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Challenges to democracy in the 21st century

There are several key challenges to democracy in the 21st century. Technological change provides new opportunities for organizing elections and political opinion formation. Demographic change involves new risks for democracy, as new generations are difficult to recruit for the democratic processes as we know them.

The increasing social, economic and cultural heterogeneity undermines the very preconditions for democracy in European and North American societies. The expansion of the constitutional elements of democratic regimes threatens to undermine their democratic components. While all these trends undeniably are important for the future of democracy, I shall focus on two trends which I consider of crucial importance: the increasing role of the media for politics, and the increasing globalization or denationalization of politics.

The media are important, because the democratic process is not simply a process of aggregating given preferences, but includes processes of opinion formation and deliberation in public debates. Under contemporary conditions, these debates essentially take place in the media. This has important consequences for the democratic process, because the media increasingly follow their own logic, and the politicians are, to a considerable extent, forced to adapt to the rules of the media logic.

According to the pessimistic view of the so called 'mediatization' of politics, the impact of the media logic leads to a spectacularization, personalization and banalization of the presentation of politics, and to a decoupling of input processes and output processes in contemporary democracies.



According to a more optimistic view, the increasing role of the media increases the transparency of politics, provides new opportunities for public debates, and has an overall enlightening effect on the citizen public.

The increasing globalization/Europeanization of politics is important, because the democratic process has so far been embedded in the nation-states, and the nations (or part of them) have constituted the democratic 'demos'. The creation of 'multi-level governance structures' threatens to lead to incongruencies between decision-makers and decision-takers, to a lack of accountability of the former and to a disillusionment of the latter. Presidentialization, deparliamentarization, 'partyless democracy' are keywords which refer to the current impact of the globalization of politics.

The reaction to these developments include a renaissance of nationalism, populist tendencies, and a politicization of European integration which is replacing the traditional 'permissive consensus' on the part of the citizens. The democratization of the supranational level of the European polity is only partial and the political structuring of politics at the European level is weak. The result of these developments is a 'democratic deficit' that is difficult to overcome.