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A new game in town — Democratic resilience and the added value of the concept in explaining democratic survival and decline

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A new game in town:

Democratic resilience and the added value of the concept in explaining democratic survival and decline

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Abstract:

Resilience has become a hot topic in research due to impactful events and processes such as the global climate crisis or the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, research linking resilience with democratic processes is still spread thin. This paper aims at contributing to this field of research by examining the concepts of resilience throughout various disciplines and applying it to the context of democracies, building on recent advances in this field. In our view democratic resilience is best understood as a democratic system's capacity to process upcoming stressors, using various sources of resilience on different levels of the system. In doing so, these capacities can moderate the extent to which a certain stressor poses a threat to the system. We argue that in comparison with traditional approaches such as democratic consolidation the concept of democratic resilience holds significant added value. This is due to the dynamic character of the concept which enables a more fine-grained understanding of democratic survival and decline.

1 Resilience in the 21st Century

Resilience - once maybe an uncharted topic in many sciences - appears to make its debut in an increasing number of research areas. Some authors would even go so far as to call resilience one of the latest buzzwords (Sisk 2017: 5). The concept of resilience has predominantly featured in environmental science and psychology. Especially the rising awareness about the global climate crisis as well as the increasing focus on mental health have certainly contributed to a growing research interest in these fields. In light of the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic the resilience of societies and health has certainly gained more momentum.

More recently, resilience has also found its way into political science, especially with a focus on democratic resilience (Boese et al. 2021; Merkel & Lührmann 2021). This can be deemed particularly relevant considering the democratic backsliding in democracies around the globe, for example the recent cases of Hungary or Turkey, as well as the increasing political clout of populist parties, especially since the well-established concept of democratic consolidation has a hard time accounting for these events.

This raises the question what democratic resilience can contribute to the assessment of the erosion of some seemingly consolidated democracies and if resilience might be the better approach than consolidation for the evaluation of democratic backsliding as well as democratic persistence.

The aim of this paper is an assessment of democratic resilience in the light of the most recent literature as well as a contrasting juxtaposition with consolidation, highlighting the added value of the concept of resilience. Specifically, the analysis shows that democratic resilience leaves room for a more nuanced assessment of the state of democracies compared to traditional concepts such as democratic consolidation. We argue that the advantages of applying a well-defined concept of (democratic) resilience are manifold as it enables a more dynamic approach, which is applicable to a wide variety of cases.

In the following, the concept of resilience, its features and common denominators in different disciplines will be assessed. Afterwards, the concept will be applied to democratic resilience, highlighting the mechanisms, stressors as well as potential outcomes before emphasizing the added value of the concept compared to more traditional concepts such as democratic consolidation.

2 The concept of resilience: A multidisciplinary overview

Finding a common ground in terms of the characteristics and definition of a shared scientific concept has often proven to be a challenge at best and futile at worst. This is also true for resilience, which "has emerged as a notion seeking to capture the differential and uneven ability of places to react, respond and cope with uncertain, volatile and rapid change" (Pike et al. 2010: 59).

The etymological origin of the word resilience (resilire (lat.) = rebound) (Harendt & Heinemann 2018: 12) is reflected in many definitions which can be found throughout the literature. One discipline where resilience has taken center stage is ecology, with scholars making use of the concept since the late 60s and early 70s (e.g. Holling 1973). In their seminal paper, Walker et al. (2002: 7) define resilience as "the potential of a system to remain in a particular configuration and to maintain its feedbacks and functions, and involves the ability of the system to reorganize following disturbance-driven change."

Apart from ecology, the concept can also be found in disciplines like psychology, engineering, organizational and risk management as well as political science. Especially in the latter the notion of resilience has gained momentum which is linked to events of democratic backsliding and the challenging of long-standing (political) institutions. While these events threaten the functioning of a society, they also pose the question if and how democratic resilience can be obtained as well as maintained. Some academic advances include the paper by Boese et al. (2021: 3), who try to examine democratic resilience, defining it as "the capacity to prevent substantial regression in the quality of democratic institutions and practices." Similarly, Merkel & Lührmann (2021: 872) define democratic resilience as "the ability of a political regime to prevent or react to challenges without losing its democratic character."

Shared understandings of resilience across different disciplines are the abilities to *adapt*, to *withstand*, to *absorb* and to *bounce back*. Depending on the field of research, some of these aspects receive more attention, for instance the ability to adapt is more prominent in ecology whereas the ability to withstand is more strongly emphasized in engineering (Langeland et al. 2016). A common notion throughout the different disciplines is the question of resilience *of what* and resilience *to whom* (Walker et al. 2002: 7). While the former heavily depends on the respective field of research (e.g., ecology or psychology), the latter is often linked to an event, stressor or external shock to which a system needs to react (Somers 2009: 12).

The concept of resilience can be broadly understood in three different ways (Southwick et al. 2014). Firstly, resilience can be a dispositional quality or capacity. If a system has certain capacities, it is better equipped to handle stressors. These qualities or capacities can develop over time (e.g. Egeland et al. 1993; Duchek 2020). Secondly, resilience can be a process and strategy to handle stressors. Thirdly, resilience can be a result and therefore mean the successful overcoming of stressors (Soucek et al. 2016: 132–133). While it is difficult to always clearly distinguish these three understandings as they can be intertwined, it does not impair the usefulness of this concept but rather contribute to its versatile application.

Resilience appears to have some common denominators in different disciplines, but it also requires a differentiation from concepts such as stability, flexibility, or adaptability. While some of these are certainly an essential component of resilience and should not be neglected, they cannot, on the other hand, be treated as synonyms for resilience. Commonly, stability can be seen as a rather static concept where the initial equilibrium should be reestablished in case of endogenous or exogenous change (Ludwig et al. 1997: 1). However, a system does not necessarily have to bounce back to the old equilibrium to prove its resilience. Due to "properties of resilient social systems" (Sisk 2017: 5), such as flexibility, adaptability, recovery and innovation[1], systems are able to undergo change or even leave the current trajectory for a new and potentially more efficient one, while still upholding the system's key characteristics and without falling below the system's breakdown threshold (Walker et al. 2004: 6–7; Pike et al. 2010: 62; Sisk 2017: 5).

In addition, a system can only prove to be resilient vis-à-vis a disturbance. Therefore, it is important to determine what kind of threat or stressor endangers a system because its response - and ultimately its resilience - depends on it. Threats can be categorized by their predictability as regular, irregular, and unexampled. Regular stressors occur often, therefore the system can develop a regular response. Irregular stressors happen very seldomly and their probability is very low, which is why a system cannot develop a regular response. Unexampled stressors (e.g., 9/11 attacks) are extremely unpredictable and unheard-of. A system can neither develop nor improvise an adequate response. Therefore, due to an inherent learning process it is easier for

[1] Note that there is no consistent naming convention for certain mechanisms throughout the literature. For instance, while Pike et al. (2010: 62) defines adaptation „as a movement towards a pre-conceived path in the short run" and adaptability as „the dynamic capacity to effect and unfold multiple evolutionary trajectories", Sisk (2017: 5) sees adaptation as „the ability to change in response to a stress to the system" and innovation as „the ability to change in a way that more efficiently or effectively addresses the challenge or crisis". Consequently, the concept of adaptation is used in a diverging manner while adaptability and innovation can be applied in a similar vein.

a system to build resilience against regular rather than irregular and especially unexampled threats (Westrum 2006: 55–58; Patterson & Deutsch 2015: 383).

Moreover, resilience can be distinguished into *general resilience* and *specific resilience*. The former means that any part of the system or the system as a whole is able to deal with all kinds of unanticipated or novel events. Neither the disturbance itself nor the part of the system that must deal with it are defined in advance. On the other hand, the latter describes the capability of particular aspects of a system to maintain their functions during and following particular threats, disturbances or events (Folke et al. 2010: 4; Baral 2013: 739; Langeland et al. 2016: 7).

Figure 1: Resilience and vulnerability as opposite ends of a spectrum. Own figure

(based on Wilson 2012b: 1221).

A system's resilience is made up of different components or origins of capital (e.g., a community's resilience is made up of economic, environmental, and social capital), which can develop and accumulate over time. Resilience is strongest when all components are equally well developed. It can be problematic if components are interdependent because the system's total resilience is weakened if one component is disrupted (Wilson 2012b: 1223). Therefore, resilience can be understood as a spectrum where resilience is found on one end and vulnerability on the other (Wilson 2012a: 20). If a system has high resilience, it also has low vulnerability and vice versa (Bahadur et al.: 2–5; Manyena 2006: 439–444). In general, even the most resilient systems still display vulnerable components, and the most vulnerable systems still have resilient components (Wilson 2012b: 1223).

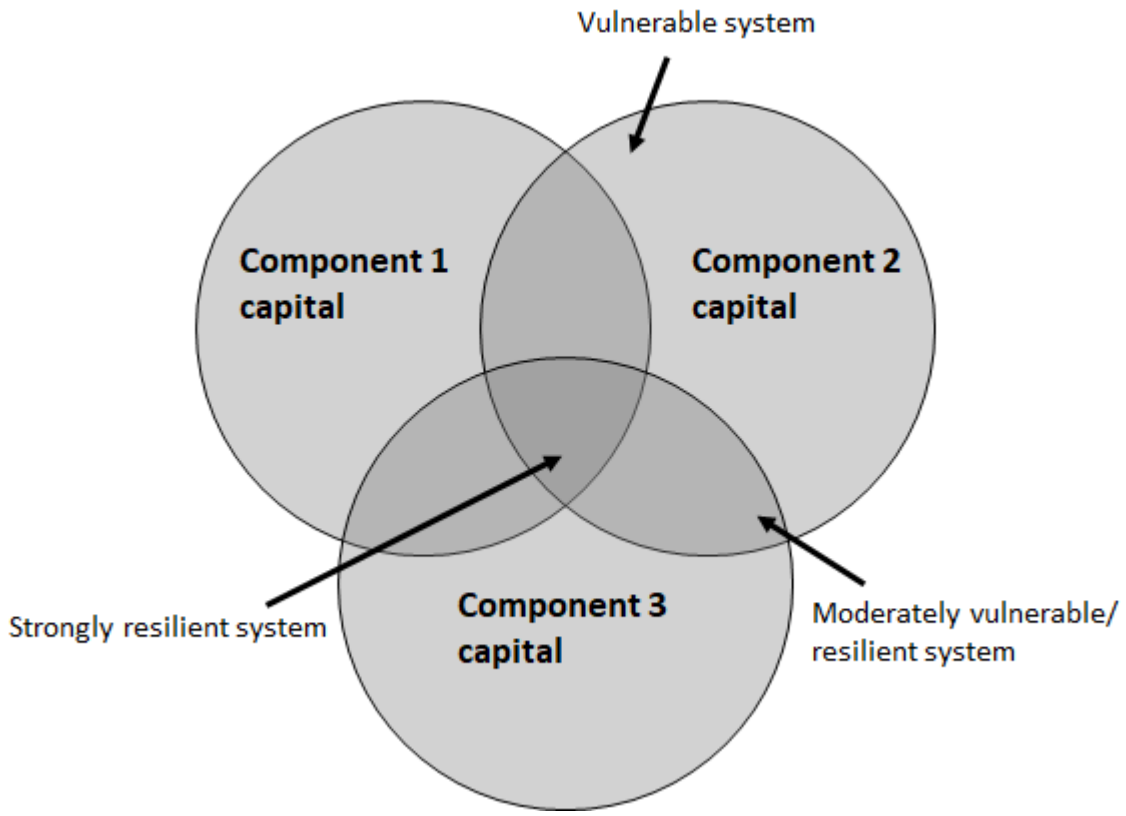

Figure 2: Resilience, vulnerability, and various sources of capital. Own figure (based on Wilson 2012b: 1223).

Furthermore, a system is not necessarily a homogenous entity but can incorporate various levels. It is therefore important to not only focus on the system as a whole but also on each individual level. Depending on the system or discipline, levels can be the individual, local community, regional, national, or global level. The capitals can develop on these different levels, leading to varying degrees of resilience on different levels of a system. What is good for one level's resilience might also not be beneficial to another level's resilience. Moreover, the levels can vary in the kind of stressors they are resilient against which means that one level could be rather resilient against a particular stressor whereas another level could be vulnerable against this stressor (Wilson 2012a: 34–36; Stollenwerk et al. 2021: 1223). Furthermore, a system's different levels interact with each other, and one level's resilience can be influenced by stressors on another level. For example, a global climate change can lead to a growing vulnerability for certain individuals (Walker et al. 2004: 3).

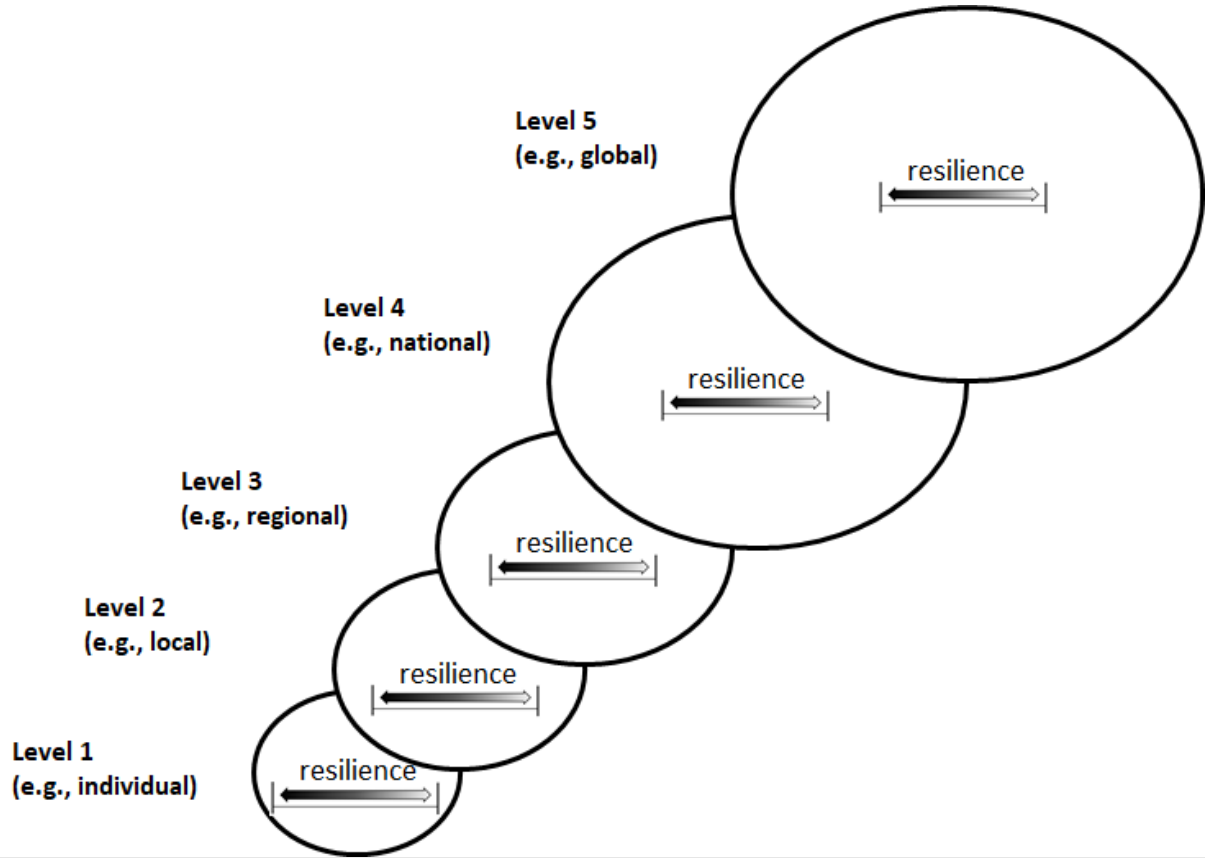

Figure 3: Resilience on different levels. Own figure (based on Wilson 2012b: 1219).

While there is no single definition of resilience across different disciplines, the shared notion is that resilience describes a system's ability to adapt, absorb, withstand, and bounce back. We argue, however, that any use of the concept in the social sciences should imply that the very core of what should prove to be resilient needs to stay intact, even though the perfect resilience of all parts of the system is not necessarily required as long as the key components are not substantially altered.

3 Democratic Resilience as a capacity

Building upon the outlined understandings of resilience as well as the conceptualization by Merkel & Lührmann (2021), we define democratic resilience as a democratic system's capacity to prevent, cope with or recover from stressors challenging democratic quality and persistence without losing its democratic character[2]. In our view, democratic resilience is best understood

[2] Speaking of democratic character, we refer to the defining principles of democracy. In doing so, the focus lies less on single institutions or a concrete institutional composition but rather on democratic meta-principles which represent the defining core and substance of a democratic system (similar to Merkel & Lührmann 2021: 872).

as a capacity. Although we do not exclude the possibility of democratic resilience being expressed in specific processes or outcomes, these are always inherently linked to and rooted in a system's capacity to respond to stressors. A democratic system may prove to be resilient, as an outcome, yet this outcome always rests upon the capacity of the system to successfully deal with stressors. It may also apply certain processes or strategies to deal with stressors, but, again, the ability to apply these is rooted in the given resilience capacities of the democratic system. This also reflects the predominant understanding in recent literature (see e.g., Boese et al. 2021; Merkel & Lührmann 2021). Following this definition, the resilience capacity operates as a moderator which determines the extent to which a given stressor poses a threat to a democratic system[3]. These capacities are not only passive but can also be (pro-)active in nature. They express themselves in a democratic system's ability to (1) anticipate risks to its persistence, (2) react and adapt (pro-)actively to present or anticipated risks, and (3) withstand stress to its quality and persistence to a certain degree (Pascu & Vintila 2020: 62–63; Merkel & Lührmann 2021; see e.g., Stollenwerk et al. 2021).When facing a certain threat, the relevant resilience capacities, which a democratic system can provide, will be activated. Depending on their extent and kind, and thus on the system's ability to react or withstand, these resilience capacities then process the upcoming stress by preventing or containing its impact. In doing so, the resilience capacities therefore moderate the extent to which a certain stressor poses a threat to a democratic system.

According to the established literature across different disciplines (see chapter 2) as well as in political science (e.g., Sisk 2017: 5; Merkel & Lührmann 2021: 872), there are different mechanisms or strategies of how systems and thus democratic systems can react to stressors in a successful and effective manner. Listed among them are flexibility ("ability to absorb stress or pressure"), recovery ("ability to overcome challenges or crises"), adaption ("ability to change in response to a stress to the system") and innovation ("ability to change in a way that more efficiently or effectively addresses the challenge or crisis") (Sisk 2017: 5). In contrast to stability, the concept of democratic resilience thus also includes modifications, adaptions, or innovations to the democratic system and its concrete institutions in order to guarantee or improve the resilience capacities and therefore the persistence of the democratic system itself. One example

While concrete institutions might change, the crucial point is that these meta-principles of a democracy do not alter and remain intact. Although the concrete selection of democratic core principles depends on the conception of democracy, the electoral component, as outlined by Dahl (1971), seems to be the basic core which most scholars can agree upon as minimal criteria for a democracy (Roller 2016: 359; Coppedge et al. 2022: 4).

[3] We include resilience against declines in democratic quality as well as against democratic breakdown in our understanding of democratic resilience, mirroring the differentiation between "onset-" and "breakdown"-resilience in a recent article by Boese et al. (2021).

for the strategy of *adaption* can be found in the ongoing debate on an electoral reform of the German parliament, as it aspires the improvement of an already established democratic institution challenged by the increasing fragmentation of the German party system. At the same time, the temporary adjustment of the German federalist distribution of competences during the COVID-19 pandemic nicely illustrates how longstanding institutions can temporarily be softened up. This displays a sufficient level of *flexibility* in the wake of a crisis in order to allow for a better processing of societal challenges. Moreover, the introduction of deliberative mini-publics on a local level is an exemplary case of an *innovation* in a democratic context, since it is a proactive way to reduce a democratic deficit.

3.1 Levels and Sources of Democratic Resilience

The overall resilience capacity, which allows for these strategies to be employed, results from various sources on different levels of the democratic system (see chapter 2). In contrast to other conceptualizations (see Burnell & Calvert 1999; Sisk 2017; Boese et al. 2021) Merkel & Lührmann (2021: 872–873) explicitly distinguish between four different constitutive levels of democratic resilience: macro-institutional (core institutions of democratic regime), intermediary (political parties), societal (civic culture and civil society) and political community[4]. Of course, these levels and sources are highly interrelated (Merkel & Lührmann 2021). If the resilience capacity on one level is weak, the overall resilience might be more vulnerable to threats as important "lines of defence" are missing. However, it also seems plausible that a lack of resilience on one level could be compensated by high resilience capacities on another level. For instance, when, caused by a certain problem pressure, an illiberal political party tries to hijack the political discourse and harm the political process, a high degree of resilience capacities at the societal level is able to compensate this through punishing the actions of this party (see Guasti 2020: 57; Laebens & Lührmann 2021: 5).

Within these levels one can differentiate various sources of democratic resilience. At the level of core institutions, for instance, much seems to depend on the relationships between the legislature, executive and judiciary, even more so as their implied accountability mechanisms can serve as a first bulwark against "executive aggrandizement" (Bermeo 2016) by agents of democratic erosion (Laebens & Lührmann 2021; Merkel & Lührmann 2021). Additionally, the

[4] This conceptualization therefore plausibly mirrors perspectives on resilience from other disciplines, which often also understand resilience as resting upon different levels and their according sources of resilience-capacity (see (see Wilson 2012b as well as chapter 2).

democratic process should be sufficiently inclusive, fair, and transparent to foster input legitimacy which renders other, more costly mechanisms like coercion less necessary. In turn, the democratic system has greater resources at its disposal to deal with eminent or emerging threats and a greater ability for collective decision-making to confront said threats (Easton 1965; Scharpf 1998; Stollenwerk et al. 2021).

Regarding the intermediary level of political parties, the extent to which democratic parties dominate the competitive dynamic of the party system is a crucial source of resilience (Merkel & Lührmann 2021: 872). Especially their ability to represent societal interests and ultimately their level of responsiveness diminishes the probability of potentially undemocratic or illiberal parties emerging and succeeding in taking office. If established parties begin to lose trust among the electorate, this potentially opens up space for anti-systemic parties (Petrarca et al. 2022).

Closely related to the intermediary level are sources of resilience at the level of civic culture and civic society, such as the above-mentioned extent of political trust or support (Easton 1965, 1975). Furthermore, widespread and deeply anchored pro-democratic values, attitudes and behaviors of citizens as well as political elites strengthen the immunity of a democratic system towards stressors or threats to democracy (Merkel & Lührmann 2021). On the one hand, a stable consensus on democratic norms and procedures among political elites leads to fairer policy output and outcomes, also from the perspective of ordinary citizens (Merkel & Lührmann 2021). On the other hand, pro-democratic dispositions among the population can constrain the political elites' ability to transgress established democratic norms and erode democratic institutions without being sanctioned by the electorate (Weingast 1997).

When it comes to the political community, for example, the presence of social trust is decisive for the (perceived) extent of societal conflict. Trust relationships promote the ability and willingness of societal actors to cooperate in the face of emerging or present risks to democratic systems as it helps to overcome collective action problems and thus enables effective governance (Stollenwerk et al. 2021). Furthermore, the level of conflict may also compromise the political elites' ability to play by the constitutional rules of democratic systems as political conflicts increasingly turn into zero-sum games. If this conflict reaches a certain level of severity, this may increase the willingness to question established procedures to reach political goals (Merkel & Lührmann 2021; Stollenwerk et al. 2021).

Undoubtedly, this list offers only a cursory overview of sources which the resilience capacity of a democratic system can rest upon. The identification of different sources of resilience and

their interactive contribution to the overall resilience capacity of a democratic regime ultimately remains a question of empirical research on democracy.

3.2 Stressors of democratic systems

As argued above, a system's resilience capacities moderate the extent of threat which a specific stressor poses to the democratic system by providing the abilities to prevent a significant decline in democratic quality. How successful and effective a democratic system is in processing these stressors mainly depends on two factors: (1) the resilience capacities, which are constituted by the sources at different levels discussed above and (2) the kind and quality of the stressor (Pascu & Vintila 2020: 62–63; Stollenwerk et al. 2021) .

As stressors themselves are diverse and constantly evolve, there can never be a one-size-fits-all source of resilience to all of them. Rather, the resilience capacity of a democratic system is relative to a range and a degree of potential stressors. Hence, democratic resilience is always specific in nature and can never be seen as "general" against all kinds of stressors. First, neither are all kinds of challenges known or can be anticipated, nor do they require the same sort of reaction (Pascu & Vintila 2020: 62–63) . Second, resilience capacities, which were built up as useful and effective resources to overcome a threat in the past, might not necessarily increase resilience in the present. In contrast, in the light of changed circumstances some of those former resilience capacities, such as the informal rule to filibuster in the U.S. Senate, might even develop destructive potential and therefore contribute to democratic vulnerability. As Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018: 74–75) argue, (informal) institutions like the filibuster actually "are essential checks and balances, serving as both a source of protection for minority parties and a constraint on potentially overreaching presidents." However, under changing contextual conditions "they could easily lead to gridlock and conflict" (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018: 74–75) hindering the democratic process. Third, from a conceptual point of view, if we understand democratic resilience as *general* resilience, the concept would lose most of its sharpness as we cannot specify the features of a general democratic resilience.

Stressors threatening democratic quality and persistence are manifold and shifting. While appearing regularly, irregularly or unprecedentedly (see chapter 2), they also range from economic over social to political ones. Economic stressors like economic inequality, social exclusion and poverty can undermine social cohesion and the perceived legitimacy of democratic states (Cuellar 2009: 6–7; Sisk 2017: 3). Social challenges emerge from disparities between different social groups, not only in their economic prospects but also in their general social standing and relation

to each other. They can become the basis of identity-based mobilization putting considerable stress on democratic systems (Harris & Reilly 1998: 9–11). Moreover, extreme (political) polarization threatens the ability to find a common political ground (Sisk 2017: 3–4) as well the acceptance of the procedural consensus which democracy rests upon (McCoy et al. 2018; Svolik 2019). Political stressors oftentimes either consist of deliberate acts by actors with illiberal or authoritarian tendencies or of political factors contributing to democratic decline in general as well as the rise of undemocratic actors (Sisk 2017: 3; Lührmann 2021).

In this context, many observers of modern-day democracies identify an evolution of stressors challenging democratic regimes. While previously the main threat seemed to stem from coups by militaries or other actors, leading to abrupt declines in democratic quality and democratic breakdown, challenges to democracy nowadays predominantly take the form of a gradual erosion from within (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018; Waldner & Lust 2018). This evolution of stressors of democracy may come along with different demands concerning democratic resilience, as it is hardly perceptible for ordinary citizens and oftentimes takes the form of legal and superficially legitimate actions by the executive (see e.g., Bermeo 2003; Lührmann & Lindberg 2019; Lührmann 2021). In the end, the ability of democratic systems to display and build up resilience against these diverse stressors and the new kind of threat emerging from within, will decide over their long-term-prospects.

3.3 Democratic Stress and Resilience: Outcomes and Scenarios

Depending on the kind and extent of such threats and the relative resilience capacity a democratic system contains, the interaction of stressors and the given resilience capacities of a democratic system can result in different outcomes for a democratic regime:

1. *Improvement*, as in the event that the system anticipates or absorbs stress successfully and - as a result of this learning experience - builds up new capacities, which may increase democratic quality as well;
2. *Continuation*, meaning that the democratic system withstands the given level of stress without major changes to its quality;
3. *Bounce-back*, as in the case that a democratic system suffers from initial damage but recovers its democratic quality via the above-mentioned mechanisms (Merkel & Lührmann 2021; Stollenwerk et al. 2021);

4. Or *declines* in democratic quality or democratic breakdown, which result from a lack of democratic resilience (Boese et al. 2021).

Following Stollenwerk et al. (2021) , scenarios (1) and (2) are most likely if the resilience capacities towards a specific threat exceed the intensity of stress put on the democratic system. Thus, being confronted with a low or medium level stressor, continuation or improvement may be the result. In the case that the resilience capacity more or less matches the kind and intensity of a stressor, continuation or bounce-back seem to be the most likely outcomes. Even if stress may hit the democratic system at a significant level and lead to an initial decline in its quality, the given resilience capacities can negate or mitigate the shock and may even lead to a recovery of previous levels of democratic quality. In contrast, in the case of a low or medium level of resilience capacities and a great level of stress upon the democratic regime or an unknown stressor, a "tipping-point" may be reached and negative consequences for democratic quality and persistence can be expected (scenario (3) or (4)). In this situation much depends on the system's short-term ability to build up new resilience-capacities towards said, potentially new, stressor to at least allow for a bounce-back of democratic quality (see also Stollenwerk et al. 2021).

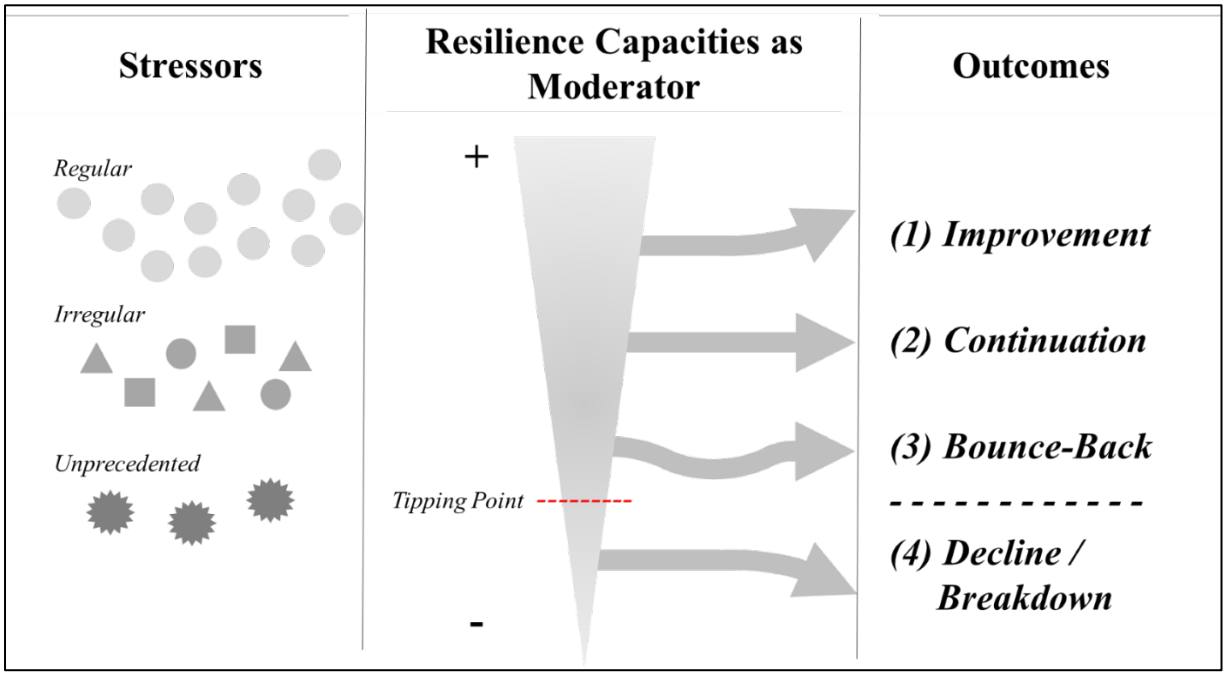

Figure 4: Conceptual framework on democratic resilience as a capacity (based on Stollenwerk et al. 2021: 1225).

4 Differentiation and additional value of the term of democratic resilience

The last section has outlined a concept of democratic resilience as well as its possible uses and applications. But what is the added value of the concept compared to established concepts in the literature? Since the fading of the "third wave of democratization" (Huntington 1991), transition studies as well as democracy research have usually utilized the concept of consolidation when it comes to explaining stability or persistence of democratic regimes (see Schmitter 1995; Linz & Stepan 1996a; Merkel 1998; Morlino 1998). Therefore, we provide a concise introduction to this well-established concept. Then, we comparatively discuss the concepts of democratic consolidation and democratic resilience. We argue that in comparison the term of democratic resilience and its different aspects provide additional value regarding the analysis of democratic decline and the functional capacities which are actually crucial for the persistence of democracies.

4.1 What is democratic consolidation?

Democratic consolidation generally refers to a *process* starting with democratic founding elections (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1991) or the adoption of a new or the revision of an already existing democratic constitution (Merkel 2010: 110). Thus, we can understand this process as the third stage of an accomplished democratic regime change following the detachment of the old regime and democratic institutionalization (Merkel 2010: 105). Ideally this process culminates in the genesis of a *consolidated democracy*, most prominently defined by Linz & Stepan (1996b: 15) as "a political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase "the only game in town."" According to their view this has to be reflected not only on a constitutional but also on a behavioral and an attitudinal level (Linz & Stepan 1996a: 6). Similarly, Merkel (2010: 112) disaggregates the process of consolidation into four stages (constitutional, representative, behavioral and civic consolidation). These sub-processes successively blend into each other as each of them generates requirements for the effectiveness of the following sub-process. More generally, we can abstract democratic consolidation as a process throughout which all rules of the democratic game (as defined in the constitution) equipoise and all relevant actors (constitutional institutions, formal and informal political actors, civil society) learn and internalize the rules of the democratic game as well as possible.

4.2 Democratic resilience vs. democratic consolidation: A conceptual discussion

Boese et al. (2021: 3–4) review democratic consolidation as a fuzzy concept which is eventually based on predictions about the stability and survival of democratic regimes – or conversely, about the likelihood of an autocratic reverse in the future. The central problem with the concept of consolidation (as it is used in the literature) consists in its disability to incorporate the fact that democracies survive even before they accomplish consolidation on all levels. Similarly, the concept is not able to explain the phenomenon of decline and breakdown of already consolidated democracies (see on this e.g. Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018; Schäfer & Zürn 2020). As consolidation was formerly seen as a process following a one-way road towards stability, recent scholars introduced the term of *de-consolidation* as a forerunner to significant autocratization (see Foa & Mounk 2016; Ágh 2019). Those revisions emphasize the rather inflexible character of the original concept, which was – and to us still– is not able to catch any kind of variation over time – improvements as well as deteriorations – once a regime is classified as a fully consolidated democracy.[5]

The determinist character of the explanatory model associated with the concept of democratic consolidation suggests that there are only two paths of democratization: incomplete and complete consolidation. Even when we consider the concept of de-consolidation as a third path the whole construct nevertheless still appears to be very rigid as the focal hypothesis persists: consolidated democracies usually do not autocratize, un-/de-consolidated ones do so more often. Thus, consolidation exclusively takes developments which can be reflected in measurements of democratic regime quality into account. Our understanding of democratic resilience in this regard proves to be more flexible and fine-grained as it takes several coping mechanisms (flexibility, recovery, adaption, innovation) *and* several possible outcomes we might observe on a regime level (improvement, continuation, bounce-back, decline, breakdown) into consideration.

As consolidation simply explains democratic survival by inferring regime *stability* from the degree to which democratic rules are internalized on different levels it completely overlooks some of the challenges a democracy might be confronted with. We suggest utilizing a concept of specific resilience that can address different stressors. In our view democratic survival is a

[5] The focal prediction the concept of democratic consolidation consists in the enduring *stability* of a regime. As noted above stability itself is a static concept. Moreover, this prediction runs the risk to create a tautology as it implies that the consolidation of a democracy might last forever.

matter of how well democracies can handle different problems.[6] We acknowledge that successful consolidation processes might foster distinct problem-solving capacities by assuring the functionality of central institutions and that they can therefore have positive effects on democratic resilience. However, we reject the perception that consolidation is a necessary precondition for resilience and that it impacts those capacities linearly.

We also have further reservations about (at least implicitly) quasi-dichotomous conceptualizations considering consolidation first and foremost as an independent and the robustness of regime quality as a dependent variable. O'Donnell (1996) already broached the issue of possible undesirable peculiarities of consolidation and discussed whether the consolidation of undemocratic (informal) institutions and practices within democratic regimes (e.g., clientelism or particularism) can be regarded as *democratic* consolidation or not. If we equate the general consolidation of institutions, including those which can be considered undemocratic, with democratic consolidation a theoretic-conceptual paradox is constituted. If we do not, democratic consolidation is not applicable to regimes which do not satisfy highest quality standards, e.g., defect democracies (see on this e.g. Lauth 2004: 116–117; Merkel 2004).

However, we assume that any democracy possesses a minimum degree of general democratic resilience capacities. We can justify this assumption by pointing to emerging democracies which are – as already mentioned above – able to survive without finalizing the process of consolidation.[7] From this we can conclude that, in contrast to the democratic consolidation literature, we can apply the concept of democratic resilience to all regimes which satisfy democratic minimal standards without any limitations. The second significant conclusion we can draw from this is that democratic resilience can be part of explanations of democratic survival on all levels of regime quality.

According to Lauth (2004: 117) even working democracies feature minor deficits, e.g., problems of corruption. The difference to deficient democracies consists in the fact that those deficits are usually not stable, as it is immanent for working democracies to spot and solve them by using legal and political control. We consider those *democratic* problem-solving mechanisms an integral part of the capacities of democratic resilience. Therefore, it is consequential to

[6] This is also in line with recent developments in democratic theory, which highlight the need to go beyond a more general and abstract model-thinking regarding democratic design, reform, and capacity for problem-solution and rather pursue a problem-based approach which allows to think about institutional solutions to specific democratic problems as well as their drawbacks and trade-offs (Warren 2017: 39–40).

[7] Conversely, terms of autocratic or authoritarian resilience are increasingly utilized to explain the absence or failure of democratic transition (Nathan 2003; e.g. Heydemann & Leenders 2011; Joffé 2021) This suggests, that we might be able to apply concepts of resilience in general to any regime type anywhere on the continuum between working democracies and totalitarian regimes.

assume that those capacities depend to a significant degree on the democratic quality of a regime. Contrary to many conceptualizations of consolidation our understanding of democratic resilience thus takes the factor of regime quality beyond a binary differentiation (democratic/non-democratic) into account.

The dilemmas listed in this section significantly diminish the explanatory power of the concept of democratic consolidation. Although it is plausible to assume that effective processes of consolidation might foster the robustness a democratic system, we do not regard consolidation as a well-suited concept to explain both democratic survival *and* decline or even breakdown. This is where the advantages of the concept of democratic resilience take effect.

5 Conclusion

Resilience has become a popular buzzword that is used in many different disciplines such as ecology and psychology. Although there is no common and clear definition of the term, a shared understanding is that resilience describes a system's ability to adapt, absorb, withstand, and bounce back from internal or external stressors. During this process it is crucial that the very core of what should prove to be resilient needs to stay intact, even though the perfect resilience of all parts of the system is not necessarily required.

We applied the concept of resilience to democracies defining it as a democratic systems' capacity to prevent, cope with or recover from stressors challenging democratic quality and persistence without losing its democratic character

This capacity rests upon various sources on different levels of the system as well as their interrelations. Depending on the resilience capacities, which a democratic system can provide, and the kind and intensity of a given stressor, this capacity is able to moderate the extent to which this stressor poses a threat to the system. This interaction may result in different possible outcomes, such as improvement, continuation, bounce-back, decline or breakdown of the system.

Building upon this conceptualization of democratic resilience, we showed that the concept is more nuanced as well as more dynamic than established approaches such as consolidation. Hence, we conclude that the concept of democratic resilience may offer a comprehensive added value when analyzing the persistence and decline of democratic systems.

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