking those inner, charismatic qualities making somebody a leader.”¹⁵

The plebiscitary leadership helped Weber develop the concept of “non-authoritarian version of charismatic legitimacy.”¹⁶ While

12 M. Ostrogorski. *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, 1902. Vol. II. P. 397.

13 M. Weber. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1976. P. 568.

14 Weber's role in the establishment of Article 48 in the proceedings of the Constitutional Commission is subject to a long debate. By contrast, his insistence on superpresidential design was loud and public. See W. Mommsen. *Max Weber und die deutsche Politik, 1890–1920*. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1974. P. 403; P. Baehr. Weber and Weimar: The “Reich President” Proposals. *Politics*, 9 (1). P. 23-24; S. Eliaeson. Constitutional Caesarism: Weber's Politics in Their German Context. In: S. Tuner (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Weber*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. P. 142.

15 M. Weber. The Profession and Vocation of Politics. *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. P. 351.

16 M. Weber. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. P. 156.

normally natural charisma would serve as a foundation for popular recognition of the leader's authority, the relation is reversed in plebiscitary rule. The one who gets the acclamation through the popular vote is thereafter recognized as possessing charisma, creating a sense of legitimacy. In other words, acclamatory voting is capable of producing a democratic charisma of its own.

The idea of plebiscitary democracy and interpretation of the Weimar Constitution as a plebiscitarian regime was taken up by Carl Schmitt in his "Constitutional Theory" of 1927. Schmitt was much more serious than Weber about the ontological status of the people, which provided plebiscitarian thinking with a strong appeal but also exposed its pitfalls. On the one hand, Schmitt denied the possibility of collective self-government: "The rule of the many over themselves means either the rule of some over the others, or the rule of an overarching third encompassing both."¹⁷ On the other hand, Schmitt falls back on Rousseau's concept of general will that was anathema to Weber. In his theory, the people as substance beneath the political form is manifested in the acts of acclamation. Acclamation is the moment of real unity which puts the people into existence. While for Weber, acclamation assumed the instrumental function of providing legitimacy to the leader, Schmitt puts to the forefront the ritual and solidifying nature of acclamation.¹⁸

Schmitt shared Weber's idea of building a synthetic regime that would combine the strengths of different ideal types. While Weber fused charisma with legal-rational legitimacy, Schmitt designed an alloy of monarchy and democracy. Since democracy was strictly impossible to him because of its radical immanence and rejection of mediation, monarchy provided democracy with a transcendent source, with a necessary element of representation. Democracy, in return, served as a reservoir of legitimacy for the monarchical rule: "In the Caesarist monarchy, as it was realized in Bonaparte's empire, the monarch is only a dictator on a democratic foundation."¹⁹ For Weber and Schmitt, the distinction between democracy and dictatorship doesn't make them mutually exclusive. Of course, as any historian of the Roman Republic knows, dictatorship was a necessary element of republican rule — on this basis Clinton Rossiter later argued that dictatorship was indispensable for a viable democracy²⁰. However, in the plebiscitarian design, democracy is not only compatible with dictatorship but enables it through voting. Weber calls the plebiscitary ruler a "dictator of the electoral battlefield," as opposed to the dictators of the past who came from the very real battlefields.²¹ Plebiscitary democracy is a synthetic rather than a hybrid regime. The concept of hybridity has been extensively used in political science recently to designate the political regimes that are imperfect yet

17 C. Schmitt. *Volksentscheid und Volksbegehren*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004. P. 67.

18 C. Schmitt. *Constitutional Theory*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2008. P. 302.

19 Schmitt. *Ibid.* P. 309.

20 C. Rossiter. *Constitutional Dictatorship: Crisis Government in the Modern Democracies*. London; New York: Routledge, 2017.

21 Weber. *The Profession and Vocation of Politics*. P. 342.

notoriously stable.²² Yet what Weber and Schmitt were envisioning was a deliberately planned, robust sort of political regime — far from being a midpoint between two opposite ideal types, it would combine their strengths in a perfect amalgam.

Perhaps the most important insight from the theory of plebiscitary democracy relates to elections. Plebiscitarians draw attention to the fact that voting can assume a very different meaning, the meaning of acclamation. In plebiscitarian settings, for all participants — including voters, candidates, and election officials — voting is not a matter of choice between various alternatives representing the voters' interests. Rather, it becomes a call for an univocal “yes!” to the leader. Weber admits that acclamation doesn't necessarily imply sincere support, because what matters is manufacturing legitimacy:

“Regardless of how its real value as an expression of the popular will may be regarded, the plebiscite has been the specific means of deriving the legitimacy of authority from the confidence of the ruled, even though the voluntary nature of such confidence is only formal or fictitious.”²³

Elections tend to take on the meaning of plebiscite when voters perceive one of the candidates to signify the acclamation to the ruler. Weber emphasizes that in these situations, the term “elections” becomes inadequate despite their appearance because,

in essence, what is taking place is “not a choice between candidates but recognition of the aspirant's claim to power.”²⁴ This can be all too easily dismissed as an obvious disfiguration of the true meaning of elections. However, it is far from certain that in modern mass societies, voters tend to naturally perceive voting as a tradeoff. As Schmitt soberly notes, acclamation relieves people from the necessity to make difficult choices with little gains in sight. It is easier to accept what has already been decided:

“The majority of state citizens are generally inclined to leave political decisions to others and to respond to questions posed always such that the answer contains a minimum of decision. Consequently, they will readily consent to an accomplished fact. During these Napoleonic plebiscites, “no” would have meant insecurity and disorder, while the “yes” constituted only belated consent to an accomplished fact, therefore, the minimum of its own decision.”²⁵

Weber and Schmitt put forward an ambiguous attitude to democracy in political theory. While openly skeptical about self-government, they nevertheless admit the inevitability of democratic legitimacy in mass societies. To reconcile it with responsible rule, they endeavor to disguise monarchical or dictatorial rule with a supposedly democratic institutional design. Voting serves as a democratic foil, covering personalist rule and providing it with irresistible legitimacy.

22 S. Levitsky, L. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

23 M. Weber. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: The University of California Press, 1968. P. 267.

24 M. Weber. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. P. 667.

25 C. Schmitt. *Constitutional Theory*. P. 134.

This way of thinking about democracy as an unavoidable bad that should be tamed and made to serve better purposes was not new to democratic theory. From the Old Oligarch, who observed ancient Athens, to Tocqueville and Bryce, who observed modern America, the most pragmatic antidemocratic thinkers were willing to admit the resilience and inevitability of democratic institutions to take them under control. Plebiscitarian thinkers of the interwar period did that with elections as an embodiment of a democratization movement. If the introduction of mass suffrage couldn't be undone, it should at least be repurposed. By focusing mass participation in politics on elections, plebiscitarians were able to develop a design in which the masses don't intervene in government but solemnly legitimize the real ruler.

While this school became particularly prominent in Weimar Germany, the discontent with mass society pushed political thinkers around the world in the same direction. In the United States, Walter Lippmann, who was significantly impressed by the power of propaganda during World War I, came to realize that in a responsible government, "the limit of direct action is for all practical purposes the power to say Yes or No on an issue presented to the mass."²⁶ While the American intellectual community was already susceptible to a realist account of democracy like Lippmann's,²⁷ the most significant boost to plebiscitarian ideas would come from the other side of the Atlantic during World War II.

26 W. Lippmann. *Public Opinion*. New Brunswick; London: Transaction Publishers, 1998. P. 230.

27 See, for instance, similar assessments in A.L. Lowell. *Public Opinion and Popular Government*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914. P. 69. American democratic skeptics were undoubtedly heavily influenced by Bryce's *American Commonwealth*.

FROM PLEBISCITARIANISM TO MINIMALISM

Much like the Second Republic in France, the Weimar Republic ended badly. The Republic again slid gradually into the Third German Empire with Hitler as a plebiscitarian dictator.¹ One could think that this should have been the end of this infamous doctrine. On the contrary, it entered mainstream political science and became a significant part of contemporary liberal tradition. It was saved and resuscitated by Joseph Schumpeter, who rebranded it in his minimalist view of democracy. While an important work of situating this approach within the plebiscitarian tradition has been done by J.E. Green and A. Körösi, I will emphasize here Schumpeter's view of elections. Schumpeter was in many ways indebted to Weber and Schmitt (the latter used to be his colleague in Bonn). He shared their antidemocratic sentiment and their longing for a strong leader. However, for obvious reasons, in 1942, when he was giving his famous lectures on "Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy" in the United States, he was in no position to endorse the Führerprinzip that stands behind the model of plebiscitary democracy.

Instead, Schumpeter suggested his famous definition of democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."³ He immediately moves on to stress two key implications of this definition. The first is that it suggests a clear criterion for distinguishing between democracies and non-democracies (I shall turn to that below), and the second consists in due recognition that this definition provides for the vital role of leadership in politics. Far from being merely a method of political competition, elections are meant to cement strong leadership. "Accepting the leadership" is the only way for a collective body to present on the political stage. Regarding Rousseau's philosophy of general will, Schumpeter clearly sides with Weber rather than Schmitt. General will is part of what he calls the "classical doctrine of democracy," a combination of views that he attacks as unrealistic and contradictory.⁴ A mystical collective entity that never errs regarding its good is a fantasy for Schumpeter. However, he

1 On the use of plebiscites by Nazis, see O. Jung. *Plebiscit und Diktatur: die Volksabstimmungen der Nationalsozialisten*. Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1995. In fact, the Nazi rule witnessed a slight decrease in the number of plebiscites as compared to the Weimar period before the Machtergreifung.

2 J.E. Green. *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. P. 171ff.; A. Körösi. Political Representation in Leader Democracy. *Government and Opposition*, 40(3): 358-378. Körösi makes a strong case for reading Viktor Orbán's Hungary as an instantiation of plebiscitarian model: G. Illés, A. Gyulai, A. Körösi. *The Orbán Regime: Plebiscitary Leader Democracy in the Making*. London: Routledge, 2020.

3 J. Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994. P. 269.

4 As several critics have pointed out, the "classical doctrine of democracy" is a strawman that Schumpeter invents himself. A combination of utilitarian and Rousseauian views that he dismantles is difficult to attribute to any particular theorist. See J. Medearis. *Joseph Schumpeter's Two Theories of Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. P. 114-115; G. Mackie. Schumpeter's Leadership Democracy. *Political Theory*, 37(1): 128-153. Schumpeter was likely trying to represent a sum total of folk views on democracy in this imagined doctrine.

follows Weber in accepting the general will as part of the contemporary political reality rather than denying it. Even if the ontological reality of general will is dubious, the firm belief in the existence of something like popular will in contemporary societies is difficult to dispute. Therefore, instead of rejecting the general will, a responsible government should learn to “manufacture” it. In a Gramscian twist, Schumpeter claims that the popular will is always a subject of fabrication, and whoever is more successful in manufacturing the impression that she relies on popular will wins out in democratic political struggle: “The will of the people is the product and not the motive power of the political process.”⁵

Most importantly, Schumpeter also takes up Weber’s acclamation view of elections. Quite consistently, he argues against proportional representation because of its inability to provide for a strong leader and efficient government. Schumpeter’s understanding of elections is by no means intended to create a peaceful way of arranging competition between the elites, even though it was frequently presented in this way.⁶ He is not interested in the electorate’s role as a moderator in intra-elite conflicts. In fact, Schumpeter is quite open on what is expected from the voters: “Acceptance of leadership is the true function of the electorate’s vote.”⁷ Unsurprisingly, Schumpeter mentions Napoléon I as an example of a dictatorial and enormously popular leader who undoubtedly contributed to France’s prosperity. Bonaparte could have

never achieved that “in a democratic way” precisely because rivaling factions of French society would have never endowed him with a sufficient mandate.⁸

Schumpeter’s influence on the ensuing mainstream political science cannot be overestimated. Thanks to Schumpeter and the conceptual shifts he introduced into the political language, the plebiscitarian roots of liberal democracy are largely hidden from the dominant tradition. There are two ways in which Schumpeter’s plebiscitarianism contributed to the “electoralization” of contemporary democratic thinking.

First, Schumpeter’s approach gained prominence in liberal political theory and comparative political science. He did not coin the concept of “minimal democracy”; most likely, it had been introduced in 1982 by William Riker in his repudiation of popular sovereignty. Importantly, Riker defines liberal democracy in a minimalist way:

“Social choice theory forces us to recognize that the people cannot rule as a corporate body in the way that populists suppose. Instead, officials rule, and they do not represent some indefinable popular will. Hence they can easily be tyrants, either in their own names or in the name of some putative imaginary majority. Liberal democracy is simply the veto by which it is sometimes possible to restrain official tyranny. This may seem a minimal sort of democracy, especially

5 J. Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. P. 263.

6 See, for instance, A. Przeworski. Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense. In: I. Shapiro, C. Hacker-Cordón (eds.) *Democracy’s Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. P. 23–55.

7 J. Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. P. 273.

8 J. Schumpeter. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. P. 255.

in comparison with the grandiose (though intellectually absurd) claims of populism.”⁹

Even before Riker, Robert Dahl, in 1956, suggested two things that differentiate democracies from non-democracies (“dictatorships”) are elections and political competition. In this, he directly relies on Schumpeter while allowing for some responsiveness of political leaders.¹⁰ Dahl’s vision of democracy is not a Bonapartist one, even though his indebtedness to elite theories of democracy is a subject of familiar criticisms.¹¹ However, by disregarding the real motivations behind Schumpeter’s minimalism and by putting elections in the core of his definition of democracy, Dahl opens the path for plebiscitarian theory to remain the hidden foundation of his polyarchy.¹²

Samuel Huntington declared in 1991 that the debate over the meaning of democracy had been settled by the 1970s, and Schumpeter had won.¹³ This statement is particularly significant because of its place in the studies of democratization that laid conceptual foundations for the field of comparative

politics for decades. Exactly as suggested by Schumpeter, comparative scholars embarked on his definition because it offers a simple tool to distinguish between democracies and non-democracies.

The crisis of the democratization paradigm in the 1990s and 2000s, caused by the emergence of polities where institutionalization of elections didn’t result in consolidation of democratic rule, led to the emergence of concepts to refer to these quasi-stable conditions between democracy and authoritarianism. Electoral authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, and competitive authoritarianism — are some of the conceptual innovations developed over the last two decades. However, despite recurrent warnings voiced by political scientists that reducing democracy to elections is politically dangerous,¹⁴ disentanglement of the essence of democratic rule from elections never took place.¹⁵ Even when the strange attractiveness of elections for monarchical leaders becomes the subject of interest, it is still assumed that “Elections are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for modern democracy. Such a regime cannot exist without elections, but

9 W. Riker. *Liberalism Against Populism*. Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1988. P. 244

10 R. Dahl. *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. P. 131-132.

11 R. Dahl. A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model. *American Political Science Review*, 1958. 52(2): 463–469; J. Walker. A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy. *American Political Science Review*, 1966. 60(2): 285-295.

12 Dahl’s conception of polyarchy relies on the belief that the economic model of competition would produce satisfying outcomes for the demand side (the people) when reproduced in politics. However, market settings are known to favor a concentration of wealth — something Schumpeter was well aware of in his praise of heroic entrepreneurs. The significance of market metaphor (as, for instance, in Downs’ political economy of voting) in promoting the idea of a strong leader is a subject of a separate study.

13 S. Huntington. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. P. 6.

14 P. Schmitter, T. Karl. What Democracy Is... and Is Not. *Journal of Democracy*, 1991. 2(3): 75–88; L. Diamond. Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 2002. 13(2): 21-35.

15 Quentin Skinner has remarked quite early that because of the positive connotation of the term “democracy,” particular institutions, like elections, tend to be deemed good by association. See Q. Skinner. The Empirical Theorists of Democracy and Their Critics: A Plague on Both Their Houses. *Political Theory*, 1973. 1(3): 298-299.

elections alone are not enough.”¹⁶

The field of comparative politics is also particularly important for shaping the popular thinking of democracy for a different reason: It produces the second way by which plebiscitarian ideas enter our imagination. The most natural way for a layperson to know whether a country counts as a democracy is to refer to the indices of democracy. By implicitly accepting these measures, we also accept the assumptions behind them — after all, technologies are the best channel for knowledge to enter our minds uncritically.

While a substantive overview of democracy measures used in comparative studies now would be a task of its own, it suffices to say that all key indices prioritize elections in one way or another. For instance, the Freedom House index is subdivided into civil and political dimensions, and the latter is strongly focused on elections. Similarly, out of the five dimensions used in the Polity IV index, four are closely related to elections.¹⁷ While it is certainly true that the measures are almost never limited to the electoral performance of the country, they still tend to consider elections as the essence of democracy.

Schumpeter’s minimalist doctrine served as an important bridge, helping the plebiscitarian tradition to continue shaping the hegemonic understanding of democracy even when plebiscitarians’ ideas went into disrepute. By reframing the most provocative ideas of plebiscitary democracy, minimalism made this worldview a significant, if unrecognized, part of the liberal-democratic tradition. Through shaping the ideas of skeptical

liberals, suspicious of the populist leanings of democrats, minimalism promoted elections to the position of the key democratic (rather than liberal) element of liberal-democratic design. As an underlying concept of technologies for measuring democracies, the plebiscitarian view of democracy managed to make laypeople, politicians, and diplomats think about elections every time they try to figure out whether the country is democratic or not. From the early years of universal suffrage to our days, the idea of voting as a democratic way to appoint a strong ruler remains an influential part of the liberal-democratic legacy, conditioning our aspirations for democracy.

16 A. Schedler. The Menu of Manipulation. *Journal of Democracy*, 2002. 13(2): 36-50.

17 J. Högström. Does the Choice of Democracy Measure Matter?: Comparisons between the Two Leading Democracy Indices, Freedom House and Polity IV. *Government and Opposition*, 2013. 48(2): 201-221

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that a remarkably antidemocratic plebiscitarian tradition has shaped one significant element of contemporary liberal-democratic thinking. This element proves resilient among scholars and among the wider public: the idea of voting is the essence of democratic politics. It is not that the dominant view of democracy in political science necessarily endorses the radical reactionary theories of Weber or Schmitt. However, the idea of elections and voting as the key democratic institution significantly shapes academic and popular understanding of democracy and its horizons. This explains why the demand for a popular vote on all main issues of a political agenda is increasingly suggested as a “democratic” solution to the crisis of representation within contemporary liberal democracy. The concept that to make the people rule, we should take a vote is a legacy of plebiscitarianism, and it remains central for contemporary mainstream definitions of democracy and practices of measuring it, thereby defining our democratic imagination. Behind this concept looms the idea that democracy is about voting for the strong, capable leader (or his decisions), a vision that became popular in many liberal-democratic countries.

If we disentangle democracy from elections, it will help us to solve many issues mentioned at the beginning of the paper. The embrace of voting and elections by undemocratic regimes is no longer an issue but a logical and consistent outcome. The emphasis on polling and voting by undemocratic leaders is also

explainable. After all, elections always had stronger ties with aristocracy rather than with democracy.¹⁸

We can stop blaming democracy for not meeting our expectations because plebiscitarianism is hardly a democracy. This, however, is only the first step to unblock our democratic imagination and develop different ways of reclaiming democratic life. This would also include rethinking why and to what extent elections are valuable for democratic politics. It is not that elections are incompatible with democracy. It is rather that democracy is not elections.

18 B. Manin. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

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