

## **Call for Submissions**

### **ECPR Joint Sessions 2021, Workshop “New Frontiers in Democracy Research: Tackling a Conceptual and Methodological Impasse”**

#### **Workshop Directors**

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#### **Abstract**

The study of democratic values and attitudes is based on a rich literature on democratic principles and process, and in recent years has made important advances in expanding comparative perspectives. In particular, recent challenges to democracy from phenomena like populism and various crises have sparked renewed interest in citizens’ relationship to their democratic regimes (Kriesi 2018; Norris/Inglehart 2019; van Ham et al. 2017). At the same time, rising dissatisfaction with democratic actors and doubts about the stability of democratic support have unveiled clear limitations of the established approaches to studying individuals’ attitudes towards democracy as an idea and as a realized institutional construct. Much of the existing research builds on a set of untested assumptions and is largely confined to conventional theoretical and methodological approaches.

Crucially, scholarship is centered on political scientists’ conceptualizations of democracy, but it remains unclear to what extent citizens conform to such expectations or share the same understanding of democracy. In short, do people follow the conceptual templates of political science when hearing about democracy and democratic institutions? Likewise, while the literature proposes an abundance of functions and democratic behaviors for political parties, parliamentarians, parliaments, and governments, research rarely challenges these assumptions and explored how these are understood by citizens (Bengtsson/Wass 2011; Dassonneville et al. 2020; Werner 2019).

Recent work on the interaction between radicalism and democratic attitudes has explored systematic patterns of how individuals with non-mainstream ideologies relate to democratic principles. In innovative ways, these studies differentiate between types of democracy (e.g. representative, direct, deliberative; Ferrin/Kriesi 2016; Heinisch/ Wegscheider 2020; Zaslove et al. 2020). Yet, they are empirically and conceptually limited in their scope. Importantly, available approaches are still confined by established theories of democratic practices and do not allow for previously un-theorized democratic alternatives to emerge.

Another limitation of democracy research is the lack of attention paid to the resilience of democratic support when faced with a crisis or when significant political preferences are in conflict with such values. Wanting to stop climate change or immigration may impel otherwise democratically oriented individuals to call for anti-democratic solutions. Relatedly, it is unclear which democratic attitudes lead to citizens allowing their own country to revert from an established democracy to a diminished subtype. Since citizens connect democracy with performance and outputs (Shin/Kim 2018; Diamond/Morlino 2005), tradeoffs need to be better understood and more systematically theorized and explained.

Aside from the failure of theorizing democratic alternatives, another limitation has been methodological. This, in particular, is linked to measuring support for democracy largely in an abstract manner (Carlin/Singer 2011; Inglehart 2003). In recognizing these shortcomings,

survey research has responded by employing open-ended questions (e.g. Baviskar/Malone 2004; Braizat 2010; Lu 2013) to test the specific characteristics citizens associate with democracy and uncover aspects not considered in the theory of democracy and in closed questions. However, open questions fail to capture the multidimensional character of the democracy concept, making it difficult to grasp the citizens' ability to cognitively distinguish between democratic and autocratic characteristics (Cho 2014; 2015).

### **Call for paper proposals**

The current state of scholarship seems to have reached an impasse, delivering fewer answers despite a substantial increase in behavioral phenomena in democracies that defy conventional research approaches. This calls for a re-evaluation of theories explaining citizens' political behavior and expectations from the political system, and for probing deeper into hitherto unexplored explanatory mechanisms as well as the meaning of readily applied, yet seldom questioned concepts.

This workshop aims to address these shortcomings and invites research proposals on democratic values and attitudes that are based on empirical scholarship but conceptually and/or methodologically innovative. We seek papers employing innovative theoretical, conceptual or methodological approaches to understanding (1) the (possible lack of) resilience of democratic support in the face of crises and perceived trade-offs with fundamental policy solutions, (2) individuals' understanding of and expectations towards democracy, its institutions and actors as well as (3) the relationship between radical and democratic attitudes.

The workshop is aimed especially at scholars who have recognized the current limitations and turned to theoretical input from outside the discipline such as psychology and communication or novel methodological approaches in this area of research, such as survey experiments, focus groups, democracy labs etc. Since the focus of this workshop is to push the boundaries of conventional political science research to better understand current developments in democracies, submissions are welcome that are based on empirical studies from all regions of the world, focusing on all levels of democracies (local to transnational), and employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Our interest is not only to showcase innovative work but select it with a view to connecting and integrating it in systematic ways so as to develop a fruitful new research agenda and explore the potential for a joint publication project.

Please propose your paper **through the ECPR Joint Session webpage** <https://ecpr.eu/JointSessions> by **8 February 2021**, using the Workshop code **VIRTUAL016**.

Please, **do not** email proposals directly to the workshop directors, as such submissions cannot be considered according to ECPR rules.