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# The Temporal Constitution of Democracies

Andreas Schäfer<sup>1</sup> and Wolfgang Merkel<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The specific institutionalization of time is a major defining element of democracies and a vulnerable condition of their stability and legitimacy. In the first part of the chapter, we cover the regular temporal routines of democratic systems. In the synchronic dimension, we consider the time-requirements of democratic practices and examine the timed relationship between different levels and actors of the democratic system. In the diachronic dimension, we ask for the time horizons that temporal constitutions of democracies create for political actors – related to future expectations and to past experiences. In the second part of the chapter, we turn to time challenges democracies face today. First, we address the issue of social acceleration that goes along with potential vulnerabilities and adaptabilities of democratic systems. Second, we discuss problems created by situations of crisis in states of emergency and in democratic transitions. Based on that, we draw some conclusions for future research.

**Keywords:** time requirements, cycles, horizons, collective memory, acceleration, crisis, vulnerability, stability, legitimacy, states of emergency

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## Introduction

The specific institutionalization of time is a major defining element of democracies and, consequently, a sometimes vulnerable condition of their quality and stability. This chapter will cover both aspects: the regular temporal routines of democratic systems and the systemic or exceptional time challenges democracies face today. The guiding question will be to what extent temporal structures and dynamics promote or undermine democratic stability and legitimacy.

In the first part of the chapter, we systematically review what perspectives in the literature exist on how democracies institutionalize time in their regular procedures and practices. Here, we look at the temporal constitution of democracies in two dimensions. In the synchronic dimension, we ask for the time requirements of democratic participation, representation, and decision-making and address the timed relationship between different institutional levels and actors of the democratic system. In the diachronic dimension, we ask for the time horizons that temporal constitutions of democracies create for political actors. First, we survey literature that deals with aspects of electoral cycles which influence the future-oriented perspectives of political actors. Second, we ask how past experiences impact the way democracies deal with present conditions.

In the second part of the chapter, we turn to debates on temporal challenges for democracies. These can be found in two strands of research. The first originates from the observation of a rapid acceleration of economic and cultural developments in late modernity. It results in a supposed desynchronization scenario that sees democratic politics as systemically anachronistic. We reconstruct and critically discuss these arguments, pointing out both the temporal vulnerabilities and adaptabilities of democratic systems. The second relates to problems created by exceptional situations of crisis. On the one hand, we will cover the discussion about states of emergency; on

the other hand, we will ask how the temporal dimension relates to the quality of democratic transitions. Based on these two parts, we will draw some conclusions for future research.

## **1. Democracies and the Institutionalization of Time**

Time is both an enabling and constraining resource in the political process. For example, the establishment of representative relations between politicians and citizens needs at least a certain amount of time, while the time budget available to achieve this goal is limited by the duration of election terms but also by the attentiveness of the audience or by time requirements of other tasks that representatives have to fulfill. Partly outer circumstances such as the complexity of a political task, and partly political institutions such as electoral cycles make time a scarce resource in the democratic process. Democracies institutionalize time in specific ways. Linz famously defined democracy as “government pro tempore” (Linz, 1998, 19). Political authority has to be revocable within regular intervals. If we follow this claim, temporal limitations are an important means to secure the democratic character of the polity. These limitations by design can stabilize and legitimize democratic systems. For that, however, the specific temporal institutions have to be sensitive to and interact constructively with time requirements of both upcoming political tasks and diverse democratic practices.

When we look at the temporal constitution of democracies, we often encounter a fine-tuned balance of temporal structures. Rights for initiating legislative processes, the standard sequencing of legislative phases, competences for setting limits to time budgets, or ways of timing electoral cycles are all rules that structure and constrain democratic processes, practices, and power relations. We still know too little about the intricate mechanisms that these structures create and the implications they have for the stability of democratic systems. However, the preliminary

theoretical and empirical evidence we have suggests that rhythms created by temporal constitutions can help stabilize democratic systems and create legitimacy but that they are also critical points where moments of democratic crisis can arise. In the following, we breakdown this complex picture into a synchronic and diachronic dimension.

## **1.1. The Synchronic Dimension: Timed Relationships**

In the synchronic dimension, we ask for the temporal relationships between political practices and political actors in a snapshot perspective. Time requirements and constraints are determined by specific demands of political tasks and the typical duration of unfolding political practices, on the one hand, and by institutional rules and strategic decisions of political actors within the political process, on the other hand. In the following section, we will focus on the external challenges posed by tasks and practices. The subsequent section will address the question of how institutional rules and strategic decisions influence the time resources within processes of decision-making and the power relationship between political actors.

### **1.1.1. Time Requirements for Participation, Representation, and Decision-making**

What time do citizens need for democratic participation? How much time does a relationship of representation need to be established and stable? How long does it take to properly deliberate on a certain matter? How long does it take to reach a democratic decision? Political practices can be more or less demanding. Accordingly, their time requirements will vary. The decisive point is that their time requirements serve democratic functions of equal integration and collective autonomy. Time is needed to allow citizens to potentially have an equal share in the political process and to build proper judgments for their collective decisions.

There are slower and faster forms of democratic participation depending on how demanding their specific contribution to the fulfillment of democratic functions is. Democratic deliberation is a particularly demanding form of participation. Still, democratic theorists see deliberation on political issues in addition to aggregation of preferences as a central mechanism of judgment building for collective decision-making. They expect deliberative processes to integrate diverse societal perspectives into and mobilize relevant arguments and information for political decision-making (Habermas, 1996; Curato et al., 2017). Deliberation and subsequent aggregation need sufficient time for fulfilling these functions. Democratic theorists have acknowledged the fact that processes of deliberation need to be interrupted by voting for pragmatic reasons because decisions also have to be taken short of consensus in an appropriately timed manner (Benhabib, 1996, 72; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, 18). However, a systematic reflection and problematization of this time requirement can hardly be found in relevant democratic theoretical approaches. One implicit assumption seems to be that sufficient time resources are (or must be) always available.

Other scholars look at practices of judgment building under the condition of scarce resources. Often conceived as a problem of information acquisition, this research can be translated into time concerns as well: How can citizens reach proper judgments when they do not have the time or capacity to collect and evaluate respective pieces of information properly? An answer is that citizens use information shortcuts. Lupia (1994) found in a study on voting decisions in a referendum in California that uninformed voters could use extant cues as information shortcuts in order to come to the same conclusions as voters who were highly informed concerning the matter under consideration. Lau and Redlawsk (2006) both substantiate and differentiate the claim that citizens use information shortcuts in their voting decisions. They find in experiments that such

shortcuts can provide valuable means for reaching judgments in complex issues under the condition of uncertainty but also that mainly people with political expertise can use them for the own advantage while they do less for other people or even lead them astray from the correct decision (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006, 229–252). Some scholarly accounts stress the positive democratic potential of information shortcuts, for example, by looking at their contribution to an efficient democratic division of labor (e.g., Elliott, 2020). Others focus on their potential downsides. Stoker et al. (2016) show how these practices of fast thinking might be problematic for democratic legitimacy and argue that more deliberative forms of slow thinking are needed to balance their negative dynamics. This fruitful scholarly debate about the role and effects of fast forms of judgment building is far from been settled but has important implications for the temporal dimension of democratic systems and for the prospects of political autonomy of citizens in representative democracies.

Digitalization provides new opportunities for quicker forms of participation which can be valuable contributions to established practices (Fawcett, 2018), too. For example, time needed to form collective action and initiating mobilization can be reduced in comparison to older forms due to new communication technologies. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) contrast the “logic of collective action” with the “logic of connective action.” Through the use of digital platforms and means of communication, the latter can unfold more quickly and often mobilize huge groups of people in short time for a current cause. However, one can ask how sustainable those modes of participation are compared to more traditional forms. There are plausible arguments that if online engagement is not linked to traditional forms of participation it has problematic consequences for democratic politics. According to Hersh (2020), “political hobbyism” leads to imbalances in political participation because it makes large groups of moderate citizens spend their time

following and engaging in virtual debates rather than in real-world political groundwork like volunteering – leaving the latter to more radical groups. From a normative perspective, White and Ypi (2016, 122–141) view parties as a cross-temporal project and stress the importance of long-term commitment in line with the norms of fidelity and sustainability: Parties do not only have to “keep up with the times,” partisans also have to fulfill “ascending” obligations to predecessors and “descending” obligations to their successors in order to secure the identity of the party. Therefore, it is rather doubtful that digital forms of participation can serve as functional equivalents to analogous ones. More likely, newer and quicker forms can complement and sometimes strengthen, but sometimes also weaken older and slower ones. Thus, shifting the range of typical practices of participation might alter not only the character of the democratic process but also the democratic quality of the judgments and decisions reached.

Looking at the relationships between citizens and political elites, scholars have drawn attention to the complexity of political representation. It has to be conceived of as a process extending over longer periods of time. Representation cannot be reduced to the moment of authorization through voting but has to be established in a continuous constructive endeavor (Saward, 2010; Disch, 2011). From a functional perspective, representation allows for expanding inclusion over time and is essential for collective will formation and decision-making in democratic systems (Warren, 2017, 48–49). Finally, the legislative process takes political time, not least because democracies regularly leave room and provide opportunities for oppositional forces to articulate their critical interventions (Dahl, 1965; Blondel, 1997) – and need to do so in order to secure stability and legitimacy (Mair, 2007).



In short, political practices require certain specifiable amounts of time to fulfill their democratic functions. Thus, in addition to the temporal limitation of democratic rule, one defining element of democratic systems should be that they leave enough time for political practices of participation, representation, and decision-making to fulfill their specific democratic functions. In other words, systems that reduce the time budgets for these practices beyond a bearable measure will also reduce their democratic quality. Although time requirements of democratic practices vary with the complexity of the respectively related political task or object, they are also determined by inner limits within which they can fulfill their democratic functions.

### **1.1.2. Timed Power Relations: Executive, Legislature, and Judiciary in Multi-level Systems**

How much time is available is not only determined by external circumstances but also by institutional rules and strategic decisions of powerful actors that have discretion over timing within and between institutional layers of the polity. The discretion over time is always linked to power, and the division of power has a temporal dimension. The different levels of democratic polities follow different tempos and rhythms.

Scheuerman (2004; see also the chapter by Scheuerman, this volume) reads the constitution of liberal democracy through a time theoretical lens. Accordingly, the traditional conception of the division of powers is mirrored in a temporal division of labor. Legislative, executive, and judiciary fulfill distinct functions that vary by their relation to time. Legislators are to be creative and future oriented, jurists past oriented, and executives oriented to the immediate present (Scheuerman, 2004, 29). This results in various tensions within and between these branches. Especially the legislation is caught in a paradoxical situation: it has to create laws that anticipate the future while accepting the modern view that the future is open for change. As a kind of

solution, laws have to be accessible for revision by new majorities at any point in time. Between branches, tensions arise when the judiciary deviates from its past orientation and creates jurisdictions that interfere with the future orientations of the legislation. A pronounced tension also exists between the slow-going deliberative process of legislation and the executive branch that is regularly oriented toward fast actions and reactions in the present.

Of course, the temporal division of power is not always clear-cut. On the one hand, there is variance in how the temporal relationships among institutional branches are constituted. Differences exist between types of democratic systems in the distribution of formal time-related competences and in the degree of temporal interdependence between the branches of government. Majoritarian and consensus democracies are characterized by different degrees of mutual entanglement of competences (Lijphart, 2012) that influence how autonomous governmental institutions can act. Thus, these types also represent distinctive ways of organizing the temporal division of labor. Majoritarian systems give the executive branch a higher degree of dominance over other institutions regarding the timing and temporal structuration of political decision-making. In consensus systems, the higher degree of mutual interdependence and broad involvement of institutional and non-institutional actors result in a comparably slower process of decision-making that cannot easily be dominated unilaterally. Moreover, temporal power relations are determined by the respective regulation of office terms. Judges can hold fixed time or lifetime appointments, which potentially influences how contested their installation is. Terms of the executive and the legislative can be linked to each other and more or less coextensive as in parliamentary systems or independent from each other as in presidential systems. In parliamentary systems, the duration of terms also depends on strategic considerations regarding election timing resulting in more or less coalition stability (Lupia and Strøm, 1995). In

presidential systems, the likelihood of the emergence of divided government potentially increases with the degree of temporal distance between the respective elections (Shugart, 1995).

On the other hand, the temporal division of labor is also a playing field for power struggles between institutional branches with partly diverging political interests, if, for example, there are different majorities in divided presidential systems. Time demands, budgets, and rules can be manipulated by powerful actors in order to push through their own projects or block alternative ones. Formal competences for initiating legislative and other policy-related processes can be used not only to set the agenda but also to create time pressures.

The governments of different democratic systems have more or less control over legislative agendas and timetables, resulting in higher or lower degrees of influence on legislation (Döring, 1995). Since time is a scarce resource in legislation, control over agendas and timetables co-determines the outcome of the process (Cox, 2008). Delaying processes strategically can also be an important means in power struggles between institutional actors. There are more obvious forms, including filibustering within the legislature and more subtle strategies. Kardasheva (2009) shows that the European Parliament uses its power to delay in order to exert influence on legislative outcomes in consultation procedures. Moreover, Rasmussen and Toshkov (2011) demonstrate that the European Parliament devotes more time to decision-making processes in which they have more power (co-decision procedures) than in those where they have less decisional power (e.g., consultation procedures). Thus, the institutional division of power potentially influences time-related strategies. Both the “temporal grid” of regular procedures and the instrumental uses of temporal rules structure political processes and their outcomes (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling, 2009, 189).

Restrictive time budgets and pressures in political decision-making are not only created by external conditions stemming from the urgency and complexity of political tasks but also a result of strategic power struggles between political actors and institutional branches. Since the strategic influencing of timing, sequencing and scheduling can have a potential effect on the agenda and outcome of decision-making, it raises questions not only of power, but also of legitimacy (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling, 2009; Fumagalli, 2019).

## **1.2. The Diachronic Dimension: Time Horizons**

The pro tempore character of democratic rule implies that temporal constraints determine the time horizons of political actors. Short time horizons can create incentives to orient oneself at short-term electoral responsiveness at the expense of long-term responsible governance (Goetz, 2014). The temporal limitation of political rule has a further normative implication. Not only the governmental office but also political decisions are – at least in a normative sense – subject to temporal restriction. Since democracies are “systematically biased in favor of the present,” they tend to neglect the future and impair the rights of future sovereigns; therefore, no popular majority can make lasting authoritative decisions (Thompson, 2005, 246; see also the chapter by González-Ricoy in this volume). Democratic decisions have to be reversible (Riescher, 1994, 230; Scheurman, 2004, 32). Future majorities have to be able to follow new political directions that are to a certain degree independent of what past majorities decided. If decisions made in democratic systems have irreversible impacts that pose severe constraints on future generations and majorities, their democratic legitimacy is precarious from the outset.

In the following section, we will consider how future perspectives and constraints affect the way political actors act in the respective present. Then, we will turn to the question of how the specific past of democracies influences how actors look at and deal with present challenges.

### **1.2.1. Electoral, Policy, and Information Cycles**

The temporal limitation of democratic rule has a cyclical character determined by elections and respective terms. The shape and effects of electoral cycles have received broad scholarly attention. A major concern of research has been the question of election timing. The timing of an election is either fixed by the constitution or to some degree subject to the discretion of current governments or majorities (see also the chapter by Schleiter in this handbook). In the latter case, incumbents can determine election dates opportunistically because they can choose periods in which their performance is seen in a favorable light or in which the opposition seems weak (Riera, 2015; Lupia and Strøm, 1995). Studies show that this strategy can result in substantial gains for the incumbents, increasing their chance for reelection (Roy and Alcantara, 2012; Schleiter and Tavits, 2016).

Apart from election timing, the subsequent question of how electoral cycles, and their duration and timing, influence the time horizons of political decision-makers is of substantial importance. A basic expectation is that incumbent governments and majorities will adjust their policies to short-term voter responsiveness because they fear for their reelection (Schultz, 1995). The short time horizons created by electoral incentives pose problems, especially for pressing social issues that require long-term solutions and often result in short-term costs (Jacobs, 2011) such as pension reforms or environmental policies. This often deplored presentism of democratic governance, however, is likely to vary with institutional settings. Fixed terms or possibilities to

reduce competition and to increase office security can contribute to incumbents investing in future goods with short-term costs (Jacobs, 2016, 445). Finnegan (2019) argues and shows empirically that competition decreasing conditions such as proportional electoral rules allow decision-makers to make long-term investments at the expense of short-term costs in climate change policy. In addition, nonmajoritarian institutions are sometimes invoked to counterbalance the political dynamics of vote-seeking political decision-makers (Majone, 1996), but such bodies are increasingly politicized as well (Goetz, 2014; Meiering and Schäfer, 2020) and thus at least partly subjected to political pressures and the logic of political cycles.

Furthermore, the actual electoral effects of government policies clearly depend on voter assessments that politicians might anticipate more or less adequately. To what extent are the time horizons of politicians and voters congruent? Studies show that voters are myopic – looking at events and policies that are rather close – but perceptions are not as short-termed as many would expect, at least with regard to past experiences. Wlezien (2015) demonstrates that a majority of American voters take into account at least the last two years in their assessment of the economic policies employed by presidents. Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011) investigate the question of how much and how long affected voters demonstrate gratitude for policies beneficial to them. Specifically, they analyze the electoral reaction after one natural disaster in Germany and find that the positive effect on the electoral result of the incumbent government is not only substantial but has repercussions for several years. Such studies challenge the assumption of myopic voters to some degree, although the question to what extent voters also grant gratitude for policies that promise long-term benefits at the expense of short-term costs is an issue that needs more empirical assessment.

Finally, the future-oriented time horizons of politicians and citizens cannot be understood completely without considering the influence of the media. According to Patterson (1998), the twenty-four-hour news cycle demands novelty, immediacy, urgency, and a singularity of reported events and is therefore unsuitable to focus public attention on important long-term development and problems. Political actors who have to adjust to these logics of news media production have to take this into account in their political communication (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Esser, 2013). However, in the era of digitalization, the stability of the classic news cycle becomes increasingly questioned. Chadwick (2017) suggests using the term “political information cycle” instead in order to capture the fact that news production is more and more characterized by an interplay between journalists, political elites, media professionals, political activists and politicized citizens who communicate via traditional and new digital media formats and engage in constant and partly real-time information processing. This has important political implications:

Political information cycles rest upon a subtle political economy of time. (...) Those who recognize the importance of time and the circulation of information – when to act quickly, when to delay, when to devote intensive attention to the pursuit of a goal, when to repeat, when to act alone, and when to coordinate – are more likely to be powerful (Chadwick, 2017, 101).

The political information cycle might create opportunities for broader participation, but it could even worsen the problem of temporal short-sightedness.

### **1.2.2. Historical Experience, Political Memory and the Democratic Archive**

The vast majority of the literature related to the diachronic dimension of democracies focuses on cycles that influence the future-oriented time horizons of political actors and citizens. However, democratic time is linked not only to the future but also to the past. Whereas democratic cycles

structure incentives for political actors through their future expectations, past experiences influence perspectives and decisions in the present, too. Two strands of research provide anchors: historical institutionalism and the theory of cultural memory.

Historical institutionalism contributes to our understanding of the role of time in democratic politics through the assumption that interests and ideas of political actors, as well as conflicts and possible solutions, are not only determined by future orientations based on generic preferences but contingent on past experiences, historical institutional contexts and path dependencies (Thelen, 1999; Pierson, 2004; Immergut and Anderson, 2008). It helps, among others, to examine the challenges, successes and failures of democratic leadership against the backdrop of long-term temporal development (Skowronek, 2008; Byrne et al., 2016; Azzi, 2017), to grasp the dynamics of stability and change in policies (Béland, 2009; Lockwood et al., 2016; Leiren and Reimer, 2018; Hogan, 2019) and politics (Immergut, 2006; Bulmer, 2009; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010) and to lead our attention to how political power is deeply inscribed in the institutional layers of democratic societies (Pierson, 2015) enabling powerful actors to hinder reforms or transitions from the political status quo (Capoccia, 2016).

The second anchor for the treatment of the question of how the past impacts the present of democracies are theories of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1980; Olick, 1999, 2007; Assmann, 2011). Although its exact meaning is contested among scholars, a common denominator of the concept is that it refers to memories that are to some degree independent from individuals and that can influence perspectives of social groups or whole societies. Collective memory – and all other forms of memory – is characterized by a dynamic interplay between remembering and forgetting (Assmann, 2009, 220). How and what we remember about our political pasts



influences the possibilities we see in our democratic present and futures, and the control over memories is an important source of political power (Bell, 2008; Brendese, 2014; Verovšek, 2020). Collective memory-related research very often focuses on social remembrance of violent conflicts or transformations from autocratic rule (Misztal, 2005; Etkind, 2009; Assmann and Shortt, 2012) – resulting in politics of memory in the narrow sense. But we can extend the idea to other kinds of political conflicts and policy fields. For example, Pollitt (2008) traces the ways in which time plays important roles for public administration and argues that policy-makers can learn a lot by looking at the longer history and temporal contexts of political tasks and by taking into account past experiences. A precondition for this is, of course, that collective experiences are still available and accessible to present decision-makers.

Generalizing this aspect, we can use the concept of the “democratic archive” (Schäfer, 2019) in order to capture the past-oriented temporal dimension of democracies that is based on collective experiences and memories. The idea of the archive refers to the infrastructural character of a collective memory that provides possibilities of usage for present purposes. In this context, “(t)he archive is a collective store of knowledge that fulfills several different functions. As with every form of storage, it involves three main aspects: selection, conservation, and accessibility” (Assmann, 2011, 329). Thus, while archival storing is conceived as a passive mode of memory, stored content can be reselected and reactivated by individual political actors and groups. This “archive” should be understood in a broad sense, including both material infrastructures (e.g., parliamentary archives) and immaterial phenomena (e.g., collective memory or political culture). It is democratic to the extent that no political actor can fully control or even dominate it. Moreover, its structure and content are to some extent pluralistic since what is stored is the result of democratic processes and power struggles between various actors, groups, and organizations.

The democratic archive is not only a result of political deliberation and contestation but can become a field of power struggles about the interpretation of past experiences at any time.

## **2. Temporal Challenges for Democracies**

A great share of the relevant literature on temporal aspects of democracies focuses on problems for democratic legitimacy and stability. First, we address studies that argue that social acceleration poses severe challenges for democratic performance, and we discuss theoretical answers to that. Second, we engage with literature that relates crises of democracies to their temporal dimension.

### **2.1. Social Acceleration and Political Desynchronization**

One of the major scholarly discourses that problematize the temporal constitution of democracies is based on the assumption that different parts of modern societies accelerate the speed of their routines and developments to a degree that results in problems for societal integration.

#### **2.1.1. The Temporal Vulnerability of Democratic Procedures**

Do the time requirements of democratic practices and processes described earlier regularly meet sufficient time resources? This question is rigorously denied by theorists and analysts of social acceleration. According to the “desynchronization thesis” (Hassan, 2008; Rosa, 2003; Rosa and Scheuerman, 2009), the timing of the democratic decision-making process can no longer keep pace with the growing speed of socio-economic development and the frequency and complexity of the regulatory needs generated by the latter.

According to Rosa (2003, 7), “social acceleration is defined by an increase in the decay-rates of the reliability of experiences and expectations and by the contraction of the time-spans defined as ‘present.’” It substantiates itself in the acceleration of and through technological developments, of social change, and of the pace of life – three processes that reinforce each other and that are externally driven by the logics of capitalist growth, cultural innovation, and social differentiation. Against this backdrop, modern politics becomes increasingly “situationalist”: it reacts to short-term pressures instead of orienting itself by long-term goals of societal progression (Rosa 2003, 21). The underlying assumption is that democratic processes are characterized by a fixed proper time, which cannot be undercut without abandoning democratic quality. But at the same time, the increasingly accelerating developments of the economy, culture, and technology increase the time pressure of political regulation and reduces the time resources available for effective political decisions (Rosa, 2003, 23): “In fact, the more pluralistic and post-conventionalist society gets, and the more complex its networks, chains of transaction, and the contexts of action and decision become, the *slower* democracy proceeds. Thus, while the speed of cultural and economic life and technological change increase, the pace of democracy slows down—and hence, we observe a frightening extent of de-synchronization between politics and the social systems it tries to control or steer” (Rosa, 2016, 37). Democratic systems, therefore, find themselves caught in a dilemma: either they maintain the quality of their decision-making processes and systematically arrive too late with their decisions, or they adapt their decision-making processes to the time constraints of other subsystems at the expense of process quality.

The desynchronization thesis has implications for the division of powers discussed earlier. It unbalances the relationship between the legislative and executive branches in favor of the latter, which is apt to quick and short-term action (Scheurman, 2004, 26). Extensive and in-depth

deliberation that characterizes parliamentary procedures is outplayed by quick executive reactions to short-term demands. As a consequence, legislative assemblies cannot fulfill their specific legitimizing democratic functions any longer and at the same time react quickly.

Scholars of social acceleration often refer to paradigmatic cases like the management of the financial crisis by democratic systems after 2008 in order to illustrate the logic and consequences of the desynchronization problem (Laux, 2011). In this context, Bohmann and colleagues (2018) analyze how the German strategy of building hybrid organizations, such as the German Federal Financial Supervisory Authority, that bridge the logics of political and financial economic management resulted in a synchronization of political decision-making and economic dynamics, albeit at the cost of widening the gap between practices of democratic deliberation and inclusion and executive decision-making. The authors claim that such strategies create a climate in which populist actors who promise to resynchronize elite decision-making with the formation of a popular will can flourish. The relationship between social acceleration, desynchronization, and populism is supported by other researchers as well. Kuo (2019) argues that current populism is an expression of the quest for “instantaneous democracy” that is nurtured by technologically accelerated forms of communication, for example, via social media, and that is undermining the project of constitutional democracy, which is based on complex, multilayered, and time-demanding procedures for deliberation, representation, and decision-making. In a similar vein, Bødker and Anderson (2019) contend that social media fosters a populist communication style that represents a “politics of impatience” against the delaying standard procedures of representative democracy. Moreover, Kaun (2017) finds in a study of recent cases that the increasing political use of social media by protest movements creates a culture of immediacy that leads to a desynchronization between fast mediated communication and slower political practices

of organizing and decision-making. Thus, the problem of acceleration posed for democracies and the limits for speeding up democratic decision-making have been acknowledged by various scholars, but this has also raised the question of potentials of democratic adaptation (Chesneaux, 2000; Glezos, 2011).

### **2.1.2. The Temporal Adaptability of Democracies**

How universally valid is the desynchronization problem? Can democracies adapt to the challenges posed by social acceleration and, if so, in what way? The desynchronization thesis has not remained completely uncontested. A common feature of this strand of literature is that it does not deny problems arising from social acceleration but demands empirical differentiation and an increased focus on the adaptability of democratic systems. Scholars have questioned how universally valid the desynchronization thesis is across diverse democratic systems and policy areas and pointed to the capacities of democratic systems to adapt to temporal challenges in productive ways (McIvor, 2011; Merkel and Schäfer, 2015; Saward, 2015).

Merkel and Schäfer (2015) bring to mind that there are decisive differences between important political challenges in terms of their pressing urgency as well as between democratic systems: climate change or pension reforms are important long-term issues that have haunted policymakers for decades, whereas short-term crises might be better examples for the pathologies of system acceleration; consensus democracies are generally slower decision-makers than majoritarian ones, and yet they often perform better in terms of efficacy and output legitimacy – and democracies, in general, do not necessarily underperform compared to autocratic systems, either. According to Saward (2015), the desynchronization thesis is too reliant on general macro-structural assumptions and does not acknowledge the performative capacity of states and political

actors that can constructively change time perceptions. The resilience of democratic orders is furthermore dependent on diverse conceptions of democracy. In Saward's view, a "slow democracy" can be designed on the basis of diverse mechanisms and devices such as decentralization and time-sensitive rules for delay in legislation. Other scholars add further insights for a more differentiated view. Riedl (2019) investigates the case of the German Federal Parliament and shows that speeding up of law-making not always necessarily diminishes parliamentary control and inclusion, but that there are time rules and practices in place that help to monitor acceleration. Fawcett (2018) explores rapid forms of participation and governance that might have less problematic consequences and pleads for a politics of time that engages constructively with temporal challenges and solutions in contemporary democracies.

There is another blind spot in the desynchronization thesis. The diagnosis of acceleration theory with its focus on the linear progressive and future-oriented dimension of time ignores the past-oriented and historical dimension of democratic politics. Accordingly, a significant variance can be observed: political conflicts differ, among other things, in whether and to what extent political experiences have already been made with them. The democratic archive potentially provides resources for temporal resilience by providing opportunities for mobilizing knowledge, arguments and identities acquired through earlier political conflicts (Schäfer, 2019). In other words, under favorable conditions, democracies can use temporal shortcuts by accessing stored political solutions that have been developed earlier via processes of deliberation, contestation, or negotiation, and that can be reused or adapted for pressing new challenges.

## **2.2. Crises, Transitions, and Breakdowns**

In this section, we cover two groups of studies that discuss forms and implications of democracy in the state of crisis. The first addresses situations when established democracies get into a status of emergency through external threats. The second deals with questions of system transformation and quality of democracy.

### **2.2.1. Democratic Stability and Emergency Politics**

In contrast to acceleration theory's diagnosis, the following discourse on temporal challenges focuses not so much on acceleration as a systemic feature and trend of modern societies but on systemic effects of exceptional situations such as crises and states of emergency. Recent situations, in which the call for exceptional measures arose, range from natural disasters to terrorist threats and economic collapse. The constitutional option of such states of emergency has a long history that reaches back at least to the ancient Roman republic, but the instrument is a feature of modern democratic systems as well, albeit not always on the constitutional level (Ferejohn and Pasquino, 2004). A status of emergency logically implies a regular legal status that has to be completely or partially suspended in order to defend it against current threats and to conserve it in the long run. The declaration of a state of emergency interrupts the normal time routines of democratic systems. It is driven by perceived time pressure and sets a new rhythm for political decision-making.

The "exceptionalism" of emergency, however, might be a mere rhetorical feature. A common theme of this scholarly discourse is the observation of an increasing normalization of exceptionalism. It identifies a new prevalence of a mode of governance that rests on emergency measures that, in the long run, are apt to restructure the polity and create a new institutional status

quo. This perspective on crisis or emergency politics shares with acceleration theory a diagnosis of increasing speed in which political measures are taken in situations that are defined as crises. It also stresses the accompanying strengthening of executive discretion while at the same time political decisions are dictated by circumstances and justified in reference to necessity (Scheuerman, 2004; Goetz, 2014; White, 2015; Kreuder-Sonnen, 2019; White, 2020).

In democratic theory, the reflection of political emergencies has traditionally been linked to the question of power: not the normal routines, but exceptional circumstances reveal where power really rests in a democratic system. Schmitt famously claimed that a sovereign is who decides about the state of exception (Schmitt, [1922] 2004, 13). White (2015), however, convincingly argues that such a simple rule of identifying sovereign power will not suffice for the analysis of the more subtle contemporary emergency politics. According to White, emergency politics are not fully controlled by a single powerful actor, although certain actors such as powerful national governments might have special weight in it. In contrast, a range of political and societal actors, including the broader public, co-produce it by acknowledging the urgent need to suspend normal procedures and agreeing to the legitimacy of exceptional measures. Without this complicity, one cannot fully understand the collaborative character and dynamics of this mode of governance.

Other scholars provide support for this interpretation. Kreuder-Sonnen (2019) asks under what conditions emergency politics of international organizations, such as the European Union, are successfully enforced and normalized, and when they are contested and rolled back. He shows that the authority of emergency politics rests on successful justification based on proportionality considerations and the rhetorical power of the respective argumentation. Coalitions of actors that either support or oppose exceptionalism have to compete for the consent of the relevant larger



audiences. Only actors that prevail in this legitimation struggle prove to be able to normalize a new status quo.

Unpredictable events and developments that are conceived or framed as phenomena of crisis might even restructure the temporal routines of democratic systems (Goetz, 2014, 392). They set a new rhythm for decision making that is dictated as much by external shocks as it is by internal political logics of democratic systems. Governments are typically not only driven by, but also drivers of, crisis politics. They use their ability for fast executive action to respond quickly to what is conceived to be an immediate threat. Knowing that their public support hinges on their perceived performance in such situations, they have a strong incentive to act immediately and implement instantaneous measures even if they only have a symbolic effect. In that way, executive discretion increases the speed of political decision-making, thereby producing the need for follow-up decisions and legal adjustments. This process sets parliamentary bodies and the judiciary under time pressure. Thus, critical events again interrupt the finely balanced temporal division of power (Scheuerman, 2004; Goetz, 2014). Governing by the state of exception in deep crises not only changes the speed of decisions but also their mode. Parliaments are often marginalized and governments govern by decrees. During the COVID-19 crisis, several parliaments of the European democracies gave “carte blanche” to the governmental administration to govern by specific decrees (Merkel, 2020).

What does this mean for the stability and quality of democratic systems? Critics suggest that emergency politics are increasingly not restricted to rare situations but become a recurring mode of governance (White, 2020). The extension and “perpetuation of the quasi-authoritarian emergency regime” build up to a “ratchet effect” that cannot be easily rolled back again

(Kreuder-Sonnen, 2019, 201). Either the people get used to output-oriented crisis policies or even demand them, as it was partly to be observed during the COVID-19 crisis, potentially resulting in a longer-term habituation (Merkel, 2020). The “hurried creation of new institutions” or “accelerated policy reforms” (White, 2015, 302) can have a lasting impact on institutional structure without being sufficiently accompanied by a process of public debate and contestation. The lack of critical democratic debate, in this view, obscures value choices lying behind policy decisions that are framed as necessary and urgent (White, 2015, 307). In sum, emergency politics could diminish both the democratic participatory quality of democratic systems and the balance of power.

However, emergency or crisis politics are justified to protect society from immediate dangers, be they economic, political, or biological in nature. When are emergency measures stabilizing democratic systems, and when are they undermining their democratic quality? If we look for criteria, much evidence suggests that the analysis has to focus on the temporal features of emergency measures. According to White (2015), we should ask if measures are conservative and restorative in nature, if they are temporary, and if actors are subject to democratic control after the crisis has been overcome. In times of deep crises, “time” is often a primary argument by those who govern more by executive decrees than by parliamentary legislation. However, if this becomes a recurring pattern, the loss of time can open a slippery slope to de-democratization.

### **2.2.2. The Temporal Dimension of Regime Transformations**

Regime transformation is a highly complex process with varying rates of speed between and within its different phases (Merkel, 2010; Merkel et al., 2019: 1; see also the chapter by Wilson in the volume). The transformation process from authoritarian to democratic regimes can be

analytically separated into three phases: the decline of the Ancien Regime, the transition from old to new political order, and the consolidation of the recently established democratic regime. Moreover, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are observing a slow de-democratization of some of the previously consolidated regimes, which can be called a fourth phase with an open regime outcome.

The decline of the Ancien Regimes can vary in speed. A long-term erosion of the authoritarian power structure is slow and can span years, as was the case with the Brazilian regime during the 1970s and 1980s or communist Poland throughout the 1980s. Other authoritarian regimes collapse at a much faster pace. This is true for those regimes that lost wars, such as the fascist regimes of Germany, Italy, and Japan in 1945 or the military regime of Argentina after defeat in the Falklands War (1982). Some communist regimes imploded rapidly with the crumbling of the Soviet bloc, such as those of Czechoslovakia (1989), Romania (1989), or the German Democratic Republic (1989).

When an old authoritarian regime loses its grip on power and a new democratic regime has not yet institutionalized its new order by the first “founding elections” or a new constitution, that period can be called a “transition” to “something else” (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Klingemann, 2019). It can be quick if the Ancien Regime has nearly disappeared and the new democratic actors rapidly call for founding elections. If the old authoritarian elites still hold a considerable share of power within the security apparatus, judiciary, state administration or in business, then the birth of the democratic regime does not follow a rapid “rupture”, but the oppositional democratic forces have to negotiate with the remaining old regime. Those “pacted transitions” typically at “round tables” follow a slower pace, as was the case in Poland and

Hungary (1988–1990). Nevertheless, the average transitions to democracy take less time than the decline and end of the authoritarian regimes.

The phase of democratic consolidation takes the longest time. It may even never lead to a fully consolidated democracy but stabilize in hybrid regimes (Zakaria, 1997; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Schmotz, 2019) or defective democracies (Merkel, 2004) as it happened in numerous postauthoritarian regimes after the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991). Before a new democratic regime fully consolidates, it necessarily undergoes consolidation on four different levels: first, the constitutional level; then, the level of intermediary actors such as the party system and interest groups. Integration – or at least the neutralization of veto players against the new democracy (typically the armed forces, secret services, or police) – follows, and, finally, the level of citizens and civil society, which must develop to form a solid civic culture. This can take decades, as it happened in Japan, Italy, and Germany (Almond and Verba, 1980), or never come to an end, as seems to be the case in many unconsolidated democracies in Latin America, Asia, or Africa. There is no strict correlation between speed and success of democratic consolidation (Morlino, 1998). Nevertheless, timing and sequencing do play a role in democratic consolidation. If the founding elections were held before the basic institutions and procedures of the rule of law were established, there is a good chance that “electoral democracies” instead of “liberal democracies” emerge and stay (Merkel, 2004).

Many of the new democracies of the “third wave of democratization” were drawn into a process of deconsolidation or deterioration (Ágh, 2019; Morlino, 2020). But even the well-established and longer established democracies of the West suffer a process of de-democratization. The United States, UK, France, and almost all democracies of the European Union lost in quality of

democracy during the last decade (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; critical: Skaaning, 2020). While the deconsolidation of the new democracies in Hungary and Poland has occurred at a rather rapid pace, we observe the erosion of democracy at a much lower speed. At present, no one can predict whether this process will continue or whether a new democratic turn will happen in the future.

To sum up, we argue that processes of system transformation, regardless in which direction (from autocracy to democracy or the other way around), run at quite different speeds. The degree of speed depends on the phases of transformation, the mode of decline of the Ancien regime, the strength of the change actors, or the international context. The causal link between the different speeds and regime outcomes is not clear. But it matters for the success of democratic consolidation whether the constitutional powers, namely legislative, executive, and judiciary, learn to mutually grant to each other the rather different time and specific speed (or slowness) they need to work properly.

### **3. Conclusion: Pathways for Future Research**

Democracy is not only government pro tempore; it also constitutes its democratic character through diverse temporal structures and uses time resources in specific ways. The temporal constitution of democracies implies several dimensions and aspects. In a synchronic dimension, we have explored the time requirements of democratic practices and the timed relationships between actors and institutions in democratic systems. In a diachronic dimension, we have assessed how electoral and political information cycles determine the future-oriented time horizons of political actors and how historical structures and past experiences influence the democratic presence. The result is a complex picture of more or less fine-tuned temporal

relationships within democratic systems and variants between such systems. These considerations lead to the following conclusions for future research.

First, a worthwhile endeavor would be to develop comparative studies of temporal constitutions resulting in different temporal types of democracies. These studies could take the different temporal dimensions as outlined in this chapter as a starting point. Based on this, the performances of the diverse temporal types in terms of their stability and legitimacy could be assessed and linked back to the respective temporal constitutions. Second, the temporal challenges posed for current democratic systems in terms of acceleration, desynchronization, emergency politics, and systemic crises need to be further assessed and differentiated empirically. Based on this, the evaluation of the capacities of democratic systems to adapt their temporal structure and practices, and the assessment of how this impacts their democratic quality is an important further step. Third, there is a need for a democratic politics of time that should be prepared and accompanied both by analytical and normative theory building. Taking into account what we know about the temporal routines and challenges of democracies, this might even result in suggestions for institutional reforms. The legitimacy and stability of democracies hinge on how successful they can maintain and, if necessary, reform and innovate their temporal structures and practices. However, since we have learned how complex and fine-grained democratic time is constituted, all deliberate changes should be handled with care.

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