DemocracyNet

INSTITUT FÜR POLITISCHE WISSENSCHAFT

UNIVERSITÄT HEIDELBERG ZUKUNFT SEIT 1386

DO PARTIES STILL MATTER?—RETHINKING "DEMOCRACY AS WE KNOW IT"

Annual Workshop–DemocracyNet *(https://democracynet.eu/)*
Date: 20th-21st February 2026
Location: Karl Jaspers Centre, Heidelberg University (https://www.hcts.uni-heidelberg.de/en/centre)

Even so-called "established" contemporary Western democracies are, at least according to the mainstream of scholarly discourses, "in crisis": citizens not merely display disenchantment and disaffection towards existing political elites and institutions (see e.g. Norris's [1999] "critical citizens") but question the legitimacy of democracy as such (e.g. Foa & Mounk 2017; 2022). Political parties arguably play a particularly crucial role in liberal-representative democracies. Their task is traditionally to create agendas, mobilise citizens, aggregate and channel their preferences to then feed them into decision-making processes in empowered institutions (e.g. parliaments), thereby providing "key linkage mechanisms in the day-to-day operation of representative democracies" (Dalton et al. 2011). For a long time, empirical researchers argued that "parties make a difference", i.e. that governments' party composition has a substantive impact on public policy (Hibbs 1992; Schmidt 1996; 1996).
Nevertheless, a branch of researchers argues that traditional parties are also "in crisis" (Poguntke 1996; Poguntke & Hofmeister 2024; Webb 2005). They may not only have lost their "roots" in society, thereby contributing to populists' rising appeal for citizens but also—as in the US—contribute to increasing polarisation in the political landscape. Furthermore, with a view to post-/neo-colonial countries, scholars have demonstrated repeatedly that political parties here frequently do not serve peaceful democratic compromise, but incentivise conflict, e.g. between different ethnic groups (e.g. Odour 2022a; 2022b). In many postcolonial contexts, they are furthermore also still utilised by societal elites—such that ethnic groups that were already privileged under colonial rule can remain in power (see Fanon's "new bourgeoisie" [1989]).
Hence, one might argue that parties should no longer be thought of as a core feature of a well-functioning democratic system after all. Rather, they might (by now) perpetuate existing political and social inequalities, promote populism and/or societal cleavages. This workshop aims at a critical assessment of the role that political parties can and/or should play, given the crisis phenomena and the political, economic, and cultural conditions that contemporary democracies in diverse contexts across the globe are exposed to.

The keynote address will be delivered by Prof. Dr. Fabio Wolkenstein, Universität Wien

We invite theoretical and empirical contributions addressing topics related—but not limited—to the following questions (please send your abstracts [300 words] **until 31st December 2025** to dannica.fleuss@uni-heidelberg.de):

- *What is the relationship between the contemporary "crisis of democracy" and developments of party systems? Do parties still matter for a healthy democracy?*
- *Are "established" parties in Western democracies "in crisis"—and if so, why?*

- *What is the role of political parties in non-Western/postcolonial societies? To what extent do parties and their roles differ in diverse context?*
- *What are potential alternatives to party-based "(liberal) democracy as we know it"?*
- *Can democratic elections realistically be organised without political parties? If so: how?*
- *Can normative proposals for democratic alternatives learn from indigenous practices that were undermined by colonial powers?*

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